

Transpersonal Awareness in Phenomenological Inquiry Philosophy, Reflections, and Recent Research

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*More than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself,
The mortal limit of the self was loosed,
And passed into the nameless, as a cloud
Melts into heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs
Were strange, not mine---and yet no shade of doubt
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of self
The gain of such large life as matched with ours
Were sun to spark---unshadowable in words,
Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world.*

----Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Phenomenological psychology invites us, as researchers, not just to an awareness of another perspective with a previously unrecognized body of knowledge but to a radically different way of being-in-the-world. In addition, this different way of being leads naturally to a different mode or practice of inquiry (i.e., the methods of phenomenological research). This paper will compare phenomenological psychology to the more mainstream behavioral and psychoanalytic approaches (Valle, 1989), present the essence of the existential-phenomenological perspective (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989), describe the nature of an emerging transpersonal-phenomenological psychology (Valle, 1995), and present an overview of the transpersonal dimensions or themes emerging from seven recently completed empirical phenomenological research projects.

Philosophy and Approaches in Psychology

Existentialism as the philosophy of being became intimately paired with phenomenology as the philosophy of experience because it is our experience alone that serves as a means or way to inquire about the nature of existence (i.e., what it means to be). Existential-phenomenology as a specific branch or system of philosophy was, therefore, the natural result, with what we have come to know as phenomenological methods being the manifest, practical form of this inquiry. Existential-phenomenology when applied to experiences of psychological interest became existential-phenomenological psychology and has taken its place within the general context of humanistic or "third force" psychology; it is humanistic psychology that offers an openness to human experience as it presents itself in awareness.

From a historical perspective, the humanistic approach has been both a reaction to and a progression of the worldviews that constitute mainstream psychology, namely, behavioral-experimental and psychoanalytic psychology. It is in this way that the

philosophical bases that underlie both existential-phenomenological and transpersonal ("fourth force") psychology have taken root and grown in this field.

In classic behaviorism, the human individual is regarded as a passive entity whose experience cannot be accurately verified or measured by natural scientific methods. This entity, seen as implicitly separate from its surrounding environment, simply responds or reacts to stimuli that impinge on it from the external physical and social world. Because only that which can be observed with the senses and quantified, and whose qualities and dimensions can be agreed to by more than one observer, is recognized as acceptable evidence, human behavior (including verbal behavior) became the focus of psychology.

In a partial response to this situation, the radical behaviorism of Skinner (e.g., 1974) claims to have collapsed this classic behavior- experience split by regarding thoughts and emotions as subject to the same laws that govern operant conditioning and the roles that stimuli, responses, and reinforcement schedules play within this paradigm. Thoughts and feelings are, simply, behaviors.

In the psychoanalytic perspective, an important difference with behavioral psychology stands out. Experience is recognized not only as an important part of being human but as essential in understanding the adult personality. It is within this context that both Freud's personal unconscious and Jung's collective unconscious take their places. The human being is, thereby, more whole yet is still treated as a basically passive entity that responds to stimuli from within (e.g., childhood experiences, current emotions, and unconscious motives), rather than the pushes and pulls from without. Whether the analyst speaks of one's unresolved oral stage issues or the subtle effects of the shadow archetype, the implicit separation of person and world remains unexamined, as does the underlying causal interpretation of all behavior and experience. Both behavioral and analytic psychologies are grounded in an uncritically accepted linear temporal perspective that seeks to explain human nature via the identification of prior causes and subsequent effects.

Existential-Phenomenological Psychology

Only in the existential-phenomenological approach in psychology is the implicitly accepted causal way of being seen as only one of many ways human beings can experience themselves and the world. More specifically, our being presents itself to awareness as a being-in-the-world in which the human individual and his or her surrounding environment are regarded as inextricably intertwined. The person and world are said to co-constitute one another. One has no meaning when regarded independently of the other. Although the world is still regarded as essentially different from the person in kind, the human being, with his or her full experiential depth, is seen as an active agent who makes choices within a given external situation (i.e., human freedom always presents itself as a situated freedom). Other concepts coming from existential-phenomenological psychology include the pre-reflective, lived structure, the life-world, and intentionality. All these represent aspects or facets of the deeper dimensions of human being and human capacity.

