TRANSPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: AN ANTIDOTE TO THE POSTMODERN MALAISE

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ABSTRACT: Kaisa Puhakka examines transpersonal psychology’s potential as antidote to the postmodern malaise that plagues our contemporary world. This malaise is reinforced and legitimized by postmodern relativistic epistemology, and it manifests as a fragmentation and isolation of people imprisoned within their culturally and linguistically determined subjectivities. The author suggests that the experiential grounding sought in transpersonal theory, research, and practice, specifically in its deconstructive mode, can be an antidote to this malaise because experiential deconstruction (as opposed to conceptual deconstruction) can open the door of the conceptual mind to a connection with what lies beyond its subjectivity. She identifies major challenges to preserving the potency of the antidote in a climate of multiple perspectives and relativism within transpersonal psychology itself and to the field’s ability to respond to the unprecedented challenges facing humanity and the planet today.

I thank the editor of The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology for inviting me to reflect on transpersonal psychology as this field of inquiry and practice celebrates its 40th year. My reflections will be from the periphery where I have been in relation to the field for the most part except for the two years I served as the editor of JTP (1999–2001). So I tend to watch the developments in the field at some distance, and the picture I paint is in broad strokes with colors that are my own and suggest possibilities rather than offer an objective account.

Looking in from the Outside

As a student in the late 1960’s, I had looked past psychology to other disciplines such as philosophy, art, and literature, for an appreciation and exploration of the subtler dimensions of the human psyche. The launching of the new field of transpersonal psychology was exciting news, for it promised hitherto unfathomed prospects for the expansion of consciousness as well as empirical and theoretical investigation of its phenomena beyond what those other disciplines could offer. The new field also provided a bridge that had been missing between my own academic studies and the everyday lives of people, including my own when not absorbed in my books. At the time, I was steeped in comparative philosophy and the study of Hindu and Buddhist texts. I found the wisdom as well as approaches to practice in those texts immensely valuable. But they were often first translations from Sanskrit, Chinese, and later Tibetan, and their obscure, repetitive style made for a tedious read for all but the most dedicated scholars. Their wisdom seemed inaccessible to most
professional and lay educated folks, and the scholars in my field often seemed too engrossed in the fine points of logic and linguistics to be of much help in making these texts more accessible. Philosophers and linguists may have been the first to bring the texts of Eastern wisdom to the Western shores, but in the end it was psychologists—in particular, transpersonal psychologists—who brought this wisdom to the American culture. In this context, “transpersonal psychologists” is taken in a broad sense that includes the forebears of the transpersonal movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s—the Beat Poets, Alan Watts, Suzuki Roshi, etc. What distinguished these from the Philosophers and linguists was their insistence on testing the wisdom of the East where the rubber hits the Western road—in everyday emotional and psychological experience.

The mission of transpersonal psychology, then, was not simply to bring Eastern wisdom to the West. Rather, it was the expansion of consciousness “beyond the ego,” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Vaughan, 1985) and the study of the means for such expansion that were available in these Eastern wisdom traditions. For this mission the field drew from other sources as well—Native American and other indigenous traditions, as well as research in psychedelics and meditation. The focus on the experiential data of individual consciousness provided a neutral ground upon which to integrate the findings from all these various sources. Indeed, the new field, while studying varieties of spiritual traditions and sects, did an admirable job in keeping itself free of sectarian bias. The following personal anecdote may convey the spirit of this openness. In the weeks before I was to take over as JTP’s new editor, in a conversation with Miles Vich (Editor 1975–1999) I asked him why of all people I had been offered the job. Miles’ responded without hesitation, “because you’ve got no shtik and no hidden agenda.” His recognition of this about me gave me no small measure of personal satisfaction, but far more exciting was his nailing of this as a key qualification for the job.

