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# A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems

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This paper presents a preliminary description of A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems (ATFAFS) as taught at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) between 1995 and 2002. In this approach, students studied the principles of Murray Bowen's family systems theory with attention to feminist revisions of the theory while simultaneously investigating their own multigenerational family histories. Additionally, students kept a journal, recorded and worked with their dreams, and worked with a chosen creative expressive modality. They may also have worked with other transpersonal modalities. Student narratives, informed by organic inquiry, illustrate aspects of the approach. The paper concludes with a detailed look at students' perceived benefits and drawbacks of the approach.

**Keywords:** *multigenerational family systems, transpersonal, feminist, dreamwork, journaling, organic inquiry, creative expression.*

This paper presents a preliminary description of A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems (ATFAFS) as taught at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) between 1995 and 2002. It is my hope that this description, based in rich student narratives, will provide a sense of the multifaceted, instructive, and healing experiences that we, teacher and students, shared together. The paper aims to contribute to the "emerging transpersonal-humanistic family-systems perspective" (Lukoff, 2005/2006, p. 4) and to the ongoing discussion concerning the training of transpersonal psychotherapists (Boorstein, 1986; Braud, 2006; Hastings, 1983; Hutchins, 2002; Hutton, 1994; Kennett, Radha, & Frager, 1975; Lazarus, 1999; Ram Dass, 1975; Vaughan, 1979, 1982, 1991; Speeth, 1982).

A single course in this topic was developed and taught to graduate students at ITP between 1995 and 1999 as a method for inner transformational work and for the training of clinical graduate students. Since 1999, a curriculum based on this approach has been available for Global distance-learning students at ITP. In 1998, I initiated an exploratory organic qualitative study with interested students of this course and approach to elicit a more detailed description from those who had used it and to ascertain benefits, drawbacks, and avenues for further study.

## **Beginning with a Dream**

It seems fitting to begin with a dream of March 24, 2006. I knew that I had allotted this day and the rest

of the weekend to prepare for a poster presentation for the North Carolina Association of Marriage and Family conference on the portion of this study focusing on the use of dreams as a complement to family study. My dream:

I realize that I have put my son Ben to sleep in the freezer. I become worried about him and go to take him out of the freezer. In the dream, he is a baby, maybe 6 months old, and I am very relieved to see that he is breathing easily and his skin looks pink and healthy, though there is much ice forming in the freezer. I take him out of the freezer. He says, "Mom, I did not want you to put me here." As I watch, he suddenly begins to transform and grow rapidly until he becomes the handsome 19 year old he currently is.

At first, I am perplexed and a bit alarmed about this dream. Why would I be putting my son into a freezer? I wonder if there is some unconscious way I have been harming my son, which this dream is trying to bring to consciousness. My husband reminds me how much I miss my son who is now finishing his sophomore year at Georgetown and has plans to stay in Georgetown all summer. My husband suggests I may have a wish to freeze Ben back in time. Then I remember that this is the weekend I have set aside to finish my preparations for a poster presentation on dreams and family study. I recall Marie-Louise von Franz's reminder that young boys in women's dreams can represent important work projects

(Boa & von Franz, 1994). The teaching and developing of ATFAFS is a work project very close to my heart, so close that it is not surprising that my dreamer would choose my son Ben to represent it. I have been working on this particular project for almost as many years as my son has been alive. I suppose I did put this beloved project in the “freezer” when I left California and my teaching in the Residential program of ITP in 1999 to move to Chapel Hill, North Carolina with my family. It is delightful and reassuring to see that Ben in my dream is healthy and unharmed, though not very happy about spending time in the freezer. It is my hope that, as Ben has matured in the dream, so has the work presented here.

### **What Is A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems?**

**A**TFAFS is a method of working on the self, used in the training of transpersonal psychologists and psychotherapists at ITP. In this approach, students study principles of Murray Bowen’s family system theory (Bowen, 1985/1990; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 1990) with attention to feminist revisions of the theory (Knudsen-Martin, 1994, 1996; Lerner, 1985, 1989; McGoldrick, 1998), while simultaneously investigating their own multigenerational family histories using tools of the genogram and family chronology (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). Additionally, students keep a journal (Goldberg, 1986; Pennebaker, 1991, 1996; Proffoff, 1992), record and work with their dreams (Boa & Von Franz, 1994; Mellick, 1996, 2001; Taylor, 1992) and work with a chosen creative expressive modality (Cassout & Cublely, 1995; Mellick, 1996, 2001).<sup>2</sup> They may also choose to work with other transpersonal modalities, such as prayer (Dossey, 1993, 1996) or meditation (Hanh, 2003; LeShan, 1974). Students may choose to present their work in a final project submitted privately to the instructor, or they may elect to prepare a family presentation to be shared with their classmates. Students are encouraged to make sense of their family history in their own terms and are encouraged to use whichever transpersonal modalities they deem useful.

