

ORGANIC INQUIRY: TOWARD RESEARCH IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SPIRIT

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ABSTRACT: Organic inquiry is an emerging approach to qualitative research that attracts people and topics related to psycho-spiritual growth. The psyche of the researcher becomes the subjective “instrument” of the research, working in partnership with liminal and spiritual influences as well as with the experiences of participants. A three-step process of preparation, inspiration, and integration governs both data collection and analysis. Analysis involves the cognitive integration of liminal/spiritual encounters with the data. Organic inquiry invites transformative change, which includes not only information, but also a transformation that consists of both changes of mind and changes of heart. The approach offers a process for cultivating these changes, not only to researcher and participants, but additionally to readers of the research. Stories present the findings using both feeling and thinking modalities, in order to engage the reader in a similar process of transformative interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Organic inquiry has grown over the past 10 years in the context of student work at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. The approach draws upon multiple ways of knowing and invites the researcher to work in partnership with sources beyond ego. While not a fully developed research method in itself, it may have relevance for the discovery process of many qualitative designs.

Perhaps the most important, and novel, aspect of organic inquiry is its strong emphasis on transformation as well as information (i.e. the knowledge building function of all research). The approach incorporates the idea that research can include spirit, body, and feeling as well as mind (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Guided by transpersonal psychology’s many models of human development, organic inquiry uses the context of a particular topic to offer *transformative change*, defined as a resulting restructuring of one’s worldview that provides some discrete degree of movement along one’s lifetime path toward further transpersonal development. Organic inquiry invites transformative changes of both mind and heart, as further illuminated below.

Although outside the scope of this article, it is important to acknowledge the wide array of researchers, too numerous to mention, who are pursuing a better understanding of transformative change in the human experience. Authors, like Jack Mezirow and colleagues, for example, have spent decades researching how one’s worldview may become restructured by critical reflectivity, focusing on what I might call transformative changes of mind—which often result in a cognitively restructured “perspective transformation.”¹

Transformative changes of heart, which is the added focus of organic inquiry, specifically requires a temporary suspension of that kind of thinking (critical

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reflectivity and rational discourse) in order to access liminal sources and ways of knowing, which are then ultimately cognitively integrated during analysis. A restructuring of one's worldview often results in an increased connection to self and Spirit, as well as a desire to be of service. Worldview in this sense refers to one's inner and outer world.

The organic orientation includes the assumption of the mystical tradition that divine/human interaction is available to one who is open (Van Dusen, 1996, 1999). This paper uses the terms *liminal* and *liminal realm* to describe a state beyond ego that may be visited by the individual psyche to gather useful experience, a state where the ego is barely perceptible (Hall, 1987; Hopcke, 1991; Turner, 1967/1987; van Gennep, 1908/1960). The word liminal comes from the Latin *limen* or threshold. One may learn to cross the threshold beyond ego, gather experience, and to return "so that the deeper ground of the archetypal field can be seen, experienced, and allowed to flower" (Hopcke, 1991, p. 118). Crossing the threshold takes the psyche to a less structured and less familiar state, where experience may be witnessed, but not created or controlled by ego.

The terms *Spirit* and *spiritual* describe the influences and sources beyond ego that have a seemingly beneficial impact, often accompanied by feelings of awe and a sense of direct intent on the part of the spiritual source. Spirit is assumed beyond any universal definition, but available within the context of the particular personality, beliefs, and experience of each researcher and the setting of the research method. The term *liminal* is used to indicate a more neutral influence beyond ego.

As described below, liminal and spiritual experience may be the setting for transformative change. Using a three-step process of preparation, inspiration, and integration, the researcher visits states or sources beyond ego to gather data and then returns to cognitively integrate that data into the ongoing inquiry process. Called organic inquiry because it is a living and therefore mutable process, it is oriented toward the study of topics relating to psycho-spiritual growth.

A major challenge in discussing organic inquiry is that it cannot be fully understood by the intellect. Can one fully describe any more-than-intellectual concept like, say, falling in love, using only words? As with many transpersonal topics, full appreciation requires an experiential encounter. Confusion and judgment are typical responses to experiences one has not had, since one has no basis for understanding. To address this limitation, I have included imagery and narrative, which are intended to offer some intuitive and feeling appreciation of the topic. A list of organic studies is also included at the end of William Braud's introduction to this paper. Reading one of these studies will give the interested reader a more experiential understanding of the approach.

In a nutshell, then, organic inquiry is an emerging approach to qualitative research that is especially meaningful for people and topics related to psycho-spiritual growth. One's own psyche becomes the "instrument" as one works subjectively in partnership with liminal and spiritual sources, as well as with participants who are able to relate their stories of the experience being studied. Analysis, which involves the cognitive integration of liminal encounters with the data, may result in transformative changes to the researcher's understanding and experience of the

topic. Stories as evocative vehicles of feeling as well as thinking, present a diverse and intimate view of the topic in order to engage the individual reader in a parallel process of transformative interpretation. The theory and practice of this procedure will be outlined in this paper.

Prerequisites

This approach to research is not for everyone. There are expectations about the process in general, as well as about the topic, researcher, participant, and the reader. Benefits, potentially transformative, may accrue for all involved.

Topic. The topic should be amenable to an organic approach. While many qualitative inquiries may benefit from an appreciation of this orientation, the ways of being and knowing articulated in this approach are especially appropriate to inquiries of a psycho-spiritual nature.

Researcher. Those who would contemplate engaging in research using this orientation must have already dedicated a substantial and prolonged, period to working on their own processes of psycho-spiritual development. Because of the subjective and spiritual nature of this approach, discernment is essential. Researchers must know their own personalities and psyches such that these do not cloud an understanding of the data. Researchers must be able to determine the differences in the data between subjective and objective, spiritual and material, self and other. They must have healthy egos in order to step beyond them and equally strong intellects to assess the validity of the organic process as it progresses. Analytical skills and the ability to clearly articulate the resulting knowledge, are critical. Examples of characteristics that would clearly disrupt, or jettison the integrity of this process include inauthenticity, narcissism, spiritual materialism, and naivete.

