

Article

## Transpersonal Psychology: Mapping Spiritual Experience

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**Abstract:** The first Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was published in 1969. Since this signal event, transpersonal psychology has emerged as a field of theory and application. A way has been made in Western psychology for the appreciation and study of interior subjective awareness, the domain of spiritual experience. One of the most recent contributions, the Wilber-Combs Lattice, offers a typology to account for both developmental processes throughout the human life span, as well as different qualities of spiritual experience.

**Keywords:** transpersonal psychology; subjective awareness; spiritual experience; Wilber-Combs Lattice

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### 1. Introduction

In the late 1960's, as Abraham Maslow, Huston Smith, Anthony Sutich, and others surveyed psychology as practiced in America (U.S.A.), they found that there was no place for discussion of interior states of awareness, of mystical experience, or of values and their impact on human activity. They felt a need to reclaim American psychology to these tasks through the naming of a new field, transpersonal psychology, and with the establishment of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, which was first published in 1969.

In that era, American psychology had veered very far from its originating basis in the writings of William James, for whom the realm of subjective spiritual experience was a proper domain for psychological inquiry, and which he described in depth in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) [1]. The behaviorist school of psychology ruled, with its emphasis on empirically observable sensory data and with the focus on stimulus/response patterns. While great insight has come from

behaviorism as it has formed the basis for empirical study within psychology, something was dramatically amiss, when the dynamics of the human psyche, with the often unpredictable turns of mystery and complexity were ignored. During my fourteen years of association with the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, from 1980–1994, I worked with admission process of students for ten years. I frequently encountered mid-life persons reorienting their career aspirations, who said that they had wanted to study the psychology of the human spirit described by transpersonal psychology, but college psychology curriculum in the 1960's and 1970's offered only experimental research on animals. There was not a framework within psychology to study the unique characteristics of the human psyche, so they sought another area of study.

Through the efforts of transpersonal psychology and related fields, much has happened. In 1975, James Hillman's now classic, *Re-Visioning Psychology* [2], began to bring into more popular view, the power of the psyche to reveal itself through mythological imagery, and assisted to bring those powers articulated by Carl Jung, those powers belonging to the collective unconscious, into more popular view. Ken Wilber began his monumental contribution to the understanding of the human psyche in his writings in the late 1970's [3,4]. Stanislav Grof (1987) [5] described a coherent holotropic theory of non-ordinary experience. He has continued research and publishing in this area to the present [6]. Jenny Wade (1996) [7] catalogued emerging models of whole life psycho-spiritual development. The once enigmatic language of Carl Jung has now become a mainstay of our discourse with one another, with such terms as extroversion, introversion, animus, anima, shadow, persona, Self, forming the basis of our understanding of the human being.

The reductionism produced by a narrow empiricism affected not only psychology. It has created a morass of confusion for all of the human enterprise of the twentieth century, from which we are just beginning to emerge. By "narrow empiricism," I mean the view that the only valid information that could be scientifically studied was that information externally observable by the senses. Of course, this left out of discourse all inherently subjective experience of the human psyche. Transpersonal psychology intentionally included this internal domain of experience in its field of inquiry.

The problem of our "narrow empiricism" has been particularly evident in that arena most closely allied to psychology, namely, religion. In 1980, Jacob Needleman in his book, *Lost Christianity*, made a shocking indictment of Christianity. The indictment was that Christianity had lost the capacity to guide people in an inner pathway of spiritual development. What Christianity had lost, according to Needleman, was its pathway into the inner life of the individual. Jacob Needleman wrote: "We are seeking to bring back *the symbolic power of the idea of the soul*, to recover it as a guide to the search for ourselves, our lost selves [8]." "[We must rediscover the] *intermediate [human]*, who alone in the cosmic scheme can care for, or harmonize, or relate all the Forces of creation [9]." In the aftermath of World War II, Carl Jung, made a similarly bold pronouncement, when he declared:

Christian civilization has proved hollow to a terrifying degree: it is all veneer, but the inner [person] has remained untouched and therefore unchanged. . . . It may easily happen . . . that a Christian who believes in all the sacred figures is still undeveloped and unchanged in [the] inmost soul because he [or she] has "all God outside" but does not experience [God] in the soul [10].

In my personal searching, I found the same sentiment spoken by Fr. Anthony Morello, a Carmelite monk from Dallas, Texas, who in 1980 taught that even within the Roman Catholic monastic orders the interior way of contemplative prayer had almost been lost within the last generation.