### **Family Systems Aspects**

The approach is built on the foundation of Murray Bowen’s (1985/1990) brilliant contribution to family systems theory, particularly his formulation of the multi-generational transmission process (the notion that “individual differences in functioning and multigenerational trends in functioning reflect an orderly

and predictable relationship process that connects the function of family members across generations” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 224), his encouragement of the study of one’s family of origin to become aware of family history and patterns both for patients and as a method of psychotherapeutic training (Bowen, 1985/1990), and his coaching to move in one’s family in a “differentiated” (pp. 140-141) way. Bowen spoke favorably about the value of working on one’s family of origin in a clinical training program:

Later in 1967 and 1968 I noted that this group of residents were doing better clinical work as family therapists than any previous residents. At first I simply considered this an unusually good group of residents. As time passed I became aware that the difference between these and previous residents was too great for such a simple explanation. The difference appeared to be related to something I was doing and I began to ask questions. Then it became clear that it was precisely those residents who had done best in the effort with their parental families who were also doing best in their clinical work. (p. 531)

### **Feminist Aspects**

In the 1970s, in psychology and elsewhere, feminists mounted a challenge to traditional institutions and disciplines, encouraging them to be more inclusive, transparent, and honoring of feminine ways of being. In this approach, Bowen’s work is presented with a feminist revision (Lerner, 1985, 1989; McGoldrick, 1998). First, the approach emphasizes sensitivity to issues of gender, race, and power (Ault-Riche, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Knudson-Martin, 1994; Lerner, 1985, 1989; McGoldrick, 1998; Miller, 1986). Second, it encourages the empowerment of the individual (Lerner, 1985, 1989). Rather than going to outside experts, students are encouraged to study their own families and make sense of their histories in their own terms. They are encouraged to become their own experts on themselves. They are encouraged to develop and strengthen their own voice. Third, the use of story and narrative is important in this approach. Fourth, the value of feeling is acknowledged alongside the value of thinking.

### **Transpersonal Aspects**

This approach incorporates various transpersonal elements. It is holistic, encouraging integration of

body, mind, spirit, emotions, creative expression, family, and community. It is transpersonal, encouraging aspects that go beyond the personal ego level of development. The approach uses transpersonal modalities such as dreamwork, ritual, journaling, prayer, and meditation. It focuses on health as well as pathology and aims to cultivate transpersonal values such as love, wisdom, compassion, and mindfulness.

A vibrant, contemplative atmosphere was developed in the class in several ways. Confidentiality is established early on. Students are instructed that they may discuss their own family work any time they feel it is appropriate to do so, but they may not discuss any other student's family work without express permission. They are instructed to bring compassionate, non-judging, and mindful attention both to themselves and to others who are presenting family histories or are reading portions of their journals. A contemplative atmosphere is fostered in the class through time spent in silence, journaling, and meditating together, as well as through compassionate listening to presentations of the multigenerational journeys of their classmates.

#### **The Emerging Transpersonal Humanistic Family Systems Perspective**

Zinnbauer and Camerota (2004) pointed out that although the discipline of transpersonal psychology has been working with the integration of spirituality and psychology for over 30 years, it is only recently that the mental health field is turning attention to this matter. This trend has been seen in the discipline of family therapy as well. Walsh's chapter, "Beliefs, Spirituality, and Transcendence: Keys to Family Resilience," appeared in McGoldrick's (1998) important book, *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice*. Walsh discussed how core beliefs and spiritual connections are important sources of resilience that support clients in transcending adversity. More recently, Caldwell, Winek, and Becvar (2006), citing the growing acknowledgement of the mind/body connection both within and outside of medical settings, studied the extent to which marriage and family therapists were affected by and/or had an impact on this shift. The authors, after conducting a survey of a random sample of 1000 clinical members of The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) regarding their relationship with Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practices, found that "most of the respondents indicated

knowledge of a variety of CAM practices" (p. 110) and recommended CAM. Interestingly, "a relatively small number of respondents indicated that they were qualified to practice, supervise or teach relative to a specific CAM modality. Such practices include relaxation techniques, guided imagery, meditation, diet/lifestyle changes, hypnosis, and prayer therapies" (p. 110). The authors concluded:

The findings of this study certainly are comparable to the results reported by Barnes et al. (2004) regarding the high percentage of use of CAM services in this country. In the professional arena, it appears that MFTs and psychologists (Bassman & Uellendahl, 2003) also are experiencing a similar increase in awareness and utilization of CAM practices. (p. 110)

Becvar, Caldwell, and Winek (2006) reported on a qualitative aspect of this study in which 54 respondents were interviewed. Notably, the respondents described a sense of a "fit" between CAM and marriage and family therapy:

There is frequent agreement regarding the logical fit between the assumptions underlying family therapy and those on which complementary alternative medicine is premised. It therefore is not surprising that many MFTs seem to have established a comfortable working relationship with a variety of CAM approaches and thus are open to and desirous of learning more. (p. 123)

I have certainly sensed this fit in my own work as an instructor and as a marriage and family therapist.

Outside the mainstream of family therapy discourse, there have been some important contributions regarding the integration of transpersonal modalities in healing work with families. For example, Kenneth McAll (1982), a British psychiatrist, in his book entitled *Healing the Family Tree*, reported on his success curing psychiatric disease through the Eucharist prayer for troubled members of the patient's family tree.

Edward Bruce Bynum (1993) has been conducting The Family Dreams Research Project, "an ongoing national and cross cultural study in the relationship between dream life and family processes" (p. 227). Bynum (2000) described a fascinating concept called the family unconscious:

What we discovered was a field of shared images, ideas and feelings in each individual within the family. This shared family emotional field, which we call the family unconscious, is a shifting, interconnected field of energy that does not obey the conventional rules of space and time in the waking state. This field of interconnected energy, influence, and information in many ways parallels some of the developments in sub-atomic physics. (para. 12)

Psychotherapist Les Rhodes (2000), in her autobiographical account of dealing with Parkinson's disease, was very influenced by both family systems work (she worked and studied with Virginia Satir for many years) and Jungian work (she was involved with Jungian analysis). The book is an extraordinary account of her deep blending of the two traditions, including many of her own dreams, and the part they played in her journey toward wholeness. The integration of dreamwork and family systems is an important aspect of the transpersonal approach to family systems described in this paper.