The pre-reflective level of awareness is central to understanding the nature of phenomenological research methodology. Reflective, conceptual experience is regarded as literally a "reflection" of a pre-conceptual and, therefore, pre-linguaged, foundational, bodily knowing that exists "as lived" before or prior to any cognitive manifestation of this purely felt-sense. Consider, for example, the way a sonata exists or lives in the hands of a performing concert pianist. If the pianist begins to think about which note to play next, the style and power of the performance is likely to noticeably suffer.

This pre-reflective knowing is present as the ground of any meaningful (meaning-full) human experience and exists in this way, not as a random, chaotic inner stream of subtle senses or impressions but as a pre-reflective structure. This embodied structure or essence exists as an aspect or a dimension of each individual's *Lebenswelt* or life-world and emerges at the level of reflective awareness as meaning. Meaning, then, is regarded by the phenomenological psychologist as the manifestation in conscious, reflective awareness of the underlying pre-reflective structure of the particular experience being addressed. In this sense, the purpose of any empirical phenomenological research project is to articulate the underlying lived structure of any meaningful experience on the level of conceptual awareness. In this way, understanding for its own sake is the purpose of phenomenological research. The results of such an investigation usually take the form of basic constituents (essential elements) that collectively represent the structure or essence of the experience for that study. They are the notes that compose the melody of the experience being investigated.

Possible topics for a phenomenological study include, therefore, any meaningful human experience that can be articulated in our everyday language such that a reasonable number of individuals would recognize and acknowledge the experience being described (e.g., "being anxious," "really feeling understood," "forgiving another," "learning," and "feeling ashamed"). These many experiences constitute, in a real sense, the fabric of our existence as experienced. In this way, phenomenological psychology with its attendant research methods has been, to date, a primarily existential-phenomenological psychology. From this perspective, reflective awareness and pre-reflective awareness are essential elements or dimensions of human being as a being-in-the-world. They co-constitute one another. One cannot be fully understood without reference to the other. They are truly two sides of the same coin.

Transpersonal/Transcendent Awareness

Some experiences and certain types of awareness, however, do not seem to be captured or illuminated by phenomenological reflections on descriptions of our conceptually recognized experiences and/or our pre-reflective felt-sense of things. Often referred to as transpersonal, transcendent, sacred, or spiritual experience, these types of awareness are not really experience in the way we normally use the word, nor are they the same as our pre-reflective sensibilities. The existential-phenomenological notion of intentionality is helpful in understanding this distinction.

The words transpersonal, transcendent, sacred, and spiritual represent subtle distinctions among themselves. For example, "transpersonal" currently refers to any experience that is trans-egoic, including the archetypal realities of Jung's collective unconscious as well as radical transcendent awareness. Although notions such as the collective unconscious refer to states of mind that are deeper than or beyond our normal ego consciousness, "transcendent" refers to a completely sovereign or soul awareness without the slightest inclination to define itself as anything outside itself including contents of the mind, either conscious or unconscious, personal or collective (i.e., awareness that is not only trans-egoic but trans-mind). This distinction between transpersonal and transcendent awareness may lead to the emergence of a fifth force or more purely spiritual psychology.

In existential-phenomenological psychology, intentionality refers to the nature or essence of consciousness as it presents itself. Consciousness is said to be intentional, meaning that consciousness always has an object, whether that intended object be a physical object, a person, or an idea or a feeling. Consciousness is always a "consciousness of " something that is not consciousness itself. This particular way of defining or describing intentionality directly implies the deep, implicit interrelatedness between the perceiver and that which is perceived that characterizes consciousness in this approach. This inseparability enables us, through disciplined reflection, to illumine the meaning that was previously implicit and un-languaged for us in the situation as it was lived.

