UNUSUAL PHENOMENA ASSOCIATED WITH A TRANSCENDENT HUMAN EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: This case study, which incorporates one experiment and a naturalistic investigation, examines unusual phenomena associated with a transcendent human experience, in the broad category of near-death and nature mysticism type experiences. The human experience is documented predominantly through spoken normal recall, as well as written and clinical hypnosis descriptions of the event, medical records and eyewitness testimony. The unusual phenomena associated with this human experience include a crucifix-shaped natural formation and face-like structures appearing on a tree strongly associated with the human experience and pertaining to a specific geographical site connected with the human experience. A number of possible explanations for the finding are explored, including paranormal explanations and chance. The finding is deemed to provide some evidence suggestive of highly sophisticated intelligence in connection with the behaviour of living earth systems.

Transcendent experiences, also termed religious, mystical, peak or exceptional human experiences, are significant events within the broad philosophical traditions of humanity (Bucke, 1901; James, 1902; Maslow, 1969; Ouspensky, 1931; White, 1997). There is a voluminous literature in the arena of mysticism and transcendent experience, with considerable debate in recent times as to how such experiences are best studied and understood (Evans, 1989; Forman, 1999; Katz, 1978; Schuon, 1984; Stace, 1960). Definitions of mystical experience are wide-ranging but the most common characteristic features of such experiences are: (a) a sense of noesis, a strong sense of knowledge and significance associated with the experience, (b) a sense of ineffability, of the experience being beyond words, (c) the transient nature of such experiences, (d) the preponderance of feelings of unity and harmonious relationship to existence, nature or the divine, (e) loss of ego functioning, (f) alterations in space and time perception, and (g) a lack of control over the event.

Broadly, theoretical approaches to the study of mysticism range from perennialist perspectives, which recognize the fundamental universality of the mystical experience as an event of pure consciousness (Huxley, 1945; Merrell-Wolff, 1973; Nasr, 1989; Wilber, 1995), to constructivist perspectives, which view such experiences as conditional on the conceptual and cultural context of the experience (Heim, 1995; Katz, 1978, 1983; Paden, 1992). In adopting a

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middle ground view (Forman, 1993, 1998), which recognizes the reality of an unmediated, pure consciousness event, that may then be interpreted or constructed in accordance with particular conceptual, linguistic or cultural frameworks, this author is of the view that each of these perspectives offers valuable insights into the study of mysticism and transcendent experience.

Mystical or transcendent experiences have been frequently reported in modern times (Hardy, 1979; Thomas & Cooper, 1980), often having considerable impact on the lives of those who experience them (Ahern, 1990; Sutherland, 1995). By far the most common and well-studied events in this broad category are near-death experiences (NDE’s), which are reported by about 4% of the adult population (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Knoblauch, Schmied & Schnettler, 2001) and have been interpreted according to various theoretical frameworks (Blanke, Ortigue, Landis & Seeck, 2001; Jansen, 1997; Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980; Van Lommel, Van Wees, Meyers & Elferrich, 2001). Other commonly reported experiences include accounts of greater love and insight, experiences of union with divinity or nature, psychic experiences and encounters with various forms of energy or intelligence. Such experiences can occur spontaneously, through trauma or injury, through the use of various psychoactive substances and within the context of spiritual or religious practices.

Among the challenges of research in this area, particularly in reference to the perspectives presented by subjects in their recollection of such events, is the highly subtle nature of transcendent experiences. Typically, the documentation of such events may comprise only a subjective report by the subject of the experience. Further, accurate recall in such cases may be complicated by a number of factors, including the intensity and state-specific nature of many such experiences and the limitations of human cognition in situations of crisis, injury or novelty. Nonetheless, there may be aspects of such experiences that can be subject to scrutiny, including novel information presented by subjects (e.g., which could not have been arrived at through ordinary sense perception), unique vantage points experienced (e.g., the out-of-body state) and so forth. In this respect, the evidence supporting the reality and validity of such events is impressive.

Whilst a thorough literature review is outside the scope of the current work, over a century of research has demonstrated that individuals in connection with such experiences appear to have unique access to highly specific information, including skills and abilities, or to unique vantage points (Harrison, 1994; Hodgson, 1897-1898; Ring & Cooper, 1997; Schwartz & Russek, 2001; Thomas, 1939). Hyslop (1909) reports the case of a man who found his body suddenly invaded by a foreign intelligence, suspected to be a recently deceased landscape artist. With little artistic training, this man produced several paintings very closely resembling unfinished sketches of the relevant artist never shown publicly. Tart (1968) reports the case of a woman who correctly identified a five-digit number strategically placed on a shelf above the bed whilst purportedly in an out-of-body state. Sabom (1998) reports the case of a 35-year-old woman who described the specific detail of a surgical
procedure to correct a basilar artery aneurysm, including the precise character of a unique saw used for this procedure whilst in visual and, to a lesser extent, auditory isolation and in the context of accepted criteria of brain death, including a flat EEG, lack of cerebral blood flow and brain-stem response. Eisenbeiss & Hassler (2006) report a chess match in which chess moves relayed by an intelligence purportedly communicating through a medium were at a skill level corresponding to the known level of play of a former chess grandmaster player. These authors also report a 94% accuracy of information relayed by this purported intelligence through the medium concerning the life of this former chess player, including information initially believed to be inaccurate, but confirmed by subsequent inquiry.

