

SOUL AWAKENING IN COMMUNITY: EMERGENCE OR EMERGENCY?

Courtenay Young

interviewed by Carol Alexander

What is your personal concept of soul awakening?

I believe it is becoming aware of an intimate and regular contact with the higher part of ourselves or that which is greater than ourselves, and an increasing dedication to live one's life toward serving that principle rather than our personality; a wish to surrender to the spirit in the moment as well as during major life crises. This awakening usually comes in stages. I don't think we rip a veil aside and discover we are there, though there may be a point when that happens and when we recognise that we are clearly and consciously upon the path. Generally we have to repeat or recycle aspects of our personality in order to get them out of the way on different levels.

At one end of the spectrum, I trust and believe that it is possible for someone to evolve very gently throughout their life. If they live in good surroundings, learn to meditate perhaps and live a contented life then their soul will gently expand. The philosophies of Zen and Buddhism work towards that end and the American Indian tradition also believes that it is possible to sit at the door of your teepee and watch the sacred hoop of the world.

At the other end of the spectrum however, we have an increasing incidence of the 'lost soul': people who are either lost in their process or who have lost contact with that level. For instance, many people in the traditional world, who have been living according to sound principles extending back over thousands of years, are having to look for new models and paradigms of how to awaken the soul or keep it alive in the face of materialism and other destructive processes. Even in the West where we have been living with materialism and rationalism for centuries we are having to look at

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Does living in a supportive and soul-conscious community accelerate the process of soul awakening?

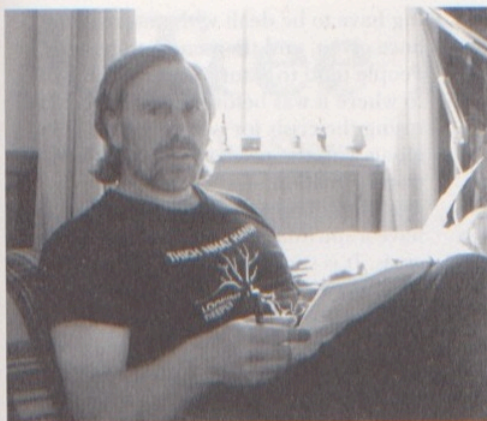
Because this community has a spiritual focus it does facilitate soul awakening. I think this is also the case because we are becoming more aware of the wider spectrum of forms that soul awakening can take. I believe the Findhorn Foundation Community mirrors this spectrum which is found on a larger scale throughout humanity.

When I came in 1986 there weren't

many people working with what I would call depth psychology and therefore the Community didn't have the ability to handle the more extreme forms of crisis one can experience through soul awakening and so there was a tendency to bundle people off to the local psychiatric hospital. If you were just having a hard time, the belief was that you had left the Spiritual Path and you needed to have some therapy to get yourself back onto it again. There was a prescriptive view that the soul awakening process was only supposed to look like the graceful end of the spectrum. There were techniques available, like co-counselling, but they were structured to help you get your 'stuff' out of the way—a clearing session—so you could get on with the 'real' work. There wasn't any value seen in the 'stuff' itself.

Nowadays it is more accepted that all the bits are part of the process. Many influences have come in—Stan Grof's work; the Process-Oriented Psychology of Mindell; the Psychosynthesis Counselling training, and so on. Mainstream consciousness is also changing slowly in that direction—Spiritual Crisis as a diagnosis is now in DSM4, the 'Bible' of medical diagnosis for psychiatrists. That was achieved through a lot of hard work on the part of the Spiritual Emergence Network, spearheaded by people like Stan Grof and David Lukoff in the USA. Hopefully we shall be seeing less people put into mental hospitals and kept under medication for long periods of time just because they have had or are having a spiritual crisis.

Recently I was re-reading *The Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing in which one of the characters, Linda, was seen as crazy, in fact, she saw herself as crazy. As it turns out she was extremely sensitive to what was happening in the world and to other people's thoughts and emo-



Courtenay Young is a psychotherapist who has been involved with spiritual emergence, crisis and special care awareness within the Findhorn Foundation Community for many years. In this interview he shares some of his perspectives on soul awakening and how he sees this important time of transition and transformation being managed by our Western society and, currently, within the Findhorn Foundation Community.

tions. Because all of this was so hard for her to support within the context of a normal life she had to set herself apart and sometimes, when it all became too much for her, she had to be sedated. She may have had something organically 'wrong' with her, something organically different, but does the fact that you have 'flu or a physical ailment mean that you are less of a spiritual person?

There is still a lot of work to do in this field. I hate to think how many people are still in psychiatric wards because they have been undergoing some form of spiritual crisis; it could be as many as 40 percent.

Does the group consciousness affect the form or how the process of soul awakening is accepted or viewed?

Yes. Inevitably. It is totally legitimate in some communities to dance around a fire for three days, or to expose yourself to the sun with hooks in your skin in order to get visions, as part of your soul awakening process. These methods would be seen here and now as self-abusive and I'm not sure a Western community could handle such experiences. Some of our forms of soul awakening would be equally unacceptable to people in other parts of the world, although traditional peoples are generally much more tolerant than we are. For instance, a schizophrenic or psychotic person in a traditional setting would be seen as having shamanic properties and have a respected role and place in society. This might in fact help them to integrate their schizoid elements and thus 'get better'.

