THE TRANSPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE:
A PERSONAL OVERVIEW*

Frances E. Vaughan

Mill Valley, California

I have come to understand the transpersonal perspective as a metaperspective that attempts to acknowledge and learn from all points of view. It is a perspective that does not seek to impose a new belief system or a new metaphysics, but rather to see the relationships between existing world views in order to envision transformational possibilities. Since 1969 the transpersonal perspective has emerged from an integration of ancient wisdom and modern science. Clearly science and mysticism need each other. Science needs the wisdom of mysticism and mysticism needs the power of science. In this sense the transpersonal perspective sees the Eastern spiritual disciplines and Western scientific approaches to psychology as complementary. It recognizes the transcendental unity of all religions and sees the unity in the mystical core of every spiritual tradition.

The mystical teachings agree that the source of wisdom is within us. Each spiritual tradition has a different way of saying it. For example, in Christianity we are told that "the kingdom of God is within." In Buddhism, wisdom is in the discovery of "our own true nature"; in Hinduism, it is in "Atman" realization; in transpersonal psychology, we speak of "the Self." Yet the source is always the same and we need access to this source of inner wisdom if we are to use science for the benefit of humanity, rather than for self-destruction. Furthermore, there comes a time when we can

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no longer rely on external teachings and teachers to tell us what to do. The transpersonal movement is unique in that there is no charismatic leader. It is an organic movement that has grown by networking. It is a movement that has drawn people to it who share a common concern and a purpose—and who share a vision of what is possible for human beings as equal participants and co-creators of our reality.

This is a new form of working together in which we do not depend on anyone person to direct our lives. This requires awareness of our capacity for self-determination, self-actualization, self-realization, and finally self-transcendence. It assumes that healthy personal growth evolves into selfless service. Thus a transpersonal orientation is basically an orientation of service in the world.

The transpersonal orientation is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It has its roots in the ancient perennial philosophy and it makes use of modern science because science, like mysticism, is also a search for truth—albeit a different way of looking for it. The search also requires wisdom, which I like to think of as a blending of consciousness and love. The Dalai Lama has often spoken of the need for compassion in the world. Mother Theresa of Calcutta also talks about our need for love. Yet it is not from an outside teacher that we know the truth of their words. Only when we are willing to remove the obstacles to the awareness of love’s presence in our lives, can we become active participants in our own transformation and conscious evolution. It is finding this awareness in our own experience that makes it possible to share it with others. In this way we support and empower each other to continue the process. My own experience of being involved in the transpersonal movement is that it has been empowering in many ways. The opportunity to speak to you at this conference is an example of that empowerment.

Part of the transpersonal purpose is to evoke the highest potential in human beings. By implication this includes the wise use of technology and of resources, but more directly it recognizes the human mind as one of our greatest inexhaustible resources. A transpersonal orientation looks at the transformational process and attempts to understand it, so that it can be facilitated and encouraged. It sees the possibility of our growth towards wholeness, which means growing beyond the ego (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). This does not mean moving into transcendence instead of ego. Ego development is viewed as a stage along the way. We can use the ego strengths that we develop in normal, healthy, adult
development and go beyond them. In this view, ego development is regarded as a mid-point on the great chain of being. We emerge as self-conscious beings, out of a pre-personal un-consciousness aware of ego development and the concomitant alienation of being identified with ego. But in transpersonal development that extends beyond the personal goals of ego development, we recognize that we all exist in a web of mutually conditioned relationships. Thus, the transpersonal orientation is based on an awareness of our interdependence, not only in relationship to each other but to the environment as well. We should remember that while we are shaped by our environment, we are also the shapers of that environment.

I want to emphasize the difference between pre-personal (pre-egoic) and transpersonal (trans-egoic) states, because it seems important to recognize that not all "non-ego" states of consciousness are necessarily transpersonal. Wilber has discussed this at length in "The Pre-Trans Fallacy" (1982). Another relevant reference is Charles Tart's (1975) definition of higher states of consciousness as those states in which all the attributes and functions of the normal waking state are available, plus some additional ones. Thus transpersonal experiences or higher states of consciousness should not be confused with other altered states or sub-optimal states. Hence, transpersonal development refers to development beyond the ego—not to substitutes for it.

