

## CENTRE PROFILE

# *The Centre for Transpersonal Psychology*

*Barbara Somers*

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**W**e never planned to set up the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology. It created itself.

Ian Gordon-Brown and I met in 1971. By 1973 we were deeply in love and, being both Aquarians, wanted to express our joy through work. 'Why not start with a single workshop?' we said; little knowing what was to follow.

Ian's experience was as an industrial psychologist. He had deep roots in the esoteric field, particularly from his work with Alice Bailey, where he had also met Roberto Assagioli. His knowledge of ancient wisdom and of group dynamics was extensive. My own contribution was as a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist, with long experience in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Added together, this was a comely mix from which to begin.

Both of us were working full-time elsewhere, so it was an adventure to start with a weekend workshop, October 1973, at Talgarth Road, Barons Court. We used a small mailing list and were astonished when 20 people turned up. The weekend

was based on talks, guided imagery, active imagination and artwork. (This was to become the pattern for all following workshops.) It explored two journeys — the personality's experience through time and space, and the soul's journey through eternity. How might these two be connected and integrated?

The experience that weekend was unforgettable. It went to such depths and heights, through tears and laughter, ending in a profound meditation. 'What next?' we were asked. So Workshop 2 was shaped up. This time the theme was the integration of head and heart, of masculine and feminine principles in all life. Feminist issues were peaking at that period, and we learned a lot, trying to umpire slanging matches between men and women. (I was often relieved that Ian was 6'2" and big with it, as we coaxed the proponents to deal with the interplay of energies, rather than the arts of war!)

Workshop 3 — on will, purpose and direction — rapidly followed. This completed the basic triangle on which so many

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later workshops were founded. It was now 1974, and the continuing 'What next?' caused us to accept the inevitable. We registered the title 'Centre for Transpersonal Psychology', and made clear-cut decisions:

1. Our aim would be to 'seed' people with the reality of the transpersonal perspective, so that they would take it on into their everyday lives and jobs, and in their turn 'seed' others.
2. To this end, we would be an organism, not an organisation.
3. We would avoid administration; would never advertise; but would rely on personal recommendation and referral to fill the workshops.
4. If ever we ceased to enjoy the work, we would stop.
5. Eventually, we would find a permanent home for the work.

Meantime, we hired suitable premises and added constantly to the workshop programme on such themes as Initiation, The Other Self, Dreamwork, Alchemy, Meditation, *et al.*

By 1976 we had each left our original work (Ian at the Industrial Participation Association and I at the Society of Authors) in order to handle the expanding workshop programme and our own private practices. In 1977 Ian took on the public side of our work. I established a training in Transpersonal Skills in Psychotherapy, with an annual intake of 22 students, which has continued for 20 years. These were exciting times. We met many fine people and made deep and lasting friendships. Joan and Reynold Swallow joined us and in 1979 set up their own Transpersonal Psychology Study Centre in

Devon, based on the London pattern. To crown our joy, in 1984 a friend of our work enabled us to buy a large house in Pembroke Place, Notting Hill, with its own radiant garden. This became our steady base. The house was venerable and needed constant attention, from foundations to roof and back again. (I recall one weekend, aptly on the theme of 'The Creative Use of Crisis', when we waded through water from a burst pipe to greet participants at the door, and everyone joined in baling out!) Ian and I agreed so often that our peak of happiness was to see the house and garden quietly containing groups of people, as they explored their lives and found new meanings. 'I feel I have come home' became such a familiar comment.

Through the fast-winged years that followed, our original concept of 'seeding' flourished widely. We managed to remain organic, with minimal paperwork, yet without loss of professionalism. Other colleagues joined us, no doubt attracted by the free spirit prevailing. We all worked hard and lovingly, with much laughter and quite a few tears as the profound work unfolded itself. The training went to Belfast, and Newcastle and Leicester; and to Edinburgh (where Transpersonal Psychology, Scotland, is now firmly anchored). Another colleague took it to Hungary. In 1994, Ian mounted a London Conference for the European Transpersonal Association (EUROTAS), represented by 12 member countries. This required a vast amount of work and planning and Ian was visibly tiring. However, a chord had been struck and meetings of EUROTAS were held in Europe, all of which he attended as President.

In parallel, I felt the need for new ener-

gies and voices to take on the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology training work. I asked Liz McCormick if she would be willing to do so and, joyfully, she agreed. We knew that, 25 years on from its inception, our work would be in safe hands.