All such experiences are valid and important events of transcendence of the everyday parameters of human experience. Some cases may present opportunity for detailed inspection of highly specific information. The case study methodology appears to be particularly well-suited to the scientific study of such cases, especially toward finding support or witness to specific details reported by individuals during such events. The current article presents a novel case in which unusual phenomena, including a crucifix-shaped natural formation and face-like structures, found at a highly specific geographical location associated with the human experience, provide novel evidence and information pertaining to the transcendent human experience. An overall working hypothesis was that a prima facie case for a direct relationship between the human experience and unusual phenomena could be made, on the basis of the rarity of the unusual phenomena identified, a descriptive goodness of fit of the human experience with these phenomena, as well as scientific explanations relating to the occurrence of such phenomena historically. An experiment and naturalistic examination were conducted to explore some of these questions - the purpose of the experiment was to consider the possible human meaning of a religious symbol located on a tree of significance to the human event and the purpose of the naturalistic examination was to consider the probability that a symbol of this kind could have occurred in a natural setting of this kind by pure chance. Further assessment of the working hypothesis explored the descriptive goodness of fit of the phenomena identified with the character of the human experience reported, the status of the unusual phenomena as evidence supporting the subject’s experience, as well as scientific explanations relating to the occurrence of such phenomena.

**METHODS**

A detailed investigation of a transcendent human experience was conducted, comprising: (a) analysis of the content of the experience, incorporating an audio recording featuring normal recall of the experience by the subject, which was verified through careful examination of other supporting documentation, including self-report journal entries (dated in a consecutive journal and in the subject’s handwriting), eyewitness testimony, medical records and clinical hypnosis reconstructions of the event conducted by a senior practitioner of medical hypnosis, (b) a careful examination of the geographical locations
where the human experience occurred for relevant evidence. This investigation comprised detailed study of a number of natural features discovered during the investigation, including local topographical features and a crucifix-shaped formation found above the subject’s initials on a tree of significance to the transcendent experience, as well as several other formations on this tree. Experiment 1 surveyed 120 individuals with respect to the meaning or symbolism of a crucifix and inscription identifying an individual on a tree. Subjects were asked two questions:

1. ‘If you saw a crucifix on a tree, what would you think about why it was there?’ and
2. ‘If you saw a crucifix and below it the name or initials of a person, what would you think about why the crucifix and initials were there?’

A naturalistic examination following discovery of this feature, evaluated the frequency of crucifix-shaped natural formations by visual inspection of 10,781 Eucalyptus species trees, including 195 specimens at the site of the Eucalyptus tree of significance to the transcendent experience. The main trunk and visible portions of the branches were all carefully inspected for the presence of crucifix-shaped or other notable formations.

**CASE DESCRIPTION**

At approximately 0730 HRS local time, on a day in the middle part of 2001 (exact date omitted on privacy grounds), Mr. C, a 36 year old man, reported a transcendent human experience. The following is a transcript of an audio tape recording consisting of normal recall of the experience by the subject, with certain private details omitted:

“My first recollection is a restless night, difficulty sleeping, agitation, restlessness, of feeling at times as though I am being assaulted mentally, intense fear - an environment of great trepidation, as though I am in grave danger, has overtaken the household, great uncertainty about the future, through the night, drift in my state of consciousness. Wake in the morning, get up, it’s pretty soon after dawn, perhaps around 7, quarter past 7 or so, I get up, my intention is to go to … (her) room and tell her (referring to a female housemate of the time) I’m going out, I put on my clothes … I proceed to … (her) bedroom, I open the door. She appears to be asleep. I say to her as I open the door ‘I’m going out for a walk.’ As soon as I had said these words, and this is hard to describe – it was as though something stood up and rose up out of … (her) body – a being, a presence of some kind rose up out of … (her) body – it would have been very unusual for her to get up in this way – she’s usually a deep sleeper, if she’s aroused from sleep she tosses and turns. On this occasion something rose up in a motion of sitting up out of … (her) body, it was my perception that her body was still lying on the bed – the presence came in my direction. Not wasting any time, shocked, intensely frightened, feeling I could be killed at any moment, with a perturbing and disturbing feeling emanating over the house in recent hours, ran quickly out of the house – I ran, slamming
the door behind me. I ran up .... Street, took a left into ... Street, running along into the park – across the road into the park on ... Street, next to the primary school. I run, run up through the park, into the street located at the top of the park, past the cricket club, I sprint up the street, there’s shops. I turn the corner and run. A strange feeling now as a I continue to run up the street corresponding to the railway – past the railway track – continue to run. Things begin to appear somewhat strange – continue running – cross over the railway track – run down past the ... mechanical workshop, Just a quick look at the workshop, I saw I believe an individual in overalls working on a car, hoping they wouldn’t notice me – no-one appeared to notice anything as I ran through – continue to run – jogging now, a little bit tired – I get to ... Road – I turn left and go up ... Road, entering into a region next to a college – children at that college, I run, now next to the creek – I see the creek and I continue to run – there’s a mist in the air, overcast conditions, very early morning. (More emotional) As I run now a remarkable change in the atmosphere of the world around me – I begin to consider my position – I’m not sure what has happened as I reflect on events of the past few minutes – I’m running away from something – what’s happened? Is this, have I entered an alternate reality of some kind, um, I’m not sure if I’m alive – is this an after-death state, have I entered a different sphere of existence, at this stage I am uncertain as to where exactly I am – um, as I run a strange experience now occurs (with gathering emotion) this is possibly the most difficult aspect of the whole experience to describe – I don’t know how much time passed in this state – but it’s extremely difficult to describe - it’s as though there are little openings in the atmosphere of the world, openings emerge as I run – and I run through them – now through here, now through there – there’s a signpost, it’s a feeling, it’s, it’s a familiarity to passing through this state – I somehow remembered this state - yes – these are worlds – they’re spheres – they’re spheres between our world and some other place, some other state – um I can feel the difference being in these states, as I pass through these – very difficult to describe – (hesitation in voice) holes – now through here, now through there – it’s as though I’m, I’m above my body running – now through here, now through there , as I continue to run. I’m running and yet I don’t seem to be going anywhere, I’m just passing through various states – I can see myself running – the world is strange, I feel as though something’s chasing me, I’m leaving the earth, I’m leaving, I’m going home, I’m departing this place – I have to leave in order to escape from this presence – in a sense there is no escaping it unless I can leave the earth – I have to escape it, for if I let it defeat me I would have failed humanity and all would be lost. Something emerges in the background – is it a human being, it is some other entity? Something’s chasing me, chasing me through the worlds – it’s, it’s not a physical, it’s something else, it’s, it’s, it’s a mental energy, - it’s an energy of some kind, an energy that has placed itself against me – very difficult to describe – I now find myself with my body again, terrified I run along the creek now, along the creek, it’s an open expanse, an open expanse of thistles, trees, and shrubs – moist underneath, it’s a bog, a kind of swampy ground underneath me as I run, the grass is tall, overgrown. I’m blocked – I, I turn back, I run, because there’s no way for me to get over this area – I run back toward an expanse of shrub, momentarily I contemplate diving, diving into and across the creek – to escape, to die – leave this place – something prevents
me from doing so, I stop at the creek’s edge – I look around – I see, I see in the
distance cars (with gathering surprise) I can actually see the people in the cars
far in the distance – their eyes, their faces, there’s a blond man in a car, he’s
smiling, looking at the people driving in the cars is strange – they seem
primitive, sad, like people from a lower realm – as though the people here are in
a lower world to the one I’m currently observing from. I make my way back –
fear, intense pain – where do I go now? I come to a Eucalyptus tree – a eucalypt
– it’s enchanting, towering above me, protecting me, I’m laying back –
experience drift, drift, shift in my, in my state of consciousness, hard to
describe, hard to describe, it’s unusual – Drift in my state of consciousness, I’m
drifting, drifting back to my normal state (sighs) I open my eyes – I begin to
walk back, to walk back toward home. I walk slowly back, reflecting on my
experience, wondering what will happen next. I feel a connectedness and a love
for the earth and its people. There’s a guiding voice assisting me – a spirit is
with me – I gradually walk back home.’