Transcendent awareness, on the other hand, seems somehow "prior to" this reflective-pre-reflective realm, presenting itself as more of a space or ground from which our more common experience and felt-sense emerge. This space or context does, however, present itself in awareness, and is, thereby, known to the one who is experiencing. Moreover, implicit in this awareness is the direct and undeniable realization that this foundational space is not of the phenomenal realm of perceiver and the perceived. Rather, it is a noumenal, unitive space within or from which both intentional consciousness and phenomenal experience manifest. From reflections on my own experience, I (Valle, 1989) offer the following six qualities or characteristics of transpersonal/transcendent awareness (often recognized in the practice of meditation):

1. There is a deep stillness and peace that I sense as both existing as itself and, at the same time, as "behind" all thoughts, emotions, or felt-senses (bodily or otherwise) that might arise or crystallize in or from this stillness. I experience this as an *isness* or *amness* rather than a state of what-ness or "I am this or that." This stillness is, by its nature, neither active nor in the body and is, in this way, prior to both the pre-reflective and reflective levels of awareness.

2. There is an all-pervading aura or feeling of love for and contentment with all that exists, a feeling that exists simultaneously in my mind and heart. Although rarely focused as a specific desire for anyone or anything, it is, nevertheless, experienced as an intense, inner energy or inspired "pressure" that yearns, even "cries," for a creative and passionate expression. I sense an open embracing of everyone and everything just as they are, that

literally melts into a deep peace when I find myself able to simply "let it all be." Peace of mind is, here, a heart-felt peace.

3. Existing as or with the stillness and love is a greatly diminished, and on occasion absent, sense of "I." The more common sense of "I am thinking or feeling this or that" becomes a fully present "I am" or simply, when in its more intense form, an "am-ness" (pure Being in the Heideggerian sense). The sense of a "perceiver" and "that which is perceived" has dissolved; there is no longer any "one" to perceive as we normally experience this identity and relationship.

4. My normal sense of space seems transformed. There is no sense of "being there," of being extended in and occupying space, but, similar to the previously mentioned, simply Being. Also, there is a loss of awareness of my body-sense as a thing or spatial container. This ranges from an experience of distance from sensory input to a radical forgetfulness of the body's very existence. It is here that my everyday, limited sense of body-space touches a sense of the infinite.

5. Time is also quite different from my everyday sense of linear passing time. Seemingly implicit in the sense of stillness described here is also a sense of time "hovering" or standing still, of being forgotten (i.e., no longer a quality of mind) much as the body is forgotten. No thoughts dwelling on the past, no thoughts moving into the future--- hours of linear time are experienced as a moment, as the eternal Now.

6. Bursts or flashes of insight are often part of this awareness, insights that have no perceived or known antecedents but that emerge as complete or full-blown. These insights or intuitive "seeings" have some of the qualities of more common experience (e.g., although "lighter," there is a felt weightiness or subtle "content" to them), but they initially have an "other-than-me" quality about them, as if the thoughts and words that emerge from the insights are being done to or, even, through me--- a sense that my mind and its contents are vehicles for the manifestation as experience of something greater and/or more powerful than myself. In its most intense or purest form, the "other-than-me" quality dissolves as the "me" expands to a broader, more inclusive sense of self that holds within it all that was previously felt as "other-than-me."

Since the publication of these six qualities, we have come to recognize two additional dimensions or essential characteristics of transcendent awareness: (a) a surrendering of one's sense of control with regard to the outcome of one's actions, and the dissolution of fear that seems to always follow this "letting go," and (b) the transformative power of transcendent experience, realized as a change in one's preferences, inclinations, emotional and behavioral habits, and understanding of life itself. This self-transformation is often personally painful because this power both challenges and changes the comfortable patterns of thoughts and feelings we have so carefully constructed through time, a transformation of who we believe we are.