#### **Research Approach for this Preliminary Study of A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems**

Organic inquiry (Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998; Braud, 2004; Clements, 2004) was developing at the ITP at the same time I was teaching there and working to develop what I now call A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems (ATFAFS). According to Clements,

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. (p. 27)

In discussing the origins and influences of organic inquiry, Clements noted:

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. (p. 28)

I developed the first version of an interview protocol during a practice session in a class on organic inquiry taught by Clements in 1998. Organic inquiry seemed quite suitable to this preliminary investigation of ATFAFS as taught at ITP. ATFAFS aims to support psycho-spiritual growth. Students are invited to work subjectively in partnership with liminal and spiritual sources through their journaling, dreamwork, and meditative work in class. Prayer, meditative practice, meditative journaling, and dreamwork supported me all along in the development of this approach and in this investigation. The feminist and transpersonal roots of organic inquiry suited the transpersonal, feminist aspects of ATFAFS.

Organic inquiries are born out of one's deep personal experience. Alongside developing, teaching, and investigating ATFAFS, I have been immersed in my own process of healing and transformation within my own family. On August 11, 2006, I reflected in my journal:

I am struck by how important my mother is to this study. I recall that I wrote the first rough outline of this study proposal in the Spring of 1998. I lived then in Menlo Park, California, and had come down to Los Angeles to visit my mother. I took her to Palm Springs, which offered a climate that was soothing to her lungs (she has suffered from severe asthma since she was 5 years old). I wrote ideas for this study proposal while sitting by the pool at our hotel.

Then came my family's move to Chapel Hill. I thought I would have so much free time to write and work on this research project, but the work of transplanting myself, my family and my practice was consuming for many years. I slowly transcribed interviews and pored over data. I used this transpersonal approach to family systems in my work with clients.

I began working more steadily on this article, however, when life brought me closer to my mother. A scary car accident in January, 2006, convinced my mother it was time to sell the house she had lived in for almost 50 years

and move closer to family. Between December, 2005 and May, 2006, I made 5 week-long trips back to Los Angeles to help my mother heal from her car accident, prepare to sell her house, and then pack things up and move when the house sold. On the plane flights between North Carolina and California, and in the early morning hours at my mother's house when I was still on North Carolina time, I began working quite seriously on this article. As the days got closer to the move, all my extra energy went into assisting my mother, and the article waited.

It is now almost 3 months since my mother's move. She has chosen to live in Chapel Hill and is now living with my husband and me while she gets her bearings and decides her next steps. I am on a two-week vacation from seeing clients, and I am devoting time to this article again. It is a labor of love. I wonder if I will finish the article while my mom is living in our house with us.

My relationship with my mother has not always been an easy one, but has of course, been a very important relationship in my work and in my life. These days together, while challenging, have been very healing days.

In 1998, I began to work with a group of interested students to create an interview protocol with the aim of developing a preliminary description of ATFAFS. Over several weeks, we developed the protocol, refined it, and practiced by interviewing each other. Questions included the following:

Please tell your stories of healing and transformation in your family in your own words. Include places of struggle and release, victories and defeats, light and dark.

Were there any important dream images that potentiated your family work?

Were there any important synchronicities?

Were there any particular transpersonal modalities that supported or helped you in your family work?

Were there any particular transpersonal experiences that supported or helped you in your family work?

Please share any thoughts you have about drawbacks to the Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems you were exposed to in your Innerwork Practicum/Clinical Practicum class at ITP.

Please share any thoughts you have about benefits of this approach.

Is there anything you would like to add?

How has this process been for you?

As a part of the protocol, participants rated different parts of the course/approach based on their perception of the helpfulness of various aspects of the course. Twenty interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed. Subsequently, two global students who completed their distance education version of ATFAFS gave permission for their work to be included in this study. In addition, 22 students gave permission for portions of their final papers, which discussed the experience and impact of presenting their genograms to their classmates, to be included in this exploratory study. In the findings reported herein, I also drew on my experiences teaching this approach, using it in my own life and in my work with clients.

### **Participants**

Participants ranged in age from 20s to 60s. All met the criteria for admission to various graduate programs at ITP. All students had completed at least a Bachelors degree. Some had higher degrees as well. Some had extensive training and experience in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy; others were just beginning study. Some had extensive experience with their own families in therapy and recovery, while others had not. The group was primarily Caucasian with some representation from the African American, Asian, and Hispanic communities.

Invitations to participate were given to all students who had attended an ITP class in which I presented this approach to family systems. Participation was entirely voluntary. I did not look at the names of anyone who chose to participate until all grades were turned in for the last quarter I taught residentially at ITP. Although grades were pass/fail and all students in the class passed by virtue of completing their assignments, I took this precaution to protect students' anonymity while I was writing evaluations.

**Student Reports on the Usefulness of  
Various Aspects of  
A Transpersonal Feminist Approach  
to Family Systems**

Twenty students provided answers to the following question about various aspects they experienced in relationship to their family work:

Please rate the following activities in terms of how helpful they have been in your processing of healing and transformation within your family. Rate the items on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing not helpful at all and 10 representing extremely helpful.

In Table 1, results are presented in the order of amount of the students' perceived helpfulness of class activities. This table also provides an overview of the mix of activities in which students were engaged.

All activities received rankings in the helpful range. The highest ranking (9.30) was given to preparation for the family presentation and the lowest (6.77) was given to dreamwork.

The three activities of highest rank related to family presentations: preparing for family presentations, presenting one's family to classmates, and listening to classmates' family presentations. These are activities that are commonly used in the study of Murray Bowen's

(1985/1990) family systems theory and the high rankings tend to support Bowen's assertion that the work of family investigation can be extremely helpful in working with one's own family of origin. Next highest were activities related to journaling: reading journal entries in class ranked highest, followed by listening to classmates' journal entries, and journaling with the class.