Transpersonal psychology has attempted to expand the field of psychological inquiry to include transpersonal experiences and their relationship to the spiritual dimension of our lives. The term "transpersonal" means, literally, beyond the personal or beyond the personality. It recognizes that who and what we are is not limited to personality and that, if we are identified exclusively with the body, the ego or the personality, we have a very limiting and restricting view of ourselves. Transpersonal psychology also acknowledges the importance of bringing about a balance of inner and outer experience and awareness, recognizing that these are two sides of a mutually interdependent reality. Before transpersonal psychology became an identifiable orientation in psychology, the term transpersonal had been used by Jungians to describe the underlying ground of ego-psychology. It had also been used by Stanislav Grof to describe experiences he had observed in his work with psychedelic psychotherapy. In his book The Realms of the Human Unconscious (Orof, 1976), he describes transpersonal experiences as those in which ego boundaries dissolve and awareness is extended beyond the ordinary confines of time and space.
In the late 1960's, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Anthony Sutich, and a few others felt the need to begin to integrate some of their understanding of the Eastern and mystical traditions with the humanistic psychology in which they had all been involved. It was Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich who felt that the term transpersonal would be appropriate to this new branch of psychology and in 1969 The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was launched. Anthony Sutich, who had also been the founding editor of The Journal of Humanistic Psychology, founded the new journal. He was a remarkable man and he lived an amazingly active life given the fact that he had been injured in a baseball accident as a youth and was totally paralyzed for the rest of his life. He spent his entire adult life immobilized on a gurney, but he could read and he could talk. Indeed, he eventually talked with people all over the world by telephone. At one time he was very active in civil rights. Later he became a psychotherapist. Although he was actively involved in starting both the humanistic psychology movement and the transpersonal psychology movement, he was not a charismatic leader. He served more as a facilitator-as somebody who knew how to empower others to do their best, to help them actualize their potential.

I first met "Tony" in 1965 at a seminar on humanistic psychology at Esalen Institute, and I was very impressed with him. I did not know that the leader of the workshop I was attending was going to be someone who was physically disabled. I was both surprised and inspired by him at that time. It was that meeting that made me decide to go back to graduate school and become a psychologist. There is much that I learned from Anthony Sutich and from working with the Journal in the early years. One of the things that most impressed me was that the Journal had a policy of publishing original work that was generally excluded from most psychological mainstream journals. It began by publishing a wide range of empirical research, theory, and applied articles, and still does, but it has avoided hostile or debunking attacks on other people's work. It sought to build on what had been done before by drawing on both Western psychology and Eastern mysticism. I was also struck by the fact that the editors of the Journal would engage in lively discussions about the papers that were submitted and sometimes they would have totally opposing viewpoints. In fact, diversity of opinion was encouraged. Everyone had their say and everyone felt heard, yet nobody seemed attached to their opinion. They were all great friends even if they had totally opposing opinions on particular papers.

This was my first experiential contact with the idea of not being attached to an opinion or point of view. I saw how
powerful that kind of diversity could be, how an organization could work in that way, and how much love and cooperation and caring came out of it. Before he died in 1976, Anthony Sutich transferred the editorship of the Journal to a colleague, Miles Vich, who worked with him from the beginning, both in humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology. Since then the Journal has continued to expand and now reaches readers in 35 countries. This growth also reflects the fact that there is now an expanding body of literature in transpersonal psychology, including a number of significant books.

The Association for Transpersonal Psychology, the national association in the United States, was formed in 1971 and the first president was Alyce Green of the Menninger Foundation. It was determined at that time that the Association should grow organically—that those attracted to it should become members. It was not advertised, and there was no proselytization. The members were simply people who were interested in it, who shared values and a similar perspective on psychology. The Association was established to support the Journal so that those people who were interested in learning more about the transpersonal orientation could have regularly published material available.