But sectarian bias was not the only challenge for the new field. Others arose from the precarious position transpersonal psychology occupied with one uneasy foot in the academic world of psychology and another in the popular, New Age culture. Academia offered credibility and grounding in scientific methods. Yet the research methods of conventional psychology were felt by transpersonal psychologists to be constrictive and often inadequate, and the new field’s standing in the eyes of academic psychology remained in doubt. On the other hand, the New Age world bestowed transpersonal psychology a great popular appeal. But this, I thought, was a mixed blessing. The annual conferences grew larger and attracted increasing numbers of lay people and semi-professionals, and with topics geared for these folks and a handful of leaders (who tended to be the same year after year) as “star” presenters to draw those huge audiences, rigorous collegial discourse and exchange of ideas tended to take a back seat. The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (JTP), under the editorship of Anthony Sutich and Miles Vich during the first 31 years, provided an invaluable service as the major, if not the only, ongoing forum for such discourse in the fledgling field.
Openness and Indeterminacy of Transpersonal Psychology

When in 1999 I stepped in as the new editor of JTP, I discovered a field that was, after riding the cultural crest for thirty-odd years, now in transition. In the previous decades it had cohered around a vision called, after Aldous Huxley, the “perennial philosophy.” This philosophy espoused universal truths discoverable in the myriad spiritual traditions, and it envisioned a reality beyond the variations of history and culture, consisting of multiple levels hierarchically ordered from the physical through emotional and mental to increasingly subtle spiritual levels. Some version of these two central ideas of the perennial philosophy was accepted by every major transpersonal theory of human development, and they had indeed come to define transpersonal psychology’s dominant paradigm.

While the existence of a dominant paradigm lent a unified vision and coherence to the research endeavors in the field, it also raised the specter if not of sectarian bias certainly of doctrinal bent. By the late 1990’s, criticism of transpersonal psychology’s “monolithic” vision had been mounting (Ferrer, 2000; Usatynski, 2001), and alternative views that were nonhierarchical and pluralistic were gaining prominence. The field that had always prided itself in being open was now even more so, and less certain. Gone was the confidence of the early days in a unified transpersonal vision, expressed by Tony Sutich at the time he was passing the editorship of JTP to Miles in these words: “I have worked with the conviction that transpersonal psychology was an expression of one or more general principles that seemed to have a quality of permanence.” (1975, p. iv).

Even with the loss of coherence and the uncertainties that came with it, the new openness to alternative views and the increasing sensitivity to cultural context seemed a welcome development. They struck me as a sign of maturation, perhaps of a deeper understanding of the nature of the endeavor in which we were engaged. As the new editor I expressed the belief that a certain indeterminacy and inability to be fully captured by any theory or set of paradigmatic assumptions seems to be intrinsic to transpersonal psychology. This is because it is an inquiry that aspires to expand human consciousness beyond the ken of conceptual thought within which paradigms and their assumptions are forged. The almost endless and varied attempts to define transpersonal psychology in the past decades (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992) suggest that this indeed is the case.

The indeterminacy at the core of the transpersonal endeavor seems to make it a particularly fine playground for the dialectic of “unity vs. diversity.” By this dialectic I mean the tension and back and forth movement between, on the one hand, the search for common essences and unifying paradigms and, on the other hand, diversity of expression and multiple perspectives. By 2000, diversity, the recognition of human spirituality as a multifaceted affair infused by language, culture, gender, and myriad other factors, was clearly gaining the foreground in this dialectic. And still to this day, diversity and pluralism appear to be the predominant emphasis. Yet I did not believe then, and I do
not believe now, that the quest for unity, essence, or depth has altogether disappeared. At the time, I suggested that it may have gone “into hiding, for incubation and maturation” (Puhakka, 2000, p. 2) to perhaps surface again at a later date.

An Antidote to Relativistic Epistemology

Increasingly, I have come to see the “unity vs. diversity” dialectic and how transpersonal psychology dances with it in a larger contemporary context. This larger context is provided by the shift from modern absolutist to post-modern pluralistic and relativistic epistemology (relativism).

I believe that transpersonal psychology can provide a much needed antidote to the largely dire effects of this shift on the culture at large. Relativism, at least the crass forms of it that inform contemporary popular consciousness, serves to legitimize and normalize the fragmentation, isolation, alienation, and cynicism rampant in the culture and recent politics of America (and to a lesser extent, the rest of the world caught up in the global consumer culture) today. As I will argue, the antidote that transpersonal psychology can offer to this is most evident in the tenets of the perennial philosophy that declare a reality that transcends the relative truths and viewpoints of the conceptual mind. But acceptance of perennial philosophy is not what gives potency to the antidote. What does is the call for direct experiential inquiry into the fundamental truths claimed by perennial or any other philosophy. Such a call is there, potentially at least, in transpersonal psychology, in the value it places on direct experience and alternative modes of knowing. Some of these modes seek to connect with the object of knowing directly without the mediation of conceptual thought. Thus they promise a way out of the postmodern solipsistic prison.

