

**Deepening Presence:  
How Experiences of No-Self Shape the Self**

by

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To protect their privacy, individuals involved in this study  
Have been given pseudonyms.

## ABSTRACT

Deepening Presence:  
How Experiences of No-Self Shape the Self, an Organic Inquiry

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In modern Western culture, experiences of non-ordinary states of consciousness are typically considered in the context of psycho-pathology. There is, as yet, little recognition for the transformational and healing potential of some non-ordinary, or holotropic, states of consciousness. There are numerous reports from individuals who claim that their world view and life experience have changed, and even transformed, following brief moments of non-ordinary consciousness: a fact that is particularly meaningful at this time in human history when the precarious global situation begs a transformation in the mind that creates such suffering.

This study looks into the experiences of the inquirer and five co-inquirers. These are individuals who intentionally experientially explore the nature of consciousness through the cultivation of holotropic states and report that they have had one or more episodes of consciousness that is not mediated by a self. In the inquiry, this experience is identified as unitive consciousness or no-self.

Using organic inquiry, a transpersonal approach to inquiry informed by heuristic research and grounded in the values of feminist inquiry, the study inquires into ways in which the co-inquirers have been shaped by no-self experiences. The co-inquirers tell their stories exploring shifts and changes in personal and interpersonal ways of knowing and being. The inquirer engages experientially and critically with a self-reflective process entering into synergistic relationship with the stories as a means of exploring her own experience. The inquiry and analysis, the ongoing and developmental process of an organic approach, draw upon a wide range of literature to inform the inquiry from an integral perspective.

The process of inquiry, and the findings, elicit discussion of the relationship between individual development and transpersonal experience, the role of retreat in service of integration, and how the experience of no-self influences an understanding of

action. The catalytic potential of working with holotropic states is discussed in relation to the field of transformative learning. Specifically, the discussion addresses the potential for intentionally cultivating holotropic states of consciousness within a learning community to leverage deep transformation.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

At the moment of enlightenment everything falls away - everything. Suddenly the ground beneath you is gone, and you are alone. You are alone because you have realized that there is no other; there is no separation. There is only you, only Self, only limitless Emptiness, pure Consciousness. (Adyashanti, 2000, p. 57)

#### Presenting the Concept

*Unitive consciousness, cosmic consciousness, oneness, no-self, samadhi, luminous emptiness, Buddha nature, Christ consciousness...* Such names point to experiences that are most typically thought of within the framework of spiritual traditions. They describe qualities of awareness that have been long sought after by religious believers through prayer and meditation as well as sacred ceremonial practices and techniques such as fasting, isolation, and rigorous adherence to codes for living and conduct (Grof, 1998; Kornfield, 1977).

Within the last century these experiences began to be recognized and described by practitioners and theorists in transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993; Boorstein, 1996; Odajnyk, 1993) and, more recently, by scientists in fields ranging from quantum physics to neuroscience (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993; Combs, 1996; Goswami, 1993). In this same time frame a distinction has emerged between what is generally understood as the form of religion and the experience of the spiritual. While it is certainly not a distinction that is made universally, this shift towards a sectarian spirituality points towards the possibility of a personal awakening of consciousness outside of the context of the religious traditions. Individuals from many

different backgrounds and belief systems now study, interpret, and seek the transcendent experiences that were once considered the purview of spiritual adepts (Tolle, 1999; Moss, 1986).

Consciousness that is not mediated by a self cannot easily be described in words. Unitive consciousness is ineffable; it is un-graspable in the context of what, in modern Western cultures, is acknowledged as reality. Yet for many people there seems to be an innate resonance when they hear of this experience of consciousness. Perhaps the best I can do is follow the example of Lao Tsu (Feng and English, 1972) and use language to try and evoke an embodied sense of the experience:

Look, it cannot be seen – it is beyond form.  
 Listen, it cannot be heard – it is beyond sound.  
 Grasp, it cannot be held – it is intangible.  
 These three are indefinable;  
 Therefore they are joined in one. (Chapter 14)

Others have attempted more literal descriptions such as the following by English journalist Paul Brunton (Ferrucci, 1990) who studied with the great spiritual teacher, Ramana Maharshi:

The brain has passed into a state of complete suspension, as it does in a deep sleep. . . . Yet my sense of awareness has been drawn out of the narrow confines of the separate personality.

I find myself outside the rim of world-consciousness. The planet, which has so far harbored me, disappears. I am in the midst of an ocean of blazing light. (p. 339)

In her autobiography, psychologist Suzanne Segal (1996) describes the experience of losing all awareness of a self-generated consciousness. This loss of self was, for many years, terrifying to her. As she came to terms with this condition of emptiness the opening of her awareness continued:



I was driving north to meet some friends when I suddenly became aware that I was driving through myself. For years there had been no self at all, yet here on this road, everything was myself, and I was driving through me to arrive where I already was. In essence, I was going nowhere because I was everywhere already. The infinite emptiness I knew myself to be was now apparent as the *infinite substance* of everything I saw. (p. 130)

Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof (1985, 1988, 1998, 2000) has written extensively about transpersonal experiences of consciousness, particularly within the context of psychiatry and psychotherapy. Much of his work originated with his research into psychiatric applications of LSD therapy. What follows is his description of the Universal Mind as experienced in such a session:

This is one of the most profound and total experiences observed in LSD sessions. Identifying with the consciousness of the Universal Mind, the individual senses that he has experientially encompassed the totality of existence. He feels that he has reached the reality underlying all realities and is confronted with the supreme and ultimate principle that represents all Being. The illusions of matter, space, and time, as well as an infinite number of other subjective realities, have been completely transcended and finally reduced to this one mode of consciousness which is their common source and denominator. This experience is boundless, unfathomable, and ineffable; it is existence itself. Verbal communication and the symbolic structure of our everyday language seem to be a ridiculously inadequate means to capture and convey its nature and quality. The experience of the phenomenal world and what we call usual states of consciousness appear in this context to be only very limited, idiosyncratic, and partial aspects of the over-all consciousness of the Universal Mind. (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993, p. 104)

These descriptions all serve, in their different ways, to point towards the experience of a state of consciousness that is profoundly at odds with modern reality. From the perspective of the unitive consciousness there is no individual self, no other, no relational awareness; all is a seamless and emergent whole exquisitely vibrant with the immediacy of being. The contrast between such an expansive state of awareness and the extraordinarily complex conceptual ordering of consensual consciousness is almost

unimaginable. Yet many people, in many different ways, have mystical experiences including those of unitive consciousness or no-self (Fadiman and Frager, 1994).

This phenomenon begs the question: What happens to the way we experience our lives when our minds have been opened up in such extraordinary ways, even if for only the briefest of moments? As I describe in more detail below, this study engages with that question in an attempt to understand the personal insights and world view of a small group of people who report that they have had this the experience of no-self.

As a point of clarification, I use the terms *unitive consciousness* and *no-self* interchangeably throughout the dissertation. Unitive consciousness is a term that relates to the writing of Walter Pahnke and William Richards (1969). In their discussion of mystical experiences during experimental LSD sessions Pahnke and Richards developed categories to “describe the core of a universal psychological experience, free from culturally determined philosophical or theological interpretations” (p. 401). According to their categories of psychological phenomena:

[Unity is] the hallmark of mystical consciousness. Such unity may be either *internal* or *external* depending upon whether the subject-object dichotomy transcended is between the usual self and an ‘inner world’ *within* the experiencer, or whether it is between the usual self and the external world of sense impressions *outside* the experiencer. (p. 401)

The term no-self is borrowed from the Theravada Buddhist tradition in which the Pali word *anatta*, one of the three basic characteristics of all phenomena, is often translated as no-self or not self. Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1988), in his book, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, describes the movement to a state of no-self: “After the meditator has realized the separate nature of awareness and its

objects, he can, with further insight, gain a clear understanding that these dual processes are devoid of self' (p. 25).

With this understanding, it becomes possible to recognize the condition of selflessness that continuously precedes self-awareness. In this respect, Zen master Dainin Katagiri (1988) of the Mahayana tradition speaks of no-person: "The condition prior to conceptualization of self or the arising of 'I' and 'mine'" (p. 183).

In this study, the experiences that the co-inquirers describe vary considerably, and they use a variety of different ways to name and frame what they recognize as no-self or unitive consciousness. For this reason, I want to emphasize that I have chosen these words only as a means of pointing towards something, not as a definitive description.

### Development of the Concept

Within the context of certain religious practices (for example, some forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Judaism, and the Gnostic church) there are studied approaches that prepare practitioners, intentionally working with the whole context of their lives in a way that is congruent with the expanding of consciousness. Over the centuries Eastern religions, in particular, have developed detailed guidance to the nature of these experiences as well as practices that methodically train the minds of students to open into an awareness that can penetrate through the illusion of an individual self (Lhalungpa, 1986). Through meditation, contemplation, prayer, yogas, and various forms of study students develop discipline and capacity to realize that the apparently concrete structures of what we think of as identity, or self, are actually intricate habits of thinking,

or self referencing. With practice it may become possible to recognize and experience the vastness of awareness that is not limited by these mental constructs (Patrul, 1998; Nyima, 1994).

Formal study in spiritual traditions is not the only means to this experience of unitive consciousness. It is quite possible for a person who has no formal training or guidance to have direct experiences that transcend the structures of familiar personal consciousness. Evidence shows that spontaneous occurrences of various transpersonal states of consciousness happen with surprising frequency. These occurrences may range from what Abraham Maslow describes as “peak experiences,” (Fadiman and Frager, 1994) to the powerful and sometimes devastating experiences of spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof, 1989; Bragdon, 1990).

In my view, such transpersonal states occur as a break in the usually seamless veil of what Charles Tart (1986) calls “consensus trance” or the “automatized and conditioned patterns of perception, thinking, feeling, and behaving [that] dominate our lives” (p. 106). In other words, the experience of these states happens in response to some kind of opening or rupturing of one’s world view: those beliefs, truths, frameworks, and processes that serve conceptualizing and knowing; the lens through which one experiences and makes sense of life.

For some people such an experience may evoke dramatic and lasting changes in their beliefs and the way that they live their lives. Sometimes the schism between normal every day awareness and that of these emergent states can be so great that it is not possible to immediately integrate what is being experienced. The result may take the

form of a temporary emotional and psychological break down and may even lead to pathology (Grof and Grof, 1989; Bragdon, 1990).

Also outside the framework of formal spiritual traditions are those people who intentionally explore non-ordinary states of consciousness through a variety of means including shamanic practices, the use of psychedelic substances, and breathwork. The purpose of such exploration is typically a deeper understanding of consciousness, personal and collective healing, and growth (Bache, 2000; Metzner, 1999; Harner, 1973). These intentionally invoked shifts in consciousness may reveal a variety of mystical or transpersonal states. It is not infrequent for descriptions of these experiences to include direct apprehension of unitive consciousness, or what Grof (1993) speaks of as the “Universal Mind”.

Christopher Bache (2000) has done extensive inquiry into the transformative potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. He describes this experience from one of his psychedelic sessions:

I experienced my work in the sessions as being not breaking through the shell of anything real (the death of a “self”) but as the simple restoration of an open, inclusive wholeness that was and always had been the true reality. All else is mistaken illusion. For a short time the illusion was suspended and I experienced my life as pure process, a rippling of an expansive field of consciousness that supported endless ripples. What freedom of movement! What contentment in this spacious emptiness! How wonderful must be the experience of those who have stabilized this freedom. (p. 223)

This study looks into the experiences of myself and five co-inquirers. These co-inquirers are individuals who, like me, have intentionally and experientially explored the nature of consciousness through the cultivation of non-ordinary states. They report that they have experienced one or more episodes of consciousness that is not mediated by a self: states that can be described as unitive consciousness or no-self.

I offer a comprehensive description of the research question and address the purpose and significance of the inquiry on pages 19 through 22. Before engaging with the question, however, I want to construct a context for the genesis of this study from my own story and from some of the literature that addresses consciousness and the transformation of consciousness.

### Background of the Study

This study grew out of the synergistic confluence of two strands of my life. The first could be defined as a process of spiritual emergence. This opening and expansion of my awareness to the experience of the transpersonal or spiritual surfaced particularly strongly in my young adulthood and later in mid-life. Emma Bragdon (1990) describes spiritual emergence as follows:

Spiritual emergence is a natural process of human development in which an individual goes beyond normal personal feelings and desires – ego – into the transpersonal, increasing relatedness to Higher Power, or God. There are usually critical points in that process when a person feels disoriented and for a time is unable to function as usual in ordinary life, relationships, work, chores, etc., while he becomes acclimated to more subtle levels of consciousness. The end result is positive transformation, observable in increased compassion, creativity, and a desire to be of service to all of life. (p. 1)

The second strand relates to a more recent experience that had a profound impact on my sense of self and how I experience reality. This experience involved a deeply emotional and transformative inquiry into the way in which I embody and manifest the norms and consciousness of white culture: the consensus trance that is specific to white European and European-American people.

### Researcher's Personal Context

My interest in the topic of unitive awareness or no-self comes directly from personal experience. It holds, quite simply, the burning focus in my attention.

During my late teens and early twenties, I went through what I would now call several periods of spiritual emergency infused with a number of transpersonal experiences. At that time, I had no framework or discipline through which to understand what was happening. I was frightened, confused, and immersed in a state of being that seemed to have no relationship to other people's reality. As an extremely introverted and shy young woman, I didn't dare ask for help nor did I believe that anyone would listen to me or understand what I was experiencing. On a couple of occasions I thought I was actually losing my mind. Throughout this period of my life, I believed that what I was experiencing within my psyche made me unacceptable to other people who lived more grounded and rational lives.

The content of some of those experiences was, in many ways, shattering to all that I knew and all that I was. Especially so because through them it became apparent to me that my experience of being an individual autonomous self was really just a conceptual fabrication. As it turned out, however, my established view of the world - the trance - was so powerful that I somehow came to hold what I had seen and felt as not really existing. I split myself off from my own experiences. Apart from a few brief but intense periods when I withdrew, I lived my life with a commitment to being normal.

In the late 1980s this suppressed or split-off material began to emerge into my awareness in ways that were both exciting and frightening. This prompted me to begin

exploring the workings of my psyche. Through a spiraling inward journey that included immersions in counseling, body work, hypnotherapy, and group process I discovered the therapeutic potency of non-ordinary states of consciousness. As I entered into these states more and more, I began to recognize and reencounter the experiences that had erupted as flashes in my awareness many years earlier.

More recently, as I continue to explore and integrate my experience in non-ordinary states, the fragmentation or splitting-off of my psyche seems to be shifting into a more unified and open flow. It is an experience that is at once profoundly disorienting and also healing. At fundamental levels I find that my understanding of reality is shifting and expanding.

Over the years, this work has led me to seek out maps to help me find my way through the thickets of mind. The most important of these maps has been Buddhism. Although I had practiced meditation off and on since the late 1960s, and read books by Alan Watts (1957), Ram Dass (1990), Chogyam Trungpa (1973), and others, I never directly engaged with Buddhist teachings at that time. In the late '80s, when I began this intentional inner journey, these teachings not only began to make sense they also offered guidance and direction as I struggled to understand my life in new ways.

Transpersonal psychology provided another map that includes many perspectives presented in Buddhist philosophy and practice. Stanislav Grof's (1985, 1988, 1998, 2000) method of working with non-ordinary states of consciousness, Holotropic Breathwork, has been particularly important (see page 28 for a definition of the term holotropic.) This method of inner exploration and healing, developed by Grof and his wife Christina, is a process designed to induce and sustain non-ordinary states of



consciousness within a therapeutic setting. The technique, integrating ancient spiritual practices and modern consciousness research, includes controlled breathing, evocative music, focused body work, art, and group sharing (Taylor, 1991, p. 85). Holotropic Breathwork has been a primary means through which I have accessed and integrated aspects of my psyche and my experience that had become dissociated. I continue to work with holotropic sessions as part of my overall practice of opening, or waking up.

The process of looking inward through these practices continues. Through the inward journey, however, I discover that the path also leads me outwards, like the multi-dimensional complexity of a sacred mandala. What I learn from the personal, inner practices is inseparable from my experience in the phenomenal world in which all life-forms co-exist. There is, in my mind, a kind of elegant inevitability in the way that this mandala of life unfolds.

In 1995 I joined the doctoral program for transformative learning and change at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). The decision to be a part of this program was more intuitive than rational. I was drawn by the promise of intense inner exploration within the context of a learning community. I am not an educator, nor do I consider myself a social activist (although I certainly wish to contribute to a shifting in cultural consciousness), but I resonated strongly with the thought of engaging with a group of people committed to inner change in support of outer manifestation. As it happened, the cohort of co-learners that I joined soon became a crucible in which I was confronted by the powerful solidity of the personal and socially-constructed self.

### Reflection on Discovering White Consciousness

Just as the fish is oblivious to the water that it freely swims in, so the locus of ordinary awareness is typically unconscious of any other realm of knowing. As Daniel Goleman (1985) so eloquently points out:

The range of what we think and do  
is limited by what we fail to notice.  
And because we fail to notice  
that we fail to notice  
there is little we can do  
to change  
until we notice  
how failing to notice  
shapes our thoughts and deeds. (p. 24)

During the time that I participated in the learning cohort at CIIS, this myopia of the self - my deeply entranced consciousness - became very apparent to me. Whereas before I had become aware of the fabrication of the self-sense, in the cohort I directly experienced its ruthless inflexibility.

A primary focus of the curriculum, and the lived experience of the cohort communities within this program, was the examination and deconstruction of individual world view. This challenging of ontology and epistemology - the form and nature of reality and the ways in which individuals and groups know what is real (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) - is a central premise in the theory and practice of transformative learning and clearly an assumption of the program at CIIS. To this end, the cohort learning community engages in a three-year process of self study, attempting to understand how the group learns, grapples with ontological and epistemological diversity, and transforms *while* it learns and transforms.

In Cohort Six, the group in which I participated, our shared exploration took place in what became a charged, sometimes confrontational, often emotionally suppressed and

paradox-ridden group environment. Individuals cared for one another, often deeply, but the entire group experience continually seemed to be blocked by our inability to transform our shared consciousness. There was a specific trigger for this situation. The cohort, while racially diverse, was unable to grapple collaboratively with an inquiry into the ways that white consciousness - the dominant, Eurocentric world view - pervaded our group interaction and conversation. Profound rifts and tensions were created between people of color and white people in the group.

As a result of this experience, four of us from the cohort undertook an inquiry to deconstruct and analyze why and how this phenomenon manifested in the cohort. The intent of our inquiry was to develop the capacity, at least among ourselves, to do what could not be done in the larger group: to explore the ways in which we are embedded in the white supremacist paradigm (Hammel, Manago, Murray, and Robinson, 1998).

Although considered by many people - especially white people - to be an inflammatory term, we intentionally used the words white supremacy in order to identify the pervasive and generally unexamined acceptance of entitlement that is the norm throughout white North American culture. Because it is unexamined or suppressed, and consequently largely unconscious, this entitlement manifests in behavioral and attitudinal norms that marginalize and dominate those who are not white and therefore not similarly entitled. Often white people are unaware of their behavior and its consequences, however there are also many white people who consciously and intentionally engage in racist actions.

In our text, *Entering the Fire with Heart: Developing Group Capacity in a White Supremacist Context*, we defined the term “white supremacy” as follows: “A system of

domination of people who are not 'White' - including people of African, 'Latino,' Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander - by people who are classified as 'White'"

(Hammel, Manago, Murray, and Robinson, 1998, p. 7).

I am a 52-year-old middle-class white woman, well-educated, professionally successful and privileged in many ways. My world view - altruistic and liberal though I may be - is woven out of the mind-fabric, or trance, of the dominant culture. However hard I may work to see into the structuring of my mind, my awareness is always enmeshed in a field that resonates to the supremacy of whiteness, patriarchy, scientific values, capitalism, anthropocentrism, monotheism, and so on and so forth. The seeds of this view are planted deep within the structures of my mind, shaping my psyche, my energy, and my body as well as the patterns of thought and emotion. This is the water in which I swim. As hard as I may try to separate from it in order to see it, it continually flows in, around and through me.

In my experience of entering into non-ordinary states of consciousness, particularly in states in which the mental patterns that reflect the individualistic self are in some degree dissolved, these culturally rooted structures may shift or even disintegrate, at least temporarily. What happens then is some direct experience of the interconnectedness and one-ness of everything. It is hard to describe the power of such an experience but, to the degree that I can consciously apprehend it, it may impact my way of being in relation to the world. My sense of self, of relationship, of individual agency, and all aspects of individual being begin to shift.

In my experience, what seems to happen is that these moments of no-self cause schisms between the socialized, embedded structures of mind and the mind that is infused

with an experience of the transpersonal. A little attentional space opens up - a somatic or holistic attention - in which it is possible to observe the reflexive way in which these structures of mind work. From that space it seems possible to bring a transformed awareness to the moment.

During the time that I was in Cohort Six I was regularly exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness and experiencing this expanded awareness. In the crucible of examining the structures of my mind, and particularly in trying to understand how I embody white supremacist consciousness, I experienced enormous schisms. The exploration revealed disconnections between my normal consensus world view, constructed from the dominant cultural and relatively unexamined individual field, and the transpersonal consciousness to which my awareness opened for short but potent glimpses.

I recall my experience during one of our cohort meetings towards the end of our second year. It was late in the day. The group had been involved in a cultural synergy process in an effort to recognize and accept the dramatic differences that had emerged among us. In spite of many well-meaning attempts at facilitation, the group was stuck. Several group members felt unheard, dismissed, and violated by accusations of insensitivity.

I'm sitting in deep stillness. My body is still - so quiet I can almost feel the opening and closing of the mitral valve in my heart. The atmosphere in the circle is dense, full of pain. The pain is also in my body and heart. It doesn't any more feel like my body, or my heart. It seems to be the collective body and heart. The pain is grief, rage, fear - all the deep animal qualities of being. The pain is loud and impersonal. It feels as if we are frozen in a hell realm of alienation. My mind, my awareness seem unbounded by self, although I'm aware of the self-reflexive mental activity that works ceaselessly in the background. The fear and pain have me, and also they are nothing, they are empty distractions. They are stealing us from our true nature.

In this open, unbounded state I begin to pay attention to my heart and, as I do, I feel the depth of love that underlies all the pain. I feel our common heart. The heart of us that is loving, not separate from the trees and birds, and the wind and sky that surround us. I sit with the love, and the pain as one - the suffering of our dividedness. How can we reach through the walls of our individualness to our wholeness? Tears flow. They just flow from my heart. What suffering. (personal journal)

In experiences such as this, I felt the painful tension between the personal and the transpersonal. My conditioning often held me captive in terms of behavior and expression. Very often I could not break through the inertia of fear and confusion that arose within me when my trance was thrown into question. Taking action or expressing my feelings and understandings was difficult, yet I could see quite clearly through the limitations of my conditioning and observed how all the subtle nuances of my being impacted others. This capacity to see while remaining frozen in non-expression and non-action was often excruciating. Many times the process of inner inquiry felt destructive - and certainly was to some of the rigid beliefs that inhabit my mind - but it was also greatly liberating, and it continues to be so.

In my view, the state of collective stuckness that we members of Cohort Six experienced had less to do with the actual content of the issues and more to do with our lack of capacity as individuals, and a group, to apprehend and move beyond the illusion that individuality is the only reality. In other words, we were fixed in the predominant ontology of dualism and any experience of interconnection was predominantly mediated through the individual ego.

The power of white supremacy and the difficulty of addressing it is that it is so deeply and pathologically rooted in the cultural psyche. For a white person, and for many people who are not white, to begin a deconstruction of such a fundamental mental

structure involves a radical deconstruction of one's entire world view. In my view, it requires going beyond the autonomy of the ego-centered consciousness. The process of inquiry can evoke enormous emotional and psychological resistance, and unresolved personal psychological issues can be easily triggered when reality as it has been known is questioned. It seems imperative to have some ground of knowing of the transpersonal, or at least a view that can see beyond ego-centricity, in order to deconstruct the conditioned personal self.

With an awareness beyond the personal the illusion of individuality becomes clear, and it is possible to comprehend the way in which the consensus trance - including the belief systems that foster individualistic divisive consciousness and generate oppression - is held in place through our unconscious participation. The point is not that we should abandon our individuality but rather become individuals who are experientially aware and act out of the wisdom, knowledge, and compassion of interconnectedness.

It is not only important but essential that we come to recognize and transcend the limitations of individualistic consciousness. I believe that it is ultimately impossible for human beings to flourish without the recognition, experiential as well as cognitive, that we are indivisible from and co-dependent with all that exists. Our quality of awareness - the depth to which we each know, experience, and open beyond the limiting structures of our minds - will ultimately affect the consciousness of the culture, and the species.

While I certainly would not claim to be divested of white supremacist consciousness, I do believe that having experienced states of consciousness in which the self ceased to be the center of knowing has helped me in approaching this deconstruction.

Having once seen through the self, so to speak, it becomes a little less devastating to consider the myths that the self has created in its own service. As belief systems come into awareness it seems that there is less fear in examining them and seeing them for what they are, and the reflexive mental habits of splitting-off or suppression are less effective. There is a courage that comes with seeing through the edifice of one's self.

### The Question that Arises

In the last quarter century, there has been a steady and dramatic increase in the accessibility of information about consciousness, transpersonal states of consciousness, and the traditions or technologies that support the exploration of consciousness. Books, seminars, training programs, even college curricula and texts are beginning to, sometimes tentatively, present the transpersonal as a factor to be considered in psychology and philosophy. This awareness of the transpersonal is also increasingly present in the corporate world.

What appears to be consistently lacking, however, is insight into the ways in which we - members of modern Western culture in which spiritual traditions no longer embrace and contextualize transpersonal experiences - can come to make sense of individual experiences that break open what we know as reality. With the exception of a few autobiographical accounts and the literature on spiritual emergence and emergency, there are few if any resources for us to turn to if this rupturing of world view occurs.

My own experiences have shown me that non-ordinary states of consciousness can have a profound effect on the way that I experience reality. For me, this has been particularly true in terms of seeing through the culturally induced trance of modern



Western culture that holds human beings as autonomous and separate from one another and the natural world. Yet the literature of consciousness studies and new paradigm inquiry rarely addresses the interpersonal and social aspects of these fields. Awareness is growing about the global problems caused by modern industrial societies and the need for a transformation in human consciousness, however, there appears to be relatively little inquiry into how radical shifts in consciousness are happening, how they come about, and what this means for the individuals who have such experiences.

#### Purpose of the Inquiry

In discussing research design, Michael Quinn Patton (1990) writes: “Purpose is the controlling force in research. Decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting all flow from purpose” (p. 150).

The emergent and intimate nature of my topic was inseparable from a sense of personal purpose: a deeply felt need to investigate the meaning of these experiences of no-self in my own life. In particular, I wanted to understand them in relation to shifts in my world view, which I have already defined as the conscious and unconscious beliefs, truths, frameworks and processes through which I conceptualize and know: the experiential and cognitive lens through which I make sense of my life.

The trajectory that was created from my own personal experiences, the search to understand the nature of these experiences, and reflection on their meaning and effect upon me, led me to formulate the focus or question underlying this inquiry. My line of reasoning and the resulting question are as follows:

1. I have had experiences of no-self that, in spite of an initial reaction of denial and confusion, have had a profound effect upon the way that I make sense out of my life and the world around me.
2. I found descriptions of no-self and unitive consciousness in writings about Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. As I read it became clear that my experiences were not unique and, in fact, I found a number of disciplines that focused on cultivating them. This discovery led me to become involved in meditation as both a spiritual practice and a means of coming to peace with what had been, initially at least, disruptive experiences in my life.
3. Experiences of unity consciousness, or no-self, are also described within the context of transpersonal psychology, which draws on Eastern and Western spirituality as well as Western sciences, particularly physics, to explore the nature of consciousness. This synthesis of spiritual and scientific knowledge has greatly deepened and opened my sense of inquiry into the personal experience.
4. An area that, until now, I have not been able to pursue satisfactorily is the sharing and reflection with others who have also had the experience of consciousness that is not centered in a self. I have tried to seek out and read the autobiographies of individuals who have had what seem to be similar experiences. I have also been drawn to work with processes such as Holotropic Breathwork that invoke non-ordinary states of consciousness as a means for learning and, in that milieu, have come into contact with other people who have apparently entered into states of unitive consciousness.
5. A sense of urgency to inquire into this experience was activated as I participated in the CIIS learning cohort and felt the divisiveness and the state of impasse resulting

from our group's inability to move beyond our racial and cultural differences. In particular I was taken aback by the power of fear and resistance, within me and in the group, to exacerbate separation and isolation.

6. The prospect of writing a dissertation presented me with an opportunity to inquire more deeply into other people's experiences - particularly the impact that the state of no-self has had on their day-to-day lives - in a way that also supports me in self reflecting and deepening awareness of my own experience in relation to, and with, others.

The question that arose and that I have held throughout this inquiry is, therefore:

What impact has the direct experience of unitive consciousness, or no-self, had on me and the co-inquirers who have intentionally sought to cultivate non-ordinary states of consciousness? How does this impact manifest in our world view and our ways of being and acting in the world?

### Significance of the Research

In process and content, this dissertation points to the significance of the experience of no-self or unitive consciousness in people's lives. It will, I hope, become a model for further inquiry and support. For myself and the co-inquirers, the process itself has provided a context for the kind of self examination and reflection that serves deep integration. For the reader, the accounts of people's experiences, the reflections, and the intentional grounding of such experiences as processes of learning and transformation may invite self reflection as well as a recognition of community. Reading of other people's experiences can bring enormous affirmation and an invitation, or permission, to

embrace one's own as not only real but important data, inviting us to explore the way in which we construct reality and to understand the possibility for bringing about change.

From this last perspective, I believe that directly addressing the transformative potential that can arise from experiences of non-ordinary consciousness within the context of learning and transformation is essential to the emergent field of transformative learning. This inquiry has the goal of linking non-ordinary experiences of consciousness and their potential for creating radical shifts in world view with the work that is being done in the field of transformative learning.

My intention is to contribute a transpersonal perspective to the theory base that under-girds transformative learning. I hope to encourage an understanding among teachers and facilitators who use a transformative approach that it is possible to intentionally and willingly support deep levels of transformation - epistemological shifts - within consciousness through personal exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness. While this dissertation is only a small step in that direction, I believe that it speaks to the cultural imperative of re-membering, or embodying, our transpersonal nature.

## Chapter 2

### FOUNDATIONAL LITERATURE

#### Chapter Overview

This chapter is intended to illuminate the inquiry framework. I explore the current literature and work of active theorists as a means of informing and supporting the

experience of inquiry and stimulating critical reflection around the topic. As a researcher in the field of integral studies, I have actively explored a wide range of disciplines as resources for information and insight. It is important to note that I do not have academic depth in any one of these fields. I am not, for example, a psychologist, physicist, or Buddhist scholar. However, there are clearly patterns of connection that emerge from reading across disciplines from a specific standpoint of lived experience, in this case the experience of unitive consciousness. It is in the interstices of these connected patterns - the linked openings - that the form of this inquiry has developed.

As a context for the inquiry, and specifically for developing a means of articulating what is transformation of consciousness, I am initially looking to the work of theorists, Ken Wilber (1977, 1995, 1998, 2000), Jean Gebser (1984), and Allan Combs (1996), as well as Charles Tart (1969, 1975, 1986), Stanislav Grof (1985, 1988, 1998) and Amit Goswami (1993). Their writing spans and synthesizes an enormous range of disciplines including transpersonal psychology, Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, cognitive psychology, quantum physics and chaos theory, education, developmental theory, and neuroscience. As I planned the inquiry and held these wide-ranging perspectives in my awareness, a sense of cohesiveness surfaced. I now see a synthesis of the different forms of inquiry and expression that these people reflect that I think of as an integral view. It is in this view that I have discovered an authentic context for my inquiry.

I begin this section by describing the concept of states and stages of consciousness in order to clarify both terminology and the model of consciousness to which I am drawn. Next, I reflect on ways to understand what is actual transformation of consciousness, again drawing on the integral theorists.

Beyond the task of developing context, I am also interested in linking the inquiry with transformative learning. To this end, I will introduce this emerging field of learning by describing Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory followed by a brief discussion of other recent writers in the field. Finally, I make a brief comment about concepts from Buddhism that support transformation and change.

### Consciousness

The word consciousness is used in many different contexts with very different meanings and interpretations. Physicist Amit Goswami (1993) identifies four different aspects of consciousness:

First, there is the field of consciousness, sometimes referred to as the mind field or global workspace. This is what I have called awareness. Second, there are objects of consciousness, such as thoughts and feelings, that arise and pass away in this field. Third, there is a subject of consciousness, the experiencer and/or witness. . . . Fourth, in idealist philosophy, we speak of consciousness as the ground of all being. (p. 106)

The underlying quality of consciousness is always present. As awareness it exists as a backdrop against which thoughts, emotions, feelings, and sensations continuously emerge and dissipate. Yet, as the one who experiences, my knowledge of consciousness is limited by my personal capacity to be aware. Allan Combs (1996) writes:

*Consciousness* is the essence of experience. Its touch is the bearer of meaning. It is pointed neither inward nor outward; I mean it is neither introverted nor extroverted. It is not simple nor is it complex. It has no structure of its own but only essence. . . . Consciousness . . . is always *about* something. . . . Consciousness is always in the business of bringing objects into awareness, whether through thoughts, dreams, memories, feelings, or sensory impressions such as tastes, sounds, and visual images. In other words, consciousness always has a point. In formal terms it is said to be intentional. . . . It is the polarizing touch of consciousness in the form of attention that activates the senses, awakens

memories, quickens the emotions, kindles desire, and animates the imagination. . . . I am inclined to think of consciousness as a subjective *presence*. (pp. 19 - 21)

Juxtaposed against this description of consciousness is the question of mind and how it relates to the presence of consciousness. In my view, mind is what engages with consciousness and shapes it in awareness through feelings, thoughts, memories, sensations, and so forth. Through these ceaselessly emerging activities of mind we experience our being in the world. Yet, as Combs (1996) points out, the mind is not a coherent whole, rather it is a constant flow of fragmented elements. It is the seamless field of consciousness - the ground of all being - in which it manifests that gives our mind a sense of coherent self (p. 23). From this perspective, when something radical occurs that impacts the way that consciousness quickens in us it also changes the patterns with which mind interacts or reacts to that quickening. In such an instance, we may experience a transformation of consciousness or a profound shift (which could be perceived as positive or negative) in how we see the world.

### States and Structures of Consciousness

Researchers in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have differentiated between states and structures of consciousness. This distinction is helpful in addressing the phenomena of transformation and change in which the direct experience of a state of consciousness can serve to disrupt and alter a structure of consciousness.

A state of consciousness can be thought of as a specific type of awareness. There is usually a kind of baseline state of consciousness that apprehends ordinary reality and in relation to which other states of consciousness are either altered or anomalous. For

example, sleep and dream states are not generally considered to be real in comparison with ordinary reality. Charles Tart (1975) originally described a state of consciousness as “a pattern, an organizational style of one’s overall mental functioning at any given time” (p.13). In his later writing, Tart refines this description in an attempt to clarify his meaning in the face of popular and often erroneous usage:

*A discrete state of consciousness (d-SoC) will be defined as a specific pattern of functioning of the mind, recognizing that this pattern may show a range of variation in its specifics while still remaining the same overall pattern. Thus we recognize a variety of objects as automobiles even though they vary in shape, size, color, and other specific features. A discrete altered state of consciousness (d-ASC) is a radical alteration of the overall patterning of consciousness (compared to some reference d-SoC, usually our ordinary waking d-SoC) such that the experiencer of the d-ASC (or perhaps an observer) can tell that different laws are functioning, that a new, overall pattern is superimposed on his experience. That is, within a d-SoC, particular parts of the pattern, particular psychological functions may function faster or slower, more or less efficiently, or show a change in the particular content they are working with, but the overall pattern remains the same. . . . A d-ASC, on the other hand, would be illustrated by a state like dreaming, intoxication with a drug, or a possible result of meditative techniques. (p. 14)*

Structures of consciousness, on the other hand, refer to the larger field within which states of consciousness can occur. One way to describe a structure of consciousness is that it is the epistemological and ontological framework - the paradigm - in which states of consciousness are experienced (Wilber, 1980). Compared to states, structures of consciousness appear stable or even fixed. This is only an illusion, however. Shifts and changes in consciousness at the structural level create the ground for transformation. Wilber (Wilber, Engler, and Brown, 1986) writes:

The most notable feature about a basic structure or level of consciousness is that, once it emerges in human development, it tends to *remain in existence* in the life of the individual during subsequent development. Even though it is eventually transcended, subsumed, and subordinated by the self’s movement to higher basic structures, it nevertheless retains a relative autonomy and functional independence. (pp. 67 - 68)



### Holotropic States of Consciousness

States of consciousness, in contrast to structures of consciousness, can be understood as specific patterns of mental functioning. Ordinary consciousness brackets a number of similar but subtly different states of consciousness. For example, one may consider both the intense focus required for driving through rush-hour traffic and the sense of relaxation as one sinks into a hot bath at the end of the day as ordinary consciousness, yet there are differences in the way that the mind apprehends and interacts with what it perceives as reality in these two different situations.

Altered, or non-ordinary, states of consciousness tend to be understood as radical shifts from what is normally experienced within the scope of consciousness. Non-ordinary states can be caused by an enormous range of situations ranging from ecstatic practices to pathological processes. The quality and content of awareness within these two experiences are very different. The former invites awareness for healing and awakening, the latter involves disorientation and impaired mental capacity. For the purpose of this inquiry I define non-ordinary states of consciousness within a specific category identified by Stansilav Grof (1998) as holotropic states. Grof describes this word as follows:

This composite word literally means “oriented towards wholeness” or “moving in the direction of wholeness” (from the Greek *holos* = whole, and *trepein* = moving toward or in the direction of something). . . . It suggests that in our everyday state of consciousness we are not really whole; we are fragmented and identify with only a small fraction of who we really are. (p. 5)

Grof (1998) has done more than any other individual in the fields of psychiatry and psychology to critically address the healing potential of holotropic states of consciousness. He links his findings directly to the experiential wisdom of indigenous cultures and mystical traditions that intentionally cultivate non-ordinary consciousness as part of their spiritual engagement with life. Grof has developed a cartography of holotropic consciousness that provides an integral “map” of different states. His descriptions are informed by material from spiritual and shamanic traditions and from the work of Carl Gustav Jung (1989), Joseph Campbell (1988), and other contemporary researchers and practitioners who have explored non-ordinary consciousness from a philosophical and spiritual perspective. In defining the general characteristics of any holotropic state, he writes:

Holotropic states are characterized by a specific transformation of consciousness associated with perceptual changes in all sensory areas, intense and often unusual emotions, and profound alterations in the thought processes. They are also usually accompanied by a variety of intense psychosomatic manifestations and unconventional forms of behavior. Consciousness is changed qualitatively in a very profound and fundamental way but, unlike in the delirant conditions, it is not grossly impaired. In holotropic states, we experience intrusion of other dimensions of existence that can be very intense and even overwhelming. However, at the same time, we typically remain fully oriented and do not completely lose touch with everyday reality. We experience simultaneously two very different realities. (p. 6)

In these holotropic states, we may have experiences directly from our personal biography, or we may enter into mythic or archetypal material. We may experience being part of the natural world as an animal or plant or even the very different existence of inanimate material such as water, or minerals. Sometimes people in holotropic states relive situations from past lives. Others may enter spiritual states such as the unitive consciousness that is the subject of this inquiry (Grof, 1998; Bache, 2000).

In his remapping of the psyche to include experiences such as those mentioned above, Grof (1998) adds two broad categories of experience to the conventional Western clinical view of the psyche. The first, the perinatal, includes the physical sensations and emotions connected with experiences of the fetus in the womb at any time following conception up to and including birth. There is frequently powerful symbolic imagery that is present in a holotropic state associated with this category (p. 15). The second category encompasses transpersonal experiences. These expand the usual cognitive boundaries of self and may include experiences of the collective unconscious or transcendent consciousness (p. 17).

Holotropic experiences, as identified by Grof (2000) and others, are not yet embraced by academics and professionals in mainstream psychology and psychiatry. There are, however, growing numbers of therapists, medical professionals, change agents, and others who do agree with these views. These individuals take part in Holotropic Breathwork sessions as participants or facilitators, and many of them contribute to this body of knowledge from their own experience and expertise (Bache, 2000; Metcalf, 1999).

### Transformation and Evolution of Consciousness

The concept of structures of consciousness was introduced by the Swiss philosopher, Jean Gebser (1984), in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Gebser proposed that over time consciousness is evolving through five structures each including and transcending the previous one. These structures have specific dimensional and perspectival qualities with

the highest, or integral, structure being four-dimensional and aperspectival. Gebser's work was critically embraced and further developed by integral transpersonal theorist, Ken Wilber (1977) two decades later.

The idea of structures of consciousness is important both in identifying the way in which consciousness appears to be evolving and also as a means of conceptualizing the actual process of evolutionary movement or transformation. Gebser, and later Wilber, developed detailed descriptions of the structures - or stages as Wilber calls them - at each level of evolution or transformation.

Wilber (2000) has developed an elegant integral map to represent the complexity of human transformation and change. The underlying patterns or structures of this map are not fixed. Their quality is that of potential, and they are always in relationship with one another in a flowing nested holarchy of evolutionary habits (p. 11). He describes this underlying fabric as a series of concentric circles, a Great Nest, representing "a great *morphogenetic field* or *developmental space* - stretching from matter to mind to spirit - in which various potentials unfold into actuality" (p. 12). The levels of matter, body, and mind have manifested to a great extent, but soul and spirit (or in Wilber's schema, psychic, subtle, and causal) are still emerging from the potential states.

Flowing through this nested evolutionary pattern, from matter to spirit, are streams of development. These streams include aspects of egoic, affective, moral, and kinesthetic development and, according to Wilber (2000), "for the most part, they can develop independently of each other, at different rates, with a different dynamic, and on a different time schedule" (p. 28). He continues: "*Overall development* - the sum total of all these different lines - shows no linear or sequential development whatsoever...

*However*, the bulk of research has continued to find that *each developmental line itself* tends to unfold in a sequential, holarchical fashion” (p. 28). Thus individuals have unique developmental processes reflecting varying levels of progression in each of the streams. This is also true for aggregates of people (p. 149). For example, among modern European cultures the ego is strongly developed while intuitive and somatic awareness is more dormant and less evident.

Finding its way through the concentric waves and linear currents of this liquid matrix is the self. Wilber (2000) writes:

The self navigates through the basic waves of the Great Nest by using the self’s capacity to *identify* with each wave and ride it to some sort of completion. The self has the capacity to intimately identify with a level of consciousness, become competent at that level, and then disidentify with it (and integrate it) in order to step up to the next higher and wider sphere and identify with it... Each time the self’s center of gravity orbits around a new level of consciousness, it has, of course, a new and different outlook on life. (p. 38)

Wilber (1980) suggests that this navigation process takes the form of evolutionary cycles in which human consciousness is engaged both from our perspective as a species and as individuals. Within the cycle are progressive identifiable levels of consciousness - relating to the various waves of the Great Nest - each consisting of a deep structure: “the defining form of a level, which embodies all of the potentials and limitations of that level,” and a surface structure which is “simply a particular manifestation of the deep structure” (p. 40). The process of evolution occurs through the transformation of the deep structures of consciousness into a new and higher level. Wilber makes a distinction between translation, which he describes as the movement of the surface structures only, and transformation, in which the deep structures are impacted.

Wilber (1980) describes this process as follows:

Once a particular level of self sense comes into being, it maintains itself by a series of more-or-less constant translations. The particular mode of self translates both its internal milieu and its external environment according to the major symbolic deep structures and paradigms characteristic of that level. . . . A given transformation, then, always helps create the possibility of new types of translations, and these translations help support and maintain the transformation. . . . Any time a series of translations fails its purpose and breaks down . . . the individual is precipitated into a major transformation. Whenever translation fails, transformation ensues - and it can be regressive transformation or progressive transformation. (p. 41)

In other words, we constantly experience events which offer us the potential for learning and growth. It is the job of the surface structures of consciousness to accommodate this new information or experience without rupturing the system containing the deep structures. When the learning event is so extreme or unprecedented that it prompts a break down of the translation process - when the underlying paradigm can no longer sustain a world view or structure of consciousness – then transformation may be precipitated.

Eckhart Tolle (1999), an emerging spiritual teacher in the West, describes this breaking apart of the world view as a “critical limit-situation”:

A limit-situation arises when through some disaster, drastic upheaval, deep loss, or suffering your whole world is shattered and doesn't make sense anymore. It is an encounter with death, be it physical or psychological. The egoic mind, the creator of this world, collapses. Out of the ashes of the old world, a new world can then come into being. (p. 182)

To offer a slightly different perspective on this process of change and transformation, Allan Combs (1996) finds that chaos theory provides a powerful means of describing the nature and activity of consciousness. In his view we can understand states of consciousness as attractors: “An attractor is a pattern to which a system is drawn according to its own nature. The [attractor] basin for a state of consciousness would include all the situations from which one is likely to slide back into that state” (p. 59).

Structures of consciousness, then, are highly complex patterns of processes that can also be thought of as attractors (p. 61). Following the propositions of chaos theory, Combs suggests that the structures of consciousness can experience transformation:

If a large enough portion of the elements which form either a state or structure of consciousness are altered, the entire system can be up-ended and sent looking for a new attractor - a new stable pattern. Here in a nutshell is the process that underlies many techniques for personal and spiritual growth. In them old structures are dismantled and new ones substituted. (p. 63)

Combs (1996) elaborates on this view by relating it to transpersonal and spiritual experiences:

Transpersonal or spiritual growth would seem to follow the same pattern as in ordinary psychological development. Transitions from stage to stage usually occur gradually, as patterning forces in the form of life experiences or spiritual practices are introduced and maintained over substantial periods of time. Exceptions occur, however, and may be dramatic. States of liberation, for example, can arise suddenly. In chaos theory, the abrupt appearance (or disappearance) of an attractor 'out of the blue' is called *catastrophic bifurcation*. In this event the system may suddenly find itself in the basin of a major new attractor. (p. 64)

Citing the example of the Zen koan as an instrument for destabilization, Combs (1996) continues:

The student is forced to confront reality at a level beyond the constructs of the rational mind. Such practice destabilizes the attractor of "everyman's consciousness." The final realization comes when a catastrophic bifurcation takes over and hurtles consciousness directly out into the state of realization. (p. 64)

These views, among others, identify the process of evolution and transformation of consciousness as a result of destabilizing or collapsing what was previously held as the known, or truth. They point the way for the development, in the field of adult education, of theories for transformative learning.

### Transformative Learning

Cranton (1994) defines transformative learning as the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical self-reflection (p. 50). The intention is to cultivate a self-reflective stance from which to examine and question one's deeply-held assumptions and, in doing so, to impact and transform them. Jack Mezirow (2000), who introduced his pioneering theory of transformative learning in the late 1970s, writes:

Our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. Human reality is intersubjective; our life histories and language are bound up with those of others. It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are. Transformative learning involves liberating ourselves from reified forms of thought that are no longer dependable. (p. 27)

Transformative learning was developed within the field of adult education. Drawing on a broad base of theoretical knowledge ranging from human development to philosophical sciences, to psychology, to social change activism Mezirow (1991) refers extensively to the work of, among others, Jurgen Habermas (1971); Paulo Freire (1997); Thomas Kuhn (1962); Gregory Bateson (1979); and Daniel Goleman (1985).