Participants. The selection criteria for participants include finding individuals who have had meaningful experience with the topic of study, who have an open-minded understanding of it, and who have both willingness and ability to articulate their experience.

Reader. The ideal reader will be willing and able to engage with the material both intellectually and personally, allowing it to effect transformative change in the areas of self, Spirit, and service.

Origins and Influences

In the spring of 1993, Dorothy Ettling (1994), Diane Jenett (1999), Lisa Shields (1995), Nora Taylor (1996), and I found ourselves searching for avenues of research where the sacred feminine might be included and in which the positive values of cooperation and interdependency were appreciated, where diversity would make us equals rather than causing a separation into leader and followers. Feminist research suggested the importance of balancing objectivity with subjectivity, in process as well as content (Behar, 1996; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1982; 1992; Miller, 1986; Nielsen, 1990; Reinhartz, 1992; Shepherd, 1993).

The organic approach also reflects the self-as-instrument and implied transpersonal emphasis of the heuristic research of Clark Moustakas (1990), and with Bruce Douglass (1985). Other approaches that have been influential include intuitive inquiry developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998, 2000), integral inquiry described by William Braud (1998b), and cooperative inquiry presented by John Heron (1996, 2000) and with Peter Reason (2000).

Organic inquiry's emphasis on working in partnership with liminal and spiritual sources beyond ego grew from the influence of transpersonal psychology. The approach invites and incorporates archetypal experiences, both transcendent and immanent, spontaneous and intentional, liminal and spiritual—experiences that are beyond ego. The sacred and transformative orientation of organic inquiry has benefited from the theories of analytic psychologist Carl Jung (1928/1966, 1969, 1921/1971, 1973) and anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960) and Victor Turner (1967/1987). Other influences include narrative theorists Edward Bruner (1986), Steven Crites (1986), Michael White and David Epston (1990), and Rhea A. White (1997, 1998). The writings of transpersonal theorist Hillevi Ruumet (1997) and mystics Emanuel Swedenborg (1763/1963) and Wilson Van Dusen (1996, 1999) have also been important.

The organic approach is still very much a work in progress. It has grown primarily because of the interest of students who felt their spiritually oriented topics and procedures needed an approach that would allow for doing research in partnership with transpersonal sources. These students found that the approaches they had tried earlier adopted primarily intellectual attitudes that were not compatible with their intentions. Organic inquiry evolved to offer an accessible framework for these types of studies, respecting and using rational approaches, but incorporating, likewise, non-rational ways of knowing.

The orientation demands a high level of inner awareness and outer responsibility on the part of those who choose it. I have accompanied the organic studies of more than 25 students (at ITP and elsewhere) and continue to watch the theory and procedures of the approach as it grows from its simple and heartfelt origins to its ongoing fuller development (Clements, 1994–1995, 2002; Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998, 1999; Miller, Stiver, Jordan, Surrey, Caldwell, & Clements, 2002). I present my own current understanding of organic inquiry, knowing that it has branched into additional formats that are being taught in other schools at this time.

An Organic Image

A full appreciation of organic inquiry requires more than an intellectual description of procedures, influences, and origins. Stories and metaphors invite the participation of one's perhaps lesser recognized intuitive faculties, which are essential to experiencing the flavor of the approach. To that end, I include the metaphorical description of organic inquiry that emerged early in our discovery of this way of working. The term organic evolved from the notion of growth within the larger context of nature, a process that both includes and transcends human understanding. We came to see the characteristics and growth of an organic study in terms of the

image of the growth of a tree. The five characteristics of organic inquiry—sacred, personal, chthonic, related, and transformative—are to be seen as cumulative rather than successive.

Sacred: preparing the soil. Before a seed is planted, the earth is prepared. Similarly, participation in the organic approach calls for spading up one's old habits and expectations to cultivate a sacred perspective. *Personal: planting the seed.* Planting the seed represents the initial experience of the topic by the researcher. The best topic will have passionate meaning because it has been the occasion for the researcher's own psycho-spiritual growth. *Chthonic: the roots emerge.* Just as the developing roots of a tree are invisible and beyond control, an organic inquiry has an underground life of its own because of its subjective and spiritual sources. Like a living tree, the process is allowed to evolve and change. *Related: growing the tree.* Participants' stories are like branches that join to and inform the trunk story of the research itself. *Transformative: harvesting the fruit.* The fruit of organic inquiry are the transformative changes it offers, changes of mind and heart, particularly for its readers.

ORGANIC PROCESS

Organic inquiry offers a systematic process for including trans-egoic influence within a context of disciplined inquiry. An ultimate goal is to offer transformative change for its individual readers, encouraged by the study's report of similar changes in the researcher and the participants. Readers, in effect, are invited to engage with the study using mind as well as heart, allowing it to relate to and impact their own experience of the topic.

The organic researcher may not hope to invite transformative change through will alone. Because of its spiritual and liminal sources, the process of an organic study sometimes resists the constancy that is fundamental to much traditional research. By choosing the approach, the researcher commits to an archetype of transformation that must be actively facilitated, but may not always be controlled. Trans-egoic sources, like dreams, synchronicity, or creative expression that originate beyond ego, may be invited, but they may not be directed.

During an organic inquiry, the researcher repeatedly follows a three-step process—preparation, inspiration (stepping to the liminal realm beyond ego to gather data), and integration (cognitive examination of data with ego engaged). This process will be discussed in more detail below. The psyche of the researcher becomes the willing setting for a working partnership between the researcher's understanding and experiences of liminal wisdom.