In the last thirty years much has happened in our cultural awareness to help us reclaim the vast reservoir of potentiality that lies within the human psyche. The renewal of contemplative and meditative spiritual practices across religious traditions, as well as the understandings of transpersonal and Jungian psychology and fields such as psychoneuroimmunology in health care, have begun this recovery. We see many signs that the Western soul has begun to be rediscovered. New and more complete models of the human soul are now being described. A new vocabulary of soul-making is emerging. The mystics of Christianity and other world religions are again being read. The power of prayer as a healing force in medicine is publicly acknowledged in certain forces within health care, such as the voices of Larry Dossey (1993) [11] and Jeanne Achterberg (1985) [12]. Many conferences in psychology and spiritual life will now ordinarily discuss themes such as energy therapy, dreamwork, visualization, emotional needs, and spiritual development from Eastern and Western sources. An emerging transpersonal vision of the human being is making these discussions possible. How might such a transpersonal vision of the human being contribute to the health of the soul?

## 2. Discussion of New Perspectives on Human Consciousness

The very language of our interior world was frequently ignored and even repressed within the twentieth century. On the one hand, in the silent experience of the human heart, nothing has changed. We still long for meaning, we still dream dreams and are drawn toward the future with vision, yet this vast interior domain of human understanding had to prove the validity of its existence. The first and perhaps the most important gift toward the health of the soul that this emerging transpersonal vision has brought forth is simply to allow us to give credence to our interior sources of information—a new validity of subjective experience. I quote from the Editor's note in the second *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, published in 1969:

“For the time being, at least, it is agreed that an empirical approach seems to be the most suitable one for the phenomena we are dealing with”. This approach coincides with what [Willis] Harman calls the “science of ordinary and extraordinary experience”. Our journal is primarily concerned with the realm of ultimate phenomena, of course, and as such comes under the purview of extraordinary subjective experience. One of the dominant tasks is “some sort of mapping or ordering of states of consciousness transcending the usual states of conscious awareness” [13].

Two examples of such subjective, spiritual experience will show the importance of the now obvious conclusion that these states of awareness should be validated for study.

In a guided meditation on a healing story of Jesus, a woman found herself remembering one of her most traumatic life-experiences. It was the time of the birth of one of her children. She had previously given birth to another child. She had been alert through that birth. But in this birthing experience, her medical team made the judgment that she needed to be sedated. Through that sedation process, carried out against her personal desires, she had felt great loss of participation

consciously in the birthing of that child. The meditation continued to be present with her for several hours that night. In her inner vision experience, Christ was with her. Christ calmed her anxiety as her memories unfolded again of the traumatic encounter in the hospital, and she watched inwardly as she entered the birthing chamber. She relived her physical contractions. Christ comforted and sustained her and in her interior experience gave her the great gift she had longed for, to participate consciously in the birth of that child. Her physical and her emotional life were changed by this visitation of Christ, the healer [14].

In a meditation retreat, a man's attention was drawn to a well known place of chronic tension in his lower back. While focusing attention there, suddenly a perspective opened within his imagination and a knight in full regalia of the time of the crusades appeared. The story unfolded of this man's quest for spiritual surrender through the life of a crusader. The place of tension in the contemporary man's body was the place a sword was thrust into the crusader, killing him. It was only in the moment of death, that the crusader realized that in the ensuing battles, he had lost his purity of motivation and instead had become consumed with the blood lust of battle and of sexual violations in which he had participated. He died with great remorse. This "past life" memory helped the meditator to understand an array of his own struggles relating to aggression, sexuality, and life purpose (personal communication to the author).

In these reported spiritual experiences, the individuals have received very helpful information from their own soul's resources. There are countless other examples, such as insight through therapeutic conversation, or clarity for decision processes. I have guided people in meditation or other processes of inner awareness now for thirty years. I have come to expect that when we frame a question or concern from the best of our human understanding, we will be met in our inner world by a source of wisdom that will shift the question, that will enlighten the concern, or that will effect a transformation.