Mezirow (1991) presents an elegant representation of the architecture of the mind and the way in which transformational learning occurs. He suggests that the fundamental building blocks of the mind are "symbolic models, images, and habits of expectation" (p. 20). These operate at a basic level in relation to spatial and temporal orientation, identification of common concepts such as objects or events that are familiar to us, and in making value judgments. At more complex levels, these symbolic models, shaped by influences from family and the larger culture, inform and create our experiences of



reality. Mezirow describes the powerful influence that symbolic models exert upon our awareness:

There is much evidence to support the assertion that we tend to accept and integrate experiences that comfortably fit our frame of reference and to discount those that do not. It appears that this process is not so much a matter of matching new information with stored information or reconstruing past events as a matter of referring to an existing frame of reference or an already established symbolic model with cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. Thus, our current frame of reference serves as the boundary condition for interpreting the meaning of an experience. (p. 32)

Symbolic models, according to Mezirow (1991), are activated and defined through a frame of reference or assumptions that he calls a “meaning perspective.” The meaning perspective is similar in concept to Wilber’s (1980) deep structures of consciousness. New experiences or concepts are assimilated and transformed by this structure which he describes as “a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience” (p. 42).

Within the established context of the meaning perspective is a set of “meaning schemes” through which the habitual assumptions are operationalized - a parallel to Wilber’s (1980) surface structures. “A meaning scheme is the particular knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that become articulated in an interpretation” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 44). Further explaining the relationship between meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, Mezirow writes:

Meaning perspectives provide us with the criteria for judging or evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate. They also determine our concept of personhood, our idealized self-image, and the way we feel about ourselves. The perceived content of our experience is determined by the specific meaning schemes included in our

meaning perspectives. When our meaning schemes are inadequate to explain facets of our experience . . . we are faced with areas or dimensions of apparent meaninglessness. Our most common reaction to meaninglessness is to become anxious. When inadequate meaning schemes involve self-concept, we fill this void by compensation, projection, rationalization, or other forms of self-deception. (p. 44)

Mezirow (1991) identifies meaning perspectives as being epistemic, sociolinguistic, or psychological in nature (p. 43). As such, they exist almost entirely below the horizon of conscious rational awareness and remain unarticulated and often contain errors or distortions that shape or limit our capacity for growthful learning. These distortions evolve as we develop through our personal life experience and through the culture as we assimilate societal meaning perspectives and schemes. In describing the power of these distortions to form an individual's life experience, Mezirow writes:

From the standpoint of transformation theory, habits of expectation and meaning schemes . . . selectively determine the scope of our attention and hence perception and arbitrarily determine the way we categorize objects and events, make associations, and attribute causality within a value system. . . . These interpretations are always generalized and make provisions for exceptions under particular circumstances. Nevertheless, they tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Because of the need to avoid threatening information, we narrow our perception, and blind spots . . . arise. They operate on attention to filter the flow of information and come to define the shape of both perception and responses. This results in character formation. (pp. 50 - 51)

Mezirow (1991) goes on to explicate the underlying reasons for this habit of perception by paraphrasing psychologist Daniel Goleman: "The attentional patterns learned in childhood become self-perpetuating; once a certain expectation of threat is learned, the person becomes disposed to look for it and find it - or look away to avoid it" (p. 51).

The central premise in Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning is a process of questioning these underlying assumptions or meaning schemes and, ultimately, meaning

perspectives through which our lives and our personalities have been shaped. This happens in a three-part process. First an individual must become aware of the hidden assumptions that she or he holds and attempt to make them explicit or visible. Next it is important to look for the sources of these assumptions and what it means to hold them. The final part of the process is to question the validity of the assumption and, if necessary, to make a choice to reject or change it thus transforming an underlying meaning scheme (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994).

The questioning of assumptions, according to Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (1994), is a reflective process. Meaning schemes can be transformed through thoughtful reflection on content and process and taking action, creating new meaning schemes, or changing our old ones based on that reflection. This is the process of normal reflective learning. Change at the deeper level of meaning perspectives requires reflection on the premises underlying that perspective. This process requires a degree of mindfulness and an engagement with a “‘dialectical-presuppositional’ logic, a movement through cognitive structures guided by the identifying and judging of the presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 117). This form of dialectical reflection helps the learner to move from abstract levels of reflection to critical self reflection in which personal knowledge and self understanding can emerge. At this level, the process of reflection can lead to a reorientation of world view (p. 193).

A primary critique of Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is that it takes a dominantly rational perspective (Imel, 1998). Robert Boyd (1991), whose work is grounded in depth psychology, proposes that transformative learning can be a symbolic and often emotional journey in which one is guided by creativity and intuition (p. 216).

Boyd suggests a “process of discernment in which symbols, images, and archetypes play a role in personal illumination” (Cranton, 1994, p. 55). Boyd has elaborated on discernment as a specific process of transformation.

Susan Imel (1998) summarizes discernment as follows:

The process of discernment is central to transformative education (Boyd and Myers 1988) . . . [it] is composed of the three activities of receptivity, recognition, and grieving. First an individual must be *receptive* or open to receiving “alternative expressions of meaning” and then *recognize* that the message is authentic (Boyd and Myers 1988, p. 277). *Grieving*, considered by Boyd (ibid.) to be the most critical phase of the discernment process, takes place when an individual realizes that old patterns or ways of perceiving are no longer relevant, moves to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrates old and new patterns. (p. 3)

Other concerns voiced by practitioners and theorists in the field of transformative education involve the approach and intention of transformative learning practice.

Specifically, these concerns address the epistemology or ways of knowing of the adult learners and the recognition that what is a transformative process to one person may be overwhelming or confusing to another (Kegan, 2000; Belenky and Stanton, 2000). Rather than opening the adult learner to transformation, such experiences may actually have the opposite effect serving to rigidify existing ways of thinking and being and shutting down the will to learn.

Typically, according to Mezirow (1991) and other transformative learning theorists such as Cranton (1994), the process of transformation is precipitated by a disorienting dilemma in which the individual experiences a misfit between an established meaning perspective and a significant event or feeling that contradicts that perspective. The intent in the learning process is to enter into this schism with an open but questioning attitude in order to discover distortions to one’s deeply-held assumptions. The sequence

of events after a period of disorientation does not necessarily follow a formula, “rather, the activities should be understood as sequential moments of ‘meaning becoming clarified’” (p. 193). The conclusion of the learning cycle is a changed self-concept that allows an integration with the new meaning perspective.

Clearly, transformation that is experienced at these deep levels can lead to profound changes in a person’s whole life experience, but changes may emerge slowly and in many different facets of life. Transformation does not happen within an isolated aspect of consciousness nor does it necessarily happen in one event. According to Mezirow (2000): “Transformation in habit of mind may be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind” (p. 21). A transformed meaning perspective leads to changes in a multitude of different aspects of self including emotions, feelings, somatic sense, and cognitive structures as well as one’s social and cultural experiences of being (Cranton, 1994, pp. 92 - 120).

The literature addressing transformative learning theory makes relatively little connection between transformative learning and an opening to non-ordinary or holotropic states of consciousness. Boyd (Cranton, 1994) discusses the possibility that transformative insights may be the “product of images, fantasies, dreams, or archetypes [that may result from] stimuli from the inner world that manifest themselves in conscious insights and seem to appear suddenly in awareness” (p. 82). Yet it seems evident that the process of deep paradigmatic inquiry and reflection will invite, or precipitate, some people into an encounter with their most fundamental assumptions about reality. Such

inquiry will throw existing structures into question and often reveals non-ordinary contents of consciousness.

Conversely, the cultivation and experience of holotropic states of consciousness has the potential to activate the transformation of meaning perspectives. In his recent book, *Dark Night, Early Dawn: Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, philosophy and religious studies scholar Christopher Bache (2000) offers the following insight about the way this process can work:

In ordinary states of consciousness, one's circle of experience [that defines the limits of one's self-identity] stays relatively constant, but in [holotropic] states it can expand dramatically. In the beginning, these new experiences simply "stretch" one's sense of self-identity, but when the envelope of experience has been stretched many times in many directions, sooner or later it must give way.

The rhythm of [holotropic] work, then, is the repeated expansion of one's experiential field far beyond its conventional boundaries followed by the contraction of this field after each session. What one contracts back into changes slowly over time, but the rhythm of expansion and contraction is a dialectic that drives the question of our identity beyond these slow adaptations. (p. 259)

It seems important to briefly address a point that Dean Elias (1997) raises, in an article published in *ReVision* magazine, about confusion regarding transformative learning and spiritual practice.

The purpose of transformative learning is not to seek or experience spiritual reality – although that may happen – but the expansion of consciousness. While the results of transformative learning experience may be spiritual clarity, the process is not a spiritual practice. (p. 6)

In Holotropic Breathwork, and other practices involving non-ordinary states of consciousness, work done in the context of transformative learning may open an individual to what he or she identifies as a spiritual experience but that is not the guiding intention of the work.

### A Buddhist Perspective

Having clearly stated that transformative learning is not a spiritual practice, I will now briefly mention a spiritual tradition: Buddhism. My intention is not to make a case for Buddhist practice as a transformative learning process (which in my view it is) but to point out some of the skills that are taught in Buddhism as a means of liberating the mind from its habitual patterns. These skills - or technologies - are valuable proven tools in the work of expanding or transforming consciousness. Insight meditation, for example, trains the practitioner to observe inner activity - emotions, sensations, and thoughts - with dispassionate but steady attention. Sustained awareness and an attitude of equanimity are cultivated so that one has the capacity to stay present and clear in the face of the kind of inner turmoil that can be caused by a disruption of world view (Tart, 1986; Kornfield, 1993; Chodron, 1991).

Psychologist Mark Epstein (1995), a long-time Buddhist practitioner, draws extensively on the practical tools of Buddhism in his work with clients. In his book, *Thoughts Without A Thinker*, he writes:

Far from being a mystical retreat from the complexities of mental and emotional experience, the Buddhist approach requires that all of the psyche be subject to meditative awareness. . . . Meditation is not world denying; the slowing down that it requires is in service of closer examination of the day-to-day mind. This examination is, by definition, psychological. Its object is to question the true nature of the self and to end the production of self-created mental suffering. (p. 3)

I make this mention of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation because these practices have been central to my own exploration of transformation and change. They supported and informed me in the cohort program at CIIS, they provide a means of

integrating experiences arising from holotropic states of consciousness, and they provide tools that I use consistently and often in this process of inquiry.

Many Western psychotherapists draw on practices such as insight meditation as resources for their clients, and much is being written about the intersection between Buddhist and Western psychologies, particularly in transpersonal psychology (Epstein, 1995; Kornfield, 1993; Deatherage, 1996). The use of these practices may also be happening in the field of transformative learning, although this is not clear from the literature. In this inquiry, the co-inquirers and I turn at times to a Buddhist framework in order to elicit insight and understanding.

### Chapter 3

## METHODOLOGY

### Chapter Overview

This chapter addresses the research methodology that I used for the inquiry. It begins with a general background to Organic Inquiry and a reflection on my decision to use this approach. This is followed by a paradigmatic view of integral and transpersonal inquiry. The chapter concludes with a description of the main characteristics of this emergent approach to inquiry.

### Background to the Methodology

The methodology for this study has grown out of a transpersonal qualitative approach called Organic Inquiry. More accurately, the insights that came to me when I



learned about this approach to inquiry led to the cultivation of this project. In a sense, the methodology chose me - through resonance - and evoked the topic.

The shape and form of my dissertation have grown out of a long period of gestation in which I immersed myself in the topic and also in the process of organic inquiry. In retrospect, I understand this gestation time as the chthonic process: the incubatory and often subliminal cultivation of the research that is an essential part of the organic approach.

Organic inquiry was envisioned and developed by four women, doctoral students and graduates, associated with the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California. Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Ettlign, Dianne Jenett, and Lisa Shields (1997) coined the name to describe an approach to research that embodied their experience of the sacredness of inquiry:

Participation in the organic approach, either as researcher or as reader, calls for an expanded consciousness. This involves achieving an attitude that digs out old ways of thinking to allow for the sacred to emerge on all levels, from the everyday to the transcendent. (p. 117)

Organic inquiry methodology draws from the personal, transpersonal, feminine, and the contextual. As they developed the vision of organic inquiry, Clements et al (1997) sustained a sense of the relationship between this emerging methodology and other existing methodologies. In particular, they embraced the values of feminist inquiry and the methods of heuristic research. As a specific intention or approach to inquiry, the organic vision can be brought to work with these and other methodologies such as co-operative inquiry or phenomenology.

My rational decision to use organic inquiry as my method of inquiry, as distinct from the intuitive experience of awakening into the organic process which I describe

above, is two-fold. First, the context and process of organic inquiry are grounded in the view that inquiry is sacred work. The transactions between inquirer and co-inquirer, the way that the work is offered to the reader, and the underlying purpose for the inquiry are all held to be aspects of an intentional and conscious participation with the numinous. In organic inquiry there is the implicit understanding that our lived experience of being is inter-dependent and co-arising within a sacred context.

Second, I am compelled by the fundamental intention of organic inquiry: to support and provoke the transformative process in the lives of all involved including the co-inquirers and reader as well as the inquirer herself. These factors, so important in my choice of methodological approach, clearly excluded consideration of methods that are not grounded in a transpersonal perspective. Other transpersonal methodologies, such as Intuitive Inquiry (Braud and Anderson, 1998), are emerging and hold similar values in terms of the sacred context. The clearly stated intent for transformation, however, seems to be unique to organic inquiry.

### Paradigmatic Considerations

In his book *Cooperative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, John Heron (1996) proposes a fifth inquiry paradigm. Describing the central premise of his paradigm as the participative nature of reality (p. 10), Heron bases his view on his earlier exploration of the nature of “personhood.” In *Feeling and Personhood*, Heron (1992) describes the ontological rationale of his theory as coming from a spiritual philosophy:

Reality, I believe, is both One and Many. The Many are a real Many, a genuine Multiplicity within Mind, spiritual monads, differentiated centres of consciousness within a cosmic presence. Personhood is one such centre, a particular focus of development within the field of universal consciousness,

unfolding a unique perspective within it, with people emerging through the progressive differentiation of the person from germinal to transfigured states. In Reality there is no separation between any conscious centre and its setting in universal mind, and since it is part of this unified field, it can participate in all other centres too. (p. 10)

Christopher Bache (2000), who is involved in ongoing transpersonal inquiry into the transformation of consciousness in relation to collective global healing, speaks to this same position in more specific detail:

Our present state of reality is one in which the edges of one person stop before the edges of another person begin. Our entire society is built upon this premise of ontological separation. It is the starting point of all our social contracts, all our moral debates. How we manage this separateness is what gives our life its distinctive flavor; it is the ontological prerequisite for everything we have understood life to be about. *Beyond the threshold of spiritual rebirth, however, separation is experienced as a smaller truth operating within the larger truth of interpenetration and common ground.* Parts are seen to cohere within and express the larger logic of the whole. Other persons are spontaneously *experienced* as partners in a complex dance, and because of this dance we are not just separate beings but vital parts of living patterns. We are the dancing itself. One's edges become softer and more porous, not in a pathological way that erodes individual agency but in a way which opens one to a *felt* connection with others and with the life-process itself. Self-interest is not diminished but extended exponentially. One literally begins to live a larger life. (p. 231)

Although there is clearly movement in the direction of the transpersonal perspective, within the context of academia it still seems unusual to position a doctoral inquiry within a spiritual, or transpersonal paradigm. I feel very clearly, however, that both the methodology that I have chosen, and my stance as an inquirer are in close relationship to this transpersonal view. As we engaged in organic inquiry, I considered the five co-inquirers and myself to be working within the larger intelligent context of the field of inquiry: a catalytic field that is inseparable from the intelligence of all being.

Given this view, a research project is not undertaken in isolation nor is it simply contextualized within a psycho-social cultural fabric. In the transpersonal view, I think of

inquiry as emerging out of the larger species, or global, mind both informed by and informing that consciousness. From this perspective, there is a third presence in addition to the dyadic relationship between the researcher, or researchers, and the topic. In sacred inquiry there is an awareness of the numinous, or the transpersonal mind, held by the co-researchers amongst themselves and in relation to the focus of study.

Intercultural researcher and activist, Robert Vachon (1995), identifies this awareness as “cosmic confidence” (p. 9). Vachon draws heavily upon the work of philosopher and theologian, Raimon Panikkar (1995), who suggested the concept in relation to the process of dialogical dialog in the process of coming to peace. The awareness of something that is greater than the individuals involved makes possible deeply human and transformative communication:

Wisdom is the art that transforms destructive tensions into creative polarities ... [that] constitute the very essence of reality. Polarity is not dualism, is not binary - since it is not governed by the dialectic of contradiction between the two poles, because each pole presupposes the other. Polarity is trinitarian... This is what occurs in dialogical dialogue among persons, since nobody is a self-sufficient monad. Dialogical dialog is not dialogue for reaching a solution, but is dialogue for being, since I am not without the other. (Panikkar, 1995, p. 102)

With this awareness - this cosmic confidence - the act of engaging with an inquiry must be approached with integrity and regard for its relationship to the larger whole. As Bache (2000) writes:

*In this supersaturated psychic matrix our individual choices may have enormous ramifications if they reflect our highest potential and seek the greatest good of humanity as a whole... Each of our individual efforts to bring spiritual, social, political, and ecological sanity into our lives may have far reaching consequences.* (pp. 244-245)

It seems to me that research within the fifth inquiry paradigm, proposed by John Heron (1996) and his colleague Peter Reason (1998), naturally holds the awareness of the

interconnection of all beings and the intention of global healing. This is entirely congruent with organic inquiry.

Heron (1996) and Reason (1998) identified three interrelated aspects of the shift into this fifth inquiry paradigm or what they call their “new paradigm for research” (Heron, 1996, p. 9). These aspects are: 1) participatory and holistic knowing, “based on a participative and dialogical relationship with the world” (p. 10); 2) critical subjectivity which “is a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process” (p. 12); and 3) knowledge “that is formed in and for action rather than in and for reflection” (p. 12). These defining aspects reflect very clearly the working definitions of organic inquiry.

A final paradigmatic consideration in relation to organic inquiry is that it invites an integral approach. In making this claim, I am basing my concept of integral inquiry on Ken Wilber’s (2000) model for integral studies. Wilber states that there are two main considerations in identifying a truly integral approach both of which are based in his extensive work articulating an integrated view of the development of consciousness.

The first consideration draws from Wilber’s (2000) four-quadrant approach in which he identifies different forms of human inquiry and awareness. In brief, this approach describes four different forms of consciousness mapped as a square divided into quarters. The upper left quadrant represents interior and individual awareness. This aspect represents the “I”, inner thoughts and feelings, personal narrative, and aesthetic sensitivity. The upper right quadrant marks the exterior and individual forms of

consciousness. This consciousness is expressed in observed behavior, objectivity, and accounts of the third person. In this quadrant is the language of “it” (p. 62).

The two lower quadrants represent the collective aspects of the interior and exterior. The lower left is the “we”, and refers to cultural attributes of “values, meanings, world views, and ethics that are shared by any group of individuals” (Wilber, 2000, p. 63). In the lower right quadrant, group awareness is based in social forms and the material expressions of the collective, such as systems, organizations, and institutions. Like the upper right quadrant, this language is of “its” (p. 64).

Wilber (2000) summarizes this four quadrant map in terms of values and expression:

Since both the Upper-Right and Lower Right quadrants are objective “its,” they can be treated as one general domain, and this means that the four quadrants can be summarized as the “Big Three” of I, we, and it. Or the aesthetics of “I,” the morals of “we,” and the “its” of science. The Beautiful, the Good, and the True; first-person, second-person, and third-person accounts; self, culture, and nature; art, morals, and science. (p. 64)

Wilber (2000) observes that individuals, groups, and cultures typically have an epistemological bias that falls within one of these quadrants to the exclusion of the other three. The modern mind - originating in white Western culture - identifies the qualities inherent to each of the quadrants, yet remains dominantly objective:

Modernity, on the other hand, did manage to differentiate the Big Three of art, morals, and science, on a large scale, so that each began to make phenomenal discoveries. But as the Big Three dissociated, and scientific colonialism began its aggressive career, all “I’s” and all “we’s” were reduced to patterns of objective “its,” and thus all the interior stages of consciousness - reaching from body to mind to soul to spirit - were summarily dismissed as so much superstitious nonsense. (p. 65)

In taking an authentic integral approach it is necessary to be conscious of, and engage, all these quadrants in the process of inquiry. Wilber (2000) emphasizes the

importance of an authentic integration of art, morals, and science (the “Big Three”), and the need to be vigilant of any tendency to slip into subtle reductionism (p. 193). Integral study should include and equally honor first-, second-, and third-person expressions of consciousness:

First-person or phenomenal accounts of the stream of consciousness as it is directly experienced by a person (Upper Left); second-person communication of those facts, set in particular linguistic structures, worldviews, and background contexts (Lower Left); and third-person scientific descriptions of the corresponding mechanisms, systems, and material networks, from brain structures to social systems (Right Hand). (p. 193)

The second consideration in an integral study is to investigate the various stages and streams of development that are present in each quadrant (I have described this model on page 30), bringing awareness and expression to the multi-dimensionality of human inquiry. The result, according to Wilber (2000), is “an ‘all-level, all-quadrant’ approach to integral studies, across the spectrum of disciplines - science, history, religion, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, education, politics, business” (p. 193).

Organic inquiry actively engages participants in a personal and shared process of exploration and change while also advancing knowledge: “This change may take place not only on the level of learning new information but also in terms of expanding one’s consciousness in the realms of heart, body and soul” (Clements et al, 1997, p. 188). The organic inquirer casts a wide net exploring everything caught within it with a mind that is both critical and intuitive, personal and also contextualized in the larger inquiry community. In my view, the criteria set out by Wilber (2000) for integral study can be embraced within the context of an organic inquiry.

### Organic Inquiry

Clements et al (1998) make nine observations about organic inquiry which are helpful in defining the intent and process of this approach:

1. The topic of an organic study is rooted in the story of the researcher's own personal experience.
2. All aspects of the study, as it evolves, are recorded and reported in the researcher's own voice.
3. Choosing to work with the organic methodology presupposes a moderately high level of consciousness about the researcher's own psychospiritual development.
4. Organic research grows from a reverence for the sacred aspects of the topic, the method, collaboration with the co-researchers, the context, and the implications of the inquiry and may include nonrational and nonverbal ways of gathering and reporting data.
5. The unique method of each organic study depends on the creativity of the researcher and is expected to evolve during the investigation because of influences both from within the researcher's psyche and from the progress of the study.
6. The goal of organic research is personal transformation for the reader of the study, the co-researchers, and the researcher.
7. The fundamental technique of organic research is telling and listening to stories.
8. Analysis of organic data may be done by the researcher, by the coresearchers, and/or in the mind of the reader.
9. The final form of an organic study is personal, engaging, and informative. (pp.123-126)

In practice, the researcher's own story is at the core of the organic inquiry. The topic emerges out of the researcher's lived experience (Clements et al, 1997, p. 28). Once having recognized the focus of the inquiry, the researcher looks to the stories of others to inform her own experience:

Although the researcher may begin the work alone, she or he finds co-researchers who can describe their own experience of the topic. The researcher and the co-



researchers work together in face-to-face interviews to allow the stories to emerge complete with details. Each story is an articulated branch growing from the main trunk where it joins the researcher's core story. (p. 44)

The process of data gathering and analysis becomes a form of dialogue between the researcher's story and the stories of her co-inquirers. During the inquiry the researcher comes to know her own experience more deeply, and the co-inquirers also may find insight in the process of storytelling and reflection (Clements et al, 1997, p. 51). Finally, as the data is presented in a form that allows the reader to enter fully into the stories of the researcher and the co-researchers, she may recognize her own experience in ways that lead to new knowledge or transformation (p. 188). In an organic inquiry the stories themselves can become the discovery or the findings.

Central to an organic inquiry is the attitude and intention of the researcher to hold the process sacred. In this view, the act of sharing one's personal stories, reflecting and working on these stories, and presenting them in a way that will reach the reader at profound levels, is a practice that originates in the soul as well as the intellect. This practice involves a meeting between individual and shared experience, and between the personal and the transpersonal. Organic inquiry is, in my opinion, an authentic model of inquiry from an integral perspective.

The organic approach is grounded in responsibility, reverence and awe for the earth and all her inhabitants as well as for the mysteries of creativity. Doing this work requires honoring ourselves, our collaborators, our readers and the context in which we work, and of consciously keeping ourselves open to the gifts of our own unconscious mind as well as to the divine. (p. 18)

This approach was entirely congruent with my intention in this inquiry. I was inspired by a desire to investigate my own experiences of non-personal awareness: to unfold them and understand them in relation to the experiences of others. The experience

of no-self presents a sensitive topic that is hard to speak about in ways that are concrete. The process required a fluidity and delicacy in the way that we - myself and the co-inquirers - spoke of our experiences and in the way that I listened and worked with the experiences and information. I feel that, for myself, engaging with this inquiry has been an experience that is at once healing and provocative. It continues to activate a process of transformation within my consciousness. Each of the co-inquirers has told me that they have found insight and, in some cases, healing from the experience of sharing and reading their own stories. It is my hope that you, the reader, will also find resonance and opportunity for learning.

## Chapter 4

### INQUIRY STRATEGY AND PROCESS

#### Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the inquiry procedures as they actually evolved during the study. Because the methodology is organic, and therefore a continually creative process, the strategy inevitably changed somewhat as it emerged from the original plan presented in my proposal. After briefly commenting on my approach I discuss the actual process of the inquiry including the selection of the co-inquirers, data gathering, and analysis. Lastly, I have included a discussion of my approach to the literature review, a section addressing validity in organic inquiry, and comments about the limitations of the study.

#### Approaching the Inquiry

This inquiry explored how direct experiences of no-self, or unitive consciousness, may have influenced the lives of five co-inquirers and myself. More specifically, the study involved individuals who reported that they had had the experience of no-self during a session in which they intentionally altered their state of consciousness with the goal of physical or emotional healing, and personal growth and insight.

The inquiry invited the participants into a deeply reflective inner journey - one that asked them to consider the most subtle, and possibly unexplored, areas of their inner landscape. Honoring their process and engaging with their unfolding insights, as well as my own, required an attitude of continuous flexibility. In my proposal I described the inquiry strategy as the under painting on a canvas. Writing the strategy gave me a starting point, the idea for the composition and developing flow and balance among the elements of the painting, but the work went through many changes in the creation process.

When I wrote the proposal my inquiry had already begun in the sense that I was experiencing the emergence and refinement of the question, the incubation and unfolding of my own story, and synchronistic meetings with people who offered insight into my process - one of whom became a co-inquirer. I was discovering that my dreams and what psychologist and author Arnold Mindell (1993) calls the “second attention” (p. 23), an awareness of what is usually peripheral and un-attended-to in one’s consciousness, were filled with connections to the inquiry.

My approach to the work with the co-inquirers was informed by two methods of cultivating and deepening communication: synergy process and shared attention. While I did not actually engage with these processes in a formal way, I intentionally held awareness of the intent and quality of communication - or communion - that they both cultivate. I believe such an embodied awareness creates a field of consciousness that invites a deepening and opening between two people. This opening into shared awareness is in alignment with the sacred nature of organic inquiry.

Synergy process comes from Yongming Tang’s (1996) work with cultural synergy. In this process participants engage in a deliberate practice of self-knowing,

other-knowing, difference-holding, and difference-transcending. Cultural synergy was developed out of Tang's personal experience as a process for transforming interpersonal disconnection. It has been used to work with issues ranging from poor organizational communication to the suffering caused by culturally identified differences such as race or gender. It has much to offer all individuals who are attempting to deepen their capacity to understand one another's lived experience. I believe that my knowledge of the synergy inquiry, and the process of attuning to another person's way of knowing, helped to guide me in understanding and feeling into the subtle and ineffable levels of awareness and emotion that the co-inquirers embodied and spoke of during our meetings.

Shared attention is a process developed by Sperry Andrews (1999) to open groups of people to new levels of creativity and insight. Participants engage in steady gazing while sustaining attention to, and naming, sensations and feelings that are shared. After a relatively short time, individuals find themselves opening to a larger field of awareness in which there is a heightened sense of intuitive knowing that is shared by the entire group. In one-on-one communication this process can deepen empathy and facilitate a dramatically increased awareness of each others' experience.

Again, I did not specifically invite any of the co-inquirers to engage in moments of shared attention, yet clearly there were times when there was the quality of mutual attention that I have become attuned to through participation in facilitated sessions. That experience of mutual attention felt vitally important to me in opening to the co-inquirers' stories. In a way it was as if I could receive a direct transmission of their knowing and experiencing as well as their spoken words. My involvement with group and individual

processes of intentionally shared attention has helped me to open my capacity to stay present and empathetically aware in the presence of another person.

### Selecting the Co-Inquirers

There were two initial criteria that I was looking for in choosing the co-inquirers: the intentional work in non-ordinary states of consciousness for the purpose of healing, learning and transformation; and the reported experience of unitive states of consciousness. Also it was naturally important that these co-inquirers had the interest, time, and capacity to do the deeply reflective processing that the topic necessitated.

Although the intentional work in non-ordinary states of consciousness that led to the participants' original experience of no-self could have taken many different forms - including the use of psychedelic substances, shamanic work, meditation, or breath work - for the purposes of the study I chose to select participants who engaged in Holotropic Breathwork as an ongoing process for altering consciousness as a means of inner exploration. The reasons for this decision were that Holotropic Breathwork is legal, it does not advocate a specific religious or spiritual doctrine or prescribed developmental path, and there is a substantial theoretical base that supports and informs this process of altering consciousness.

Identifying the participants' experience of unitive consciousness required some careful communications both on my part as the researcher and on the part of the potential co-inquirers. There are subtle differences, for example, between an experience of leaving

the embodied self while still retaining a personal locus of attention and the experience of attention that is spread throughout a field of consciousness without the felt organization of a defined personal center. My hope was to identify co-inquirers whose description of their experience of no-self approximated the latter: a consciousness that is not mediated by a subject in relation to objects but rather continuously opening into undifferentiated awareness.

The participant group consists of three women and two men who reported that they had had at least one experience of no-self, as described above. They are all involved - as an I - with the Grof Transpersonal Training (GTT) in Holotropic Breathwork: a process designed to evoke non-ordinary states of consciousness in service of growth and healing. (It should be clear, however, that this inquiry is not directly associated with, or endorsed by GTT.) One participant is currently in the facilitator training program and the other four are certified practitioners. I recruited the co-inquirers from the Holotropic Breathwork community for two primary reasons: It consists of people who have experience with non-ordinary states of consciousness; and these individuals are typically comfortable with the kind of deep self reflection that the process of organic inquiry requires. The community also provides a culture of sorts in which there is a frame of reference and language relating to my topic.

Identifying participants from this group was largely a process of referral, synchronicity, and self selection. Because there is a strong networking system among GTT graduates and trainees, my initial contact with potential co-inquirers was through word of mouth and by posting an e-mail (see Appendix I) describing my inquiry on the on-line forum for GTT practitioners and trainees. There were ten responses to my on-line

posting. It was clear from those initial communications that each of the people who contacted me felt some deep chord of resonance with this topic.

Once the list of potential co-inquirers had been compiled I contacted each person by telephone or through e-mail to initiate a discussion of the project and process. Following this initial correspondence, it became clear that two were either not really interested or for other reasons were not able to participate. I then talked at length with the remaining eight potential co-inquirers by telephone, or face-to-face, to determine if their experience matched the working descriptions of no-self, or unitive consciousness described above. As I came to learn more about each of these people I used the following criteria to determine suitability for the project:

1. The willingness of the individual to engage in sustained self reflection.
2. The degree to which the potential participant would contribute to the group diversity in terms of work in the world, spiritual practice, age, culture, and education.
3. The availability, and accessibility, of the individual within the constraints of my schedule and resources for completing the dissertation. (Because I was planning face-to-face meetings, there were geographic considerations. Although GTT is active all over the world, I had to limit the study to participants living in the west of the USA unless, of course, a potential participant was willing to travel at her or his own expense.)

The selection of the final five participants ended up being determined largely by geographic proximity, their availability of time, and the depth of their interest in the topic. One of the co-inquirers lives near to my home in northern Arizona, one is located in northern New Mexico, and the remaining three live in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Before they agreed to engage in the inquiry, each of the co-inquirers had the opportunity to review the proposal for the study and to clarify any questions relating to their participation. They were also required to complete the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix II).

### Data Gathering

The data for this inquiry emerged out of two individual meetings, or storytelling/interview cycles, with each of the participants. During these sessions I asked them to look deeply into themselves, to invite forward their stories, and to try to discern as authentically as possible shifts or changing qualities of being that could be quite subtle and previously unconsidered. My intent with this process of data gathering was to enter into it with great sensitivity to each person's attentional and relational style. I attempted to cultivate communication that engaged us both deeply and holistically. As Clements et al (1997) suggest in their description of organic inquiry:

The data in organic research comes from people's experience. It begins "where people are in their actual lives. Rather than tests or questionnaires, the researcher uses face-to-face interviews to gather data. In these interviews, the researcher encourages persons to tell their stories including all the details. We find that this storytelling is a tool which encompasses more than an intellectual approach and affects the whole person deeply." (Nielsen, 1990, in Clements, et al, p. 48)

With this in mind, I preferred not to define one specific approach to our storytelling/interview meetings. Rather, I engaged with the interaction as an emergent process that manifested with one participant as an exploratory conversation and with another as witnessing the unfolding of an elaborate and magical story. However, although the appearance of the sessions was rather different for each co-inquirer, the intention with each was to support relaxation and opening to reflection as well as reverence for the process. What was consistently most important, in my mind, was that the experience

support each of us in evoking deep personal reflection and inner questioning in relation to the topic of inquiry. Clements et al (1997), again:

In organic research, we attempt to allow the story to tell itself without preconceived notions as to where it might lead. Like the whole process of organic research, interviewing has a life of its own. Through asking an open-ended question about an experience or about an everyday life situation, we invite persons to tell us their story. The details are important. They add texture, color and richness to the facts of life. They lure us both to listen intently, to laugh and sometimes to cry together in the telling and the hearing of the story. Even the narrator may hear something new about her own life. (p. 49)

### *The Meeting Sessions*

I had originally envisioned engaging in three meetings with each person. Each meeting would center on a specific question relating to the topic, and alternated with a period of reflection and review of the transcripts. As I began the process of scheduling the meetings, and talked more in depth with the co-inquirers, I made the decision to reduce the process to two meetings. Part of this decision was in consideration of the time and expense involved in travel.

Once I began the inquiry it became clear that although I had a basic guideline for what content would be covered during each of the sessions the organic nature of storytelling and reflection was creating a more emergent agenda for our meetings. We eventually addressed all the questions, but the way in which that addressing happened was quite different for each person. The guiding questions for the first session were: “Tell me about your experience, or experiences of no-self. What do you remember about your life at that time?” For the second session, I asked each co-inquirer to reflect on how he or she makes sense of that experience now, how does he or she now think about self and other, and what are her or his ambitions or visions for the future?

The sessions with each of the co-inquirers lasted between one and two hours and were tape recorded and transcribed. All but one session was face-to-face. Because of scheduling conflicts I was not able to meet with one of the West Coast co-inquirers for our first session. We decided to try and cover both sessions in an extended meeting during my second visit. During that time, however, I inadvertently taped over part of his storytelling. We finally completed the second session over the telephone in mid January.

### *First Meeting*

The intent of the first meeting was to help the co-inquirers to reconnect with their actual experience, or experiences, of unitive consciousness and the situation leading into that experience. I asked the participants to reflect on these experiences in preparation for the meeting. I also suggested that they consider the setting in which they wished to meet. The four co-inquirers who lived at a distance chose to meet in their homes, which provided a wonderfully rich context for our sessions. The co-inquirer who lives close to me preferred to meet out of doors under the trees at my house - a choice which felt very congruent with his love of nature.

I asked each person to pay attention to what was coming to her or his attention during the inquiry - any synchronicities or dreams, for example - and to freely include those experiences in the process. I asked the co-inquirers to consider whether there was an object, or artwork, that would support his or her reconnection with the experience. One of the co-inquirers read me a number of her poems as way to bring language to what she was feeling; another sent me a couple of stories that he had written at the time of his experiences. In addition, I was aware that our environment, as well as the embodied

presence of each of the co-inquirers, continually gave me insight into what they told me. It seemed as if the way in which each person manifested in her or his surroundings was a concrete reflection, and illustration, of the subtle qualities of their story-telling.

At the start of each meeting we usually spent 10 to 20 minutes in easy conversation, making a cup of tea, or just allowing ourselves to sink into a comfortable state with one another. Three of the participants requested, or I suggested, that we share a period of silence before we entered the process.

Once we had settled into the meeting and were ready to begin our conversation, I asked each participant to tell me the story of his or her experience - or experiences - of no-self, recreating the thoughts, emotions, physiological sensations, and so forth, that accompanied those experiences. My hope was that each person would be able to feel back into those moments as if they were actually happening. During this process of remembering, I asked about the context for that experience: "Who were you then? What was your life like? What meaning did you make of this experience at that time? What images, feelings, and sensations are evoked now as you speak of it?"

When the story was complete, I typically asked how she or he relates to that original experience today and what the remembering process was like. I asked the co-inquirer to consider these questions as holistically as possible looking at them from a standpoint that includes the emotional, somatic, and spiritual self as well as the intellectual.

Following this first session, I transcribed the material from tape and began the reflection phase (described below). I had originally intended to draft my retelling, or synthesizing, of each co-inquirer's story/interview at this time and to give it to them for

review and reflection prior to our next session. However, what I discovered in the process of transcribing and reflecting on the transcript was that I did not yet have enough context to do this. I knew that the second sessions were likely to be quite different from this first meeting, and I felt the need to see the relationship between the stories told in both sessions before attempting to work with each person's words. In addition, it seemed important to hold a view of all the co-inquirers' stories in relationship to one another, and to my own reflections, prior to reworking the language and presentation in any way. Once I had transcribed the tapes of the first session, I sent each co-researcher a copy of the transcript and explained my plan to wait until after the second session to begin the retelling of the stories.

### *Second Meeting*

When I met with each of the co-inquirers for the second time, I began by asking if there were any concerns or thoughts that he or she wanted to share after having read the transcript of the first session. I had made verbatim transcriptions of those first session tapes, and a consistent response from each of the participants was that they were surprised by the non-linearity and what two co-inquirers referred to as their "incoherent" way of speaking. I found that this reaction to seeing a word-for-word transcription interfered with the co-inquirer's deeper reflection on what she or he had said, so I made the decision to present a lightly edited version of the transcript for the second meeting.

During the second sessions, I asked the co-inquirers to consider if there are ways that their experiences of unitive consciousness impact or influence their interactions with other people. I asked them to think about the present-day experience of self and other

from an intellectual and a somatic perspective and to explore the relationship between this experience and the remembered experience of no-self. I also asked what effect the experience of unitive consciousness may have had on each person's sense of purpose or mission in this life and how this shows up in the way that they live in this world. I requested that they talk about their highest aspirations or dreams and their longings. Again, I encouraged the participants to tell stories, or use whatever other means seems appropriate to them, in order to bring depth and complexity to the experience.

Towards the end of this final meeting we took some time to review any questions or issues or last thoughts in relation to everything that we had been talking about. Finally, I asked each co-inquirer to talk about the meaning that this storytelling and interview process had had for them.

Once I had transcribed and sent out the drafts of the second sessions, I began the retelling process which I describe in more detail below. I had completed both sessions with four of the five co-inquirers when I did the retelling; the fifth participant and I were still trying to organize our second session. As I wrote, I attempted to hold an awareness of the whole fabric woven from all the stories while also honoring the uniqueness of each person's voice. Only when the retelling of all four co-inquirers' material was complete did I send out the drafts. The fifth co-inquirer's story was written and sent out almost a month later after we completed the delayed second session.

### *Researcher's Story*

In organic inquiry, the researcher's own story is considered an equal and parallel source of data with the stories of the co-researchers. As the researcher's story changes

through her interaction with the experience of the co-researchers it also provides insights and guidance for the process of analysis:

As the story of the researcher is changed, she or he is transformed, however subtly. As well as offering the stories themselves to the reader, the researcher reports her or his own personal process of transformation in sufficient detail so that the reader may realize the possibility of participating similarly with the stories and experiencing an equivalent yet unique transformation. (Clements et al, 1997, p. 157)

In order to work with my own story as data, I began the formal research process by documenting my experiences and reflecting on them through the same lenses that I offered to the co-inquirers. This process produced a combination of journal entries, free-form writing, and art work which provided material for reflection during the analysis of the data: a point of reference and a source to draw from as I discovered, and illustrated for the reader, how my story changed through the inquiry.

### Analysis

The intent of organic inquiry is transformation - of the inquirer and co-inquirers during the process of the research and, ultimately, of the individual reader. To this end, it is assumed “that the reader takes an active role in the analysis of the data” (Clements et al, 1997, p. 78). In addition, the co-inquirers are encouraged to reflect on the meaning that the process of storytelling and the exploration of their experiences has had for them. The context and the personal story of the researcher, too, is essential (p. 49).

As an integral process, organic inquiry requires the researcher to hold an awareness of the wholeness of her perspective: the relationships between personal and objective; individual and collective; the imaginal and the material. In addition, she must be conscious of the data from a developmental perspective. This means being sensitive to

the often impenetrable complexity of personality, individual bias, and world view that the researcher and all involved bring to the inquiry.

The analytical process in organic inquiry, then, takes place through many perspectives. The researcher must continually bear in mind not only the validity of her personal responses but also the validity of the co-inquirers and the reader. The challenge is to interact with the data in a manner that leads to revelation rather than reduction, and that stimulates a number of possibilities for dialogic engagement rather than creating a definable specific unit of knowledge.

In addition, the process of analysis is ongoing and iterative. It starts with the story of the researcher which is then engaged with the parallel stories of the co-inquirers. All of this takes place in relationship to existing fields of theoretical study and literature. As the stories unfold, and the cycles of engagement and reflection progress, the analytical process is also active as the researcher constantly examines the responses, insights, and questions that arise from her exposure to others' experiences. This process takes place in a holistic manner: "Feelings are as important as thoughts in analyzing and reporting the data" (Clements et al, 1997, p. 50).

Analysis has been an active process for me throughout the course of this inquiry. Much of the early analytical process took the form of journal entries, dialog with peers, reflective reading, contemplation, and artwork. Towards the end of the inquiry, this material itself became data for analysis.

### Reflection Phases



In the spirit of organic inquiry, my methodological process has been cyclic and interwoven. Threaded among the interactions with the co-inquirers were periods of quiet reflection on the interactions and the data as part of the on-going analysis. In his writing about heuristic research, Clark Moustakas (1990) calls this process “indwelling” and describes it as “turning inward to seek a deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature or meaning of a quality or theme of human experience” (p. 24). The quality of this indwelling was that of observation, waiting, and gently noting what came to the foreground through imagination and awareness as I reflected. The intention in these reflection phases was multi-layered: they provided a time for centering; for coming home to my own experience and story; for immersing myself deeply and empathically in the co-inquirer’s stories; and for opening myself to a synergistic or experiential knowing of the process and what it was manifesting.

### *First Reflection Phase*

Following the process of writing about my own story, and before embarking on the meetings with the co-inquirers, I entered into the first reflection phase. During this period I spent time in-dwelling with my story and reflecting on what I knew and anticipated about the experiences of the other five participants. I also used this as a time for meditation and activating intention for the study, cultivating what Christopher Bache (1995) calls the “morphic field” for this shared work. Bache writes: “These fields are always present wherever collective intention is focused in group projects of sustained duration and repeated form. Usually, however, they operate below the threshold of consciousness” (p. 18).

One way that I fostered intention was by cultivating a ritualistic process of starting each day as I was planning the meetings with the co-inquirers. I began with meditation, followed by creative work such as journaling or visual art, and one or two hours reading material relating to experiences of unitive consciousness. This part of my day felt sacred and filled with the presence of all of us involved with the study. I was aware throughout the day that the inquiry was working in me, but those early hours seemed to have a unique intensity and purpose about them.

In the terminology of organic inquiry, that first phase of reflection represented a bridging between the chthonic, interior, cultivation stage of the inquiry, and the active participation - relational/growing - phase of interaction with the co-inquirers. Yet it was also a preliminary phase of analysis; an exploration and assessment of what I knew, felt, and anticipated as I began the study; and a sorting out of that information so that I could make it accessible to the reader in the final document: "The organic researcher uses her or his own story or experience as the measure of the data" (Clements et al, 1997, p. 156).

### *Second Reflection Phase*

The second reflection took place following the first storytelling/interview session. During this phase, I listened to the tapes of the first sessions and transcribed them. In doing this, I was consciously deepening my relationship to the stories and both the content and the nature of the story telling. I approached this process as a contemplation holding an embodied awareness that the framework for my reflection was the inquiry. I also brought a sense of sacredness and respect to each participant's story and opened myself to learning from each person's presence and sharing.

During this phase, and in each reflection phase, I kept an informal journal of my responses and insights continuing the exploration of ways in which the co-inquirer's experiences were influencing and changing my own experience. During this time - and throughout the inquiry - I was able to bring insights and experiences that I was having into extraordinarily rich conversations with a small number of friends who have an interest in non-ordinary states and the transformation of consciousness.

### *Third Reflection Phase*

Following the second session with the co-inquirers, and having transcribed and sent out the tapes from that process, I began to work on retelling the stories. As much as possible, I used the words of the co-inquirers engaging with the language and felt presence of each co-inquirer in an iterative process of writing and reflection. Each co-inquirer received a copy of the retelling, and we discussed clarifications and changes to the text by telephone or e-mail.

The intent of the retelling was to attempt to capture and synthesize the most salient content of the stories in a way that deepened my own comprehension and satisfied the co-inquirers that their experiences have been heard and understood. The retelling also created a form for presenting the co-inquirers' experiences that could be included in the final dissertation document so that they would engage the reader.

Having completed the retelling of the co-inquirers' stories, I entered into a third period of reflection and analysis. The first step was to re-engage with the material gathered from each of the co-inquirers. Having revised their retold stories in response to their feedback, I again reread the co-inquirers' words deepening my sense of the

relationship between their original story of the no-self experience and their daily lived experience, their views of life, their dreams and their longings, as well as appreciating the larger context within which these reflections exist.

Finally, I reflected on my inner responses, questions, insights, and ways that I have learned from the experiences of these others who have participated in the inquiry. I originally thought that I would weave my reflections and responses into the retold stories. As I began that process, however, I realized I was uncomfortable with doing this. The co-inquirers' stories are extraordinary and expansive in their completeness. They need to stand alone. I felt that inserting my reflections into them would not only be intrusive, but could also appear reductive and objectifying within such a deeply personal context. Instead, having spent time contemplating each story and my experience of being with the co-inquirer during his or her telling, I wrote a personal reflection to follow each co-inquirer's story. These reflections are not reflections on the co-inquirer's story, they relate to my own story and the insights and shifts of awareness that have emerged through the experiences of being with the co-inquirer.