This experience continued for several days thereafter whilst the subject
covalesced in bed at home and later in a hospital setting, including the
experience of ‘leaving my body and going through holes in space’; ‘being taken
on a ride through the universe, being shown all of the planets of our solar
system, and knowing their place in the scheme of things, everything has its
rightful place, I felt I knew the reasons behind historical events, why things had
to happen a certain way for us to be where we are now as humans, when I
descended to where my body was I could hear sounds – cows mooing, people
talking – drawing closer as I descended’; ‘I felt that the earth, the stars and
planets are all very advanced living beings, that we normally don’t see this, but
I could feel a connection to these energy forms and even felt I could
communicate with them’; the experience of ‘spinning and flying through the
solar system as though I was the earth’; physical phenomena such as a feeling
of heat and vibration in the region of the forehead; and reported enhancement
of his cognitive abilities, which he described in the following terms – ‘I felt as
though wherever I thought of I could be there if I wanted to, or whoever I
thought of I could know things about them, such as their thoughts and
feelings.’ All citations are from an audio recording containing a normal recall
description of the experience. The paraphrasing of the experience is regrettable,
but is justified on brevity grounds, the reported experience being quite lengthy,
with much repetition. One further representative passage from the subject’s
description of regaining consciousness at night in a hospital setting (audio
recording) is worth citing in full, with some details omitted on privacy grounds:

‘My next recollection is of waking up – I’m in a strange room – I get up – I’m
looking around – strange room – danger – fear, pain – I feel trapped, captured,
the door opens, someone looks in, withdraws, I get up, walk around, turn on
the backlight – what’s this? It’s, it’s, it’s (emotional) it’s a beast – a large entity
of some kind – it’s sad, as though its wounded – disbelief as I look at this
muscular, humanoid, hairy entity – it looks back at me – behind bars – it’s
behind bars – what’s going on? I say (emotional) and stumble back into bed –
pain, fear … I feel a sense of, I can hear noises outside, noises, I’m drifting, as
though I’m flying, as though I’m on a craft, ship of some kind, I’m floating, I
feel as though something’s watching me, I feel a sense of being under surveillance – a dialogue coursing through my body – love, love, love, unity, unity, togetherness, togetherness, it goes on – we are beautiful, we are wonderful, we are not evil, we are not sinful, we are beautiful, we are wonderful, we are accepted, we are entering the new century, the new millennium – I feel a sense of intrusion, fear, great agitation, pain, fear, great trepidation – a sense of attack, as though something’s attacking me, as though something’s punching and kicking at me – I feel as though there are two figures at my bedside – I recoil, I recoil in horror, terror – I put my fingers in my ears and I begin to press – harder, harder- push – harder, harder – I’m being guided - harder, harder – popping sounds, clicking sounds – as though of some type of manipulation to my consciousness, as though something is trying to affect my consciousness, some type of manipulation – clicking, popping, clicking – as though of a recorder being switched on and off in my brain – clicking, popping, trapped – a sense of entrapment, of being trapped in my body, in this state, under attack, there are strange beings punching and kicking at me, smacking me repeatedly – my brain, my head is vibrating, my whole body is shaking as they, as they attack me – punching, kicking, scratching…. under attack – continuing to be attacked – my head is vibrating – pain, fear, what’s going on? Why isn’t anybody helping me – nobody coming to my aid? Eventually I, I feel, I can hear sounds, I can hear sounds outside … (describes two female voices chanting). I can’t make out the words – other people are screaming – there’s noise outside, there’s people moving around. Where am I? Have we reached the new world, the new earth? … under attack, I’m being pounded – punched – trapped – they’ve got my body – they’ve got my body. I’m trapped. In the midst of this – somebody comes into the room – someone’s come into the room – I feel something dripping from my head – something’s dripping from my head – someone’s thrown something onto my head – it’s not blood – like – I can smell, like olive oil, olive oil, dripping down my head, my hair is disheveled. Strange sensation – it’s as though my body is trapped in one world, being relentlessly attacked and battered, whilst my mind is elsewhere, my mind is free, has escaped the old world. Again the inner voice, the inner spirit guiding me.’

