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SIMILAR TO A PLATEAU EXPERIENCE

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This report is an exploratory follow-up study to Cleary and Shapiro's (1995) work, "The Plateau Experience and the Post-Mortem Life: Abraham H. Maslow's Unfinished Theory." These authors described in detail the plateau experience Abraham Maslow reported experiencing in the final two years of his life. Among the features which appear to be central to the plateau experience are heightened awareness of the present moment, feelings of gratitude, and calmness and serenity of sentiments and behavior. These characteristics are not unique to Maslow's own plateau experiences, but are observable also in many acquaintances we admire.

Maslow's plateau experiences had come about after he attained an acceptance and understanding of death following a near-fatal heart attack. He suggested, however, that the plateau experience could also be fostered or voluntarily induced. If there were ways to voluntarily promote plateau experiences, would the experiences of our friends contribute to the understanding of ways in which other persons could foster similar experiences? Could the understandings which our friends had developed facilitate or improve the experiential awareness of other persons striving towards self-actualization, or help scholars pursuing transpersonal theories? The search for practical and theoretical knowledge about the more positive dimensions of life challenged us.

We, therefore, drafted a letter to seek information about the personal experiences of some of our friends that included the following text:

It appears to us that, whatever the precipitating circumstances, some of you are experiencing something similar to the plateau experience. If you agree with us, we hope that you will share with us: (1) a description of your experience and how it relates to Maslow's description of the plateau experience; (2) how long these experiences have been a part of your life and how long they last; and (3) if particular circumstances were associated with precipitating your experiences initially, and subsequent triggers.

Associated with the plateau experience are: a change in an individual's pattern of daily living with a shift in awareness and a change or re-prioritizing of values; a sense of miraculousness of the usual in your life—heightened awareness of the transcendent quality of every day life; a feeling of gratitude for each new day—hanging onto the moment because each moment is precious; a feeling that your life has counted in some way, with less stress on undertaking new work; calmness and serenity—freedom from urgent needs and fears.

Please don't feel a need to force your responses into some particular mold. We are enclosing a copy of a theoretical paper [Cleary & Shapiro, 1995] . . . which describes Maslow's plateau experience in more detail.

**Editor's note: William F. Kautz died in 1996. An obituary notice appears on page 64.*

SELECTION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

In selecting our subjects, we did not attempt to account for the detailed list of 15 characteristics of the plateau experience Cleary (1995) enumerated,¹ but placed primary emphasis upon two qualities: serenity and gratitude. With these two characteristics in mind, we looked through our address book and each of us proposed some acquaintances for inclusion; the other affirmed or questioned the choice. As a general rule, we did not want to burden individuals suffering from failing eyesight, hearing, or general health conditions. In the end, each of the twenty individuals included in this study was approved by both of us. Only two were not included because of a lack of agreement between the two authors. We then mailed out seventeen requests and handed out three personally. Everybody replied. A few politely declined, some included their spouses in their responses which finalized in a total of twenty-two respondents. The responses varied in length from half a page to seventeen, and in some cases included appended published materials.

The respondents had become known to us over a fifty-year period, having been engaged with one or both of us through pacifist, social, religious, or educational activities. We had first become acquainted with nearly half of the families in Hawai'i where we have lived for 36 years, but we originally met other respondents in Chicago, Madison, Wisconsin, Gallup, New Mexico, California, or on the U.S. East Coast. Although we had not so planned, half of the respondents turned out to be men, and half, women. The majority were senior citizens between 60 and 90 years of age; three were middle-aged, between 40 and 52.

Although most were retired, all were still engaged in some paid or unpaid work, at least part of the time—writing, teaching, or working with persons who had special needs. Current or previous professional activities of our respondents are as follows: Nine had taught on a college or university level, five were Protestant ministers (one also taught at a seminary), two were physicians, two were professional workers with voluntary organizations, one was a government administrator, one was a researcher, one a businesswoman, and one a health-and-fitness worker.

Because of our long association with religious activities, most of our long-term friends are involved in some way with religious traditions as well. Eight are Quakers, another often participates in wider Quaker gatherings. Seven, including the five ministers, are members of mainline Protestant churches. One couple are both devout Hindus. The three remaining persons are involved in religious life through participation in small groups: two attend 12-step program where reliance on a higher power is affirmed frequently; the third, although not a formal church member, has participated for 15 years in a study-prayer group at a Methodist Church.