The transformative goal of organic inquiry is offered to the reader by way of the stories of the participants as well as through the story of how the researcher has changed as a result of the study. These stories invite the individual reader to participate in a similar process of informative and transformative growth. Stories are necessary adjuncts to conceptual formulations and descriptions because they evoke not only thoughts, but feelings as well. Stories serve as vehicles to deliver us to the

liminal realm where transformation is possible and they also form the cognitive container for our ego's changing identity as it experiences new liminal material. The priority of the details of our life stories change as we reinterpret them based on new experience (Crites, 1986; Hopcke, 1989).

As an illustration of the idea explained above, I will insert a story into this largely intellectual discussion, an invitation to experience both the potential impact of stories and a model for how the organic process of traveling beyond ego might work. Some readers may find the transition from thinking to feeling difficult as it requires a relaxation of the critical function we typically engage as we read scholarly material.

Several years ago, I was teaching a class on organic inquiry. I began, as classes at this school often do, with a meditation encouraging students to consider a connection beyond ego for the project they would be doing that quarter. In the silence, I invited my own spiritual connection to emerge. I sat, curious, until an image took form. In my mind's eye, I "saw" an image of a *kachina*, one of the tall dancing gods of the Hopi and Zuni Indians. Then I saw our group encircled by an outer ring of kachinas, one for each of us. They stepped and swayed forward and back, feathers in hand. I felt that they were eager to join with us. They came without emotion, however I felt a strong emotional reaction, which overflowed into silent tears. I felt the awe that often accompanies this sort of transpersonal experience. When I opened my eyes, I considered the meaning of what I had seen and intuitively understood it. As will be described below, intuition, unlike logical thinking, knows what it knows instantly and without question. It is not necessarily the only truth, but it is immediate and feels certain. In this moment, I intuitively understood that the presence of the kachinas was a confirmation of my hope that the students might make their own personal connections beyond ego. At the end of the meditation, I told the class what I had seen and we discussed its meaning.

This story is a brief example of the form that liminal/spiritual experience may take in organic inquiry. The controlling mind steps aside, inviting liminal experience to come to consciousness. Afterwards, the experience may be cognitively integrated into ego-awareness by finding its meaning and by integrating it into one's conscious experience.

MAKING A CASE FOR LIMINAL PROCESS

The organic orientation suggests that intellect might do well to come into a working partnership with the rich and under-utilized resource that lies within the liminal realm. Liminality has been the object of investigation as subliminal self (Myers, 1903) and transliminality (Sanders, Thalbourne, & Delin, 2000; Thalbourne, Bartemucci, Delin, Fox, & Nofi, 1997). It also resembles concepts of increased openness (Costa & McRae, 1985) and increased thinness or permeability of boundaries (Hartmann, 1991).

Liminal activity has been the topic of transpersonal research for years, but less often a part of its process. Experiences like meditation, dreams, genius, exceptional sports

experiences, psychic abilities, and creativity have been studied and state specific sciences have been considered (Tart, 1972), but until recently, liminal experiences have not commonly been embraced as research procedures. Opening the door to liminal influence, however, requires the researcher to adopt a radically different attitude towards the topic, the methods, and the purpose of a study. Egoic control is relinquished during the time the psyche is a visitor in this unpredictable² realm. Afterwards, when the threshold has been re-crossed, the controlling ego is invited to direct a careful integration of what was experienced.

Experiences beyond ego are inherently difficult to research. They leave no evidence other than the reported memory of the one who had them. Skepticism is certainly warranted regarding the reality of this type of encounter. Not infrequently, I have an experience and later, when the feeling has subsided, even I doubt its validity. My ego dismisses it as unreliable and ultimately useless. Carl Jung (1973) addressed this disbelief in his memoir, where he described his own spiritual companion.

Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force, which was not myself. In my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things, which I had not consciously thought. For I observed clearly that it was he who spoke, not I. (p. 183)

William Braud (1998a) addressed this issue of varying realities.

To the physical scientist, the *real* is what is external and measurable, what can be accessed by the senses or physical instruments and verified by the senses or physical instruments of others. To human beings, inner events—that are unobservable from the outside—can be as real or more real than outer events. (p. 236)

To the transpersonal scientist, then, what is real includes not only that which is physical and that which exists as inner experience, but also, that which may originate in non-egoic states of consciousness.

THEORETICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE THREE-STEP ORGANIC PROCESS

The three-step process that is at the heart of organic inquiry has arisen in many forms and settings during the previous century. I include three.

Rites of Passage—Arnold van Gennep

Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960) determined that a “complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)” (p. 11). A rite of initiation includes all three stages. Victor Turner (1967/1987) focused on the second stage of the model, the “betwixt and between” (p. 3) period of liminal

initiatory experience. In this stage, one abandons identity, status, property, and expectations in order to connect with the infinite in a profound reflection that affects changes “as a seal impresses wax” (p. 11). These descriptions suggest the potential for intentional liminal experience whereby one may leave one’s everyday level of operation and establish connection with something greater.

The Transcendent Function—Carl Jung

The transcendent function is a model of personal and collective transformation that “arises from the union of conscious and unconscious contents” (Jung, 1969, p. 69). To arrive at the transcendent function, one must find an access to the unconscious material. In a process Carl Jung called active imagination, one pays attention to whatever fantasies and associations present themselves within the context of a prevailing mood. From this, he wrote, will come a symbolic or concrete expression of the content of the mood. He insisted that only after the inner material has been experienced should one allow the conscious mind to engage with it. It is in this meeting, this bringing together of opposites (the unconscious experience and the conscious interpretation) that the transcendent function is produced, “a living, third thing” (p. 90).