**Results**

**Case Description**

This case description was the overall character of the experience reported by the subject at this time, the report being consistent across all of the descriptions of this event. The specific experience is reported verbatim from an audio recording of normal recall description of the experience by the subject, including reflections by the subject on the nature and significance of this experience. The journal entries of the subject from the period and the clinical hypnosis audio recording were used merely as corroborative evidence of the event and were not reported as they are virtually identical to the normal recall audio recording. The patient’s exit from his home as part of the initial flight experience was confirmed by the eyewitness testimony of the female who was
sharing house with the subject at the time and was startled by the commotion of him running out of the house. The identity of the apparition reported by the subject at the commencement of the experience was not recognised by the subject. The audio recording descriptions of the event demonstrate a considerable display of emotion, including an apposite, palpable sense of fear and altered perspective. These recordings also demonstrate difficulty in finding appropriate words to describe transcendent elements within the experience, suggestive of their ineffable quality.

Medical records obtained by the subject under local Freedom of Information provisions and used with the consent of the subject confirmed that Mr. C experienced a ‘sudden change in behaviour and perception’ on the day corresponding to his initial flight experience and reported having achieved ‘a new level of consciousness and a mystical state,’ that this was ‘important for humanity’ as well as ‘the animal and plant kingdom’ and reports becoming aware at this time of ‘an inner flame or spirit.’

His description of his experience at this time in both the medical records and audio recording of the subject suggests that he felt it was of special importance for the rest of ‘humanity,’ that he had achieved something ‘important’ or ‘momentous’ and that he ‘wanted to tell others about my experience.’ This is a unique experience in the life of this individual, described in the audio recording of the subject as ‘by far the most significant experience’ of his life, and has had a profound life impact, particularly strengthening a love for nature and sense of ecological awareness (Botkin, 1990; Devall & Sessions, 1985). The subject felt as though this experience provided (citation from audio recording by the subject) ‘a new understanding of the world and the universe’ and that he felt he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point and then be re-born, reenter my body and begin a new life.’ Medical records confirm the subject was in good health both prior to and following this experience. The subject does not have a history of mystical or other experiences and the only history of some relevance comprised reported out-of-body experiences in childhood. Brief psychotic disorder was also ruled out as an adequate explanation of the subject’s experience as a whole on a number of grounds, including spiritual or religious insensitivity, the absence of certain key features of psychosis in this case (e.g., disorganised speech), as well as evidence of this experience as a highly beneficial and transformative life event (see also discussion section).

Unusual Phenomena at the Geographical Location of the Transcendent Experience

The transcendent experience occurred in a rural region, in an area of parkland. The most prominent natural features at the location were a waterway and a range of trees, grasses and shrubs, including specimens of the genus Eucalyptus, Lonicera, Carthamus, Themeda, Poa, Plantago, Cynara, Ulex, Lycium and Verbascum. Examination of the geographical location of the
human experience uncovered several natural features that appeared relevant as evidence pertaining to the transcendent experience.

A geographical feature that was deemed worthy of note was a topographical feature involving the spread of a local waterway. This feature occurred in the standard directory of the region (Melway, 2001), which comprises a computer-generated representation based on photomapping or aerial photography. The relevance of this topographical feature was grounded in the presence of some overlap existing between the nature of the experience described by the subject on the one hand and of specific topographical features, on the other, at this exact location. This was seen to be relevant due to the nature of the experience described, particularly the out-of-body component of the experience, and the possibility that topographical or geographical features may be described by a subject that may only be evident in this state (e.g., description from an aerial perspective). Specifically, it was noted that the waterway in question comprised two branches which terminate several kilometers from the location of the subject’s experience – one terminating precisely in an area of a designated regional cemetery (West Branch) and the other precisely within a local airfield (East Branch). Given that the obvious concepts associated with termination points of this waterway – of death (a regional cemetery) and flying (an airfield) were both dominant features of the experience reported by the subject at this location – this was seen to be relevant as a synchronicity or meaningful coincidence (Jung, 1952/1973) in the sense that the nature of the experience described at this location appeared to match specific geographical features of the location. In the literature of synchronicity, it is considered that precisely matching or occurring coincidences of this type may be meaningful or provide information about the nature of a specific event, such as Jung’s description of the appearance of a golden scarab beetle at the precise moment a subject was describing a dream which featured a golden scarab. Moreover, to the extent that Mr. C may have observed or added to his knowledge of this topographical feature during his experience, perhaps subconsciously using this information to later contextualize or describe his experience, it may be notable that observation of this feature from the location requires an aerial vantage point. This may lend some support to the out of body character of the experience described. It is important to note that Mr. C was not in possession of the directory containing the waterway relevant features at the time of his experience and report of his experience.