I would like to expand on these points in the subsequent sections, starting with the transition from the modern to the postmodern worldview and the widespread malaise coinciding with it, and transpersonal psychology’s answer to these. I will elaborate on this answer in terms of what I have called “experiential deconstruction” as distinct from “conceptual deconstruction,” with the latter being central to postmodern epistemology (Puhakka, 2007). Lastly, looking toward the future, I would like to touch on the unprecedented challenges of the contemporary world situation. I believe that retaining the antidote’s potency will be essential if transpersonal psychology is to have a constructive role in meeting these challenges.

Relativistic Epistemology and the Postmodern Malaise

The epistemological shift at the heart of the transition from the modern to the postmodern view of science and subjectivity has been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g. Derrida, 1967/1973; Foucault, 1969/1976; Gergen, 1991), and so I will not go into details here except to situate transpersonal psychology in this transition and make some observations about this field’s potential to
provide a way out of the fragmentation, alienation, and malaise that seems to have been increasingly with us ever since.

The epistemological shift out of modernity had been underway for some decades before transpersonal psychology entered the scene. The deconstruction of modernity’s truths had been going on in the humanities and was already undermining the confidence of modern science’s ability to yield objective, unbiased truths about the natural world. And such deconstruction was not all bad. The “softening” of the scientific attitude with an increasing recognition of the role of subjectivity in the findings and conclusions of scientific research may well have helped crack the door for transpersonal research and theory, as these were no longer the only endeavors against which the charge of “arbitrary” or “subjective” could be made. The shift may not have been all bad in other ways also. In its early days in the academy, the deconstructive impetus had a liberating effect on minds that were becoming aware of presuppositions and assumptions to which they had previously been oblivious.

But in time, the spirit, even if not the skillful and rigorous execution, of deconstruction hit the streets where it was transformed into a cultural zeitgeist of crass relativism. One person’s “truth” was now as valid as the next person’s, because each person’s truth is “true” for him or herself and cannot, and needed not, carry weight beyond that. The alienation inherent in this zeitgeist stems from the notion (and experience) that each person is locked into his or her own subjectivity which is, in turn, deconstructed into modes of linguistic and cultural praxis. This leaves no way “out” to a connection with anything beyond the beliefs and interpretations that make up this subjectivity. It also leaves no way “in” to a connection with oneself, for the self one seeks to connect with has no substance beyond the patterns of cultural and linguistic conditioning.

Seeing our constructions of self and world for what they are is not all bad. In fact it could be liberating, except for the paradoxical absolutism with which this postmodern predicament is usually affirmed by intellectuals and increasingly lived out by the rest of us. It leaves no way out of such constructs, and no way in to their roots within psyche and culture. For most lay people, such an articulation of the “no way out, no way in” predicament would probably seem arcane, and even the more intellectually inclined are likely to reject it as too harsh. Yet it seems to me that the effects—perhaps largely unconscious—of this postmodern predicament are increasingly evident in the isolation of people and fragmentation of the social fabric, in the ease with which “truth” has come to be equated with “opinion” or “feeling” and is used as a tool for manipulation by the media and in politics and advertising.

Transpersonal Psychology’s Answer: The Quest for Connection

Transpersonal psychology’s quest for connection with oneself and with the rest of the world challenges the postmodern predicament I outlined above. It affirms the possibility of a “way in” as well as a “way out.” The strong
countercultural momentum with which many people in the sixties and seventies embraced the transpersonal vision bespeaks the felt sense of loss of these connections in conventional education and the culture at large.

Earlier articulations of the transpersonal vision were enshrined in the tenets of perennial philosophy. While these tenets made for an accessible and coherent counterpoint to the postmodern predicament, they also made transpersonal psychology vulnerable to the legitimate criticism that its vision was an absolutist meta-narrative, a regression to modernity’s universalist claims which postmodern deconstructive analysis exposes as being arbitrary and indefensible. Indeed, as already mentioned, criticisms as well as voices for alternative paradigms have emerged within the ranks of transpersonal psychology itself.