If the first gift of the emerging transpersonal vision is to claim validity again for our own subjective experience, the second gift is to reorient ourselves to the very nature of the psyche itself. What do we think it is? What are its limits? How does our finite human mind relate to the Infinite dimension of reality? We get close here to some theological or metaphysical ponderings. For myself, I have been satisfied to name this sea of information in which our consciousness dwells, "soul," so long as we define it as St. Augustine did: "a cavernous treasury, . . . a confusion and richness, both [15]." The membrane of this soul in relationship to the collective and to the Eternal worlds is very thin. We become, as Needleman sought to restore, the "intermediate [human], who alone in the cosmic scheme can care for, or harmonize, or relate all the Forces of creation."

A useful metaphor for the human psyche or soul is an iceberg. Only the tip of the iceberg floats above the water and the essential character of the iceberg is the same as the cosmic sea surrounding it, yet it has been uniquely constituted into its own separate identity. If the soul or psyche is this cavernous treasury, of the same essential character as the cosmos in which it dwells, have we not perhaps overly objectified those terms Ego, Id, Personal Unconscious, Collective Unconscious? This issue was dramatically illustrated when the works of Freud were translated into English. In the standard translations used in America, Latin terms were substituted for the more intimate German terms. "Ich," "I" in German became the *ego* in translation [16]. In Jung's original writings, "I" or "Ich" or what we call ego, was simply all of which I am consciously aware in my inner world. For Jung, the

“unconscious” was simply the vast sea of information from the interior of which I am not yet aware, the cavernous treasury, which from time to time will reveal more of itself. He was at pains to try to point to a new intermediate condition, in which information from the unconscious is assimilated into the “I.” Theoretically, because the Self, this vast container of information is infinitely expandable, so also our “I,” as it is made more and more conscious of the vast ocean of consciousness in which it dwells, is capable of infinite expansion. This puts us closer and closer to Needleman’s intermediate human. Jung spoke of this new psychological state as a “mid-point of personality.” In his *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, he wrote:

It may not be immediately apparent what is meant by a “mid-point of the personality.” I will therefore try to outline this problem in a few words. If we picture the conscious mind, with [the “I” or] the ego as its centre, as being opposed to the unconscious, and if we now add to our mental picture the process of assimilating the unconscious, we can think of this assimilation as a kind of approximation of conscious and unconscious. This would be the point of new equilibrium, a new centering of the total personality, a virtual centre which, on account of its focal position between conscious and unconscious, ensures for the personality a new and more solid foundation [17].

To use our analogy of the iceberg, we begin adult life primarily identified with that tip of the iceberg that is visible out of the water. This was the totality of the psyche visible to the strict behaviorism and narrow empiricism of the 1950’s. As we begin to assimilate more of our interior experience through dreamwork, exploration of emotional complexes, meditation, journal reflections, art process, prayer, or bodywork, our “I” shifts down into the main body of the iceberg. And we may even have glimpses of the fundamental unity of the ice with the ocean!

Culturally, we have advanced in the last thirty years, to expect much more ready access between these previously opposed forces within the psyche, that we ordinarily call the “ego” and the “unconscious.” We might do well to envision ourselves much more like this notion of Jung’s—that the “I,” the conscious part of ourselves, is frequently visited by information from the less conscious but exceedingly dynamic part of ourselves, the cavernous treasury of the soul [18].

Thus, the first task of transpersonal vision has been to reclaim the validity of subjective experience. The second task has been to discover that there is a fluidity of information flowing between the so-called unconscious and the conscious dimensions. The third discovery that we have made is that this soul, or Self, if you wish or simply psyche, actively strives toward health, meaning, and wholeness. There is an active search for health within our psyche. If we ignore our psychological symptoms of quiet desperation or boredom, the quest for meaningful existence rooted deeply within our psyche will manifest in dreams. Or, if we succeed long enough in ignoring those, in physical symptoms, perhaps ultimately in disease. Similarly, if we ignore our desire for meaningful perspective on our existence, if we refuse the metaphysical challenge to struggle toward a coherent philosophy of life, we will subject ourselves also to psychological and perhaps physical distress. Within us is an innate drive toward health, meaning, and wholeness. This dynamic is well attuned to the theme in spiritual practice of a hope for advancement of spiritual life. The term, spiritual formation, points in this direction. There is a *telos* toward which spiritual life points. This may be named in a variety of ways depending upon each religious tradition. In Christianity, it may be characterized as striving for the “mind of Christ,” in

Buddhism, there is the hope to dwell in “Buddha mind;” in Hinduism, the aspiration for Samadhi. Our historic religious traditions point us toward a potentiality of human character continuing to form throughout our life. This aspect of human life is illustrated over and over again in the drive toward health and wholeness that we witness in psychological practice.

