PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SURRENDER: A PSYCHOSPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Recent developments in the field of transpersonal psychology (Walsh, 1976, 1978; Bugental, 1978; Boorstein, 1980) indicate a growing interest in experiences which touch the deepest level of psychological and/or spiritual life. The psychotherapist whose work engages a client at these levels may be faced occasionally with the phenomena of "surrender." In the milieu of a transpersonal psychotherapy surrender may contain both an emotional and a cognitive component, though it is of an essentially involuntary nature which tends toward a dramatic upheaval in the life of the client. Surrender as seen in therapy is not the same as superficially similar experiences observed in coercive group activity, psychotic breaks, heights of sexual passion, or the willful rejection of a defined cultural role. Rather, therapeutic surrender is an initially negative, even shattering experience which dissolves the client's sense of personal reality and brings him or her into contact with unitive forces which can provide a foundation for a fundamental and positive alteration of the self. Surrender is thus a psychological experience that can be differentiated from acceptance and conversion. While similar in nature, the active "turning around" (Grk: 'metanoia') of conversion appears to be system-oriented, i.e., moving from belief in one direction or view to another radically different one (James, 1978). Acceptance, however, can be considered the passive mode of conversion, which understands, assimilates, or at least wholly embraces a changed view before conversion activates and moves it in new directions.

The receptivity of acceptance and the activity of conversion thus differ markedly from a sense of "emptiness" which most characterizes surrender. In surrender, one faces a final act of giving up, an ultimate letting go of all previously held doc-
trines, beliefs, and conceptions of self. In Buddhism this self is "illusory," and in Christianity it is described by Paul as the "lower nature." These conceptions have their psychological correlates in Assagioli's (1965) "lower-higher" selves, and Wilber's (1977) ego-existential levels of consciousness, and similar terms used to differentiate everyday ego-bound consciousness from the transpersonal or spiritual domains. Central to virtually every transformative discipline is the need for transcending the lower, ego-bound self and surrendering to the more universal identity found e.g., in the "Sunyata" of Buddhism or the "God's will" of Christianity. Such an abject surrender may take place with tremendous struggle, as the ego attempts via every trick imaginable to perpetuate its own game of hide and seek (Trungpa, 1973).

A means around such control by the ego is, in Buddhism, the cultivation of "mindfulness" via a variety of meditative disciplines. Through rigorous practice (preferably under an enlightened teacher), the ego-constricted sense of "reality" can be realized as illusory, and the leap of surrender into unknown change can take place. What lies beyond this leap is at the time unknown, since any desire or vision of personal fulfillment or final reward is itself an ego-bound construct and not without desire of personal gain.

A complete surrender cannot fail to involve detachment, for a greedy interest in the attainment of certain mental states would cease to be surrender altogether. We might say that there is a condition of openness to experience, expressed by both detachment and surrender (Naranjo, 1971).

The implications of the concept of surrender within the field of psychotherapy are significant. While perhaps not common in many therapeutic settings, the surrender experience is most likely to find its way into the therapeutic milieu where therapy and spirituality most clearly interweave: depth psychotherapy. In such a setting fundamental ontological questions and meanings of one's existence are being explored. Psychological and spiritual considerations may become indistinguishable. The act of surrender, therefore, can be seen as an existential reality which has broad-based implications for the psychotherapeutic process. With the spiritual quest and long-term psychotherapy at the deepest levels sharing similar goals, an examination of the surrender process can be approached usefully from both a psychological and spiritual base.

In seeking a therapist the client may be seen as making an admission that he or she needs assistance on the way to improved mental, emotional, or spiritual functioning. The decision to seek assistance may be reached with some resistance
or pain, especially in those cases in which a monolithic character structure, able to stay in command of all aspects of the self, may seem in danger of crumbling. Thus, some form of surrender has a place in the establishment of the therapeutic alliance as the client exposes his or her inner life to the therapist. By accepting some degree of vulnerability the client has initiated a "leap" which has surrender as a component.

The elements of vulnerability and risk are related to the idea of surrender, both in a spiritual context and in the therapeutic endeavor. In therapy at the "deficiency" or basic need levels (Maslow, 1968), the client is often breaking through layers of resistance, which Perls (1969) labeled as the "impasse point.' At the deficiency level, analogous to Wilber's "ego level" of development (Wilber, 1977), the focus in therapy is on the character armor, identity issues, and the defensive structures which inhibit healthy ego functioning in the world. The emphasis is on construction, maintenance, and the requisite patchwork for restoration of psychic and emotional balance.

On the "being" or "transpersonal" levels (Maslow, 1971), however, surrender may involve some ego dissolution, even if temporary, and an accommodation of the unknown. In some cases, at a tension-filled point of impasse there may be a leap through the impasse, into realms of the unconscious—a metaphorical "journey through Hades." Such egoless surrender can carry considerable risk however, without an underlying base of ego-level integration. Hence, such a leap, whether it be into the arms of God, guru, or therapist, may be better founded with an undergirding of strong, functional ego integration—a point sometimes overlooked in the psychospiritual marketplace.