Ian was deeply involved with achieving UKCP Accreditation status for the Centre, and could be seen through a snowstorm of paperwork. We were concerned for the many workshop participants who might not wish to follow the psychotherapy path: for example, all those people who attended each weekend who served the arts and crafts. For them, and many another, I

shaped in 1995 the Centre for Transpersonal Perspectives, which runs a changing programme of workshops on themes dear to the transpersonal heart. And this work goes on apace, alongside the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology training programme.

'I am a totally fulfilled man,' said Ian, one bright evening in early 1996 as we relaxed over a meal together. A few months later (6th October) he died gently in his sleep. He was a splendid person, and has left a great void in all our lives. We salute him and continue in the same spirit of gratitude and joy, as ever.



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## What is Transpersonal Psychology?

Elizabeth McCormick

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In terms of the ever-blossoming psychology tree, the branch of transpersonal psychology is young.

Transpersonal approaches to the human condition officially entered psychology studies in 1964 with the publication of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, edited by Anthony Sutich and Abraham Maslow. They evolved through a concern with honouring states of being

that had not previously been included in other approaches to psychological thinking. Part of the honouring was to name and place these states of being, in their own right, rather than reducing them to interpretations from other psychologies.

The word 'transpersonal' was first used by William James in 1906 in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and then, in 1917 in German, by C.G. Jung. It has since become

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an umbrella term for naming those experiences where the sense of personal identity or self extends beyond ('trans') the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of life as a whole. These experiences are filtered through the individual person, hence 'trans-personal'. What is termed 'transpersonal experience' is the meeting of the non-personal with the personal and the language that is created from this meeting.

The wide range of human experience covered by the umbrella term 'transpersonal' and enquired about by transpersonal psychology includes both the everyday personality and states of mind beyond everyday perception, as in recognition of beauty, feelings of bliss, awe, ecstasy, wonder, reverence, and in meta- and altered states of consciousness such as transcendence, depth intuitions and pre-cognition.

Transpersonal experience also includes states of 'oneness', of being at one with the universe, the giving and receiving of unconditional love and compassion for others and for life itself. It embraces mystical experience and spiritual awakenings, the movement of soul in all animate life and the whole variety of human spiritual experience and spiritual paths, meditation, the creation of sacred space, the soul journey, together with the presence of spiritual emergency in crises, in illness, in breakdown to breakthrough, and in the near-death experience. One person's evocation of their own transpersonal experience will be different from another's. It can be difficult to put into words, but it is important to keep trying, because this can be part of the individual commitment to authenticity of feeling.

The language for the expression of these aspects of human experience beyond the personal has traditionally been carried by those most committed to the contemplative life, who live nearer to the essence of what is transpersonal: poets, artists, visionaries, mystics, those who have quietly honoured a religious attitude. Since psychology is the investigation of human experience, of which these states of being, including spirituality, are part, it seems appropriate that they be included in psychological enquiry. The great test, it seems to me, for our current age of debate, is not only to be able to enter into the experiences within the transpersonal umbrella, in order to meet them with the energies they carry and to know them *subjectively* as empirical fact, but also to be able to explore their *objective* reality. To be able to speak authentically about the value (or lack of value) of contemplative silence we must first explore it for ourselves, and then be objective about our experience. Perhaps the example of C.G. Jung is pertinent here. During his well-recorded breakdown he became traveller, artist, observer and scientist. He was within the actual experiences of his breakdown descent, while at the same time observing their pattern and recording images and dialogues in his notebooks.

It is vital to become discriminating in our approach to transpersonal experiences, because these are so often open to misinterpretation. Any enquiry must distinguish between pseudo-spirituality, spiritual 'escapism' or 'tourism', and profound authentic spiritual experiences. It is important also that spirituality and spiritual practice do not become psychologised, because this too often gives a reductionist,

pathologised view of what is a common and profound experience for many millions of human beings. Spiritual discipline, not unlike scientific research, demands rigour and attention, self-awareness and continual self-renewal. It demands that ego personality be ultimately engaged in the service of the process of that which is trans-personal. This engagement becomes the fulcrum for discovering what is beyond. What is evident from the last 30 years of transpersonal psychology is its capacity to link an individual to a system of meaning and begin a healing process that no psychological understanding that honours only ego personality can offer.