These eight qualities or dimensions call us to a re-contextualization of intentionality by acknowledging a field of awareness that appears to be inclusive of the

intentional nature of mind but, at the same time, not of it. In this regard, I (Valle, 1989, 1998b) offer the notion of a "trans-intentionality" to philosophically address this consciousness without an object (Merrell-Wolff, 1973). As phenomenological psychologist and researcher, Steen Halling (personal communication, July 25, 1988) has rightfully pointed out; consciousness without an object is also consciousness without a subject. Trans-intentional awareness, therefore, represents a way of being in which the separateness of a perceiver and that which is perceived has dissolved, a reality not of (or in some way beyond) time, space, and causation as we normally know them.

Here is a bridge between existential/humanistic and transpersonal/ transcendent approaches in psychology. It is here that we are called to recognize the radical distinction between the reflective/pre-reflective realm and pure consciousness, between rational/emotive processes and transcendent/spiritual awareness, between intentional knowing of the finite and being the infinite. It is, therefore, mind, not consciousness per se, that is characterized by intentionality, and it is our recognition of the trans-intentional nature of Being that calls us to investigate those experiences that clearly reflect or present these transpersonal dimensions in the explicit context of phenomenological research methods.

Further Reflections and Recent Research on Transpersonal Experience

Following are our personal reflections on these dimensions as well as a description of recently completed phenomenological research in this area. Our purpose and hope in offering these reflections and information is to deepen our understanding of transcendent experience through the application of phenomenological research methodology and to facilitate the emergence of a new approach: transpersonal-phenomenological psychology.

This presentation is based on the following thoughts regarding the meaning of transpersonal in this context. On the basis of the themes that Huxley (1970) claimed to compose the perennial philosophy, I (Valle, 1989) presented five premises that characterize any philosophy or psychology as transpersonal:

1. That a transcendent, trans-conceptual reality or Unity binds together (i.e., is immanent in) all apparently separate phenomena, whether these phenomena be physical, cognitive, emotional, intuitive, or spiritual
2. That the individual or ego-self is not the ground of human awareness but, rather, only one relative reflection-manifestation of a greater transpersonal (as "beyond the personal") Self or One (i.e., pure consciousness without subject or object)
3. That each individual can directly experience this transpersonal reality that is related to the spiritual dimensions of human life

4. That this experience represents a qualitative shift in one's mode of experiencing and involves the expansion of one's self-identity beyond ordinary conceptual thinking and ego-self awareness (i.e., mind is not consciousness)

5. That this experience is self-validating

It has been written and taught for millennia in the spiritual circles of many cultures that sacred experience presents itself directly in one's awareness (i.e., without any mediating sensory or reflective processes) and, as such, is self-validating. The direct personal experience of God is, therefore, the "end" of all spiritual philosophy and practice.

Transcendent/sacred/divine experience has been recognized and often discussed, both directly and metaphorically, as either intense passion or the absolute stillness of mind (these thoughts and those that follow regarding passion and peace of mind are from Valle, 1995). In day-to-day experience, a harmonious union of passion and stillness or peace of mind is rarely experienced. Passion and stillness are regarded as somehow antagonistic to each other. For example, when one is passionately involved with some project or person, the mind is quite active and intensely involved. On the other hand, the calm, serene, and profoundly peaceful quality of mind that often accompanies deep meditation is fully disengaged from and, thereby, disinterested in things and events of the world.

What presents itself as quite paradoxical on one level offers a way to approach the direct personal experience of the transcendent, that is, to first recognize and then deepen any experience in which passion and peace of mind are simultaneously fully present in one's awareness. If divine presence manifests in human awareness in these two ways, and sacred experience is what one truly seeks, it becomes important to approach and understand those experiences wherever these two dimensions exist in an integrated and harmonious way. In this way, one comes to understand the underlying essence that these dimensions share rather than simply being satisfied with the seeming opposites they first appear to be.

The relationship between passion and peacefulness is addressed in many of the world's scriptures and other spiritual writings. These two threads, for example, run through the Psalms (May & Metzger, 1977) of the Judeo-Christian tradition. At one point, we read, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46, p. 691) and "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Psalm 62, p. 701), and at another point, "For zeal for thy house has consumed me" (Psalm 69, p. 707) and "My soul is consumed with longing for thy ordinances" (Psalm 119, p. 749). Stillness, silence, zeal, and longing all seem to play an essential part in this process.