The fourth discovery made in this era of transpersonal discovery is the nature of the language of this psyche or soul or Self. That language is not the articulated language of reason, it is the language of symbolic manifestations, of emotionality, of imagination, of intuition, and of symptoms of distress or disease. Our fourth task is to learn this language well, if we would maintain the health of our souls. A good transpersonal counselor or spiritual director must be committed to an intimate knowing of one’s own unfolding psyche and learning of one’s own language of the soul. This self-knowledge gives us humility in listening for the metaphors, symbols, and primary images that clients bring to their spiritual and therapeutic work. This is the arena of spiritual experience. It is captured in the medieval European understanding of “memory,” as containing both past and future imagination.

Various models of interior life developed by transpersonal psychology have brought us closer to medieval European thought on the nature of the individual. In the English writing, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, we find the intermediate human being that Needleman was seeking. The human being is described in the following way.

Beneath you and external to you lies the entire created universe. Yes, even the sun, the moon, and the stars. They are fixed above you, splendid in the firmament, yet they cannot compare to your exalted dignity as a human being.

The angels and the souls of the just are superior to you inasmuch as they are confirmed in grace and glorious with every virtue, but they are your equals in nature as intelligent creatures. By nature you are gifted with three marvelous spiritual faculties, *Mind*, *Reason*, and *Will*, and two secondary faculties, *Imagination* and *Feeling*. There is nothing above you in nature except God. . . .

When you are reading books about the interior life and come across any references to *yourself*, understand it to mean your whole self as a human being of spiritual dignity and not merely your physical body. As [a person] you are related to everything in creation through the medium of your faculties [19].

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Mind, Reason, Will, Imagination, and Feeling are listed as the human faculties. Mind is the overarching category, perhaps consciousness itself. To this container, the author adds reason, imagination, feeling or emotions, and will. Other medieval writers would have added the senses and named imagination as memory, which has an expanded definition from our present usage. In our time, we might make intuition a unique faculty, as well as kinesthetic information from the body, and also the capacity for moral judgment. These are the “faculties,” or “intelligences.” “Intelligences” is perhaps preferable in our time, because it implies that we can learn to cultivate each one distinctly. It also implies that we will have natural capacities in some and less developed capacity in others. One of our tasks of soul-work thus becomes cultivating our skills of receptivity with each of the discrete faculties or intelligences. We would not think it proper to educate our children without some development of reasoning skills, but we regularly graduate students without adequate emotional skills, and we even suppress the skills of imagination and intuition, rather than seeing these also as

intelligences or faculties to develop. Much of our counseling work, in fact, is remedial work, in simply assisting people to develop their feeling faculty or emotional self-understanding. Through this lens, the faculty of imagination or memory takes on a fascinating aspect.

In some medieval writings, the term memory is used in the way we currently use imagination or symbolic awareness. It was not limited to the past, as we use the term. Bonaventure wrote of it, in the thirteenth century in this way: “. . . the memory retains the past by remembrance, the present by reception and the future by foresight [20].” In other words, memory is not only related to the past, but the function of mind that also envisions the future. This concept of imagination is captured in the provocative title of David Hogue’s recent book, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past* [21].

One way of viewing the extraordinary shift in understanding of the human psyche that has taken place through the transpersonal movement is a recovery of the capacity of the human being for the faculty of memory or imagination. Now with ready ease, through a variety of relaxation, meditation, or hypnosis techniques, we take as normal, the capacity to recover memory of past psychological states. We are also becoming more sophisticated in its use and are learning that this memory is not necessarily fully trustworthy factually of a past event; however, it is absolutely trustworthy psychologically. Such memory, whether of a crystallizing moment in our childhood or imaginal information from the realms of spirit, gives us information needed for our current movement toward psychological health. The capacity of memory would also then relate to the imagery states in which we receive information relating to future possibility for ourselves, or in which we seek to discern the future that is drawing us toward itself. This imaginal realm has been the classic domain of spiritual experience, which Ken Wilber has designated as subtle level experience. Subtle experience of the divine contains some image of the divine, such as the experience reported earlier of the woman remembering her birthing experience with Christ present. Causal experience in this model would be an experience of the divine without form, such as an experience of divine light or kinesthetically felt divine presence.