Carl Jung has described a procedure whereby an individual may choose to intentionally visit the liminal realm not only to gather experience, but to return with it to the world of the ego in order to integrate it and thereby effect “a change in personality” (Jung, 1928/1966, p. 219). This kind of process is an integral part of the organic notion of changes of heart.

A Helical Model of Psycho-Spiritual Development—Hillevi Ruumet

The field of transpersonal psychology offers a variety of models showing human evolution from infancy through adulthood (and beyond), including levels of spiritual development (Ruumet, 1997; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1995). The work of Hillevi Ruumet represents an elegant model of spiritual growth, which is accompanied by a necessary and parallel psychological development.

The model includes two series of tasks. During the first, one develops a strong ego, and during the second, ego learns to realize its transpersonal potential. To move beyond the first series, to the second, requires a major transition. The ego, which one has been ardently perfecting during the first series of tasks, must give way to a recognition that it is part of something greater, a process that is often neither expected nor welcome. To address the second series of tasks, one makes a series of returns to earlier levels. Each new level of spiritual growth requires returning to work with unfinished psychological issues of the earlier ego-developing levels. The importance of the integration of psychological with spiritual work in Hillevi Ruumet’s work relates to the organic notion that transformative change involves a partnership of changes of mind and changes of heart.

Arnold van Gennep defined liminal experience, Carl Jung suggested a means of employing it, and Hillevi Ruomet explained the lifetime developmental process of learning how to get to it with some regularity. These three have demonstrated, from varying perspectives, that the mystical experience of immediate and intentional connection between egoic and liminal realms is real and available, not for all, certainly, but for many.

Underlying all of the procedures in an organic inquiry, from choosing the topic to presenting the final form of the research, lies a fundamental model, the three-step process introduced earlier, which has the potential to effect transformative change, a restructuring of both mind and heart resulting in an increased connection to self, Spirit, and service. An understanding of this model is in a continual state of testing and refinement. This process, simply stated, is one in which an individual moves from the realm of ego-control to a liminal encounter, gathers experience, and returns to integrate it into the ongoing inquiry.

Preparation

The three-step visit to liminal experience and back can be either an intentional or a spontaneous experience. The intentional version will probably occur in the context of a preplanned procedure within the research design. For example, Robin Seeley (2000), who studied women's experiences of finding their life vocation, designed her participant selection process to include a vision fast during which she intentionally invited spiritual assistance.

Steps of Preparation. Before the researcher intentionally departs for the liminal realm, there are tasks to be accomplished in the world of the ego. Some of these tasks may be deliberately accomplished and others may happen unintentionally and without thought. This may vary from researcher to researcher and from one experience to the next.

The first task involves recognizing a question or object of concern. The second involves a need to contain the controlling ego. The ego must be willing to adopt a state of curious ignorance. For some, whose egos have a strong attachment to being in charge, this is a formidable achievement. For others, this task is easier. Denise Hutter (1999) reflected on her natural ability to accomplish this task: "At times I felt that this study had a life of its own and was directing me every step of the way" (p. 28).

In the third task, the ego adopts an attitude of respect for the values of reverence, cooperation, and mutuality. One accepts one's position as the instrument of the study, the stage upon which the drama of the study will be played out. The fourth and final step of preparation is the actual opening of the psyche to liminal experience.

Styles of Connecting to Liminal Experience. No two individuals reach spiritual or liminal experience in the same way. Carl Jung (1921/1971) defined four functions: thinking, feeling, intuition, and sensation. These are ways of describing one's

orientation to life, which may also be used to describe ways of moving into and out of liminal experience.

Two of the functions, thinking and feeling, are ways of organizing and deciding. Thinking makes logical choices while feeling chooses based on subjective value and worth. Both use reason. The remaining two functions, intuition and sensation, are means of perceiving. Sensation gathers experience by way of the physical world, though one's inner response colors the perception. Intuition knows without being aware of how it knows. Carl Jung called it "a kind of instinctive apprehension" (p. 453).

Traditional scientific procedures and concepts make use of all four of these functions, though they usually give credit to only two, thinking and sensation (Shepherd, 1993). The scientist who gathers data through measurement—how long, how far, or how much—is using sensation. The thinking scientist uses logic to sort and develop concepts and models for theoretical systems. Somewhat less understood and accepted in research procedures is the intuitive genius of an Albert Einstein who acknowledged that his discoveries arrived more through intuition than logic (discussed by the mathematician, Hadamard, as cited in Vaughan, 1979). Little credit is given to the role of the feeling function in science. In fact some scientists have stated that "science is value-free" (Shepherd, 1993, p. 51).

Jung's theory suggests that each of us by nature prefers one or two functions to the others. In the interests of balance, we might do well to consider consciously investigating the potentials of our less familiar functions. Below is a discussion of the roles of the four functions in the preparation stage of the organic three-step process. In reality, however, they rarely operate separately.

Preparation Through Thinking. Both meditation, (focused attention) and contemplation (attention focused on a particular text or topic) are traditional pathways to spiritual experience. William Braud described another way of using thinking to move into a liminal experience in "An Experience of Timelessness" (1995). While reading an article about time-related phenomena, he decided to test the author's suggestion that the context of time is inescapable. Using focused attention, he employed thinking to move beyond space and time to an experience beyond ego. Describing the experience, he wrote, "I feel I deliberately started constructing a time-absent experience as an intellectual exercise. . . . I controlled the beginning of the exercise. But soon, the experience grew to something unexpected and uncontrollable" (p. 65). Thinking served as the vehicle and then gave way, allowing his psyche to cross the threshold.

