

Subpersonalities and the Transpersonal

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I used to say (Rowan 1990) that the basic definition of a subpersonality was: 'A semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person.' This fitted with most of the ideas about subpersonalities which were around at the end of the 1980s when my book on the subject was written. But experiences in transpersonal workshops which I started to run in January 2003 led me to revise that definition as too narrow. I now think that the better definition is: 'Any aspect of the whole person which can be personified.' And by 'whole person' I explicitly include the real self as described in humanistic psychology, the soul as described in Jungian studies (e.g. Hillman 1975), and the spirit as described in mysticism worldwide.

The conventional wisdom is that subpersonalities are at a lower level than the real self, the soul and the spirit. They speak of imperfection and the need for further therapeutic work to resolve them or reduce them to colourful facets of a basically unified psyche. I have no quarrel with that: it is the fruit of long and reliable experience in therapy.

Let's pretend

But supposing we simply ignored all that and treated the real self, the soul and the spirit *as if* they were subpersonalities, what then? After all, from a therapeutic point of view, the way that subpersonalities are used is to put them out and talk to them. The client is asked to imagine that the subpersonality is sitting on a chair or cushion, in the manner explained in psychosynthesis, gestalt therapy or voice dialogue therapy, and to

engage in a dialogue with that person. Why should we not equally be able to ask the client to imagine that the real self, the soul or the spirit is there on the chair?

When we experiment in this way we find that it is perfectly possible to do this. It is even possible, we find, to set up dialogues between these entities, should we so wish. And from this work some interesting findings emerge.

1. The nature of each entity is clarified by enabling borders and boundaries to be set and a set of contrasts to emerge.

2. People find they are able to enter into states of consciousness which they previously thought could only emerge after years of spiritual practice. These states are temporary rather than permanent ('states are free, stages have to be earned') but they are quite real and useful.

3. By exploring these different levels of consciousness in this way, therapists can extend their range and expand their awareness of what is possible.

That is the basic case I am arguing here. Here is an example:

The client was in his forties and had a lifelong interest in football. He had a dream in which his mother was saying a number of foolish things in the presence of Sir Alex Ferguson. He was worried that Ferguson would get impatient with her. But the great man was kind, thoughtful and wise. He treated his mother with great dignity and respect. My client was very impressed with his gentle yet strong demeanour.

Without talking about it, I put out a cushion and invited my client to imagine that the Alex Ferguson of his dream was sitting on it, and he could talk to him – tell him things, ask him things, anything at all. He found this very easy, and asked him for his advice on some of the things we had been talking about earlier in the session. Then I invited him to sit on the cushion himself and speak as Alex Ferguson. He did so, and said some very wise and deep things, showing a level of

depth and insight which he had never demonstrated before. I then asked him to go back to his place and be himself again. I asked him how he felt about that experience. He spoke very slowly and surely, and seemed to have gotten a lot from it.

I told him that in my opinion he had been talking to his Higher Self or Inner Teacher – someone who he could now contact at any time. This was a figure who could be a resource for him when in doubt. He left feeling much better, he said, about the problems he had been going into earlier. We can also think of this figure as representing his soul – the wisest part of himself.

This is what I was saying in 2003:

In the whole field of therapy there are three great realms, which can be labelled as the instrumental, the authentic and the transpersonal. If we look at the numbers involved, probably most of the work is done at the instrumental level, a smaller amount at the authentic level, and a smaller amount again at the transpersonal level. But in terms of the level of consciousness of the therapist, although most may be located for the most part at the instrumental level, quite a large proportion are probably at the authentic level, because of the work they have done on themselves in their own therapy, and quite a decent proportion are probably at the transpersonal level, again because of their own attempts at self-development through meditation, psychosynthesis, shamanic workshops or other practices.

Subpersonality work is mostly carried out at the instrumental level, because it is here that

subpersonalities give most trouble. They are usually unexamined parts of the person which cause problems because they are hidden from view. As soon as they come out into the open, and start to relate to the rest of the personality, they lose their sting and their power. And in fact to discover and deal with them is one of the best ways of moving on to the authentic stage, where we do not need them any more.

When we work with subpersonalities, the technique which helps most is concretization. This can be done in various ways: through two-chair work, through art work, through Voice Dialogue, through psychosynthesis, through active imagination, through work with dolls or sandplay, and so on. Perhaps the most common of these is two-chair work, because it is very flexible and easily adapted.

What we are going to do in this workshop is to adapt two-chair work to a job for which it was never intended, in order to push the boundaries and to try something original.

So clearly something new was being envisaged here, although it had been suggested earlier by others, for example Will Parfitt (1990), who gives us this exercise:

Relax and centre.