It is possible that the lower rankings for creative expressive work, prayer, and dreamwork have to do with the fact that not all students were exposed to all activities. Dreamwork was discussed in Innerwork Practicum briefly but not in Clinical Practicum. Students had exposure to dreamwork in other coursework at ITP. Creative expressive work was also offered in separate courses at ITP. Prayer was entirely voluntary and was not a class activity. Harriet Lerner's books *Dance of Intimacy* (1989) and *Dance of Anger* (1985) were required reading for the Innerwork Practicum classes taught to first year doctoral students, and were recommended reading for Clinical Practicum students. Additionally, it is important to note that rankings are subjective and may change with reflection. As Karen noted:

Reading journal entries to class—I ranked it as a 6. But now that I'm thinking about it, it should probably be like a 10. Wow, I just never felt really accepted. I think that's what it is. I felt really accepted by the class and I think a lot of that has to do with Innerwork, because I really put myself out there. I think there was only 1 or 2 times when I didn't read. I remember always saying to myself, "Other people are passing, but I'm going to read."

Upon reviewing the results of this questionnaire, I realized that there were several important activities in the class that were omitted in the questionnaire, and that I hoped to include in future studies. These include maintaining a non-judgmental stance, compassionate self-awareness, and compassionate listening.

**Illustrations of Important Aspects of  
A Transpersonal Feminist Approach  
to Family Systems**

This section includes detailed examples of important aspects of ATFAFS provided by student accounts of their experiences. I selected the passages because of their ability to transmit various aspects of the process. Participants chose their own pseudonyms for the study. I changed certain details to disguise identities. Passages have been editing lightly for clarity and brevity.

**Table 1.**

**Average Ratings of Class Activities in Terms of How Helpful They Were in the Process of Healing and Transformation Within One's Family**

1 = not helpful 5 = moderately helpful 10 = extremely helpful

Preparation for family presentation	9.30
Presenting your family to classmates	8.98
Listening to your classmates' family presentations	8.75
Reading journal entries to class	8.11
Listening to classmates' journal entries	7.76
Journaling with class	7.61
Creative expression work	7.61
Reading <i>Dance of Intimacy</i> (Lerner, 1987)	7.36
Informal discussions with classmates	7.23
Prayer	7.19
Reading <i>Dance of Anger</i> (Lerner, 1985)	7.15
Dreamwork	6.77

### **Jane's Dream, Family Presentation, and Experience with Journaling**

*Jane:* [I had] one dream right before I gave my presentation. I hadn't thought it was going to be any big deal, giving the presentation.

I'd been preparing for this for about 10 years. About 10 years ago, I began asking my mother about the family. ... My mother had some notes she had written. It wasn't very complete but at least it was something. So I thought, well, it's not going to be any big deal and I was really looking forward to doing it. Like I said in class, who else is going to listen to this. So it's kind of an honor to be able to tell these stories.

But the night I gave my presentation, I had this dream about these grubby people. I told this dream in class.

I was at a party, some outdoor party of some kind. I was with my friends, my people, my community, the people I socialize with. And in walked these grubby people. Filthy, dirty people with dirty clothes and dirty hair and everything. Fat. They weren't bad looking, but they were just so filthy. It was sort of horrifying. Nobody was really saying anything about it. My friends were making conversation, were making nice with those people, and I thought, do you guys not notice that these people are incredibly filthy? I was the only one. I didn't even know who these people were. They weren't my relatives, like anyone I recognized, but everybody's acting like, "There's so and so." Finally I asked my friend B., "Who are these people? Why are they so filthy?" And she said, "I'll tell you later." But still people were being so kind to them.

I woke up and thought, what a weird dream. I wonder who those people are. That's so odd. And so it wasn't until I wrote that in journaling that I realized it was my family, that I had some sense of shame about who they were, their flaws, their dysfunction. I never really felt that because I didn't feel any particular connection with most of them. I really didn't know them. Most of them were dead by the time I came along. And so I thought, that's really interesting that I feel that.

And so, after I did the presentation, what I was also struck by, there was this huge, it was like a big release afterwards. It was very emotional afterwards. It was very emotional afterwards. I did this presentation on Thursday. On Friday, we had that closing ritual group

practice. That whole day I was just a basket case. I was fine Thursday, but by Friday, I felt absolutely exhausted, spent emotionally. I think it was a rebound effect from doing the presentation. I couldn't stop crying. I just couldn't stop crying. This whole family presentation thing which I had determined was merely going to be a benign little exercise was tapping into feelings of which I was totally unaware.

There is a big difference in sharing my family's story with people who are interested and care about me and sharing it with people who are not that interested. For one thing people who aren't interested in me and my history won't sit and listen to all that. It makes them uncomfortable. It is an act of love to be willing to listen and empathically take all of it in. Presenting my family in that empathic supportive environment allows me to see and begin to drop some of those engrained defenses and contact some of that wounding as well as the feelings generated by that wounding. It also allows me to place myself not just in an historical context but in an emotional and psychological context. That part felt so big to me.

**Reflections on Jane.** I chose to begin this section with Jane's account because it illustrates quite well many aspects of ATFAPS, demonstrating how many of the pieces fit together and support each other. Jane's dream came right before her family presentation, and the dream's significance began to clarify for her during a class journaling session before the presentation. Jane noted that she underestimated the power of the family presentation, having been gathering family information for 10 years.

The dream is about "grubby people." While journaling about the dream before class, Jane realized that these "grubby people" were her family, and she tapped into some feelings of shame about her family, feelings that surprised her as she had never met many of the people represented on her genogram. She said: "Most of them were dead by the time I came along."

