

WHEN THEIR WORLD CHANGED

I wrote this article originally for an issue of a French journal whose theme was on Death, hence some of the particular references and perspectives. I am not particularly morbid. However it fits also with everything that I want to say about the subject in terms of Holistic Health and Complementary Medical perspectives, so I am leaving it largely unchanged. I also work with this model within a New Age community and within the field of Transpersonal Psychology and Spiritual Emergence work. I was originally trained as a Body-Psychotherapist and ground much of the spiritual and transpersonal work firmly within the body.

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One can consider spiritual growth and transformation from the perspective of death. The death of what is commonly called "the ego" is often necessary before Spirit can fully emerge. It can seem as if part of us has to die before we can more fully live and, depending on how deeply we identify with our egos, this is almost inevitably a painful process. It can also be terrifying if we do not realise what is happening.

Many of us are searching for something better, for something beyond that which we can see, touch or feel. We often use phrases like, "I am looking for some meaning to my life." We often, to begin with, do not know what that 'something' is. We may use the word "Spirit" in this context. This word is used often without really knowing what it means or what it contains. (Of course, part of the attraction is also the mystery.) However, it seems that this spiritual development is beginning to happen spontaneously in people as well.

What I mean by that is that I am aware of a general and more widespread awakening of Spirit. Not only do people want to connect their personal process with their transpersonal or find ways of doing what they do, but with more meaning, more essence, and more spirit - and the joy and grace that comes with spirit - but also people are beginning to find, quite suddenly and sometimes quite frighteningly, that they are having spontaneous spiritual experiences. I call them this because (a) there is no other appropriate word and (b) that is what I think they are.

Let me use an analogy of a society which does not recognise puberty as a healthy stage of development. The changes in female body shape are distortions. The growth of hair on the face, under the arms and in the pubic area are aberrations and disgusting. There is something wrong with the change in a man's voice and they have discovered this surgical technique to correct it. Adolescent spots mean a skin disease. "Puppy-fat" is corrected by rigid dieting. Some people reject adolescence 'naturally' and become anorexic - which is seen as a good thing, rather than an illness. The symptoms of puberty and adolescence are so condemned and vilified that they become shameful and the person is rejected by society. I suggest that this is what we do with the spiritual developmental process that should happen 'naturally'. Perhaps it is beginning to.

Now these experiences and the symptoms that attach themselves to such experiences are thus often misunderstood. Not everybody is aware of spiritual dimensions or open to seeing psychological processes in this light. Quite frequently the actual manifestations of spiritual awakening are and have been mistaken for symptoms of psychosis, or insanity, or witchcraft, or demonic possession, or illness. One fear I have is that, as this groundswell of spiritual awakening increases, there will be an increasing incidence of these types of diagnosis.

Let me give an example: an elderly lady in Texas rang up a referral service some time ago and said, "Can you help me ? Last Christmas God came and sat on my head." When asked what she meant by that she said, *"I seem to know things that are going to happen before they happen and I get messages telling me what to do and what is happening with other people. I know what people are thinking. Now, my Minister says that I am of the Devil and my women's group at the Church say that I am a witch and my husband, well, he just doesn't what to know anything about this at all, so can you help me?"* She was referred to a counsellor who is aware of some of the aspects of these processes.

Why I am writing about these matters is that sometimes, or perhaps even often, the results of what seem like a spiritual journey or process are as devastating to the person involved or to those around them as a serious illness or a death of that person would be. In some cases this is more devastating as the death process carries certain levels of acceptance. Western 20th century society doesn't handle death particularly well - but it is still accepted as part of normal reality, however much we might want to avoid it. The transformation processes I am concerned with are not considered as part of normal reality. Thus when someone gets involved in such a process, nobody knows how to handle it.

I mentioned the concept of the death of the ego being a necessary part of a spiritual process. This, in one form or another is acknowledged by nearly every religion, including the 20th century western religion of psychology. Sometimes it is expressed as a surrender; sometimes as an initiation; sometimes as a purging of the old; sometimes as a taking on of the new - like a marriage. It is nearly always described as a major transformation of and for that individual. It is taken seriously - within a religious context. But if it transgresses the bounds of that religion or if the symptoms don't fit the practices of that religion or the person becomes scared and irrational then that person is abandoned. No-body wants to know. And this makes the situation worse. They become the "lepers" of the society.