Sit on a chair or cushion with a second chair or cushion conveniently placed in front of you, facing in your direction. Imagine that your soul sits on that chair. Without trying too hard, engage your soul in a dialogue. Start by

telling it something about what you think, feel or sense.

When you feel ready, move positions, sit on the chair or cushion opposite and become your soul. Look back at yourself as a personality in the original position, and answer back. Say whatever comes to you.

At your own pace, allow a dialogue to happen between your personality and your soul. Do not try to make it anything special, or force it in any way, but simply see what happens. And watch for non-verbal messages that might come from the soul chair, such as particular body postures, facial expressions, gestures and so on. (p.122)

This is not a scholarly book, because there are few indications of where the various things come from: it is a practical book for wide use. It is as if the author were saying: I have been working in this field for some time, and here are some of the best things I have come across and used myself. Further clarification of my own use of the idea is given in the advertisement for my workshop, which went like this:

It is well known that we have subpersonalities, and that there can be dialogues between them, potentially transformational in psychotherapy. But is that all? If there is an authentic self, as would be required in an existential construction, how is that to be conceptualised and treated? And if there is a soul, as a transpersonal construction would have it, how is that to be conceptualised and treated?

In this presentation, I want to urge the dialectical solution of saying that the authentic self is and is not a subpersonality, and that the soul is and is not a subpersonality. An exercise will be given in which it is possible to explore this in an experiential way.

I would like to conclude by saying that the meaning is in the movement, in the sense that by grasping the dialectical notion of paradox we can move forward in psychotherapy without denying the reality and importance of the authentic self and the soul. The therapist and the client both gain in freedom from this acceptance of a paradoxical reality.

So here we have the genesis of an idea which turned out to be very fruitful. Let us just see what the results were, in terms of the actual experience of the participants.

WHAT COMES OUT

One report said that the workshop started by outlining Ken Wilber's four levels of Mental Ego or instrumental self, Centaur or authentic self, Subtle or transpersonal self 1, and Causal or transpersonal self 2. It was explained that an individual can experience development within a particular level of consciousness (translation) or a more significant and fundamental move from one level to another (transformation). If we move from one level to another, this type of growth revises our whole sense of who we are.

There was then an exercise to give these different levels a voice, the first one being to write a dialogue between the Centaur or authentic self and the Subtle

or transpersonal self 1. A handout was given to help in this, along the lines of the chart in Chapter 4. One participant said:

My 'conversation' did not proceed fluently. At least as dialogue it did not. As a monologue it proceeded apace. My authentic self, confident in its established position as the way to be was strong in its competence and advantages. My subtle self, while feeling that it should be more developed after all its years of Christian nurturing, found itself surprisingly mute and uncertain of who it was.

Comparing our experiences in pairs I had no problem in locating myself on the psychospiritual map and identifying the focus of my growth as translation within the level of the authentic self. The weak voice of my subtle self had surprised me as it had the Buddhist with whom I was comparing notes. Perhaps we were not as spiritually developed as we might have thought.

This shows the paradox inherent in this sort of work. On the one hand the task seems easy and straightforward, but on the other hand there may be unexpected difficulties and resistances. After a break, the next exercise was to set about allowing the two transpersonal selves - the 'subtle' and the 'causal' - to converse. Again a handout was provided, along the lines of the chart to be found in Chapter 9. Again we can look at the experience of a participant:

The causal self includes the following characteristics: no interest in symbols, no interest in gender, sees

through distinctions between unity and diversity, paradox runs through everything, one with nature, no fear because nothing is alien. It was the voice of this self that indulged its opportunity to speak. Full of discontent at being discounted and unappreciated and whose only consolation seemed to be biding its time until it would come into its own in eternity. I was both surprised and amused at the strength of feeling.

Following each of the two conversations I demonstrated a brief counsellor-client encounter. This was to show how different the experience would be with the counsellor meeting the client with a different self. Volunteer clients emerged. I met the first as my subtle self and later the second as my causal self. Participants said that it was surprising what a very different 'feel' this gave to these most brief of meetings. It also seemed to lead to a very different experience for the two 'clients'.

Later in the year I presented another workshop, with a somewhat different title, which brought in the question of transpersonal levels but did not explicitly mention subpersonalities. Again I started by outlining the Wilber theory, and pointed out that the implication of his work was that self-actualization was quite achievable, rather than being the remote goal which in the 1970s it had seemed to be. I did a demonstration with a volunteer of work at the authentic level, just to set the base level at which a great deal of work in therapy is carried out.