In organic analysis, it is in the description of the researcher's changing personal story which reflects her or his own transformation due to experiencing the stories of the co-researchers which then serves as a model for the reader to participate in the identical process. . . . As the researcher carries the two stories in parallel, her or his own story changes because of resonance with the story of the other. (Clements et al, 1997, p. 157)

### Literature Review

An integral part of the analysis process involved a reengagement with the pertinent literature from the various fields of study, and experience, that have informed

me throughout this inquiry. Using the literature as a resource to leverage my understanding of the shifts and insights that took place within me during the inquiry and as a lens through which to critically examine this process of meaning making, I created a kind of meta-narrative that weaves through the text of the dissertation.

Because this study is integral in nature, I have drawn from a wide and eclectic range of literature. For this reason, and to be congruent with the more fluid organic intent of the methodology, I have chosen not to develop a single chapter addressing a critical review of the literature, but instead have included reflections on the work of relevant writers and theorists in each section except the findings. These reflections are intended to bring a sense of synergy between the lived experiences and deeply personal reflections of myself and the co-inquirers and the theoretical perspective presented in the literature. It is my hope that the reader will discover insight and inspiration in this synergistic relationship between the personal and the theoretical.

This approach to the literature review is not uncommon in organic inquiry. As Clements et al (1997) point out: “In organic research, even the traditionally academic and objective literature review may become personal and engaging” (p. 103). Organic researchers have worked with literature in a wide variety of ways. For example, some studies include discussion within the context of an interview and intersperse a critical review of the literature throughout the dissertation. Whatever the form in which it is approached, the intention is to make the literature accessible and meaningful to the reader and provide depth to his or her engagement with the inquiry.

### Validity

During the time that I have been learning about and practicing organic inquiry, one of the most consistent questions that I find myself engaging in with people who are curious about the methodology is the problem of validity when doing such intensely personal research. How can one bring measures of validity to a process that is so intuitive, emergent, and ineffable in nature? In relation to one woman's response to reading an organic study, Clements et al (1997) comment:

Organic research does not pretend to present generalizable results and aims at precisely the sort of personal response that Becky experienced. It is the intent of the methodology to influence fewer readers more deeply than many readers with conclusive and objective findings. (p. 209)

Clark Moustakas (1990), speaking in relation to heuristic research, writes:

The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? (p. 32)

Transpersonal psychologist and researcher, William Braud (1998), writes:

"Validity has to do with whether one's findings or conclusions are faithful or true to what one is studying" (p. 213). I would add, in relation to organic inquiry, that validity also implicates the ways in which the researcher is aware of her self as an instrument of inquiry. According to Braud:

Once we have become aware of the importance of the researcher in any research project, it makes sense to attend as carefully to researcher characteristics and biases as we previously did to the characteristics of participants in our research samples. (p. 235)

In my view, there are two important factors to consider in relation to one's own validity as an organic researcher: the degree of self knowing, and awareness of bodily wisdom. Self knowing includes familiarity with the structures of one's personality and the habitual patterns of inner and outer reactivity that have been laid down in our

psychological development. I am certainly far from free of introjections and projections, for example, but if I am aware of what they are, how they work, and when they are activated, I can be more present and receptive to the co-inquirers and their stories and to my own inner responses.

In relation to self knowing, Braud (1998) makes the following observation:

The emotions can 'lie' on occasion and can also be misinterpreted. Therefore, emotional reactions should be assessed carefully and their contributions given appropriate weightings in any validity assessment. Yet emotions and feelings can offer unique indications of the validity of specific findings and conclusions and even of the success of the overall research program. (p. 219)

The clearer and deeper the inquirer's capacity for self knowing, the more probable it seems that she can come to recognize and trust the signals sent by the presence of an emotional response and to discern the difference between that presence and the typically reactive content of emotional thinking. The ongoing cultivation of this awareness has become a part of this inquiry and, increasingly, I come to trust the authenticity of subtle levels of awareness that underlie the re-activity of my personality.

Bodily wisdom can grow, I believe, directly out of self knowing. As one becomes more practiced in self awareness one seems to naturally become attuned to the language of the body. Braud (1998) writes:

Our bodies often provide indications of our true intentions or of aspects of the outer world of which we are otherwise unaware... By observing our own behaviors – where our bodies have taken us or how they have delayed us – we can learn more about the balance of our intentions in ambiguous situations. (p. 216)

In addition to these aspects of validity that are so vital to organic inquiry, there are two other strategies that I feel are worth mentioning: First, the cyclic nature of organic inquiry (similar to a number of other qualitative methodologies such as heuristic research and phenomenology) ensured that I engaged over and over again with all the

materials involved. I revisited the stories, the literature, and my own reflections many times in the course of the inquiry. In this cyclic process I found a developing relationship with the inner and outer material. My story shifted and changed as I learned. So did my understanding and appreciation for what I felt and read.

A second strategy to ensure validity is the use of thick descriptive language. This way of presenting data is valued in feminist methodologies and is an integral aspect of organic inquiry. Norman Denzin (1994), in a chapter entitled “The Art of Interpretation, Evaluation, and Presentation,” suggests that thick description “gives the context of an experience, states the intentions and meanings that organized the experience, and reveals the experience as a process. Out of this process arises a text’s claims for truth or verisimilitude” (p. 505).

Whereas thin description is a reporting style, offering only factual information, thick description attempts to engage the reader at a different level. Using thick description, the researcher invites the reader to come to an emotional and sensory understanding of the text and to engage through his or her own knowledge and experience.

This strategy of using thick description is mentioned by Carole Barlas (2000) as a measure of validity in her dissertation case study: “I give thick descriptions that allow the reader to understand the experiences of the study participants and determine if the meaning made in this study can be useful in his or her own context” (p. 75). In the findings section in particular, I have attempted to bring as much depth and richness to the language as possible in order to transmit the experience of the meetings with the co-inquirers.



### Limitations

While engaging with rigorous critical reflection, organic inquiry offers an intuitive and interpersonal approach to the inquiry process. The relationships between the researcher and participants are rich and personal, and this depth of connection informs the work as it unfolds. When working with the literature and situating the inquiry in relation to existing knowledge the researcher approaches the process as a dialog with her own story and the stories of the co-inquirers. Organic inquiry is thick and rich. In its intensity an organic study can become a catalyst for change in those whom it touches (Clements et al, 1998, p. 126).

In discussing the limitations of this organic inquiry it is helpful to see it not as an isolated study, but in relationship to a body of inquiry that is emerging from the fields of transpersonal psychology, consciousness studies, and spiritual inquiry (for example: Grof, 2000; Bache, 2000, Metcalf, 1999). This study intends not to surface a generalizable truth, but to bring depth and context to the growing exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness and to suggest new approaches to transformative learning.

There are three limitations that seem important to identify. First, the fact that I chose to work with people from the Holotropic Breathwork training, and my own involvement with that work, introduces a bias to the study in relation to the type of meaning making that has developed within that community. The group of co-inquirers was small and relatively homogeneous, particularly in terms of culture. In addition, these individuals were all self-motivated, interested to engage with an inquiry into their

experience, and willing to do deep self-reflection. The experiences and findings from the inquiry cannot be generalized. Yet the presentation of the co-inquirers' stories, as well as my own reflections and insights evoked by these stories and other readings, may have meaning for a variety of different readers of this document in ways that cannot be predicted.

A second limitation applies to the manner in which I approached the meetings with the co-inquirers. During our interactions I chose to give minimal direction, preferring to allow the emergence of whatever seemed relevant to each person. In retrospect, I feel that there could have been some interesting insights to be gained in relation to the inquiry question if I had pursued an exploration of the present moment experience between the co-inquirer and myself as part of the inquiry into self and other. In addition, I feel that bringing the co-inquirers together for a group process (perhaps including a breathwork session) would have deepened the inquiry, particularly in relation to the idea of learning community in transformative learning.

Finally, with regard to the literature which has informed my inquiry, my choice of sources has been largely confined to European and European-American writers. In particular, I have drawn from a relatively small culture of individuals who are writing about transformation of consciousness and learning from a Western transpersonal perspective. I want to note this as a limitation of the study and to recognize that there is much information, very relevant to this topic, to be found from non-white, and non-Western writers and cultures. I have drawn from an intellectual and experiential milieu with which I am familiar. While doing so has informed me deeply in the process of

inquiry, I am also aware that to remain within this context in future inquiry would be both limiting and exclusionary.

## Chapter 5

### FINDINGS

#### Overview

Organic inquiry does not seek a specific outcome in the manner of more traditional research, instead the goal is to support change or transformation in those

involved in the research, as well as the reader of the study. The experiences and stories of the inquirer and the co-inquirers serve as the vehicle of learning and transformation. The reader is invited to approach the stories in the same way as the researcher, exploring them through the window of personal experience. While remaining true to the voice of the narrator, these stories are written to be accessible and engaging and are presented with thick contextual description. In this form, they reveal and invite the process of inquiry. At the same time, the stories share the insights and understandings that have arisen for the participants through the process of inquiry. In this inquiry, therefore, I am identifying the stories as the findings.

This chapter presents the stories of the co-inquirers and my reflections in response to those stories. At the end of the chapter, following the stories, is a short afterword in the form of a personal reflection. This first section serves as an introduction to the chapter and offers a background to situate the stories in the process.

### Introduction to the Findings

I began to gather the stories from my five co-inquirers in August, 2000, and the process continued through the fall and winter. All but one of the meetings were completed by mid-November, and the last story was recorded in the middle of January. These six months of living in and with the stories has been extraordinary.

I heard from several of my friends and colleagues who have worked with organic inquiry that there is something that happens when one enters other people's stories. Reality takes on a different appearance and others' ways of knowing and being seem to flow continuously through one's awareness. It became clear to me as I worked that there

was a presence, or field, into which this writing was emerging. This field was being shaped, albeit unconsciously, by each of us involved in the process.

The elegance of the process through which these five participants joined with me seemed to foretell the flavor of our interactions. Following an initial flurry of responses to my online request for people to take part in the study, and a number of long telephone conversations, four individuals obviously understood what it was I was asking and were interested in exploring their experiences. My fifth co-inquirer, a friend of many years, had volunteered already. I could viscerally feel the sense of a pattern coming together as each co-inquirer agreed to join the project. The mandala for my inquiry was clearly forming in a seamless and definitive way.

The three women and two men with whom I worked in this project are people who are committed, each in their own way, to life as inquiry and a process of learning and transformation. Their inquiry has taken many forms including engagement with religious and spiritual teachings such as Tibetan Buddhism, mystical Christianity, and Native American practices; explorations of non-ordinary states of consciousness through breathwork, plant medicine and psychedelics, body work, and various yogas; and involvement with transpersonal psychology and philosophy through reading and practice.

These five co-inquirers are white North Americans, and all are in the middle years of their lives. Their professional occupations, past and present, include: engineer; educator; internet designer; owner of a construction company now working as a free-lance builder; head nurse of an intensive care ward; therapist; architect; and spiritual guide and counselor. Each of them is involved in Holotropic Breathwork. All but one have completed the facilitator training and three are active, to varying degrees, in

offering workshops. Three of the co-inquirers are currently students in doctoral programs, and part of their interest in participating was in anticipation of engaging in their own dissertation work.

I traveled to the San Francisco Bay Area and to northern New Mexico to meet with the co-inquirers - only one lives close to my home. Each meeting lasted between one and two hours. The content of our meetings took different forms. One participant, for example, offered an extraordinary and complete story of emergence into a new awareness, while with another participant our meeting became a dialog-like investigation of concepts and feelings. As I transcribed each of the sessions, I found myself struck by the intuitive organic way in which the speaking unfolded to reveal so richly the inner experience of each person (although there were times during a couple of the sessions when I had to face, and release, an inner anxiety that the session was not addressing what I had envisioned it should).

When I originally framed the ideas for this dissertation I grappled with the paradox at the heart of this project: How is it possible for a self to explore the experience of its own non-existence? I also wondered: How can there be an experience of no-self when there is no self there to experience it? This paradoxical dilemma has been faithfully at my side throughout the process, and it came to the foreground in more than one of the sessions in ways that evoked some deep sensitivities.

Ultimately there are no words to evoke what it is that each of these people has experienced, and continues to experience, but there is a resonance within their words that, I believe, can touch those of us who read what they have to say. At best, these stories can only point towards awarenesses that are profound and life changing and which continue

to unfold moment by moment. Yet, when it is received and recognized, that pointing may serve as a catalyst for change in another.

My intention in this chapter is to focus on personal experience. I do not refer to the literature, nor do I attempt to draw on any theoretical or philosophical body of knowledge. It is an interior journey into which I hope you will bring your own experiences and reflections.

At the beginning of each of the co-inquirers' stories I offer a brief introduction to situate the session and to provide a little background. For the most part, I have used the co-inquirer's own words adding a few lines here and there to create context. Most of the sessions begin with the co-inquirer speaking about an experience in which they lost all sense of a unifying self awareness. The sessions then unfold organically with an exploration of the experience of self and other and the purpose, or lack of purpose, that each co-inquirer is aware of in his or her life.

Following each of the stories are my brief reflections. These are not so much reflections on the individual stories as an intuitive personal response to the words and presence of the participants. They have emerged from my own story and represent engagement with something that has been evoked in me. I do not attempt to explain the connection or bridge my reflections to the narrative. They are intended to stand alone, but in relation to what the co-inquirers have said.

As you read the following chapters it is important to understand that what is presented here is intended for the soul rather than the intellect. Allow yourself to feel into the words of Tricia, Diane, Raj, Peter, and Rex. Notice your responses and insights, especially when there is a sense of recognition or an impulse to reframe or rationalize

what has been described. Be aware, also, of your body, emotions and shifts in your energy.

My recommendation is that you read one story at a time with a break for reflection and integration before you start the next one. Each co-inquirer has a unique and different presence. What each person says is profound. There is much to be felt and learned by sinking into these words with spaciousness and an inquiring mind.

## TRICIA

### Introduction

My meetings with Tricia took place at her home north of San Francisco. One of the first things that I became aware of as she invited me in - in addition to the enthusiastic and energetic presence of her dog - was the extraordinary calm of the space. It seemed that everything had a slight translucence, and there was a sense of quiet order which



called forth a resonant peacefulness within me. As I spent time with her, it became very clear that these qualities were outward manifestations of Tricia's spiritual transparency - reflections of deep personal transformation.

We sat together on her sofa with the dog curled up beside us. At first he was watchful, then he relaxed into sleep. His steady breathing, together with the sound of the quietly meditative music that Tricia had selected, offered a gentle, almost imperceptible background for the storytelling.

Both of our meetings started with a few minutes of silence after which, speaking into the quietness, I asked the framing questions for the session. That silence seemed to be an invitation to sink deeply, and it set the quality of speaking. Often Tricia's words came very slowly and quietly, seeming to rise out of a profound depth. At times, we moved back into the silence, being still and waiting for the natural emergence of what needed to be said next.

Several times during the process of story telling, and especially after having read the first transcript, Tricia expressed concern about what happens in attempting to capture an ineffable and continuously emergent experience. As she said at the beginning of our second meeting:

My concern - and I think it's a concern that I have even in terms of just sharing my story and having it written - is the element of concretizing it. It becomes something very structured . . . Also the risk of objectification: the subject/object relationship to what's written. As I read [the transcript] I didn't have the sense of the embodied dynamic flow and expression that I experienced as I was speaking. . . There was something about concretizing what is an ongoing continuous flow of being - an expression of being.

She also speaks of the paradoxical nature of attempting to speak about an experience in which there is no-self: "It's very difficult to talk about. To even use the

word ‘experience’ seems inaccurate or a misnomer because there’s no-one to have the experience. Do you know what I’m saying?”

As I have already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I believe these are enormously important considerations not only in the writing and presenting of these stories, but also in the reading of them. Therefore, I ask you the reader to enter into Tricia’s narrative - and the stories that follow - with the awareness that it points towards a profound opening and unfolding of being that is far outside the finite linearity of language. Rather than thinking about these as specific definable experiences, allow yourself to open into the space beyond her words. Imagine these pages as the pages of a musical score. The music itself, not the symbolic representation, is what you feel as resonance in the instrument of your own being.

### Tricia’s Story

Tricia’s first experience of no-self occurred when she was in her mid-40s at a time of huge change in her life. She had started therapy in her mid-30s in response to an insistent inner questioning: “I was asking the question: ‘Is this all there is?’ And: ‘Who am I really?’ And: ‘Why am I here?’” By the time she was in her early 40s it had become clear that she should make some deep changes in her life. She decided to let go of a successful and demanding career in health care education, completed a second Master’s degree, and started a part-time practice as a clinical counselor. These changes were in support of her continued inner work:

My commitment was to my own healing path and movement towards wholeness and my own spiritual deepening. At that time I was still searching for something. I was searching to connect with the divine in a more full, and complete, and

whole way. Back then I had more of a Jungian orientation so I was seeking union – re-union.

Although she came from the Christian spiritual tradition, and practiced

Christianity until her late 20s, that frame proved to be too limited:

I don't remember that the container was absolutely shattered, it just didn't hold me. My own experiences of the Divine didn't fit with the structure that I had tried to fit my religious practices into. I was expanding out of that and practicing prayer and meditation on a daily basis - but meditation more as a tool, not a spiritual path. In a way, in my mid-30s and up until my mid-40s, transpersonal and experiential psychotherapy - and also Twelve-Step [group] work - became my spiritual path.

By that time, instead of looking outward for spiritual guidance, Tricia's spiritual

knowing became more self-directed:

I always had contact with a really precise inner guidance or inner wisdom. I just trusted it impeccably. Probably early on there was a little more hesitancy but over time I learned that there was wisdom that was unfolding the process. My responsibility was, first of all, to get out of the way of that and then to cooperate and participate with it... I was just working with this unfolding and letting it guide me to the next situation that would hold the process, or support the deepening of the process... I felt like I was being called to make a very deep descent into the unconscious - into my own inner feminine is how I would have talked about it at that time.

This inner guidance, manifesting in dreams and a series of clear synchronicities, led Tricia to work with Stanislav Grof, first at a workshop bringing together Holotropic Breathwork and insight meditation and later as a participant in the facilitator training program.

Walking to her first breathwork session with the friend who had been instrumental in bringing her to the Insight and Opening workshop (facilitated by Stan Grof and Buddhist teacher and therapist, Jack Kornfield), Tricia remembers saying: “‘I feel like I'm walking to my own death.’ There was some sense that I was going to die in the process, and at that time my fear was around physical death.”

That first breathwork session was profound, but it was during the second session that the experience of opening beyond a self occurred. In talking about this experience, Tricia says: “I’m sharing this with you for two reasons: one because it’s the first really clear, distinct, and extended experience of consciousness that I was able to track; and also because after that it was a fairly consistent recurring experience in breath work.”

Before the breathwork even started - I was stretched out on my mat and Stan [Grof] had begun to do the relaxation exercise - I felt this intense heat start to move up my body. I think it first started in my left leg, but what I remember mostly is this intense heat in my pelvis and in the base of my spine. My first reaction was: “Oh, this is too soon and too much.” It just hit me so suddenly and so early, even before the session had begun.

And then I began immediately to practice what Jack [Kornfield] had been teaching us in terms of naming our experience. I remember going: ‘Burning, burning, more burning, intense burning...’ [laughs] It was all I could do. I just drew on every practice and tool that I knew to stay with what was happening. So I felt this really intense fiery energy that stayed quite a while, it seemed, in my pelvis - and seemed to even localize for a while in my uterus.

At the time I had fibroid tumors - there was one large tumor on the right hand side - and I remember not only my uterus contracting, but the energy seeming to concentrate in that one large fibroid. I remember having the sense that this fiery heat, or energy, was somehow burning away the fibroid. I had the sense that something was being transformed in my uterus as I just stayed with what was happening.

The energy stayed there for what seemed like quite a while, but I had no concept of time. It was really intense. Then it started moving up my spine and the next thing I was really aware of, or remember, was that it had moved into my heart. There were a couple of bands of holding, or contraction, on the left side of the heart, and I remember the energy - just like it had concentrated with the large fibroid - seemed to be concentrating on these bands of holding. It was almost like this very loving healing touch. It was like a hand... touching that place in my heart.

Then those bands or contractions released, and my heart just exploded open. I had this tremendous heart opening and felt ecstatic joy, and as this was happening I began to sob. It was tears of joy and ecstasy. It seemed like this was what I had been seeking my whole life - feelings of compassion, joy, ecstasy, opening beyond what I had ever imagined or experienced. So I thought: “This is it! This is it! [laughs] This is what I’ve been seeking. This is what union with the Divine is.” I had a sense of the Divine dwelling in my heart and opening my heart.

And then the energy, after a while, continued to move upward even more...

I then felt myself start to expand. At first I thought my body was expanding, then I realized it was my soul - my whole being - my whole consciousness. It wasn't leaving the body, everything just started to expand. We were doing this work in a gymnasium, and I experienced myself as the size of the whole gymnasium. It was as if I were containing everything that was happening - everything was happening within me. I felt totally transparent, and there was a sense of calm equanimity, yet I was containing all the pain and suffering. I was aware, but from a very transparent place. It was like I was every man and woman and all the pain and suffering and struggle that was occurring. Somehow I was the container for that.

Then I felt consciousness continue to expand and just felt bigger and bigger. At some point, I just felt as if I was the whole universe, but there was still a sense of a witnessing consciousness that was aware of itself being the whole universe. In my own naming of that afterwards, I refer to that as kind of a cosmic consciousness or universal consciousness. There was still some kind of universal or cosmic self that was experiencing itself as all of existence, and there was still some kind of ability to differentiate form at that place.

Then I'm not sure. I can remember from that place still feeling a subtle edge, and then I remember that starting to dissolve... [long moment of silence] Then just clear spaciousness... [speaking very quietly and slowly] At that point I can't say that I was there. All I can say is there was consciousness and clear spaciousness - an empty spaciousness. And yet, within that knowing was the potential for everything. You know? It was like empty fullness.

[Here there is a long pause, then she speaks very softly and slowly with moments of silence.]

Then, briefly, there was another stage that seemed to be of a kind of a clear light spaciousness. Then it moved into darkness, or blackness. I remember things after the fact - this is all reconstructed - but there was awareness of the change to blackness. Then, briefly, there was a loss of consciousness: after the blackness, nothing. When I came out of that, and when there was a self again, I remember feeling some anxiety. [I was] actually startled, [though] not by any thing. Everything happened so slowly. There was no concept of time and space. It just unfolded so gradually, so naturally and spontaneously, and from a place of such joy and ecstasy that there was no fear. There was nothing but just surrendering to the process. It was after the fact, when a sense of "I" returned, that there was this anxiety about what if "I" hadn't returned? The fear, or anxiety, was around the experience of not existing.

This pattern of moving through expanding states of consciousness continued in Tricia's breathwork, although the content and intensity of various parts of the experience changed and evolved over time:

I cannot remember a time that I went into breathwork that I didn't have that experience. And there was something about the pattern that was consistent.

[Sessions] always began with this embodied energy moving through me. Early on, the experiences had lots of heart opening - really feeling my heart explode open. After a while, the experience changed and it became more and more subtle. It wasn't as dramatic as the earlier times when I think certain things were opening. It became much more subtle and seemed like the experiences of exploring expanded states of consciousness were prolonged.

And also over time that state of moving into the blackness and of non-existence was prolonged. There were changes and pieces of personal archetypal things that would come up, but the breathwork would always conclude [with] an hour or two... or sometimes it would be three hours of being in a state of unitive consciousness.

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There came a time when there was just no content. I was consistently, for months, just going into a contentless samadhi [meditative absorption] state.

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There were so many things that were supporting the process. It's just that the breathwork was the primary vehicle at that time - the primary tool. At that time I was [also] in Jungian analysis, I was doing intense dream work, intense body work, intense prayer and meditation, 12-step work. It's just that that's where it all really came together for extended periods of time. There were times - because of the container that was available and the spaciousness of that - that the process would go on for hours. I remember one night it went on for eight hours. That was probably the longest period.

I asked Tricia what happened to the experience of fear and anxiety that she had felt following her first experience of what she described as the darkness, or blackness:

In terms of the actual experience the anxiety became subtler and subtler, but it stayed for a while. When I would experience it was after [the session]. It's as if as I would go into this black spaciousness, and then non-existence, my breath would still. Observers from the outside would say it would appear as if I weren't breathing. I think it was some kind of a still point. And how I would be brought out of that is there would be a gasp. At some point... an hour, two hours, it would be like [gasps] and then I would come into full consciousness and awareness. And right at that edge is where [in early sessions] was this [sharp intake of breath] and it was a fear around non-existence. I'm sure there was some fear of death and what if something in me hadn't breathed me? [laughs] Or gasped me? [laughs] So there was probably some fear of death, and the fear of non-existence, and fear of no mind.

All of that's true, but at the same time there was also a desire... I refer to this sometimes as just the void, and there's a peacefulness, a peace... [voice very slow and quiet - almost inaudible] I think somewhere in the Bible it says: "A peace that passeth all understanding." There's peace, and yet it's beyond peace because there's no experience. The paradox is that for a while afterwards, as the

“I” would return, there was this anxiety and fear that would arise around non-existence. So both things were true.

And there’s something so precious about the ego’s fear... you know? I feel this kind of tenderness and preciousness and a sense of awe in terms of how it unfolded, and continued to unfold, and continues to unfold without really, at that time, an outer guide or spiritual teacher. It really allowed me to experience, and to really trust the wisdom of being, and that it’s actually *being* that’s unfolding the process.

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I have talked about the specific anxiety around exploring those states of consciousness. But then there was the larger anxiety in terms of my life, because my whole world view was shattered [laughs]. Everything in my life was re-arranged. I had started a process of letting go of some things that I had built, but I’d gone sort of half way. Well, as this process started opening my whole life started unraveling. It was a conscious choice, I mean, I was participating with it. I just didn’t expect it to happen so rapidly and so completely [laughs].

Somebody said to me recently.... when she invited God into her life, she didn’t realize that she was going to arrive on her doorstep with a wrecking ball and say: “This all has to go!” So, when I heard that, it was so perfect because for as long as I could remember I was inviting God, Goddess, All That Is, what I began, more recently, to call the Divine. I was always inviting the Divine into my life. Little did I know that my life was going to change as rapidly and as completely as it did.

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Some time - I think it must have been early in ’94 before this process started and before I had the awareness of Stan - I had this deep process, and I think I sat in meditation, and I had this knowing: “Your life as you have known it is over.” It was so clear. My sense at the time was that I was hearing the voice of God. It was that direct, immediate knowing: “Your life as you have known it is over.” It was unequivocal.

I remember feeling very anxious about that because I liked my life. I’d let go of some areas, and I thought I’d made some changes, and it was like: “Well can’t we compromise here? Can’t I hold on to this, this, and this, and I’ll give up this, this and this?” [laughs] I had trained with Anne Wilson Schaefer and Living in Process, and I remember her saying we have to be willing to sacrifice everything. We may or may not be required to, but we have to be willing. We can’t bargain with the Divine and say: “Oh, I think I’ll hold onto this, this and this...” So that was almost my mantra: “I have to be willing to let go of everything. And I may or may not have to.” But this knowing was: “Your life as you’ve known it is over.”

During that period, in the mid-90s, Tricia’s life did, in fact, unravel. She closed her practice, left a long-term marriage, sold her house, and moved from her home in the mid-west to California with the intention of doing doctoral studies in psychology.

Although she has experienced deep life changes throughout the past ten to fifteen years, the openings were particularly intense and occurred most rapidly during the years in and around the breathwork training:

The last four or five years have been really devoted to integration - integrating the profound openings that occurred so intensely during especially that two year [period]. I can now look back and see the opening that was occurring over a decade. That whole experience during training was some kind of marker. Something profoundly shifted during that period of time that had been cultivated and supported - and the container had been built along the way, steadily... The last five years - four or five - have been really devoted to integration and more subtle work.

Tricia and I talked for some time about what integration means in relation to these experiences in which the concept of an ego-centered self, as it has been known and experienced, is no longer firmly intact:

I'm not talking about integration in service of ego development, as the term is normally used. What I'm talking about is that, even though I was having profound unitive experiences, and profound mystical experiences, and exploring transpersonal states of consciousness - mystical and beyond - my ego-centered consciousness wasn't transformed by one experience, or even multiple experiences. Certainly my world view was shattered. That's what brought up the anxiety for the ego.

I had done a decade of psychotherapy, and that was necessary to work with ego issues and probably for the ego to relax enough and the defenses to soften enough that those kind of experiences were even possible. My own experience of the ego is that it's pretty tenacious [laughs] and likes to think of itself as having some real existence rather than just being a construct, and that doesn't dissolve overnight.

I'd been working with a therapist who was transpersonally oriented, and then with a Jungian analyst, but my experiences were even beyond a Jungian self/ego axis. So I didn't have a context, even though I had support. You know? Some of the people who were supporting me were saying: "We don't know what's happening here."

So I didn't have a psychological context. I didn't really have a spiritual context because of my spiritual path, and it wasn't like I could look in the phone book and find "Mystical Christianity." Where I was guided was to Teresa of Avalon and Saint John of the Cross, but they weren't contemporary living breathing people - there wasn't a community of contemporary Christian mystics [laughter] that I could go to for support.



It felt like I didn't have a context, psychologically, spiritually, or culturally. I wasn't living in the Bay Area [at that time] I was in the Midwest. I really think the inner wisdom and guidance moved me to the Bay Area. At the same time, my ego mind wanted to understand what the hell was happening. I wanted a context [laughs]. The mind wanted to understand, and study, and know, and find the answers. On a deeper level it was all being guided and unfolded, but there was this ego mind there that was very anxious about what was happening and was seeking to understand. So I think that that also played into the motivation, especially, to go to [graduate school] and study Eastern as well as Western philosophical traditions, spiritual traditions, transpersonal psychology.

Now, the interesting thing is this whole process really altered my mind in such a way that my mind couldn't wrap around these concepts and theories [laughs]. One of the most profound changes that I experienced was with my mind, and it was very troubling to me for a number of years. At the time, I was used to having a very well-developed intellect and being able to navigate pretty easily intellectually and I loved theory, and loved synthesizing, and [now] I had no capacity. I just didn't have the capacity even to read. It would have been helpful to me. I would try to read, and I couldn't focus. I would fall asleep. I couldn't retain anything. I at some point started referring to it as teflon brain. Sometimes I could be in the moment and have a direct, immediate knowing about what I was reading and go: "Yes!" An hour later I could not tell you what I read. A day later I might be able to tell you, maybe, the name of the book. It was really a dramatic change.

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The ego was very anxious about what was happening. On one hand I was willingly surrendering to the Divine, on the other hand the ego wanted to maintain its kind of central position.

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So when I talk about integration it's discovering a context for these experiences. It's also recognizing that I could have an experience of self realization - or repeated experiences of unitive consciousness - and not be a self-realized human being. That is a life-long process of spiritual work and spiritual development, and the mystery is infinite, and the exploration is infinite. What I understand the process to involve is not just the experience of unitive consciousness, but a lived reality and presence - embodied presence in the world - and that's what the integration has been about. How to integrate these realizations into a lived reality - embodied presence - that's not centered in ego consciousness, but continues to have to work with the structures, and the beliefs, and the conditioning of the ego. Because [the ego] doesn't dissolve. Maybe it does for some people - some realized beings - but I think for most of us it's an ongoing long-term process.

The first year that Tricia was in California was one of retreat:

That was the year when everything was stripped away, and I just waited. I've never lived so simply and purely in the moment. I'd finished breathwork, I didn't

go to school, I didn't work. For one year of my life I did nothing but be with whatever was arising.

During that year, Tricia began working with a spiritual teacher within the context and practice of spiritual inquiry. Their continuing work together includes psychological approaches that support spiritual development.

Her process of identifying a teacher was deeply intuitive and powerfully guided by synchronicities. While concerned about not entering into a formally prescribed path, she felt the strong need for a context in which to understand and work with what was continually unfolding, as well as longing for spiritual community:

So there was that desire for context and, at the same time, there was a deeper inner knowing and wisdom. Not [wanting] to attach to anything that would create any kind of box, or a prescription, or a dogma, or a container. Just like Stan says: "Better to have a really big story, or no story at all, than too small of a story."

Tricia's teacher began to encourage her to discover ways to speak about her experiences as part of her integration and learning process, and as a way to move out of isolation.

That was part of the aloneness, because not only was this my lived reality, but I felt no way to language [the experiences] without reducing them." Discovering the work of A.H. Almaas was an important opening in this search: "For the first time I felt like I wasn't alone. This wasn't a mystic who'd written in the 1500s, this was a contemporary person and he was articulating - he had language.

### Second Session

During our second meeting, we began by exploring the idea of "other" - first from a general perspective and then within the context of intimate relationship - and the often-confusing distinction between essence and personality:

Well, first, I hold "other" as ultimately not separate from me, yet as a distinct and unique expression of true nature. It's really a very interesting and profound

realization, and also it affects how I relate to others. I've had glimpses of true nature - my own true nature, or the true nature of the universe - and am in a continuing process of looking at who I've taken myself to be and my conditioned personality, and am continuing to unpack that. There's a way in which through these glimpses of true nature, and working with my own conditioned personality, it's become easier for me to see not only other people's conditioned personality, but something beyond that that I consider deeper and truer. To see essence, to see true nature, and to hold both simultaneously. Actually not even to see them in conflict with each other in a dualistic way, but to see one as maybe the more superficial expression - more rigidified, solidified, concretized.

I think in some ways it's helped me to be less reactive to other people and situations and to also work with my own reactivity. Both things are true. I still have reactivity, but I'm much more aware of my own reactivity and what it is in an other. I don't feel quite so caught in that level of interaction or reactivity.

But more than anything, I feel this appreciation. I just see these essential qualities that, no matter how strong the personality is, they're not entirely covered by the personality. They still poke through [laughs]. I just enjoy, and appreciate, and am sometimes in awe of that.

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Sometimes it's in my most intimate relationship where I'm challenged most [laughs]. Sometimes I can see essence much more clearly in people that I don't have such a close, day-to-day, intimate relationship with. I've thought a lot about it, especially because just as my world view was shattered, so too my whole view of relationship was shattered. I no longer see relationship as this structured agreement or arrangement between two separate individuals. Rather I see relationship as an arising - a process that arises.

I think one of the things that can create difficulty in an intimate relationship is - just as [happens when] one person or partner's world view changes radically - if one person or partner's view of relationship changes dramatically that can certainly create more tension in the relationship. That's one level that I've experienced directly.

Another thing would be that being in that very close, intimate, co-arising with an other - even though one has glimpses of ultimate truth, or the ultimate nature of reality and one's own ultimate true nature - there's still that confrontation with the conditioned personality, the ego personality, that gets bumped up against consistently and intensely. It becomes then a reflection for all the aspects of the personality that are still alive and well and haven't been transformed by those glimpses.

I really do love to think about the possibility of intimate relationship as a spiritual path: a sacred path. I think about [psychologist and author] John Welwood's work in that area. Certainly, for me, I don't think that I could explore intimate relationship as a sacred path if I didn't have a spiritual container, or context, and spiritual practice to work with. I'm not sure that just the relationship alone would be enough.

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As I was going through the most intense and profound places in my own spiritual opening, I chose to live alone. I felt really clear about the need to do that. So I lived alone for four years. It's only been the last year that I'm again living with my partner. The same partner. We took a four-year sabbatical. We stayed in relationship with each other, but it was a different relationship. We've looked many times at how the relationship is ending and beginning - transforming.

Originally it felt like a major ending, or death, of the relationship and a waiting to see what could be reborn. Now it seems more like one day at a time - one moment at a time - always ending and beginning in a continuous process. My ability to show up in relationship, to be as fully present as possible to another human being; to be open and willing to inquire into my own process, and to inquire into the process that is the relationship; to look at how the other's behavior impacts me and vice versa - how my thoughts, words, actions impact another human being; just to hold all of that, and inquire into it and use it as part of my spiritual deepening, is quite a challenge and a commitment.

I also think it requires a commitment of both people.

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I've always thought there needed to be [a] common ground - common awareness [commitment to inner work]. Now I'm questioning. I think it would be nice [laughs]. I'm certainly aware that I still have preferences, and that is one of my preferences. But I'm wondering if it's absolutely necessary. Is the vehicle still there - perhaps not in the form that I would have it - to teach me?

So I don't have any words of wisdom around this other than that I'm inquiring into that whole dilemma around being in relationship, or partnership, where there is perhaps a gap in awareness, or a very different awareness. How does that get processed and dialogued, and worked with? All I can do is watch my attachment to having a shared world view, or awareness, or ways of inquiring, or way of working with one's self. I can look at my own resistance to an other who maybe doesn't share that, and then I can see attachment and resistance. What would it mean just to fully accept this person, this human being, and their unfoldment as just the way it needs to be for them? The relationship itself, even with all of its differences and dichotomies, may be exactly what's needed for both person's spiritual development. Even though to the ego mind, or the conditioned personality, it would appear as if that were not true.

This same sense of presence - grounding in the moment with awareness of what is arising from the conditioned personality - is evident in Tricia's view of how her life's work and meaning are unfolding for her in the future:

It's impossible to stay fully present in the moment and be projecting at all into the future. There's something even about the word *vision* that suggests something that's coming, rather than what is in this moment.

First of all, I experience everything that's arising in the moment as meaningful. So, for me, meaning, purpose, or vision is not something that I

anticipate will unfold in the future, it's every ordinary moment. It's the preciousness. Appreciating this moment here with you, and my dog relaxing and being able to settle into sleep. Being here with us now and watching his breath pattern.

This is something that's really changed for me because, prior to a certain unfolding in my own process that we've been exploring and those glimpses of unitive consciousness, I would say that I did have a vision, or direction, that I was moving in. I was certainly on a very committed healing path, moving towards wholeness and supporting other people in their healing path, and I'm still doing that and that work's deepened. I had a vision of creating a healing center and of larger work in the world. [I was] committed to making a contribution to the healing of the planet through my own personal work, and my work with others.

Today, I would say that that possibility still exists, and I don't feel an attachment to it, nor do I think it's necessary for my life to be meaningful, or for the experience of meaning. I don't have any vision about what the next moment, or the next year, or the next decade might look like. That's new. That's new for me in the last few years.

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It's really quite exciting and quite freeing [to know this] because I can just show up for whatever is and just appreciate it. I have this sense of awe and wonder with whatever's arising - whatever experience I'm having and with whomever. Meaning seems to be inherent in the unfolding of the universe, so it's not something that I create. It's certainly not something associated with anything that I might do in the world. It's more related to being, and it's just inherent in being. Being is meaningful. Being an expression - a unique individualized expression of being in the world, an embodied presence - is meaningful. And how being expresses itself through each of us uniquely is meaningful and awesome. From the simplest act of kindness, or attention, or awareness.

We then turned the conversation to a consideration of what it means to take action in the world, particularly from this standpoint of radical presence:

For me, whatever action you need to be taking in the world would be a natural spontaneous unfoldment and expression of being through each of us. Using the gifts, and skills, and capacities that we have to offer. [Although] it might not look any different from the outside looking in, I think it would be the motivation and where the motivation is coming from. I think many people, from their conditioned personality or ego - because of a charge or energy around an issue or something not worked through in their own history - might engage in some form of action or activism and there might not be such positive results from that. In general, I don't trust the ego - personality - so much as I do essence to be the movement. So I think that there's potential for our action in the world not to be as effective, not to be as beneficial, not to be as far-reaching or even as precisely targeted where it's needed, if it's motivated primarily from the understanding of the ego

mind - the conditioned personality - as when it comes from the unfoldment of being and embodied presence.

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If we act from the wrong place, and the wrong motivation, how do we know that we're not just contributing to the mess? And, please hear me, I'm not suggesting a lack of action. My own experience is that my capacity to act in the world is enlarging - expanding - not contracting. So it's not about withdrawing from the world or being unaware or insensitive to what's happening in the world.

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I know I want to be of service in the world. For me, the whole purpose of spiritual development, spiritual deepening, spiritual maturity, expanding our capacity and polishing the vessel and making it more transparent is so each of us, as expressions of true nature or being, can more clearly, and effectively, and transparently act in the world. That being can act through us, as us.

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Eventually, I think for some people - I'm certainly not speaking from personal experience but I have models and mentors that I can look to - the work of transforming the personality has gone deep enough that there is a transformation that occurs, and there is a clear, relatively transparent being-ness, or embodied presence, that can effectively work in the world without being part of the world. Which is another challenge - how to be in the world and yet not embedded in the unconsciousness of the world.

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After going through about a five-year transition period where the focus was a lot more on integration ... I would say that more recently, especially even this year, I'm experiencing a larger capacity. However we talk about that. Sometimes it feels like being spoken, being moved, being acted in the world. What I'm noticing is more movement outward into the world, after years of deep inner work....

So there was a period of deep descent, based on the context that I had at that time, that resulted in what might be language as a profound ascent and an access to expanded dimensions of consciousness - all of these words are relative. With that, then, bringing that consciousness, bringing spirit into matter, or bringing those glimpses of those realizations into embodied reality.

That seems to me to be my work. It has been my work for a few years now. It's not around accessing new realizations so much as it is embodying those realizations fully in order to be of service. To be of service to truth, to the ultimate truth of reality, however I name that: God, the Divine, the Nameless. Ultimately that would be my purpose: to be of service to the Truth, and to be as clear an expression of that truth as possible.

So that, then, relates to my ongoing lifelong commitment to spiritual growth and development. To become more and more transparent. To be a servant or to be of service to that truth. And, as a result, to be of service in the world. Not from any understanding of my ego mind about the problems of the world, or what needs to happen or not happen, but rather from the larger truth of reality about serving. That, to me, is where true activism and true service originates.

And, you know, it's my cutting edge because I see so much pain and suffering in the world and that activates something in me.

Towards the end of this second meeting, I asked Tricia to speak about how she now experiences what she earlier had called "inner guidance":

The only thing that's shifted is my understanding of that guidance, even calling it "*inner* guidance" [and making a] distinction between inner and outer. In my 30s, I still had very much an I-Thou relationship with it as if it was something separate from me. Maybe there was a stage where I perceived it as something not fully a part of me. So maybe [first] something more outer, then [later] a stage of more inner.

Now I'm aware that guidance is inherent. It just is. I experience a deep connection with guidance, and I'm aware that being is actually unfolding the process and *is* the guidance, or the unfoldment, of the soul's process and the embodiment of presence in physical form and reality. Guidance is inherent in that.

.....

A quality of the unfoldment is intelligence. There is an inherent intelligence in the unfoldment which I might experience - if I'm experiencing myself either from the personality, or even from a localized expression - as guidance. Probably what I'm really experiencing is just the intelligence that's inherent in manifestation and the fundamental nature of what is unfolding in form.

### Reflections After Meeting with Tricia

I feel the power of remembering. How intense it is to be in the presence of one who embodies, and re-embodies, the energies of a being-ness that is beyond experience. The resonance evokes in me the re-membering of my own stories - brief moments in which all that I knew shifted. I feel invited into a place of storytelling: compelled to tell of my experiences in the presence of others, not to reify the stories, but to evoke that awareness in this moment, now. Such stories are not to be seen as artifacts from personal history, but as reminders of what is always here and immediate.

I wrote down my stories one afternoon in the late summer, sitting outside and soaking up the warmth and the sounds of the garden. I sank into them, sometimes

wondering who I was writing about, sometimes wondering if I'd made them up. Now, as I look at them again, I decide to read them aloud to myself. To hear the telling, just as I have been listening to others speak of their own stories.

As an art student, in 1969, I decided on a whim to join a friend at a Christian prayer gathering. For some time he had been participating with an informal group of people led by a man who was influential on my friend because of his strongly mystical interpretation of Jesus' teachings.

I remember being nervous. I didn't have any kind of spiritual practice and my expressed interest was more intellectual than religious. I was also very unstable at that time, filled with powerful emotions, a highly active psyche, and an overwhelming feeling of being a misfit. The nervousness was partly because I had no confidence that I could engage in a way that was appropriate to a spiritual group. I also experienced some kind of resonance with the group, perhaps the leader. I felt drawn to be there and yet my anxiety mounted when I entered the room.

As I remember it, the meeting took place in someone's home. We were all gathered in the living room, seated on chairs, sofas, some on pillows on the floor. It was quite a small room. We were packed in tightly. I was on the sofa, scrunched up against one end with two other people next to me. I think we had each been given some sheets of typed papers - that's what I see when I look with my mind's eye - but what the content was I don't recall.

After some initial introductions and a brief opening comment, the leader began to lead us in prayers. I have no memory of what he said or how the meeting was conducted. What I do remember is that I seemed to first sink into a deeply quiet place then, as the prayers continued, I felt the top of my head open and my whole being filled with a cascade of pure energy - gentle, vibrant, cool, endless energy. My body sat erect for however long this exquisite sensation lasted (it seemed like hours, but was probably ten minutes) but my awareness - the sense of I - began to melt into the flow beyond my body and beyond any sense of self or separation. There was the me sitting, breathing, being a body with some sense of observing the experience, and there was Awareness that was without boundary. That Awareness was utterly loving and compassionate - like nothing I had ever experienced. As my awareness/Awareness was in this vibrantly energetic undifferentiated state my body began to weep. As the awareness slowly differentiated and returned to the boundaries of a personal view, the weeping continued. For hours I felt that wonder - maybe someone at that prayer group called it grace because that's how I remember naming it later - and then began to experience a deep sense of loss as the feeling faded.

For maybe a week I tried to make sense of the experience. My friend was convinced that Jesus or the Holy Ghost had spoken to me, but I felt no connection to Christian cosmology and his ideas felt like attempts to label something that could not even be approached by rational mind. I had no language or context in



which to express what had happened. All I could attempt to convey was how profoundly painful it felt to be separated from that loving and boundary-less state.

Soon the experience began to weigh heavy as something that isolated me even more from other people, and that added to my sense of emotional imbalance. I stopped trying to talk about it and started to suppress the feelings and sensations when they arose. As the days passed I successfully sealed the memory into a separate compartment of my mind. All that was left was an unsettling ground swell of awareness that reality was not quite what it seemed.

.....

In the mid '70s, after I had come to the United States, I was living in Reno. I was in the process of separating from my first husband and exploring the possibilities that seemed to open to me as I lived on my own for the first time in my life. Under the guidance of some friends I decided to deepen this sense of exploration inwardly by doing a therapeutic session using MDMA (Ecstasy). Although I had experimented with drugs of one kind or another while I was at art school, I had never done so in such an intentionally structured way. I was curious to know what I could discover about my own nature and, in particular, about my capacity for being in relationship.

There's not a lot that I remember about the early part of the session. I think it was interesting, informative, pleasurable, but probably also somewhat predictable. About halfway through, however, I decided to ask for insight into who I was. The way I framed the question was simply: "Who am I?"

That moment is still intensely clear. I was lying on the floor with my feet towards the center of the room. There was little furniture, and I had the sense of being in an open airy space. It was peaceful, quiet, the light was low, and there was just a little breeze coming through a window that was ajar. I asked the question mentally, silently. As soon as the words and intention passed through my mind I felt my consciousness pulled, with great power, away from any experience of the outer environment. I plunged inward with such force that it felt as though I was moving at extreme speed. Then I experienced complete emptiness. That inner place was completely empty. I had a sense of light - or, more accurately, not dark - but that was all. There was nothing. No longer was there any inside or outside. No feeling, no sensation. No self. No concept of orientation, because there was nothing to orient to, or to be oriented. Just an infinite emptiness beyond any capacity to describe.