There were people in the Sioux tribes who chose to walk backwards, to laugh when they should cry and so on. They had a role rather like that of the European court-jester, representing the anarchic element within the group. A

jester could hit the king over the head with a pig's bladder whereas for other people, to touch him was to die. There are satirical programmes and journals that get away with ridiculing the established order, but if this is done in the wrong place, then the perpetrator will be judged and his eye blackened.

Established practices will determine whether or not we simply look 'too' upset, or we seem to others to be irrationally disturbed. There is an element of judgement here which we are slowly losing as we gradually begin to realise that many people going through crises are simply using the moment to break through layers of themselves in order to arrive at a better understanding of, and a closer relationship with, their own soul.

In your view, how broad a spectrum of the different forms of soul awakening does the Community currently accept and how does it deal with these?

As this community develops we are accepting more and more possibilities, but unfortunately we do still sometimes have to send people into hospital. We are *not* a therapeutic community. Maybe one day we will be able to have our own crisis centre here but at the moment we don't have that facility and we have other responsibilities. People in crisis can need twenty-four hour care and recently we had to take two people to hospital in one week. It would have meant finding two round-the-clock teams for them and in the meantime the work of the Community still has to be done and those who do it are already stretched. At this point it is necessary for people to be temporarily held by some other group or by their family. This needs to be seen in perspective—it isn't necessarily a negative event. We had a meeting of the Crisis Help group at which someone said: "By the way, I was

once one of those people who had to be sent away," which was nice because it points to the fact that at one time or another any one of us might go through this and come back to be of help ourselves. It is not an irrevocable process.

Do new techniques being introduced here cause new problems?

Yes, new techniques bring new problems. One of these was the Holotropic Breathwork, the work of Stan Grof, which started as a way of facilitating breakthroughs by inducing physiological and psychological triggers into people's personal growth process through the use of mild hyperventilation and music. This helped many to access and express areas in themselves which normally would be less acceptable. For instance, if you want to howl like a wolf it isn't easy to find a place to do that without ending up in a psychiatric hospital, yet doing so may help you to connect with some of the shamanistic elements present in you. If that is your particular route, or a stage upon on your path, then it is good to have the opportunity to do it.

So, there was a wave of enthusiasm for Holotropic Breathwork that swept through the Community and many indulged in and sampled it. Some reacted against it, as you would expect, as any group will produce a variety of responses. There were also some problems with integration, with people needing time off work in order to assimilate their experience.

Ultimately, the Community was criticised as being 'unspiritual' for allowing this practice on its premises. No-one has ever died of it, whereas they have from alcohol, or mountain-climbing, or downhill ski-ing, which are also techniques used to experience euphoria and to reach other levels of consciousness. If someone were to die during a

Holotropic Breathwork session I imagine that the whole Findhorn Foundation Community would have been closed down, but if someone gets lost on K2 then others wishing to follow are not stopped.

The judgement, I believe, is about the trigger that stimulates the soul awakening process. A trigger like a car accident or near death experience would be acceptable, but hallucinogenic drugs would render you outcast. Judgements within cultures change. Taking laudanum (opium) was once seen as acceptable, now it isn't. I happen to believe that television is very destructive, but I am in a minority. Protestantism shook the European world, Catholicism destroyed empires—new movements do bring problems. Some stay with us while others die.

Would spiritual emergencies be easier to deal with in a community with clearly established 'maps' of the awakening consciousness, as exist, for instance, in a Buddhist community?

I don't think so. The crisis is usually a shake-up, in psychological terms, of all the survival techniques, mechanisms and

habitual patterns that have served up to this point but are now preventing advancement. For instance, a workaholic pattern will have carried someone through life quite well, gained them esteem and given them their drive; something has to stop that. In the spiritual directive what is needed is 'being' rather than 'doing'. It doesn't matter if a person has trained in Psychosynthesis, Buddhism, Christianity, or whatever the influence has been, that workaholic person will get ME or a heart attack, something which will stop them from carrying on in the way they were going. The type of experience will depend more on the type of patterning that has existed and the various symptoms are very different.

The models I use are pragmatic, developed from experience, not from a discipline or credo of any sort but from observation. I don't approach people with a thought-form of how it should be for them. I can advise against certain actions; help them to get themselves back to a degree of normality before making any decisions; see that they eat and sleep normally, for instance; and try to see that the process doesn't become psychotic. Basic fears of what is happen-

ing have to be dealt with and reassurance given, and then encouragement. People tend to want to get their life back to where it was before rather than recognising the crisis for what it is and going along with the process of change and transformation.

I don't know that it is possible to have a spiritual transformation without a crisis. It is such a powerful happening. The egotism, the conservatism, the need for structures, the habitual patterns we hold are such contradictory forces to what is trying to occur and the places we are trying to get to. Surely it isn't possible to break through all that without a crisis? However, there are people in this community who practise various forms of daily spiritual practice and I haven't seen them in crisis—they seem able to work with their crises themselves and it looks graceful—they are aware enough of themselves to see where they are going and understand what is happening to them. That enables them to go ahead with their transformation process, trusting that they will emerge clearer, stronger and more in touch with their own soul.

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