We then went on to the Subtle level, again helped with a

demonstration. One participant said:

We had a discussion of this level too and the most important thing that emerged was a feeling of having passed through an 'either/or' consciousness to a 'both/and' level of being. As we discussed the Subtle level of our thinking, our 'being' also shifted into the Subtle level by virtue of common sympathies, some kind of osmosis took place. I have also noticed the difference of levels of ease amongst the participants, as some were showing signs of strain and challenge being drawn to this level, whilst others were very much in their elements.

Then came a lunch break and after lunch I introduced the last column. Some people seemed to have come mainly for this: something that they had met in their spiritual development, but had not thought to use in therapy. One participant said:

I was eager to volunteer to be the client for this demonstration. John started with a minute or so of silent meditation. I was very nervous at first, this was the first time I have revealed this part of myself in front of an audience. As soon as I've started speaking the room seemed to have disappeared and there was only John and me. Within minutes I felt relieved as I felt John was truly there with me, not as John, but something impersonal and at the same time deeply familiar, and I was no longer 'me' but something that was acutely aware of the interaction and the presence. I was left with

a sense of great gratitude. It was very meaningful for me, although it was hard for lots of people to follow what was going on. This new level of being and relating didn't feel like therapy at all and it was very different again from the previous levels of therapy.

There were some short questions after the demonstration, people were trying to find some foothold, some experience in their own lives that related to this nebulous, intangible stage. I saw people deeply immersed in contemplation, in inner search. The energy stilled and quieted. Next I suggested that participants tried for themselves either the Subtle level or the Causal level of therapy, in couples, ten minutes each being therapist and then client. One participant said:

I chose to work at the Causal level with a partner who also felt he wanted to try this. This again was quite a revelation. I did things that I don't normally do in my sessions with clients. In fact I did very little, yet it felt completely appropriate. I have improvised and just 'went with the flow'. I did not stand in the way in any way and we both felt that it was a powerful and meaningful joining. The use of words for description in this part of my report actually feels quite awkward, they don't quite do justice to what I'm trying to describe.

There was another brief break and then I handed out reading lists of recommended books on each level. There was a discussion where the emphasis was all on the transpersonal issues and questions. People

began to disclose more and more spiritual aspects and related experiences about themselves, slowly and reluctantly at first, and more and more in depth as the discussion progressed. Unfortunately we were running out of time just as some very interesting notions were aired about God and the spiritual arena.

What I learned from this was something I had not been sure of before: that most practitioners (and I think that the attending participants were mostly humanistic or integrative in their orientation) have had some experience of the transpersonal, and can move into the appropriate states of consciousness without too much difficulty.

The next thing I did, in early 2004, was to run a short (one morning) Masterclass on authentic relating. Here there was no mention either of subpersonalities or of the transpersonal, although again I thought it useful to use Wilber's ideas to argue that self-actualization was experience-near, rather than some distant and perhaps unachievable goal. Again I gave a demonstration of work at the authentic level, and then asked a volunteer therapist to work with a volunteer client at that stage.

This then prepared the way for the next workshops to be more oriented towards the integration of the subpersonality idea with the development of therapists in the transpersonal realms. Later in the year I was doing demonstrations of work at the Causal and even at the Nondual level, and there seemed to be no limit to where participants could go when they tried it themselves.

USING THESE IDEAS IN EVERYDAY THERAPY

What emerges from all this is that we can use these ideas in everyday therapy without enormous efforts in retraining. To the extent that we have had at least some experience of the subtle level, we can tune into this for the one hour in which we are seeing a client. Or at least we can recognise the state of consciousness when it comes up spontaneously in therapy. All of us have more acquaintance with the Subtle than we thought at first. After all, as Wilber has often argued, we all have dreams, and dreams are a spontaneous experience of the Subtle stage of consciousness.

We also have dreamless sleep, and Wilber has suggested that this may be an experience of the Formless, the spirit, the causal or even the Nondual. So none of these states of consciousness

are far away or inaccessible. We know them all already. It is just a question of taking our courage in both hands and doing it.

Of course there are always dangers in anything new. One of the discoveries we can make at the Causal level, for example, is that there is no empathy there. This accounts for the sometimes insensitive and even brutal treatment handed out by gurus to their disciples. To a therapist brought up to believe that empathy is the best thing ever, this is a weird experience and even a crushing blow. But for the client who is ready for that, it may be just what is needed. And this is even more true of the Nondual, where a kind of humour creeps in and complicates the issue.

Therapy can be a huge realm of discovery including self-discovery, if we will let it be so.

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John Rowan had three books published last year, and this year was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the UKCP. He is in private practice in North Chingford, and runs a series of Masterclasses in advanced transpersonal work. He can be contacted on JohnRowan@aol.com. This extract is from John's latest book, *The Transpersonal*, published by Routledge in 2005.