I have no idea how long that experience lasted. Maybe just a few minutes, maybe much longer. Eventually a reference point seemed to manifest - some awareness of observing - from which to be in this nothingness. There was a long time of watching. There was an idea that something was holding everything in place for the duration of that watching. Then, quite suddenly, there was an identity: a "me" who had feelings and could reflect on the experience.

With that reconnection with self came a flood of fear. My whole sense of self was fragmented, devastated, and my immediate response was shame. In a world which required me to be somebody - to show up in ways that had impact and meaning - I had been shown that not only was I nothing, but I didn't even exist! As one who was shy and introverted and uncertain of her own agency, I felt

that my worst fears were acknowledged. There really wasn't anything to me. The experience became something to hide away, never to be acknowledged or spoken of. As with the first experience, although for somewhat different reasons, I buried the memory.

I take a deep breath and sit for a minute in the quiet after reading.

Listening to my voice speaking of memories that have lain silent.

Like seeds, these stories lay dormant within me until there was a place to speak them. When I began to explore breathwork in the late '80s, and to reconnect with spiritual practices, they flowered again in my memory. Like a magnet, the knowing that was within me began to draw towards itself new experiences in the form of people, workshops, meditation, and so forth. It was almost as if some energetic circuit had been connected and the learning that was tasted long ago was free to flow again.

Now I'm coming to trust what I know - and continue to open into. I hear other stories, read accounts of awakening awareness, and meet people who challenge and support me to embody that knowing. More and more I see that this is not a personal process. The inner knowing is not so much my inner knowing as a personal interpretation - more or less distorted by my individual psychology - of the ineffable intelligence of being. Maybe I'm just beginning to realize - as opposed to intellectually recognize - what a number of scholars of consciousness (and physics) have been long been telling us: You and I and all matter are secondary to consciousness, not the other way around.

## DIANE

### Introduction

My times with Diane came at the beginning and end of the meetings with the co-inquirers. When we spoke first it was in the heat of the late summer. Her home in the northern New Mexico countryside seemed to invite in the intensity of the elements, and the dramatic flashes of an evening lightning storm wove into the other-worldliness of her story, taking us both deeply into each moment of the telling of it.

By the time that we got together for the second meeting, it was early November and the brilliant, cold, crystal blue of the sky held a presence and clarity that seems to permeate her words as I re-read them.

Diane's home felt to me filled with space and a deep awareness of spirit. Everywhere I could see the mindfulness with which she places things - pieces of art, wood, sage, ritual objects - creating what I would call her mandala within the larger mandala of the ancient and sacred land.

Diane's family roots, and her sense of identity, are in New Mexico: "I see myself as deeply New Mexican. It's very much about place for me. Sometimes I feel like a cactus. These deep roots are so dry. But it's place - deep place for me."

She comes from a large extended family, the oldest of 26 grandchildren, and in many ways a surrogate mother for all these "siblings": "I had 25 little 'ducklings' that I care-took. My own brothers and sisters weren't enough. I also did for others."

This role of protector and helper grew directly out of her experiences of growing up in what she identifies as a dysfunctional family: "My dad was really abusive. He was an alcoholic, and I was the oldest child... I care-took all the time and, also, part of that role was the control freak."

### Diane's Story

As we started the first session, Diane said that remembering and telling her story has been an important part of her healing from that early wounding:

Part of my story is remembering and reclaiming the lost parts. I was real angry that I was a girl. My dad wanted a boy, and I was his best son, and I was his first. So I didn't like women. I thought they were stupid and weak like my mother, and it wasn't until I was in crisis starting about 14 years ago that I began to even accept women much less reclaim my own [lost girl/woman part].

Diane's story starts when she was in her 20s and working as the head nurse in an Intensive Care Unit. She describes her self as:

Driving, competent, and [in] control... At that point I was pretty angry. I don't know how long I'd been angry - for decades. And bitter... I had this really big sword that I pulled out when all you needed was a pill to take out and swallow... you know? I would pull out my sword.

At some point during that time, what she had felt to be an unshakable belief in the effectiveness of allopathic medicine began to falter: "When I was doing that medicine I

really believed that we had the answers that we could fix anything. And then slowly that began to erode and I ended up often talking somebody out of having a procedure.”

As her confidence in the medical system began to wane, Diane started to explore: “I started having psychic readings that scared me to death at first... Then, somehow, I found my way to a sweat lodge.”

Diane is, in my view, a story teller in the true tradition of storytelling. Her tale unfolds as a mystery, an adventure of the spirit, and an extraordinary transformation. As a listener or reader it is easy to get carried along by the sheer intensity of the flow. I present the story without re-framing or interpretation - her words speak clearly - all I have done is edit a little for clarity.

So I found my way to the sweat lodge in the early 70s, and I sat there. I was the only white person at this lodge. I lost my body and became the steam, and I became the rocks, and I became the ethers, and I have never left that place.

I found god in the sweat lodge that night. I found a place where there was no judgment. The teaching, when I was in the lodge the first time, was about how you enter the earth mother, and you lose your form as you stand before the lodge. As a two-legged with an ego, you lose your ego as you become like the four-legged on your hands and knees as you walk into the lodge. Then you sit on your haunches like the bird people so, again, you’re losing your form and you’re losing who you think you are. Then you sit in this total darkness where you can’t even see your own hand, and there are other people’s bodies that you’ve never seen before in your life and they’re touching your skin, and pretty soon they’re sweating, and you’re all sweating, and it doesn’t even matter. Nothing matters. It just doesn’t matter.

One person was Jewish - I guess he was [mixed heritage] because he was very dark, [or] maybe he was Arab, or maybe he was from Israel. I don’t know - he was praying in Hebrew. There were several natives speaking in their own tongue. And then there was a couple of people speaking in Spanish. It just didn’t matter. It was all the same. And to listen to somebody else’s prayers in the dark is really powerful. They put some cedar on the rocks. There was a little flare, and I saw this man crossing himself with a crucifix, and somebody else was praying to whoever they pray to in Hebrew. So there were all these prayers to their own whatevers... and it just didn’t matter. I finally got it. I finally got there’s another god than what my [Oklahoma/West Texas Baptist] grandmother preached at all of us about.

And so that was my first experience with that sort of state.

At the same time I was in the ICU, and I kept going back to sweat lodges, and then I did vision quests, and then I did peyote. And the more I did the less the world I was working in made sense. It just didn't make sense. So I started being really schizoid. I was sneaking medicine men into the unit, and I was sneaking psychics into the unit. I would have a fight with the administrator about what the hell I was doing... It just wasn't making sense any more to stay there.

So I resigned not too long after that, and I didn't have a clue what I was going to do - didn't have a clue. I remember when I walked out of the unit the last day. I pushed the push plate and the doors took, like, 20 years to close. I'm watching, just watching... [I] can't believe [it]. I have this great job, and I'm at the top. I've got a great unit, and I built it myself. I hired the staff and trained them - what a team! And I'm walking out and I don't know where I'm going. I'm just standing there watching those doors close, and I knew, I knew, I knew to the bottom of my soul that that medicine was over for me. I knew also - whatever that means - that someday another medicine would find me. Then the doors closed.

[When] you don't know what to do, you go back to school. So I went back to school for architecture and went into hospital planning for ten years, and it was great fun. [I] got into trouble a lot, the learning was great, and all that, but it didn't fill me up the way nursing had. It just didn't give me that reason to wake up in the morning like I'd had [before]. That total belief in something.

I didn't know what I believed in. I continued to do sweat lodges and vision quests, and got involved in the business world, and had a consultancy practice but it just didn't fill me.

About seven years ago, I threw myself down in a temper tantrum one day out in this [medicine] circle I have out there. I was really at a very dark place. I was really at a sad place - a frantic place. And I just said to the grandmothers: "I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why I'm here." I'd been healing myself and waiting for the [new] medicine - waiting for what I was to do next. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know where to look... So I said "Grandmothers, you know, I don't know why I'm here. I don't know what to do, and I don't know why I'm here." And I said "Grandmothers, please send me a sign." And I don't know what I expected, but they didn't.

Sometime about then I started rolling over [in bed] and looking at the digital clock, and it would say 4:00. I didn't have any dreams with it, or any thoughts, it just was being a clock. I mentioned it to my husband and I said "I keep waking up at 4:00 in the morning." He'd be gone somewhere and I'd be still waking up every morning at 4:00, 4:00, 4:00. And it was very frustrating because it was so perfect 4:00 ... not 3:59 or 4:01, but 4:00.

At the same time I started getting calls from my aunt in Albuquerque who's six years older than I am. The first time I remember, [she called] asking me about some nursery rhyme. I didn't know what she was talking about.

Then the next time that I remember, she called and I said: "Hello", and she said: "What is seven?" I said: "Seven *what*?" And she said: "I don't know, just seven." I said: "I don't know, there's seven chakras." And she said: "What's a

chakra?" And I started off with the chakra discussion, and she said: "Whatever." And that seemed to satisfy her.

Then I called her back and said: "Then there are seven directions." And she said: "That's it, it's seven directions." And I said "what's *it*?" And she said "I don't know, it's the seven directions." So I said: "Oh that's nice."

So then her son came over, he's an electrician and he was doing something for me, and I had a Lynn Andrews book, *The Flight of the Seven Shields* or something that has *seven* in it. I said: "Take this to your crazy mother she's asking about sevens."

Then she called me another time and said: "What kind of red bird?" And I said: "What kind of red bird *what*?" She said: "I don't know, what kind of red bird?" And I said: "Well, there's cardinals, there's red-tailed hawks..." She said: "No, I think it's a parrot." I said: "*What's* a parrot, Sharon?" She said: "I don't know, I think it's a parrot."

[Another time] she asked me about some stones.

Her calls were spread out over months, but they were getting kind of bitchy and frantic, and sometimes I would not even answer the phone because she was just getting wiggled out. I thought, "She's in menopause. She's just losing it."

Then she called me one day and left a message: "I have the list together: seven red feathers, three white stones, a blue stone, a black stone. Now let me sleep." And I called her back, and I said: "Now what, Sharon?" She said: "Your seven red feathers. Just fucking leave me alone. I've got to sleep. Just leave me alone." And I said: "Sharon, *what* are you talking about?" She said: "Your goddam feathers. Just leave me alone, Diane. I'll get them, but I've got to sleep. Just leave me alone."

I said: "Slow down, lady. You've been calling me for months, now you're bitching at me and telling me to leave you alone. What are you talking about, Sharon? What are you talking about?" ... She said: "You don't know anything I'm saying?" And I said: "I haven't known anything you're saying for months. What are you talking about?" ... She said: "Have you been awake every morning at 4:00?" And I said: "Yes". She said: "You have been waking me up every morning at 4:00 for months, yelling at me to bring you your seven red feathers." And I said: "Sharon I don't know what you're talking about, again. I've been awake in bed, but I've never thought about you, you've never crossed my mind. I've never had a dream about you. Nothing. Do you hear me?" She said: "Well I don't understand. They said they're for you." And I said: "*Who* said they're for me?" And she said: "The grandmothers."

My heart just fell: "Oh my god, Sharon. What?" And she said: "The grandmothers. They sent them for you." "Listen, Sharon. Tell me your story, and this time I'll listen to you. Because I didn't think it had anything to do with me, and now I think it may be about a prayer that I asked the grandmothers." So she told me that over the months she got bits and pieces of dreams. And she was very clear that she was being instructed by the grandmothers. She said: "What does it mean." And I said: "I have no idea. I have no idea."

A few days later, she called and [left a message saying]: "I have everything on the list. I feel really happy. I can sleep now." I listened to the

message and I thought: "Good, maybe she'll go away now for a while." Then she called me just a few minutes later, shrieking: "I went outside and I saw some red willow, and I picked it up, and I lit it. It made me really happy and made me feel like I can sleep. Then I walked in the house and I saw that book that you sent me several months ago. I hadn't picked it up. So I picked it up and I opened it, and where I opened it up was talking about burning red willow. What's going on here?" I said: "It's all right, Sharon. It's all right." She was just shrieking. I said: "We use the red willow to make the sweat lodge." And she said: "Well, what's a sweat lodge?" We talked a bit. "Well how do you know about that?" So I said: "Because I've been doing sweats for 25 years." "Well I didn't know that." So she calmed down.

Then she called me a few days later and said: "I've been waiting for you." And I said: "Why, Sharon?" And she said: "Because I said I have everything on the list." "Listen, Sharon, I have no reason to come to Albuquerque. You said you have to bring me something." She said: "That's right. I'll be right there."

So 60 minutes later she drives up that hill. She's kind of a gnarly lady. She looks like a truck driver, and she's always got a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. She has a really bad complexion, and she's a fiery red head. She got out of the car, and I looked at her and it was like... you know how people at the breathwork have this glow about them? I'm looking at her going: "Who is this?" And she puts [out] her hand and says; "Stay where you are." She has this clump of red willow with her, and she lights it, and she smudges me perfectly. She didn't know what that word was. She'd never been smudged. She didn't have any clue what she was doing.

She said that she had driven through 60 miles of red-feather fans. She said: "I don't know what this means, Diane. I just know that I saw, as the car drove, I just saw all these fans move." And she said: "I know they're red feathers, but when they move I see flashes of blue. I don't understand that, but I know they're red... The grandmothers told me to tell you this is your initiation and not to be afraid." And I said: "Well you're scaring the shit out of me. You're really scaring me, Sharon."

So she comes in the house, and she sits down at the counter there, and she takes this little box and she pours this pile of crap on the counter - these little dyed chicken feathers and little tiny stones - and she looked at me, and I said: "I'm really sorry, but I don't have any idea what this is about. I mean, I get no hits on this." She said: "It's all right, it's all right. These are the things they told me to bring you and then the rest will follow."

She leaves, and within ten days I was mailed, given at parties, UPSd, six red macaw feathers from women I knew and didn't know. When the sixth one came I got really freaked out - terrified freaked out. I went to see this Apache man who I'd sweat with for 20 years and talked to him. He wanted to know my dreams and peyote visions and my aunt's dreams. He said: "This is women's medicine, Diane. Will you talk to someone else?" And I said: "I will go to the fucking ends of the planet." And he said: "All right, I'll call and see if someone will help you."

And he said: "I have another feather for you." I was really scared, and I didn't know what they meant. I didn't know what they were for. I didn't know



what I was supposed to do. I didn't know why they were coming. And I didn't know what the first one was for, much less what the seventh one. I told him that they had come from women and that if I was supposed to get another one, then I was sure it would come from a woman. And he said that was fine, that he knew that. So he smudged them, and he wrapped them in red cloth and told me to go home, and that he would call me.

Then I called this woman in Ohio - this Lakota woman who lives as a traditional medicine woman - and she wanted to know my aunt's dreams, and peyote visions, and my dreams. She said: "What tribe are you?" And I said: "I don't have a tribe. I have blond hair, I have blue eyes. I don't have a tribe to follow." She said: "Those dreams are only carried in the DNA. What is your tribe?" And I said: "Annie, you know, my aunt remembers something, but it's, like, nothing." She said: "I want to talk to your aunt."

Sharon called her, and I heard the story for the first time that when she was five years old her grandmother had called her and told her that she was [descended from] five of the original Cherokee nations. My grandmother said that it was important for her to know this, and that some day she would have to remember that it only takes one drop.

Annie called me back and said: "The one drop is our concept of DNA." Then she said: "Your DNA's been activated." And I went through this thing for a while of feeling like I'd just found out that I was adopted. Having no knowledge of that and then being drawn into the ceremony so powerfully. Then to learn that I had blood. [Later] I learned about my grandfather - who was the only kind thing in my life - [that] his grandmother was Choktaw. So I learned that I have three great-great grandmothers that were Native American, and I didn't know that.

So Annie asked me where each feather had come from, and I told her. One had come from a woman in Arizona that I didn't know. She'd sent this bundle. It came with a crystal that had sweet grass wrapped around it, and a smudge stick, and a book on the return of the bird tribes, and the feather... I think that's it. And it was all wrapped in white tied thongs. [Annie] told me to get the bundle off my land, that there was danger there. I said: "What about the feather? The feather was part of the bundle." She said: "Did [the Apache man] see the feathers?" And I said: "Yes. He picked up that one first and then he smudged it." She said: "It's all right, he caught it. Bring it."

It got very strange. The strangest energy I've ever had. I would wake up in the morning and it had snowed the night before. There would be a pile of stones at my front door, and there were no footsteps in, no footsteps out. I opened up the door, and I saw the stones, and I slammed the door and called Annie. She said: "Open the door, and tell me what shape the stones are in." I opened up the door and my dog's laying on them. She said: "It's all right. The dog's got it."

So there's all these weird things going on like that. [The Apache man] came over and circled the house, and smudged the wind, and called me three times a day. And I had more powerful dreams than I've ever had in my life during that time. I was in the weirdest place. It was rather like a continuous non-ordinary state that I was in for that whole month when the feathers started coming and when I went to Ohio.

I was going to meet [Annie], flying from Albuquerque to Cincinnati, Cincinnati to Dayton on Delta, and she was going to meet me at Dayton. So I get on the plane, and for some reason it goes to Atlanta instead of Cincinnati. Then, in Atlanta I got routed on Convair - whatever that is - to Dayton. So now I'm arriving from the wrong city, on the wrong airline, at the wrong time. And I don't know this woman.

I got off the plane going: "This'll be interesting. I've got to find Annie, but I've got to pee first." So I go into the bathroom, and I'm in the stall, and I [recognize] her voice - because I've been talking to her on the phone: "Diane, come on, let's go." It's not like: "Diane, I'm right here. Hi." It was like: "Let's go." And I'm, [saying]: "Annie, how did you find me?" She said: "We'll talk about it later." I said: "No. I don't get it. How did you find me?" And she said: "When the information was wrong I waited in the lobby until I saw your lights. They were in the bathroom. I followed them there. I looked under the stall. Your light's there. Let's go." I go: "Oh god, what's happening to me? I've finally lost it."

We go to her house, and she said: "Did the seventh feather come?" I said: "No." She said: "I have it." And she gave it to me. They were in a pattern of step sizes; and there were two here, and three here; and then this one was taller; and then I had a little tiny one. And the one she gave me was this other tall one. And they were all left hand and right hand. So I had three that were left hand and three that were right. The one she gave me was the right-handed, one of the tallest. So then I had this pattern plus this little one.

I was really hoping that she would just take them. I was in terror. You ask the universe for a sign and then it comes and you don't know what it means or what you're supposed to do with it. I had no idea what it was trying to tell me. A big part of me just wanted her to take them and then some day I would go back if I was ready and talk to her about it.

She picked up this little one and she said: "Where did this come from? Where's the long central one?" And I said: "I don't know anything about a long central one. This is all I have." She said: "There's a long central one coming. It's not time, and this one's holding the space. I haven't seen this little one in my visions. Should be a long central one coming."

They took me to the sweat lodge. I was the first one in, a woman after me, and then Annie by the door. First of all Annie had me tie [the feathers] above my head with a thong [Then she] asked the owners of the feathers to come in and to bring their teachings. I didn't see anything.

There was a raging snow storm - a blizzard - when we left the lodge. I walked out barefoot, and everybody else put their shoes on - I was in an altered state and the rest of them were used to being in the sweat lodge. We ate, and then [Annie] went straight to bed, then I went upstairs.

I realized that one of my feathers was missing, and I went running downstairs. She [had] told me not to talk to her husband because it was woman's medicine, but I told him I'd lost something and I had to go outside. He said that everything was OK or Annie would be down here, and I said: "It's not OK." So he gave me this big-ass flash light, and I went outside, and - you would have

blown to Pennsylvania - it was just a raging blizzard. I followed my footprints, because I was the only one to have no shoes on, [but] I couldn't find [the feather]. I went over to the sweat lodge and opened up the door. Inside was this feather sticking upright [in the frozen mud where I'd been sitting] where my ass was, leaning toward the rocks. When I [shone] the light in it was just like electric - glowing.

Then I came home, and nothing happened for several months. I was so tired. It was like everything stopped. Then I had a vision quest about the feathers, and first the medicine man said to just hang out for a while and see what happens. I started rubbing my arm and he said: "What's going on with your arm?" I said: "Nothing, it just kind of bothers me." And he said: "No, what's going on with your arm?" And I said: "Well, it's been falling asleep for 25 years." He said: "Just go into that." And I saw my arm became a broad sword. The hilt was in my back, so it was this whole sword. I was rather shocked!

I said: "My god, my arm's a sword." And he said: "What's it for?" I totally knew what it was for. I said: "It's to protect myself against my father, and it's hacked off a lot of men in my life." He said: "Do you need it?" And I said: "No." Then he said: "See if you can take it out." I couldn't, I didn't know how to. And he said: "Look up here in the corner of the room, see if you can come up here." No problem, and as I turned around and looked back at my body I was, like: "Oh, my god. It's just melting." He said: "That's right. If you don't give it a place to live, it can't survive." The next day my arm quit falling asleep. After that many years of having been diagnosed [with what's] called thoracic outlet syndrome.

The next hours we spent with the feathers and finally trying to touch in to what are they about. The first thing was: "You know one thing about red feathers is that you can't hide. It's not about stealth, they're out there." Then the color of them - this red first chakra, and the blue fifth chakra. He said: "You know, I think it's a lot about speaking your truth, and you don't - you're really out of balance." He said: "A lot of people don't walk their talk." And he said: "You've been [walking your truth] for a long time, but you don't talk it." He also told me that macaw is like an ambassador to the bird tribes because they don't only have the parrot's voice, they have the human voice [also]. So I began to get some pieces on what the macaw was about.

And then I went to Vancouver on business. And I'm laying there in this really nice hotel. Just kind of zoning out. [The TV is on in the background] and I see this thing on a National Geographic special, or something, with a bunch of covers of National Geographic [magazines], and one of them was [a photograph of] a macaw. That's the only thing I saw, and I thought: "God, oh my god."

So the next thing, I [went] over to the university library and found the issue. I was so excited, and I'm sitting there reading it - about how a raptor flew by and [the macaws] all took off and flew above this eagle. It was, like: "Oh my god, so the eagle is their natural predator and their natural defense is flying above

it.” And I was at peace: “Get above it.” Where I’d always engaged, tried to fight it, pulled out my sword to kill instead of getting above it.

And this guy walks by and says: “Are you into macaws?” And I said: “Yes, kinda.” He said: “Have you been to Vancouver Island, to the Emerald Forest?” And I said: “No.” He said: “They’ve got great macaws there.” So I jumped in my car - my husband was with me - and we drove to this place. I asked the owner if he had any information on the ceremonial use of feathers. He said: “There’s a lady who works here who might know something. I don’t know anything about it. Her name’s Joanne.”

So I go and look out for her, and I ask her if she had time to talk, and she said: “No, I’ve got a really large group coming through, but if you want to come back later I could talk.” I said: “Right, I’ll come back later.” She said: “Do you have just one second?” I said: “Yeah.” She left, and she came back with a feather. I thought [my husband] was going to faint!

So we went back, and I told her that I had to tell her the story in order to accept this feather. [After I told her] she started crying. She said: “What’s going on here?” And I said: “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going on here. I only know that you’re part of this very strange circle.” She said: “I’m adopted. They tell me that I’m Cherokee, but I don’t know what that means. When I saw you, I had to give you that feather. I work here, I have a hundred feathers, but the one I gave you matches the ones you have.”

She said: “What’s going on?” And I said: “Joanne, I don’t know what’s going on. What do I have? That’s why I’m here, I don’t know what I have.” She said: “You have half of a green-winged macaw tail. There are 14 feathers in a tail, and you have half. The green-wings are only found in the Amazon. No place else. On the big macaws the plumage is identical for the male and female. They mate for life, they’re monogamous. When they fly, they keep the baby between them so if they’re attacked by the eagle they can protect it better.” I was, like: “Oh my god.” And I said: “What do tails do?” She said: “One thing, they’re balance.”

So I started getting this thing about this male/female balance, about this whole androgyny thing, that started to make sense to me, in my life - in my story. I started understanding what the message was trying to say to me. What this being had come to show me.

Not long after, I did [another] vision quest with the feathers. The first thing that happened was that I saw all these sparkly lights. They were like drops of water, very sparkly and very powerful. They started just being light, then they started swirling and coalescing and returning to this huge rainbow spiral. Then this spiral went away and I was above the world, and those same drops came back and started raining. What was happening was they were raining on all the medicine people in the world. Some had one color and some had many colors, and it was all just medicine - all the same. And I saw some people who resonated with just one color and they went to that color, and some went to lots of colors. They had this whole understanding about medicine.

The next thing I saw was a bridge. I was looking at this bridge, and I was trying to see what kind of bridge it was. I became the bridge. I was bridging this

chasm, and I was trying to understand what was on either side. I wasn't clear about that. I thought it was bridging medicine, but at that point the only concept I had was western medicine.

So when the man came to get me and [I told him] my vision, he started crying and just held me in his lap and rocked me and cried. He told me: "It's time to make your fan." I said: "Are you the fan maker?" And he said: "No, you're the fan maker." I said: "I can't make a fan, I've never seen anyone make a fan." He said: "Diane. You know, if you need help it comes."

Three days later, I was in Taos with a friend. She has a shop up there. I walked in and she said: "Did you see those people? They had a peyote fan with macaw feathers in it. Do you want me to find them?" I said: "Yes." So she called the Pueblo, we found them, and I told them I wanted to see this fan they had. I said: "I'll pay you the same, and I have the feathers. I need you to help me make my fan. Would you do that?" So they wanted to know where I got the feathers. I gave them the short version [of my story], and they said they would. So she worked with me to pray on each feather. We wrapped it in tobacco while we prayed on it, and directed the prayers - except for the seventh feather. The seventh feather I wasn't allowed to pray on. When I asked her why, she said: "Because that's for the great mystery. And that that you don't know. That's not for you." And so I made the fan.

About three years ago I went to Peru. First I went to Brazil, and I did Ayahuasca [plant medicine] almost every night. When I left there they gave me some and said it was obviously an ally of mine and it was a gift.

Everywhere I went I met Vietnam vets. It was very curious. Finally I was in Peru for a month, and I met this one guy and we kind of connected. I said: "What is it with you guys?" Everyone I'd meet they'd say they were in mining or drilling. "Are you guys all looking for something you've lost in the jungle 25 years ago?" And he was, like: "God, you're a bitch." And then left.

Then [he] came back a couple of days later, and said: "Man, you jabbed me in guts, lady, but I've been thinking about what you said. Maybe that is what we're doing down here." Then a few days later he said: "You know, I haven't thought about this since I left Viet Nam. I used to do a lot of drugs in Viet Nam, maybe I'll do something again. I'm really screwed, and I'm really uptight, and I need some help I think. I hear there's some drugs down here that a lot of people use. But I wouldn't trust anybody down here." I said: "What is it?" And he said: "I don't know, it has a funny name." And I said: "Is it Ayahuasca?" And he said: "Yeah, I think that is it." And I said: "Well I have some and, if you want, I'll hold space for you."

So I was setting space for him, and telling him that this had been a give-away to me, and I was giving it to him, and it was about healing. And he said: "You sound like you're not going to do it?" And I said: "I'm not. I don't know if there's enough for you. I know there's not enough here for both of us. But I'll be in the energy with you." So I stuck my finger in it and licked just a bit, and I journeyed as big as I ever have with just the molecules of it.

It was quite the intense journey, and I got sick for four days and nights, puking and shitting. It was all I could do to get bottled water down. When I came out I was clearer than I've ever been in my life. I'm laying there [thinking]: "Oh my god, what is happening? What happened?" And I just started reviewing this journey I've been on.

First of all I started reviewing the thing with him, about setting space for him. I was really clear about intent, and I [thought]: "You fucking bitch! You had an agenda. You wanted a healing about Viet Nam."

Then I totally got it. About 31 years ago - 1968, '69 - my lover, who I thought was my first son's biological father, was killed in Viet Nam. He was a helicopter pilot, just like all these other guys had been. So here it was: the medicine was working on me like the intelligence of the universe. So I was just sitting with that, and about how I'd had my own agenda, and how the medicine had worked on me, and I just started reviewing my whole [story].

I had gone to Peru for the feathers. I just got it: how the whole male-female balance was my problem. The whole not speaking - [having] this silent world that I lived in. The whole macaw thing. The whole fan thing. All of it was my story. It wasn't about something else. It wasn't about something I had to do with these feathers. It was about my own story. And I didn't know that until I lay there in Peru. I didn't get it. It was still external to me. It was still something I was supposed to do.

So, laying in this fairy-tale place of big purification, I finally I grabbed this in my mind and *got* it. It's my fucking journey. My dad wanted a boy, and I tried to be the boy and hated the women. Just how totally out of balance I was in my own self. And how this incredible healing journey, that I'd been on for a real long time, had just come together in this incredibly magical way with these feathers and this fan.

A very extraordinary journey.

## Second Session

When I came do our second session together, we planned for me to stay with Diane at her home. Just hours before I arrived, she was involved in an automobile accident. Her treasured car, in which she had traveled all over the country, was wrecked. Diane was stiff and bruised, grieving for her ruined car, but miraculously unshaken.

When we recorded our session the next morning, she seemed relaxed and present in spite of all the calls to be made to family and friends, insurance company, auto towing company, and so forth. She described her experience of consciously letting the

trauma/energy of the collision work its way out of her body by staying centered and aware of sensations and movement that needed to be expressed while she was still sitting in the car after her accident. The powerful quality of her presence and somatic awareness moved me deeply.

As we began the session, I asked Diane to speak about how the loss of all sense of her self that she first felt during her original sweat lodge experience has affected the way she thinks about self and other:

When I came out from the sweat lodge - which was my first no-self experience, experiencing myself as a part of everything else - the old man helped [each of] us crawl out, gave us a big hug, and said: "Welcome to the world." As a rebirth. I really got that. I really got that I'd gone in thinking one way and come out thinking another.

Realizing how much I'm only a part of everything else, I had a marked shift. When somebody else was in their own pile of stuff it was also my stuff. When I had the capacity or courage to face my stuff I was also helping another person look at their part.

So I began to see myself as a cell of a larger organism. I could either be a healthy cell or an unhealthy cell. I guess what I got from my experience, in a word, is compassion. All of a sudden I knew that it could be somebody else's story, but it's also my story. Humanity's story.

Also, there seemed to be some judgment that fell away in that hour - ten hours - or whatever that sweat lodge was. There was a part of me that saw how judgment was a separation.

Diane said that this sense of no separation also works within her, lessening the power of self criticism: "Again, more compassion. More of the sweet girl of myself."

This awareness of unity manifests within Diane as a feeling of purpose: "What I feel called to do is to help other people begin to wake up... That's the big picture that I got from this - helping someone to wake up."

When I asked her what it was that she felt was calling her, she said:

It feels like it's part of me, and no-self, that calls. One of my beliefs is that there is this evolution of the soul, or the greater soul, or of the archetypal realm. It's that process of reaching out *for* help and reaching back *to* help. So there's this

endless chain. For me, what's calling me is my own desire to be helped and to reach back and offer that same help that I just got. If somebody helps me, I don't necessarily feel that I owe it to them, but I owe it to somebody else. To help the next person.

We talked a little about the power of despair and fear and how feelings of hopelessness had become ways of accessing deep learning. I asked Diane when she had felt such despair:

Not for a long time. I used to. [It was] the dark night of the soul, I was very suicidal, and I went to see my first therapist. She wanted me to go in the hospital and do drugs because she was worried about me. I said to her: "Oh no. This is too big, and I don't want to miss it." Which she thought was a very strange answer. But that's how I thought about it. This is so huge that if I miss it I might have to come back and do it again. There's always some internal trigger for me to look deeper and know there's a way out of it only through and beyond it.

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Fear has this interesting way of motivating me. Somebody asked me if I had ever had any drug addictions. I said: "Probably adrenaline." I think as a kid there was always so much to be afraid of that I knew what that adrenaline rush was about. As a kid I learned I could crawl out the window and run: I could escape somehow. So fear has this motivating factor to me - to do things. Where [my husband] gets afraid and freezes, [fear] really activates me. I think faster, I move faster, I have a lot of solutions faster.

.....

So I'm not afraid of fear. There's some kind of a thrill and a rush that comes with that. A lot of people go: "God. Intensive care. How could you do that?" Well, actually it was very easy because I'm used to working at that level of intensity and being very competent in that - being able to do a lot of work at that level of charge. I also know it was addiction. So it was like strength is also weakness.

One of the ways in which Diane has found comfort in a world of suffering is to explore the whole concept of reincarnation even though, at times, it feels to her like "some kind of white [middle] class American rationalization":

As a system it [is] very interesting, it [feels] very comforting to think of it that way. Otherwise I can get in despair about it, because it feels so overwhelming and I get into the loss of innocence, and the children, and all that... There's hope for me in believing in reincarnation. So I have that belief system for help alone. Without it, the despair can come in, as it does with animals. Because I don't have a way to incorporate them.



During our conversation, Diane spoke at some length about her understanding of herself as one who has a role to play in mediating people's experiences of grief and death. During a past life regression that took place when she was visiting the Lakota woman in Ohio, she was identified as a "griever," and a "sort of psychopomp" - one who assists souls in leaving the embodied realm and crossing over. Reflecting on this, she said:

Sometimes I wake up at night. It's not like a dream, it's like knowing that's what I've been doing in the night space. It's [like] a lucid dream. And that makes sense to me on this side and how comfortable I've been with people dying.

I asked Diane to speak about her personal experiences with the death of people close to her. She told me about her grandfather's death:

I went in and I bathed him, and I put clean pajamas on him because he'd pooped. My family was freaked out. For me it was a really sacred task of caring for this body. I didn't want somebody else clearing up his poop that wasn't sacred about it, you know? I talked my family into coming in and helping me - combing his hair. For me that's an easy thing. It doesn't have the trauma to it that a lot of people have about it.

Then when we went to bury him I told the funeral guys not to cover up the casket, that we were going to do it. I went over to his house, which was a quarter of a mile away, and I got every shovel that he owned - which was a lot - and we shoveled ourselves. There was something about that that was hugely healing for my family. It weirded out a lot of people around but for my family, they got it.

So when my aunt died last year, I brought the shovels with me. My cousin - it was his mother who died - said: "Diane, how long has this been our tradition?" And I said: "We started with granddad." So it's like something happened in my family.... there was something that broke the fear, that feels part of the teaching somehow.

It was part of my contract. It's also woken up in some others now because they saw that it wasn't so horrid. They saw that they could do it too. And they found what it felt like to do that.

The death of Diane's aunt offered healing for her grandmother:

After everyone had gone through the line - the reception line at the casket - I went over and got my grandma. I said: "Grandma, you have to say goodbye to Pat." (Pat is, her daughter.) She said: "Oh honey, do I have to?" [My son] was standing there going: "Ma, don't do it, don't do it." I said: "Yes, Grandma. you have to do

that.” She said: “Will you help me?” And I said: “Yes, Grandma, we’re here.” So we took her wheelchair over, and we stood her up. [My son] was looking away because he was crying so hard he was just losing it. And he was looking at me like: “I can’t believe you’re doing this. I just can’t believe you’re doing this.” So we stood her up, and she was holding [Pat’s] hands and touching her face - she’s mostly blind - and there was a huge healing, obviously. She finished. She had to finish... But she wasn’t forced.

When I asked Diane when it was that she began to experience her place in relation to grief and dying, she said:

It’s been my role for a long time. And I think it came from my grandfather... My first memory [is] when I was about five. I had this dog at my granddad’s. She ran out into the street and was hit by a car, and I heard her out on the street screaming. Her back was broken so she was backwards, basically. He came running with his gun. And I saw him, and I knew. And I said: “I have to.” So he held the gun. I don’t think I had the physical strength to pull it. I only remember the screaming of my dog, and my grandfather. He put his arm around me like this, and the gun, and it was my perception at the time that I had taken [suffering] away from that dog. And so goes my life. [weeping]... It wasn’t about my dog dying. It was about taking away the pain and having the capacity to do that - the capacity to end the suffering.

So I think there’s this huge contract as a psychopomp.

I asked Diane to reflect on the enormous journey that she had described at her first meeting and to consider where she is with that story now, particularly in relation to what we had been talking about:

I thought [originally] they were teachings about balance and also about voice. I think now, instead of teachings I see them as reflections, or some combination. It’s like they were mirroring for me the journey I had taken. They were getting me to honor it. I had already been doing that journey. I’d already been reclaiming the male/female balance. I’d known how lost my female was to me for 15 years. So it was kind of like the end of the journey. I didn’t understand that at the time.

[It’s] also about the importance of telling the story and of being out there, instead of being back where I’d prefer to be. Like someone said to me: “You can’t hide the feathers. They’re not about stealth. [laughs] They’re not the owl. They’re out there. In your face!” And I think it’s about me understanding that the work needs to come out.

.....

So many people have said to me: “You keep trying to stay the student. When do you know that you’ve been a student long enough? You have to become a teacher eventually.” It feels like it’s moved into that: that these signs have said, “OK.

Your story has been going on a long time. You don't need to stay a student at this time. You can speak it now. You can teach about the balance because it's something that you know. Something that you've traveled." So it's feeling like I've moved into a place of owning.

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My girlfriend was with me, and she said: "I had no idea that you were teaching all this stuff." [laughs] It's finally saying that I know something. I don't know everything. I don't know that much. But there's some things I know. It feels like a big shift that way.

It comes from a lot of confidence in the non-ordinary states - of not getting overwhelmed in those places. Knowing how to navigate in them. Going in through the veils and in and out of the veils.

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The first time I did peyote, the medicine man said: "Speak with peyote. Just hold this and see what happens." And the little spines became black serpents. They were chanting. I remembered at the time that they were chanting to me that I'd had these same black serpents that would chant to me when I was sick as a kid. When I got a high fever they would do the same kind of chant: same rhythm. What they were saying was: "You're a healer. You're a healer." So the medicine man said: "What is peyote speaking to you?" I shook my head. And he said: "What is peyote saying to you?" And I said: "I can't say. I can't say that." I could not say that.

That was almost 30 years ago. I'd been trying to understand. Was it: "You don't want to own it?" Or: "You're afraid of the power, or the responsibility?" Or all that? Now I understand that my soul knew, but it's taken me 30 years to catch up to that. *I am not the healer. The healer is within each one of us. That girl did not know that. The higher self knew that. Only now do I understand my reluctance then of my truth. So I have really moved from a place of believing that there are healers on the outside to knowing that, at best, there are guides and teachers to help that inner healer wake up. I realize at this point that I have contracted to guide and to teach that, where I used to think that I was supposed to do the healing. I'm way away from that now.*

Finally, towards the end of the session, I asked Diane if she could describe her inner landscape to me - give me a glimpse of what it is to experience herself:

[Healer] Daniel Santos said to me one time: "Your energy is really clean." And I said: "What does that mean?" He said: "Oh, I don't know. A lot of people want to tell you about everything that's happened in the day. You know? The husband had a fight, or [something.] I've known you for years, and I didn't know you're even married."

So what that felt like to me is that I'm pretty engaged in my own story, and not other people's so much - unless I am engaged with them. So if I'm alone, I'm not in dialogue with anybody else very much.

My inner scape is a lot like my outer landscape. It's desert with these pockets of gardens. I think that there's something [about] my little gardens here [at the house], that I struggle with so much, that has very much to do with my inner landscape. I'm trying to find a place of the happy childhood. I'm trying to find places that I can finally let joy come in. It seems like the older I get, the sillier I get. Which tells me that the less reverent I am, at some level the more reverent I am... I'm more silly, and I'm more serious, and I'm more irreverent and I'm more reverent. So it feels like there's an expanding of it all.

A lot of this is time to let joy come in - without responsibility. Laughing at [the dog] or having a lizard catch my eye that's not acting right. And I'll just go and spend whatever time with that lizard, trying to understand what's going on with it. My eyes are called to it.

.....

Part of what my inner landscape is about [is] understanding my choices and their repercussions. And watching a thought form and how it manifests... If there is some pain coming, or a pain with me, I try to be conscious about it. If there is some transformational quality, that I'm fully partaking in it - not as a martyr, just being present and mindful about what it could be.

That's a lot of my inner landscape: the mindfulness about things. Being in the present moment. And always the natural kingdom, inside and out, all day long. Sitting at my computer looking outside watching a bird, and watching a hawk's shadow above it, and engaging with that.

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It seems like part of my inner landscape is prayers all day. But it's prayers of gratitude, not petitioning prayer.

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When the feathers came, and I went to see [my Apache teacher], he said: "Where are you?" I said: "You know, when I see a hawk, or when I see a tree, or when I water my plants, I feel the same as when I'm in the sweat lodge." He said: "We call that walking in prayer. The purpose of doing ceremony and doing ritual is to learn to walk in prayer. It's not so important once you've learned to walk in prayer."

### Reflections After Meeting with Diane

I'm disturbed by these stories - fascinated and yet disturbed. How tightly I cling to the familiar! Not in my words - I like to spin the story that I'm exploratory and open to new and different experiences - but if you could see into the core of me you would discover one who cherishes the ways she knows. This one creates life in the form of

rituals: well-walked paths that lead her safely through; bowls and cups imbued with the power of breakfast, or afternoon tea; the entering and leaving of the house; the beginning and ending of the day; even the way she approaches thoughts of family, homeland, and childhood. In these forms is some reflection of her being - an assurance that she does indeed exist, and she is good.

There's a comfort in leaning back into the well known: a sense that what has been shaped in the patterns of my life is resting on deep, old foundations, and ways that have emerged over generations through my lineage. A tenderness, too, as I reflect on how tenuous it all is, how quickly life passes, and how clearly ephemeral is all this carefully attended structure.

I've not always felt this way. I thought I had to balk against tradition: break out and away from those patterns of daily existence that felt as if they would stifle every last ounce of creativity in my being. What I didn't recognize then was that it's as natural as the repetition of waves on a shore for us human beings to create form in our living. To break out of one form is to break into another.

Yet there's something else here that has to do with the relative fullness, or emptiness, of these forms.

Perhaps I can cherish the forms, or rituals, that are carried out with intention and awareness for the richness with which they fill my life. What it is to take out my red morning tea mug, open the fragrant packet of chai, and pour in the boiling water feeling the steam moisten the skin of my cheeks as I inhale the spicy scent. Stirring in milk and honey, I watch for just the perfect chestnut brown color that tells me it's ready. Then, feeling the heat almost too intense for my cold hands, I take the first scalding sip. This

little morning ritual has become a mark of entering my day. I constantly try to stay awake in its familiarity. It reminds me to be with the familiar as novelty.

But then what of the unfamiliar - the truly new?

What about ways of knowing that turn what I know on its head? And beliefs that contradict all that is familiar to me? What about others whose lives and values and aesthetics are completely different from my own? What is evoked then? What happens when I am asked to release my comforts, however awake to them I may be, and to enter into life without ground: to experience everything in constant emergence, nothing but this moment? And what does it mean that this asking comes out of my own being?

Somewhere there is a point of steadiness in the flurry of emotional and psychological upheaval that is provoked by these insights. From this point something watches the reactions: Curiosity / interest / resistance / dismissal / fear / anger / consternation / resignation / attraction / delight / wonder / distaste / horror / anxiety / confusion / and so on / and so on. Sometimes my awareness can rest in that steady place, often it's swept up by the reaction and an urge to hang on for dear life to the structures that I know.

But the continual brushes with newness change what I know. The old patterns and forms feel hollow - less substantial and safe. Grief and a feeling of deep core loss is near the surface, and at times it feels as if I'm dying. I get caught up in the drama and imagine myself falling away from family and friends: leaving everything I know and living as a meditative recluse with nothing but a few meager items of subsistence and a diet of nettle leaves. But that's just another story...

So far, in *this* story, not much has changed - same cup of tea in the morning, same fondness for the familiar, and fascinated caution with the unfamiliar - and yet everything has changed. Underneath the attachment and fascination is some different quality of knowing - different from the one whose identity *was* the attachment and fascination. In fact, as I look for ways to describe it, it's a bit difficult to say what the identity is these days. There's the feeling of comfort that comes with that first sip of tea, but I'm hard pressed to say who or what feels that comfort. And there may be strong reactions of anxiety or fear in the presence of other people, or stress when I'm working against a deadline, but it's no longer so clear who or what is anxious or afraid or stressed. Even that sense of loss and grief has an impersonal quality - it comes up, and sometimes its intensity seems to define me, then it passes and leaves nothing much behind.

So there's love of familiar comforts, possibly a deeper appreciation than at any other time in my life, and there's something else. That something feels like the potential freedom to experience newness, difference, the unknown with more presence and less angst than ever before. And, writing this, there's a bubble of laughter in me as I recognize that it's *all* new. Every moment it's new: radically new and unknown. And that's the edge: where the steam from the tea is a fleetingly exquisite sensation, and the rising fear is a dynamic fluttering in my abdomen, and comfort becomes a resting in that point of steady awareness.

RAJ

Introduction

During our sessions together, Raj and I sat surrounded by the rich presence of the tribal and indigenous art and artifacts that fill her home. My sense was of being in a sanctuary - a sacred place infused with an energy that matches the intensity of her presence.

I was aware of being a little nervous as we began the session. We had met briefly before, during a workshop that we both attended, but it felt like a big step from that meeting to this opportunity to dive deeply into experience together. As Raj spoke, and I listened into her words, I became aware of the energetic field in which we were interacting. My emotional and energetic bodies became quite activated. I was aware of a strong energetic buzz, which stayed with me for several hours after the session. My eyes leaked tears throughout our conversation - a symptom that I've come to recognize as an emotional response to another person's being.

A couple of times during the session I asked Raj what she was experiencing, and at one point she said: "The more I do non-ordinary state work, the thinner the veil is between this realm and that more expansive sense. It's so easy for me to just go out there." Later in the same session, she said: "I can feel the ecstatic energy right now. It starts right down here in my belly, and I can feel it in my body. The veil is waving back and forth..."

The way I make sense of my experience of intense energy in both of these sessions (and, incidentally, in the meetings with some of the other co-inquirers, too) is that I was feeling energetic resonance with Raj's being. As her embodied awareness was intensified and focused in the process of re-membering her story, her energetic presence also intensified and was palpable. In those moments, I was acutely aware how powerfully



we embody the energy of our experiences and awaken those energies with our attention. I could witness the past experience as not different than what is embodied in the present moment.

### Raj's Story

During our first session together, Raj began her story by speaking about her passage from a professional career as an engineer, through sickness and healing, into experiences of unitive consciousness and a profoundly changed view of the world. In many ways, her story is that of the classic shamanic journey through illness and various tests into a clear relationship with the essence of the natural world and life.

As with each of the other co-inquirers, Raj was aware of some inner urging towards spiritual awareness, even though she had no context or understanding of what that could mean. At that time, Raj was living with her partner of more than 12 years. Their relationship had begun when she was 21.

I was an engineer. I was in management in a high-tech company - upper-level management. I knew in the deepest part of myself that I was wasting my life not having a spiritual connection, but I didn't know what to do, or where to go, or how to do it. So I was just working away.

The story of Raj's journey really begins when her life situation was radically and forcibly changed by ill health:

I think my second birth in this lifetime began when I had a really serious neurological disorder. I was bedridden. I was in excruciating pain. I couldn't walk. I couldn't feed myself. I couldn't get to the bathroom on my own. And I was told by the doctors that there was 100 percent chance that I would never recover. There were experimental treatments that they could give me for a few months but then I would be back in the same place and, eventually, I would develop immunity to this drug.