The dream and Jane's commentary illustrate the class atmosphere that was intentionally cultivated over time: an atmosphere of loving-kindness, respect, curiosity, exploration, openness, and non-judgment toward all participants—self, family members, class members, and their families. The kindness, acceptance, and non-judgment of her friends in the dream are remarkable to Jane, while in her dream, as the dreamer, she is so focused on her judgments: "They weren't bad looking, but they were just so filthy."



Jane commented: "Presenting my family in that empathic supportive environment allows me to see and begin to drop some of those engrained defenses and contact some of that wounding as well as the feelings generated by that wounding." Here we see a beautiful example of Jane making sense of her family history in her own time, in her own terms. The interplay between contemplating her dream through her journal and contemplating her family history seems to promote a deepening of understanding and a bridge beyond the intellect to deep feelings that had previously been unconscious.

### **Sunshine's Family Investigation, Journaling, and Listening to Classmates' Family Presentations**

*Sunshine:* I think it was a good experience in that I had never really talked to my parents about their childhoods. I mean we had talked a little about them, but never really had gone into depth about them. It was a good process in terms of me asking them questions about their family life and childhood and getting them to open a little bit more because they were closed about disclosing their childhood experiences. They both had a painful childhood in a lot of ways. So it was definitely healing for me to talk to them and gave me insight into what some of the patterns were.

It was really helpful for me in terms of getting in touch with the unconscious. The journaling, really, is like letting your unconscious take over. There's space for that. And there's something about the class that helps to elicit it, I think. I never really journaled that much outside of class. I never really got much out of it. The space kind of allowed the unconscious to open. So I think it is a great tool for getting in touch with your unconscious. Hearing other people share is a great way to build connections or intimacy. I saw sides of people that I had never seen in other classes. And the family presentations were really powerful too—I saw sides of people I would never normally know about or see. [These aspects] cannot really come out because there are some norms or something. I don't really know what it is. It's like a transpersonal thing.

The space is created for people's whole self to come forward, which I guess is what the transpersonal is. It is a powerful approach because it does bridge the personal family history with the transpersonal. Transpersonal is not just focusing on your defects and pains and your family's problems but it is holistic. I think it is a really powerful approach.

**Reflections on Sunshine.** I was struck by Sunshine's words, "The space is created for people's whole selves to come forward." This was something I noticed as well, again and again, particularly during students' family presentations. I often noticed a sense of students' full presence and wholeness during their family presentations and afterwards, when I observed students relating to each other in class.

Sunshine reflected on the healing aspects of talking to her parents about their childhoods, which opened new conversations and avenues for exploration and helped her understand family patterns. Many students reported similar experiences.

She described helpful aspects of journaling sessions in class, which particularly assisted her in getting in touch with the unconscious. Sunshine said, "The journaling really is like letting your unconscious takeover... The space kind of allowed the unconscious to open." Some of the writing exercises I presented, especially those developed by Ira Progoff (1992) and Natalie Goldberg (1986), do have a quality of allowing one to open to and listen to the unconscious. It was my hope that journaling would also allow time and space for integrating the information and insight that came from the unconscious, as seen in Jane's comments above.

Sunshine noted that the class atmosphere "allowed the unconscious to open." I believe this is true. I believe the atmosphere of compassionate, non-judging awareness of one's own words and of others' sharing fostered the openness. I further believe that the presence of a group who are journaling together helps everyone in the group move more deeply, just as a group of meditators can support the depth of an individual's meditation experiences.

Sunshine reflected on the community-building aspects of ATFAPS: "Hearing other people share is a great way to build connections or intimacy." The opportunity to hear classmates' journal entries as well as family presentations contributed to this sense of intimacy.

### **Mary's Creative Expressive Prayer and Genogram Work**

*Mary:* One of the things I did was to make a REALLY BIG CHART (genogram), and I lived with it on my wall. So there was this corner I would slip into to do my family work, and the three dimensionality of it was important, the spatial aspect.

And lately what I have been doing is I have been casting the faces of my family in plaster and then

pressing clay into them, so right now I am doing people that are closer to me. So I put their pictures around, and I work on the mask, and I pray about them, and I think about them, and I make other things around. And there's a lot of stress and struggle in this. I'm doing my oldest sister's children right now. She's going through a horrific time. It's hard being so far away. So for me, it's like laying down these prayers for them and decorating their faces with leaves of plants that are blooming. It's a trippy thing, but it's been really good for me, you know. I woke up this morning. I spent a couple of hours working on L. And so, it's like the same part of my room. There's a way that spatially I feel like—I don't know. I haven't articulated this yet. So there's a way that it's significant for me to return to that part of my room, to start to put up on the walls further manifestations or explorations into my family. And it's helping me open myself to them in a really good way. And there's a way I can touch those faces and be aware of myself with those faces that I am hoping to more and more be like.

And when I first started casting them, I didn't have any idea that it would turn out to be such a big heart thing for me, you know. I feel like, when I'm working on the faces, you know how you tend a little kid when they're sick, you wipe their face, just like that big heart thing. You know, I really feel this big heart thing for me to work on these.

So here's something else. I'm thinking out loud. There's a way we have a family situation where the boys haven't really helped us. And it's an old pattern in the family where the men are very charismatic, very powerful, and they're each in their own way crazy.... They have wild hair or they played too hard or like this man, he really has a screw loose.

I feel like in doing these masks that I am finding my way with those—that field thing again... spending that time and I love this. [It is] really prayerful, loving to do this work. I feel like myself. I'm finding a way in myself to be able to be congruent with what's going on. It also feels that the working I'm doing three dimensionally is helping me find my way to this other part of the family that I'm not... that I'm finding my way with this mask. I'm finding my way also into myself, like how to view the way I develop.