In summary, the respondents are a group of people we admire, most of whom are older than Maslow was at the time of his death (62). Generally, the respondents are seeking new light for personal growth and appear to exhibit much more than ordinary amounts of serenity and gratitude. They are interested in religion and are involved in useful work (paid or unpaid). Additionally, each respondent had been married and each has been concerned with the welfare of society.

THE EXPERIENCES

Transformations

Maslow's plateau experiences, which followed upon a serious, life-threatening heart attack, produced a considerable alteration of his awareness, attitudes, and ways of working. Consequently, in our description of the plateau experience in our letter, we used the words,

“change, shift, and re-prioritization.” This feature of a sudden departure from one’s earlier ways of living was not, however, acceptable to most of our respondents, although most of them did not object to being thought of as calm and thankful. One respondent, writing for herself and her husband, both of whom recently had achieved “senior citizen status,” states:

Although we have been molded by experiences along the way in life, we can’t claim an abrupt change in patterns or priorities, or a suddenly heightened awareness. The mere fact of growing older, highlighted by such milestones as Senior Citizen Status, losing beloved friends and relations (and patients), as well as health adversities, can lead one either into avoidance or acceptance of thoughts of mortality, or a combination. In our acceptance moments, we are keenly aware of the beauty and love surrounding us. Avoidance may take the form of throwing ourselves into our projects, although we do not hold that in a negative light.

Some respondents, however, like Maslow, did undergo some radical change in their life prior to the onset of their plateau-like experience.

A man, two decades older than the preceding respondent, recalled occasions when activities had been re-prioritized. In the first instance, he had suffered a serious attack of hyponatremia in which he thought he was having a stroke. When his movement and speech improved, he was filled with gratitude, but he also felt a need to make some changes:

As I lay in the hospital I began to think about responsibilities I had assumed. Some were purely personal, but some involved other people who would be affected if I could not do my share in something I had helped to start. For a person of uncertain health, already fourteen years into retirement, I had assumed too many continuing responsibilities. It was time to review my priorities. When I returned home, I discovered that my wife had similar thoughts. That day I . . . reduced my load considerably. I still remember the sense of calmness which came over me. . . . That was nine years ago. I continue to participate in affairs of our Retirement Village and our church, but am still helped by the revised priorities after hyponatremia. This may not involve all the elements of Maslow’s plateau experience, but I see it as similar.

A different kind of transformation was reported by a widow who twenty years ago, when in her fifties, was diagnosed as having Limb Girdle Muscular Dystrophy, a debilitating disease of the motor muscles in hip, leg, and arm areas. She says:

In the beginning I was more annoyed than anything because I had to change my habits, and having never been limited physically before, it was a new way of thought. The very slow progression made it easier, for there were no drastic changes all at once.

She was a professional staff person active with Project Concern and, within a year of the diagnosis, had to give up her job. She calls it “a time of great sadness.” Soon, she had to give up her hobby of square dancing as well. She credits her long-term involvement in church life with being a stabilizing force as she sought to make needed changes in her daily activities. The very slow progression of the weakness was a “situation I give thanks for daily.” Her search for a new direction of fulfillment and service resulted in telephone contacts with people having difficulties and needing acceptance and a listening ear. At present, she is also teaching the study section of the senior ministry of her church where the group is “drawn together into

an exciting exchange of fun, prayer, study, and a pot luck lunch. It seems to be a high point of the week for us all.”

Her plateau-like experience evolved gradually in response to the physical exigencies of the slow but undeniable changes in her daily life. Even before that evolution, her involvement in church life provided a base on which her later personal growth could occur.

Triggers

Most of our respondents provided a description of what they consider to have been a trigger to a plateau-like experience. These triggers are varied and include being in the Peace Corps, meditation, attending Quaker Meetings, being around friends and family, engaging in art, studying Buddhism, working at self-improvement, and even accidents.

One respondent, for example reported a serious accident when their camper crashed into a truck. After the crash they were “surprised to still be alive.” And although sustaining bad cuts and multiple broken bones, they viewed the accident as somehow of a blessing:

Since then I have been more aware of the frailty of life, and thank God for each day. I am ready to go any time, though not asking for death. I think perhaps life has been more placid since then.

Overall, most respondents reported that experiences of coming close to death had not changed their perceptions as much as other developments in their lives. A couple, in their seventies, for example, felt that aging, maturation, and retiring from employment had been more influential in changing their orientation than the close brush with death each had experienced. Their recent plateau-like experiences have been much associated with pleasurable care-giving for young granddaughters.