So... given that diagnosis, I think it was a huge shamanic wake up call. Life as I had known it could no longer exist. I had to find a deeper connection - a

deeper purpose. I had to discover my spiritual self or I would literally lay in bed for the rest of my life.

So at that point, during the intervals where I had a little relief from having the test treatments, I began to explore all kinds of alternative [healing practices] - breathwork being one of them. Through a number of different modalities I was able to get a deeper spiritual connection as to why that was happening to me. Through that, I was able to shift it over a period of about two years, and I haven't had any lapse since then.

.....

That's just a little backdrop to what started me on this journey. It felt very orchestrated and very planned from beyond. It wasn't an accident. It's the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm a miracle according to Western medicine. They wanted me to come and talk at conferences - to talk about what my healing process has been.

The discovery of non-ordinary states of consciousness through breathwork opened Raj to experiences of awareness that were beyond those mediated by the self. Her words point towards those experiences. Unfortunately it is not possible to capture on paper the intensity of her speaking, the deep pauses, or the embodied spaciousness that created a powerful felt sense of what it is she describes:

Over time I began to have more and more experiences that had more of a quality of connecting with an energy, or a presence, or an essence beyond myself. I was still myself, but there was a quality of connecting with something beyond.

During the three or four years after I was sick - that's when I was in the [breathwork] training - I would have glimpses of experiences where I would completely go beyond being. It's like going beyond the physical world. It was like a place of just consciousness. I'm thinking of a couple of experiences that are similar in this particular mood. There was a very specific sound, emotion, color, sensation, everything to those experiences. It was like being part of a sea, that goes in infinite directions, in which there is no real me. It's very hard to explain.

It felt to me like a force so big it's almost like what's behind everything. Like the creative impulse of everything, the creative impulse to create, the spark behind the manifestation of everything. There needs to be some impulse - I want to say thought but that's too human - yes, some impulse for creation to be there. So there's everything in potential. None of it's really there in that particular space. It feels incredibly loving. Just really, really deeply loving.

These were a couple of breathwork experiences I had. There's this feeling of flowing. There's this movement. It's hard to explain. It's not a void as in blackness at all. It's aliveness, and flowing, and like the energy of the universe.

When I had connection with that, I felt very much like I was experiencing something behind me, and behind everything. So *me* was this tiny little outcome of this.

Exploring breathwork and other alternative healing modalities at first led to a deep inner struggle. Raj describes it: “Like my consciousness bouncing against the boundaries of my self - my mind.” She continues:

[There was] a lot of struggle, but all the images, all the feelings, were very much within a sense of self. There may [have been] transpersonal things like past-life experiences, but they all still had a sense of self. So it was like I was in this box. I had images of that a lot - being in a box. A caged animal where I was in this box.

As I was beginning to have glimpses of those experiences, it was really unsettling to my psyche - my spirit. I hadn't studied any religions or anything, so I didn't have any context. They were beautiful, really wonderful experiences. They weren't disturbing, you know? I could accept them. I could deal with them. I was open to them. But how could I go back and integrate them into the engineering world? So I had these two worlds going on at the same time.

That's when the image of the tiger in the cage started to emerge. [I was] starting to really feel trapped. I was existing on these different levels, and I didn't know what to do with these experiences. How do you bring that into your life? What do you do with that? I still need a body. I still need to eat food, [to] have a house. So what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to orient my life around this and have it work? It was very, very confusing, and I started to get more and more frustrated with everything in my life that didn't seem to support that kind of feeling [or have] that understanding as part of what I was doing.

It became really hard to deal with my co-workers and even my friends: my friends who I loved dearly [but] who weren't going through these same experiences. It was just very hard for me to feel a real connection with them. It was nothing about [not] liking them, or enjoying them, it was just this need - as a “self” - to find connections with other people who could really understand these experiences and could work together.

.....

In retrospect, it makes me wonder - and possibly remember - how people can do really deep spiritual work without being in the context of a system, like Buddhism, where there's people who have walked that path before and who can guide you along the way. Because having none of that was completely disorienting.

.....

I was slowly trying to find a way to have my life be more connected with this kind of energy - this kind of knowing. I was studying to be a breathwork facilitator. I was studying to be a body worker. I was studying polarity therapy. To do polarity therapy well you need to be connected on a lot a different realms

so that was really supportive of [this] process. So I had a body work practice part time, and I was engineering part time.

It felt like - on an energetic cellular level - there was some transition going on in my body because of all of this process. It had a certain gestation period and it had to unfold at its own pace. I just needed to have this deep level of trust to allow this to incubate and that it would unfold into something for me where I would be able to live my life in a way that was more connected with these experiences, learning about them and integrating them into my life.

It felt completely clear that there was a process going on that I just needed to follow. No amount of my mind trying to figure it out and thinking: "Well if I just do these five steps in these ten months..." It was just a complete knowing that that was completely meaningless. Something was definitely gestating in me. I could feel it really deeply energetically. It was definitely being spawned by all my experiences, including the ones we're talking about.

This gestation took place not only in the mind, but also within Raj's body.

Although the processes of opening and unblocking the energy channels is not widely recognized in the West, there is a growing recognition of this aspect of spiritual emergence. Raj names this experience as kundalini and speaks of it as a guide in the process of opening and shifting consciousness: "The [energy blocks] that were opened made me shift as my body shifted." She describes this period of almost two years as a hard and challenging time:

It was a feeling like my energy systems were on fire. I couldn't sleep. I just had to be physically active all the time. If I didn't work out on a given day I would have so much fire in my body.

We talked a little about the helpfulness of a spiritual counselor or facilitator in working through this kind of process. Raj was involved with body-oriented therapies, including breathwork and acupuncture, and she was working with a chiropractor. Although she was also seeing a therapist, the sessions were focused on her relationship with her partner, which ended during this period, and did not address the deep spiritual processes that were emerging through her. As with many of us, for Raj the concept of spiritual guidance is laced with resistance:

I can see where it would have been incredibly helpful. This is where personal neuroses mix with spiritual experiences. [laughter] I grew up in a very controlling family environment where every move that I made, every thing I did, was watched and judged. I still have a little of this rebellion against any kind of teacher figure. You know: “You’re not going to tell me what to do from out there. How do you know? I’m not going to give you the power over my journey. Who are you to do that?” The personal neurosis rebel. That really head strong feeling to my mind.

What she did experience was a yearning for a community: “People who were peers, who were on a similar journey, that I could share it with. That was more what I could deal with, given my personal neurosis.” To some degree that was what she found in the breathwork training group. It was also through her involvement with the breathwork that she met and deeply connected with the woman who is now her partner and companion on this journey.

I was going through this fiery thing and at some point it felt like the gestation was reaching a transition. It’s hard to explain. It felt like I was ready for some kind of big shifts. I wasn’t really ready before for big shifts and, suddenly, something had been cleansed out of me, been burned out of me, and I was ready. So I went to work at my first Insight and Opening [breathwork and insight meditation workshop]. I went down early just to hang out in the desert - I had never been down there - and I went into the desert to do a little ritual. I said: “OK, universe, I’m really ready for the shifts in my life. Whatever that means, however I can manifest my soul - or whatever words you want - I’m really ready, and I can feel it in every cell of my body.” You know, I’d been thinking it for years, and there was an intention, but to really feel that on a completely resonating level....

So I went to work at Insight and Opening and met this woman there – who’s now my partner. That’s a whole story, a fun story... [laughter] but I don’t know that it’s relevant to your dissertation. What is relevant, I think, is the way we connected. I met her at the retreat but we didn’t really get a chance to connect, and she invited me to her house [on the coast] for a couple of days the weekend after just to hang out and recuperate. I went down there, and we talked, and I really liked her. It was a nice connection.

[One of those nights] I had a dream - an incredibly intense dream - that she and I were at this gathering, and she had put LSD in my orange juice because she knew that we had to connect, and that the only way we’d connect was if I was in a more open expansive place. There was this desperation that she had to make sure we connected, and that’s why she was ordered to put LSD in my orange juice. [laughter] And all through this gathering we’d start to talk to each other, and somebody else would pull us away. Then we’d start to talk and connect, and

something else would happen. It was more and more intense, like we have to connect. There's this soul-level urgency.

I woke up in the morning and [thought]: "This is really weird..." As the day went on, I could just feel this opening happening in my energy being. I just got bigger and bigger. It was like I was feeling her on this really deep level. We started to talk about it right before I had to leave. We were at Big Sur, which is this really incredibly expansive open energy, so we were just falling into this sea of boundary-less space. It was really intense.

And I left. I just felt this energy and that was it. I went to Italy for two weeks, and I came back. This started a really deep spiritual emergency for me. I didn't sleep or eat hardly anything for a month I was so on fire. It was like I got shaktipat [transmission of spiritual energy] on the soul level or something. It was so big.

I'm saying all this because the second big category of no-self experiences were in sexual experiences with her... It was almost an immediate thing for both of us. We'd be making love and I'd completely transcend my body, and I'd be back in that floating in space place, and she would be there with me. It wasn't like I'd left my body.... it was kind of like I became all of it at once. That happened all the time.

She started to have a kundalini awakening during this experience so it was really powerful. It was *really* powerful - a really deep spiritual experience...

It's this experience of being so completely in resonance and connected that I've completely no clue... really, in terms of [what's] my nervous system and my perception. I'm seeing through her eyes, and I'm feeling in her body. I can't differentiate: "This is my hand. This is my face." There's this complete lack of that. It's all one being. That's not a no-self experience, it's an extended self experience.

Then, if we have time that we can stay in that space, it's like a meditation. We're not intentionally doing it, it's all spontaneously happening. It would be like a meditation - the longer you stay in it, usually the more deeply connected we would be. That bubble would expand so the two of us are one thing, then the room is one thing, and then the trees and plants around the building are one thing, and then you can feel the ocean and the earth... And it expands out to this consciousness being. All of that at one time.

By this time Raj says that she had many more skills and capacities for integrating these experiences and to be with them in her daily life. As she describes it: "It would affect me [in different ways] depending on what neuroses were present, and what I was having to do in the material world would impact how long this feeling would stay with me even afterwards." Most frequently these experiences of expanded consciousness would linger and enliven her awareness of the world:

I would go outside and just completely feel - it's hard to explain it - the plants and the earth... we are alive together. That would be the feeling: there's not me and that's a tree, we're alive together. We're co-participating in being alive. The experience in my body is very different.

Everything appeared really bright and really vibrant. I'd look at a tree and it would almost be like Kirlian photography [which captures images of the energetic aura]. I could just see and feel life everywhere. When I was connecting with people, it was almost like I wasn't there - but not in a dissociative way. I've experienced this a lot in breathwork as a facilitator - there's ways of talking: I'm talking with you; there's me; I'm talking about my experience with you; I'm witnessing it, but I'm separate. But there are other times where I just feel that it's that same feeling, and we're one together. I'm just completely aware of the client's body feelings and a flowing in consciousness together.

I'd have a lot of those experiences. When I meet people in the world and talk to them there's not me and my mind thinking and reacting to them - sometimes there would be also [that] at the same time - it would be just feeling people as if they're not separate from myself.

.....

It's a deeply loving quality. It's deeply loving, and it's a no-feeling at the same time. When I'm strongly identified with myself, and all my neuroses are present, I can feel myself reacting to people. I can feel a tension, or an uncertainty, or an agitation, or an anger when [I] react to people in the world. That would be gone. There would be none of that. So it was almost like a no-feeling. But not a numb no-feeling - it's very alive - because I know the numb no-feeling, too. Very alive, accepting, loving - not loving in the intimate sense, but just an accepting with a loving quality.

It seems as if - knowing nothing about it - that a place of enlightenment would be like being in that kind of place, magnified, all the time. I feel like having a glimpse of it makes it more easily accessible and possible to stay closer to, and connected with, if I am having the right context in my life. There's still the struggle, and I still get caught in the self - material things - and completely lose sight of these feelings. At other times I stay deeply connected for periods of time and it waves in and out. I haven't reached the point where it's a lasting change, that I can feel that connection.

.....

All of my life feels related and connected, and that is a really big shift. My soul is connected with everything that I'm doing in my life, whether it be stewing in my neuroses or whatever. There's this consistent feeling of connection with my self. I don't have the consistent connection with the more expansive parts, but it's there enough in the background that it influences me all the time. It's like a framework, or perspective, that makes things smoother. It's like there's this greater feeling of trust. There's just this flow and impulse happening that I'm a part of - *I* is a separate thing, but is a part of. I don't need to be so hard and contracted about what *I* as a separate thing need to do. There's this other flow going on that I just need to let happen. Therefore everything feels more connected.

As we reflected on the impact that this opening and expansion of consciousness had on her life, and struggled to express the ineffable qualities of these experiences, Raj offered to share some of her writing:

I'm not a great poet, but sometimes saying words in more poetic form [helps]... These were probably written within the first six or eight months that I was with [my partner]. I couldn't express it any other way. I couldn't find any words for what I was experiencing. I tried to explain it to people, and I just couldn't do it. Poetry was the only way I could even come close to starting to capture [the experience], and this isn't quite getting it.

#### THE UNIVERSE OF LOVE

One kiss  
 your eyes, your hands, your skin, your sounds, your smile  
 the fire slowly burning any obstacles  
 I reach you  
 I reach me  
 I love you  
 Our bodies know, just follow  
 Held by the ocean  
 Led by a force greater than anything my mind can hold  
 Just follow  
 My heart, a bud  
 Slowly opening petal by petal, deeper and deeper  
 I feel every inch of your body  
 Or is it my body?  
 Or is the body?  
 Deeper, deeper  
 My mind fades  
 Surrendering to the raw passion of the force that built the universe  
 Held within our souls at the center of the bud.  
 Deeper and deeper  
 Love feels like a shallow word  
 I have found the center, the core, the bliss  
 In the form of a woman  
 I surrender completely to this.

#### I AM LOVE

How can I capture this radiance  
 This ocean essence  
 This purity  
 This universe, in the shallowness of words?



This wave of creation that flows and radiates  
 through every cell of my body  
 and yours  
 and the ocean  
 when we allow ourselves to be it.  
 How can I express such splendor  
 to one who has not felt your essence melt with mine  
 melt with the divine  
 How can mere humanness witness the softness of your face  
 your heart, your sound  
 from outside this wave?  
 And ocean of movement, bliss, birth  
 given a channel in our form  
 the only such form ever created and ever to be created.  
 From this place I am love with you.

This [third poem] is one of my favorite poems, and it's kind of related. I was in a poetry class at school, and I was in that space of feeling my consciousness and everything around me as one consciousness: the plants and everything, even though *I* was there, too. It was like both were going on at the same time. We had an assignment to look around and find a thing that's attracting our attention and write a poem about it. I was just looking at the sun on these leaves and having this feeling of consciousness about this plant....

#### THE LEAF

How could you dare to be so green?  
 So vibrant?  
 So unabashedly making love with the sun?  
 Shamelessly spreading yourself in your full magnificence.  
 The purity of your lack of fear in growing, and eating  
 and sharing with life.  
 Offering your laughter and ecstasy to anyone who's eyes pause  
 long enough to taste  
 Translucently showing me the way to my divine greenness  
 I eat of your audacity for all the world to see.

In addition to this changed way of experiencing the world, Raj expressed awareness of a deep shift in the way in which she connects with other people:

It feels like my self's projection onto the world. This is what all of our manifestation is about: trying to rediscover the connection with this space, this source, whatever it is. So there's this feeling quality, when I'm in this space, of connecting .... on a level that makes an opening for that connection within me and with that that's in them. It's not like I'm consciously thinking: "How can I guide this conversation?"

I've very low tolerance for surface interactions with people: "Nice weather we're having..." I want it to be real. I need it to be this real, deep, authentic level or why bother? At first that was really split. If someone was on that level there would almost be this frustration, but now there's more of an acceptance of that: "Oh, OK, I see... that's what's happening at this moment in the universe."

I think, at the same time that I'm having this deep awareness of other people, it's easier for me to have that awareness of myself. It's easier for me to be guided by that bigger place, and witness the human-ness and the neuroses, and not get as completely kidnapped by them so that I lose any sense of perspective. It still happens, but it doesn't happen as frequently or as deeply.

As the first session started to draw to a close, we spent a little time talking about Raj's decision to go to graduate school to study transpersonal psychology. Clearly that environment is supportive of the experiences that she has had and, she said: "Being around people who are studying and learning, lead by these types of experience.... was definitely one of the reasons I'm there." Mostly, however, she has been drawn there because

I feel that this is the work I want to be doing. I want to somehow be working with other people to support their self discovery. Whatever that means for them. It may mean something completely different from what I've found for myself, but it just seems that's a critical thread that's needed in the world right now: encouraging people. Having space, time, and perspective and holding it for people to explore for themselves, and through themselves, the universe. I'm at [graduate school] because, unfortunately, credentials and all that mean something in this dimension.

### Second Session

As we began the second session, Raj expressed a number of times that she felt disconnected from her experience of deep embodied presence, and that made her aware once again of how easy it is to fall into disconnection: "I can kind of remember that energy, that space, those insights. I guess this interview can be an example of the failure to integrate it in a consistent way!"

I asked her to describe what she felt were the differences between this disconnected way of being and the deeper self, and she began to feel into the ways in which her awareness flows between these states: “Well, I think there’s my moment to moment awareness .... that’s distracted and in a contractive individual self mode, but at a deeper level of my psyche there’s a different awareness that influences and directs how I do my life.”

My partner was telling me the other night how she feels that she gets really caught in the details of life and has a hard time seeing the big picture, and we talked about somebody else she knows who sees the big picture and can’t see the details. She feels that I can do both.

That’s kind of how it feels in my psyche. I can get caught in the little details in what feels like the contractive individual-self world, but on a deeper level there’s a knowing about our spiritual base or reality, or whatever it is, that infiltrates all my decisions: “Where am I going in my life? What’s the direction I’m going in my life? What are the big choices I’m making in my life?” [These] are all influenced by that even though I get caught on a momentary basis in the details.

At the end of our first meeting, Raj mentioned that through her experiences of the one-ness of consciousness, she was coming to understand duality as a “basic principal of the universe.” I asked her to speak a little more about that from the perspective of this feeling of disconnection:

That’s kind of the insight that my thinking philosophical self mind was getting while I was energetically opening.... I don’t think we could exist in a human body if we were completely 100 percent connected with that expansive no-self space. We wouldn’t have a mind then. We wouldn’t have thoughts. We wouldn’t have movement in human form. It’s like there needs to be duality for us to be in human form... It feels like magnetic poles to me. Like vortexes is how I feel it in my body. The closer I get to the expansive place the more I get drawn in and the easier it is to stay connected. And the closer I get to the contracted space... So finding that balance where I can hold both feels really delicate. I’m not very skilled at doing that...

.....

I’m in the balance when I’m participating in this world. I’m not just dreaming, or meditating, or doing breathwork. I’m participating. I’m out in the world, writing papers, and picking up my mail, and doing earthly things. Yet, within myself, I

have that awareness of how those activities are connected with a bigger sense of self, or bigger purpose. So it's kind of having the feeling in my body from which the material world actions flow.

.....

At the deepest levels of connection with that space, at some level it no longer becomes a duality. It's just a oneness at that point. The whole thing is integrated, and working together, and flowing. There's not this separateness to it.

The quality of Raj's presence, as well as what she says, makes it clear that for her somatic experience is a powerful way of knowing. I asked her to describe what this sense of balance feels like in her body:

It's very energetic. I can really feel it in my spine. It's almost like all my cells become relaxed, like there's more air everywhere. There's more space everywhere... Things aren't as dense. So it's not like: "OK, here's the edge of the table and then there's space." It's not that same sense of distinction. It's like the breeze goes through me, and my perceptions of the world go through me. It's not me with a boundary, and some air, and then a tree. It's hard to explain - it's like there's this energy that just goes through all of it at the same time. So my body just feels less dense - like everything's permeating me, and me it.

.....

It's more fiery energy. Sensual almost. Not sensual necessarily as sexual, but almost sensual in the cells of my body.

We talked about what it was like to cultivate a way of knowing that is so different from the predominantly - or dominantly - rational ways of modern Western culture. Raj described it as:

Training the mind to not have to understand everything, and rationalize it, and put it into place so that things can be flowing as in this energy is flowing. Perceptions and intuitions and insights can be flowing without them needing to be comprehensible by the mind. Then part of the mind's involvement is following that, and trusting it, and allowing it to unfold, and not judging it.

Before it would be all rational thinking or rational decisions about what my actions were, and what my choices in life would be, and how I would deal with my relationships. And now almost all of it comes from more of an intuitive and instinctual knowing place. I just follow that energy and trust it...

One of the most important ways in which this retraining of her mind was supported was through her involvement in polarity therapy. Her teacher was "a deeply

intuitive, clairvoyant person” who helped her students to develop and embody these ways of knowing: “She would guide us in how to trust ourselves and how to discern when we were getting caught in our minds versus following intuition.” Raj has also found it to be a practice that she works with continually as a breathwork facilitator and in working with clients in counseling.

While not being attached to a concrete vision for her future, Raj has a strong orientation to work in the world, and she spoke intensely about the changes that she has experienced in her relationship to personal agency and capacity to affect change:

It feels as if I’ve at least partially escaped the trap of all of life being oriented around material belongings and safety. Part of that I’m free to do because I have enough money that I don’t need to ever worry about that again. But even before the money part happened, I feel it was a process of detaching from that so I realized that the material world would take care of itself. I didn’t need to fixate on it. When I got to that resolution was when the money appeared.

I feel that the focus now is .... how can I make the best use of my experience as a human being, and as a spiritual being, within the scope of all time, and infinity, and whole universe? Within that context, how can I be of benefit while I’m in a human form?

That amazingly broadens my perspective on what I want to do in the world in my lifetime. So instead of *doing* being: “Well I want to make sure I have this much money saved for retirement, and I really want this sports car, and I’d like to have this house when I retire” - the kind of things that for many people it’s their goal, that’s their focus in life - to me it’s: “When I’m no longer in a body and I’m connected with a greater sense of consciousness, how will I have contributed to the evolution of consciousness? How will I have impacted on a global, universal, energetic level what’s going on in the universe? Will I have contributed to human beings’ connecting with the greater spiritual universal reality, or will I have contributed to our dissociation from that?” So [to me] that’s really big. It’s a big topic versus: “I want to start a biomedical company.” It just feels so deep. The framework feels a lot bigger.

I don’t have an absolutely clear vision of what that’s going to mean. Partially because I don’t want to because my mind would be the one that would want to know. The more I can stay connected with following what’s presented to me, and being in the energy of what’s flowing through my body, it’s going to emerge and I don’t need to know.

.....

I feel like the work that I need to be doing now is in working on how big I can be: how big I can be in terms of my connection with this space that we’re talking

about. This reality. The more I can embody that, the more I can feel my power as a spiritual being - not power in a materialistic sense, but my power as a spiritual being - the more I can manifest supporting the planet to reconnect spiritually.

So I feel like the work for me is not on defining what kind of job I'm going to have or what kind of center I'm going to open. That's a detail... It doesn't even matter whether I know what's going to happen. What's really important is that I'm learning how [not] to .... fall out of my knowing and my connection with myself as something beyond my individual self.

.....

The times that I've been at the center of pulling a group of people together to initiate an action - a social action - there's a tremendous amount of energy that needs to be held, and perspective that needs to be held, and long-term vision that needs to be held, [and a] lack of getting caught in my own neuroses and tapes. To really hold tight to that long-term vision and not get caught in the individual psyches and neuroses and obstacles is a really hard thing to do when you're talking about big issues that impact thousands or millions of people.

I've just barely tapped into what that really feels like. It's a different thing .... to show up at a march for women's rights than it is to be working organizationally to bring together all the major women's organizations in the country to work on an issue together. The magnitude of the energy that's being held and the potential for change is so big, and I've found myself in those situations up against my own limitations in the sense of my own empowerment. Where do I feel overwhelmed and back away? .... When I'm talking to these really powerful women, where am I not able to hold the energy? Where am I just not big enough to really hear what they're saying and really feel a way to support what's unfolding through them? Because, if I feel small and insignificant and caught in my own ego, I'm going to be reacting differently than when I'm in a really expansive holding.

I'm just barely starting to have this [interaction] with many people who have had big influences on the planet. They're amazing just to be in the presence with because they're holding the energy that's way bigger than most of us hold. Somehow they're channeling something that's bigger - that's how I experience it - than most of us tap into. To be in the presence of that, in a way where you have the power to give them money to manifest what they're talking about wanting to do, means you need to be matching their intensity on a level. You need to be matching their passion level. Not that you yourself have experienced the same things they have, but that you're at the same intensity level.

I, personally at least, can't do that unless I've done the work on myself. Unless I've done the work on myself of being able to be connected with big energy, with bigger meaning, with bigger purpose than just my own individual little life. As long as I'm caught in my individual self issues I can't do that. Maybe there's people that can. To me, it seems like the more we can understand ourselves and be with ourselves in terms of our biographical past and the more we have really experienced in our bodies connecting with bigger energy - with bigger senses of the universe - that's the space from which manifestation can happen in this realm in terms of real shifts in our consciousness.

.....

The call in the really broad sense for me - that I feel clear about - is the call to support providing a space in a way for people to re-connect with themselves and with their greater spiritual selves. It feels to me like the smallest vision for that would be in individual practice where I was working one-on-one with people, which I always want to do at some level. But it feels like, [from the perspective of] the energy that's coming in for me these past years, that's really confining. What I need to be doing is somehow way bigger than that. So it's leading workshops, or setting up a retreat center focused on this, or being involved with some trainings, writing books... It's something that would broaden out and impact in a vaster way - a bigger way - in addition to just working individually with people. And exactly what that's going to look like I don't know.

.....

Money is energy, and the right use of money supports the exact things we're talking about wanting to do. What builds Jack Kornfield's retreat center that allows more people to come together and be in meditation? What's supporting Stan [Grof] in continuing his work? All these things. The energy of money can be directed in a number of different ways.

So I'm finding myself in a position where energetically I have a connection to huge quantities of money. My ego still enjoys some things like having a nice home, and I want a nice car. I'm still trapped somewhat in that. But in general I feel like I want to use this energetic channel... I want to connect this access to the energy of money with what I was talking about earlier in terms of my life purpose oriented around something big energetically.

Those two are very connected to me. Having access.... to huge quantities of money is what's awakened that in me, because I realized that I had [previously] defined my reality according to my perception of what my financial resources were.

.....

[This access to money] makes me have to define myself in a completely different way... I'm completely free to .... manifest whatever I can in my life. I'm aware that those boundaries [that I used to have] were artificial. That [awareness] had a big impact on this whole process. I'm forced to realize how much I limit myself... How the material level - the material world - affects my sense of how I can act as a spiritual being. You know? If I can only make \$50,000 a year, and I need to work 50 hours a week to do that, how am I going to have the time to go out and open a retreat center? And where does the money come from? [laughs]

But one connection that's important is I think it's very interesting that there was a level of spiritual development that happened within me *before* the money part manifested for me in this life. It's almost like I began to connect spiritually and energetically with a different way of being, and then the channels were open to: "OK the universe is upping the ante a little, we'll see what you can do with this level of energy."

I asked Raj if she ever gets fearful as she opens into these ways of being with powerful energies and, if so, how she worked with that:

Well, it depends [laughs]; there's a spectrum. Closer to the enlightened end is being able to notice that I'm having the fear and allowing myself to feel it. There's no tension around it; it's just OK: "I'm feeling really afraid right now. That's all right, and I need to allow myself to feel really afraid." Sometimes I can do that. [laughs]

At the other end of the spectrum is being completely consumed by it so that I lose any sense of perspective. And that's always when I've lost my connection with the greater sense of self. I'm in my small self and it gets the life-or-death fear. That there is life and death - it's this definite duality. So I'm in that place. It sucks. [laughs]

But I'm getting better at being able to know what I need to do to pull myself out of that: connecting with my closest friends, or partner, or meditating. Physical movement actually really helps me. Like if I'm in that place, I go biking... so I'm in my body, and somehow that brings me out of that box.

As we came near to the end of our time together, I wondered if there was anything Raj wanted to say that she thought would be helpful to someone reading this dissertation:

Well, I'll just say what's coming to my mind, and my intuitive being. I think the two biggest qualities that I've needed to be able to do this whole process are trust and courage. I see people all the time getting information, and having experiences that are beyond-the-self experiences, but they fight against them, or don't trust them, or aren't willing to explore how to really bring that into their lives.

For me, that's where this fire energy is so important; to give me the courage. There needs to be tremendous willingness to be really bold and really push the edges and explore, and that's not easy to do in this culture. Usually that means that you're breaking out of our cultural norms. We have ways you're supposed to behave, and interact, and do things, and do our careers, and relate to our family. Really courageously following our intuitions often means not following all that. I just think that needs to be acknowledged with people who undertake this path.

I also think the power of witnessing is really important. Trying to do it completely on our own within ourselves reinforces the sense of individual self. Instead, the power of witnessing brings it out into a bigger self - a bigger experience in the world. [Witnessing] as in your working with a teacher, or you share your experiences in a group context, or you do something like breathwork where there's somebody witnessing your actual experiences.

.....

When you're sitting on a cushion by yourself, meditating has definitely positive implications, but it hasn't been taken beyond the individual self. Whereas when somebody witnesses something the box - the boundary around the experience -



has been shattered. It is opened. That experience is out in the world. It's not just within the individual - which, in my experience, leads to a deeper level of people's ability to really trust it, and honor it, and acknowledge it, and have it be healing.

### Reflections After Meeting with Raj

I move my awareness into my body, first experiencing the flood of sensation that surges up. Wherever my attention moves there is a whole array of tingling, flowing, prickling, softness and sharpness. After a few minutes, I gently spread my awareness into the whole of my body. It's a bit like slowly sinking into a warm bath. Moment by moment there is an increase in the intensity until all of me feels amazingly alive and immersed in aliveness. All the thinking that had been going on is now quiet, and there is just a strong sense of well being and presence.

Now, as I'm sitting at the computer and typing, that awareness is still within my body. My mind is attending to the words, shaping them as they emerge, while also flowing through the whole field of sensation. It feels as if thoughts are surfacing from the sensing. Whenever there is an impulse to analyze, to move out into conceptual process, I bring my attention back into the body. What can I learn from writing out of the moment in this way?

I'm aware how comfortable I am with the strong sensations. There is a feeling of lightness, airiness, and at the same time a grounding that is almost euphoric. The sunlit trees outside my window are vibrant with the same intensity that I feel in my body. I feel warm, even though the air in this room is quite cool.

Now I experience a thought coming in the form of a question: “What happens that I lose this quality of presence so easily when I’m interacting with other people?” My mind begins to reach into the abstract, running past memories, and imaginary scenarios from the future in an attempt to explore this concept.

Taking a breath and sinking back into my body, I’m aware of some amazement at the endless creativity that is at work in the mental realm. It takes a moment or two to rediscover the peaceful quality of presence. The foray into thinking evoked a somatic response - something like a subtle fear or anxiety. I notice a difference in the quality of feeling in my solar plexus and belly, and my jaw has tightened a little. As I write, I’m also aware that my thighs have tensed just a fraction, too, as if there might be the small possibility of having to jump up and run.

I move back to the question, sustaining some awareness of these shifting qualities in my being. What comes to me immediately is the way in which the presence of an other carries with it, subtly or not so subtly, what my embodied sense of self perceives as a threat. This thought raises a flurry of objections. How can this be when I also know the seamless nature of being? Many times I have deeply experienced unity with an other person. I’ve worked long and hard to dismantle the psychological patterns that held me in a sense of isolation. I’ve meditated for countless hours with the knowing that we are not separate - that separation is ultimately an illusion.

In spite of all this, I know the truth of this somatic response. It’s not the whole picture, the anxiety may or may not subside, but it is a quality of my experience of being with other people.

Now comes an insight about the importance of recognizing and feeling that response as it happens. The sensations of anxiety are there in my being: tightness, shallow breath. If I can just stay present with this, then my presence is also here with the other. But there is also a powerful urge to start conceptualizing. The past and future vie for my attention with concerns about what that person is thinking, or whether I am acceptable in some way or another, or if I will be able to respond to them in an appropriate manner, or if they will infringe on me - want something of me.

Here is the self arising: an elaborate creation of the mind, woven through with pain and fear, pulling away from the warm expansion of awareness into a cool constricted pattern of mental energy. As I follow the imagination, I'm aware that my body is getting cold. The lively sensation has fallen away. The observing I experiences a momentary feeling of vertigo as if all stability has gone.

Back into the body. It takes a minute or two to open into the spaciousness.

What I see is a subtle decision point in this process. There is a moment in which awareness falters, and the automatic mental processes sweep in cued by the somatic response to follow a well-cultivated pattern of thought and behavior that defines and reinforces self and other as independent of one another. But if I can be with the awareness, retrieving it and reconnecting with my body before I'm lost in all those concepts, then there is presence with the other. There is awareness of presence, and the awareness and the presence are not separate.

And what is this observing I that knows both the contracted sense of separation and the vibrant presence?

The words that come are: “This is the presence within.” This is an enduring quiet watching I that is aware, even when there is not awareness. I get the image of those little Russian wooden dolls that open up to reveal yet another doll inside, or perhaps a bud that opens and opens to reveal petals still forming at the center. However deeply I look within, there is always an I observing the I that is looking. There is something in the depth of presence, though, that makes the I transparent to itself.

## PETER

### Introduction

Peter and I live close to one another in northern Arizona, so it was easy for him to drop by my house for our meetings. Our conversations took place in early fall, and the air was warm and clear. We spent our time together on the deck, in the shade of a tree, with the sounds of birds, wind, and the occasional sightseeing plane flying overhead.

We have known each other for years, and there is an easy familiarity between us. Often our talking would lapse into a comfortable silence, waiting for awareness of what would be said next. Our meeting had a conversational quality and, for this reason, there

are times when I have included my questions or reflections as part of the text - offering brief passages of dialogue within the narrative.

Peter is a long-time Buddhist practitioner and much of what he speaks about is contextualized in Buddhist philosophy. At the end of our last session he said:

Reading the transcript showed me.... how much my thinking about this stuff is influenced by Buddhism. Also how much my attempt to really directly inquire comes off sounding like Buddhism. So I still think Buddhism's right... I talked about where those kind of intentions that take the place of a self come from? And I realized that I said: "They come from fear and desire." When I reread that I said: "Oh. That's Buddhism. Yeah." [laughs] It kind of impressed me to see how, in my most intimate and earnest gropings, I come out with something that sounds like what Buddha came out with.

As we started the first session, we pondered the paradox of attempting to speak of an experience of no-self when there was no sense of self through which to have an experience. Peter began by saying:

I was thinking about this... wondering philosophically whether that statement even makes sense - whether it's possible to experience a no-self. Is that like experiencing a no-elephant? Or even more like experiencing a no-unicorn? Is there anything there to have not an experience of?

Later in the conversation we came back to this question and Peter said:

I don't see how no-self could be an object of knowledge. I have pursued that question. I got a really clear answer from Thrangu [Tibetan Buddhist teacher]. He said: "Yeah, obviously there's no way that no-self could be an object of knowledge. The mind's nature is completely unknowable. Even the Buddha can't find the nature of mind." So I think of experiences of no-self as some kind of experience of the *context* in which that understanding happens.

There's lots of ways that I can think of the experience of no-self. One of them is the experience of the *context* in which I get that the mind has no innate substance, shape, or form. But I think people would [speak of] experiences of no-self at times when they get that [sense of self] torn away from them in very big ways or when their field of experience expands.

### Peter's Story

The first experience that Peter described took place after he had attended a Buddhist retreat in February of 1988. It was a time of change and unfolding in his life. He had recently moved into a shared home with his partner and was just about to start a new job. A friend told him that Choje Rinpoche [Tibetan Buddhist teacher] was teaching a seven-day Dzogchen [teachings and meditation practice on the state of complete awakening] retreat and asked if he wanted to go. At that time, he said, "I had never heard of Choje Rinpoche. I'd never heard of Dzogchen."

Peter had been interested in Buddhism for a long time:

I got interested in Buddhism when I went to Naropa [Institute] in '74. Then after two years of trying to hang around Naropa... and getting freaked out by the scene because I wasn't from New York, and rich, and gay, I took up Theravada [school of Buddhism] practice for years, but I always felt like I belonged with the Vajrayana [school of Buddhism] practices. The Theravada practices - especially Theravada philosophy - didn't make sense. But I hadn't known how to reconnect with the Vajrayana, so it was less than a year before this experience that I connected with the Vajrayana again.

Peter was able to attend only four days of the retreat before he had to return and begin his new job. Those four days were filled with important teachings, however: "It was really interesting to be given these symbols like 'open sky', 'big space', and pointing-out instructions [traditional Buddhist form of teaching]. The things he was giving as far as pointing-out instructions were just really direct."

It was three days after I came back home, and I was sitting in the living room. I didn't know that I'd lost myself. I'd been trying to do the Dzogchen thing, but I didn't know I'd succeeded until the self started to reform itself. I was sitting there, and suddenly I noticed that something was missing: a whole organizing sense of centricity... Along with a sense of centricity that wasn't there, there was a whole set of habits of organizing experience that weren't there.

As soon as I noticed it I freaked.

Over a period of about two or three seconds I watched it come back, and I got to see this amazing restructuring of my experience, out of where it had just

been, back into my familiar mode of having a centered self. So, experientially - metaphorically - it was like my vision was contracting. It was a sense of large space contracting down to tunnel vision. A little more analytically; apparently a lot of automatic associations that I have to things hadn't been functioning, and I got to see them come back.

I don't know whether that experience is the dissolution of the self or not, but it was certainly the cessation of concern with my self. Personally, I can't see any difference. I don't see anything to the self except this excessively structured concern with the self.

It happened so fast, and it's been 12 years now, [so] I don't exactly remember the details of what kind of structure I saw come back, but I know there was a structure of self concern. All my daily concerns about survival, and career, and relationships, and worry, worry, worry, worry. I saw them come back as a way of structuring my awareness, and I suppose it was scary to be without them. Something [became] scary about that experience when I discovered that I was having it.

I asked Peter if he could identify what it was in him that was scared. He said:

If I was to put it in my body, I would think it would be my throat or in the middle of the head. Probably throat. It definitely seemed like some sort of survival fear: "Can I survive without a self, or whatever that was?" "Can I survive?" And is that concern the same as the demand to maintain the self.

The Dzogchen teachings, followed by this experience, started a relationship with

Choje Rinpoche:

I kept seeing him a lot, and I made various aspiration prayers that were scary, in a sense, to feel that kind of dedication again to Buddhism. [For example], I said: "I want to show everybody that I know about this." Then, a month later, I got to arrange a talk for him at [the university] and 150 people came. It was just kind of remarkable to see those things fruit like that.

.....

At the same time, the new job was interesting. And that fall I got real interested in organizing the Greens [political party] and there was this whole beginning of a lot of political stuff, which was also an expansion of hope or aspirations of some sort. We were trying to come out of the '80s. Trying to kill the damn '80s.

The following year - all through 1990 - was just amazingly transformative for me. I had some transpersonal experiences that changed my feeling about my place on earth and the future of the planet. And I started doing the Mantok Chia [teacher in the Taoist tradition] practices. A lot of stuff was really changing.

I asked Peter if that experience of having been without an organizing sense of self

had stayed with him as some kind of reference point.

Yes. A lot. Just knowing that that had happened meant that it was real and possible in a way that I couldn't have believed if it hadn't happened. And I couldn't understand it at all - still can't. It changed me to know that that was actually possible. And it probably freed me up some to know that it had happened more or less through beginner's mind - without a lot of practice.

I also wondered if he'd had similar experiences since that time:

Never like that. No. The process has been very different since then. Which is partly why I question the talk about experience. I wonder if it could ever happen the same way again. What seems to have happened since then is more of an integrative osmotic coming to terms with.... and slowly letting go of this obsessive self concern. I've never again had such an experience that's so dramatic.

I don't know why not. I assumed that I'd have increasing numbers of experiences like that, and I haven't. It seems as though I jumped to something, and what I've been doing ever since is the expansion of my ability to feel and believe in various kinds of connections that are larger than the self that I had before. A loosening of my idea of self. But, although I've tried to do various kinds of intensive knock-myself-over-the-head work, I've never had an experience like that again.

*M: I'm curious about whether there's a longing in you to re-experience that.*

No. Not now. That's funny, there's not.

*M: Was there?*

Yes, for a couple of years, at least when I practiced I wanted to get that back. It was that touchstone of what I thought was real practice... [exhale and long pause]

It's kind of scary to me that I don't crave that any more. It's like that was a direction or a touchstone. And I guess I feel kind of sad about something.

At the moment the distinction of the experience of self or no-self doesn't seem like an important distinction. It just doesn't matter. I don't even feel like I know myself. Looking at that distinction - I can say: "OK, so I'm completely off the path if this kind of stuff doesn't matter to me any more. I don't care about self, no-self." But I don't think that can be true because I'm still terribly fascinated with Buddhism and transpersonal psychology. It's not like the whole field doesn't matter to me. But the distinction, self and no-self, seems to be more of a philosophical one now. I just sort of take it for granted there's no self.

.....

I see myself as this complex of needs, instincts, habits, genetics, and drive, and biochemistry, and evolution and whatever - and there's no self in there.

.....

When I look at the things that I have felt to be my self at various times, they were mostly fear - which leads to a certain kind of self concern - and some kind of



desire for something; expansion, maybe. So there's fear that defines itself and then there's a kind of striving. [This striving is] whatever it is that has some kind of agenda for the unfolding of its experience. The potential for that dynamic is so powerful.... and it seems to be my deepest sense of what I'm doing here. That seemed to be one of the major things that I would identify with and call my self.

I'm less identified with that than I used to be, so the project of healing that stuff seems more like just a project - it needs to be healed... It's like the self is a mental illness that needs to be healed.

And there's some loosening about the identification with this particular set of [problems]. I can still tell that I am in love with this particular set of problems that defines Peter, more than I'm in love with your set of problems, but it's a little looser than it used to be.

*M: When you say "I'm more in love," what is the "I" that's in love?*

The "I" that's in love with those sorts of problems, if it's something, is not the same as those set of problems, right? It's more like the intention of mind that feels this drive for healing or expansion. So that's coming back to saying one of the meanings of self is this drive for expansion.

Philosophically, I take self to be this floating construct that can attach itself to various kinds of process and energy and identify with them temporarily. So, at one time my self is this involvement with some feeling, and another time it's this involvement with a different feeling... I can talk gestalt and say various powers come up to the foreground and, while they have control of the body and its energies, they get to call themselves "I."

*M: So, in the heat of the moment of being in love with some problem or other, what's the experience?*

Well, often it's desire to get away from suffering. The problem is felt as a pain. So there's this desire to alleviate that pain - move through it somehow.

At this point in our discussion, we began to explore more the ways in which Peter's experience of seeing the self reform or reconstruct itself creates the way that he is making meaning today:

It convinced me that all the stuff I'm talking about is not just philosophy, that there's some big shift in experience that happens, or can happen. A human can function in a way that is really different from anything I thought was possible.

*M: Say a little bit more about that.*

Well, I can't really understand how a human can function without an obsessive concern for structuring the world... If you don't structure the world, how can you

possibly survive? That's what it seems like thinking is for.... to structure the world in order to make a model and survive.

So it was shocking to see that the mind could function some other way. I haven't had enough experience of that to know how that would work but, as I watched the self reform, it didn't seem that I was gaining anything in terms of actual intelligence [laughs] it just seemed like more filters were coming back on my awareness. So the experience showed me that there is another way of functioning other than everything I know about.

In spite of this loosening of my belief structure, I don't [continue to] have that kind of experience. So if I hadn't had that experience, I would never have known that experience [laughs]. I mean, I'm sure my belief structures [wouldn't] have loosened nearly as much without having seen that mind functions without that self obsession.

.....

I haven't had any experiences of no-mind like that ever again, as far as I know. I've had lots of expansion experiences where my self becomes temporarily bigger, like identification with the world mind and with the evolution of the world mind, but those were like intense identification.

*M: So that takes "I" into a different frame...*

This is the two different senses of "I" that I've been trying to talk about. Yeah. One is that it's the break down of boundaries and exclusivity so there's an expansion. The other one is where identification can somehow disappear.

Our conversation moved to a consideration of these experiences in terms of spiritual learning and practice and, specifically, in the context of Vajrayana Buddhism which Peter continues to practice. Since moving to northern Arizona, he has been studying with Garchen Rinpoche, a Buddhist monk and teacher from eastern Tibet who has established a center near Prescott.

What I've come to now is that I've finally started believing in the connection with the guru. Sometimes, when I'm around [Garchen] Rinpoche, I get a sense that's somewhat like my original experience. [A sense] of knowing intimately enough that it's all not what I think, so that part of my mind - that framing, obsessive part of my mind - just gives up. I don't just know that he knows expandedness, I know that he knows the no-reference point.

This is very strange territory to try to say what's going on in a relationship like that. Is it that I know that there's no reference point, and I project it onto him because he can hold the projection, and I'm willing to do that? Or is it that.... the self sense in both of us just breaks down so that we participate in the same understanding? Does that understanding come from the breakdown of the self

sense and the sharing with somebody's mind? There are so many questions I could ask about how that works.

What Choje Rimpoche was trying to do.... was mind transmission. I had a couple of seconds of it from him that first Dzogchen weekend. There was one time when I was listening to him talk, and I saw what this was about and I felt my eyes change as I looked at him. He looked at me, and he just stopped talking for three or four seconds and just stared at me. That was my transmission. It was like a recognition that the understanding was right.

So maybe those experiences with gurus are similar to the one I had when I was sitting. I feel like the completely clear openness is in all those experiences, but maybe somewhat obscured in all of them, too. I recognize that they all have the same essence, but they're not quite the same experience. I [also] keep knowing that those are closer to the essence of complete openness, which is what I feel is the no-self mind.

My whole vocabulary is just so Buddhistic. It's hard for me to find any other vocabulary.

I asked Peter how this knowing of the mind's compulsive and continuous reconstruction of a sense of self influences how he thinks and feels about the "other", particularly people who are close to him:

Well. That's a scary question... It makes me want to go eat, and drink, and run away. [laughs] Got any snacks? [laughs]

Well, I want relationships to acknowledge that this whole transformative path is extremely complicated and unpredictable, and I don't want to be tied down too much by somebody's concepts about me. And I don't want to tie down anybody else by my concepts about them too much. What I'm trying to do now is strip down relationships to some kind of more simple way of connecting.... a few simple intentions, like to try to be affectionate and interesting. [laughs]

I know that - related to this summer's [meditation] retreat, for instance - there was this sense of big-ness of mind in the first couple of weeks where lots of this obsessive structuring of who I am, and what's possible in relationships, and stuff, just looked really dumb. I wanted to be without it. So .... where that self is trying to go now is relationships that don't confine each other so much.

*M: You said "obsessive structuring". I don't understand what you mean. Just give me an example.*

Ah. Like - is it possible to do the kind of expansion that I need to be doing right now and live with [friend], or do I need to move out in order to do that?

*M: And the obsessive structure would be that you have to have a framework for that relationship? Or name for it?*

Right... and that everybody else will have a name for it, too, and will always be looking to see who we are together. Will anybody else get involved with me if I'm involved with [friend], you know? Or is everybody else all worried about inter-personal politics and a lot of projection?