In his teachings on attaining the direct experience of God through the principles and practices of Yoga, Paramahansa Yogananda (1956) affirms, "I am calmly active. I am actively calm. I am a Prince of Peace sitting on the throne of poise, directing the

kingdom of activity" (p. 6). And, more recently, Treya Wilber (quoted in Wilber, 1991) offers an eloquent exposition of this integration:

I was thinking about the Carmelites' emphasis on passion and the Buddhists' parallel emphasis on equanimity. It suddenly occurred to me that our normal understanding of what passion means is loaded with the idea of clinging, of wanting something or someone, of fearing losing them, of possessiveness. But what if you had passion without all that stuff, passion without attachment, passion clean and pure? What would that be like, what would that mean? I thought of those moments in meditation when I've felt my heart open, a painfully wonderful sensation, a passionate feeling but without clinging to any content or person or thing. And the two words suddenly coupled in my mind and made a whole. Passionate equanimity--- to be fully passionate about all aspects of life, about one's relationship with spirit, to care to the depth of one's being but with no trace of clinging or holding, that's what the phrase has come to mean to me. It feels full, rounded, complete, and challenging. (pp. 338-339)

It is here that existential-phenomenological psychology with its attendant descriptive research methodologies comes into play. For if, indeed, we each identify with the contents of our reflective awareness and speak to and/or share with one another from this perspective to better understand the depths and richness of our meaningful experience, then phenomenological philosophy and method offer us the perfect, perhaps only, mirror to approach transcendent experience. Experiences that present themselves as passionate, as peaceful, or as an integrated awareness of these two become the focus for exploring in a direct, empirical, and human scientific way the nature of transcendent experience as we live it. Here are the "flesh" and promise of a transpersonal-phenomenological psychology.

At this time, we are pleased that a more formal emergence of transpersonal-phenomenological psychology has already begun. All reported, each in its own chapter (in Valle, 1998a), seven recent research studies employing an empirical phenomenological approach have investigated experiences with transpersonal qualities or dimensions: "Being Voluntarily Silent" (Ourania Elite), "Being With a Dying Person" (Tom West), "Feeling Grace in Being of Service to the Terminally Ill" (Paul Gowack & Valerie Valle), "Being With the Suffering of Orphaned Children" (Patricia Qualls), "Encountering a Divine Presence During a Near-Death Experience" (Tim West); "Experiencing Unconditional Love From a Spiritual Teacher" (Craig Matsu-Pissot), and "Being Carried Along by a Series or Flow of Unforeseen Circumstances or Events" (D. Hanson & Jon Klimo).

Although we refer the reader to each of these particular reports for a list of the specific constituents presented in each study, a reflective overview of these results reveals an emerging pattern of common elements or themes. We offer these eleven themes as a beginning matrix or tapestry of transpersonal dimensions interwoven throughout the descriptions of these experiences, not as constituents per se resulting from a more formal protocol analysis. As we looked over the results of these studies, these themes naturally emerged, falling, even, into a natural order. Some are clearly distinct, whereas others appear as more implicitly interconnected. These themes are:

1. An instrument, vehicle, or container for the experience

2. Intense emotional or passionate states, pleasant or painful
3. Being in the present moment, often with an acute awareness of one's authentic nature
4. Transcending space and time
5. Expansion of boundaries with a sense of connectedness or oneness, often with the absence of fear
6. A stillness or peace, often accompanied by a sense of surrender
7. A sense of knowing, often as sudden insights and with a heightened sense of spiritual understanding
8. Unconditional love
9. Feeling grateful, blessed, or graced
10. Ineffability
11. Self-transformation

Let us look at each of these themes in turn.