A woman, in her 90th year suggested that careful management of one’s life was the key to induce plateau-like experiences:

Only by good management do we find the time to enjoy reading, carrying on whatever chores are still possible, cultivation of friends, enjoyment of natural beauty, especially time for reflection and fruitful solitude.

She thought that basic needs had to be provided first and then some special problems of old age resolved, before reaping the rewards of one’s earlier choices and experiencing “golden” years:

These last years have been golden because there is so much love in my life. When romantic and parental love (were no longer available) I embraced friendly love, and by giving as much as I am able, I am receiving more, much more. It grows. My cup runneth over.

A particular trigger is not always as effective across individuals or time. For example, many reported attending the stillness of Quaker (Friends) “waiting worship” as a plateau-like experience. As one woman puts it: Friends Meeting for worship has for many years been a time of what I’d call plateau-like experiences. It’s a time of expectancy, wonder, gratitude, sometimes great joy and understanding.” However, such experience may not always occur. A Quaker M.D., for example, thought that historical Quaker Meetings had an ineffable quality lacking in present ones.

Some triggers are more unusual than others. For example, a respondent, involved in editing an early nineteenth century diary for publication, found cognitive meanings which deepened her understanding and compressed the time difference between herself and the original author. Because of its cognitive nature, despite its momentary length, it seems more like a plateau than a peak experience:

I remarked that condensing M. W.'s revelations of her struggles to synthesize her Christian principles with her emotional turmoil was like an "I-thou" experience—a meeting of souls across the century and a half that separates us. My assistant exclaimed that she had just become acquainted with "I-thou" thinking. . . . That moment of serendipity—when she understood what I was saying—was, as I reflect on it, like an explosion of meaningfulness. We both understood M. W. in a timeless way; we understood each other better at a spiritual level, and we were understood by our Father/Mother God who cares so deeply about our awareness of spiritual truths. . . .

At a more prosaic level, I often find myself whispering at the computer keyboard or elsewhere in my labors, "I love my work." At other times it seems a dreary and endlessly prolonged effort. (In other reading, after questionable sections at first), there comes a passage that enlightens my thinking or illustrates in a significant way something I have personally experienced. That must be a daily occurrence for many people, and may or may not be a plateau-like experience. . . . I believe everyday life furnishes these quiet moments of clarity and delighted recognition—and I mean to be more grateful for them, as gifts of grace.

This, then, is a case when brief, new cognitive understandings seem to have renewed or reinforced every-day perceptions expanding them into plateau experiencing.

Some triggers were more common than others. Many respondents mentioned the joy they experienced in simply being around friends and family, including watching children and grandchildren (an experience Maslow himself reported). For example, a retired English professor reports: "I *love* watching small grandsons. I feel appreciative both of their very being now and of their future."

The present authors, pooling our resources, and considerably helped by friendships, were able to experience six of our best years after Bill had a stroke which weakened muscles in ways which threatened his life and later caused recurring problems. Some of our most consistent triggers for plateau-like feelings were the rich communications with friends and family with whom we were able to share many insights. Furthermore, the thoughtful and compassionate assistance of friends and strangers helped us renew our faith in the principle of God being in every human. Early on we jointly decided that staying in communication with people we had known through the years held a very high priority for us. That decision has played a large part in what we regard as a continuing plateau-like experience, one which has occasioned much gratitude. After the stroke, which brought Bill near death, we both felt that we had been given more earthly days to help ourselves to grow in wisdom and compassion, qualities which may survive in the life to come.

Other experiential characteristics

Even though we had identified serenity and gratitude as two key elements of the plateau experience, respondents may have felt otherwise. Almost all respondents used words implying gratitude (e.g., feeling blessed, being appreciative, being thankful) but only a few

characterized their experiences as serene. Some even rejected the categorization as the following example of this man who felt he had been “definitely close” to being on a plateau when he was in the Peace Corps:

Being in a foreign country made the everyday experience unusual, if not miraculous. But being religious at the time certainly got me in tune with the miraculous, too—at least more so than at any time since. . . . I did feel that I could transcend my former self-centered way of being. I was also aware that my days (there) were definitely numbered.

I had only two years, and I did “hang on to moments” and see people in a different light. Similarly, my acts there had a certain power because I knew my time there was limited. As a result, I left with the feeling that I had made a difference . . .

I know that doing good works is the best way to live, and I lead my life that way (only some of the time). . . . As a result, I’d say that my life is characterized by an *existential angst*, rather than a *serene calm*.