In 1973 when James Fadiman was president of the Association, we had our first national conference. Since then, we have had an annual conference, in California, which has grown in size and explores different themes each year. Our first overseas conference was the First International Transpersonal Conference, held in Iceland in 1973. A second International Conference followed in Iceland in 1975. Since then, there have been international conferences in Finland; Brazil; Boston, Massachusetts; Melbourne, Australia; and in Bombay, India.

In regard to the different areas of investigation in transpersonal psychology, I think it's useful to make some distinctions made by Ken Wilber, a leading theoretician in this field. In Eye to Eye, he makes a distinction between the different realms of knowledge (see Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). He argues that there are three kinds of knowledge: the empirical realm concerned with sense data; the mental realm concerned with logic and reason; and the spiritual or transcendent realm concerned with insight and truth. Each realm of knowledge has its own way of acquiring information and each has its own rules for validation. A "category error" occurs if we attempt to reduce one realm to another or attempt to interpret the findings of one kind of knowledge in terms of another. Pursuing an interest in any of them
importance of spiritual training

requires undertaking the training required to attain understanding in that realm. While those of us who are not trained as physicists would not attempt to evaluate research being conducted in a physics laboratory, almost anyone is willing to evaluate spiritual teachings without having undertaken appropriate training. I think one needs to acknowledge that each realm of learning requires specific training in order to appreciate what it has to offer.

empirical research

In the realm of empirical research in transpersonal psychology there is a growing body of research on the physiological and psychological correlates of altered states of consciousness and meditation. There is also a considerable amount of data from biofeedback research that is relevant, such as the work of the Greenes at the Menninger Foundation and Dr. Fehmi at Princeton. In Bangalore, India at the Institute of Mental Health the physiological correlates of Yoga are being investigated. At Harvard, Dr. Daniel Brown is studying the effects of meditation on perceptual sensitivity. Projects funded by the Institute of Noetic Sciences of San Francisco are investigating exceptional human abilities and optimum health and well-being. Also, there is research on the effects of what we have come to call the "consciousness disciplines," derived from the Eastern meditative disciplines (Shapiro & Walsh, 1982). Recent findings indicate that people who undertake some of these consciousness disciplines experience changes in lifestyle and values. A social scientist, Duane Elgin (1981), reports that there is now a large number of people in the United States whose lifestyles are changing in the direction of voluntary simplicity, largely as a result of their having incorporated some type of meditative practice into their lives.

contemporary theorists

In the mental realm, Ken Wilber is making a major contribution to transpersonal theory (1979, 1980, 1981). Other well-known contemporary theorists include Stanislav Grof, Roger Walsh, and Charles Tart.

applications in psychotherapy and education

In the spiritual realm, transpersonal psychology becomes the psychology of spiritual development. Here we find both individual and group explorations, and much eclectic as well as traditional practice of Western and Eastern origins.

Applications of transpersonal psychology are evident in a number of developments in education and in psychotherapy. In education, it represents an expanded view of human capacities and emphasizes the integration of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of well-being. There is also an emphasis on service, or the application of learning in
the world. For example, at the California Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Menlo Park, California; where I teach, the curriculum represents a balance of these five areas. Each student practices a physical discipline such as Aikido or Tai Chi; each does "emotional work" either in clinical training, and/or participating in group process. These students also study the theory of transpersonal psychology, do their intellectual homework, and strengthen their background in general psychology. In addition, they are all expected to have a spiritual discipline of their own choosing. There is no one belief system that is exclusively supported. Rather, there is an emphasis on a willingness to question beliefs, to develop an intellectual understanding as well as having experiential knowledge of a particular tradition. Transpersonal theory needs to be informed by transpersonal experience, so education is not limited to talking about spirituality. Experiential participation is essential. Enlightenment or illumination does not occur simply from learning the letter of the wisdom teachings; it is attained only through direct experience. Genuine experiential activity is therefore encouraged in conjunction with theoretical learning. The fifth area of emphasis, on community, translates the individual, personal transformational process into community service.