It seems that the transpersonal/transcendent aspects of any given experience manifest in, come through, or make themselves known via an identifiable form or vehicle. This theme was evident in all seven research studies, the specific forms being silence, being with the dying, being with suffering, near-death experience, being with one's spiritual teacher, and synchronicity. Transpersonal experiences can come through many forms including meditation, rituals, dreams, sexual experience, celibacy, initiations, music, breath awareness, physical and emotional pain, psychedelic drugs, and the experience of beauty (Maslow's, 1968, description and discussion of peak experiences are relevant here as well as to a number of the themes discussed below). We again use a musical analogy: Just as the violin, piano, flute, or voice can be an instrument for the manifestation/expression of a melody, so, too, there are many ways in and through which consciousness reveals its nature.

The existential-phenomenologist may interpret this as further evidence for the intentional nature of consciousness, that this is simply the way in which consciousness presents itself to the perceiver. There is also the view that consciousness is a constant stream of "energy" existing beyond the duality of subject-object (i.e., consciousness without an object) that flows through all creation, being both all-pervasive and unitive by its nature. Aware of the paradox implied in this perspective, Capra (1983) states:

[The mystical view] regards consciousness as the primary reality and ground of all being. In its purest form, consciousness...is non-material, formless, and void of all content; it is often described as "pure consciousness," ultimate reality, "such-ness," and the like. This manifestation of pure consciousness is associated with the Divine...The mystical view of consciousness is based on the experience of reality in non-ordinary modes of awareness, which are traditionally achieved through meditation, but may occur spontaneously in the process of artistic creation and in various other contexts. Modern psychologists have come to call non-ordinary experiences of this kind "transpersonal." (p. 297)

The next theme, intense emotional or passionate states, overlaps with the first in that these states can be considered a vehicle. Yet these states also stand alone, ranging on a continuum from being an instrument for transcendence to being a reflection of transcendence itself. Representing emotion as an instrument, consider the words of one of Qualls' co-researchers: "I feel this deep, soul level kind of sadness. It speaks of the softness and the beauty of the human soul that suffers."

One of Tom West's research participants claimed, "I was besieged by emotions that I'd never dealt with before." And Hanson and Klimo report one response as, "It was an exhilarating feeling, very powerful."

Qualities that characterize the latter side of the spectrum include joy, elation, bliss, euphoria, peace, and contentment. The following description from one of the protocols in Tim West's study addresses this: "I never knew that such peace, such bliss could exist...I felt the joy, the peace, the deeply loving, caring, glorious energy of that presence."

Elite quotes one of her participants as saying, "I started to feel extremely happy---happier than usual. I'm usually a pretty happy person, but this state of not speaking made me feel very loving and very happy and quite contented with life and everything that was going on around me."

The third theme, being in the present moment, often with an acute awareness of one's authentic nature, appears explicitly in a number of the studies. Gowack and V. Valle report that this experience is described in all 12 of their co-researchers' descriptions. Responses from these co-researchers include, "Grace grounded me in the present and surrounded me as though always being part of my dominion, my environment." "Mentally, it is an experience of alertness at an elevated level. I feel merged with the moment, feeling the complete rightness of now. There is no sense of serving another, but only of being in this moment."

Elite describes her research participants as becoming involved with both the internal and external world in a deeper and more intense way and as seeing the present as playing a vital role in one's life. She quotes one of her participants: "There was this incredibly predominant sense of a tremendous amount of energy saved, on a moment to moment basis, from not having to talk...I could be more directly in the experience and

less in the words...I could observe my own feelings and my feelings interacting with people with a heightened awareness.”

With Treya Wilber's thoughts on passionate equanimity in mind, is this not what is needed to be fully passionate about all aspects of life without clinging, without one's mind "hanging on"? If one is fully present, fully aware in each moment, there is no clinging, no attachment to what was or will be. There is, simply, a constant letting go into the next moment, into whatever is next.

Elite weaves this element of being in the moment with our next theme, transcending time and space: “When one is in the here and now, the ever present, one finds oneself nowhere (now-here) because all time (past, present, and future) is contained in the now. This is the point of timelessness, the timeless dimension of the Divine.”