Aside from gratitude, the most common characterization used by respondents to describe their plateau-like experiences included joy, love, new understanding, and increased alertness (e.g., “becoming more aware, more conscious”). The following description of this woman’s experience, after she had participated as a leader in a Marriage Enrichment program, captures the common themes of gratitude, enjoyment, and increased awareness:

By the time we got to Honolulu (in early retirement) I had come to notice and enjoy my surroundings when we were in a forest or upon waking, hearing birds and trying to identify them—rather as my friends and giving thanks for them—at any moment more aware.

Sometimes, it was difficult to evaluate if the respondents were describing a peak or a plateau experience (perhaps they can alternate or even coexist):

I had renounced everything . . . that renunciation gave me a peak experience, energy, which I had never ever experienced in my life—which lasted for a couple of days. I had gone to an ashram where I was doing this intense meditation. Then I called my husband and I said, “This is what I enjoy! This is what I am—this energy! just being energy.” But then, of course, I was brought back to the family (my child, my husband) and my duties were in front of me. But then, after that my life has changed so that whatever I’m doing now is without expecting results or fruit. I’m doing everything as doing it for God—even if I’m cooking I’m doing it for the love of God. It’s an opportunity that I can do it for my family—and hence since then I feel similar to what Maslow had experienced—I feel at peace.

OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSION

This study is a report of the responses by a group of admired friends whom we initially chose on the basis of our considering them to embody some of the principal characteristics of a plateau experience: calmness and serenity in meeting a variety of challenges, increased awareness, and gratitude for ordinary things and experiences. In our solicitation of respondents, we did not consider whether they had a near-death experience or not. Also, we did not base the selection on age, although most were senior citizens and the youngest was

nearing forty; nor on gender, although it turned out that half were men and half were women. We set out to see when and under what circumstances their plateau-like states had come about, and whether they had been continuous or recurring. We found the responses to be varied, in subject matter and in length. Most of the respondents found the concept of the plateau experience interesting and their answers showed thoughtful attention to our query.

Overall, based on the comments of our respondents, it appears that a variety of circumstances can precipitate or lead up to a plateau-like experience. Sometimes, the prior experiences had been a single cataclysmic event, but in most cases two or more events had a significant part in the attainment of the state. Often a more gradual accumulation of experiences and learning—a process our respondents called “aging” or “maturation,”— contributed to the origination of their growth in serenity and gratitude.

Specific significant experiences that eventually lead to personal growth included retirement, accidents, disabling illnesses, achievement of senior citizen status, and death of a close relative. Psychological and spiritual growth, however, was not automatic but often came about through reading, meditation, or discussions in small groups.

Experiencing a plateau-like state often requires some maintenance practices which can vary across individuals. Among the helpful practices reported by our respondents are: early morning exercises or meditation; recording special insights which one has been given; keeping a journal; observing grandchildren and children and contemplating their present and future potentials; meeting with people of common interests and like-minds; communicating with old friends; thinking about life and death in practical-oriented committees and organizations; participating in small self-improvement, study, discussion, or prayer groups, or in silent unprogrammed worship groups; and reading about the life of the spirit and inspiring seekers.

We conclude by reiterating the exploratory nature of our study. Because of the wide variety of past and present circumstances of the respondents who contributed to this study, the far-ranging content of the responses, and of the generality of our questions, there is a need for studies which call for more specific answers to more specific questions, and with their being administered to a wider variety of subjects.

To our knowledge, no other empirical studies of the plateau experience have appeared. Yet it seems clear to us from Maslow’s description of his plateau experience, and the results of our own exploratory study, that the content, distribution, prior life experiences, and triggers of the plateau experience deserve further research. It was one of his greatest contributions to psychology to reawaken us to a fuller vision of human potential. The legacy of the plateau experience may, with further development and understanding, prove to be a significant part of Maslow’s uplifting vision “of the farther reaches of human nature.”

REFERENCES

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- Cleary, T. S., & Shapiro, S. I. (1995). The plateau experience and the post-mortem life: Abraham H. Maslow’s unfinished theory. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 27, 1-23.

NOTES

1. Cleary (1995) delineated the following fifteen characteristics: aesthetic apperception, attention, awe, Being-cognition, durability, ecstasy, experiential/conceptual meaning, post-mortem life, rhapsodic language, serenity, suchness, Taoistic receptivity, time expansion/contraction, transformative, triggers, voluntarily.