**Reflections on Mary.** I chose to include this excerpt because it provides a striking example of a mode of creative expressive prayerful work that one student developed

for herself. Mary found that working in three dimensions was important for her. She lived with her REALLY BIG CHART (genogram) in a special corner of her house. She described a creative expressive, prayerful practice that she created for herself as she did her family work.

Mary worked on a project of casting the faces of her family members in plaster and then pressing clay into them to create masks. As she worked with each mask, she surrounded herself with pictures of that family member, thinking about him or her, offering prayers, and decorating the mask with the leaves of blooming plants.

This is a modality that arose spontaneously for Mary, and its power surprised her. Mary said, "When I first started casting them, I didn't have any idea that it would turn out to be such a big heart thing for me." Mary found huge benefit in this practice. She touched a new part of herself she hoped to develop: "And there's a way I can touch those faces and be aware of myself with those faces, that I am hoping to more and more be like."

#### **Sweetness' Continuous Family Investigation: Compelling, Exciting, and Painful**

*Sweetness:* Yes, it's been about 3 years. It's been a continuous three years of working. There hasn't been a time in which I said, OK, I need a break. I'm not going to do anything on this. Things have come about the family and pieces about the family and family dynamics continually over this three-year period of time, and I know that there's still this call to continue to do work with it. My father is very excited for me to come home this summer because we're going to look up some more things. I have been sharing with him each step of the way what I've been doing and he's very, very excited about it. I've become more excited about it and keep doing things on the Internet.

*Interviewer:* What kinds of things are you doing on the Internet?

*Sweetness:* Finding birth certificates, finding death certificates. Like I never really knew the history of Kentucky and where people came from and how the land was allocated originally and Kentucky was next to Tennessee, which was a state that we were not free in and couldn't be free in. So lots of people came to Kentucky with no sense of family, nothing, but just to get away from being in a slave state. Uncovering that piece of history and what I've recently found out is that my mother's grandparents weren't from Kentucky. So that's been really, really interesting to really start tracing

and picking and finding and delving into. And it's been painful. It's been a really painful process. I got into some of the Archives of Kentucky and found some of the court hearings and where they would, a slave was trying to run away, off a plantation, they would be caught and sentenced to so many lashes, whippings. Reading this, the pain and the torment, it sometimes feels overwhelming, it feels a little much, and yet there is this push to keep delving and trying to locate this information and trying to make sense of it.

I'm not quite sure what all this means, but it's been really important to share with the family. And everyone wants me to bring home the big sheet that I prepared for class, so I can hang it up. And everybody wants to be on it. It's like we all want to find where we are. "Did you put this person in?" "Well yes, mom, of course I put them in." "Oh, we were hoping maybe we could have a reunion when you come and everyone can see this."

They're hoping that I have found some pieces of information about my mother's grandparents, which has been very difficult if you were African American. You didn't go on a census; you went on as property. It's those kinds of things, and people's names changed. Oftentimes you had to take the name of the family that owned you. So it's been that kind of holding that's been hard. ... I feel a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. And I feel this research is part of the big piece.

**Reflections on Sweetness.** Whereas Mary's family work drew her toward prayerful mask-making, Sweetness was drawn deeply into family investigation. In this transpersonal feminist approach to family systems, students are encouraged to follow a particular direction that has the most heart and meaning for them. Sweetness found much benefit in her chosen direction. It brought her closer to her family. She enjoyed sharing her work with her father at every step of the way. In addition, her family was interested in her ongoing exploration: "And everyone wants me to bring home the big sheet that I prepared for class, so I can hang it up. And everybody wants to be on it."

It also eased a burden she carried. Paradoxically, though some of what Sweetness uncovered was extremely painful (e.g., "If you were African American you didn't go on a census, you went on as property"), she felt a sense of lightening: "I feel a weight has been lifted from my shoulders." She attributed a part of this lifting to her family work.

As I witnessed students of different cultures and ethnicities share particular pieces of their family history, I perceived greater possibilities for understanding, empathy, and appreciation of differences. It was as if we were each privileged to look through a very detailed and private window of life and experience at times so different, at times so similar, to our own. There was something very powerful and illuminating about seeing each person in the very deep context from which she or he came. Several students reported that this process was a start in the healing of past hurts that had happened in their relationships.

### **Austin's Somatic Response to His Family Presentation: A Heart Opening**

*Austin:* So it [my family presentation] was a very, very touching experience. I didn't know how touching it was, but I knew when I was asked how I was doing at the end [of the presentation] I couldn't say. I didn't know because I was so touched, too deep to really put a label or name on what it was.

And then we did a Reichian experience [in my next class]. We were lying on our backs and loosening up the armoring in our bodies. I remember feeling a "ping" in my left lung. I didn't know what it was. I just remember feeling it go off, kind of like a small needle. I went through the rest of the day. I did a drawing while listening to class and it ended up being this drawing of a person sitting cross-legged and having a swirl coming out of the chest cavity. I did it completely unconsciously. I wasn't paying attention to what my hands were doing as I was listening to class.

Then I went home and came back the next day. As I was pulling up to ITP a song came on the radio, Elton John's "Candle in the Wind," the verse, "you're like the candle in the wind, you've been blown out long before your legend ever did." At that instant my grandmother on my mom's side flashed into my mind and I just saw so vividly my genogram and her children, all my uncles and aunts and my mother and myself as her lineage, and you know she was blown out so quickly in the car accident. I just lost it.

I cried for the rest of the song. I had a little bit of time so I was going to go in and meditate. I went into the meditation room and my left lung started hurting again. And so I did some concentration meditation on that area to see what was going on. With every breath it started getting worse and worse and finally I just stopped concentrating on my breathing because it was hurting so much.

