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Relational Spirituality and Developmental Spirituality: Introduction to Special Topic Section

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Transpersonal psychology began with a primary focus on beyond-ego psychology, one that examined states, stages, and aspirations beyond conventional ego consciousness and formal operational cognition (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). Yet the field has consistently aspired to two additional themes—one relational, one developmental. The relational refers to a psychology of the situated individual, the person embedded in community, culture, and cosmos. The developmental indicates a psychology of transformation, both individual and social, that seeks out the processes and paths that lead to psychic integration, kindness, and grace.

Much transpersonal literature still focuses on non-ordinary states, whether spiritual, meditative, non-ordinary, holotropic, drug-induced, or exceptional; a great deal of the literature also now features transpersonal perspectives on individual human development, the most prominent being that of Ken Wilber. However, the content area of the field is not limited to these. As a study of the situated individual, it is becoming a psychology of interconnectedness and participation in the world—one that grapples with a psychology that is not just of the brain but of the whole body, not just of the mind and the emotions but of the felt sense, not just of the psyche of the individual but of society, culture, ancestors, and of the living systems in the natural world. Its philosophy is no longer only one that offers eternal truth about individual redemption, but also one informed by

more contemporary approaches such as participatory thought that emphasize the dynamics of embodied interconnectedness more than those of singular transcendence. From this perspective spirituality is also a relational development, one that transcends ego not by going up into higher states but outward into the self-forgetful engagement of compassion, altruism, service, and the practice and promotion of justice.

The first article in this section, *Consciousness and Society*, by Harry Hunt, begins by observing that non-ordinary states are not merely private, interior experiences, but that in many cultures these realms of consciousness have been understood as social experiences that could be shared in group contexts. Rather than aspects of an individual quest to rise above the world, these states were often seen to have a more communal function, a shared encounter with the numinous that strengthened the sense of meaningful belonging-together. “Western valuation of individualism and autonomy” and the “negative face of group states of consciousness” such as mob mentality (p. 114) tend to obscure this sense. Paradoxically, Hunt proposes that the pursuit of individual development may bring one deeper into states of awareness of the nature of being and, in ultimate acts of acceptance of the frailty and suffering of the human condition, become aware of the collective and relational nature of existence. This constitutes a movement toward what he calls global spirituality, and offers a frame that unifies both developmental and relational spirituality.

This call to a more relationally informed spirituality is also the theme of the two papers that follow, both by Gregg Lahood. In these pieces, entitled *Paradise Unbound*, and *The Belief in Others as a Hindrance to Enlightenment*, Lahood unpacks the lineage of perennial philosophy, nonduality, and New Age streams of thought within the field and argues that it carries an inspiring but self-centered and intolerant brand of spirituality. Beginning in the latter 19th century with the rise of theosophy, transcendentalism, and a missionary-like promotion of cremation for the dead, New England individualism blended with newly arrived Eastern philosophies to form a hybrid spiritual cosmology in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and other contemporaries. This vision blended Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity into something that claimed to represent the eternal truth contained within these traditions, though it was at the same time something entirely new and quite different from any of them.

The writings of the transcendentalists had broad and beneficent impact. For example, it was Thoreau's tract on *Civil Disobedience* that inspired Mohandas Gandhi to use a non-violent approach against the British occupation of India, a movement that led to India's independence in 1948. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King emulated Gandhi in his approach to win civil rights for African Americans. What began as an orientalist interpretation of Eastern spirituality gave rise to a non-violent political approach that has since been used by César Chávez to win rights for Mexican farm laborers, and that has played a prominent role in non-violent revolutions from Czechoslovakia to the Philippines.

The hybrid spirituality of the transcendentalists also provided direct inspiration for the Beat movement of the 1950s and the Hippies of the 1960s, and eventually served as template for the esoteric core of the New Age. This, in turn, was the milieu out of which transpersonal psychology emerged—a loose-knit counterculture informed by a popularized vision of individual transcendence through an eternally true path that was imperfectly reflected in Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. It was as the prophet of this New Age version of transpersonalism that Ken Wilber rose to prominence.