If the society does not facilitate this transformation with some rite of passage, or acknowledge it with respect, or plan for it or expect it or welcome it in any way whatsoever, the individual is then not only struggling with their own personal process but also with the (active)

resistance of the collective. That response may be to incarcerate people in mental asylums because (for example) they think they are hearing the voice of God. This has happened over the years and is happening more and more frequently. I do not think that people are becoming increasingly psychotic. However they may be becoming increasingly psychic. The point is that the manifestations are often quite similar.

Furthermore the family of the individual often feel that this loved person has become strange, alien or remote. That person is much less concerned with what has been the medium by which the family has bound itself together. They no longer do that which is expected. They have changed. It is a short step from this to that person being alienated from their close loved ones and thus the support that they may need to go through this change. In some cases the alienation is total and it is as if the person has indeed died.

The person's actual experience can be very, very different. It can feel as if they, for the first time, are truly alive. They see more, understand more, are intensely aware of everything around them. It can be euphoric. This is the fantastic part. But if you can't make others understand; if they don't want to know what you have become aware of or are experiencing, the pleasure soon turns to pain and the euphoria to terror.

One aspect of the spiritual journey or quest towards finding out something important about ourselves is the telling of it: the recounting of it and the accepting of this story. We really do need a vocabulary or a language and a medium of expression in which to frame some of this. Present language is not fully sufficient, reflecting more the norms of society. We also need an atmosphere that supports such a telling, for this telling has an important aspect; it is a release and an integration. Without this, the incredible energy of this process gets bottled up inside. It can start to ferment. One becomes further and further removed from those around. Thus 'not-telling' is a sort of poison and makes us sick. What one often discovers in people who's journey has gone wrong (and who may have picked up a label like "psychotic" in the process) is that they have not been able to talk or to tell what has been happening with them. This 'not-telling' might actually have been one of the factors that made the journey go wrong. So it is important to listen to their stories, especially if you work in this area, just as it is important to bring this area more and more into the open and to a general level of acceptance.

In "The Myths of Mental Illness", an article in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (USA), David Lukoff suggests that when we take this journey, we begin to experience the world from a different perspective; that of a more archetypal mode. Our world begins to get 'peopled' with Gods and Demons, Myths and Legends, Dreams and Nightmares, Wondrous Beings or Monsters. We may see ourselves in these shapes and we may see others like this. Actions take on

a deeper significance like that which they often carry in myths: forgetting to change the sails to new white ones can mean the death of your father or a chance encountered object (like a ring) means the possibility to defeat the Enemy. If this world of myths is not understood, it can bring a lot of fear with it, as well as a lot of beauty. Normal rational thought plays little part in these realms. For example I remember that, during such a period in my own life, after reading D.M. Thomas's 'The White Hotel', not only did I seem to start to be surrounded with the most incredible eroticism emerging from mundane objects, but also I became terrified of the tunnels that link the London Underground platforms, for it seemed as if all these crowds of people (and myself) were being funnelled to some horrific end like that of Babi Ya, described in the book. Paranoia and psychosis indeed perhaps! Well, that is the issue.

There is the archetypal story of a madman, recently released out of an asylum, who met a guru sitting naked under a tree. The madman said, *"When I did that they locked me up. What is the difference between us that the people revere you."* The guru said, *"It all depends on who you speak to."* Telling the story is important.

It also feels important to emphasise that I am not talking about spiritual emergence in terms of the growth movement interest in spirit - Mind, Body, Spirit Festival type of stuff. I am talking about an incredibly powerful energy beginning to flow through us, individually and collectively, that can sweep one off one's firmly planted two feet or can blast through some of our pretty philosophising or can confound our attempts to rationalise everything by a wild myriad of seemingly unrelated experiences.

We are at a time when we are nearly in the last decade of a millennium. There is quite a widespread collective subliminal belief in the West that something will happen at the turn of the millennium - in about 5 years time. At the end of the last millennium, there was also a similar belief. At that time they thought the world was going to end. Don't laugh ! As a practicality, about half to two-thirds of Western Europe did not plant any crops that year - why bother ? The result was, of course, widespread starvation and thus for many the world did end that year. I don't think we have changed very much in 1000 years. I think we expect, on a mythical level, something to happen - some spiritual salvation whereby the slate will be wiped clean and we can make a fresh start. The hype about the Age of Aquarius and the New Age is perhaps part of this; and I think that this is also in part an actual reality. There is definitely something new and powerful happening.

