

# Recognising the Sacred

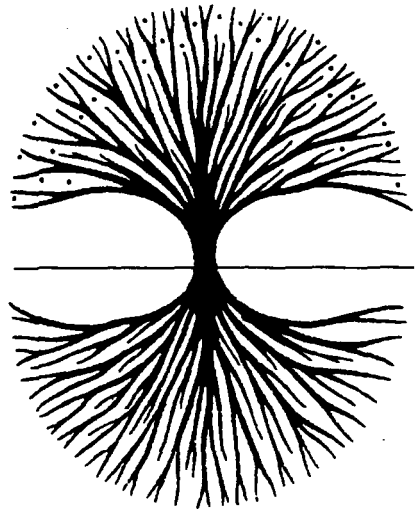
## Tree Staunton-Soth

Psychotherapy and spirituality are sometimes seen in opposition to one another. Hillman accuses psychotherapy of being soul-less, teaching us to analyse and reduce things into a framework which denies their essential meaning. Therapists often dismiss spiritual movements and those who follow them as being on a 'trip', ungrounded, escaping, or using beliefs to suppress their true feelings.

What I am seeking to understand a little more in writing on this theme centres on a question of when is true spiritual experience possible, and when is it a compensation for or denial of the loss of other, more basic human needs?

Our Vietnamese Buddhist teacher frequently made references to psychotherapy which questioned its validity. He had got the impression that it consisted largely of expressing anger and beating cushions. This, he said, was 'watering the seeds of your anger'. When I approached him to talk to him about the usefulness of therapy, he joked, 'Do you earn much money?' I think he found it very hard to embrace the idea of one person being paid to 'be' with another.

An interesting dynamic was uncovered through this exchange with the Master. The exchange took place in a



public place with others watching, and I was astonished to experience the feelings of rivalry and competition from those fellow retreatants whom I had previously seen as so deeply involved in their spiritual journeys — serious meditators.

What had he said? they asked eagerly. How had I managed to engage him? Suddenly they were like children, all wanting a piece of the cake.

Who were we trying to kid? For all of us there, I expect, there was a strong wish, conscious or unconscious, to have our emptiness filled up, to be fed spiritual goodies by the Good Father.

How much are we searching for the good object, denied us in childhood, when we follow a spiritual quest? How much is our search to find something spiritual a defence against facing a real emptiness or absence which we endured at a time when the presence of a love object was essential for our growth, physical, mental and emotional?

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In this scenario, the Church or guru becomes the Good Father, guiding the lost child in the conduct of her life; the Goddess becomes the symbolic Good Mother, feeding, nourishing, providing the ground for a safe existence. If this is true it could be that belonging to any religious community is an attempt to recreate the family, this time a happy family with a good (symbolic) parent.

It is also my experience that there is a correlation between childhood deprivation and 'spiritual' awareness in early development. The child who has inadequate contact with real parent figures does develop (or remain in) a sense of symbolic reality. In the absence of a holding environment in the family, the child has a strong need to 'hold' herself in 'oneness' with the world — you might say to 'spiritualise' matter — and to develop rituals. The energy is channelled out of the body and into the so-called Higher Energy centres. Such a child does not develop normal ego boundaries, and allowing the necessary fragmenting and re-forming of the self, but rather holds herself with her own awareness in a kind of superconscious state.

And it is in this state that she may experience mystical experiences. Reich talks of the mystic being "structurally close to the schizoid character". In short, the less grounded one is in everyday reality, the more one is open to mystical/spiritual experiences and 'other' realities.

The body is the shadow in conventional religious terms — the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Reich spoke of how '*homo normalis* hates the schizoid mind . . . the schizophrenic world mingles in the one experience what is kept pains-

takingly separate in *homo normalis*'. The chaos, the irrational, the paranormal.

Marion Woodman says our task on earth is to find the 'place of soul', the eternal part where spirit and matter meet. But, she says, spirit does not want to come into the body; it wants to remain ideal vision. So the mystic/spiritual seeker despises the flesh.

In psychotherapy, we are interested in a 'real' relationship because we want to know why someone has turned away from themselves/their body. A spiritual experience is said to 'transcend' the limits of ordinary consciousness. How much is it because those normal limits are too painful to bear? Is it transcendence or avoidance?

Perhaps people turn to both spiritual experience and therapy out of some kind of disappointment and disillusionment with people in their lives, past and present. These longings and searchings which draw people to spiritual movements and sects are perhaps what John Rowan refers to as 'prepersonal' rather than transpersonal.

After a while in the psychotherapeutic world I am sometimes tempted to see almost everything as a re-enactment of a primary scenario from childhood, to see all 'objects' in our world as merely actors in the drama we set up in our first years (or last lives) and continue to play out until death.

But to give in to this would be reductionist. I am also aware of our essential 'spiritual' nature. We do incarnate for a purpose, and through our personal struggles we do contribute towards the resolution of collective conflicts.

So what of the truly transpersonal

experience? What are the conditions necessary to propel one into such a state where one transcends all familiar limitations, and experiences one's whole self and beyond? Is this different from the core experience which one can feel after a good, clearing, releasing, insightful therapy session?

It seems to me that trying to define whether or not something is pre- or transpersonal — that is, to attempt to evaluate the quality of another's experience and assess their developmental level in linear terms — would be misguided in any system, therapeutic or otherwise.

In their book *The Common Experience*, J.M. Cohen and J.F. Phipps bring together many different reports of spiritual experiences, some collected from Mr or Ms Average of the general public by the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford. The reports are in complete contradiction to any theories I may have had about emotional development and about grounded experience in the body and feelings being a necessary prerequisite for a true spiritual experience. Numerous reports verify the sudden, unpredictable nature of the experiences. In many cases they came without warning; their effects, in some cases, remained; and people had not necessarily prepared themselves beforehand or seriously contemplated these matters before. Furthermore, they were not by any means always 'out-of-the-body' experiences. For example: 'I was enjoying an almost, nay actual, physical thrill of delight . . . I had pleasurable thrills running across underneath my skull, almost like a cold shower in hot

weather.' 'There was an experience of great peace and contentment, also heightened awareness. I really "saw" the room for the first time.' 'I touched some hitherto hidden button within me, and a little packet or quantum of warmth, light, love (call it what you will) flipped into the middle of me and then spread outwards, irradiating my whole being. The experience was the most exciting I have ever had. It was piercingly pleasurable.'

For many, the experiences came as a total surprise and there is no indication of particular attention to personal growth, relationships or emotional development. So it seems that life-changing spiritual experiences can happen to any of us, anytime, without necessarily preparing ourselves by self-awareness, personal growth or serious meditation practices.

A spiritual awareness may add another dimension to our lives and make our existence more meaningful, but does it help us to manage our feelings on a day-to-day level? From this perspective the spiritual and the therapeutic seem to have slightly different functions, but they certainly go hand-in-hand, complementing one another, and acknowledging the different levels which co-exist in the human experience. Perhaps any divergence between the worlds of therapy and of spirituality stems from a need on the part of individuals to separate and protect the system which works for them. To me the two are intricately linked in our task of incarnating, humanising the archetypes, and recognising the sacred in our lives.