Transpersonal psychology places the human awareness that receives and mediates those experiences described as 'transpersonal' at the centre of its philosophy and its psychology. All aspects of the person, their ego personality, their life journey, are mediated through this ultimate central energy, sometimes known as the transpersonal self, or just the Self. It is this centre from which psychic life stems and around which the life of the psyche revolves.

The transpersonal self is both sought by the everyday 'I' and acts as a magnetic point drawing the everyday 'I' toward it. It is this energy that links human life with other animate life, uniting all living energies within the wider world. For transpersonal psychology, the *transpersonal centre* is what differentiates an individual from being merely the sum total of their genes, social and environmental history, their ego personality, inner complexes, past sufferings, neuroses. Whilst transpersonal psychology integrates many different theories of personality

development and character style, together with the skills and techniques of practice learned from these well-tried and tested theories, its central tenet is the presence of a transpersonal centre, whether or not this is referred to as such. It invites the individual to explore wider realms of awareness, a vision of, and a search for, wholeness; to feel connected to the body of mankind as a whole, with its world historical collection of story, myth and adventure, where past, present and future are in creative interplay.

Since 1964 there have been many developments in transpersonal psychology in America and in Europe. Many Eastern approaches are also being explored. At a conference called 'Beyond the Brain' given in Cambridge in 1995 Professor Charles Tart, a leading thinker in transpersonal psychology in America who has led research into precognition, extrasensory perception and clairvoyance, spoke of how much Western psychology has concentrated its energy on 'endarkenment', that which goes with the past, whilst for millions in the Eastern regions of the world the goal of life is enlightenment.

### *Developments in transpersonal psychology in Britain*

In the late 1960s, in California, Ian Gordon-Brown, Joan Evans and Diana Whitmore worked together with the Italian psychologist Roberto Assagioli, father of psychosynthesis and one of the original pioneers in transpersonal psychology. In the early 1970s they each returned to Britain and later became founders of three important centres. Diana founded the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust;

Joan the Institute of Psychosynthesis and Ian, together with Barbara Somers, the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology in London. From 1974 onwards this last offered introductory workshops in transpersonal psychology which now continue under its sister, the Centre for Transpersonal Perspectives. These are open to anyone interested in exploring the transpersonal perspective in life. They also offer the opportunity for prospective students to experience the work of the Centre and for the Centre and teachers to begin to know them.

The two-year postgraduate training in transpersonal perspectives in counselling and therapy began in 1977. It has kept its essence and strong core structure, but evolved and incorporated different ideas and approaches as demanded by time. Traditionally the training was underpinned by two central maps. One was the the image of the individual as a seed, coming into life with their own true nature — a DNA mix of genetic history, personality structure and unique self. If the seed were an apple pip it would grow into an apple tree, if a peach stone into a peach tree, and nothing could alter that process. The resulting tree might emerge into conscious life looking a bit misshapen, but it would still contain its own essential nature. The work of a transpersonal psychotherapist is to help bring into life that essential nature. This is a theme that James Hillman has taken up in *The Soul's Code*.

The other map was developed by Barbara Somers from Edward Edinger's map of emergent development of ego and self throughout the life journey, from pre-uterine life, through birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, matu-

rity and wisdom. The emphasis is upon the dance between the two journeys of ego (personality) and self (with its integral link with soul), the language of each and the interplay between them, often presenting as 'symptoms' of a physical or psychological nature.

Between 1977 and 1996 the Centre functioned as an organism rather than as an organisation. The teaching was along the lines of the oral tradition, where word and image is offered by the Seniors to a group of students. The process allowed each individual to meet their own transpersonal self and experience through the channel of communication opened by Barbara and Ian. Each participant was encouraged to make this experience their own and take it into their own life. Thus began the process of seeding mentioned by Barbara Somers in her own article. The Centre was a place where we came — with many different clinical and theoretical experiences amongst us — and found a haven of kindness and true acceptance, where humour and joy was an integral part of learning, where we could explore and flourish as our selves, where our natural process of growth was tended at its own pace.

It is from this tradition that we must now move into the next phase of the Centre's life following the death of Ian Gordon-Brown in 1996. Just a few months after Ian's death the Centre was awarded accrediting status with the HIPS section of UKCP. This was entirely due to Ian's hard work and commitment to professionalisation. All of us have been tested on our own commitment, ideas and our transpersonal understanding. It is as if we are being initiated into this next phase

in the time-honoured transpersonal way, by having to meet outside reality with inner understanding. We have had to find growing places within ourselves in order to forge the new shape from the original rock. Our roots and traditions of acceptance and the commitment to the Self has allowed us to listen first and then act.