I am not demeaning it. I live and work in a New Age Spiritual community of about 150 people in northern Scotland. I work as a psychotherapist and meet many people who come to the Findhorn Foundation on such a path or life-quest. These are people in transition: people searching for something new in their lives. They have left homes, families, partners, jobs. They have sold

houses, cars, washing machines and videos in the hope of finding something better. Some of them are having a very hard time. It is sometimes difficult and frightening. It is sometimes lonely - even amongst beautiful friendly people. How much more so is it alone in a city with no supporting frameworks? Alienation is another form of death.

I think we will see a much greater incidence of people experiencing kundalini-type energy flows, psychic experiences, visions, revelations, channelling, mystic and mythic events and the like, because that is what is in this particular Pandora's box which is now opening. Now you may view this as horrific and it might be so. The dark side of the spiritual salvation and the slate being wiped clean is our capacity to destroy ourselves and this planet in either a phallic explosion or a poisoning of the earth. It was Caroline Myss, a medical clairvoyant, who, in a talk at the Findhorn Foundation, drew the parallel between the American archetypal myth of the Space Shuttle and the (Mother) Russian archetype of power for the people both going horribly wrong almost simultaneously in 1986. There is also, as ever, at the very bottom of Pandora's box, still that thing called Hope.

However what I am particularly interested in is the area where a person undergoing these type of perceptions or experiences finds an overlap with what is labelled as psychotic symptoms. How do we react to someone who is very disturbingly within one archetype "going crazy", and within another "becoming enlightened". I would suggest the key lies in the phrase "very disturbingly" for if we can suspend judgment for a while and try to understand what experiences this person is having and what they are, then I think this actually helps the person with their process.

We help people with their dying process, cannot we also help them with their emerging process - their living process. Modern westernised society removes us from much of our myths and archetypes, unlike with our forebears who lived within a medium that included them. So-called psychotic individuals thus can offer an opportunity for us to visit with persons who are still experiencing the world in an ancient mythic mode of consciousness. Joseph Campbell suggests that the only difference between the mystic and the psychotic is that the mystic learns to swim in this type of modality and the schizophrenic has fallen in unexpectedly and is drowning.

This is some of the thinking around the Spiritual Emergence Network that was started by Stan & Christina Grof. I support this approach wholeheartedly, even though I have some reservations about their particular practice of Holotropic Breathwork. Most of us have not only had some spiritual experiences but would consider ourselves as on a spiritual path of sorts and have probably experienced aspects of the emergence of our spirit and some of the incredible energy that is involved in this process, even though we might not have recognised it as such at the

time. Thus we can, I hope, empathise with those who are not so successful at breaking out of the chrysalis. For these people, it is more a process that has become a spiritual emergency. Nicole Kester, a co-ordinator of SEN, differentiates like this:

"The difference also in the spiritual emergence experience is that, ideally, it leads to increased creativity, feelings of peace, an expanded sense of compassion, and I would say, healing and compassionate action in the world. Spiritual Emergency, as defined by (Emma) Bragdon, is "disorientation and instability that result from intense spiritual experiences which overwhelm the individual's ego functioning and for which there is no social or cultural support."

In Tibet, a person going through intense spiritual experiences, for example, tremors and powerful rushes of energy in the body (sometimes referred to as Kundalini) or overwhelming visions of powerful demonic or heavenly beings, would be treated with respect. The North American Indian, who heard voices or had visions and acted on them in a way that fitted into that culture (which might mean going on a journey, refusing to speak or eat for many days or asking the whole tribe to not only listen to but to act out his dream) would get made into a shaman with a very high status. Some of the mystical experiences of people in mediaeval society led to them becoming Saints of the Catholic Church. In some societies, people use drugs, plants or intensified states actually in order to get such effects in public ceremonies based deep within the culture and fabric of that society. In our society:

"We know that persons openly undergoing such experiences in our culture are more likely to be locked up in a 72-hour ward, given powerful mind-altering medications, and possibly diagnosed as mentally ill for life. Their visions and voices are not seen"

as productive to the society or important for the individual. We bring about alienation and a type of death by this lack of recognition.

It is very interesting that more modern (and increasingly numerous) accounts of near-death experiences are perhaps the most convincing of all, in the existence of a spiritual life. This is one of the most consistent reports from people who have experienced such. Many of them also significantly change their life pattern after such an experience; they serve or help others; they collect for charity; they change their belief systems; they lead (perhaps) a more spiritual life. They often also report a reluctance to talk about their experiences, which is hardly surprising.