The key finding of this study was a 23.8 cm × 10.3 cm natural formation in the shape of a crucifix on a Eucalyptus tree identified by the subject as of significance to this experience. Mr. C had subsequently inscribed his initials on this tree, characterized by its two distinctive trunks, in recognition of its significance to his experience. Mr. C reports that this was the only time he had carved his initials on a tree and was an act motivated by the perceived significance of this tree and location to his experience. Mr. C remembered the specific tree from its location at a specific landmark (a laneway and property in the background) as well as the area in front of the tree where he had taken shelter. The natural formation is shown in Figures 1–2, with Mr. C’s initials not shown on confidentiality grounds. In the naturalistic investigation, visual
inspection of 10,781 Eucalyptus spp. (more than one species) trees had not identified a single visible formation in the distinct shape of a crucifix. No other notable formations were observed on any of the trees closely inspected. Occasional criss-crossing lines or natural markings were observed on a number of trees, but nothing that was in the character of a crucifix shaped formation or other notable symbols. Experiment 1 revealed that 89.6% of those surveyed had suggested that they would associate a crucifix on a tree with the idea that somebody had died at that location; 99.1% of those surveyed indicated that a crucifix accompanied by the name or initials of an individual suggested that the individual identified by such an inscription had died at that location.

Several other items uncovered by close inspection of the Eucalyptus tree, and of images of the crucifix-shaped natural formation, have been noted by a number of observers. These include two structures, confirmed to be natural formations, with face-like characteristics (eyes, nose and mouth) appearing just to the upper left of the plaque placed over the subject’s initials (see Figure 2). One of these face-like structures occurs in the lighter portion of the trunk, and another, adjacent, and to the immediate left of this feature, in a darker portion of the trunk. Curiously, and within the limitations of confidentiality restrictions, the face-like structure that appears in the darker portion of the trunk appears in its general character to resemble Mr. C’s overall facial appearance at the time of this experience, including the shape of the face and a physical feature that precisely matches one of Mr. C’s facial characteristics at the time (i.e., a moustache). A number of observers have speculated on the resemblance and character of the face-like structure that appears in the white portion of the trunk, but such speculation was not considered relevant to a scientific exploration of this finding. Another interesting formation that has been noted occurs just above the two face-like structures – this is a structure that in its overall character appears to resemble an angelic being, as described particularly in the religious and spiritual traditions of humanity – thus, the structure appears to have the general shape of a human body – thin at the bottom, larger in the middle, with a small (head-like) structure above the middle portion, and with two wing-like and symmetrical projections fanning upwards on either side of the middle portion of this structure. There appears to be a line, along the edge of a piece of bark, running down from this structure down to the face-like structure in the darker portion of the trunk. It is important to point out that, whilst some of the formations, such as the face-like artifacts, do not represent entirely perfect depictions or images, this fact has to be evaluated in the context of the tree as a living system, of the sheer improbability of such formations at such a location, and against the very real possibility that these formations may have undergone some degradation prior to being discovered. In the end, people can make up their own minds as to whether these structures can be interpreted in this way or whether another interpretation may be appropriate.

A noteworthy parallel to these discoveries is a meeting several days following the initial experience, confirmed by eyewitness and handwritten correspondence records (a letter from the old woman given to the subject), between the convalescing Mr. C and a stranger, a very supportive ‘old woman’ (referred to in Unusual Phenomena and Transcendent Human Experience 35
audiotape testimony, in journal entries and in the subject’s medical records), not privy to any details of his experience, who brought him a flower, and, two eyewitnesses confirmed, asked him to write his details on a crucifix type ‘cross’ she had painted on a sheet of paper (referred to in the audiotape recording and a journal entry).

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, whilst it is difficult to see how one could definitively prove a connection, a prima facie case would seem to exist for a connection between the unusual phenomena observed and this human event, in support of the working hypothesis of this paper. The nature of the transcendent experience, the goodness of fit of the experience with the phenomena identified, the status of the phenomena as experiential evidence of the subject’s experience and scientific explanations of such phenomena are explored further in the following sections of this paper.

**The Transcendent Human Experience**

The current finding examines evidence associated with a transcendent human event. With respect to the experiential evidence, the experience appears to conform to the accepted criteria of mystical and transcendent experiences (Brainard, 1996; Forman, 1998; James, 1902) – there is clearly a sense of noesis associated with the experience, of ineffability and transiency (in the sense of transitory periods of concentrated illumination within the experience), a loss of control, feelings of unity, alteration in time and space perception, and of the dissolution of normal ego boundaries. Many of the features described by the subject have been thoroughly reported in the volume of literature on mystical and transcendent experiences (Bucke, 1901; Hardy, 1979; Mercer, 1913; Ring, 1980; Underhill, 1911/1993; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Thus, the subject’s experience of communion with the ‘earth, stars and planets,’ as ‘advanced beings,’ and of ‘spinning and flying through the universe as though I was the earth,’ resemble experiences of unity and connectedness with the earth or the natural world described in the literature, such as Bucke’s experience of the universe as a ‘living presence’ (see also Coxhead, 1985; Hardy, 1979; Johnson, 1959; Bancroft, 1982; Markides, 1985, 2001). Likewise, the subject’s experiences of enhancement of his cognitive abilities, exploration of the universe, encounter with other beings or forms of energy, of descent back to the earth, physical sensations, such as feelings of heat and vibration in the head region, a sense of instant knowledge or illumination and insight into the nature of things, are also commonly reported in the literature (Atwater, 2007; Grey, 1985; Grof, 1975; Hardy, 1979; White, 1979; Murphy, 1992; Ouspensky, 1931; Ward, 1957; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

The positive and transformative nature of such experiences (James, 1902; Jung, 1961; Stace, 1960; Maslow, 1969) is also supported by the current finding despite the presence of very painful and extremely discomforting moments within the subject’s experience, the subject assimilates his experience overall as a momentous and significant achievement of his life. The negative experiences
reported by the subject, such as his experience of some kind of mental assault, of being ‘punched, kicked’ and so forth, are difficult to characterize scientifically, but are reminiscent of negative near-death encounters, such as Rawlings (1978) report of a young girl who had tried to commit suicide and reports an afterlife experience of demons grabbing at her. Such experiences have also occasionally been described with reference to the concept of psychic attack, involving the transmission of negative energy or influence toward another, such as by willful or controlled out-of-body experience (for example, Fortune, 1988; Monroe, 1971).