The new phase of the Centre's work is in its infancy. Nigel Wellings was the inspiration behind the new design structure. He and I have worked together to create the current training, and we are joined by Rob Waygood, Barbara Somers, Claire Chappell, Val Coumont Graubart and Peter Merriott. We have a strong administrative team led by Barbara Scott and Anita Somers, and many others are now taking their place appropriately within the widening scheme of things. The spirit behind what we offer is to allow students an experience of what transpersonal is for them and how this language may inform their working life. In developing the core training in transpersonal psychotherapy which forms the backbone to the accreditation process we hold that the cornerstones of good psychotherapy are individual therapy, supervision and a commitment to contemplative practice.

To this we add two phases of teaching input. In Stage 1, the certificate year in transpersonal psychology, we continue the note sounded in the introductory workshops. We enjoy students from different walks of life who develop a transpersonal listening ear and note which they take into education, medicine, law, the arts and on buses and building sites. Some go on into Stage 2, professional preparation, to learn a core skill of transpersonal psychotherapy. Then we

encourage their going out into the world of therapy to learn other ways, to enjoy other experiences that contribute to their development as psychotherapists, and build their individual accreditation needs to enable them to apply for the advanced diploma in transpersonal psychotherapy and accreditation with HIPS.

### *Current developments*

The training, in its new phase, is integrating many different approaches to understanding the self and the myriad ways in which a struggling personality reacts to the life it finds. Our tradition drew from the work of Hillman, Grof, Frankl, Maslow, Assagioli, Jung, Somers and Gordon-Brown. We now add Vaughan, Tart, Wittine, Winnicott, Bion, as well as Wilber, Bollas, Ryle, Bakhtin. The Tibetan traditions of meditation and visionary shamanic ritual of inner descent also inform our approach to the way in which we transmute knowledge into understanding. Our work is illustrated and leavened by the poets Rilke, Eliot, Blake and Bly, and the visionary artists who have contributed so refreshingly from out of themselves to our historic understanding of human inner life and the condition of psyche and suffering. But at the heart of transpersonal psychotherapeutic work is the therapeutic relationship. This forms the vessel which must withstand the heat and cold, the split, borderline, fragmented states, the many different subpersonalities that will enter the space in order to be known and understood, integrated or transformed. The vessel must allow the diverse invitations from the different aspects to be respected and named. The preparation for this is a sound understanding of relationship and its myr-

iad presentations, psychological, psychic, psychiatric, physical, embodied, acted out. This is gained through both individual therapy and academic study. The therapist's own commitment to regular spiritual or contemplative practice furnishes them with a living relationship to the rhythm of the inner life and to their own relationship with the transpersonal. The latter, seen as a living flame, becomes the most potent form of authority, a guide and energy to return to, especially when this flame is eclipsed by the extremes of personality difficulties or when one's own weariness is in need of restoration. Our individual way of approaching this is usually something quite simple, in the quality of being, our exchanges with others, in the way we watch the sun rise or a blue flower grow in a dark wood. The most fundamental human freedom is still to choose one's attitude. A transpersonal attitude can nourish

the heart and bring a soulfulness of experience into the everyday. It can dignify a human life to have meaning.

### *The Bright Field*

I have seen the sun break through to illuminate a small field for a while, and gone my way and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of great price, the one field that had the treasure in it. I realise now that I must give all that I have to possess it. Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, not hankering after an imagined past. It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

*R.S. Thomas*

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## ***A Student Perspective on Transpersonal Psychology***

*Karyn Fletcher*

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*'You only develop the muscle for the long journey by travelling.'*

*Ian Gordon-Brown*

**B**efore I started the training with the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology, I attended a series of five workshops which turned out to be an excellent preparation

for the training programme. In one of those workshops, run by one of the Centre's two founders, Barbara Somers, we were told a particular story that warmed

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and held my heart in a big way. Looking back it summed up a lot about my reaction to and my commitment to working in a transpersonal way.