I surrender! What a prize! There cannot be a harvest before the crop is grown. Before the self is ripe, what can you dare to give away? Until you are there, in all your strength, you do not have the power to surrender (Deikman, 1976).

It is therefore worthwhile to bear in mind that a psychological surrender may not automatically produce instant transcendence, but could be the door to various levels of darkness and purgation reflective of a spiritual journey. While the initial steps along such a journey may well contain elements of "spiritual sweetness" as described by St. Teresa (1961), continued movement can take the individual through various "demon-filled" rooms of the "interior castle." This path to the unitive experience, through the archetypal territory of the "shadow" (Jung, 1969), may be sustained by and emerge into a transpersonal or being state of experience which includes its underlying ego base. In this pattern of development the ego's temporal existence is guided, and to some degree energized by its ontological source.
Transpersonal therapy or teaching which ignores the ongoing and arduous work of integrating the shadow thus runs a risk of falling into what Hillman (1975) called "transcendental denial" - an attempted flight over or around the murky waters of the shadow world.

It may be that an integrating surrender can only take place when there is a healthy ego intact, a semblance of a self-directed person present to navigate the travails of the journey. The individual, having wrestled with the "demons" obstructing the path of growth, knowing the effort involved, feeling the fear of the unknown ahead, and with reasons motivated by the deeper levels of consciousness, is prepared to follow Degen's advice on the existential impasse:

You've climbed to the top of a hundred foot pole.  
Now keep on going (Degen, 1971).

This struggle, followed by an experience of surrender, is clearly different from a dabbling in the varied delights of the spiritual life. It is more an opening to the totality of the self-with possibilities for the integration and transcendence of the ego, and further assimilation of the shadow. Such a journey may have begun with long preparation, intensive individual soul-searching, and perhaps some precipitating crisis which propelled one to the brink of psychic collapse.

The role of crisis in this process may be understood in the light of the nature of surrender to occur independently of control by the rational, ego-bound mind. Surrender involves a leap, a push, a giving-up, an abandonment of hope, a cleansing through painful purgation for which no exclusively rational process can substitute. Hence, surrender comes over one in a wave, when reason, will, and knowledge are no longer adequate to sustain self-directed life. A severe crisis thus may act as a major catalyst in the surrender process, for in crisis or catastrophe the personal world, and perhaps the larger world as well, loses its carefully ordered reason or meaning. A pervasive sense of despair and meaninglessness may herald the end of all previously held world views, as the essential impermanence, transitoriness, and illusion of all life forms is experienced as an ontological truth.

The Old Testament story of Job is perhaps the classic example of a person being driven to his knees, humbled by forces his rational ego is powerless to contain, finally giving up any willful intention of further influencing his fate. At just such a point one can be said to be ready for the grace of "point zero" - one has "become nothing" (Buddhism), "died in Christ" (Christianity), "relativized the ego" (Western psychol-
ogy). With the dissolution of previous conceptions of personal identity the redemptive process is ready to begin; there is an opportunity for a new being to emerge from the rubble of the former self.

A therapeutic situation which includes immersion in such psychospiritual depths may also require coming to grips with the transference dynamic. If the theme of surrender is at the heart of the therapeutic relationship, how it is managed in any transference can determine how liberating such surrender will be for both client and therapist. Such a process could require the therapist to be aware of any yoke of "Godness" or "wise guru" which the client may have constructed in the initial stages of therapeutic surrender. A liberating therapist could use such initial surrender to guide the client back to a more permanent source of psychospiritual renewal, grounded in his or her own transpersonal awareness.

The basic orientation of the therapist would seem to be central to the surrender dynamic. A therapist's focus on symptom reduction alone, when the client requires guidance through a psychospiritual crisis, could cut off the client's growth and undermeme the healthy forces shaping his or her development. Thus the nature of the therapist's own interior life, level of awareness, and knowledge of transpersonal journeys could be of utmost relevance to the client's unfolding process. Likewise, a therapist's penchant for doggedly promoting the maxim of "taking responsibility for yourself" can be seen to be ill-timed when faced with a client involved in surrendering "self" in a spiritual crisis. While the idea of therapeutic surrender may be of little importance in limited therapies such as the treatment of weight control or in vocational rehabilitation, it is an issue which could have central importance in a depth-oriented transpersonal psychotherapy.

The varying implications of the process of surrender, and the need to approach it with sensitivity and subtlety, constitute a challenge to the therapist's own insight and depth of self-acceptance. It is no less a challenge to the client, who, from a psychospiritual perspective may be at a most vulnerable beginning to a profound and perhaps enduring reorientation toward the whole of life.

REFERENCES


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