Preparation Through Feeling. In organic inquiry, the primary way of using the feeling function as a way to spiritual or liminal experiences is through the use of stories. Stories can be used to gather, understand, interpret, and explain the data and findings of a study. They are both method and results. They are the soil, the seed, the plants, the roots, and the fruit all at once. Stories inherently communicate on the level of evaluative judgment far more effectively and efficiently than the conceptual process of the thinking function. Mystics have traditionally used poetry, painting, music, and stories rather than intellectual descriptions to communicate spiritual inspiration.

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes suggested that at the root of effective stories lie "patterns of psychic perception and understanding common to all human beings" (Hopcke, 1989, p. 13). Archetypes of transformation communicate through stories as they "function autonomously, almost as forces of nature, organizing human experience for the individual" (p. 16).

Preparation Through Sensation. One method of using sensation to intentionally spark spiritual or liminal experiences might be holotropic breathwork (Grof, 1992). Other methods could include using creative techniques or movement. Rituals of sharpening pencils, lighting candles, automatic writing, and beginning work at a particular time or date all invite participation of influences beyond the rational realm. Water often invites altered states. Repetitive practice, whether athletic, musical, or meditative, may stimulate liminal experience.

Preparation Through Intuition. Intuition delivers the big picture, as opposed to sensation's fondness for details. Intuitive information may be a vision or words. It may be an insight or an understanding. When using intuition, after the early steps of preparation, one shows up and simply waits for illumination, which occurs immediately and with certainty. An often-successful approach to intuitive liminal or spiritual experience was illustrated above by Carl Jung's conversations with his inner Philemon (1973). Spontaneous synchronicities, seemingly coincidental events that carry unconscious intuitive meaning, have shown up several forms in organic studies, including malfunctioning equipment like video cameras, tape recorders, and computers. While usually spontaneous, dreams can also be intentionally invited to serve as avenues of intuitive connection to liminal experience. Before sleep, one sets an intention to incubate a dream that will address a specific question or concern.

Sangeetha Menon (2002), a researcher of consciousness who investigates the essentially subjective nature of experience, describes her approach as "equal amounts of . . . spiritual practice, . . . meditative reflection, and . . . discussion" (p. 69). She uses meditation, study, prayers, dialogue with her spiritual teacher, painting, poetry, web-design, and photography to prepare her mind for her research.

Inspiration

In this second step of the organic three-step process, the researcher steps over the threshold into the liminal realm in search of inspiration. We are out of ego's territory. We may not determine the outcome of the experience. Victor Turner (1967/1987) suggested that while there, an individual is in a paradoxical realm of "pure possibility" (p. 7), which can result in a profound inner change. Carl Jung (1969) described it as a place that is liminal to the controlling ego, but not to the aware psyche. The controlling ego must endure being largely powerless, but the psyche may willfully explore this realm.

"The experience itself," wrote Wilson Van Dusen (1999) "can vary from small incidents to life-changing visions in which a person loses all contact with this world for a time" (p. 3). Both liminal and spiritual experiences are often difficult to put into words. He describes receiving a divinely inspired poem.

I felt something about to emerge. In the midst of this experience, key phrases may come to me. I don't really sense the central theme and organization until it is all set down. Then the poem's theme and organization come as something of a surprise. It feels as though the poem has been given to me. (p. 25)

Familiarity. Each intuitive encounter seems to make the next one more available. David Sowerby (2001), in his survey of how professional intuitives recognize and interpret their inspired information, found that their success depended on developing familiarity through a trial and error personal relationship with their own source of inspiration. A personal relationship between an individual and a spiritual source develops like a friendship. The identification of a *muse of the research* by a researcher may be a helpful way to work with organic investigation.

Confirming Signals. Several years ago, I explored the notion of spiritual partnership (Clements, 1999). I interviewed 13 people from a variety of professions who related to Spirit in a variety of ways. Some heard words. Others saw visions. Some were informed by direct intuition, while others relied on synchronicity. Angels, shamanic spirits, God, a deceased relative, and the Goddess were all described as helpful and immediate spiritual partners.

The people I interviewed routinely reported involuntary confirming signals that accompanied their connections to Spirit. A writer said he wept uncontrollably when in conversation with the divine. A filmmaker felt hairs rise on her body to inform her when she was on the right track. A minister experienced a physical trembling of her body. A researcher in India felt significant certainty in moments of spiritually derived truth. Synchronicities also confirmed her interpretations. Confirming signals for others included strong feelings of joy, contentment, love, and wholeness.

These are not reactions that one could or would make up. These signals, different in nature for every individual, were ways to discern which thoughts were inspired by Spirit and which might be ego's work. They were proof, not to others, but to the one who experienced them. An organic researcher may develop this sort of vocabulary of confirmation over time.

Integration

The third and final step in the three-step process, after preparation and inspiration, sees the researcher returning to the rational world with newly collected experience. The ego's role during the previous step of inspiration was to stand just outside the door as protector, supporter, and witness of the process. In this final step, the ego respectfully engages with the material, examines its meaning, and is simultaneously changed by it.

Changes of Mind and Changes of Heart. In addition to potential changes of mind, changes of heart are also involved in the organic notion of transformative change. One man in my investigation of partnership with Spirit told me that a lifetime of negotiating the suggestions and the demands of Spirit taught him to work as the "feet and hands of Holy Spirit" (Clements, 1999, p. 127). Changes of heart

transform the very nature of who we are, preparing us to be better partners to liminal/spiritual influence.

Jungian analyst James Hall (1987) has written that it is the nature of the psyche to move along a path of ongoing transformation. The ego learns to move in a bigger arena both in the inner realms of the individual and collective psyche and also in the outer world. The transformation of the individual involves moving toward intimacy with all humanity even as one achieves greater harmony with the vast unconscious.

Using Stories for Integration. As previously mentioned, organic inquiry uses stories during the preparation stage in order to induce liminal or spiritual encounters. Stories may also serve as the setting for the integration of material that was gathered during the stage of inspiration.