I thought I had a deflated lung and so I ended up going to the hospital. The doctor said it wasn't a deflated lung, that it was muscular, in between my ribs up against my lung something had pulled, supposedly. He was going to do an EKG on me because he thought I was having heart problems. But after checking me out he said he didn't think that was necessary because my heart was sounding strong. I hadn't even thought about it being over my heart. I just was thinking about my lung.

So that was the first indicator that maybe this was heart related. Within two weeks I was back in Aikido practicing and so that kind of ruled out strained muscles. It didn't hurt after that. The only other time after that was when I was listening to someone else's family presentation, and I was being touched emotionally again. So really for me that was an opening up of my heart to my family and to myself and that's kind of my indicator. When I feel that little ping I know, "Oh, that must be emotional. Something emotional is coming up."

I haven't felt it in quite a while because I am paying attention more now to my emotions. It's like when I'm not paying attention that it goes off. It's my indicator light. It says, "Pay attention to what's going on."

**Reflections on Austin.** Austin spoke to the power of the experience of his presenting his family to his classmates: "I didn't know how touching it was, but I knew when I was asked how I was doing at the end [of the presentation], I couldn't say. I didn't know because I was so touched, too deep to really put a label or name on what it was."

The experience continued as Austin progressed through his courses that day. A Reichian experience in his next class focused on loosening body armor. He reported feeling "a ping" and unconsciously completed a spontaneous drawing of a person "sitting cross legged and having a swirl come out of his chest cavity." I am reminded of Peter Levine's approach to the healing of trauma, which he has termed *Somatic Experiencing* (Levine & Kline, 2007). Levine talked frequently about the healing effects of the discharge of energy that has been trapped in the nervous system after trauma. I wondered if Austin was experiencing such a discharge of energy, straight from his heart area.

Austin's experience continued into the next day. In response to a song on the radio, Austin reported, "my grandmother on my mom's side flashed into my mind and I just so vividly saw my genogram... and you know she was blown out so quickly in the car accident. I just

lost it. I cried for the rest of the song." I wondered if perhaps more of what is called "discharge" in the somatic experiencing work was occurring for Austin. I also wondered if, in Reichian terms, Austin was feeling the benefit of a loosening of his body armor.

Troubled by an intense pain in his chest area, Austin made a trip to the hospital, thinking that there was a problem with his lung. Austin was told that his heart and lungs were fine, and that the doctor suspected some sort of muscular strain. Austin noticed that the "ping" only happens when he is touched emotionally, as when he is listening to someone else's family presentation. He made sense of the experience in his own terms: "So really for me that was an opening up of my heart to my family and to myself and that's kind of my indicator... When... I feel that little ping I know, 'Oh, that must be emotional. Something emotional is coming up.'"

Recent discoveries in neuroscience have pointed to the importance of mindfulness of emotion as a factor that supports neural integration. Siegel (2009) noted:

We find that this flow toward maximal complexity occurs with integration and actually achieves the qualities we can remember with the acronym FACES: flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable. (p. 157)

Siegel further observed:

This is how integration can be seen as the heart of health—in a body, a brain, a mind, a relationship, or a group such as a community or a society. When we "emotionally process" something within any of these levels of experience, we are altering the state of integration of our system. (p. 159)

I believe the way Austin moved through his experience demonstrates the characteristics of the FACES flow: he described an experience that is flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. It will be interesting to check in with Austin to see, years later, if he feels that experience contributed to an alteration in the state of integration of his system, as Siegel implied.

#### **Benefits and Drawbacks of A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems**

Major themes from students' comments about the perceived benefits and drawbacks of ATFAFS are presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

## Drawbacks

Four main themes of pitfalls or drawbacks emerged from the data: possible hurts, class organization issues, critiques regarding approach, and critiques regarding the instructor.

**Possible hurts.** I discussed confidentiality issues

**Table 2.**

***Students' Perceived Drawbacks to A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems***

**Possible hurts**

- Possible hurt from family members you contact/ are unable to contact
- Possible cut off from important family relationships
- Possible breach in confidentiality
- Group not supportive
- Possible physical repercussions
- Process can be overwhelming
- Not adequate support or container if someone has a spiritual or psychological emergency
- Process can take you to some very dark places
- Unpleasant memories
- Uncovering a family secret can create nervousness in the family
- Too much emotional processing for some without enough balance of practical work in the world.

**Class organization issues**

- Would prefer separating family systems and journaling into two classes. More theory. More experiential work. More time to present. More family systems courses in curriculum for those who choose to go on.
- Presentation time too rushed
- Need more processing time
- Would have liked a smaller class with more processing time

**Critiques regarding approach**

- Needs more information about the definition of a transpersonal, feminist approach to family systems
- Not easy to evaluate statistically
- Lack of acceptance from the counseling world
- Not enough emphasis on emotions/feelings
- Takes a lot of time
- Past oriented

**Critiques regarding the instructor**

- April: My experience is that she's bringing back the feminist side of her she had to push down in the spiritual part of herself. In coming to terms with this, I believe she is trying to integrate those pieces of herself.
- Mary to Irene: I question your relationship to your own authority. Irene's own biases and blind spots

at the beginning of the class, and I asked that students respect each others' confidentiality. There is, though, always the risk that there might be a breach.

I was aware, when planning and teaching this course, that some deep and unpleasant material might arise, which might at times be overwhelming. Though there was processing time in class, through dreamwork and journaling, I understood that this might not be enough for some students at some times. To address this concern, I made a repeated recommendation to students from the beginning of class that they arrange support for themselves through outside psychotherapy. There were quite a number of transpersonally-trained psychotherapists in the community during the time I was teaching. Additionally, as I became aware of how powerful an effect the family presentations could have on students, I regularly suggested that students plan for some time of rest and support after their presentations.