It feels comparatively fresh to be out of all that kind of thinking. Which sure doesn't mean that I feel really clear. When somebody wants to do that kind of thinking at me - about me - I react really defensively and just want to push it all away and say: "That's not what I want to do."

.....

This stuff that I'm trying to push my way through is this cognitive structuring of my life, and all these assumptions about what relationships get to be, and what they can't be. So I suppose my ideal relationship - which I crave as the next form of my expansion project - is the relationship with the dakini [female spiritual protector]. That has got to be like the relationship with the guru except you'd have sex in it. By that I mean totally simple. I mean a really simple experience without all these thoughts about relationship.

So what I'm involved in is trying to tear down all these thoughts about relationship that have been so oppressive all my life; all this family dynamic shit.

*M: So there's still a piece of this that I feel that I want to get at... In seeing, or coming to recognize, or at least questioning the validity of self as a concept, what does that mean in the way that you see an other?*

Right. I see others... as just like me. [laughs] I see people as some sort of bundle of propensities, drives, and habits. People make sense to me to the extent that they're identifying with that expansion process... If they're placing themselves as ... if their life is some kind of sacred project, it makes sense to me. If people aren't doing that, I think they're evading.

*M: Evading? Not just asleep, but evading?*

Evading, yes. I don't see anybody as asleep... I don't see how anybody can not notice this... What people are doing seems so clearly designed to avoid things rather than just being [asleep].

*M: So what relates? What is relating?*

What I feel is that you're just me. It's the same person relating, and somehow we have slightly different confusions. I guess, philosophically, I feel this is what everybody wants. When they think they want this [union], they want to be able to see through to where the other person is the same as them. That's why they get so upset with all their differences. That could be interpreted as everybody wants to deny that there is any other. Everybody would like to just be themselves. However one interprets it, it seems to me that's what we want - to see through to being the same *one* of us.

So that's what I think is who is relating - it's actually me.

I have trouble seeing this with most people, but with you I can see. Let me look a little more. [Peter looks at me. Long inhale and exhale.] See, if I look and discover that I don't know who you are at all, it's more evident that I don't know who I am at all, either.

.....

[Silence and a long breath. There's a welling up of emotion in us both with the transparent awareness of the moment.] My way of thinking about this now is that there's just one of us, and it's Buddha or somebody like that. I don't know how to reconcile that sense that there is *one* of us with the experience of non-structured and non-centered consciousness. I mean, philosophically, I can say that there's this function of identification with certain parts of my process, and that potentially it seems like there's consciousness in the whole process, and *this* expansion project is getting more conscious.

So all that's like expanding identification. It doesn't explain why there's some sense of identification at all. I suppose I would say that some sense of something that we call ... self-awareness has some sort of coherence. Maybe, to the extent that awareness is constricted, coherence is more localized in some place than another, and that gives some sense of separation, and a self comes out of that.

If awareness was not localized, I don't know if the self concept would arise... When I say, "We're all Buddha." I also think: "Well, the Buddha and the creation are one." Is it possible to talk about a consciousness - a Buddha, or a Christ, or whatever - without its embodiment, or not? To the extent that there is embodiment in the universe, there are restrictions of consciousness to some relatively localized field. From that comes this delusion that consciousness is inherently localized, and you get a centric sense.

I don't know if all that's true or not...

.....

At an emotional level, I feel like love is just this process of overcoming boundaries, or ... it's a recognition of the existing unity. [pause - long exhale] To the extent that I don't live in that unification all the time, when I come back to it I tend to cry for some reason. [laughs, sighs] [My friend] used to think I was just terribly sentimental about things because whenever I'd get into holy space I would cry, and she would say: "It's just the way it is. What's there to cry about? What are you crying about? It's beautiful. What's the deal?"

The rising of the emotion just has something to do with, like, looking at you, and presence, and wondering who you are, and not being able to get any idea except that you're the same as me. I can't say where that comes from. Then the mystery of that makes me cry when I haven't been doing it for a while.

And also I [cry] because somehow this separation seems sad. You know? I look at you, and you look defended. You look like you're in the mystery, but you also look isolated somehow. And so it seems sad.

I asked Peter to stay with this feeling-thinking state and to explore what it means

to know both the unity and the separation at the same time - as parts of the same

wholeness. As we talked, I used the metaphor of veils to describe what it is that separates and isolates us from one another.

Well, there's this mystery of how unity and the separation manage to coexist at the same time. I certainly don't think you ever get to unity by just trying to peel away all the veils. It's like the unity eventually just proclaims itself even if the veils aren't gone.

I think the veils are like onion skins, and there are plenty of them. [But] when you see that the unity is there, in spite of the veils, it changes the experience of what you're doing by having to deal with veils. You don't expect to be able to get perfection on the veil level, but in some way there's perfection somewhere, somehow, at the same time. This is what I was talking about when I said that people who somehow frame their life as a sacred project I can get along with, and everybody else I have trouble with because it seems like they're so evasive. I can't hold their awareness very well if somebody is totally involved in their evasion of it, or their identification with veil space.

I can't find any way to relate, except through the veil, when somebody's wanting to do a veil relationship. I figure I need to do that out of respect for them, or something, so I do it for a while, and it's very frustrating. Whereas, if there's some perception of the unity, then dealing with the veils becomes just a matter of a joint process of unfolding them, or letting them get looser, or something like that.

So it brings me back to what kind of relationships I want right now. Which is involved more with deconstructing the veils together than with trying to get them right. [laughs]

.....

This has to do with why I'm not very interested in intellectualism any more ... All the concepts are veils. You attempt to perfect the concepts, and it just seems like not exactly as fruitful a project as I used to think it was. [laughs]

As we neared the end of our first session, I asked Peter how he was feeling. I had become aware of some emotionality and a shifting in his presence as he was talking.

I feel like I'm up against my edge of everything I know. I don't know that I know any more... We've talked me into some kind of yearning for process right now. Some kind of emotional process.

.....

I suppose one of the un-deconstructed parts of my organism is still the sexuality. It's this sense of what do you do when you drop the constructs? My mind goes right to physical contact. It seems like a kind of reality in which I still need to play for some reason.

*M: And physical contact is synonymous with sexuality for you?*

Everything is synonymous with sexuality for me right now [laughs]... In the universe everything is synonymous with sexuality, so physical contact is synonymous with sexuality...

That emotion is.... just longing to be able to stay in that sacred recognition of oneness. In that recognition the urge to play comes. And I'm not very good at playing in words; it always gets too serious. I want to play physically, and I'm not very good at playing physically, either, so then there's the sexual structure that gives it a form and an energy to go with.

Our first session was cut short by the arrival of visitors, so although our scheduled time was over, we didn't complete the flow of thought that had arisen at that moment.

### Second Session

We next met two weeks later and quickly dropped into the spirit of our previous conversation. We started the session with Peter reflecting on the ways in which his experience of losing a framework of self has affected his being in the world and, in particular, his sense of life purpose or mission.

I know this experience made me less grasping at myself. I know that it was connected with some of those openings, that happened in the next year or two, of ecological work and concern with the earth. Part of the way it's connected is that sense that "I" is living in a bigger intelligence. This intelligence is not just a product of me or an attribute of this narrowly constructed self. The self could be gone and there was still intelligence, or more intelligence.

Partly from trying to understand that, and partly, maybe, from an immersion in it for a short time, I started to have more trust that the world was alive. It was just shortly after that that a bunch of symbols came into my mind that I turned into some kind of meditation practice that had to do with expansion and connection. It seemed, after that experience, that a lot of new things came into my life that seemed to be given to me by some set up that wanted me to have a way of practice that I didn't have and a new understanding.

Life mission: I know that [for] a few years immediately after that experience I became a lot more interested in saving the world. That's what all of the '90s, until '97, were about for me - trying to save the world in various ways. First that was Green politics, then it was the Internet... It included finding the breathwork and starting the [Holotropic Breathwork] training.

I started the breathwork without much of an idea of personal healing. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I was fairly opaque to the idea of emotional healing. I was too blocked to know what that was. I was just interested.

I wanted to expand my consciousness. I'd read a lot of Stan's books. I'd read *Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution*, that anthology of writings, and had this sense of connection between Stan's work and saving the world. I'd been convinced for decades that the problem with the world was the need for expanded consciousness, [and] a necessary part of the transformation had to be the expansion of consciousness. So I went into the breathwork training from that point of view...

At the time I started the training I thought maybe I was going to change careers and take up some kind of psychological career. Then, four months later, [the creation and development of] Veronica [Internet search engine] came along and that totally occupied me for three or four years as something important and worth doing. So I just forgot about changing careers.

.....

I need to talk about another experience. I've talked about the experience of no-self. But I haven't talked about the experience of expanded self, which happened a year after that.

This was a vision that I had; a vision of the transformational crisis of the world mind. I had been doing meditation practice that, as I said, came to me spontaneously shortly after the original no-self experience. I had some symbols of light and certain ways of connecting that became my meditation practice. Among those symbols was the apple tree in the back yard which seemed to channel a certain kind of light power which I'd never noticed before in a tree. I could really connect with that tree. I really became convinced that that tree and I were meditating together. That was one of the things that held for me a connection with the biosphere.

At a certain point I [was meditating] that my mind was not an individual thing, but my mind as I experienced it was the outgrowth of the life process of earth. I didn't have some sense of a cosmic consciousness. This was definitely earth. I knew myself as an organic being, and I knew my mind as the thinking of the biosphere. I felt that there was a holy mission. Somebody had to think for the earth. When I said that, in the context of practice, it wasn't like somebody had to think about how to organize politics or technology or something - think for the earth in that sense - somebody had to think *as* the earth. It was like the planetary biosphere mind was just dreaming. To bring more self awareness to that was this task that I'd been given.

So the way I would meditate was that I would find myself sitting there in the back yard connected with that apple tree and the sky. The apple tree was holding energy that I later understood in the tantric iconography [teachings to transform the gross body speech and mind into a state of enlightenment] was the vase that they use in all those [Tibetan ritual practices]. So I'd find myself not holding any of these thoughts as those of the small self that I thought I was, but whatever thoughts came to me, I recognized as the thinking of the planet. I seemed to become aware that there were lots of other people doing that too - maybe thousands of people. I didn't know how many, but it seemed that there must be other people doing that. So [I was] knowing the unity of the world mind and also the individuality of these humans who were intending to heal the world



mind by recognizing these thoughts as the thoughts of the world mind and therefore coming out of the dream.

.....

That was the context of the meditation practice that I was doing. Then, one day, it went into a vision. I experienced it as a crisis of a mind - of the relation of the world mind and the human collective mind. All these cultural contradictions of humans destroying their biosphere reached un-deniability, finally. The old critical mass cliché: when enough people realize that the culture's not sustainable, that's one thing, but when enough people realize that enough other people have *also* realized it, they suddenly get empowered to say so.

So in my vision this rising awareness was coincident with, and the catalyst for, breaking these boundaries between the sense of separate-self minds, and people waking up to the reality of the collective mind. It was like something that had built up below the surface of consciousness and then suddenly breaking through to awareness where millions of people say to themselves: "Oh, millions of other people are thinking like I am. Stop believing in all that denial bullshit. Acknowledge things they way they are." Then some growing sense of power, and empowerment.

So I just had this vision of a period of nine or ten days when the world mind of humans went through this transformation. How the powers that be tried to spin it for about three or four days, and everybody just turned off their television because they knew the truth, and they didn't want to hear that bullshit any more. My sense was that this was all catalyzed by ecological crisis, and the eco-crisis was not deniable, and out of it came this mass awakening to the experience of being a collective, so to speak.

So the first act, essentially, of the unified mind of people was realizing that they'd come just to the brink of destroying their biosphere. This was like the scream of awareness. They'd just run over the edge - like in a cartoon - out into space. The content of the scream was: "Bring back the garden." Which I think defines the project around which people will awake.

So this was a very altered state of consciousness I was in. I had the conviction that I was fractally experiencing *now* something that everybody was going to experience *eventually*.... and it transcends time in some way. So maybe this, as an historical event, will happen in 2029, or whenever. I got it in 1989. It's just spread out here in time.

So this is where the sense of mission came from - this experience. I had this strong, strong understanding from this of how the mind conditions all this experienced world, both in an immediate meditative sense of creating experience, and in a cultural sense. How much people are living in a cultural world to the exclusion of any other kind of world. They're just living in culture. That's about all they see.

I saw that people are suffering under these delusions brought on by more than millennia, by millions and millions of years of karma [the law of cause and effect] of the way that we've evolved in this biosphere. The hardship of struggle. Millions of years of being eaten or eating. Killing, and fighting, and striving, and starving, and being tortured. The whole difficulty of being embodied beings. The

delusions and contractions that have accumulated around the history of experience.

I saw quite clearly that we're beyond all of that. Our minds actually have gone beyond that. We're actually out of that. That's actually not our historical situation now. The only problem with that now [is that we] are holding onto - continuing to process - all those delusions. We're out. I saw us as out of that. We have, as a species, transcended our millennial karma.

.....

I saw all the things that people think of as traps, that lead them into doing the wrong things, as simply not having seen through to the fact that it's all past now. I had this huge wish - this huge heart wish - for everybody to see this and just drop it. Those Palestinians and those Israelis - just drop it. We're out. We can make a new world now because it's already here. We're a species that's got this incredible mind, and we're using it for these really crazy purposes because we're still believing that our situation is something that it's not anymore. We're still implicitly thinking as though we're some sort of lesser animal that doesn't have the options that we actually have.

So my mission came out of this. I've never told anybody this ever before, except once. I felt like the mission that I was given - and I made some sort of pact with the earth - was that I needed to show people the role of their mind in this whole thing. People were going to [continue to] approach all these crises, and politics, and stuff, as though it was some sort of external phenomenon. Unless they saw that it was their mind making all these problems they were going to miss the point. So I made some really deep pact with the earth in that experience.

That defined my mission. I felt like that's why I did the Internet search thing. It just sort of fell in my lap. The whole time I did that I felt completely inflated with this archetype of building some new artifact whose quality was more like that of mind than any artifact that had ever been built before. The structure - the learning that comes out of using the Internet implicates the mind-nature of everything.

*M: And is that mission still alive for you?*

Well, no. I have trouble connecting with this mission any more. I see it as really valuable. It's got to happen. But at some point I felt like it's happening or not happening [with or] without me, and I don't feel very important any more in this thing.

*M: Has anything replaced that?*

Not in the way that I wish that it would. I wish I had something else to do that was that important now. But I don't.

*M: Importance is measured by...?*

...By how fast and how profoundly it's going to work the world change.

Peter expressed deep disappointment and frustration over the lack of support that he experienced for the development of [the Internet] project and his failure to muster the financial backing that was needed. He was also unprepared for the commercialization of the Internet. The vitality that had accompanied the gestation of his project eventually withered to a feeling that he describes as bitterness and depression:

First [the aliveness] went out because of my own inability to build that in a way that I could continue to be involved with. Then, second, there was a sense of colonization when that wave of Internet - which was all idealistic and academic - was finally overrun by commerce in late '95. It was like being colonized by a superior power. So I went into the depression of a colonized people whose culture had been destroyed. We had an Internet culture, and it was destroyed, [and] I went into depression around that.

I asked Peter to talk about the personal exploration and healing [he recently underwent major back surgery] that he has undertaken in the past few years in relation to this loss of connection with his vision. He told me:

Well it's pretty relevant to what I guess this self project means, because that sense of personal ineffectiveness just seemed to develop to the point where I needed to transform my ability to act as an individual. That's taken the most strange directions. I don't know if they're very effective or not.

Peter continued by describing this process of change and his experience of self:

In a way I surrendered to my body and emotions. And in a way that seems so trivial compared to what I was doing before. It doesn't seem like I'm helping anybody except this one being. I feel really diminished in that sense. I also don't feel like I have much choice because I'm just non-functional. I feel like I have to do this really personal and trivial stuff - emotional healing, and physical healing - and I don't really believe that it's important at all. But I'm not able to do anything else at the moment. This is where my life stream has taken me.

*M: Could you say something about your not believing it's important at all?*

It's the oddest thing. It feels compelling. It's what occupies my attention rather than, say, trying to come up with something new to remodel the Internet. It just feels compulsive. It feels like every day I wake up and find myself in this compulsive story that I have to somehow be compelled to live. It doesn't really

help anything. It feels intensely indulgent. Even if it's not fun, it feels self indulgent.

I don't know what to say about its not being important except it's not important. In a way I wonder [if I'm] into a period of life where, by rights, I should have died ecologically. I don't feel like I'm serving any function for the world now. I feel in some way maybe I'm just an old guy, over the hill, who's just hanging on for no good reason. Just working on personal history. That's kind of how I feel about it.

*M: Well, this question comes up of how to work towards the letting go of the self through healing the self.*

Right. That question plays into my assumption that the self is just a mental illness. Letting go of it is healing it. Because what's being healed there is a set of fears and desires. If those are healed, the self is essentially non-operative in that sense.

*M: But to heal emotional wounds, can you do that only through some acknowledgment of something that acts as a self, because that's what's been wounded?.*

No. I don't think that's true... There's a point of view about healing emotional wounds that, in some sense, assumes they're real... There's a point of view that knows well that they're not real, and yet they persist. They [also] exist, but they're not real. That's where I seem to be most of the time.

.....

I know that I'm also working from the other end. It's not just a matter of struggling to work through [these wounds in order to release them]. There's another perspective that those things just need to dissolve. Both perspectives are real and they're like different ends of the process. I think they're both happening simultaneously.

*M: And yet that feels like it's not important - a waste of time?*

Well, I can definitely make a case why it would not be a waste of time. But how it *feels* is that it's a waste of time. Sure, I've known many times that my personal experience is fractally related to the [collective] experience, and all that. There were times, particularly in the middle '90s, when I did have a very strong sense of that - that my ability to push through my personal blockages was crucially related to the ability of the world mind to push through its blockages... I really had a feeling that those changes that I needed to go through then were important to the world. That's how I experienced them. Same issues. How could I expect anybody else to do it if I didn't do it?

But that's not how it feels now. I think it might be true, but how this feels is really trivial - unimportant and yet compelling.

*M: I feel you're frustrated by it. Can you tell me what that is?*

Part of it is that I have no choice to be doing anything but to be doing what I'm doing now. I don't like that. It's frustrating. I wish I did have a choice to make my actions mean more than they seem to mean now. But it doesn't feel like I have a choice. [long silence followed by a deep sigh]

I mean, day after day I make resolutions to get up early, set my mind on a particular thing, and try to be really focused and creative. And day after day that's not what I do. I get up, and drink tea, and I have to go in the garden and hang out with the flowers and just pull in the chi [life force] and, literally, that's all I can do.

*M: Do you feel something akin to guilt or responsibility that you're not moving?*

I don't feel like I'm being responsible at all. No. I suppose I think I should be. I mean it seems what I'm really doing for the last year is just working with the trivia of learning how to have a domestic life for the first time. How do you get furniture? How do you arrange your bedroom? Learn more about cooking and stuff that I don't think is basically very important. But that seems to be the content of what I'm doing. Shall I buy another pair of sheets or not?

So, yeah, I feel guilty about that.

I could make some case for discovering my sexuality more maybe - sounds a little more juicy than figuring out where do people buy lamps - and it feels just as un-new as the other. Everybody has had sexual problems for ever. I just happen to be retarded enough that I'm having to work on them now. That doesn't impress me too much.

I asked Peter what it is that stops him from getting involved with groups or projects that offer the possibility of excitement, and he told me that he feels that his being, the whole that is made up of "my history, my organism, my skills, my confidence - all that stuff - is not adequate to be part of that change any more. [There's] some sense of inadequacy, or un-safety."

I feel really quite bad about having given in to that and opting to play the life of this scared animal. When I was at [graduate school] a lot of stuff was up. One of the things that got to me was I realized how little my mind was actually in that project. How much of my mind was in this emotional, relationship, self-healing process, rather than the intellectual project... Other people would be really fascinated, and I wasn't fascinated any more. I'm not sure why. Somehow it turned so that it seemed like my body is more compelling than any ideas... So it's really hard to do any of this work that's very intellectual.

*M: Do you have longings?*

I don't know. Right now I've uncovered something that's really kind of shocking to me. It's like I came to [Arizona] to die, you know? Just felt like I couldn't hack it any more, so I just retired. I don't quite see, when I look at people who seem to be very effective now, how they've managed to integrate their sense of personal embodied life with the work life and the intellectual life. I don't know how they've done that. I just feel like I've failed, you know?

I know there's lots of people who are unhappily working, and so forth. But there are also a few people I know who really have got it integrated, who are really excited about doing this work from the point of view that I talked about. And I'm not one of them any more. I'm kind of appalled.

For the first time in my life, [I'm] thinking that the purpose of working is to make enough money to get by, and stuff like that. I never thought that before. The purpose of working was to change the world. Now, for the first time, I think that the purpose of a career is to buy a house and have a comfortable life, or something. And that seems like a real come down. Some real descent into self constriction.

At this point we stopped our conversation because Peter had to leave for a meeting. The next morning we met briefly to complete the session with a wrap-up of the topics that we had covered. In this process, Peter added these final reflections about his present situation:

I do know that what's going on for me now seems to have to do with catching up with ways of embodiment that I neglected before, but what that has to do with those experiences [of no-self] is not at all clear. It just seemed to be some sort of personal healing that had to be done because I perceived that my neglect of some aspects of my embodied life seemed to be turning rather rancid. I had to do something about that. So that seems to be a big part of motivation and purpose right now.

.....

My longing seems to have just folded into simple things, like healing my back, and being touched, and getting to look at the birds, and the rocks, and stuff that just seems really ordinary.

I think I get a lot of satisfaction out of teaching; helping various people psychologically, or emotionally occasionally. There's a few people that I'm connected to that I'm helpful to in their growing wisdom or dharma practice. That's important to me. That seems to be juicy. Though I don't seem to be longing for much except for comfort. And somehow getting fully embodied. That's all I'm longing for. It's weird. Totally weird. [laughs]

I really can't explain that longing in terms of.... my past experiences. The longing for simplicity. Or not even the longing for simplicity - it's just the settling into simplicity.

### Reflections After Meeting with Peter

In 1998, I decided to step back from my doctoral studies and moved to northern Arizona to go to massage school. It was an idea that I'd had from time to time, that working with the body might be a more authentic way to engage, rather than continuing to work in ways that seem to strengthen the conceptual mind. I felt the need to cultivate my awareness in ways that were intuitive and non-conceptual.

I was also overwhelmed by a deep and emotional state of being that pervaded every aspect of my life. My capacity for critical thinking or intellectual creativity seemed to be gone, and I had no will to engage. My soul was raw and hyper-sensitive to suffering on personal and interpersonal levels. The costs of cultural superficiality and avoidance seemed too much to bear. Something was stirring inside, but the movement felt as though it was tearing me apart. My body was shaking, and my heart felt broken.

The six months of massage school created gentle containment for this "melt down". My life became radically simple: a rented room in a house shared with two friends; a subsistence budget; the daily structure of classes; and the continuous experience of touching and being touched. In some sense it was a time of purification. My diet simplified and I ate only organic food, I was introduced to flower essences and essential oils, and I surrendered into the heat and dryness of the desert.

As a backdrop to all this was the awareness of my dissertation topic. Although my proposal wasn't completed, I knew the theme, and it seemed to focus my awareness. It was as if everything that I experienced - conversations, sensations, and memories in body

work, even the noticing of birds or plants - were infused with this inquiry into the self and no-self.

In a sense, who I thought I was began to evaporate or slough off. Like Dorothy pulling back the curtain to reveal the real wizard of Oz, I began to see through some of the stories that I had been telling myself about who I am and to recognize, in a more experiential way than ever before, the empty structure that they hang on - the habitual patterns of my mind.

What arose out of this was not clarity, but some sort of deep disorientation. My capacity for any kind of analysis fell away, and my memory failed alarmingly. On the one hand, here was this experience of living very much moment to moment; aware in a somewhat detached way of all that was emerging and falling away. On the other, there was a feeling of almost panic. I felt incapable of engaging coherently with most of the people in my life, let alone continuing to participate in the doctoral program at CIIS.

The seamless illusion of self was clearly becoming a little threadbare, but rather than being a blissfully liberating experience, it often felt as if I were drifting into some arid existential wasteland. How could a life so full feel so meaningless?

As it turns out, the dissertation, which often I've felt as an insufferable burden, has become a friend reminding me to approach everything from an inquiring stance. Reading, talking with friends and, more recently, hearing the stories told by the co-inquirers, shows me that my experience is not new; not unique in any way. The disconnection and dis-orientation are among the experiences that people report when the beliefs about I and self are fractured in one way or another and that fracturing is brought to consciousness.



What is disoriented? It seems that the ontology of self, that acted as the magnetic center for habitual mental patterns, has shifted slightly or is losing power. As the draw of that center changes, so do the patterns of self referencing. In a way, my mind no longer knows itself or its relationship to others quite so clearly.

Against this strangely disrupted state of being, the workings of the personality and the powerful conditioning of emotional responses are thrown into strong relief. Here the experience of body work and somatic awareness helps to guide my attention to the subtle changes that accompany - and even precede - mental reaction within my body. Fear, excitement, anger, anxiety all come with their own stories enfolded deep within the flesh and bones, cells and molecules, that make up me: my personality. When the stories of my being mix it up with the stories of your being, all kinds of reactions happen.

What seems really important nowadays is to unlearn my embodied stories enough so that I can be in the presence of an other without falling into some kind of habitual reaction. By this I mean bringing awareness to the point of union between somatic response and conditioning - that movement from response into habitual pattern.

Questions flow: How to do this practice of continuous awareness and function in the daily business of living? Should this work be done alone or in the company of others? Can I trust my inner wisdom in this, or do I need a guide or teacher? Then the questions subside into a kind of acceptance that this is an unfolding that seems to have its own intelligence - and its own humor. Immersed in this dissertation, I could not be in a more perfect classroom! There really is nothing other than being.

## Introduction

The meetings with Rex turned out to be a bit of a logistical challenge for both of us. Early on, we had a long and satisfying conversation by telephone in order to find out whether or not we felt a shared interest in the inquiry. Getting together in person proved more difficult. His schedule and mine seemed to be persistently at odds, and that was compounded by the fact that we live in different states. We finally arranged our first meeting at the time that I was getting together for the second session with the two other participants who live in California.

Interestingly, the obstacles to our work together continued in that meeting, this time because I inadvertently reversed the tape two-thirds of the way through the session and lost a sizable portion of our conversation. We decided to record our second meeting over the telephone, but at the first try I discovered that my recording equipment wasn't working properly. Eventually we recorded the second session in mid January after I had already drafted the retelling of the other four co-inquirers' stories.

Because I lost part of his story during the first session, I asked Rex to re-tell it in our phone meeting, consequently the sequence of his reflections was less linear than those of the other co-inquirers. Rather than presenting Rex's story in the order that it eventually unfolded, I have woven together the transcripts of our two sessions. The weaving helps to re-capture some of the original flow but, unlike the other stories, I do not make a distinction between the first and second sessions.

During the time that we were trying to schedule and reschedule our meetings, Rex sent me two manuscripts that he had previously written about his experiences in non-

ordinary states of consciousness. One, written as a letter to a friend, described an extraordinary healing experience in which he entered into the painful wounding relationship with his biological mother and, in doing so, discovered the loving relationship with the cosmic Mother. In the second manuscript he tells the full story of a holotropic experience: "The Miracle of July." During our meetings Rex referred a number of times to this event, and in the following re-telling of his story I have used an excerpt from his writing.

We met at Rex's home in the San Francisco Bay Area. He lives very simply in a basement apartment that he has been remodeling on a steep street overlooking the Pacific. We got together late in the evening and, because it was dark and I was a little concerned about finding my way, he walked out to the street to meet me. As he led the way back into his home, I was immediately taken by both his quiet warmth and a sense of shyness.

We settled in with a cup of tea and, particularly during the pauses in our conversation, I was aware that he had a local jazz station playing quietly in the background - every now and then the music would be interrupted by a little static when a plane flew over. Other than this there was a sense of deep quiet which I welcomed after the intensity of driving in unaccustomed traffic.

### Rex's story

Rex works by himself as an independent builder. In the past, he owned a small construction company, but he had to give that up when his financial situation fell apart.

Describing his life before losing the company he says:

I was married for 17 years. I was a contractor. I had a business. I had a partner - a business partner. I was never successful. Basically I had no friends - I don't have a whole lot of friends now, but I have some friends. I'm out there in the world a lot more. [Then] I had no social life. I spent most of my time with my ex-wife. If the phone rang I'd let her answer it. If the phone would ring I'd be scared. If anybody suggested I go to a party or something I'd figure out a way not to. For many, many years I used to take drugs. I used to take codeine, and sleeping pills every night to sleep. I drank. All to push down that global fear that I had of people.

I had all this energy. I've always a huge amount of energy. I'm also lazy, so it's a paradox. I'm a Taurus, you know? Tauruses are lazy farmers. I'm not. I'm a totally unconventional type of person. I just want to lay around and do nothing and yet I have mars conjunct sun so I want to be doing something all the time. The thing that saved me was I started running.

I started running originally because I was starting to gain weight. I was 29, and I was starting to get a belly. Eating fast food, and everything, for all those years, it came to a point where it was just starting to show. I tried dieting, and I couldn't do it. So I started running, and after three months - maybe six months - I ran my first marathon. I was crazed with it.

When I was on the street [homeless] for a while I didn't run, but other than that I've run just about the whole time. I just run a few miles every day. It's very little compared with what I used to do, but it's great. I love running. I used to go out and run for five or six hours in the mountains, on the trails, once a week or something like that. I'd run 60 or 70 miles a week for a real short period of time when I was really training like crazy.

That's one of the things that saved me. The other thing that saved me, in a way, was I just used to use the drugs to push down my feelings all the time.

Rex began seeing a therapist in 1989 and, five years later, began working with Holotropic Breathwork. His life has been challenging in many ways during the past decade. During that time he ended his marriage, declared bankruptcy, and lost his business. For a short time, he ended up living on the streets in San Francisco. As Rex speaks of these years, however, it is clear that he also sees them - however difficult - as a

time of profound learning and change, including a significant shift in his willingness to consider something other than a material reality.

It's very interesting because, a lot of the time - I would say probably the greater part of my time in the world - I have believed in jack shit. I don't believe in God. I think it's just a bunch of shit. And then there are times when I feel absolutely convinced that there is the divine - I'm not even sure what it is that gets me from one of those states of consciousness to another - and then it's almost as if I always believe in God.

The reason I bring that up is because that's something that I think about a lot. The only reason I do think about it lot, of course, is because of the experiences that I've had since I began breathwork. Maybe a little bit before. About 1990... Around the time when I first started to read Jung, and I first went into talk therapy. I think I was around 40 years old, and I was just getting to the point where I was feeling - I was seeing - my own mortality. I was being confronted with that. It scared the shit out of me, and I was petrified. It seems to me that that probably had something to do with why I was launched onto the whole path. Though I've never actually put that into that context before.

The first sessions of breathwork - about 12 in all - were "absolutely magnificent experiences." Rex was working with a facilitator in the Bay Area who had an enormous capacity for gentleness and support: "He's got this bodhisattva [enlightened being who chooses to reincarnate to help all beings become free] character, and he saved my ass." This facilitator's compassionate nature was especially important because Rex regularly experienced fear in being with other people.

I was petrified of being in any kind of group. I didn't have any problem going into the non-ordinary state and going mostly into birth stuff. I didn't have a lot of fear of that. I had the most incredible sort of joy going into those places of just catharting, because I'd been holding myself in for so many years - in a petrified place. But I had an absolute terror of talking in groups. [There'd be] ten people before my turn - I'd watch him going around the group, and when it would come to my turn I'd just be petrified. Then it would usually be pretty transformative when I actually did start to talk because I usually was able to communicate - not always but almost always.

The initial experience that Rex described, in which his sense of identity opened beyond the self into the transpersonal, took place at a two-week module during the

breathwork training. Rex speaks of the whole module as a time of learning and calls it “The Miracle of July.” The whole session seemed filled with experiences that evolved and built to a final intense moment of union. He starts speaking about a meeting that he had with one of the facilitators:

There was one core experience where something shifted, and it was just the most amazing thing. I was in a consultation with [facilitator], and I had been going through incredible stuff. I was desperately in love with this woman who was in the training. I thought that she was in love with me, too. Well, it turned out that she wasn't. It didn't matter, but at the time I thought that she was. Everybody in the group was incredibly supportive of my process. Even [the group leader] said that that was a really, really special two weeks. The whole setting was absolutely perfect for me allowing myself to come out.

I had this one consultation with [facilitator]. I don't remember what the question was that she'd asked me or what exactly we were talking about, but I remember for a moment we were looking at each other and she was just marvelously open and accepting. Just loving and beautiful. We were looking at each other, and for a minute I closed my eyes. I was just sort of transported to a place of being with my mother when I was maybe four years old, and it was absolute confusion and terror, because my mother was just closed. She was really beautiful, and she was really loving, but she was absolutely not there a lot of the time. There was nothing to hang on to, and she was the only thing I had. My father was just incredible anger and frustration. I was scared to death of my father.

For just a really short time, I was there in that place with my mother and that absolute total confusion and fear.

Then I came out of it, and I opened my eyes. And as I was coming out of it, and opening my eyes, I felt something down here in my solar plexus. Like two halves of a ball is how I've come to describe it. They aren't really together, and they came together. Just like that, and I was whole. It was amazing. Then I opened my eyes, and I looked at [facilitator], and there were tears flowing, and I said: “This work is a miracle.”

You know, you have these trips and you think: “This is the most amazing thing that ever happened.” Then, two weeks later it's like: “Oh yeah, it was something but not that big of a deal.” Every other thing that's happened to me, with maybe one exception, there's been something - there's been some kind of shift or whatever - but not like this. This was just the most amazing thing that ever happened to me. It took this global fear that I have - or had - of being in the world, and it just left me.

The reason I started talking about this is because we were talking about my fear of being in groups. Well, I remember, maybe it was two days later, we were in a big sharing group. I still had some of this fear [inside] of different people. We were in the big group, and I know everybody really well, right? As I

looked at these people, one by one, I'd feel this strange feeling of fear, and anger, and weird things about them, [then] it just went away. It just left, one by one, as I looked. It was, again, the most amazing thing.

Then I had an amazing birth experience. Not a biological birth, but a rebirth with the whole group. The whole group got around me. I was sitting with the woman I was in love with, and I had my hand on her back. This, I think, is probably very close to a no-self experience.

What happened was, I had my hand on her back. Suddenly, I felt myself just go out. I had my eyes open the whole time, and I got this image. Remember the movie 2001? There was an embryo in space? There was also a picture that Stan [Grof] drew at some point, that he shows in his slide show, it looks very similar like an embryo in space. I got that image, that I was this embryo in space with the umbilical cord hanging out and attached to the cosmos. It was just absolutely incredible.

[In his manuscript describing this process, Rex says:  
The phrase "DIVINE CHILD" popped unbidden into mind. Waves of bliss washed over me and when it finally came time to share, Stan and [group leader] turned toward me and I began to talk. ... it feels like I released all the locked up pain and longing of a lifetime. At some point Stan asked me if I would like to have some more contact. I can't remember, but I probably made some wonderfully eloquent reply like "ummmm." And the next thing I knew people had gathered around me, and little by little, everyone gently settled on top of me. It was a short amount of clock time, but it felt like an eternity that I enjoyed this womb. Then people gradually got up and I lay back. My eyes were half opened, half closed, and I mentioned something about fear upon which Stan told me a story the gist of which was something about there being a fine line between when a baby is afraid and when it is thrilled... The next thing I knew lots of hands were under me, and I was being lifted up. In unison, everyone began to make a soft sound. I remember being amazed by all the different sounds that went into making that one sound. Then Stan asked me to make my own sound, the sound of my own power. Slowly I started, and gradually it grew into a deep shamanic chant.]

I think [I] was very close to being just one with the group around me. And not having any preferences for anybody. It was like everybody was just this glow of love, or something like that. Then that opened out into the larger experience of being one with everything.

As he talked, I was aware that Rex was sinking deeply into his memory process, and yet also there was some sense of active energy present. I asked how he felt in his body as he talked.

It's a little scary. It's nice because it was such a wonderful thing to share. It's a little scary because... I guess there's two of me. There's the person that's stuck on a track of doing - getting stuff done and being addicted to these different things, you know? Not substances, but just being set on this path that I know is not really open. I'm just rereading *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* - Jung called it number one and number two personalities. Remember that?

So, number two personality would be the one that's connected to god. Being in line with the number two personality is a wonderful thing, and it's something that I'm able to do fairly often. At least a few times every day [laughs].

I guess, for me, about 99 percent of the time I was unconscious. Now it's only 80 percent of the time, and there's 20 percent of the time where I actually have the objective observer back there that's watching me doing stuff. It's conscious of what's going on. That's mundane, really. It's a big deal, but it's a mundane thing. It's not like times when I feel synchronicities happening or [I'm] high in any kind of way. It's just a mundane thing. Being conscious. Just being aware and awake. It doesn't necessarily feel good either; it's just there.

.....

It's like we somehow learn that consciousness is what's important. Being awake is what's important. Engendering it in any way that we can is what has to *be*, somehow. If I have any philosophy, that's about the extent of it. To just work on consciousness and to work on smiling.

I asked Rex to talk about what he meant by working on smiling:

Well, you know, it's amazing how you can change the energy. Again, this is a very mundane thing - it feels very ordinary. I've got a lot of anger in myself. I could point back to my father, or I could point back to other things that happened when I was a kid. Maybe past lives, or whatever. Sometimes we get the opportunity to work through these things. In non-ordinary states you get the opportunity to work through these things. Then again, there's a huge amount of time when we *don't* have the opportunity to work through these things. We can either continue to be driven by the neurotic stuff, and be angry, or we can decide to smile. [laughs]

So I walk down the street, and I'm angry, and I'm not doing anything about it except staying on that path of being in the compulsion, in the fear, in the need. Going back and forth between those two things. I don't see what's happening around me. Probably I'm putting out bad energy, even though I'm not necessarily trying to. But if I just change it, if I look around at the people that are around me, and I just smile, then I get some changes.

I wondered how Rex connected his experiences in working with non-ordinary states of consciousness - such as "The Miracle of July" - with what he described as this



practice of smiling. He expressed interest in the question and paused for a long time.

Then he laughed:

I don't know what to say.

I used to have this thing happen to me where I'd lose my train of thought, and it used to be terrifying for me. It used to be the most terrifying thing that could ever happen to me. It's in relation to somebody else - somebody watching me. [Just now] I sat for a good minute, and I really didn't know where I was going, and I didn't feel the terror arising. It's not there. So that has a lot to do with the work.

If I hadn't been doing this work, I'd be sort of trapped. If I hadn't been doing this work, the day that I had today would have driven me to drink. I mean it did, for years, and years, and years, I drank and did drugs and stuff...

Another learning that has grown directly out of an experience of non-ordinary consciousness is slowing down. Rex calls this experience "The Spiritual Awakening," and introduced it as a process of "slowing down and watching what was happening."

There was all this fear about things moving too fast and me not watching what I was doing. If I didn't watch what I was doing today, I would have hurt myself a lot of times because there was just all this weird energy. I did hurt myself a couple of times, slightly. But I would have really hurt myself.

Describing the background to this experience, Rex says:

There were a lot of things going on in my life at that time. It was at the end of 1997, which was six months before I wound up getting evicted from my place, where I'd been living for a long time, and then wound up on the street. There was a huge amount of inner turmoil around that time.

My business was at a point where my debt was so great - I had already declared bankruptcy and gone through the bankruptcy - so I didn't have any means. I didn't have any credit cards. I didn't have any way to borrow money or anything. I had two or three jobs going at the same time, and people working for me, and [I was] needing to come up with money on a really regular basis to pay people and [buy] building materials and all that. So there was a lot of stress and fear about everything falling apart. And my tendency was to hide from aspects of that. I'd get ten bills in the mail every day, and I'd just take and dump everything. I was just hiding from the scary aspects of my life, particularly having to do with the stress around the money thing.

.....

That's the background for this experience. I don't know exactly what else was going on that particular day. I remember that I went to sleep in the middle of the day. I went into a really deep sleep, and when I came to, I came to really slowly.

Just coming out of a really deep sleep. I slowly became conscious. I was really, really still, and I was really paying attention to a state that seemed very unusual - very novel or different. Then it became apparent that I was continuing to wake up more and more, and I was becoming more and more conscious... it's hard to describe.

.....

I woke up really groggy, and I almost didn't know where I was at first. Then it was like my consciousness got really, really big - continue[d] to expand out there.

It was crazy. I mean, I've had that a few times now. A few times in breathwork. Have you seen that Hindu thing? A map of consciousness where there are all these concentric lines that extend out? It's an old thing. Not ancient old, but turn-of-the-century old, that somebody drew. Anyway, there's an actual physical feeling that my consciousness was somehow out there. Extended out a ways.

It felt like it kept extending out. It really, really went far out. Not just within the limits of what I could see, but everywhere...

Other times when I've felt expanded consciousness, I've felt something specifically in my head like a glowing feeling around my third eye. Or it would feel like my skin was expanding out... but I don't know that I really felt any of that. I was aware that I was becoming somehow more conscious and continuing to wake up.

.....

What I did was help it. I stayed completely still for a really, really long time. So I went from this deep sleep state to being super aware over the course of quite a long time - maybe 20 minutes or something like that - without ever moving at all. What happened after that is that I made a decision at some point to move - get up. But instead of just getting up, I got up in slow motion. I made myself be aware of absolutely everything that went into standing up, from the movement of the tiniest muscles that I could possibly feel, throughout my whole body. Maybe it took me 10 minutes to actually stand up.

The purpose of the thing was to become aware of everything that I was hiding from. I'm not sure when, but what ultimately developed was me saying to myself to slow all the way down and just watch and see what happens.

Over the course of a couple of hours, I went through sampling all of these different movements that I could get my body to make. Then I walked out into my kitchen and I would pick up something that was on the counter - a spoon or a can or something like that - and I would move really slowly, and I would transfer it to the other counter on the other side of the room. Really slowly. And I would take note of what I was doing, then I would move something else. I would keep in mind a sort of catalog of everything that I was doing so I knew where everything was that I touched.

It seemed that everything had gotten out of control in my life, but I don't think I had a memory of anything ever really being *in* control. I don't think I was ever really aware. This was the first time I had slowed down enough to *really* pay attention. Just to *pay attention*. There was a purpose to it because everything was

out of hand and out of control. It became apparent, too, that it was [also] about waking up.

.....

It hurt, really, really hurt to slow down. But I didn't have a choice. Nobody was going to help me. It was like Job ... God had been fucking with him forever, right? He'd lost everything. There was nowhere to go. Nobody to turn to. So he had to turn to himself, and that's what I did at that point. Then I continued to do it when I really fell apart, which wasn't very long after that. It was about five months after that - four months after that - everything fell apart. All these shitty experiences kept on happening and kept on happening. They were my doing. I did it. I did it all to myself. I had to learn how to put one foot in front of the other, in front of the other, in front of the other... until I finally wound up here.

.....

I really use [this process] as an exercise. I remember one time not too long ago - three months ago - I don't really even remember what was going on. It was a stressful day for some reason or other. I was accident prone. I got up in the morning, and things were falling and breaking. I hit my skull. All these stupid things were happening. So I said: "All right. Slow all the way down." And I did for long enough to really watch every movement and become aware of what the energy was that was in my body that was making these things happen.

So it's just a sort of exercise that I use to keep myself sane.

"The Spiritual Awakening" was distinctly different from previous shifts in consciousness that Rex had experienced:

It was very deliberate. A lot of the others... felt like something that happened *to* me, not so much something that I *did*. [And with] some other experiences it's a little bit hard to see how they contributed to my change, whereas with this one it's very clear.

During both our meetings, we talked about what are the conditions that precipitate such deep change in a human being. Rex reflected on the intensity of his own situation and commented:

We have these desperate needs, and we have these desperate fears that are all from the animal side. It seems like when we go down into those things - those desperate needs and those desperate fears - when we get completely lost in them, then there's a chance that something will happen and we'll wake up. When we get totally in that place. When you get to the place of feeling lost - when you get in that complete panic - if somehow we can stop at that point and just be *in* it, then I think that's the moment that we have the possibility of waking up. Of real transformation.

I mean, I was in sort of a state of grace in the period around [“The Miracle of July”]. Then, suddenly, I felt that awful feeling of separateness. Total separateness... Just complete aloneness. Lost. I had nothing. I had no connection. I didn’t have my connection to my mother. It’s like through the mother, I guess, that we connect into the world. And then, here I was in a container that was really, really safe. And that’s the only reason I could feel it. It was a state of grace.

In terms of Rex’s own transformation, releasing his long-standing attachment to drugs was probably an important step. Although he continued to take the sleeping pills and “downers” during the first two years that he was involved with the breathwork, Rex would stop using them for a day or two during the sessions. He stopped taking them completely in March, 1996, about three months before the experience he calls “The Miracle of July.”

The reason I stopped was because I was at a module, and I had a consultation with [facilitator]. We sat down, and suddenly I couldn’t think of a goddamn thing to say except to blurt out the whole story about the drugs I’d been using. I’d never told him about it. Nobody knew. Even my ex-wife didn’t know the extent of the stuff I was taking. I was lost.

It was a beautiful sunny day. It was at White Sulfur Springs. Have you been there? Just a beautiful spot. We were sitting there at a picnic table. He’s got those beautiful really soft and huge eyes just looking at me like this. And I’m sitting there, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I couldn’t be false. I don’t know how to be false. I just sat there for a good minute or two, desperately in terror of telling anybody this because I’d never told anybody.

Then I just blurted the whole story out to him, about how I’d been using these drugs all the time. With his history of addictions, he said: “Fine.” And then he said: “What are you going to do?” [Laughs] It was his contention that I was going to have to go to meetings. I said: “Absolutely not. I’m not going to go to any meetings.” I couldn’t. I was petrified at the thought of just getting up in front a group. I couldn’t have done it. I know I couldn’t have done it.

Yet I had to deal with it at that point, right? So I did. I went home and from that time I didn’t do any drugs. I basically cold turkeyed on all the stuff. I didn’t sleep properly for a week, just a couple of hours every night. Crazy stuff going on. Just crazy. Absolutely nuts. I mean it’s just demons, right?

The thing that held me, that kept me on the path, was the knowledge that I was going to see [facilitator] again quite soon. That was just before they started the training in Oregon, and they needed somebody to drive the U-Haul truck up to Oregon non-stop a week later. I had gone to a one-week module - there are two weeks together, right? I went to the first week, and at the end of the second week

they needed somebody to get a U-Haul truck and then pack all the stuff up and bring it up to Oregon for them. So I had a week where I wasn't going to see [him], but I knew I'd see him at the end of the week. Not to do any work with him or anything, but just to say: "Yes, I did it." And I did that. He was amazed that I'd done it... That's what got me through that first week. After that I just stuck to it for three months. Then it was like God said: "OK, cool. You did it. You did it in three months. We're going to give you something." She gave ["The Miracle of July"] to me.

.....

What happened with "The Miracle of July" is that some really deep-seated fear of being in the world - really basic fear - left me. Then it was like because that left me I was free to experience the world in a different way. [Before] I needed to take those drugs all the time to keep that fear manageable. After "The Miracle of July," I didn't need to any more. So I opened myself up to a body of experience.

