Gateways and Pitfalls

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What's in a name? Is 'psychospiritual' substantially different from 'transpersonal', or is it just a politically (UKCP-wise) more acceptable term for the same agenda? This agenda could not be more relevant to our present desacralised western society, which is crying out with a hunger born from the spiritual wasteland in which we live. As the proverb goes, we may have gained the whole world, but we have truly lost our souls. In this tragic process, we may be on the brink of recognising what we are doing to our Selves.

Transpersonal psychology has had a mixed upbringing and may have fallen into questionable company. It was originally intended by Abraham Maslow and others to extend the range of psychology to include the dimension of human experience that lies beyond the personal — namely those numinous and spiritual experiences which could not be understood within the confines of the major three forces in psychology (behavioural, psychoanalytic and humanistic). Despite efforts in England by Barbara Somers and Ian Gordon Brown at the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology to bring depth with a Jungian perspective, 'transpersonal' has become associated with 'height' psychology focusing on the expansion of consciousness and avoiding the dark side of the psyche.

In America the early optimism of the Human Potential Movement has been further fuelled by New Age beliefs that anything can be transformed in a short space of time. Although John Rowan in his book on the transpersonal rightly makes a clear distinction between New Age and transpersonal, they are often fused. A recent television programme on the New Age featured several transpersonal therapists. On the workshop circuit, transpersonal has become a popular umbrella term for a new transformational technology which offers freedom from past history, journeys into the light, connection with 'soul-mates', a guilt-free licence to seek personal salvation and promises of instant enlightenment — getting 'it'. Coupled with the American taste for goals and the myth of personal improvement, transpersonal techniques have caught on in the market-place of individual growth and self-improvement.

In contradiction to this 'masculine' goal orientation, the transpersonal umbrella has also included those therapies which have been influenced by the re-emergence of the 'feminine'. From sources as wide as shamanism, Celtic mythology, the grail legend, paganism, Goddess worship . . . there has been a challenge to the patriarchal rule of the personal ego in psychotherapy. This is a challenge to the

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upward and forward myth of personal growth, to linear notions of development, to techniques as opposed to craft, to the heroic ego that wishes to conquer the dragon of the unconscious and colonise the underworld. Most of all it is a challenge to the light-addicted — those fleeing the darkness of their own psyches. For the feminine does not need the searchlight of ego-consciousness to find her way, she can see in the dark, is at home in the twilight or moonlight.

Both transpersonal and psychospiritual psychotherapies are concerned with paying attention to more than the personal ego — what is beyond the 'skin-encapsulated ego' as Alan Watts put it. Yet this 'more' may be conceived in very different ways. Due at least partly to its wide and varied parentage, the transpersonal orientation has no clear boundaries and is more to do with the attitude of the therapist than with what they actually do. Stan Grof's view is that it is not the content of the therapy that defines a transpersonal therapist, but the model of the human psyche that they hold. Similarly Roberto Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis, which is possibly the paradigm case of a transpersonal therapy, wrote that psychosynthesis is best understood as a 'guiding attitude' rather than as a distinct form of therapy. John Rowan quotes Frances Vaughan, 'The change in attitude that occurs when a therapist moves towards a transpersonal orientation has been described as a shift from working on yourself to working *with* yourself.'

Although clear enough to those who have experienced them, this vagueness about boundaries makes the transpersonal therapies look woolly and naïve to those outside their way of perceiving the world. To the more established professions in the psychoanalytic tradition, who have already attained academic respectability and delineated their territories with jealous precision, this boundary diffusion is a professional sin. Attempts to give the transpersonal some intellectual rigour and clarity, such as Ken Wilber's brilliant schema of advanced states of consciousness and John Rowan's own schematic maps of what might count as transpersonal, seem not to marry with the non-academic emphasis on experience. As David Jones' introductory quotation from the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Psychology* shows, it is the experience rather than the interpretation that matters. Perhaps there is something essentially mysterious about the transpersonal experience which defies explanation. As Wittgenstein said, '[Concerning] that of which one cannot speak, one must remain silent.'