Recently Ken Wilber and Allan Combs have made a major contribution to the intersection of transpersonal psychology and spiritual experience in the diagram they call the Wilber-Combs Lattice. This way of differentiating levels of consciousness from kinds of spiritual experience is a major step forward. In Wilber’s early works, such as *Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977) and *The Atman Project* (1980), this distinction was not made. As we view the Wilber-Combs Lattice, the vertical dimension describes the development of the capacities for individual human consciousness, beginning at the bottom and advancing in complexity as one moves upward on the diagram. The diagram uses categories derived from the work of Jean Gebser. Wilber correlates these categories with similar designations of several theorists on human development, including Sri Aurobindo, Jane Loevinger, Jean Piaget, and James Fowler [22]. For simplicity, I will only compare the stages of Gebser and James Fowler. Thus, Gebser’s archaic and magic thinking are associated primarily with infancy and early childhood and relate to James Fowler’s magical and mythic-literal stages. In late childhood and our teen years, Fowler’s conventional stage may become strong. This category relates to Gebser’s mythic stage. Persons operating at this stage of development will be well connected with the dominant worldview of their culture. If our rational process becomes more developed, we will be able to differentiate ourselves from our cultural norms, coming into what Fowler describes as individual-reflexive stage and Gerber calls rational. Persons who have developed spiritual practices with sustained attention to the welfare of all persons in the human family may move into Fowler’s

conjunctive stage or Gerber’s pluralistic stage. The most enlightened individuals of any culture or religious tradition may manifest Gebser’s integral or Fowler’s universalizing stage. In earlier discussions, Wilber had noted that subtle and causal experience would manifest in a primary way in the more advanced levels of consciousness. While this remains true, it is also possible for a person in early childhood to have a spiritual experience that is causal or even non-dual in nature. The Wilber-Combs Lattice in Table 1 shows us how to make sense of these variations in human experience.

**Table 1.** Adapted from Wilber-Combs Lattice [23].

<b>Types of Spiritual Experience</b>	<b>Gross Nature</b>	<b>Subtle Deity</b>	<b>Causal Formless</b>	<b>Nondual Nondual</b>
<b>Levels of Consciousness</b>				
Super-Integral	*	*	*	*
Integral	*	*	*	*
Pluralistic	*	*	*	*
Rational	*	*	*	*
Mythic	*	*	*	*
Magic	*	*	*	*
Archaic	*	*	*	*

Types of Spiritual Experience/horizontal axis; Levels of Consciousness/vertical axis.

Types of spiritual experience are noted in the horizontal axis: gross refers to ordinary waking experience; subtle refers to vivid dream-like states or meditative states in which deity is experienced in form; causal describes experiences of formless meditation or deep sleep; “Non-dual awareness . . . is not so much a state as the ever-present ground of all states (and can be ‘experienced’ as such) [24].” As previously noted, the experience of the woman reliving her experience of childbirth with Christ present would be a subtle level experience. Her own quality of personal functioning, most likely at the pluralistic level, allowed her to gain great personal insight from this experience. Sometimes, because of the dramatic shift of understanding that such an experience might bring, it may instead take many years for a person to fully integrate such experience. In some cases, this has been the experience of persons who may have suffered a near-death experience, in which they were catapulted into the causal or non-dual experience. If their level of ordinary functioning is at the mythic or even rational level, it may be very difficult to make sense of such experience. It may take many years of searching for a new reality structure to accommodate the spiritual experience.

The Wilber-Combs Lattice also helps us in interpreting the often quite confusing world of religious language. For example, a vision of Christ at the crucifixion may be interpreted by a person of mythic understanding to say that all persons must have this kind of experience if they are to be truly Christian. Whereas if a person of pluralistic experience has such a vision, the result will very likely be to observe the metaphoric and universal need for people to understand the role of suffering in human existence. They will look for parallels in other religious traditions.

### 3. Conclusions

We stand at a very exciting threshold, in which the recovery of the faculties or intelligences, together with their skillful use, is enabling us to discover the vast healing potentiality of the treasury of each self. Transpersonal models of consciousness, with attention both to stages of development and to inner states of awareness enable us to have deeply meaningful conversations across the global community. Through skillful use of the Wilber-Combs Lattice, it is possible to appreciate both the differences and similarities of advanced states of spiritual experience, which various religious traditions hold as potentiality for human beings.

We are intermediate humans already. Through the collective human experience, we are finding in fresh ways that we are already dwelling in the unbroken fabric of life. Our health is to so live more and more in conscious cooperation with that unbroken fabric.

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