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THE CONCEPT OF A BREAKTHROUGH

*One cold Saturday in February we had an all-day marathon and I had the most profound experience of my life. For on that cold winter day I discovered a whole new world . . . I experienced my own beauty that day, as a woman, as a person. I really felt it on the inside . . . I loved everyone **as they were** . . . I was seeing differently . . . I went through a door to a place I could only call whole, clear vision. (L.G. Klan 1982) *The Other Side of Fear.**

This is the breakthrough in the group - in this case a primal group - which I have spoken of before as one of the most characteristic aspects of personal growth as humanistic psychology sees it.

I have myself experienced this, and called it getting in touch with my real self; and I have seen it happen to many other people, in my own and other people's groups. To me it is familiar territory.

And of course there can be smaller breakthroughs, not so fully, not so dramatic perhaps, but still marking an important step forward. In the field of therapy, we often say that each such breakthrough must be followed by a period of working through, to integrate the new material into daily life.

(Before continuing, it seems worth while to dispose of one false obstacle. From a feminist point of view, there may be something suspect about the idea of a breakthrough - it sounds rather masculine and penetrative. But really this is not so - a birth is a breakthrough, and girl babies are just as good at breaking through as boy babies - and need to break through just as much. Feminists need to, and do, break through established conventions more than most people.)

Not long ago I came across a diagram which seems to me to do justice to the idea of a breakthrough. It comes from Ken Wilber's (1976) book **The Spectrum of Consciousness**, and it looks like Fig.1.

What Wilber says - and I am deliberately dropping his labels, because I want to generalise what he is saying - is that we progress in our personal growth, or in our personal or spiritual development, from

one number to the next in logical fashion. We extend what we know from 1 to 2, we add more information from 2 to 3, we add new experiences from 3 to 4, we get new feelings and sensations from 4 to 5 - and all these things are interchangeable and additive.

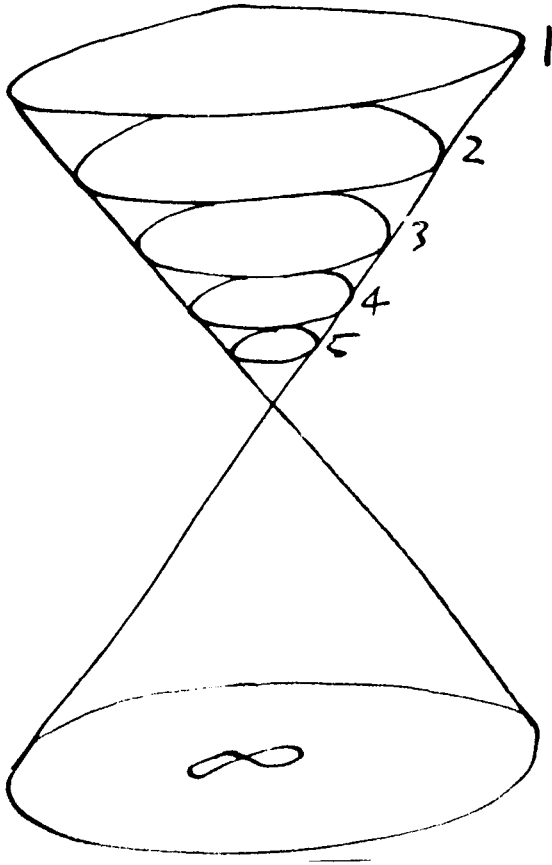


Fig. 1.

But then we come to the point where the upper and lower cones intersect. This is the point where a complete changeover takes place. Instead of progressing to the next number, we fall through into infinity. All our existing acquisitions become useless at this point, and we cannot use the old approach anymore. An entirely new set of rules applies.

This seems to me a very accurate and evocative picture of what happens. And Wilber emphasises that the only way we can avoid the logical sequence of regular steps followed by a breakthrough

is by refusing to let go. All the way down from 1 to 5, it was a question of acquiring more and more, of getting, even of grabbing, perhaps. But now, at the central point, it is a question of letting go, of abandoning our preconceptions, our identity.

Now Wilber is talking about spiritual development, and the ultimate level of consciousness, whereas I started off this article by talking about personal growth. And I am not at all saying that these are the same thing. All I am saying is that they take the same form. There is more than one breakthrough, but all breakthroughs have this same pattern.

This is of course very similar to the idea of the dialectical transformation of quantity into quality. Water gets hotter and hotter until it turns into steam, or colder and colder until it turns into ice. The last straw breaks the camel's back. The caterpillar grows and grows until it turns into a butterfly. Societies change gradually until the revolution comes.

It is also reminiscent of the recent discoveries in catastrophe theory, but I think catastrophe theory is different in that you can always get back to your starting point. With the kind of breakthroughs we are concerned with in personal growth, there is no way of going back.

What I have found in my own experience is that there is one of these double-cones (Wilber's hour-glass figure) below another, so that there is a continual process of learning followed by breakthrough followed by consolidation, followed by new learning, and so on. This is something which has certainly been found in spiritual growth by people like Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill and James Horne (1978).

So this seems to be common ground between personal growth (the work done in groups and in one-to-one therapy) and spiritual development, the work done in meditation, prayer and ritual. In both cases there is an intellectual element and an experiential element, and in both cases it is the experiential element which is the real heart of the matter, so far as change is concerned.

And in both fields this point, where we have to let go of our previous images and self-image, feels very risky and dangerous. But always we find that it is less dangerous and less different than we thought at first. So the message is that all shall be well: and all manner of things shall be well.