But the perennial philosophy is not just a metaphysical system; it is also a set of prescriptions for practices to awaken or expand the horizon of awareness and to develop one’s capacity to know beyond the merely subjective. Many of the alternative paradigms have their own prescriptions for practices designed to awaken and connect with the world within as well as without. My point is that, regardless of theory or paradigm, transpersonal psychology has, from its inception, placed a premium on experiential, as distinct from conceptual, validation of truths. Thus, irrespective of theory or paradigm, transpersonal psychology has consistently recognized that there are truths (or realities) beyond the reach of the thinking, analyzing, and even synthesizing mind, and therefore that alternative, non-conceptual, modes of knowing or perception must be accessed or cultivated to apprehend these. The call for not only acknowledging but accessing such modes of knowing is explicit, for example, in Walsh’s (1995; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983) proposal of the standard of adequatio for researchers investigating mystical and other transcendent states.

Obviously, experience or experiential knowing is not adequate just because it is “experience.” Postmodern deconstruction has shown convincingly that experience can be just as context bound and dependent on subjective perspective as any other endeavor that depends on the conceptual mind. What is called for, then, is a deconstruction of the conceptual mind itself; in other words, a mode of knowing that is non-conceptual. In common usage we call such knowing “experiential,” but it is important to appreciate that while most experience is structured by the conceptual mind, I am using “experiential” in a narrower sense to refer to non-conceptual awareness or the kind of direct “seeing” Krishnamurti (1973/1987) talks about that is not mediated by interpretation and not divided into the “seer” and the “seen.”

To summarize, transpersonal psychology’s potential as an antidote to the postmodern malaise lies not in its theoretical or paradigmatic formulations, nor even in its valuing of human experience in all its forms, but in its commitment to discovering and developing ways of knowing that do not depend on conceptual thinking or on perception shaped by culturally, linguistically, and psychologically conditioned schemata. Such non-conceptual knowing, of course, does not speak and makes no claims—which is why most transpersonal researchers shy away from it or consider it too elusive to be of

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use for theory or research endeavors to which articulation of knowledge claims is essential. However, I believe that the quality of speaking and making knowledge claims can be very different when these activities are informed and infused by the ineffable and by the understanding that comes with connecting with, or even just glimpsing, the ineffable, namely, that it cannot be spoken of.

Two Kinds of Deconstruction: “Conceptual” and “Experiential”

To further clarify the relationship between the conceptual and the non-conceptual or that which cannot be spoken of, I would like to introduce a distinction between two kinds of deconstruction (Puhakka, 2007). We might call one of these conceptual and the other experiential where “experiential” is understood in the narrow sense of non-conceptual I spoke of above. In most academic discussions, all deconstruction is assumed to be conceptual, and so the distinction I am introducing is typically not recognized in those discussions.

To begin with conceptual deconstruction, its objects are concepts and ideas and meanings composed of these. Conceptual deconstruction has no end point, for any seeming endpoint can be further deconstructed in terms of other concepts or ideas ad infinitum. This is what it means to say that there are no foundational or absolute truths, or that there are only contexts within contexts endlessly.

In experiential deconstruction, the data of experience are analyzed into components and ever finer subcomponents in direct observation. These data can, and usually do, depend on conceptual thinking and forms of perception conditioned by language, culture, etc. Obviously, then, the two kinds of deconstruction are not distinguished by their objects. Rather, they are distinguished by how they approach their objects—their methods, if you will. In experiential deconstruction the object is apprehended in immediate or direct observation that includes the observer so that ultimately the distinction between the subject and object of the observation is itself deconstructed. This distinction is presupposed by all operations of the conceptual mind, including its deconstructive activities, and so we can see that experiential deconstruction, when taken all the way, deconstructs the conceptual (i.e. thinking and perceiving) mind itself.

This takes us to another contrast between experiential and conceptual deconstruction, which is that unlike the conceptual, the experiential has an end point. This end point is the literal vanishing of the components or the dissolution of any and all elements that seem to possess an identity or enduring structure discernible to the conceptual mind. Thus in terms of mental content, the end point could be said to be nothing (i.e. no-thing). However, the epistemic event in which experiential deconstruction culminates has truth value on its own terms, which means that it can only be grasped by accessing it directly, rather than indirectly by interpretations of the conceptual mind.