In addition to its mystical and transcendent nature, Mr. C’s experience also appears to be of a near-death character – the subject’s description of flight, of fearing for his life, the out-of-body state he describes, the perception that he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point and then be re-born, reenter my body and begin a new life,’ of entering holes or tunnels in space, the sense of distance from earthly inhabitants, the sense of profound alteration in the state of consciousness, of receiving information about his life and the nature of the universe, encounter with beings or spirits of some kind, his experience of ‘leaving my body’ and of ‘being taken on a ride through the universe,’ the experience of returning to his body, his uncertainty about his state as evident in his statement ‘I’m not sure if I’m alive’ all suggest an experience of a near-death character (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980). The out-of-body component of the experience is also supported by the subject’s description of specific facial characteristics of people far into the distance, of his possible incorporation of suggestive topographical features into his experience and the experience of descent and return to the body described by the subject. It is not possible on the available evidence to determine the extent to which the subject may have been in mortal physiological danger throughout this experience – it is more probable in this case that the experience resulted from the trauma suffered by the subject’s experience and intense fear of impending death, which has been demonstrated to be sufficient to produce near-death type experiences (Rogo, 1989).

With regard to the subject’s flight experience, in particular the significance of an apparition appearing to emerge from the body of a housemate described by the subject, the evidence from the subject’s description of his experience suggests that the apparition was merely the culmination of a series of troubling experiences leading him to flee his home. The subject reported that he related the apparition to his experiences of being ‘mentally assaulted’ at that time and was keen also not to disturb the other occupant of the shared premises. The subject reported coming into contact with a range of distinct energy forms or beings during his experience, including a ‘large … muscular, humanoid hairy entity,’ a guiding ‘spirit,’ ‘two figures’ and ‘strange beings’ at his bedside, a type of mental energy pursuing him, female voices chanting, being taken on a ride through the universe, and so forth. In the broad context of his overall experience, therefore, it is important to clarify that contact with his housemate, who reported no real knowledge of the subject’s experience, was very brief. The subject reported that his intention to advise his housemate that he was leaving
to go out was a courtesy as he was leaving the house at an odd time and so, for example, the other occupant would be mindful to securely lock the premises upon their exit.

Finally, the classification of Brief Psychotic Disorder (298.8) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) was also briefly considered in characterizing the experience of this subject. Brief psychotic disorder is a condition characterized by delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, usually in response to a stressor of some kind (e.g., childbirth) and that may occur for at least a day (but less than a month) before a return to normal functioning. However, leaving aside the unusual phenomena discovered, such a category was not deemed appropriate in this case on a number of grounds, including insensitivity to the religious and spiritual experiences described by the subject, the absence of a clearly identifiable stressor, the absence of disorganized speech and the fact that the experience reported was deemed by the subject to be highly positive and life enhancing (in contrast to most mental disorders). Furthermore, the degree of insight expressed by the subject both during and after his experience, the sense of composure and serenity observed by others in characterizing the subject’s behavior during his experience overall, the mystical nature of the subject’s experience, including his identification with a non-egoic, trans-personal realm of experience (e.g., his experience of ‘spinning and flying through the solar

Figure 1. Photograph of the crucifix shaped natural formation on a Eucalyptus species tree taken in November 2006.
system as though I was the earth’), appeared on the whole to militate against a pathological interpretation of this human event.

Natural Formations

Turning to an exploration of the most significant findings in this paper, namely the natural formations on the Eucalyptus tree associated with a specific human experience, there are a number of issues that would appear to be relevant in exploration of the scientific status of this finding, and in keeping with the overall working hypothesis of this paper.

Natural formations as evidence of the validity of the subject’s experience. One consideration relates to the natural formations in their capacity as evidence supporting the subject’s reported experiences – in this respect, the natural formations would seem to be of obvious relevance to both the ‘nature mystical’ and near-death qualities of the experience reported. With respect to the former, the presence of these formations in the specific context of this experience quite obviously supports the possibility of a profound interaction between a human being and the natural world. With regard to the latter, it is notable that the crucifix shaped natural formation completes the symbolic combination of crucifix and identifying mark of an individual that are commonly associated with memorials or with locations where individuals have died (see experiment
2). The highly specific and suggestive nature of this formation, given the obvious association of such formations with intelligence, does lend support to the reality and validity of the near-death aspects of the experience reported, and of such experiences more generally. Thus, the subject’s perception that he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point,’ is rendered more believable by the presence of natural formations of a memorial quality at a location of clear relevance to the experience. Nonetheless, this author does not think it appropriate to engage in speculation on this question, as there are certainly alternative interpretations of the finding, some of which may move into the territory of religion. It is not the intention of the author to speculate on such matters.