Inspiring as it is to imagine that all the different streams of world spirituality have at last been distilled into a unified truth that embraces all the cultures of the world, this approach has a shadow side. For one thing, New Age religion has a proclivity toward narcissistic self-

spirituality: it is a path that focuses on the transcendent experience of the individual to the exclusion of mutuality and sharing. For another, such hybrid spirituality tends to see itself as superior to the traditions on which it draws, even though it may involve no particular rigor of practice or thought. As the carrier of an eternal truth that existed long before such traditions came into being, New Age truth proposes to achieve planet-wide unity through the submission of all lesser, "partial truths" to its syncretistic yet authoritative pick-and-mix One Truth.

New Age perennialism has been, more or less, the philosophical backbone of transpersonal psychology for the first 30 years of its history. Yet with the turn of the millennium, the field also began to move toward a more relational direction, first with the participatory approach called for by Ferrer (2002), but now also through the work of Heron (1992, 1998, 2006) and Lahood (2007, 2008; Heron & Lahood, 2008). This call is for a relational rebirth of transpersonal psychology, a humbler field that draws more on Buber's I-Thou than on the New Age's I AM. Such a relational spirituality is not opposed to spiritual development, but situates such development in relationship to the communities of life rather than relative to some individual esoteric achievement that provides power and status.

The remaining articles within the special topic section deal with the theme of spirituality within a more developmental frame. The first of these, *Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development*, by Harris Friedman, Stanley Krippner, Linda Riebel, and Chad Johnson, considers spiritual development not as something that can be reduced to a single and uniform phenomenon, but as a way to refer to powerful human processes that are too vital and multifaceted to be contained with any one model. Their approach is to set forth some of the diverse territory, considering traditional models of spiritual development as found in indigenous, Western, and Eastern communities; integrative-philosophical models such as Wilber's; psychological models such as those offered by Allport, Kohut, Gilligan, and the field of transpersonal psychology; and neurobiological models that are still in their infancy. They conclude by invoking Ferrer's (2002) call for giving up on any attempt to rank different traditions relative to ultimate criteria, and suggesting that instead different paths be valued by how effectively they release the individual from self-centeredness and lead to fulfillment.

After this comes an interview with Robert Bolton entitled, *The Self and the Great Chain of Being*,

conducted by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos. Bolton lays out a perennialist position that is quite different from that of Ken Wilber. Among the interesting facets of his exposition is a position that the “Cogito” argument attributed to Descartes can be traced back to the 4th-5th century Christian theologian and church father, St. Augustine of Hippo. Bolton hears in St. Augustine’s (1963) idea that “every mind knows and is certain of itself” (p. 308) not only the precursor of Descartes’ famous cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am) but also a key element in the construction of the Western notion of personality, which he considers to be an especially Christian concept. Bolton reads as the essence of a well-tempered mind, one that Bendeck Sotillos ably engages and brings forward.

Michael Abramsky’s piece, *Jacob Wrestles the Angel*, is a psychospiritual analysis that offers a Jewish engagement with the concept of spiritual development. Abramsky draws on the tradition of Midrash, a traditional rabbinical hermeneutical exploration of biblical stories, and he weaves together scriptural narrative, psychoanalytic theory, kabbalistic imagery, and Buddhist doctrine into an informative and elucidating story of one man’s struggle with releasing his life into the hands of the divine. This is developmental spirituality revealed in a relational context.

As Jacob discovered, the spiritual path is not without its crises. The next paper, by Darlene Viggiano and Stanley Krippner, examines *The Grofs’ Model of Spiritual Emergency in Retrospect*, and asks whether it has stood the test of time. The paper offers a helpful review of the concept, tracing its roots to the work of William James, Carl Jung, and Roberto Assagioli, and its later development to Christina and Stan Grof as well as David Lukoff. Included is an interview with Karen Trueheart, former director of the Spiritual Emergence Network, which explores the durability of this model and asks whether there are ways in which it might need revision.

The final paper, *The Gift of Life*, by Rochelle Suri, is a call to engagement with death as a spiritual teacher, illustrated by an account of the Aghori, a North Indian sect that engages in a number of socially condemned practices designed to highlight the nonduality of life and death, pleasure and pain, good and bad. If death is part of life, the author asks, then how can life be lived fully if death is denied and repressed?

This diverse offering is a tribute to the creativity and innovation that still flowers within the field of transpersonal psychology, bringing forward thoughtful

engagement from a wide variety of perspectives. It is an aging and failing oak tree that is reduced to a simple structure with few branches; a vital and vigorous oak entwines itself in elegant and complex ways that defy simple description.

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