I believe that experiential deconstruction as I have outlined it above could be transpersonal psychology’s gift to the beleaguered attempts in our contempo-
rary world to break out of the subjectivity of our own minds into a connection with something real that is not just another belief or mental construct. But the question may be asked, how “real” is experiential deconstruction itself? Does anybody actually do it? In particular, do transpersonal psychologists do it?

The many spiritual traditions from which transpersonal psychology draws for its experiential explorations in research and in clinical practice carry out experiential deconstruction to varying degrees of depth and completeness, and not all of them involve practices deliberately designed for developing the capacity for direct observation or “seeing.” One well-known tradition that does offer models for taking such deconstruction all the way to its end point and for cultivating the capacity for doing so is Buddhism. The basic premise of Buddhism is deconstructive, that is, accessing truth or reality in Buddhism is not a matter of construction (“contrivance” is the word used in many Tibetan texts on the subject) but rather, it is a matter of deconstructing the culturally, linguistically, and even biologically conditioned constructs we have of the self and the world.

Few spiritual traditions and their practices are as uncompromisingly deconstructive as Buddhism; many involve a mixture of constructive and deconstructive endeavors, and which is predominant depends on the intent or aim of the practice. If the aim is to produce a desirable altered state or a spiritual high, the practice is more likely to engage imagery and other mental processes constructively. If the aim is to push the limits of knowing beyond the bounds of the conceptual mind that includes imagery, the practice is likely to be deconstructive in its emphasis.

There is no need to make a judgment as to the superiority of the constructive over the deconstructive or vice versa. I am simply calling attention to the potential of the deconstructive approach to offer a way out of the solipsistic prison of individual subjectivity. And it seems to me that most, if not all, of the practice traditions from which transpersonal psychology draws engage in some degree of experiential deconstruction, if not to altogether dissolve, at least to relax and permit alteration of, the usual cognitive processing schemata. As such, they can be an antidote to the isolation, fragmentation and malaise that inevitably follows from the postmodern belief that we can only know and connect with, the contents of our culturally conditioned conceptual minds.

*The Future of Transpersonal Psychology: Meeting the Challenges for Humanity and the Planet*

Where is transpersonal psychology today? According to a recent study (Ruzek, 2007), it has not become the “fourth force” of psychology its founders once hoped for. In fact, it has not joined forces with the rest of psychology and is seen as largely irrelevant to it. Yet it seems to me that the success of its alignment with mainstream psychology may not be the only, or even the best, way to assess transpersonal psychology’s contributions to our world. As a field of inquiry and practice, it has spread far and wide, crossing disciplinary as well
as geographic boundaries. Under the current editorship of *JTP*, the field has moved from being a subspecialty of psychology to an interdisciplinary field of study and has also moved from being primarily an American-centered movement to becoming truly international. With the disappearance of the boundaries that previously defined the field, the question arises, what is “transpersonal” in transpersonal inquiry and practice in the various arenas where these are being carried out in the contemporary world? The surfacing of this basic question again is testimony to the intrinsic openness of the field. In that openness lie opportunities for renewal of connection with and relevance to the world in which we all live, a world that is now in peril.

The challenges humanity and the planet face today are unprecedented. Indeed, they are so unprecedented and so enormous that one could buckle under and turn away from them. Yet no one can ignore them and remain relevant to the world in which we live today. I, too, cannot close my reflections without attempting to outline a few major forks in the road for transpersonal psychology as it responds to the great challenges that are already facing humanity and the planet and that are likely to grow greater in the future. Without a doubt there are other forks in the road ahead besides the ones I call attention to here. But these three come to mind as I contemplate humanity’s collective predicament and how transpersonal psychology might play a positive role in navigating it:

1) Will this field of inquiry and practice retain its potency as an antidote to the postmodern fragmentation and malaise or will it, too, succumb to it?
2) Will transpersonal psychology be able to effectively mobilize and join forces with others in the efforts to save and heal the planet or will it withdraw from those efforts into isolation and irrelevancy?
3) Will it be able to wholeheartedly embrace the predicament of humanity facing the prospect of its own extinction, or will it join the majority in denial?

Which road the field and the community supporting the field may take at each fork depends on how we deal with challenges that arise within the field itself. I see two such challenges.