**Goodness of Fit of Natural Formations With the Human Experience.** Another key consideration in relation to these formations would seem to be the goodness of fit issue; that is, the extent to which the natural formations fit with this human experience in a broad sense. Assuming that such formations as crucifix-like and face-like formations, are quite rare and unusual phenomena from a historical perspective, given the sparsity of scientific reports of such phenomena, it is relevant to ask whether this human experience would justify the occurrence of such phenomena. Given the subjective nature of the human experience, a key consideration on this question has to be the meaning attached to the experience by the subject, who is, after all, in the best position to evaluate his experience. In this regard, allowing for a degree of grandiosity that may sometimes characterize such experiences, it is significant that the subject’s experience itself suggests something of great importance in this overall event – this is evident in Mr. C’s description of the event as a ‘momentous’ one, ‘by far the most significant experience of his life,’ in the profound life impact of this experience, in his experience of affinity with and representation of all of humanity, evident in his use of the word ‘we,’ such as in the example, ‘we are wonderful, we are accepted, we are entering the new century, the new millennium’; his concern that ‘I would have failed humanity’ if he was defeated by a pursuing presence; his experience of ‘connectedness and a love for the earth and its people’; and in his description of the event at the time of his experience as of being ‘important for humanity’ as well as the ‘animal and plant kingdom.’

Furthermore, the novel nature of the phenomena that appear to have given rise to this experience, the near-death character of the experience, the profound altered states, encounter with intelligent beings, of ‘being taken on a ride through the universe, being shown all of the planets of our solar system’; of feeling a sense of communion with ‘the earth, the stars and planets’; his apparent experience of planetary consciousness, of ‘flying through space as though I was the earth’; of descending back to the earth hearing ‘cows mooing, people talking – drawing closer as I descended’; the occurrence of experiences over several days, hospitalization; physical manifestations, such as feelings of heat and vibration in the region of the forehead, give this experience considerable breadth and scope as a human experience of this kind. On the question, therefore, of whether this human event could justify or fit with the presence of such rare phenomena, there would seem to be sufficient grounds to
suggest a connection of the human experience with the natural phenomena, given particularly the meaning of the event for the subject and also with respect to the representative nature of this event in the broad tradition of mystical and transcendent experience.

*Scientific explanations of the natural phenomena.* A third major consideration in the scientific exploration of such a finding relates to possible explanations for the presence of such rare and unusual phenomena in the context of a human event of this kind. From a scientific perspective, the phenomena are fully documented, the photographic evidence is of very high quality, and, therefore, in the spirit and ethic of scientific inquiry, these findings do justify fair and proper scrutiny. The possible explanations for this finding would seem to fall into three broad categories – firstly, psychical type explanations, which may incorporate such human abilities as psychokinesis or extraordinary somnambulistic attainments; secondly, chance and coincidence; and thirdly, explanations that bring into play some type of intelligence that may underlie such elaborate formations in the broad context of earth and life systems.

Turning to an exploration of the first type of explanations, of psi type phenomena, the only feasible explanations of this type would presumably involve some form of psychokinesis, that is, alteration or manipulation of the physical world or environment reflecting the powers of the human mind. Generally, such explanations can be considered to be highly improbable, given particularly that psychokinesis, let alone unintentional psychokinesis, of a kind that could produce elaborate carvings, crucifix-like and face like structures, has never been demonstrated historically. Were such abilities to underlie the current finding, they would certainly be worthy of scientific scrutiny in their own right. The only other explanation worthy of consideration in this area is the suggestion that Mr. C may have carved the crucifix and other structures unconsciously, perhaps in some somnambulistic state. This explanation can be safely ruled out for a host of reasons – for example, careful inspection of the natural formations confirms that there is no evidence of interference or human construction in the emergence of these phenomena. The edges of the crucifix contain irregularities, bumps, protuberances, natural variations, which are not consistent with intentional carving of this structure. With regard to the face-like and other structures, intentional construction would require considerable artistic skill and finesse in working on a very irregular living surface, that is also inclined to peel away or crumble when force is applied. Further, with respect to the crucifix - to physically produce a fissure of this depth on a tree would require at least the use of an axe and a ladder, since the top of the crucifix is over 7 feet off the ground. The author investigated this possibility by trying to position a ladder in front of this Eucalyptus tree in 2006, confirming that the ground in front of the formations on this tree is very uneven, rendering it extremely difficult to safely position a ladder at this location, let alone with sufficient balance to enable the carving of highly elaborate structures in an unconscious state by a human being with no artistic training.

With regard to the second category of explanations, namely, that the physical proximity and geographical specificity of the natural formations relative to the human event (including the transcendent experience and carving of initials on this
tree) is an act of pure coincidence or chance, this is an explanation that can be extremely difficult to rule out, since the limits of coincidence are difficult to establish. Whilst individuals can make up their own minds as to whether an event of this kind can be explained by chance, there are a number of obvious facts that would seem to render such an explanation extremely unconvincing: firstly, the evidence suggests that the crucifix and other formations were not present on the tree at the time of the subject’s experience – this is based on the following facts – (a) detailed investigative inspections of the site in the years following Mr. C’s report of his experience, incorporating photography of the relevant Eucalyptus tree, had not identified a crucifix shaped formation or other formations on this tree; (b) Mr. C made no reference to such formations at any stage, including under clinical hypnosis. If the formations were present at the time of his experience, particularly given his possibly heightened sensitivity within this experience, one would have expected him to have noticed them or to have referred to them in some way. Particularly as Mr. C believed that his experience was of great significance, he would presumably have pointed to the crucifix and other formations in underscoring this importance when reporting his experience; (c) the ephemeral or constantly changing nature of these features, the pattern of change that they have actually exhibited between periods of inspection, as the tree has shed its bark over time, renders it virtually impossible that they would have presented at the time of the subject’s experience in the exact form they display when the formations were photographed in 2006. The face-like structures, for example, disappeared when this layer of bark peeled away within several months of the tree being photographed; and (d) Mr. C confirmed that he had not noticed these formations, including in his initial experience and in marking his initials on this tree.