This theme is clearly illustrated in this description offered by one of Tim West's respondents: “I became Light...It was infinite, and I was conscious of this eternity, yet there was no reference, just pure conscious awareness of vast eternity, eternal space, going beyond your conception of speed, beyond your conception of space, being aware of so much yet no time passed. And yet all time passed.”

In the fifth theme, the researchers reported their participants as feeling connected in various ways to nature, people, or God. In this sense of oneness, there appeared to be an absence of fear. Gowack and V. Valle identified one of their constituents as the feeling of oneness or being connected to all human beings and to all there is. This experience was an exceptionally spiritual one for those who felt connected with God, the universe, a Higher Power, or the inner Self. Examples from their protocols include, “I just suddenly found myself connected into and acting from a very "deep" place. I was aware of oneness.” “I combed his hair, washed his face, swabbed his mouth, all with the touch I would imagine belonging to an angel. I did not feel like I was important...but that I had transcended my usual self and was in touch with the sacredness of all things on this earth.”

Stillness and peace are central to the next theme. One of Hanson and Klimo's co-researchers simply shared, “I remember feeling very peaceful inside.”

Gowack and V. Valle report one participant stating, “I have had so many gifts from being with the dying...I carry on caring for my friend, caring for myself. I work in a kind of stillness.”

Referring again to Treya Wilber, she speaks of equanimity as being a key ingredient to feeling passion without attachment. “This stillness is often accompanied by a sense of surrender. Life experience tells us that surrender of this type (i.e., that implicit in peace of mind) evolves from letting go of, or surrendering, one's need to predict and control the events in one's life.” In their study of "being carried along by a series or flow of unforeseen circumstances or events,"

Hanson and Klimo emphasize the role of surrender: “Surrender is an important issue here as these subjects open to possibilities beyond the form of the desire that they are attached to.” One of their participants said, “It was like not being in control of what was happening, but it was all right. I knew if I surrendered to it I could ride on the power of it.”

Matsu-Pissot offers the following statement from one of the protocols in his study: “[I am] getting where I'm not trying to control things as much.”

The next three themes--- a sense of knowing, with a heightened sense of spiritual understanding; unconditional love; and feeling grateful, blessed, or graced--- present themselves as deeply interwoven, each one appearing most often in the context of the other two. Tim West's thoughts regarding his findings reflect this integration: “This contact with the divine is characterized by such infinite power, loving acceptance, and complete immersion in feelings of well-being or safety that the experiencer emerges with a knowledge of ultimate reality which is at odds with what he or she has experienced in day-to-day life. The experience engenders intense feelings of gratitude, a sense of grace, and a sense of a private and personal communication with and acquisition of knowledge from a divine source.” This characterization is based on the words offered by his co-researchers, for example: “What I bring from this [experience] is a sense of total understanding. There is this pure [unconditional] love that I want to radiate outward.”

One of Tom West's research participants reflects this interrelationship of themes as well: “He really afforded me the opportunity to see God in even broader ways than I've ever experienced God...I could let go and say good-bye, and also say "thank you", with a tremendous, deep abiding sense of gratitude. That's just what gratitude is basically--- it's the ability to be present to the love that's there.”

Two co-researchers in Matsu-Pissot's study address these themes: “[This is] the experience of a love that acknowledges the expression of the truth of myself. I felt blessed, protected, and these feelings seemed very permanent...Those dear people who have given unconditional love to me still do so from the other side.”

The tenth theme, ineffability, arose from the different researchers' statements regarding how difficult it was for their participants to describe their experience. One of the co-researchers from Tim West's study describes this aspect: “Being asked about my feelings when I experienced a divine presence, I am immediately at a loss for words. For my trouble with explaining what I felt is that I am truly speechless...as soon as I bring it out into words, they're so limiting; it brings it down and it tries to package something that is boundless, endless, and eternal.”

Elite, in summarizing her findings, says: “The spiritual writings of the ages repeatedly describe its [silence's] essence as masked by paradox and riddles. Ironically, only silence itself can best describe the silent phenomenon. It can be described as the Sacred Silence--- an ineffable experience indeed!”