*The Central Place of Mutual Inquiry and Dialogue in Transpersonal Psychology*

The first concerns the field’s ability to remain viable and potent as antidote to the postmodern fragmentation and malaise. We have looked at this in terms of the experiential emphasis and deconstruction. Another angle on this is how the field fares with the multiple perspectives and diverse concerns within its own ranks. Earlier we noted that diversity and pluralism have now taken the foreground in the unity vs. diversity dialectic. There is a danger of getting lost in the myriad perspectives and of succumbing to the very fragmentation and malaise to which transpersonal psychology promises an antidote. To stave off such danger, it might be tempting to go for systematizing and pulling the multiple perspectives together into an “integrated” vision or theory that we can
all subscribe to. But this would simply be a retreat to another meta-narrative and modernistic absolutism. A mutual dialogue and inquiry that engages the perspectives fully seems to me to be the only viable option.

What does it take for such a dialogue and inquiry to be successful? Even among well-meaning and sincere participants such a dialogue typically ends up affirming one or several of the perspectives (or perhaps an “integrated” perspective as discussed above), which ultimately reinforces the tendency toward fragmentation. So what is required of those who see the limitations of any one perspective for success in moving toward clarity rather than fragmentation? Minimally, it seems to require that participants in the dialogue hold their own perspectives lightly and are willing to inquire “backwards,” so to speak, into their own presuppositions. It would seem to me that, because of its enduring concern with what lies beyond the thinking mind and its perspectives, transpersonal psychology is well-suited for cultivating nonattachment to perspectives and thus for fostering clarity and connectedness in the midst of cultural, theoretical, and methodological diversity.

How well will transpersonal psychology practice the difficult art of holding perspectives lightly? This, of course, is an open question. Not being attached to perspectives is only half of the difficulty. The other half is not distancing from the diverse perspectives, not retreating from them into a foggy all-inclusiveness where one is averse to differences and eager to find common ground and agreement at the expense of clear understanding of differences (which seems to have been the approach favored in the field, as Walsh notes in Ruzek, 2007). Whether the field moves into the future with a clarity and openness that can see through and beyond the relativity of its own as well as others’ conceptual formulations depends on whether the field retains the experiential edge that connects its vision and understanding to what lies beyond the purview of the conceptual.

We do well to appreciate that the experiential edge can be engaged in more ways than one, for more purposes than one. It can be engaged for healing or indulged for spiritual entertainment, both of which are constructing activities. Or it can be engaged as the kind of rigorous inquiry I have called experiential deconstruction. It is important to be clear about these differences. Experiential deconstruction is what provides a perspective or viewpoint “beyond perspectives” (and so it is really not a view “point” at all but is rather like limitless “space”) in which all perspectives can be held lightly and with clarity. Whether transpersonal psychology can hold its own multiple perspectives as well as those of other fields lightly with clarity seems to me to depend on the place of direct, experiential deconstruction and knowing in its theory, research methods, and applications.

Responding to the Crisis of Humanity and Planet: A Quantum Leap?

The second major challenge to the transpersonal field directly relates to the impending (if not already in its initial stages) crisis of humanity and of the
planet. My impression is that there is both awareness of and concern about this crisis among transpersonal psychologists. However, the field has until now been weighted toward the needs and aspirations of the individual rather than the collective or the whole, and this orientation does not seem to lend itself to effectively meeting humanity’s systemic crises. These concern not only the ecological and climate crises but global capitalism which requires endless population growth and depletion of resources for short-term gain (Klein, 2007; Berman, 2006) and so aggravates the other two crises.

The shift from an orientation that starts from the individual’s needs and aspirations to one in which the starting point is the interconnected web of life is a kind of quantum leap. An analogous shift is found in the spiritual practice traditions. In Buddhism, it is recognized as the shift from “small vehicle (hinayana)” to “great vehicle (mahayana) practice—not to be confused with the historical schools that bear these names in the Buddhist tradition. In small vehicle practice, whether in the Theravada or Mahayana schools, one is concerned with self-improvement and attainment of liberation or enlightenment for oneself. In great vehicle practice, the concern is for the liberation of all beings. Among the great vehicle practitioners in Buddhism, it is widely understood that small vehicle practice does not in and of itself lead to great vehicle practice. Only when realizing the illusory nature of the individual self and its aspirations does the shift to the great vehicle naturally and spontaneously take place.