Our life is a story, and as we experience growth and transformation, our story changes, including our past, our present, and our future. As we change, we view the past differently, we live the present in a new way, and the potential for the future is expanded. When one's linear and logical expectations are interrupted by liminal experience, one's story may change to accommodate this disruption. Experiences of one's past can take on an alternative meaning (E. Bruner, 1986; Crites, 1986; Murray, 1986; White, 1997).

Integration Toward Self, Spirit, and Service. In organic studies, the integration of transformative change has been seen to show up in three ways. One may become more self-aware; one may develop a greater facility in connecting to the changes of heart and mind available from the liminal and spiritual realm; and one may come to feel a greater desire to be of service in the world—self, Spirit, and service.

Integration Toward Self. The first of the three indicators of potential organic transformative change is increased self-awareness. One comes to know one's own personality so that one may make best use of one's abilities, experiences, and resources. This is the training of ego, the changes of heart, in order to support the ego's collaboration with spiritual guidance. Stories offer an opportunity for the integration of liminal/spiritual experience back into our daily lives.

Stories of adults have an innately temporal quality. This orientation towards progressive development makes stories the ideal setting for psycho-spiritual growth (E. Bruner, 1986). "Story as a model has a remarkable dual aspect—it is both linear and instantaneous" (p. 153). This instantaneous yet linear quality allows us to identify immediately and often non-rationally with the aspects of a story that then offer the potential for personal development.

Kevin Murray (1986) suggested just how stories may change us when he wrote "more than one possible account can be construed from the events of a person's life, according to the perspective of the biographer" (p. 277). Not only does every person have a different story, every individual has an infinite number of stories, depending on the context of the moment when the story is being told.

Previous events may take on new meaning and change one's story. A new discovery or even a recalled memory within a new context can radically rewrite previous experience. Stephen Crites (1986) wrote: "the self is a kind of aesthetic construct" (p. 162). One chooses, consciously or unconsciously, which events to accumulate into one's running self-narrative and which to dismiss. "I recollect the past out of my interest in the future" (p. 163). Like clothes from a closet, one attires oneself in memories from the past, which are carefully chosen to support one's image of where one is headed. One is lured by the future to reconstruct memories of the past. Each new story is utterly convincing and a persuasive substitute for the former one.

Integration Toward Spirit. Rhea White (1997), in her description of the integration of exceptional human experiences, has described the process by which transformative change may result in an increased connection to Spirit. Each of us lives with a narrative of who we are at the moment within our given circumstances. That story rarely reflects a reality greater than the one defined by one's ego. "The self these stories are about is almost always the ego-self. Mention is rarely made of moments of contact with the All-Self" (p. 108). However, when one spontaneously experiences an event that cannot be contained by the ego's understanding, one has the option of rewriting one's story to include it. "It is narrative that enables us not to identify solely with either self, but to experience ourselves as a consciousness that moves back and forth and in between, not dissociated from either" (p. 101). "The All-Self also seemingly collaborates in the process by presenting images, ideas, and concepts in sometimes seemingly miraculous ways" (p. 103).

Integration Toward Service. Rhea White (1997) has also written that association with Spirit begins a potentially long-term process that can transform one's worldview. "This process becomes not only personally but socially meaningful" (p. 97). One connects to an ever-widening circle of similarly inclined people.

Wilson Van Dusen (1996) has suggested the form that a transforming individual's desire to be of service might take. He described what he calls *love of the life*, a concept from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1763/1963), that describes the unique abilities each human has. It is the work that we love doing and that makes us most useful. "The love of the life contains the whole design of the person" (Van Dusen, 1996, p. 90). "People who have enjoyed mystical experiences want to aid the design of creation. . . . They seek to be useful in life, to contribute something to the All" (1999, p. 22). One simply desires to help.

"We work on ourselves, then," wrote Ram Dass and Paul Gorman (1985), "in order to help others. And we help others as a vehicle for working on ourselves" (p. 227). One helps not only because there is a need, but also because it is an offering to Spirit, an act of gratitude and reverence, and a natural result of one's own ongoing transformation.

APPLICATION OF THE ORGANIC INQUIRY PROCESS

Both the preceding discussion of the underlying thoughts of organic inquiry and the following presentation of the more practical aspects of its procedures are necessarily

abbreviated for this paper. They may be seen in greater detail in the manuscript-length version of these ideas (Clements, 2002).

Researcher's Story

The first step in an organic process involves writing one's personal story of the topic under consideration. Vulnerability is an important part of successfully writing this story. However the shadow of vulnerability, self-indulgent solipsism, must be avoided. Organic inquiry, with its invitation to explore the depths of one's psyche can be a temptation to indulge in self-satisfying, but unnecessary revelation. The researcher's story is written before any data are collected, so that it may serve as a record of that preliminary experience.

Data Collection

In organic interviews, most researchers ask participants to describe specific experiences of the topic. Most also have lists of subsidiary questions, which they hold to the side until hearing the full story, knowing that many of these questions will be answered in the course of the storytelling. Before the interview, the researcher intentionally moves into a frame of mind where Spirit may participate as well as ego. One hopes that the interview will itself be a liminal or spiritual experience so that transformative change may occur. As described above, a variety of means may be used to invite liminal or spiritual experience including ritual, creating an altar, lighting a candle, meditation, silence, poetry, or prayer.

The ego needs to relinquish control, but not to collapse. An interview invites intimacy, but not merging with the participant. In an organic inquiry protocol, questions are held lightly. The relational quality of the interview is more important than asking every question of every participant. One invites the participant to exceed one's expectations rather than to meet them. During the interview, the researcher maintains a double focus attending not only to what the participant is saying, but also to her or his own inner response. Response notes, recorded after the interview, will be used in the analysis.