Even if one assumes that the crucifix like structure was present in some form at the time of the subject’s experience in 2001 (the face-like structures are surface manifestations on the bark that would certainly not have been present in 2001), the explanation of chance or coincidence has still to consider the following facts: (a) the initial experience of flight reported by Mr. C appears to have been in response to a fear stimulus and resulting trauma occurring in the subject’s home, which had nothing to do with natural formations, (b) Mr. C stated that he had never previously traveled into this specific area, which was consistent with his vague journal description of the area as ‘the back marshes’ (journal entry), (c) The evidence suggests a lack of subconscious knowledge of this geographical region. In deep hypnosis, Mr. C named six of seven roadways and six premises, corresponding to frequently traveled locations on the main route to his home. In contrast, his description of the specific area around the waterway failed to provide the names of three roadways, a building and the waterway referred to in the experience, (d) Mr. C had moved to this geographical region only 4 months prior to this experience, never having previously lived in this region, and had no detailed knowledge of this geographical location. The available evidence establishes to a very high degree of probability that Mr. C’s contact with this Eucalyptus tree appears to have been entirely spontaneous, (e) the historical scarcity of natural formations featuring human symbols, (f) the demonstrated infrequency of crucifix-shaped natural formations on Eucalyptus spp. trees (see naturalistic investigation findings), (g) the improbability of a crucifix-shaped natural formation at a site,
on a tree of clear significance to the transcendent experience and directly above Mr. C’s inscribed initials, (h) the rarity of face-like structures and other relevant formations occurring on this specific tree, as well as the sheer volume of formations, including the fact that one of the formations could be seen to contain actual physical characteristics of the subject of this experience, (i) specific reference to the association between Mr. C’s inscribed details or identify and a crucifix by a woman at the time of his experience – this finding also moves in the direction of precognition as the woman refers to a connection between the subject’s identity and a crucifix that had not yet arisen since the subject had not yet carved his initials onto the tree, and (j) the infrequency with which human experiences of this precise character are reported.

The third category of explanations for this finding would seem to be the most parsimonious, or simplest explanation, and also that explanation which fits with all of the facts of this case. This category of explanations does not require one to assume the operation of psychical abilities which have never been demonstrated historically, or of other remarkable and extraordinary feats of the human subconscious mind; nor does it require one to accept that Mr. C, in an act of feverish flight from his home, in response to a trauma of some kind, by pure chance, stumbles on the one tree certainly in this region, perhaps in the whole country, or perhaps in the entire world, that contains crucifix-like, face-like and other formations all in the one place. The third category of explanations assumes something that has already been reasonably established, that is, that the crucifix and other elaborate formations on this tree may reflect the operation of some type of non-human intelligence.

Overall, the current finding supports the view of the earth and the natural world as systems that may be guided by highly sophisticated intelligence (Bateson, 1979; Lovelock, 1979; Roszak, 1978; Russell, 1983). Plant life and trees are not generally associated with intelligence sufficient to produce elaborate human symbols and structures (Trewavas, 2003). Nonetheless, there is nothing to suggest that such formations are not possible, safely assuming that sufficient intelligence exists within the depth and connectivity of living systems (Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1975; Hay, 2002; Kaufmann, 1995; Lovelock, 1979, 2009; Margulis, 1998; Prigonine & Stengers, 1984; Sheldrake, 1981), that could underlie the occurrence of such formations.

Whilst due caution needs to be exercised in drawing assumptions on the basis of a single case, this is the general territory traversed by findings of this kind. At the end of the day, because the study of such formations may not be an established scientific discipline, such findings can be difficult to characterize in a definitive and categorical way – the finding is certainly worthy of careful inspection and people, scientists and non-scientists alike, can make up their own minds in explaining this particular event.

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The Author

*Karl Hanes* is a clinician and scientist who has worked in the psychology field for over 15 years. He has published a range of scientific papers, with contributions in such fields as neuropsychology, psychiatry, psychology and psychopharmacology. He has had a longstanding interest in transpersonal psychology, including the use of psychospiritual methodologies (e.g., mindfulness) in psychotherapy and the healing and growth potential of transcendent human experiences.

**Author Note:** In this article, I have aimed to involve the reader in the process of scientific evaluation and to invite readers to make up their own minds. Ultimately, things that are true will tend to be borne out historically and to find their rightful place in the scheme of things. I would be happy to provide some further details to those who may wish to find out more about the subject of the experience, in informing their reading of the overall findings. Refraining from such details in the body of the article, however, is meant to have advantages - this is just an anonymous subject, it is just a perfectly healthy and

ordinary person who appears to have been suddenly overcome by intense and unusual experiences - it could be anyone, it could be you! This mystery and anonymity of the subject also has the advantage of avoiding any tendencies toward megalomania, in elevating the importance of a particular person or person(s) - in this case, it is the experience and the phenomena that matter - in pointing to the possibilities for the display of intelligence or connectedness in relation to living earth systems, above and beyond the nuances or life story of a particular person. The human being is probably just an ordinary human being, just as the Eucalyptus tree in this study is in virtually every way, just like any other Eucalyptus tree.

Editor’s Note: An unusual article such as this, from a well-honed scholar, summons and encourages dialogue as it may evoke an array of responses in readers. Accordingly, editorial board member Dr. Charles Tart, a well-known and respected transpersonal researcher and scholar, has agreed to write a response. Join him in following the movement of his own reaction and thought as he experienced reading the article. His response appears after the reference section. We welcome other readers to contribute their voice as well and if sufficient response is received we will offer a forum section either in a future issue of the Journal or on line.