Does the term 'psychospiritual' promise to offer any clearer understanding of this territory? As Gödel's theorem posits, no system of thought can be complete in itself, for it needs to appeal to a bigger system to understand its underlying premises. The problem with attempting to understand transpersonal experiences from within a purely psychological frame is the temptation to reduce the phenomena to what is already known and understood, as Freud did in equating mystical experience with the oceanic feelings of the embryo in the womb. The spiritual domain offers a meta-level frame from within which to understand phenomena which are experienced psychologically

but yet seem to transcend psychological explanation. By attempting to expand the psychological field to cover 'spiritual' experiences, transpersonal psychologists and therapists may have been guilty of collapsing levels and hence fusing or confusing contexts so that there is no meta-level to give meaning to the experience.

By being less identified with the experience and placing equal emphasis on the frame of understanding, the psychospiritual does seem to offer a way forward. A psychospiritual therapist would be more discerning as to what level of theory would be appropriate from which to understand the client's experience, and could draw on a wide range of models to act as a meaningful context. This is where Wilber's and Rowan's models come into their own, because they clarify that each experience needs to be understood within its own context.

Another area concerns what each name brings with it. In contrast to the transpersonal's confused parentage, psychospiritual is the 'child' of two archetypal parents (Psyche and Spirit). This clearer lineage immediately sets out a claim for the territory interfacing psychology and spirituality. In bridging the gap between the psychological and spiritual domains a number of gateways and pitfalls open up. The gateways come from interfaces being areas of innovation and creativity, because fringe areas bordering established territories demand new ways of thinking and understanding. The pitfalls depend on the relationship between the areas. Now, Psyche and Spirit do not get on. Following the family metaphor, they are clearly not married and, given the state of our materialistic culture, it is amazing that they ever got it together at all — it must have been a one-night stand or an immaculate conception! In fact they are so often in irreconcilable dispute that their psychospiritual offspring may well suffer from the child therapist's dilemma of trying to hold together conflicting parents.

So what is this divide between psyche and spirit? The spirit wants to be free, as the Smirnoff advert reminds us. It fears being trapped in matter and prefers solitude on mountains to the busy market-place of modern life. It has no time for the varieties of neurosis and the fascinating knots in which humans bind themselves. It wants to cut free and soar into the heavens. It seeks perfection. It is transcendent and universal in its nature. In contrast, psyche, the soul, loves the local and unique; is enraptured by the vicissitudes of human craziness; values its imperfections as expressions of its difference; wants to experience all the details of joy and suffering; delights in beauty and accepts its ugliness; wants to dwell in the valleys, the 'vale of soul-making', as Keats called it.

In common with all attempts to interface domains or traditions of a different order, the psychospiritual will have its own difficulties. The power of the beliefs and practices of the original domains which it is attempting to integrate will not easily be overturned. Just as spiritual experiences are not well understood in the psychological domain, so psychological experiences are misunderstood by many spiritual teachers. Such teachers often warn against the intensification of disturbing feelings, say in uncovering

wounding or abuse from the past. Within a spiritual discipline, such feelings might well obscure the Self, but within psychotherapy they become the very means of revealing soul.

Another serious problem for spiritual teachers is the notion of the unconscious. As Alstead and Kramer point out in their chapter on 'Gurus, Psychotherapy and the Unconscious', 'To attract followers, gurus must present themselves as enlightened (without ego), which includes not having an unconscious. There is good reason for this: to surrender totally to another it is essential to believe that the recipient of such trust is not motivated by self-interest. Being ego-less is the only way self-interest could not be a motivating factor. The possibility of unconscious elements in the guru would mean there could be unacknowledged or secret self-interest.' The recent history of eastern gurus falling into western temptation through having secret sexual relations with their disciples suggests that the unconscious may indeed affect spiritual teachers who step outside the field in which their tradition holds them (for further information see Wilber's *Spiritual Choices*).