In spite of the potency of learning in the two experiences that Rex described to me, he still went through a long period in which his life as he had known it was basically dismantled. I was struck by the equanimity with which he reflects on that intensely disruptive time: "Ultimately it was good, I think, but I took chances that I wouldn't have in the past, that got me to the point where my marriage fell apart, my business fell apart, my whole life fell apart."

[The slowing-down lesson of "The Spiritual Awakening"] was too little, too late. It was too little, too late, to salvage my business.... I did slow down, and I did start to act more cautiously in terms of my business. But I don't think there was any way that I could have saved it at that point. It's good that I didn't.

You know how we have these old habits.. It's very hard to change ourselves, it seems, if we're in the same environment. So my environment changed completely, and it became easier to shed a lot of old things...

.....

We spend so much time trying to get it so that things feel good. When it does feel good it feels like it's going to stay that way, and when it doesn't feel good and it feels awful, then it feels as though it's going to stay *that* way. There's something weird about that. I think I've gotten to the point now where I can at least recognize that it's not always going to be this way. I've really come only a little bit in that, but just a little bit I have come. Being able to recognize this, and also [that] the ups and downs aren't as big. The roller coaster is a little more mellowed out.

We talked at some length about what is emerging in Rex's life in terms of these changes and the deep learning that has come through them. In particular, we considered the embodied expression of change:

Being in the body's real important. To feel myself and to move as I talk. I think that's probably one of the reasons why it's so important when you're doing medicine work with somebody [for instance] to be doing some singing, or something like that. To be actually putting something out that's non-verbal, and there's some sort of movement that goes with it.

I asked Rex how he works with the intense energy that he experiences in his body, in addition to running:

Different ways. To some degree, I focus. I watch what I'm doing. I really watch myself. It's really slow. Sometimes I speed up and try to get everything done at once, but I stop myself. I really stop myself and just let that stuff go - push it away or whatever. It's counter productive.

We can only do one thing at a time. That's Buddhist talk, but I came to that one on my own. I heard it here and there, but I discovered it from whatever - from god. We can only do one thing at a time. Well - we *can* do more than one thing at a time, but we're not going to do them very well.

This sort of fits [with] the difference between me then and now. In my work, in the construction I do, I still want to please everybody - I always wanted to please everybody. Somebody comes to me, and they want a job done, and I want to give them a good price on it - tell them I can get it done in the time that they want it done in, all that stuff. But now I only work by the hour. I never ever give anybody a bid on anything. I tell them right off the bat: "I will not give you a bid on anything. I work by the hour." I tell them how much I charge per hour. If they want it, that's fine. If they don't want it, I walk away. Then the next thing that I do, I tell people: "I'm going to tell you how long it's going to take, and you need to take that figure and multiply it by two, right? Then it's probably going to take longer than that." And usually it does. But if it doesn't, people are pleasantly surprised.

I just take care of myself. I set it up for myself. I used to set myself up the other way. I used to give people ridiculously low bids on things, and I would really sit and figure it out. In fact, when I was running, I used to figure out my bids. I used to go over them from this way, and that way, and from all different angles. I thought I had it all figured out. But, guess what? I always lost money. Now I never lose money any more. I go in, and I do the job. I take my time, and I do a good job. I charge a lot less than I used to charge when I figured out my bids, yet I make more money than I used to make - a lot more. I don't have anybody working for me because I don't want the situation where I'm trying to leverage

and make money off somebody else's work. It's not worth it. If I need a second person, I bring them in, and the customer can pay that person.

So all that's different. Completely different. I set all that up for myself that way. And that's only because I had this stuff happen.

.....

It's very Buddhist in value. I've read a few Buddhist things but not much. I resonate with it. I don't really meditate [except] sometimes when I run, but I think I'm able to hold a meditative state some of the time, anyway, going about my day-to-day things.

And then most of the time I judge myself, and I'm angry at people, and I feel guilt, and I feel fear, and I feel shame. All of that bullshit. You know? But it's a lot different than it used to be. It's a lot better than it used to be.

The body has also become an instrument of knowing and healing for Rex. He discovered this during the experience of "The Miracle of July" and has explored the relationship between physical and emotional awareness - both in actual, and metaphorical expression.

[During "The Miracle of July"] one of the things I found [was] that touching a spot on my body soothed me, and it was a device that I could use. I remember, I mentioned that to Stan. I asked him a question about it or something, and he said: "Well, it's something you'll use for a while, and then it'll probably go away." He was right. I don't do that any more. But that was the place where the fear was. Where fear had always been. So, whatever it was that transformed in me, the main physical connection lost its moorings. It wasn't any more really connected in there.

Like recently, I went to the chiropractor. I had some stuff in my back that was really bad. My back had got really out of whack. He crunched me one day. He did it a bunch of different times, but this one particular day he did this thing to my back that was just excruciating. That opened everything up, and for three weeks, maybe a month after that, I was in pain almost all the time. But everything cleared up. Essentially, what he says and what it felt like to me, was that I was all messed up in my back before he did that. All the muscles were used to being in that wrong position, and even though it wasn't comfortable, I didn't have as much pain as after, when he adjusted it properly.

In a way, this was kind of a metaphor. I had become, I think, really used to being in the wrong position, and it becomes comfortable. All of these ways that I was were unhealthy (well can we call it *unhealthy*? I think it is in a way, but it's just the way things were.) Then this thing happened - "The Miracle of July" - and I became more whole. Things were different. Then the rest of me had to follow. It's still going on. It's five years, and I still have these beliefs that I'm not good enough in a lot of ways, but they don't have the same connection that they used to. I had really a lot of trouble just having normal conversations with people in the

past because of all this fear. Now I get into the middle of a conversation where there's a confrontational aspect to it, or something like that, and I notice sometimes it's not scaring me. It's not affecting my body. But I still have a belief somehow that something bad can happen. You know?

For a while, we explored the question of anger and what it means in terms of connections and interactions with others.

To be honest, most of the time, I'm stuck in my angers and my preconceptions about people; probably at least 80 percent [of the time], maybe more than that. Like driving down the road, pissed off at the person who's tailgating behind me, shooting out bad energy. Then maybe 20 percent of the time - if that - I try to let it go. [I try] to look at the other person. There's a great thing about driving a lot because there's a lot of frustration when you drive, especially here because there's so much traffic.

So somebody's passing you on the right - people are supposed to pass on the left, though people pass on the right all the time - [and] I'm pissed off at that person. I've got a preconception of that person somehow. It's a bad person of some sort. I've got some way of looking at that person, and I want to look at that person that way because they're passing on the right. [laughs] So sometimes I stop myself, and I look at the person, and I try to just be open and see whatever. And sometimes it's what I thought - they have that look, right? Sometimes it's not. Sometimes they're cool. So I think that [I can do this] because I've done the work.

The thing is, I think there's a lot of people out there that have never done the work and are probably a lot more open than I am - they just naturally don't have that stuff. But I'm able to [be somewhat open] because I did the work. I think that's special.

The question of what it is to know others - or an other - came up several times during our conversations:

We're all so different. It feels to me, and this is something that I say a lot, it's so hard to really know anything about somebody else. Of course that's not true, right? And it *is* true. You can know all sorts of things about people, but when compared to the way that we know ourselves, it's so crude.

.....

One of the things that I always say if I'm working with somebody - trying to help somebody - [is]: "Nobody else can ever know *me*. Nobody else can ever get inside *you*." Yet I have the terror, and my terror is totally unique. It's mine. Nobody else could ever figure it out... My terror and your terror are totally different, yet it's a human thing. They're really the same thing.



When I asked Rex about his hopes or wishes for his life and also about any sense of vision that he might have, he responded:

One wish would be that I get into a good relationship at some point. But in terms of material things not too much. One of them would be to get to the point where I feel that I can really write. Enough so that I can publish something.

Rex was reluctant to speak much about his hope for a good relationship, simply saying:

My relationships in the past, in some ways they were good. I was friends with my wife and all, but I think I used that relationship to hide from the world. I would hope that in the future the kind of relationship that I would have would be much more conscious in terms of exploring the possibilities within the relationship and discovering the world.

In terms of vision, or views of the future, he commented:

One of the things that comes up a lot is... I feel closer to believing in reincarnation than I ever did before. I feel like that makes me responsible because there's no getting around anything. Absolutely every one of our actions has a repercussion. You can't just do anything. You can't get away with anything. I think in the past I tried to get away with things - and I probably still do. I'm sure I do. But I think I'm seeing more and more. It feels good in a way. I feel that I have a continuity beyond this one go around.

.....

Then we get to the question that you asked before. What is the meaning of the whole damn thing if hardly anybody knows? Hardly anybody has any sense. They don't have a clue. Then what's the meaning of it? What are we doing? What difference can we make? And that's stuff that I struggle with, I guess.

.....

There's some awareness *in* me, and there's also something *out there* that's holding us. It's reassuring. That's the interesting thing. Is that thing benign? And then what is benign? And then you get into stuff like what is good, and evil, and all that. Then we think: If that's true, and there's really no good and evil, then why smile? Right? I think that I should - or not even should. I think that I will.

As we came to the end of our second session, I asked Rex what it is in him that can see through our habitual ways of defending ourselves against the world - that can "blow our cover."

That's consciousness. And the scary thing about it, I think, is once we become conscious that way, we can never go back. A couple of times recently, because I've had all this pain, I've used heroin. In the old days, if I used heroin it would be really difficult not to do it again the next day and then again the next day. Now it feels good and everything, but I just can't see myself falling into these things because I'm too attached to consciousness.

I think that [consciousness is aware of itself]. It has a life of its own. I have many, many days in a row where I just do the mundane stuff. I go through all the motions, and I don't feel consciousness really. Then one morning I'll be driving downtown, and Holy Toledo, I'll be just feeling things... I'll be in an altered state or something. It's very hard to put my finger on when it's going to happen, or what brought it on. Sometimes it could be a dream or something, or anything. Maybe I'll look at my transit chart and see something: "Oh yeah, there's something there." But maybe not.

The creativity is certainly abundant. And then, when that happens, it's like: "Man, this is always here." There's a Beatles song: "Life goes on within you and without you."

.....

What we're saying here is what we've come to on our own, right? But this is what's in all the books. This is what they've been writing about for ages.

.....

It's interesting because right now my body is at a low ebb, and I don't feel particularly conscious. But it seems as if through this process of talking about these things I've got to a place where I'm almost connected to that [sense of presence] that we were just talking about. It sort of opens up the possibilities of those endless possibilities. Which is what it's all about, I think. That's hopeful.

### Reflections After Meeting with Rex

In the mid '80s, I was at heart an angry, unhappy woman. From the outside everything looked full of promise. I had a great job and enjoyed being involved in a number of interesting activities such as cross-country skiing, backpacking, painting, and professional and community organizations. My marriage was difficult. That was certainly a contributor to my dis-ease. But in so many ways, there was evidence that I was doing just fine according to those measures of success that seemed important at the time. Even so, there was something at the core of me that felt sick, crushed, unmentionable.

One afternoon, I kicked the dog. Anger that I didn't even know was in me just boiled over out of control, and my dear gentle golden retriever took the full force of that energy. It was as if I was taken over by some rage far bigger than myself. The power of it was shocking.

In almost the same instant, I was overwhelmed with shame. He just stood there looking at me cringing in anticipation of another kick. His big eyes brimming full with his being. Completely, preciously innocent. And I, the perpetrator, could find nothing to excuse my action against him. How could it be that all the power that was locked up within me had been reduced to violence against one who could not (or would not) defend himself?

I'll never forget that moment.

Most of all, I'll never forget how profoundly out of touch I was with my heart and my inner wisdom, and the shock of what this person could become in that absence.

I don't think I've ever felt so alone.

A lot has happened since then, of course. Very soon afterwards I joined a women's support group and went into therapy. Then I began meditating, and as my inner life caught fire and burned, breathwork became a vital means of learning and healing. But more than 15 years later, that knowledge stays with me - knowing how my pain, unattended, could gather force and strike out against an other.

Last weekend I sensed the presence of that part of me in a very different way. I had gone to the Bay Area to assist at a breath workshop. During the previous few days I had been very open and yet inward; drawn into quiet formless space. It had been a time in

which there was little need to interact with others around me, so my days had been spent writing and reading.

The trip was long - flights delayed by bad weather - and I realized when I arrived that I hadn't prepared myself for the shift into a more interactive environment. I could feel discomfort, and a palpable disorientation, as I sat and talked with my friend that evening. I couldn't quite understand what was happening, but I knew I couldn't connect and that anxiety was rising. Even though I have known her for a number of years, and love and trust her implicitly, there was a sense of fear in my body.

The next day I spent reading and then helping with the preparations for the workshop. When my friend and I talked again the following night, she mentioned that my presence had changed from the previous evening. There was more sense of spaciousness and also a grounded quality. Reflecting on what she said, this felt quite accurate to me. I attended closely to these feelings and watched how they shifted and changed in my interactions during the course of the weekend.

What I saw was this: When my attention is opened up into a sort of diffused liquid space - not engaged by any one particular object yet very aware of it all - there is not a solid sense of self. It is as though self-ness evaporates and what is left is emerging sensation that only becomes *my* sensation when the awareness contracts a bit. (This feels very different from spacing out which is much more mental, and I'm not aware of what's around or within me at all.)

It is easy enough to stay open, or permeable, to this quality of attention when I'm alone, and the more familiar or expansive my surroundings, the easier it is to re-connect to that way of being. When I recognize the need to be focused, it is simple enough to

intentionally move from the spacious mind to a more single-pointed attention. But sometimes I don't recognize that need to change, or I forget, and then the disorientation sets in.

In those moments, particularly when someone is trying to talk directly to me, I experience a sense of confusion. It feels as if they are talking to something that isn't there. It's a bit like being woken out of the consciousness of a deep reverie immediately into a conversation - a shift of consciousness has to take place in order to participate in the verbal cognitive structures of communication.

But then there are those deep old reflexive habits of the personality; embodied, emotional responses to being unsafe, unable to speak for herself, afraid of being wrong/bad or causing an upset of some sort. Such old, old habits. In the momentary absence of the usual ways of organizing attention (self, other, you, me, this, that) those habitual patterns - the little child - become activated. Someone wants me to respond to a question, but *me* isn't there. Momentary panic. Then that old default *me* tries to muster herself to create some semblance of a normal self. The powerless child left all alone to take responsibility. The urge to run away. The fear of being seen as nothing.

I remember how little it would take for that child to strike out - in some form - in fear or anger if she felt really threatened.

At some point during the weekend I started to be more aware of the first moments when the child became activated - just a little stirring when someone approached me to speak. When I recognized that feeling starting to emerge, something in my awareness moved towards the child with a quality of gentleness. In a way it was like putting my arms around my little frightened self and reassuring her that she was safe. But it was so

subtle. Just a touch of attention and the reflex softened, and I could be present with whoever it was who wanted to talk - within the spaciousness.

This more open way of being feels precarious - too much stimulation quickly activates my habitual mind, and other entrenched ways persist - but it also seems hopeful somehow. I can feel the possibility for communication, and communion, in ways that I couldn't previously sustain. Some deep wound is healing. Perhaps I am becoming more fully, heart-fully human.

#### AFTERWORD

This time of meeting with the others involved in the project - diving deeply into their memories, evoking their experiences, looking into their ways of being - has been for me a journey into my own being. With a kind of unerring sureness, each interaction has

revealed yet more within my own experience in a way that has been gentle, and in many ways healing, but also unrelenting.

While I intentionally did not seek out themes or points of connection in the co-inquirers' stories, I do recognize consistency in my own resonances with what I felt and heard during our times together. These resonances move in me and work with the parts of my psyche that sought out the connections. I feel the healing and learning that comes with sharing awareness and reflection.

Much of what I've learned has been expansive and guides me into integration, but there have also been times when I have been faced with the limitations of my own knowing and capacity for communications and presence. In my more fanciful moments, I imagine that I have been walking with a wise guide who has led me into the perfect situations for this learning.

As I brought the conversations with the co-inquirers to an end, each of them indicated that they appreciated and learned from the process. When I asked Raj how she had reacted to reading her transcript, she remarked:

It's really beautiful to have this, to read what I was trying to say.... It brought it to life more ... [It's as if] I was hearing somebody else say these words. I'm seeing it in a different way than when it's being expressed out of myself.

Diane said: "I'm really thankful about this process. It's been really integrating for me, which is what I seek - integration."

In an e-mail to me, Rex wrote:

It was fascinating because it was just like seeing a pretty significant part of my life that I don't really think about in quite the same terms as we covered them. All the major changes that have taken place in my life due to the spiritual journey that I've been on. I haven't really - especially in day to day life - acknowledged it. It was fascinating to see that. It's like an ego thing too - to read about yourself. An ego boost.

There were also, as I have mentioned above, some concerns. As we started the second session, Tricia said to me:

I think my biggest concern is, even though we talk about experiences and have some shared experiences, I don't really think of what's unfolding as separate experiences or events. I think of one whole, continuous, unfolding process that arises in each moment. So even what arose that day [that we met] arose in that moment and for that moment.

An important aspect of my own learning from the inquiry involves a shift to a less subjective relationship to my experiences. I am now able to articulate them more clearly, and invite them to integrate into the totality of who I am. I can better accept the fluidity of all experience. Underlying each of these aspects I am aware of a single theme that keeps emerging into my awareness: The mind works tirelessly and endlessly to create or remake, moment to moment, a consistent experience of self. I keep coming back to this recognition that the I that is assimilating and making sense out of this process is very different in nature than the I that knows in the awakesness of the moment. At this stage of my development, trying to hold this awareness is the best I can do in attempting honest communication, as free as possible from the fixations and avoidances of the busy self-creating I.

I have mentioned several times the energetic and emotional intensity of simply being with each of the participants as they told their stories. I found that there was often a resonance akin to recognition that seemed to fill me as they spoke. It was as if there was something in my body that knew, even more than my mind, what their experience was like. So there was the verbal communication - the telling of the story - and there was a wonderful resonance with the embodied knowing that I think of as consciousness activated within us through our combined attention to that story.



Hearing and feeling the others' stories very directly brought me into a place of engaging with my own in a new way. I began to see that I had been thinking of this cluster of experiences from my early and mid 20s as if they were special objects. In my mind, I can see myself holding them as esoteric artifacts from another culture. They are clearly powerful, but lacking the wisdom to understand them, I came to regard them as exotic and indecipherable.

What became much more apparent as I listened to the fluidity of these other stories, is the problem that comes from reifying an experience. By holding so tightly to my own old stories, because of the powerful way they originally impacted my life and because of my sense of isolation, I limited my capacity to grow into new understandings. They had become abstracted and dry, and I was no longer in touch with the knowing that they had seeded within me. I also see that there had been some times when I felt that my stories might make me special in some way - compensating for what was actually a deep self doubt and lack of confidence in my capacity to be what I imagined to be normal.

I think about what the young Western spiritual teacher, Adyashanti (2000), says about the impermanence of such experiences:

No matter how beautiful the spiritual experience is, it is only an experience, and experiences come and go. Freedom is found only in that which does not come and go. If it doesn't come and go, that means that it's present *now*. (p. 31)

By looking into my own stories through the experiences of others, I feel as though some relaxation has taken place. These are not unique experiences; others know them; they come and they go; and I find comfort in the presence of the co-inquirers. My hands open up and those special artifacts quietly, and without drama, begin to fall apart. The

shards are interesting but no longer directly relevant to the insights that come about in the present experience.

Rereading the words of Bernadette Roberts (1993) who has written extensively about her mystical experiences and opening into no-self, I am reminded again to hold experience lightly:

The secret of allowing an insight to become a permanent way of knowing and seeing is not to touch it, cling to it, dogmatize it, or even think about it. Insights come and go, but to have them stay we have to flow with them, otherwise no change is possible... If we are really ready when [they come], the sheer momentum will carry us and place us in the flow – wherever it is going. (p. 30)

One of the most useful recognitions that I have found in this process, however, has been that of the powerful impulse that is within me to maintain autonomy. On one level, particularly during the face-to-face meetings with the co-inquirers, was this amazing sense of boundary-less depth and communion; that tender and compassionate resonance with the experience of unitive consciousness. At another level, I had a feeling of deep anxiety, that I recognize as reaction that lives within the structure of my personality, and an impulse to pull away into more familiar definitions of self and other. Throughout the inquiry, I could feel the uneasiness evoked by these two very different centers of awareness - the sense of unease being located in the self-directed impulse.

It is very revealing to me that I never chose to explore this experience directly with any of the co-inquirers and that the inquiry process was so strongly verbal, when the content was so non-verbal, or ineffable, in nature. For instance, when the co-inquirers talked about how they made meaning of the other, they talked about their personal feelings and experiences, but I didn't ask them to consider the more immediate moment of otherness that we shared together during our meeting. This feels like an omission in

the inquiry. It also points me towards a future shared experiential inquiry into this impulse toward separation with an other or others who have a direct knowing of the quality of non-separation.

In spite of that omission, however, I feel some sense of integration in recognizing how my attention moves briefly into a field of spaciousness and then is pulled back into the more constricted self sense. Underlying the attention is something clearer and quieter that I know as awareness. This awareness does not seem to flow in quite the same way and is more identified with the space than the personality. I experience awareness in my body, and in that feeling my attention may fall into the spaciousness of the present moment, letting go of thoughts for a few seconds at least, and with them some attachment to identity. When I lose that embodied sense of awareness, then the attention falls back into the business of mental activity and the continuing construction and definition of self. The more I can keep evoking the awareness in my body, the less my attention becomes enmeshed with habitual thought patterns and the more porous the self-sense seems to become.

As I write this, I am once again struck by how simply the movement into awareness becomes an opening of the heart. All those feelings of anxiety and the need to establish my identity can only emerge when my attention has moved away from embodied present awareness into the conceptual realm of thoughts past and future. In the absolute now-ness of the present moment there is only presence!

One last thought comes about the sense of being somehow drawn forward by those early brief experiences of losing all sense of self. Although at the time I didn't have the tools - either in acquired knowledge or, I believe, in my learning capacity - to

understand what had happened, something seemed to be turned on in my consciousness. It took 15 years before I let myself reconnect with the memory of those experiences. But when I did, I had an almost immediate hunger to learn and grow. I felt pulled into a search for what I thought of then as spirituality, and the commitment that I had for moving ahead in my career seemed to just fall away.

I imagine, in the process of re-membering, my deepest consciousness was rekindled. For all those years, a tiny glowing coal of knowing had been nestled in the depths of my being, waiting to be fanned into life by attention, and bringing warmth to some quality of awareness in my psyche. Something in me knew when the time was ripe; when I had learned enough and grown the capacity to embrace such a different view of being conscious. Through the same knowing, I believe, I have intuitively sought to meet and be with people who also know these experiences.

## Chapter 6

### DISCUSSION

#### Overview of the Discussion Chapter

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first I explore three ideas that have consistently re-emerged within me during the inquiry. I have found myself grappling with them as topics of conversation, meditation, and questions that I held as I read. Engaging

with them has been a learning process which continues to unfold. What I present offers no conclusions. It is ongoing inquiry.

The second part of this chapter turns to the field of transformative learning. Here I wonder what learning in and from experiences of non-ordinary states of consciousness might offer to an education-based theory. Again, this is a conceptual exploration, not an attempt to define a specific recommendation. Throughout the section, I draw from relevant literature as a means of critiquing and developing my discussion.

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, the stories and reflections create a kind of field or texture in which you, as the reader, may find points of resonance. That has certainly been my experience of working with this mandala of stories, conversation, and reflection. I have approached both the stories of the co-inquirers, and my own reflective process, with an attitude of curiosity. As the five stories unfolded in relation to one another, I found myself drawn deeply inward. For a while, it was difficult for me to recognize what was my own voice and what were the voices of the storytellers. I was swept into memories and long periods of reflective silence while some observing part watched with quiet interest.

The whole process of immersion in the stories was both deeply subjective and inter-subjective. In the context of this document, each story is identified as a separate section in a linear progression of reading. As I write, however, I feel the intense texture of awareness that is within those stories and reflections as a constant presence layered throughout the text. Like deep water on which the boat of this inquiry floats, the shared

knowing that has emerged in the story telling process surrounds and supports my objective exploration. This first part of the discussion, then, addresses what has arisen into the foreground and engaged my curiosity at different moments out of the rich gestalt of this inquiry.

### Reconsidering No-self

Before beginning the discussion, I want to make a brief personal comment about the attitude with which I have come to hold experiences of no-self or unitive consciousness - and also how I am not holding them. To start, I do not consider these experiences to be specifically spiritual (as in transcendent) or mystical. True, they can emerge in the context of spiritual practice, or mystical tradition, but I do not believe that the occurrence of a moment of no-self awareness is in and of itself necessarily a spiritual experience. Rather, I believe that it comes from a momentary and usually involuntary re-tuning of attention to the quality of consciousness that is always present, but very rarely apprehended.

Some of the literature that I draw from in the discussion speaks about no-self in the context of spiritual awakening. These descriptions of awakening are helpful because they point to this quality of consciousness that is not self-centered. However, in an awakened state (I use the word 'state' loosely, since I believe that awakened consciousness continues to evolve through different stages and states) this consciousness is stabilized and embodied as an ontological transformation. I do not propose that brief moments of insight into the unity of consciousness are necessarily a sign of impending

awakening. Bernadette Roberts (1993) reflects upon this observation in her book, *The Experience of No-Self: a Contemplative Journey*:

I learned that a single insight is not sufficient to bring about any real change. In time, every insight has a way of filtering down to our usual frame of reference, and once we make it fit, it gets lost in the milieu of the mind - the mind which has a tendency to pollute every insight. (p. 30)

Finally, I do not consider these experiences particularly special. I am more and more convinced that they occur quite often and to many people. What I think happens less frequently is that an individual actually notices, inquires into, and recognizes what he or she has experienced. The self-referencing habit of the mind is so strongly programmed to deflect attention from anything that might cause anxiety, that it literally overlooks such brief, if dramatic, moments. When there is some recognition and response to this momentary loss of self consciousness, then, I believe - in spite of Roberts' (1993) assertion otherwise - that a tiny kernel of knowing can remain active within the psyche, sensitizing the individual to the limitations of consensus consciousness.

### Growing Into Opening

While it may seem obvious to say that an individual interprets any experience through his or her own ontological and epistemological framework, I have found it both helpful and healing to reflect on my own experiences of no-self within the context of my developmental process. I have come to this awareness through hearing the co-inquirers speak of their growing understanding of their experiences, through my own process, and by reading about transpersonal developmental theory and the work of spiritual teachers who address the issue of developmental readiness.

In my reflections on Tricia's story, I described two moments in which I experienced a falling away of my self. The first of those two experiences was warm and wonderful. Immediately afterwards, I felt as if I had been held with a depth of love that I had never known in all my life. Within a few days, however, what I felt began to slowly transform into a feeling of separation and self doubt. What had, for a short time, felt like complete and unconditional acceptance turned on itself, and all I could feel was some sort of alienation.

In retrospect, this doesn't seem so surprising. At the time I was intensely insecure about my agency in the world, and I had a very fragile view of my own self worth. To consider that I had experienced grace - an acknowledgment of my being from a divine source - was unthinkable even if in my deepest heart I wanted to believe that this was so. Psychologically, I was captive to a powerful regime of critical and disempowering ways of knowing.

The same was true following the second experience, which happened about five years later, in which I saw what I interpreted as my own emptiness. At the time, I had no understanding of emptiness in the context of Eastern spirituality. What I saw instead was my complete lack of reality as a human being. It was clear evidence of my worst fears: I was a truly insubstantial person, and it was only a matter of time until someone saw through the careful facade of personality that I tried to hold together.

Looking at these experiences through the constructive-developmental lens provided by educator Robert Kegan (1994, 2000), I can understand my responses in terms of my epistemological immersion in subjectivity. Kegan writes:

A form of knowing always consists of a relationship or temporary equilibrium between the subject and the object in one's knowing. The subject-object



relationship forms the cognate or core of an epistemology. That which is “object” we can look at, take responsibility for, reflect upon, exercise control over, integrate with some other way of knowing. That which is “subject” we are run by, identified with, fused with, at the effect of. We cannot be responsible for that to which we are subject. What is “object” in our knowing describes the thoughts and feelings we say we have; what is “subject” describes the thinking and feeling that has us. We “have” object; we “are” subject. (2000, p. 53)

At the time, although I had a healthy intellect and curiosity about much of what I experienced in the world, my sense of self was deeply subjective and defined in relation to what I perceived as outer authority in many forms. Somewhere between what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) describe as “silence” and “received knowledge” I had the belief that “the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others - not in the self” (p. 31). At a very deep level, I had come to believe that I could not trust my own experience of self. Others were the reliable measure of my existence, and it was terribly important that I should live up to their expectations and hide any inkling that, at heart, I might differ from their view.

From this way of knowing, “[women] are especially at the mercy of authorities’ judgments. If someone in a powerful position tells such a woman that she is wrong or bad or crazy, she believes it” (Belenky et al, 1986, p. 49). This sense of vulnerability was a very real concern following these two experiences, especially as I felt the shame of knowing that my self did not really exist. Because my mind could not fully translate and assimilate what had happened, with a complex and elegant twist of the psyche the experiences became relegated to the fringes of my unconscious. In the words of psychologist Daniel Goleman (1985), I learned to lie to myself about the experience of no-self in an effort to avoid the inner discomfort of accepting something that was so disrupting to my world view:

We are piloted in part by an ingenious capacity to deceive ourselves, whereby we sink into obliviousness rather than face threatening facts. This tendency toward self-deception and mutual pretense pervades the structure of our psychological and social life. (p. 241)

The memory of those experiences remained undigested and hidden in my psyche until the late 1980s when I began to study Buddhism and came across writings about emptiness. Then, as I began to listen to meditation teachers, to read, and to develop a sitting practice, I began to remember what I had experienced almost 20 years before, in my late teens and early 20s. Recalling my first naïve explorations of spirituality and attempts at meditation brought me back into touch with a number of deeply spiritual moments including the two short experiences of no-self.

Reconnecting with these memories - and experiencing again the powerful feelings that they awakened within me - took me deeper into practice. I was now able to accept what I had experienced from a new perspective. My understanding was limited, but it was immensely healing to read descriptions of what I had briefly known.

A few years later, I had a third experience that, while disturbing in the moment, served as an integration and movement towards a very different way of understanding consciousness. I wrote the story of this experience in response to an assignment asking me to describe a transformative moment:

In March of 1994, I participated in my first extended silent meditation retreat. The decision to do this retreat rose out of a longing for depth in my spiritual practice. I felt a kind of hunger for experiencing something sustained, and intentionally focused. I think that I'd describe myself at that time as a "butterfly" practitioner - I would light on a practice for a while and then drift away, re-align and drift away, explore new practice, wander for a while, then come back to the sitting. At some level I didn't trust my own capacity for engaging with practice.

The retreat was a ten-day vipassana teaching, held at S.N. Goenka's center in North Fork, California. The choice of this particular center was more or less intuitive. I had some understanding of the vipassana practice but had never experienced Goenka's method. A couple of women from my sangha had attended

a retreat there and laughingly called it the “vipassana boot camp” in reference to the rigorous way in which the retreats were conducted.

When I arrived, I discovered that this description was quite appropriate. The lodging was austere, the resources very basic, and the welcome minimal. The focus was, as promised, on silence. The rules for the retreat included no speaking, no eye contact, no physical contact, no reading, no listening to radios or tapes, and no writing. Physical activity was restricted to walking between the dormitories, the meditation hall, and the dining room, although we could take walks around the small, grass and tree-ringed lake that lay on the edge of the property. There was no visual decoration, no images of the Buddha, no emphasis on creating an aesthetically-pleasing environment. The silence was visible and tangible.

Our days started at 5:30 a.m. and ended at 9:30 p.m. We ate breakfast and lunch in silence. Tea was served in the afternoon, but no food. We sat in meditation practice and teaching for 12 hours each day.

During the first two days, my body reacted against the seemingly endless sitting. My knees hurt, my back hurt, my nose itched, my arms itched. It was excruciating trying to sit still for such long periods of time. I was impatient often and several times felt angry and ready to just leave and go home. But I didn't.

On the morning of the third day, I felt different. My body didn't react so persistently. In fact, I found that I could sit quite comfortably for almost all the morning. But my mind started to play up. Now I couldn't focus, and my thoughts would wander to anywhere but the practice at hand. By the middle of the afternoon, I was feeling quite despondent, unsure of whether or not I would be able to stay with the practice and, even if I could, whether I'd gain anything from it, or if it would continue to be a test of endurance.

During the mid-afternoon break, I went for a walk around the lake. I tried to walk mindfully, paying attention to the way that my feet and body moved, the sensations of the ground under me, the air against my skin, and my clothes moving in the breeze. In spite of my intentions, I could feel resistance. There was a sense of unease in my body. My mind kept fixing on thoughts, and I had to keep bringing my attention back to the moment.

Halfway around the lake, I quite suddenly realized that the quality of my attention had changed, and I felt a stillness in my mind and body. A moment later, I experienced a profound emptiness. Nothing was there. I actually stumbled because it felt as though there wasn't even ground under my feet. The next second, I could feel everything that I knew - my entire sense of the known world - receding away from me, and I was left with nothing with which I could identify. There was nothing to reflect my self. In fact, there was no self.

This emptiness was so complete that I think that I just stood there, stunned, for a couple of minutes. Then a huge rush of emotion flowed in, and panic. Everything that I knew and valued seemed so ephemeral. In particular, I was aware of how fragile was my construction of beauty and the comfort that I felt in being in a beautiful place such as this - that my senses of love, and familiarity, and affection, were all such constructions. My logical mind quickly clicked in to assure me that this was a moment of existential fear. I kept trying to

frame it intellectually. Emotionally, I was terrified - so much so that my mind blanked out and couldn't reflect on the experience for the rest of the day.

That night, I awoke out of a dream that felt so real that I didn't at first realize that I had been dreaming. My mother had died, in this dream, and my father was so devastated that he was dying himself. I was trying to comfort him but knew that it was only a matter of a short time before he, too, would be gone. In my dream, I felt intense grief, but I was also focused on trying to care for my mother's body and my father in his pain. I woke up in tears. When I went back to sleep, the dream came back again and again. Finally, I stayed awake weeping and fully expecting to find a message from my family on the notice board when I went for breakfast.

The whole morning I wept. Grief and tears poured out of me.

By mid-morning, I knew that this was not about actuality, in the sense that my parents were actually dead, but about the death of all that was familiar, as I had experienced during that walk the previous day. This was an experiential teaching about the depth of attachment and the intensity with which the emotional self weaves together with the material realm to create "self" and "reality." I was experiencing death in the egoic sense. This knowing wasn't intellectual - at least initially - it felt more as if it rose up into me from some deep, intrinsic wisdom.

From that day, until the end of the retreat, I experienced profound peace. My mind seemed very spacious and quiet. My body was comfortable and still. There was a great openness that seemed to invite me just to *be*.

The psyche that integrated this experience was very different from the psyche that was so uprooted by the earlier experiences. It was not just a matter of having been introduced to an understanding of no-self through Buddhist teachings and practice; there was also clearly a different order of consciousness at work. I now had some capacity for awareness about what I had previously considered to be my self. Wilber (2000) offers a way to conceptualize this process of change by first identifying two aspects of the self: the distal self, which he describes as the "observing self" that is experienced as "I"; and the proximal self, or the "observed self," which is felt to be "me" (p. 33).

During psychological development, the "I" of one stage becomes a "me" at the next. That is, what you are identified with (or embedded in) at one stage of development (and what you therefore experience very intimately as an "I") tends to become transcended, or disidentified with, or de-embedded at the next, so you can see it more objectively, with some distance and detachment. In other words, the subject of one stage becomes an object of the next. (p. 34)

Speaking from the perspective of adult transformative learning, Kegan (2000) discusses this movement from I to me as a movement from subject to object - a movement that he identifies as “the real meaning of transformation” (p. 54):

Constructive-developmental theory looks at the process it calls development as the gradual process by which what was “subject” in our knowing becomes “object.” When a way of knowing moves from a place where we are “had by it” (captive of it) to a place where we “have it,” and can be in relationship to it, the form of our knowing has become more complex, more expansive. (p. 53)

At this stage in my development, the brief opening to emptiness of self - rather than creating a crisis of reaction and closing down of my psyche - served to activate a process of inquiry. The taste of a radically different consciousness fueled my curiosity, and more than that, touched into a knowing that was already present just below the level of my normal awareness. Within that knowing was the recognition of an I that is truly trans-personal within which the individually experienced I is simply a moment-to-moment arising of habitual thought. Through this experience, too, was an almost immediate sense of integrating the two previously undigested moments of opening.

What speaks to me most clearly as I reflect on this progression of experiences is how, once I had the capacity, the momentary dissolving into undifferentiated consciousness was a powerful catalyst for learning and transformation. I found within myself, for example, the capacity and resources to examine very deeply the psychological habits that kept me from happiness. Almost as though I had turned on a light, I was able to see many of the fears and self-defeating behaviors that I had been unconsciously avoiding for most of my life. In my breathwork sessions, and in therapy, I was able to experience the healing quality of deep emotions for the first time in my life. It seemed as

if I was literally more conscious and less asleep, or entranced, by the dream that I took to be my self.

Until I reached this stage of development, although I found healing and learning through other experiences in non-ordinary consciousness, the experience of no-self was simply too threatening to the I that I believed in. Those early experiences were profound; they stayed with me, but I could not fully engage with them and grow from them until much later.

Somewhat in contrast to Bernadette Roberts' (1993) perspective, in which the awareness of brief unitive experiences is quickly lost, Christopher Bache (2000) says: "To experience Sacred Mind even briefly profoundly shifts one's sense of identity because it gives one an entirely new reference point from which to experience the life process" (p. 19). While I agree with Bache in principle, I would add that the recognition of that shift of identity may not happen until the individual has the developmental capacity to engage with that reference point.

The relationship between development (and the world view associated with any stage of development) and transpersonal experience is discussed by a number of writers, from a number of different perspectives. Allan Combs (1996) offers an overview that serves as a good starting place from which to explore some of the literature:

Among spiritually sensitive people of each generation there can be found individuals who translate their own experiences of transcendence in many different modes. Among the first generation of American astronauts, each returned to the Earth with his life somehow modulated upward to a new level. Their explanations of this change ranged from the deeply mystical, on the one hand, to fundamentalist affirmations on the other, but they all had been to the same place. And indeed, this is the way it must be with inner astronauts as well. (p. 196)

Speaking to this process of individual interpretation of experience, Ken Wilber (2000) describes all subjective thoughts and experience as arising within “*a space or clearing* that is created by, and largely controlled by, *the intersubjective structures of his cultural worldview*” (p. 119). Wilber gives the example of a person who is at Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral stage 2: “He will *not* have a moral-stage-5 thought cross his mind. He is not ‘free’ to think anything he wants” (p. 119).

Even if this person has a peak experience of a transpersonal realm, that experience will be largely interpreted and carried by the intersubjective structures which have developed in his own case. (Failing to see that subjective experiences *arise in the space created by intersubjective structures* is one of the main liabilities of many forms of spiritual and transpersonal psychology, and especially those that focus merely on altered or nonordinary states.) (p. 119)

At a relative level, I concur with this view of the relationship between experience and developmental capacity, however, I do not believe that it offers a complete picture. There are questions that remain. Do transpersonal experiences, although interpreted and accommodated through an individual’s world view, actually transcend that accommodation to exert a larger influence within a person’s psyche? In other words, does a powerful transpersonal experience remain as an active presence deep within the recesses of consciousness? Can that presence reemerge and be experienced differently at a later time? Does the experience of the transpersonal, even though it might be dismissed and forgotten, nevertheless call an individual from some deep, subliminal level to be more fully conscious?

I believe that the answer to these questions is yes. In my view there is an innate wisdom in each person that recognizes the transpersonal and knows that he or she is not limited to the psychological structures of consciousness - whatever their stage of development.

While the personal awareness may be limited and unable to perceive a way of knowing beyond the reactions of the personality, it seems to me that a holotropic experience can set off a resonance within the depths of the psyche that may have a transforming effect, over time. Like a seed in the desert, it may take years to flower, but the potential has been activated.

I also wonder whether for some people there is a way in which the presence of such experiences in the psyche, however undigested and unrecognized, may actually serve as an attractor for other transpersonal experiences in the future. I wonder if at some deep level, a momentary immersion in the condition of being self-less resonates with what Adyashanti (2000) refers to as our impulse to be free. He describes this as “an evolutionary spark within consciousness which originates from beyond the ego. It is an impulse toward the divine, unity, and wholeness” (p. 3). Are these experiences simply this innate impulse making itself known?

A.H. Almas (1996), a western spiritual teacher whose work integrates a wide range of spiritual philosophies and practices with a psychological approach, is strongly critical of most spiritual approaches which do not take into account the capacity of the student. For instance, he makes this comment in his book, *The Elixir of Enlightenment*:

We are seeing more and more that the teaching cannot be done in a general way. Universal teaching, regardless of how deep and true, must be tailored to the specific needs of the particular individual. Otherwise, the teaching will be ineffective, and it is no fault of the student. (p. 15)

One of Almas' students, John Davis (1999), addresses the developmental process that can be guided by a sensitive teacher as a process of freeing the soul. He writes:

As the soul is more clear and open, it is more spacious, more sensitive, and less thick. Experiences can have more impact. This can help us understand those times when we have had wonderful peak experiences that did not leave much of a



permanent, transformative effect. Because our souls are usually structured by personality, these experiences are lost in the inertia of our usual ways of thinking and feeling. As our souls become more open, inertia is replaced by the soul's intrinsic permeability. (p. 50)

Whatever our state of development, it seems probable that the specific experience of no-self can be profoundly shocking to the I or subjective sense of self - which is often referred to as the ego. Descriptions of opening to no-self often allude to the depth of fear or emotional reaction that is subsequently evoked. Suzanne Segal (1996) for example, entered a continuing awareness of no-self in which for many years she was almost overwhelmed by fear and deep anxiety. This state of fear eventually eased as she came to understand - through a long process of spiritual counseling with several different transpersonal psychologists and spiritual teachers - what had happened and how it was being interpreted through her existing world view or intersubjective structures. She described that fear-filled state as follows:

The worst fear we encounter as human beings is the fear of annihilation. What happens, then, when annihilation occurs and still something remains? The Buddhists say that we have then stepped into truth. The skandhas remain but their truth (which is that they are empty) is revealed. This was my direct experience. But why had no one ever mentioned how bizarre and frightening the "step into truth" can be? . . . . It seemed improbable, however, that any true encounter with emptiness would not include at least some fear. The reality of the infinite must inevitably be terrifying to the flimsy illusion of the finite self. (p. 109)

Speaking of his own experience, Adyashanti (2000) writes:

At the moment of enlightenment everything falls away – everything. Suddenly the ground beneath you is gone, and you are alone. You are alone because you have realized that there is no other; there is no separation. There is only you, only Self, only limitless Emptiness, pure Consciousness.

To the mind, the ego, this appears terrifying. When it looks at limitlessness and infinity, it sees meaninglessness and despair. However, the view changes to unending joy and wonder once the mind lets go of itself. (p. 57)

However brief the experience of no-self, I believe it is important to recognize and not underestimate the depth of fear that may be activated and to consider how it is being interpreted through the individual's frame of understanding.

As I reflect on my own growth and development, as well as the personal stories of the co-inquirers, I see the importance of practices that support and develop a capacity to be in uncertainty and psychological discomfort. Whether those practices take the form of psychotherapy or meditation, or any one of many forms of work with the body/mind, using them to cultivate equanimity, compassion, and awareness seems to be a vital groundwork if transpersonal experience is to become transformational.

### Dropping Out and Growing In

One of the aspects of sharing stories with the co-inquirers that was particularly reassuring, as well as insightful, was seeing clearly that we have each been moved - willingly or reluctantly - into times of retreat. There appears to be some ongoing deep restructuring of the ways that we live in the world. To be clear, I don't hypothesize that this is necessarily a direct result of having had an experience of no-self. It does, however, seem to arise out of a shifting in the framework through which we know our existence and also in what we ultimately know at the deepest level of our being, however that shifting comes about. Transpersonal experiences seem to play a role, whether we consider them to be catalysts or symptoms, in activating these shifts.

That process of drawing inward looks a little different for each of us, ranging from almost complete isolation to down-scaling and simplifying work and living

situations. In my own experience, it has taken the outward form of letting go of a career, immersing myself in graduate school, and drastically simplifying my life style. Making these changes in my life was not the result of a logical reasoned process, but more in answer to a call from some deep part of myself. There was nothing that I would call a true crisis. What I experienced was more a steady falling away of all ambition - a reordering of my outward impulses.

Inwardly, I felt an irresistible and powerful downward (chthonic) momentum that seemed to pull me away from engagement at the more superficial levels of culture and personality and into a process of inner learning and change. Rather than resisting and holding on to the forms of my life, as I had done in the past, I relaxed my hold on what I thought my life should be like. Increasingly, I have come to know that deep change takes place outside of the thinking reasoning mind. Only as these changes begin to be reflected in lived experience does one recognize that something is new and different. In relation to this, Byron Brown (1999) a senior student of A.H. Almaas, writes:

Even powerful experiences of truth don't change long-held beliefs about the self unless they are taken into the soul and understood. Simply using the insight as a new standard or belief does not accomplish this. Understanding and integrating an experience means recognizing the implications that this new awareness has on your experience of your life as you learn to live in accordance with it. (p. 23)

During the course of this inquiry, I've come to think of this movement into retreat as a process of embodying a different way of knowing. By embodying, I mean a transformative process in which one becomes, to some degree, the transpersonal knowing that one has apprehended. This is not only a time of old ways falling away it is a process of "growing into", an expansion that involves all aspects of the being, including the physical body and energy systems as well as the psyche. Like a larva in her chrysalis, the

one who is transforming is intuitively drawn to create a place of retreat in which to remake herself.

As a spiritual teacher, Adyashanti (2000) speaks of embodiment in terms of awakening. Whether one considers transpersonal insights - such as no-self - to be aspects of spiritual awakening, or simply an opening to a different state of consciousness, his view of embodiment seems applicable:

This process of embodiment is a continual stripping away of every remnant of attachment and ego. It is a movement of continual surrender to the vast implications contained within true spiritual Awakening. It is a phase of spiritual unfolding fraught with many dangers, self-deceptions, and misunderstandings. It is where many seekers of liberation succumb to fear, doubt and a lack of conviction. The process of embodiment can be simultaneously very thrilling and quite disorienting. (p. 63)

In my experience the overriding quality of this retreat time and process is inward and downward. This trajectory pulls the attention fiercely away from engagement with outer activity and into an awareness that is accessed literally through the body. The body seems to offer a seemingly unbounded source of awareness. It is a way in to a larger sphere of knowing. Emotional issues and activities may capture the attention and draw it away. At times, there may be deep confusion, but the gravitational pull of the body's knowing is so powerful that it is only a matter of time before the awareness returns. What is more, the body also actively resists re-entry into a more actively engaged life. Too much social interaction or involvement in an analytical rational process that does not invite qualities of feeling or emotion, evokes strong physical reactions.