During my last year of teaching, with the able help of my teaching assistant, we experimented with creating a way in which older students might mentor new students through this process. My teaching assistant held a number of support groups for interested students.

Finally, due to the risks involved with bringing up trauma, some training and practice in trauma healing (Levine, 1997; Ogden, 2006) might be a useful adjunct to this curriculum to support the transformative aspects of the program.

**Class organization issues.** Most comments in this category asked for more of various aspects of the course: more presentation time, more processing time, more theory.

**Critiques regarding the approach.** More information is needed in defining this approach, which this article begins to address. It is interesting that for some there was too much emphasis on emotions/feelings, while for others this emphasis was seen as a benefit. The approach does take time, though students can choose how much time they wish to devote. The approach does involve taking a look at the past, but I would argue that the present can be greatly enriched when there is a fuller understanding of the past.

**Critiques regarding the instructor.** I think there is some truth to the observation that I was in a process of reintegrating the feminist part of myself that did not have full expression in my spiritual life at the time. I think there is also truth to the critique that I had some issues with relationship to my own authority and

**Table 3.**

***Students' Perceived Benefits of  
A Transpersonal Feminist Approach  
to Family Systems***

**Healing**

**Healing/transforming of self**

- Nurturing the coming out of aspects of self not yet been explored
- Insight into self/self understanding
- Seeing patterns
- Broadening perspective/seeing people in context
- Seeing self differently
- Stronger sense of self
- Creates an opening to the unconscious
- Making the unconscious conscious

**Emotional healing**

- Allows dropping of engrained defenses
- Opening gates to emotional awareness and expression
- Being seen and accepted
- Weight lifted from shoulders
- Opening the heart
- Healing the heart
- Movement toward softer emotions (love, forgiveness)
- Acceptance
- Developing love and compassion
- Access to forgiveness

**Healing of important relationships**

- Being more fully one's authentic self in important relationships
- Process of forgiveness
- Honoring people as they are
- Holding all people in a loving way
- Renewed appreciation for those who came before
- Appreciation for family members' journeys
- Insight into important others

**Healing for other family members**

- Contributes to global healing

**Empowerment**

- Finding voice
- Strengthening voice
- Discovering for one self rather from outside experts
- Choosing one's own focus

**Community building**

- Having dark part seen and accepted
- Increases intimacy
- Promotes appreciation for differences
- Feeling understood and accepted

**Powerful**

- Working with many levels at once

with finding my voice. I do see this preliminary research and the writing of this article as a way of finding and strengthening my voice.

**Benefits**

The benefits described by students were substantial. Four main themes emerged: healing, empowerment, community building, and powerful. The healing theme divided into the subthemes healing/transforming of self, emotional healing, healing of important relationships, healing for other family members, and contributes to global healing.

It is not surprising, and heartening as well, that healing was the major theme that emerged regarding benefits of ATFAFS. That the healing category encompassed strengthening sense of self, emotional healing, and healing of important relationships is also not surprising; this confirms my own experience with the work and my observations of students and clients over the years. I was delighted to see that the theme of empowerment emerged as a perceived benefit: finding voice, strengthening voice, discovering for oneself rather from outside experts, and choosing one's own focus were all aspects that are consciously nurtured in this approach.

Community building was another major theme that emerged, and again confirms my observations while teaching. A very special kind of community is described, one that I hope we as humanity are growing toward, where dark parts are seen and accepted, intimacy is increased, there is support for appreciation for differences, as well as an increased feeling of being understood and accepted.

Powerful was the final benefit mentioned, described by a comment as, "working many levels at once."

A major benefit not mentioned by students, but that I have enjoyed in my own life as a result of working with this approach, is something I call "sturdiness." I have noticed a deep groundedness, which I attribute to an understanding and familiarity with my roots through the generations. I have, of course, worked with this approach longer than my students, and this sturdiness has developed over time.

**Final Words**

When I was on faculty at ITP, I participated in a retreat at which we talked about core values for the Institute. As I recall, we agreed on four values: mindfulness, compassion, discernment, and appreciation of differences. I believe ATFAFS contributed to each

of these values. Were that meeting happening today, I would argue for a fifth value: empowerment. I would argue that developing and strengthening voice is critical to the training of transpersonal psychologists. I believe that strong and developed voices will support transpersonally-trained psychologists, spiritual guides, teachers, and scholars as they set out to do their various forms of healing work in the world.

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2. In the residential doctoral program at ITP, this approach was taught in a class entitled Inner Work Practicum; Creative Expression was taught as a separate course by Dr. Jill Mellick. In the ITP Global course A Transpersonal Approach to Family Systems (Lazarus, 1999), creative expression was included as part of the course. When students worked with this approach in Clinical Practicum, journaling, dreamwork, creative expression and other modalities were not a part of the course. Students used these modalities as they felt called to individually.

Public disclosure of journaling, dreams, or family history is never required. Students may pass on reading journal entries and may elect to submit

a paper on their family investigation instead of choosing to make a family presentation to the class.

### About the Author

*Irene Lazarus, PhD*, maintains a private practice as a licensed marriage and family therapist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Dr. Lazarus served on the faculty of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology for 24 years during which she taught in both the global and residential programs. Dr. Lazarus served as the Associate Editor for Clinical Matters of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology from 2002-2008 and as the Coeditor and Editor of the newsletter for the North Carolina Association of Marriage and Family Therapy from 2002-2009. She has presented at national and state conferences and to graduate students on A Transpersonal Feminist Approach to Family Systems.

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