Other types of experiences fall into the pattern of a possible spiritual emergence, which have also been described as 'peak experiences' (Maslow), 'religious' experiences (James), 'conversion' experiences (Armstrong), 'paranormal' experiences (Greerly), 'conversion' experiences (Allison) or 'ecstatic states' (Eliade). J. Perry in a 1986 article in ReVision says:

"(spirit) ... is constantly striving for release from its entrapment in routine or

conventional mental structures ... if this work of releasing spirit becomes imperative but is not undertaken voluntarily with knowledge of the goal and with considerable effort, then the psyche is apt to take over and overwhelm the conscious personality with its own powerful processes."

This we can define as a spiritual emergency. I want to define the word "psyche" as that part of our spirit that is more in contact with our emotions and which covers the realm of psychic experiences and I would like to use the word "Spirit" for that which is more transpersonal and is connected to the soul. The language is difficult sometimes for it is early days yet. The mediaevalists were a bit better at it than we are. If you don't believe me, read some of the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, whose work, incidentally, has had a marvelous modern revival. A sign of the times? So we have few points of reference and we struggle. In this struggle, there is a natural tendency to revert to role models and what reference points we do have as in our myths and archetypes. When the struggle of transition and emergence goes wrong, we have a spiritual emergency.

Stan & Christina Grof have identified various forms of spiritual emergency. *Awakening of the Kundalini (Serpent Power)* is where there is a radical transformation of the person's relationship with their biology. There are often powerful physical sensations: heat, streaming energy, tremors, violent shaking, spasms, violent twistings. Extreme illnesses and sometimes childbirth can bring on such experiences or are a result of it. The symptoms can be mistaken for epilepsy. A *Shamanic Journey* is often accompanied by a dramatic episode involving an altered state of consciousness. There is an emphasis on physical suffering and encounter with death followed by rebirth and elements of ascent. A *Psychological Renewal through Activation of a Central Archetype* is where the person perceives themselves in some form or other as being in the middle of a world process and again there are elements of death, afterlife and return to the beginnings. The form of the experience lends itself to interpretation of a Central Archetype experience. A *Psychic Opening* is an episode characterised by striking instances of extrasensory perception (ESP) and other parapsychological manifestations - like the little lady in Texas. An *Emergence of a Karmic Pattern* is where the individual might experience dramatic events that seem to be connected to a past lifetime or birth and where there is a flavour of a different time or spatial context. *Possession* is where the person might take on facial characteristics, gestures and attitudes of something typically diabolic in nature. This does not mean that they are actually possessed by an outside agency that is evil but that the pattern of spirit emerging through them in a disturbed way takes on this form. There seems little doubt that such experiences occur. What is, I believe, needed is to validate them, ideally in something like DSM III, the diagnostic for psychosis, but also more generally in society.

I must mention an excellent book. Emma Bragdon has written *A Sourcebook for Helping People in Spiritual Emergency* from which I have taken some quotes. It is published by Hodder & Stouton. Furthermore there is an international group of people who act as regional co-ordinators for the Spiritual Emergence Network. This is a referral service only. As yet there are no real treatment centres or counselling services provided by this network, which was started in 1980 by the Grofs as a response to an increasing incidence of this type of experience.

In this country we have only got the Arbours Association, started by Joseph Berke and Morton Schatzman in north London in the 1970's, which works with people in crisis without using drugs. Their approach is very psychodynamic, a development of Freud & Jung's work, and they were inspired by the work of R. D. Laing at Kingsley Hall. Whilst nominally acknowledging the spiritual component, I have not found much of this element operative in practice. Lothlorian, a very small community in south-west Scotland, has now been taken over by Samnye Ling, a Tibetan Buddhist community and thus has a definite spiritual approach, albeit a fairly established and inflexible one.

If, as I believe, there is a new pattern or phase of human growth happening, which is that of a spiritual nature, then we, as a race or a global culture, need to recognise and prepare for it. In exactly the same way that we create rites of passage or initiations for adulthood, marriage and to some extent death, we also need to begin to develop these for spiritual emergence. This awakening, perhaps more than any other factor, carries with it the hope that we will not obliterate ourselves as a species and a planet with either a bang or a whimper; that there is something greater than ourselves and that we are an intrinsic part of - you may call this God if you wish - and that, however frightening or disturbing these processes may seem, they are part of a healthy growth and a greater Plan and need to be recognised as such.

Courtenay Young