It may be that transpersonal psychology is called to make a parallel shift from its individualistic orientation to one that recognizes the web of life as primary. What would make it a quantum leap is the realization that the interconnectedness of life is not a hypothetical endpoint of an individual’s developmental process but is rather the most concretely “real” place where we start our inquiry and practice. For such a quantum leap to happen, all perspectives must be held very, very lightly! Until now, it seems to me that the majority of transpersonal psychologists and other Western spiritual practitioners have held positions analogous to the small vehicle practice, that is, they believe that the realization of interconnectedness is an individual achievement that is postulated as occurring somewhere later in the developmental process. With the quantum leap, this realization and its facilitation becomes the first step from which transpersonal theory, research, and practice proceeds.

What makes this reversal so radical as to merit it being considered analogous to a quantum leap is that it starts not with an assumption of a premise, which is the usual practice in articulating a theory or a methodology, but with a realization that changes the theorizing consciousness. Will this realization be a sudden “leap” or a gradual progression through various disciplined practices one may take up? This question has been debated for over 2000 years in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions (e.g. see Potter, 1963; Smart, 1968) and no doubt in other traditions as well, and I will not go into it here beyond acknowledging the tricky nature of the question to which the long history of the debate testifies. For our purposes, we might say that the realization, whether sudden or gradual, is practice. Thus with the quantum leap, practice
now comes first and theory and methods, informed by a consciousness changed by the practice, follow. The practice consists, minimally, of holding perspectives lightly, of not attaching oneself to views or perspectives even as one engages them fully. The transpersonal field has until now been just a field. With the incorporation of such practice, it may become a genuine discipline.

I have likened this radical shift to the move from the small vehicle practice that is concerned with individual liberation, enlightenment or self-improvement to the great vehicle practice in which the concern is with all of life. Thus the shift calls into question the central place which the search for an expanded self-identity has had in the transpersonal endeavor. What the self identifies with has been examined by transpersonal psychologists in the past decades, but that it identifies with something or other has been accepted as given by most. Thus the dominant view in transpersonal theory and research has envisioned a path of spiritual progress that proceeds not by shedding the layers of self-identity but by expanding one’s identity towards wider horizons and more inclusive boundaries (e.g. Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Wilber, 1980, 1995). In this, transpersonal psychology has been aligned with the mainstream cultural ethos—I believe to its detriment in the long term despite having popular appeal in the short term. Even though one would like to think that such expansiveness has nothing to do with the narcissistic orientation (also widespread in the culture) in which the self incorporates into itself and identifies with whatever it values, it is not clear to me how exactly one tells them apart.

When the web of interconnectedness is taken as the starting premise, the individual and his or her needs and desires, including the quest for ever-expanding self-identity, are seen as being among the many strands of the web, no more and no less important or substantially real than the rest. Again, this is a radical re-orientation which runs counter to the beliefs and values promoted by the culture at large including the machinery of advertisement. But it would certainly seem more optimal for effectively dealing with the challenges and crises of our time that have to do with our survival and wellbeing together with all beings of this earth. When the understanding of the web is clear and deep enough, the practice of kindness and compassion would arise naturally and spontaneously from such understanding rather than being a contrivance designed to move the individual up on the developmental ladder or further toward the goal of on his or her spiritual path.

The above shift in orientation in transpersonal research and practice would address the second fork in the road I outlined in ways that are obvious enough to need further elaboration. Working out the ramifications of this shift in theory and research methodology would be a daunting, but I imagine exciting, task. Certain areas of practice, such as psychotherapy and counseling, will have a somewhat easier time as they can draw directly from spiritual practice traditions such as the nondual wisdom traditions that have made the quantum leap (Predergast, Fenner, & Krystal, 2003; Prendergast & Bradford, 2007).

The experiential emphasis, especially in its deconstructive mode, can open access to the web of life beyond the conceptual mind. When the understanding
that there is more to life than our individual dramas (including spiritual
longings) is clear and the connection to this web of life is palpable, then would
one not embrace all of it—both the living and the dying that are but one
inseparable dance—with open arms? A transpersonal field of inquiry and
practice that encourages such a full embrace of all that is confronting humanity
and the planet today could offer a beacon of sanity and force of healing in our
troubled world. In envisioning such a field—indeed a discipline—I may be
dreaming what may be, quite possibly, unattainable. Maybe so, but what could
be a better occasion for such dreaming than the start of the fifth decade of this
at once troubling and fascinating field?

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