Data may also be gathered in a group setting. Some studies include this as an opportunity for participants to respond to each other's individual interviews, while others gather their initial data in the group meeting. Organic researchers have found that a group format often amplifies the meaning of their data.

Analysis

The analysis of an organic inquiry will include liminal and subjective methods that may result in findings that encourage transformative change as they invite individual readers to engage with the data. An organic analysis has three parts: the *participants' stories*, the *group story*, and the report of *transformative change*.

Participants' Stories. The intended outcome of the first part of the analysis is a pure rendering of the experience of the individual participants with little presence of the researcher.

Examining the interview data, in order to write these stories, requires repeating the organic three-step process of preparation, inspiration, and integration. One approaches the liminal or spiritual realm to gain an inspired understanding of the participant's story in order to edit it into a version that will, in turn, inspire the reader directly. One examines the data at least four times. With each separate listening or reading, one prepares and crosses the threshold to observe feeling, intuition, sensation, or thinking in order to choose which words vividly re-create the experience of the participant.

When the examination is complete, the edited story is constructed. Using an intentional creative process, one becomes a novelist, using the clarity of research in the service of appealing to the imagination of the reader. One likely uses sensate details and feeling descriptors more than thoughtful reflections or intuitive insights, which will be saved for the more thinking-based and conceptual group story that follows.

Group Story. Typically, an organic study will include several participants, usually more than 10, so the reader may have a variety of experiences of the topic with which to potentially identify. After the participants' individual stories have been written, one investigates the collective meaning of them. How do the stories' similarities and differences result in a larger meaning? What new insights emerge that will theoretically inform the topic of the research?

The group story has two parts. First, it is an edited experiential report of any analysis that has already occurred as a part of the data collection from interviews, from a group meeting with the participants, or from subsequent contact with the participants. Second, it is a theoretical synthesis of the researcher's understanding of the data. Meaning derived from thinking (using Jung's typology) grows from a logical distillation, while meaning derived from intuition seems to appear out of the blue, having a sense of wholeness to it and an inherent structure that may not come from a linear process of thought. As discussed above, science places a higher level of trust in rationally derived meaning than in conclusions arrived upon using intuitive means. Further investigation and understanding of intuitive process is needed. Organic researchers may rely on a personal vocabulary of confirming signals, as mentioned above, to validate intuitive meaning.

Transformative change. Where the group story is likely an example of changes of mind, transformative change deals also with changes of heart in which one's guiding identity and worldview may change. These changes may occur either spontaneously or intentionally, in an instant or over a long period of time. The researcher examines them in terms of developing concepts of self, Spirit, and service.

Transformative change in the participants may be reported in several ways: as part of their original stories, during the interview as a result of having had their stories heard by the researcher, because of the impact of a group meeting, or as a result of reading the edited versions of their and others' stories.

The researcher is more likely to be changed by the study than the participants due to a higher level of exposure. After analysis of the data collected from participants and without referring to the earlier researcher's story or other notes, the researcher writes a new account of her or his experience of the topic, including the process of the research. A comparison between this new researcher's story and the original one will be the first indicator of the researcher's transformative change. After comparing the before and after stories, one returns to journal entries, response notes, and comparisons with the participants' stories in order to find and report on the trail of transformative change that led from the researcher's before story to the story written later.

Reports of transformative change, by *early readers*, usually three in number, specifically solicited by the researcher, become the final part of each study's assessment of transformative change. Evaluated using the self, Spirit, and service indicators of transformative change, early readers' spontaneous reflections offer some indication to the researcher of the transformative potential of the study for the reader. They also serve as an additional stimulus to the reader in terms of how the material might be transformative. Depending on the researcher's process of selection, these readers may represent a range of responses, from a naïve response to an informed opinion. Organic researchers have found both to be valuable.

Presentation to the Reader

Because organic inquiry has the goal of offering transformative change to the individual reader, the researcher presents the results of the research including stories that are aimed at catching the attention and encouraging the participation of the reader.

This process suggests a third use for stories in organic inquiry. Earlier uses included a way to induce liminal and spiritual experience and a way to integrate this experience into one's own identity. In this third venue, the researcher intentionally constructs stories to invite the reader to participate both liminally and cognitively. The first use of stories offers *induction*, the second offers *integration*, and this third use offers an *invitation*.

Stories suggest an *interplay* whereby the reader experiences the parallel between her or his own story and the one on the page. One steps from thinking to intuitive knowing, from logic to insight. The carrying of two simultaneous and parallel experiences has produced a third and new experience with new meaning. A process of surrender and synthesis takes place. The ego surrenders its ability to logically comprehend the parallel interplay and a synthesis of old with new offers creative insight. This suggests new ways to reassemble the facts of the reader's life into new stories that offer new outcomes. The integration that previously took place for the researcher may now happen for the reader. One story speaks to another and a new story emerges.

In presenting the study, the researcher first intentionally invites readers to participate. Second, she or he presents the transformative material, which includes the stories of the participants and the story of the research, in a form that will invite crossing the threshold into the world beyond ego. Third, the researcher offers her or his own story

of integrating the material as a model for a similar integrative process by the reader. Once again, the researcher has employed preparation, inspiration, and integration.

VALIDITY AND LIMITATIONS

Transformative Validity

Qualitative inquiry examines the validity of a study based on its textual authority rather than its numerical accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It also strives for consensus and coherence (Braud, 1998a). Besides textual authority and patterns of consensus and coherence (which certainly apply to the validity of the more traditional part of an organic analysis, the group story), the organic approach suggests and encourages transformative change for the individual reader. Every reader is on a unique path so the valid transformative outcome for one reader will necessarily be distinct from that of another. Consensus is not likely unless the readership is strictly limited.