If the divide between the psychological and spiritual is to be bridged, it will need an earthy spirituality which rejoices in human life without needing to transform it and improve it. This was beautifully expressed in the film *Wings of Desire*, where angels are glorying in the wonders of human incarnation. Unfortunately many spiritual traditions are caught in a dualism that separates and alienates matter and spirit, body and soul, reason and instinct. The spiritual path can encourage its adherents to rise above their lower nature. This dualism gets reflected in psychospiritual theories such as the concepts of the lower and higher unconscious in psychosynthesis, which leads to an inevitable depreciation of the lower by comparison with the higher. James Hillman is very strong on this and in his chapter on 'Peaks and Valleys' critiques a spiritual superiority which takes us away from life to abstract realms of mountain tops. It is not surprising that in psychosynthesis guided meditations the symbols of the Self are discovered coming down on rays of light at the top of mountains. It is where this spiritual dualism operates that the dangers of an unacknowledged shadow are most to be found.

It may be that rather than bridging the gap, psychospiritual therapies actually widen it, by colluding with clients and students who are unconsciously escaping the difficulties in their life. This may be especially true with those whose own psychological make up, that of the *puer*, leads them to a desire to fly and a fear of being trapped on Earth. This is illustrated in the story of Icarus, who would have been a present-day advocate of psychospiritual therapies. Icarus was the young man who, with the help of his ingenious father, Daedelus, escaped the trap of life with the help of waxen wings Daedelus built for him. Intoxicated by the sense of freedom, Icarus flies too near the sun. The wax melts and he plunges to his death. The story describes the puer's tendency to inflate and carry us to intoxicating heights where we lose sight of our mortal limitations. This 'high' cannot last, the wings will inevitably melt in the heat and we may be in danger of crashing into a de-

pression at the other end of the inflation.

Assagioli says of psychosynthesis that it only takes you to the 'door' of the spiritual, and was clear himself about the need to separate psychological work from that of a spiritual path. The spiritual teacher has had a training far exceeding even that of UKCP psychotherapy accreditation! He/she speaks with an authority that can be awesome; that invites surrender; that uplifts you or casts you down according to his or her insight into your spiritual path. The relationship of the guru and *chela* or teacher and disciple are of a quite different order from that of psychotherapist and client. The former is based on spiritual authority and surrender; the latter, at least for therapies which have freed themselves from the medical model, on mutual learning and respect.

Irina Tweedie, for instance, talks of her Sufi master as utterly destroying her personality so as to lead her to enlightenment. Who is going to authorise their therapist to do that? No-one in their right mind . . . but then therapy can take us out of this 'right mind' and into an idealised transference which may lead us to believe in the therapist's powers. Worse still, a therapist who has had their ego inflated by psychospiritual exercises may take the transference personally (especially where they have not been adequately trained in unconscious phenomena) and believe that they have such powers. Many readers of *Self & Society* will remember experiences from early encounter groups in which leaders did take such powers and were inevitably abusive — although this may not have been recognised as abuse at the time. Can you imagine how much greater the delusion could be if this personal inflation were backed up by a spiritual philosophy? We do not have to go far to see the dangers of cult phenomena infiltrating the body of psychotherapy.

Where there is great potential there are also dangers. None of these dangers means that such a psychospiritual bridge could not be built, only that its building would need to be constructed with great care. Practitioners would initially need to be fluent in two worlds to effectively operate at the interface, and how many present practitioners could claim this fluency? But perhaps then in time the psychospiritual will grow away from its parents and develop its own path — which may have little to do with either psychology or spirituality as we know them.

Further Reading

Anthony Ecker and Ken Wilber, *Spiritual Choices*, Paragon, 1987

Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, Turnstone, 1975

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Kramer and Alstead, *The Guru Papers — Masks of Authoritarian Power*, Frog, 1993

John Rowan, *The Transpersonal — Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Routledge, 1993

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