It was a story about a young Native American boy living in the North, who was looking for something, or someone, called Singing Stone. Some of the village people had a vague notion of having heard of this but could not grasp who, or what, it truly meant. 'Yes, once before, long ago, maybe, far away, but now . . . no, we're not sure . . .' The boy reaches adolescence and leaves his family, travelling South to seek this thing called Singing Stone. And so with the people in the South he makes a life as a strong brave, gathering friends and respect as a young warrior, but still getting the same answer whenever he enquires about Singing Stone — 'Yes, once, maybe, but now . . .' And one day some years later he voyages to the lands in the West, marries, has children, lives a full life in the village, but still, in the back of his mind, in the pit of his stomach, what is this thing, this person — Singing Stone? When, as an old, old man he again feels he must leave and move on, for his search has not been satisfied, he heads out again, this time for the lands in the East. After much lone travelling, for a long, long time, he spies a village way in the distance. As he walks towards it he sees that people are starting to wave to him and come towards him, recognising him. And as he approaches them they say 'Welcome home, Singing Stone'.

That story named for me both a starting place for a new portion of my own journey and a recognition of the ongoing tale within us all; the seed of all our own potential; that we can move from what is forgotten, to remembering and then, hope-

fully, to becoming fully awake. I wanted to work with people in a way that could facilitate that journey.

I began the training in a true novice state. Most people came with a more certain sense of a spiritual connection, together, often, with long years of working therapeutically, either as therapists or in other alternative practices. My own background was much more commercially oriented. It felt at the beginning as if I had joined an orchestra that had been practising for a long time together and I had turned up with my basic Year 3 recorder! Much of my work was in training and developing people in organisations, although I had completed three years of counselling training prior to coming to the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology. I guess you could say I was exploring and looking for something that expressed not just a model for working with individuals, but a way of seeing the world. I also had numerous years on my own therapeutic journey.

One of the extraordinary feelings I remember when I began the training at the Centre was this sense, like Singing Stone, of 'coming home', something that is not uniquely my experience; so many of my fellow students said the same. Coming home meant being part of a metaphorical orchestra that was not elitist, and was full of heart and authenticity for both player and music. And there was a spot for me and my little recorder to 'toot' where it felt appropriate and to begin to listen to the resonance of the music, for the first time and in a different way. This music was very much about listening alongside, the place for something larger than ego, a place for the Soul to be heard, a gathering place for exploring the shadows, a place where the images could

express themselves and find their voice, their own note within the client.

We worked, practised, discussed, laughed (how joyful to be with colleagues and therapists who couldn't dream of being without laughter in their heart!). We listened to stories and myths, explored archetypal figures, dreams and all of the imaginal world, the 'felt sense' of the client's inner world. The more I worked this way the more I was struck by how enabling it was, even when issues were very dark and difficult. The quote at the beginning of this piece was something Ian Gordon-Brown said during one of the early workshops. We build the muscle for the therapeutic journey by walking on, by doing it, by getting on with getting on, learning, holding on to the penny candle to light the path in front of us.

As a student I was struck by the openness to other models as complementary to working transpersonally. In fact, they are positively sought as part of the training philosophy. And although the training must end, the larger network of the transpersonal family continues and is very supportive. I have found the training impacting on all areas of my life, not just on the way I operate as a therapist with individual clients, but on the work I do in organisations — the collective story, the hero, the heroine, the magician all live there too.

What I have learned from working in a transpersonal way is a sense of immense respect and humility, a mindfulness of the holistic gateway. Joseph Campbell said, 'We create the way we walk. How else can we arrive without travelling to what was already within?' That brings me back to

my original spark of deep inspiration in the story of Singing Stone, which still continues to resonate personally and collectively. For me personally transpersonal psychology has been, and continues to be, a learning and life-affirming way to work and to live. My recorder continues to make its own particular sound and that sound is me.

### *Professional preparation and mentoring*

At the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology, the river that runs beneath all is a respect for and space given to the seed of potential in each trainee. The respect allows for a large degree of independence in working one's individual path towards accreditation so that, in the mentoring process, integrity and soul are always present. In discussion I felt this process was honoured by my mentor, whilst at the same time bringing that individual approach together within the framework and guidelines of the UKCP.

The mentoring I have received has been a gathering place — from a guide, rather than a teacher of experience and wisdom (I can hear him laughing at that). I have had the chance to review, examine and develop a programme that will add to my skills, clinically and personally, and to continue the process of developing as a professional in this field — something that doesn't end after accreditation! I have found my mentor's professionalism, balanced as it has been by the 'heart' of the transpersonal, critical in this preparation period, and also typical of what I had already experienced in the training.