This type of validity is personal and not necessarily generalizable or replicable. Validity is measured by asking the question, “Is this useful to me?” A study has *transformative validity* when it succeeds in affecting the individual reader through identification with and change of her or his prevailing story, probably in the areas of self, Spirit, and service. The responses of early readers, described above, can give some indication of a study’s potential transformative validity.

Accurate and detailed reporting of actual procedures on all four levels of experience—thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition—is essential to organic validity. Scrupulous self-examination and reporting is required as well as a high level of consciousness. One needs to discern the value of one’s own subjective evaluation, the influence of Spirit, and the intent of the original data.

Analyzing the material from a variety of perspectives offers a balance that invites validity. To accomplish this, one looks at the participants’ stories, the group story, and the transformative change, three views of the same data. One also examines one’s thinking, feeling, intuitive, and sensory responses to the stories, as well as changes to both heart and mind, trying to avoid a one-sided assessment of their meaning.

The internal validity of procedures can also be assessed by the individual researcher, using the confirming signals that she or he has learned over time, like chills, a feeling of certainty, or tears.

Limitations & Future Challenges

Organic inquiry is a young, emerging approach to research and one that is inherently inexact due to processes that involve working subjectively and in partnership with Spirit. Both the procedures and the outcome must be questioned. When we feel we have been “inspired” by material beyond ego, what truly is the source of this material and can we assume it is accurate? There have been indications from investigations within the fields of psychiatry, psychology, mystical studies, and

parapsychology of useful indicators of accuracy. However, our present understanding of this mode of inquiry remains quite limited. The source of inspiration and the manifestation of that source vary from one researcher to the next, making this type of research difficult or perhaps even inherently impossible to duplicate. The setting is unavoidably subjective. Is one merely “making up” the liminal/spiritual response to one’s inquiry? Aside from confirming signals, a subjective evaluation, we have no measures of accuracy at the time of the experience. Once an experience has occurred and has been considered, one can check with others to explore similarities that could indicate some degree of consensual validation.

Because the researcher is the instrument of the study, distortions, whether intentional or unintentional, are possible. A narcissistic researcher, a deluded researcher, an angry researcher, a confused researcher, or a sentimental researcher—each could have harmful and limiting effects on the outcome of the study. Even a balanced researcher, hopeful for results that satisfy expectations, may edit or interpret the data in distorted ways. The researcher must be sufficiently self-aware to be able to acknowledge biases and assumptions, so that they may become informative filters rather than unseen confounding factors. Ongoing vigilance, honesty, and surrender are required to approach clarity of intent in undertaking subjective procedures.

The researcher who chooses to work in this way will probably be one who has experienced many of Hillevi Ruomet’s (1997) stages of psycho-spiritual growth. In addition to a moderately high level of self-awareness, the pre-requisites for adopting this approach to research include previous personal spiritual experience, an interest in exploring it, and a willingness to be yanked around in the process. “Doing organic inquiry is demanding and challenging. It is not for the faint of heart or faint of mind, nor is it an appropriate approach for those who are not willing to experience transformative change” (Braud, 2002, p. 10).

A final potentially limiting factor in the successful outcome of an organically framed study involves the reader being willing to engage with the study in a sufficiently intensive way to allow for the possibility of transformative change. Readers’ appreciation of an organic inquiry requires engaging experientially and personally with the study’s data and findings. Ideal readers are willing to take the time and make the effort to expand their perception to include not only intellect, but also sensory, feeling, and intuitive ways of knowing in order to experience an interplay with the stories that define their identities. An organic study will succeed most with those readers who are willing to commit themselves to risking changes of mind and heart. Some readers (as well as researchers) will find the organic approach meaningful because of its spiritual, Jungian, feminist, and subjective orientations and others will feel less comfortable.

Many of the limitations of organic inquiry are endemic and unavoidable. Others suggest the future of the approach.

Organic theory and procedures are based almost entirely on Western transpersonal concepts. Except for the research of Dianne Jenett (1999), who used organic inquiry to study women’s ritual in Kerala, India, little cross-cultural organic research has

been done. Will these practices derived in the West, also apply to other cultures? I would hope that future non-Western organic research will contribute to a development of the approach's theory and practice.

Organic inquiry would do well to investigate the efficacy of its own assumptions, theories, and procedures. Philipa Caldwell (2003) is currently investigating how stories function, a study that will inform the theory of organic inquiry. An exploration of the nature of the three steps of liminal/spiritual contact—preparation, inspiration, and integration—would be meaningful. Other areas that invite inspection include: the nature of interplay in the effectiveness of stories as agents of transformative change, the reliability of confirming signals like tears or chills, the impact of personality styles on the design and process of organically framed research, the usefulness of the concept of a muse of the research, a discrimination between changes of heart and changes of mind, a validation of self, Spirit, and service as effective and adequate measures of transformative change, and an examination of the concept of transformative validity.

Of greatest interest to me would be inquiry into the idea that the divine intentionally communicates with us. Liminal experience is the foundation of successful organic inquiry. When liminal becomes spiritual, and one experiences the source of one's trans-egoic experience to be a willing, even enthusiastic, partner, something more is happening. Further investigation of this phenomenon would be fruitful.

NOTES

¹ Mezirow first introduced the term “perspective transformation” as a key finding of his 1978 study of women returning to higher education who became “critically aware” of their beliefs, ways of being, etc. (usually triggered by a “disorienting dilemma”), such that they emerged with insights leading to a restructured worldview. A better understanding of how, and under what circumstances and contexts, changes of a transformative nature progress has spawned decades of research. The interested reader is referred to Mezirow & Associates (2000) for a summary and cross-spectrum treatment of the topic.

² An encounter in which ego is in a restful place and becomes an “observer” (a la Deikman's *The Observing Self*) calls for an open stance in which one may not predict what will arise.

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