A few years ago, in a holotropic session, I had the following experience which seems to offer a metaphor for the quality of this inward downward process. In particular,

it reminds me that the deepest knowing, the heart of awareness, is made of a different cloth from the rational mind:

For some time in the session I've been experiencing my heart opening. It's an odd combination of pleasure and pain. I feel so much compassion and awareness for the deep suffering of so many beings. Tears just flow out of me and I want to become large enough to embrace all the suffering beings on this planet. Then I see a Tibetan lama standing in front of me. In spite of his profound and deeply established equanimity, he is weeping and suffering because he has learned that one of his monks has immolated himself in an act of defiance against the Chinese. I reach out to the lama, inviting him to be held and comforted. He leans in towards me, and I gently put my arms around him and draw his head to my heart. How amazing it is that, as his head touches my chest, it doesn't stop. He flows right into and through me into a space that is enormous. He draws me into the space with him and there is no more he or me. The suffering that had been so painful is now simply the energy of presence. The lama, the monk, myself, suffering beings, are all simply presence.

From one perspective, it seems as if this process of retreating into a time of inner inquiry and embodiment is a process of surrendering to some intuitive knowledge, or as Tricia originally described it, "inner guidance". It seems that we have the wisdom to attend to the insights and issues that are making themselves known to us. If this requires taking time away from work or making changes to simplify our lives, we seem to accept the necessity of such change, although it may be entered into reluctantly and with difficulty. There is certainly precedent in spiritual traditions for times of retreat and contemplation as an active engagement in the deepening spiritual consciousness. Depth psychology and transpersonal psychology also speak to the importance of times of withdrawal for healing and integration.

Carl Jung (1989) wrote about his years of retreat while he built his home - the Tower - at Bollingen. During that time he achieved an integration of his "fantasies and the contents of the unconscious" (p. 223). He clearly felt the imperative to focus in this way: "I had to achieve a kind of representation in stone of my innermost thoughts and of

the knowledge I had acquired. Or, to put it another way, I had to make a confession of faith in stone” (p. 233). During this period of his life, he would often retire to his room and remain in isolation for lengths of time: “In my retiring room I am by myself. I keep the key with me all the time; no one else is allowed in there except with my permission” (p. 224).

From the beginning I felt the Tower as in some way a place of maturation - a maternal womb or a maternal figure in which I could become what I was, what I am and will be. It gave me a feeling as if I were being reborn in stone. (p. 225)

In his classic book, *Transitions*, William Bridges (1980) names the time of withdrawal the “neutral zone.” Within this solitude, we can surrender ourselves to a deeply felt emptiness creating an opening for renewal, and we can gain perspective on the ongoing experience of change (p. 120). Bridges says: “As Arnold Toynbee pointed out, it is into some rabbit hole or cave or forest wilderness that creative individuals have always withdrawn on the eve of their rebirth” (p. 131).

The intensity of this interior experience - this withdrawal within oneself in the context of reflection and inquiry into the nature of one’s being - might be thought to be nothing more than a narcissistic obsession with personal issues and feelings. Perhaps there are elements of narcissism that come to the fore at times. But, based on my own experience and the experiences that the co-inquirers have shared with me, I believe that this is truly a passage into soul work, a “confession of faith” by embodying the process of changing.

In *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, Ken Wilber (1995) addresses the issue of narcissism in relation to withdrawal in service of development. According to Wilber, there is an almost inevitable stage of interior-ness that accompanies an opening to a larger view.

Increasing evolution means increasing depth and increasing relative autonomy. In the realm of human development, this particularly shows up in the fact that, according to developmental psychology... increasing growth and development always involve *increasing internalization* (or increasing interiorization). And as paradoxical as it initially sounds, the *more interiorized* a person is, the *less narcissistic* his or her awareness becomes... For all schools of developmental psychology, this equation is true: increasing development = *increasing interiorization* = *decreasing narcissism* (or decreasing egocentrism). (p. 255)

Wilber (1995) believes that this movement into interiorization continues in transpersonal development: “The higher stages of development, the transrational and transpersonal and mystical stages, all involve a new going within, a new interiorness” (p. 255). Concerns with self-absorption, narcissism, and denial of social reality abound in relation to the impulse of spiritual withdrawal. Yet, Wilber writes, this is a misapprehension of what is actually taking place in the process of individual development: “The more one *goes within*, the more one *goes beyond*, and the more one can thus embrace a *deeper identity* with a *wider perspective*” (p. 257).

Meditation, then... involves yet a further *going within*, and thus a further *going beyond*, the discovery of a new and higher awareness with a new and wider identity – and thus meditation is one of the single strongest antidotes to egocentrism and narcissism (and geocentrism and anthropocentrism and sociocentrism). (p. 257)

One last aspect of retreating that should be noted is that of grieving and despair.. Transformative educator, Robert Boyd (1991), describes the transformative journey not as a series of rational problem-solving practices dependent on critical reflection, but as a process of discernment. According to Boyd, who bases his work in depth psychology, discernment includes three inner processes: receptivity, or deep listening to one’s inner process; recognition, or recognizing and understanding that one has choices and must make them; and grieving, or experiencing the emotional responses to loss of the familiar (Taylor, 1998, p. 15).

In a chapter entitled “Grief Work,” Gordon Myers and Robert Boyd (1991) discuss the role of grief in the context of group learning:

Social grieving becomes the organizing principle of individual behavior and group activity as group members, acting collectively, come to terms with the immediate demands of their developmental challenge. Group members can take meaning from their struggles if they have the knowledge that grief work is an evolving dynamic in the developmental life of the group. (p. 121)

Sue Scott (1997), also an adult educator whose work embraces the perspectives of depth psychology, identifies the significant differences between the views of transformation held by those in the field of transformative learning. From the standpoint of critical social theory, transformational learning focuses on “letting go of frames of reference that have been outmoded or uncritically assimilated” (p. 45). From Scott’s perspective, the depth orientation

focuses on profound emotional experiences that force us to grieve the loss of what used to be a meaningful state of being before we move into another state that is deeper, wiser, and more in tune with matter, the body and soul, and the material world. (p. 45)

Scott (1997) addresses the relationship between grieving and transformation:

Grieving is integral to transformation. The grieving process involves both rational and extrarational notions of change. Internal events can also trigger transformation, particularly in the second half of one’s life, when meaning-of-life questions seem to bubble up into consciousness. Transformation requires that an old way of seeing or doing is changed to a new way of seeing or doing. Something that is familiar must be denied and let go of. (p. 41)

Systems theorist and Buddhist practitioner, Joanna Macy (1991), speaks directly to this grieving process in her activism for global ecology. She sees individual grieving and despair as an expression of collective pain at the loss of the world as we have known it. In her book, *World as Lover, World as Self*, she writes extensively about what she calls “despair work.” She states: “Despair is the loss of the assumption that the species



will inevitably pull through” (p. 17). In this work, she guides people in meditation, movement, creative expression, and reflection with the intention of breaking through their socialized emotional defenses that protect them from feeling the individual and collective horror and despair that naturally arise in response to the destruction of plants, animals, and the life of the planet Earth.

The growing awareness of despair, particularly at the transpersonal or collective level, can be profoundly disorienting. Feeling despair can lead to a sense of intense isolation because there is no place for it in society. Macy (1991) writes: “It [seems] it is we, not society that is insane” (p. 19). She continues: “As long as we see ourselves as separate, competitive, ego-identified beings, it is difficult to accept the validity of our social despair, deriving as it does from our interconnectedness” (p. 21).

Macy (1991) explains that this disintegration of the sense of isolated self is a natural process in human development. It permits the emergence of “higher psychic structures and awareness” (p. 22). What falls apart in these periods of grieving is not the actual self but the defenses and ideas that confine the self and prevent it from awareness. What is eventually revealed is the self filled with energy, compassion, and the will to work on behalf of all life: the “world as self.” It is through the despair and disintegration that consciousness can expand and the potential for radical shifts in view can occur.

Each of us involved with this study has been in some way compelled to surrender to the evolutionary urge toward retreat within. In one form or another we have each experienced withdrawal, grieving, and at times, despair. Speaking for myself, I feel that there really was no choice but to retreat. I was no longer able to function effectively or with conviction in the context in which I was living.

The need to withdraw has caused me to question what I had previously believed to be meaningful participation in society. My work was with human and community service, and I held idealistic - if somewhat unexamined - values about the need to be actively involved in social change and contributing to human well being. A strong impulse to do this inquiry came from my need to explore this apparent paradox and to heal and integrate my desire to be of service - to “make a difference” - with the inescapable momentum that takes me within into reflection, silence, and aloneness. This exploration has led me into a more complex and deeper view.

### The Door of My Heart

At this point, it seems appropriate to loop back to the introduction of this text and pick up a thread, that I set out in the introductory chapter, describing my personal context for the study. In that section, I talked about my experience of participating in a learning community in which our ability to grow together was thwarted by our lack of capacity to be with, and hold, our differences. I also suggested that the experience - even just a brief moment - of a consciousness that is transpersonal helped me open to an inquiry into the limitations and distortions of my world view. In particular, I began to see the ways that my consciousness is structured as a member of white Western culture.

What follows is an elaboration on this concept: direct experiences of no-self, or unitive consciousness - holotropic states - can serve to activate an opening, or shift in consciousness. (I’m still wary of defining such shifts as transformation, but over time they may lead to a transformed mind - using the Eastern view of mind located in the

heart.) Such a shift can support authentic self inquiry and development of capacity to apprehend the painful truths from which our psychological defenses attempt to protect us.

To evoke a presence for this discussion, I quote a poem by Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1993). He wrote this poem in 1978 at the time that he was involved with helping the boat people escape from Viet Nam. His work has offered me guidance and a focus for contemplation and surrender for many years including those contentious times in the CIIS learning community. It still does:

*Please Call Me By My True Names*

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow -  
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving  
to be a bud on a Spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,  
learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
to fear and to hope.  
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death  
of all that is alive.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing  
on the surface of the river.  
And I am the bird  
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily  
in the clear water of a pond.  
And I am the grass-snake  
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,  
 refugee on a small boat,  
 who throws herself into the ocean  
 after being raped by a sea pirate.  
 And I am the pirate,  
 my heart not yet capable  
 of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,  
 with plenty of power in my hands.  
 And I am the man who has to pay  
 his “debt of blood” to my people  
 dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm  
 it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.  
 My pain is like a river of tears,  
 so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
 so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,  
 so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,  
 so I can wake up  
 and the door of my heart  
 could be left open,  
 the door of compassion. (p.72)

We human beings live in precarious times. Human conflict and oppression is pervasive, and even thinking about naming the accumulating threats to ecological survival makes me want to pull away. Yet here we are, this human species, living as best we can with a consciousness that can only rarely turn to look directly at the havoc we continue to wreak in our nest. (The “we” I refer to is those of us who are part of modern industrial cultures all over the planet.) The modern mind has learned to divide us deeply from the environment in which we exist, from one another, and even from our own being. It is a mind that is hypnotized by its own stories and fascinated with its own image. Even when evidence of our sickness in the form of oppression, violence, and destruction is

right in front of our faces, the reflex is so often to respond in kind or (metaphorically) to go to sleep.

I know this phenomenon well in my own being. Within the microcosm that is me, I experience the resistance, denial, anger, grief, numbness, and fear that I see around me in the cultural body. In a very specific way, I recognize this pattern of reflexive withdrawal in relation to being part of the dominant culture. Every aspect of my being is infused with forms of consensus consciousness that are not me, but my culture: white, European-American. It is horrible to see the ways in which my consciousness, embodying centuries of cultural hegemony, can automatically create thoughts and actions that minimize and cause psychic or actual harm to others.

The real horror of this situation, however, is that in modern Western culture, the experience of self is powerfully identified with this individually embodied consensus consciousness. From this perspective, to inquire into one's consciousness as dominating and racist is, at some level, to betray one's self. Put another way, to attempt to explore white supremacy as a cultural system from anything other than an objective standpoint is to destroy this self: it is suicidal. When challenged in this way, the self that is identified with consensus consciousness fights to protect itself with whatever psychological defenses it can muster, and the inquiry is aborted.

Buddhist educator, Robert Horton (1998) facilitates a series of workshops titled "The Untraining". These group sessions are designed to help white participants come to understand the ways in which they are culturally "trained" to be white. Horton states that an important factor in starting to change embodied white consensus consciousness is the

individual's capacity to create a little distance between his or her observing self and the content of consciousness. In the notes for the first workshop in this series, he writes:

When we shine awareness on the training, things come up: changes of subject, being unable to focus, wanting to figure out if we are racist or not, shame, wanting to confess to a person of color and be absolved, righteousness, forgetfulness, depression, anger at ourselves, attempts at political correctness, hopelessness, a sense of impossible burden, etc. We need to be able to create a space in ourselves and in this group to hold all these reactions and not lose sight of our basic decency. (p. 2)

It is in relationship to this need for space in our selves that I believe experiences of no-self, or unitive consciousness (and probably other holotropic experiences) can help to undo the destructive consciousness of individually embodied white supremacy.

Although my egoic mind is enormously powerful, and can at times overwhelm me with emotional reaction to ideas and situations that threaten its illusion of autonomy, I find that having experienced a state of no-self has established this impersonal consciousness in some way. Somewhere in my psyche, there is an experiential awareness within which a more spacious form of relative self seems to manifest. This self - although still a reflection and creation of culture and relationship - has a far greater capacity to understand the ways in which consciousness is trained and how personal ego develops psychological means to defend that training.

Having a brief experience, or experiences, of the wholeness of consciousness, in which it is so clear that the idea of an autonomous self is created only by forgetting that one is inseparably and completely an aspect of all that is, seems to invite a relocation of the seat of awareness. Whereas awareness seemed previously to be unquestionably located in the ego self, now there may be some times when awareness is held in a less personal perspective. There may be instability in this multi-dimensional self and an

unpredictable see-sawing between different self-perspectives - particularly when beliefs and norms are challenged - but there is also a possibility for seeing beyond the horizons of one's world view; beyond the trance of the culture.

As these minute shifts take place in my own awareness, and as I feel my consciousness changing, I am sure that they do not happen in isolation. The field shifts, also. The whole of consciousness is working me - I am working it. There is no difference.

When one has experienced an other as not separate from one's self, when the environment has been felt and known as consciousness, the cost of falling back into the consensual trance becomes increasingly intolerable. The desire to be of service becomes an imperative. Yet it is also clear that the work must (at least initially) be done within. The personality and its habitual ways of being and interacting are deeply entrenched. As Adyashanti (2000) says:

The hope for the environment lies in the realization that all beings and all things are yourself, including those who oppose you. Until your vision and compassion is big enough to include those who oppose you, you are simply contributing to the continuation of destructiveness. The end of separation is the salvation for all. (p. 125)

Ever pragmatic, Bernadette Roberts (1993) also addresses this point in her detailed reflections about the experience of no-self:

It is only when we realize our oneness with the true Other that we come upon a unity and wholeness that can withstand the test of all encounters with other selves. In this way, no matter what happens in our relations with the outside world, we are not fragmented, we do not fall apart, become lost, dependent, or see problems where there are none. It is only after we come upon the Other - the still-point at the center of our being - that we find the key to a powerful sense of security and independence that *then* allows us to go out to others, to be generous, to give them their freedom, to be open-minded and understanding. If for some reason we do not find this inner resource, we have no choice but to grasp at what is without, and it is this premature movement outward instead of inward that gives

rise to all problems in relationships. The real problem in life, then, is not between people, but between the individual and his true Other. (p. 191)

There is no doubt in my mind that the groundwork of change happens within, yet the edge that I stand on in my own being - the question of purpose and vision - lies with the issue of right action. I feel the urgent need for change, the imperative for action, and I feel the overwhelming despair that so easily immobilizes me. Caught up in the urgency and hopelessness, I lose capacity - the expansive view - and become small.

Slowly, I see that these responses are, in themselves, traps of the mind. They are real, and they are deluded. They come from my fearfulness. The seat of consciousness has moved from connection to isolation - from awareness to consensus trance - and the highly effective ways of holding the status quo intact become activated.

What I look for is how to hold the question of right action with spaciousness and a kind of ruthless clarity and to open up whatever form arises out of that openness. I am guided and encouraged in this by words from social activists, authors bell hooks (1997) and Alice Walker (1997), in a series of interviews with Buddhist women writers in the magazine, Shambhala Sun.

In the first interview, hooks (1997) speaks with Maya Angelou:

I believe that this nation can only heal from the wounds of racism if we all begin to love blackness. And by that I don't mean that we love only that which is best within us, but that which is faltering, which is wounded, which is contradictory, incomplete (p. 22).

This speaks to me of action, this awakening to loving blackness, and also loving what it is in me that is unable to love. It requires deep inward investigation and yet cannot be separated from knowing and experiencing being in the human mix. This kind of loving action requires uncompromising kindness and compassion.



In a second interview, Walker (1997) speaks about her ever growing capacity for being present while engaged. Her compassion is so evident, yet so is her unflinching commitment to activism and healing:

Hearts are there to be broken, and I say that because that seems to be just part of what happens with hearts. I mean, mine has been broken so many times that I have lost count. But it just seems to be broken open more and more and more, and it just gets bigger... You have a sense of openness, as if the wind could blow through it. And that's the way I'm used to my heart feeling. The feeling of the heart being so open that the wind blows through it. I think that is the way it's supposed to feel when you're in balance. And when you get out of balance, you feel like there's no wind, there's no breeze, there's just this rock and it has a big thing sticking through it. I don't know how you get from one feeling to the other, except through meditation, often, but also activism, just seeing what needs to be done in the world, or in our families, and just start doing it. (p. 25)

I look into the mirror that Walker's (1997) words offer. In the reflection I see a heart that is beginning, in my 52<sup>nd</sup> year of life, to break open.

There is no hard and fast evidence to confirm that holotropic experiences in general, and specifically the experience of no-self or unitive consciousness, support a person's capacity to actively engage as an agent of change. To the degree that activism is an internal process of inquiry, I can say that that is absolutely my personal experience. It is also true in my impressions from working with the co-inquirers in this study.

I am only now starting to move into a more outward orientation in my own life after these several years of retreat. It is constantly challenging to remember to trust my deepest embodied being and to allow that to manifest rather than the habitual mental ways of being. Yet there is a deep stillness within me, a transparent presence which I have not allowed myself to feel for most of my life, that has emerged from knowing directly that self is not limited to me. The work that I have done, and continue to do in holotropic states of consciousness unquestionably supports that knowing.

The door of my heart opens slowly. The wind blows.

## HOLOTROPIC STATES AS A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### Introduction

In an article introducing his approaches to transformative learning, educator Dean Elias (1997) wrote:

Transformative learning happens. The challenge posed by the Einstein quotation [a problem cannot be solved with the same mind that created it] is whether we can discover and then create the conditions needed to evoke and accelerate the process of transformative learning. (p. 6)

In this section of the Discussion chapter, I explore an idea that has been with me almost ever since I started to work intentionally with non-ordinary states of consciousness. This idea relates to the potential for learning and change that can come from experiencing holotropic states. Specifically, I am interested to know whether holotropic states could offer conditions for transformation and change within the context of transformative learning. These states may or may not elicit an experience of unitive consciousness or insights into the absence of self. The specific content is secondary for the purpose of this exploration.

Typically, the context for holotropic work is therapeutic. While I would be among the first to agree that the best therapeutic work is exactly about learning and change, I also believe that there is a significant difference in describing the intention of a modality

as healing/therapeutic or describing it as learning, even though both may be involved in either process. My curiosity leads me to explore Holotropic states as a means of experiential learning.

Although I began to do holotropic sessions with the intention of personal healing, I soon realized that my whole belief system was being brought into question. Quite often, instead of experiencing relaxation and calm, I found myself more and more in turmoil. The ways that I made meaning, or ascribed value, or inferred relationship were being shaken up, and I was soon launched into what felt (feels) like an insatiable inquiry into what it means to be conscious. It became very clear that what I experienced in those sessions was a powerful catalyst for personal growth and change.

While this dissertation addresses ways in which the experience of a specific non-ordinary state - that of no-self or unitive consciousness - has influenced change, other types of holotropic experience may also lead to change and transformation. It might be helpful here to give an example from a holotropic session to illustrate my point. During a breathwork session in 1992, the process led me to explore my feelings about the strongly critical way in which my grandfather apparently treated my father as a boy. This occurred about two-thirds of the way through the session:

I feel very, very open - like a small child - and it's extremely painful to witness both the bewilderment of my father who had done nothing to evoke such displeasure, and also the suffering of my grandfather who is somehow a captive of this way of being. As I watch, everything starts to move in front of my eyes and I see first my grandfather's father, then his father, then my whole paternal lineage slowly spiraling backwards in time before the eyes of my mind. With each preceding generation I realize that the pain and brutality becomes more intense. This is the human condition. The images spiral back to medieval, and pre-medieval times and I witness slaughter with crude weapons and instruments of torture. The journey continues back into pre-recorded history, to early humanity. The mind that is involved with this activity feels so incredibly limited. At moments I am witnessing that mind - at others I am *in* that mind, seeing and

thinking *as* that mind. There are never-ending bloody battles, and some primitive and sexual quality seems very evident in the gruesome violence. I feel physically sick as I witness this, but I can't look away. This is not something separate from me - this is part of my human nature.

Then a gentle hand is placed over my heart and I feel immense tenderness toward all these beings. It occurs to me that I have been traveling down the spiraling ladder of my own DNA. This is the fabric out of which I am built, but over time the mind has changed, and there is the possibility of choice and new ways of being in relation to that nature. With each new generation there is an increasing potential for freedom from suffering. I think of the possibility of actually restructuring the DNA to create a wiser, more compassionate human being.

I spent many hours exploring what I had experienced in this session. Not only did I get insight into my personal history, but also experienced directly the evolving quality of the human mind - mental (and emotional) capacity. This wasn't just thinking about or visualizing the past. What I had seen and felt was immediate.

Shortly after this session, on a purely intuitive impulse, I began to read Ken Wilber's (1981) book *Up From Eden* and was at once interested to discover in his vivid descriptions of human evolution a complete resonance with what I had observed and felt in my journey. It occurred to me that in the holotropic session I had been learning directly and experientially about my own psycho-somatic healing, and also some larger view of human development. Reading Wilber's words invited me into a process of critical reflection upon that experience. The content and the process of these combined events made a deep impression on me, particularly in relation to an embodied awareness of existing within the ongoing evolutionary process.

As I continued to participate in holotropic sessions, I began to approach them as learning experiences in which I was being taught through some deep inner or transpersonal guidance. During the same period of time I was involved in graduate studies, first in transpersonal psychology, and then transformative learning. The two

processes of learning - experiential-intuitive and cognitive - have complemented and enlivened one another in ways that it is almost impossible to explain. Yet there has also been some sense of isolation in the process. While what I learn is relevant to all aspects of my life, I feel convinced that this way of learning would be enormously enriched and expanded within the context of a community of learners.

In this section I continue with this line of thought. First, I address how the use of holotropic experiences may or may not be relevant within the framework of transformative learning. I then describe the nature of some of the experiences that may emerge from holotropic work and how they relate to transformative learning. I discuss the practical aspects of how this approach might be incorporated in a learning community. Finally, I note some considerations and limitations in using such a process.

For the sake of consistency, and because I am familiar with the method, I use Holotropic Breathwork as a model for non-ordinary experiences. There are a number of other processes that could be used, including various other forms of breathwork, sweat lodges, shamanic journeying, and so on. My preference is for an approach that is as free as possible from a prescribed structure (such as formal ceremony or ritual), that invites an authentic expression of feelings and emotions, and that has a theoretical foundation that can be engaged with critically and constructively.

### The Holotropic Session

Holotropic Breathwork is a process in which the individual enters into a three-hour (approximately) session of enhanced, deeper breathing accompanied by intense, loud, evocative music that both mirrors and provokes the shape of the experiential

process. Each person participating as a breather is partnered with a sitter who attends to the breather's needs throughout the session and offers emotional and physical resources when necessary. The breather and sitter then exchange places for the second session. One or more workshop facilitators provide guidance and support and can intervene when necessary with body work or verbal contact. Following each session, the breather draws a mandala. He or she may also write about the experience. At the end of the workshop, there is a period of group sharing in which each person can speak briefly about what occurred for her or him during the breathwork.

Although holotropic sessions are most often conducted in group workshops, there is not typically an ongoing facilitated process to support learning. The work is primarily seen as an individual process once the day of the workshop is over; the understandings drawn from the session are typically processed by the individual, alone, within the context of assimilation or personal integration.

This is where a collaborative transformative learning approach to the exploration of holotropic consciousness - or the inclusion of holotropic sessions within an appropriate learning community - might blossom. In my view, there is an enormous potential for personal and group learning to be gleaned from non-ordinary states within the context of a learning community. Opening to a shared and ongoing process of critical reflection and inquiry with a group of learners who are willing to work in holotropic states could support deep epistemological shifts in individual members and the group as a whole. From a transpersonal perspective, I believe that such work can be instrumental in healing the cultural and species fields of consciousness.

### Relevancy of Holotropic Experience

How, then, is the holotropic experience relevant to transformative learning? In my view, the experience of non-ordinary states of consciousness may serve to support the process of change in several different ways. Perhaps the most obvious is that it may actually present as the disorienting dilemma which exacerbates the process of change. More likely, however, a holotropic session may open up and build on a shift or change in consciousness that is already activated and in process.

The content of holotropic sessions cannot usually be directed by the will of ordinary consciousness. Rational thought is not operational in non-ordinary consciousness, and it is usually considered counter-productive to enter into a Holotropic Breathwork session with a fixed goal. However, recent research into a shamanic approach to breathwork points to the value of working with a stated intention in that context (Metcalf, 1999). Very often, sessions provide unexpected insights or expanded views in relation to issues that are important in one's life that are apparently guided at least in part by what might be called inner wisdom. For example, while there may be no forthcoming solution to a question posed by the rational mind, there may be an experience that reveals in some way that the question itself is based on wrong thinking.

Grof (2000) identifies the learning that may come from Holotropic states as ranging from practical knowledge to transcendental wisdom:

The most obvious benefit that we can obtain from deep experiential work is access to extraordinary knowledge about ourselves, other people, nature, and the cosmos. In holotropic states, we can reach deep understanding of the unconscious dynamics of our psyche. We can discover how our perception of ourselves and of

the world is influenced by forgotten or repressed memories from childhood, infancy, birth, and prenatal existence. In addition, in transpersonal experiences we can identify with other people, various animals, plants, and elements of the inorganic world. Experiences of this kind represent an extremely rich source of unique insights about the world we live in and can radically transform our worldview. (p. 299)

In relation to spiritual learning that may come through non-ordinary states of consciousness, Grof (2000) addresses the potential for dispelling *avidya*, the “fundamental misunderstanding and confusion concerning the nature of reality and our own nature.” He continues:

The only remedy for this kind of ignorance is transcendental wisdom (*prajna paramita*). From this point of view, it is essential that the inner work involving holotropic states offers more than just increase, deepening, and correction of our knowledge of the material universe. It is also a unique way of gaining insights about issues of transcendental relevance. (p. 300)

A few examples of learning experiences that have come from my own work and that I have observed in facilitating holotropic sessions for others include the following:

- non-local awareness
- transparency of awareness with another
- re-living and healing trauma
- embodying collective feelings such as grief, rage, fear
- witnessing the planet and all life forms as a single living organism
- recognition of cultural delusion and the power it holds over us, and through this gaining insight into personal responsibility in the machinery of oppression
- demystifying death and dying through experiential process
- recognizing a source of ‘impersonal’ confidence or intuitive wisdom
- capacity to look directly into one’s own identity in relation to race, gender, humanity, instinctive nature, etc.



One particular theme which occurs quite frequently in holotropic sessions is that of death and birth. These archetypal forms seem to be enormously important in the process of change and transformation. In an ongoing and cyclic process, old beliefs and ways of being have to die and fall away in order for new understanding to be birthed.

Taylor (1998) observes: “Episodes of transformative learning ... often involve intensive emotional experiences, particularly grieving the loss of old meaning structures and the acquiring of new ones” (p. 57). While grieving loss is a vital part of the process, from a holotropic perspective it is also important to recognize the death that precedes that loss. Just as a child may gain clarity, however painful, from seeing and touching the body of a dead parent or sibling, so an individual may find freedom in experiencing the actual death of an aspect of his or her self. The same principle holds true for birth.

This theme of dying and being born is not just conceptual. During a holotropic session, it may be felt somatically and emotionally as a powerful - even at times overwhelming - process. The intensity of the experience often contributes to its transformative potential. In holotropic states it is possible to temporarily allow the self-restraints of everyday life to fall away and to fully embody emotions and feelings associated with the death of the familiar, the fear of the unknown, and the blissful openness of new birth. This complete immersion can free the individual to gain insights that were previously concealed by the psyche’s defensive mechanisms.

Insights such as these may help an individual and, I suggest, a learning group to enter into a radical new understanding of topics ranging from personal growth, to social and cultural issues such as gender equity or environmental degradation. Through the intentional and willing interweaving of personal experience with the group it becomes

apparent, in a very direct way, that individual work and collective process are completely nested or linked.

### Considerations

#### *1. Participant readiness, development, and different ways of knowing:*

As it is envisioned by Jack Mezirow (2000), and others in the field including Patricia Cranton (1994), and Edward Taylor (2000), learning that is transformational involves a shift in our epistemology. The ways in which we know and through which we make meaning are changed - our view of the world is different.

According to Mezirow (2000), a key factor in evoking the process of transformation is critical reflection. Opinions about the nature of this reflection, vary quite widely, however, as illustrated in this summary on the First National Conference on Transformative Learning by Wiessner and Mezirow (2000):

Mezirow reported that the Taylor (1997) study found agreement that critical reflection is central to transformation processes, but that it must “centrally include elements beyond cognition: intuition, feelings, empathy, spirituality and other factors outside of focal awareness.” Marsick clarified that most reflection in workplaces is simple reflection, rather than critical. Stanton reported that reflection is related to developmental stage, as defined in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986). Cranton demonstrated varying ways reflection is done by different people. Brookfield emphasized that power and hegemony should be the central focus for critical reflection. (p. 334)

As I have already stated in the previous section, the developmental readiness of the learner, as well as his or her capacity for some form of reflection, and willingness to open to deep levels of change, is an important consideration. The relevance of development, capacity, and differing ways of knowing, is also addressed by transformative educators such as Kegan (2000), Belenky et al (1986), and Cranton

(1997). For instance, in an article entitled, “Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing,” Mary Field Belenky and Ann Stanton (2000) describe the way in which a “Connected” discussion in a learning group can work with different capacities by “pointing out where opinions are different, helping participants uncover the sources of and reasons for the differences, exploring the implications of each position, and asking the class to reconcile different opinions” (p. 93).

Closely related to the issue of the learner’s readiness is that of the educator. A critical self awareness and continuing self inquiry are prerequisites for any teacher. Beyond this, there must also be a heart-full awareness of the values, stances, and beliefs that the educator holds and how these are brought to the learning context. In addition to being conscious of the learner’s capacities and ways of knowing, the facilitator of transformative learning must recognize the assumptions upon which his or her approach to learning rests. These assumptions, while invisible or benign to many, may serve to alienate some members of the learning group and work against the learning process. As an example, Elizabeth Kasl and Dean Elias (2000) write of their conclusions drawn from their experience as white faculty members in a racially and ethnically diverse graduate learning community:

As a faculty, the content of our initial meaning perspective about transformative learning theory did not include race and ethnic diversity as an integral component. Rather we thought of race and ethnicity as two of the many sources for potential disorientating dilemmas that could precipitate transformative learning processes. Our frame of reference has changed: we now assume that, in U.S. culture, habits of mind are permeated with hegemony of white (and male) privilege that must be consciously confronted in all our interactions. (p. 248)

Consideration of assumptions is clearly necessary within the context of any learning community that seeks transformation. Such consideration is especially important

in an approach to learning that invites participants to enter into deep experiential and emotional processes such as those evoked in holotropic work. To attempt to facilitate deep change in other people without ongoing reflection from personal and contextual perspectives is, in my view, irresponsible.

## *2. Participation - willingness and ability:*

Perhaps the most obvious consideration in the use of holotropic sessions as a learning process is willingness on behalf of the participants. Many individuals may not be open to engaging in such intense experiential work, and there are also some physical and psychological contra-indications to working with Holotropic Breathwork. It is a primary principle in Holotropic Breathwork (with which I fully concur) that participation is voluntary and that no group member should feel coerced in any way to do the breathwork. There should be a clear and extensive introduction to the theory and process of holotropic work so that all involved can make well-informed choices.

In addition, there should be a shared understanding that material may be evoked in a holotropic session that an individual may not be ready to discuss with the group. Sometimes powerful memories or somatic experiences may evoke strong emotions that need to be attended to gently outside of the group context. As the group culture evolves, it may become increasingly safe for members to bring this very personal material into the shared process.

In consideration of such powerful and emotional experiences, it is extremely important that each group member has a support system beyond the group itself. This may take the form of a partner or friends who are open and aware of the nature of

holotropic experiences, or a therapist or counselor with a transpersonal orientation. In addition, physical activities such as yoga, tai chi, swimming, dance, and body work are excellent ways to facilitate the processing of deep emotional material.

An alternative method of working with groups who are not able to do breathwork sessions, yet are committed to this form of transpersonal approach, would be to invite group members to access their past experiences of non-ordinary consciousness. Bringing their stories into the group, and reflecting on what learning has, and still can be evoked from them, can be a powerful means of opening the group to other ways of knowing.

### *3. The Group Context:*

Clearly, Holotropic Breathwork is not an approach that will be readily suited to adult learning in the mainstream academic environment. My sense is that it may find an application in transpersonally oriented training programs, workshops, and learning groups. It may be appropriate for some approaches to organizational consulting. It could also be a valuable means by which educators in the field of transformative learning could explore their own process of change.

Learning in this way requires extensive periods of time, not just for the breathwork itself, but also for the process of reflection, sharing, and integration. Holotropic states exist outside of the normal framework of time, and group work that encourages individuals to feel into such states cannot effectively take place within a highly structured time frame. An ideal format would include both multi-day retreat settings and regular group meetings in a cyclic movement in and out of the deeply experiential work. A possible form could consist of a learning community meeting

periodically for retreats and learning subsets or partnerships that meet regularly between the longer sessions.

#### *4. Working with the Individual or the Group:*

Work in holotropic states cannot be determined by the agenda of rational consciousness; therefore outcomes of breathwork sessions cannot be anticipated or controlled. It is possible, therefore, that during a session one or more members of the learning community may encounter personal issues that cause them to withdraw from the group. As I have mentioned above, sometimes an individual may unexpectedly evoke a memory or insight that requires specific individual attention. This personal issue may preclude that individual's involvement with the group process.

Ideally, the learning community should develop capacity to bring compassion and support to any member who encounters such powerfully emotional issues. Growth and healing can occur when a group learns to collaborate sensitively in the decision-making process about whether or not it serves a member's well being to continue to be a part of that community.

#### *5. Group Facilitation:*

The last consideration that I offer to this discussion is the question of whether or not the learning group facilitator/s should also be the facilitator/s for the breathwork sessions if they are part of the learning process. The potential for activating, and exploring, psychological projects and introjects is enormous during work in non-ordinary states of consciousness. This fact has to be an ongoing consideration within the learning

context. Transparency on the part of the group facilitator is an essential attribute in maintaining a clear relationship with participants.

In my view, the answer to this question rests largely with the nature and capacity of the group. If a learning community either shares facilitation among all the participants or is strongly democratic in its approach to facilitation, and if there is a strong basis of trust, then it seems that it could benefit the whole community for the facilitators to become participants in holotropic sessions. On the other hand, if the group is dependent on the facilitators for guidance and intervention, then it may serve the group culture more if the facilitators maintain that role by facilitating the breathwork sessions.

### Afterword

In closing this section, I will return briefly to my interest in the experience of no-self and speak to its relationship to a transformative learning practice. While there is no way to know whether an individual will ever experience a falling-away of the self concept during a holotropic session, it is quite likely that he or she may have insights into that possibility. Support and wisdom within a group may also help to activate that awareness, thus sensitizing each member's experiential capacity.

From a transformative learning perspective, there is no reason to hold an agenda regarding this experience of unitive consciousness or no-self. It would be nonsensical, for example, to make the experience of no-self a group goal in a classroom setting. Learning emerges in whatever form it takes; hopefully, the group develops its own focus and means for evoking understanding. Yet there is a trajectory of growing awareness that emerges from working in holotropic states. As that awareness is embodied in one or more

individuals, it can infect the larger group. Christopher Bache (2000) addresses this directly from his own experience as an educator:

Research suggests that our individual mind fields interpenetrate the mindfields of those around us and, at a deeper level, that they emerge out of and remain connected to vast fields of collective intelligence. Our experience in meditative and psychedelic states is that as we move into deeper levels of awareness, we discover that our many lives are threads in a single, intentional fabric of complex design. There they are so tightly interwoven that they cannot be meaningfully separated from each other. These observations suggest that when one person begins to throw off the layers of illusion and recover his or her true and natural condition, surrounding persons will necessarily be affected... Our spiritual ecology simply does not permit isolated realization. (p. 185)

Bache (2000) continues by specifically commenting on the role of the educator, or facilitator, in this process:

As more teachers begin to actualize the deeper potentials of consciousness, therefore, we should expect to find resonances of clarity and cleansing spontaneously manifesting among our students. This will happen not because we have inappropriately assumed the role of spiritual mentor or guru but because of the *interpenetrating nature of mind itself* and the *contagious quality of clarified states of consciousness*. Furthermore, the deeper the natural connection between student and teacher, the more pronounced these resonances will tend to be. (p. 185)

By intentionally and critically exploring the learning that comes from non-ordinary consciousness, just such a culture of resonance can emerge within a learning community. As Bache (2000) so clearly states, the quality of the teacher or facilitator's embodied awareness substantially supports this emerging group consciousness. The teacher may well be the initial catalyst. However, a group that is committed to shared learning in holotropic states, and critical reflection upon that learning, is not only inviting its own transformation, it is also working towards the healing of the collective consciousness.



## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSION

By its nature, organic inquiry does not easily lead to a neat ending point, or a single clear conclusion. Through all the twists and turns of the inquiry process, I have

encountered many new questions, intensified my curiosity, and experienced deep learning. In a very real sense, the ending is the beginning. New ideas and projects are already seeding from the fruit of this inquiry. This last chapter presents some recommendations for further study and concludes with a brief personal reflection.

### Recommendations for Further Study

In the previous chapter, I discuss the potential for introducing Holotropic Breathwork into the process of a learning community as a catalyst for change and transformation. I feel there is value in pursuing a group inquiry in this context to learn more specifically how intentional work in non-ordinary consciousness can support transformative learning.

Like any group work that involves intense self-inquiry, a learning community that invites holotropic states of consciousness and recognizes the transpersonal, can also invite and support a timely exploration of the meeting places between learning and therapy. The distinctions between these two approaches to transformation and change will undoubtedly become increasingly blurred as individuals become aware of the healing that comes from self-exploration. By bringing critical awareness to the subtle shifts between learning and therapeutic processes, individuals and groups may be able to find within themselves an increasing capacity to heal through the experience of learning.

Equally if not more important, in my view, is the inquiry into a state of mind that is not configured by the limited personal self. This form of inquiry is also a practice, for the mind that has not been in this state cannot really know what it is. Opening to the potential for such a different consciousness, and recognizing the subtle and powerful

ways in which ordinary consciousness resists opening and thereby limits us, is work ripe for study from an integral perspective. We are both the object and subject of such inquiry.

In the context of spirituality and religion, inquiry into the nature of self and no-self has traditionally been a personal endeavor. The insights that I have experienced through collaboration with the co-inquirers, and others who have supported me in this process, lead me to believe that undertaking an inquiry into no-self, or unitive consciousness in the context of a learning community would be very powerful. The potency of such an inquiry could, I imagine, not only explore and support the transformation of each individual involved, but also bring awareness to the ways in which he or she manifests change beyond the group. In other words, a group of learners with intention can bring the critically reflective approach, that is so vital in transformative learning, to the process of transformation of consciousness. A shared transformative inquiry can explore how it is contextualized within the larger culture with respect to the ways in which group members embody and actualize transformation through communication and action.

### Reflecting in the Mandala

During the days that the words of this final section were gestating, I found myself reconnecting to the unnamed urging that originally guided me towards the inquiry. Beneath the clarity of the questions that presented themselves and formed the dissertation project, there was an impulse, or movement that was at work deep in my psyche. Some wise and powerful part of my being was reaching for embodiment, integration, and for a

voice that could speak from the depths of experience. With some irony, I see that through the exploring of no-self I sought authentic self knowing. In my soul, I know that the gradual recognition of the self's non-existence somehow releases the relative self into more transparent and creative forms of expression.

This process of inquiry, especially the meetings with the co-inquirers and the power and depth of their stories, has guided me towards this longed-for integration. In a real and embodied sense I experience myself as more whole and more present. What was fragmented within me is starting to coalesce and flow, and through the flowing comes some liberation of the voice. In this feeling of aliveness is a new sense of relationship and an indisputable recognition that what is alive in the other and in myself is not only the same, but also is not differentiated.

Working with experiences and insights that are so ineffable has prompted me often to use metaphors as a way to point towards meaning. Psychologist Linda Olds (1992) writes:

In their root sense, metaphors transfer or carry meaning across [“phor” from *pherein*] and beyond [“meta”], from one context to another. Metaphors are “meaning transports” which extend our level of understanding by comparison, or some might argue by smuggling extra dimensions into our analysis. In either case they enrich the field of potential comprehension. (p. 24)

One metaphor, in particular, that has been in my consciousness throughout this inquiry is that of a mandala: the symbol of wholeness and unity. Returning to this metaphor, I experience what it is both to observe the enormously complex mandala of existence and, at the same time, to be in it - to feel the validity of my tiny place in this mandala of all being. The intricate patterns of the mandala - the threads of the web, to use a metaphor for a metaphor - have all resonated minutely to the tiny tuggings of this

inquiry just as this work has grown in resonance with the tugs of other writers and inquirers. Our inquiries are inseparably part of the whole.

My story, in the context of this inquiry, ends here with the recognition of the mandala. In this symbol I find an acceptance for the wholeness of what I have previously thought of in terms of duality: the parts and the whole, the self and no-self, the relative and the all. Knowing this leaves me increasingly clear that each one of my individual values, beliefs, and actions has some effect on every living thing. Through this recognition I see and feel the ongoing imperative to cultivate new depths of presence and awareness in my ways of being and to embody a consciousness that nourishes peace.

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## APPENDIX A

### Request for Participants

(Posted as an e-mail on Holo-cert List, 7/15/2000)

I'm hoping that some of you might be interested in an inquiry project that I'm doing. I'm looking for 3 to 4 'co-inquirers.'

First let me tell you a little about me: I've almost completed the GTT - the upcoming module in Santa Fe will be my last until certification - and have been working with HB as a participant and assistant for more than 10 years. I'm also in the dissertation stage (hence this project) of a Ph.D. in "Integral Studies: Transformative Learning and Change" at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). I'm now living in northern Arizona where I'm piecing together a motley work life as a massage therapist and grant writer while I attend to the dissertation. My goal is to be finished by next April.

The intention for the inquiry is, broadly, to understand the effects that experiences of what I'm referring to as 'no-self' or 'unitive consciousness', have on people. That is, how

does the temporary (often momentary) experience of consciousness that is not apprehended by a 'self' impact (or not) one's experience of being - one's world view.

More specifically, I'm interested in inquiring into this with people who choose to work with non-ordinary states of consciousness as a means of healing and opening consciousness and who have had this experience, or experiences (although the original experience of no self may have been an anomalous occurrence - not the result of such exploratory work). For this reason I'm looking for my co-inquirers among GTT trainees and facilitators.

The process is extremely self reflective - I'm asking participants to inquire into their own experiences, using some broad guiding questions, and to share their stories with me in a conversation rather than interview format. The intention of this methodology is to cultivate an experience that offers insight and potentially some measure of transformation for all involved: inquirer, co-inquirers and the eventual reader.

A secondary hope that I hold for the inquiry itself is to begin to inform the theory that is developing in the field of transformative learning from the perspective of exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness with the intention of deep learning and change.

So - rather than overdosing with information - if this is of interest to you, please would you contact me?

There is one big consideration: I don't have the resources to pay for extensive travel and - since I'd like to meet with the co-inquirers face to face - it would be difficult to travel very far afield. The west side of the U.S. is preferable. What would be brilliant is if anyone who is coming to the Santa Fe modules is interested. But, if this speaks to you, wherever you are, please contact me.

Thanks,  
Marianne (Murray)

## APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form***CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT***

Marianne Murray, a doctoral student at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, is conducting a dissertation inquiry project entitled: *The Empty "I": an organic inquiry into the ways that the experience of no self shapes the self*. The purpose of this study is to inquire into the ways that the direct experience of no self – or unitive consciousness – may have influenced the lives and world view of the co-inquirers. The study seeks to explore and understand the participants' cognitive and embodied memories of this state of consciousness in relation to their sense of self, relationship, and the experience of living.

***Procedure:*** If I agree to participate in the study, I understand that I will be asked to take part in three sessions with the researcher. These sessions will take place at my convenience and will last from one to two hours. During these meetings I will be asked to talk about my experience of no self both in the original experience[s] and in relation to my life experience. In addition, I understand that I may be asked to participate in follow-up telephone calls in order to verify information or to gather further data.

I understand that our sessions will be tape recorded and transcribed and that I will be able to review the synthesis of the transcribed material. If I elect during the sessions to discontinue my participation the tape[s] will be deleted. If I continue to participate with the entire project, the tapes will be deleted within one year of the end of the study.

**Risks/Discomforts:** The process of evoking memories and deep reflection may touch on sensitive or emotional areas of the body/mind. I understand that I am not obliged to answer any question or participate in any part of the process which feels detrimental to my well being. I also understand that the names of mental health professionals are available to me should I feel the need to seek assistance.

**Confidentiality:** All information that I contribute to this study will be held in strict confidence within the limits of the law. Tapes and transcripts will be kept in the researcher's home in a locked cabinet, and will be identified by numbers or pseudonyms only. No real names will be used in the dissertation, or any reports or publications that may result from this study. I understand that I will receive a copy of the final draft of my profile prior to the completion of the study for verification and final input. Any details that I request to be deleted from the profile at this time will be honored.

**Benefits:** I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me in the form of payment or training from my participation in this study. However I may find the process of reflection and inquiry into my experiences to be helpful, thought provoking, and integrative.

**Questions:** I have discussed the project with the researcher and have had my initial questions answered. I understand that I may call the researcher for further clarification: Marianne Murray, (520) 204-5996. I understand that if I have any concerns about my rights as a participant in this research, or if I feel that I am at risk, I may report my concerns – anonymously, if I wish – to the Chair of the Human Research Review Committee, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103, or call (415) 575-6126.

**Consent:** I understand all of the above, including that my participation is entirely voluntary. No pressure has been applied to encourage me to participate. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time.

***I hereby give my consent to Marianne Murray to be a participant in this project.***

A copy of this consent form has been given to me.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



Out beyond ideas of  
wrong-doing & right-doing  
there is a field.  
I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down  
in that grass  
the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase,  
each other  
doesn't make any sense.

Coleman Barks and Michael Green  
*The Illuminated Rumi*, 1997, p. 98)

May this work  
be of benefit  
to all beings.