In psychotherapy, many new developments in the transpersonal orientation come from the work of psychotherapists who were traditionally trained and then became interested in Eastern disciplines. Those who undertook their own search and began to practice some of the disciplines, found that this practice had significant effect on their professional work. Many professionals interested in healing found there was much to learn from the ancient traditions. Much of transpersonal psychotherapy was born out of the experience of therapists who found that deeper exploration of their own spiritual growth had a profound effect on their professional work.

It seems useful to make a distinction between the context of therapy which is established by the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the therapist, and the content of the therapy which is established by the client. A transpersonal therapist does not necessarily deal only with transpersonal content, but may simply be facilitating the growth of the client, assisting in the process of healing and integration at whatever level is appropriate. However, one would expect a transpersonal therapist to be qualified and capable of working with people who are ready to grow beyond the stage of ego integration. Clients who function well at an ego level...
may come to therapy because of disillusionment or disappointment with the attainment of ego goals. There seem to be two ways of arriving at disappointment: One is by not getting what you want; the other way is by getting it. We know that success in terms of ego goals and achievements in the world can leave one feeling empty and depressed. This is the existential crisis that can be precipitated by the experience of success, as well as failure, by a brush with death or an experience of loss. If, at this point, a person is willing to confront death and aloneness and the basic nature of our existence, it may be the beginning of a transpersonal awakening. It is, in fact, the transpersonal awakening that can lead one through the existential crisis of despair. What is sometimes called "the dark night of the soul" could be called the "dark night of the ego."

The transpersonal content in therapy, then, may be introduced by a client who is having transpersonal experiences or who is ready to move into transpersonal areas of exploration. Sometimes a client may feel disturbed by transpersonal experiences which have happened either spontaneously, as a result of meditative practice, or as a result of unsupervised use of psychedelics. Whatever the cause, there now seems to be an increasing need for therapists who have some understanding and knowledge of the transpersonal dimension, because clients who feel they are experiencing a kind of spiritual emergency may not feel adequately cared for when they go to a therapist who is not familiar with the transpersonal domain.

Finally I want to emphasize that the transpersonal perspective is open-ended; it is always in process. It never seems to be fixed, finished, or completely defined. Each of us is participating in the process that is unfolding because the evolution of consciousness is happening in each of us. The holonomic theory is a good metaphor because it illustrates that the whole exists in each of us, and each of us exists as part of it. We may imagine that we are separate from all that is; this is the illusion. However, when we wake up to who and what we really are, we discover that we're all in it together, that each of us has a part to play, that each of us has simply to understand what our unique contribution can be.

Sometimes this understanding develops under the guidance of teachers, but it is my observation that good teachers lead us to find our way to our own inner guidance (Vaughan, 1979). Typically, our gurus remind us that it is the universal Self within our hearts that we need to contact in order to find the wisdom that will guide our personal growth as well as
our society's transformation. It seems to me that it doesn't matter whether it's Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge; Bhakti Yoga, the devotional path; Karma Yoga, the path of works; or Hatha Yoga, the way of the body. All have their value. One simply needs to find the way that is appropriate for oneself, and we are here to help each other do just that.

Therapists are not supposed to give advice. Nevertheless, in this context I would like to recommend the advice (as quoted in Boorstein, 1980) that comes to us from the great teacher Gautama Buddha:

"Do not believe in what you have heard. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. Do not believe anything because it is rumored and spoken of by many. Do not believe merely because the written statement of some old sage is produced. Do not believe in conjectures. Do not believe merely in the authority of your teachers and elders. After observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason and it is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it."

REFERENCES


Requests for reprints to Frances E. Vaughan, 10 Millwood St., Mill Valley, CA 94941.