The last theme is in some ways the most powerful; it represents the personal mark these experiences left on the one who experienced them: self-transformation. The breaking down and re-forming of existing patterns of who we think we are is at the heart of spiritual development as a living process (e.g., Ram Dass, 1976; Watts, 1966). We present this as the last theme because it seems to be present in, and the culmination of, all the processes represented by the other ten, both individually and collectively. The selected words of the research participants from the different studies address this theme in different ways. One of Elite's co-researchers said, "There was very much a sense of rebirth that came out of the birthing that came out of the struggle of those days."

One of Tim West's participants stated, "I'm not as judgmental, and I'm less interested in hanging out with or listening to the people who are judgmental."

A co-researcher in Matsu-Pissot's study said, "I'm able to deal with what happens on a better level; [I am] much more appreciative and [have] much less resistance."

And Qualls, as a researcher integrating and expressing her findings, concluded, "Suffering has the potential to transform the sufferer and/or care-giver, and offers an opportunity for the sufferer and/or caregiver to experience discovery and [personal] growth, and to give and/or receive compassion and love."

Concluding Thoughts and Questions

The findings of these seven phenomenological research studies, and the themes that they seem to share, have deepened our understanding of the nature of transpersonal/transcendent experience and appear quite consistent with what others have reported in this regard. In addition to Maslow's (1968) related work on peak experiences and the qualities suggested earlier (Valle, 1989), Grof (1985), for example, has done extensive research on non-ordinary states of awareness. He identifies a number of characteristics common to these states including transcending space and time; the distinction between matter, energy, and consciousness; and the separation between the individual and the external world. Our impression of the descriptions that have emerged from self- investigations as well as the results reported from more formal analyses is that these non-ordinary or altered states of awareness are often accompanied or followed by a deeper sense of spirituality and self-transformation.

Although the results of phenomenological research do, indeed, deepen our understanding of our experience, these same findings raise both new and ancient questions regarding the paradoxical nature of human experience and existence itself: Are we created or a manifestation of a greater essence? Is duality real, or are we missing the oneness in and of all things? Do cause and effect exist, or is everything happening in a spontaneous and simultaneous way? Are there a perceiver and a perceived, or do we not recognize the one Being? Does creative expression spring from passion or a deep inner stillness? Do we truly accomplish good things in the world, or is it "grace"? Is there an essence of life and reality or only what we perceive them to be?

Regardless of how we answer these questions or how each of us perceives life to be, there remains a mystery, the mystery of ultimate Reality. This mystery may be something we can "solve" with our minds, or it may, in the classic phenomenological sense, be a basic constituent of the experience of ultimate Reality itself. In any event, it seems to us that the very act of questioning emerges from a dualistic mind-set or ground, that is, "to question" implies by its nature both the one who questions and that about which one is asking. Whenever the mind attempts to understand the essence of the transcendent realm, it always ends in paradox.

Even with this paradox, and whatever its pre-reflective constituents may reveal them to be, there is undeniably a consciousness or awareness that simply is. With this "in mind," we leave the reader with the following more philosophical reflection. If one regards consciousness as intentional in nature, that is, that consciousness always has an object, then, in both reason and mystical experience, consciousness is the intended object as well. Intentionality is a quality of the mind, not consciousness. We are always, implicitly and unavoidably, connected with that which is beyond.

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Awakening: A Center for Exploring Living and Dying is a non-profit educational and service organization whose purpose is to offer encouragement and support to those who seek the direct personal experience of the sacred within. As a community, we see every aspect of living and dying as an opportunity to deepen one's compassion, self-understanding, and spiritual awareness, especially situations that involve a life-threatening diagnosis, coping with the effects of a serious accident or illness, or grieving the death of a loved one.

The Awakening Retreat Center is an interfaith center designed to provide a supportive environment for individuals and groups exploring ways to integrate their work in the world with their spiritual lives. Located in the foothills of Mt. Diablo in Brentwood, California, the Center provides a beautiful and peaceful setting for personal and group retreats.