

A New Cartography of the Human Psyche

The study of holotropic states points to an indisputable conclusion: the dimensions of the human psyche are infinitely larger than academic psychology would like us to believe. To account for the experiences and observations arising from research into holotropic states, I suggest a new cartography or model of the psyche. In addition to the usual biographical level, this model contains two transbiographical realms: the perinatal domain, related to the trauma of biological birth; and the transpersonal domain, which accounts for such phenomena as experiential identification with other people, animals, and plants; visions of archetypal and mythological beings and realms; ancestral, racial, and karmic experiences; and identification with the Universal Mind or the Void. These experiences have been described throughout the ages in religious, mystical, and occult literature.

POSTNATAL BIOGRAPHY AND THE INDIVIDUAL UNCONSCIOUS

The biographical level of the psyche does not require much discussion, since it is well known from official professional literature. As a matter of fact, it is what traditional psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy are all about. However, a few important differences arise when we explore this domain through approaches using holotropic states, rather than through verbal psychotherapy. First, one does not just remember emotionally significant events or reconstruct them indirectly from dreams, slips of tongue, or transference distortions. One experiences the original emotions, physical sensations, and even sensory perceptions in full age regression. That means that during the reliving of an important trauma from infancy or childhood, one actually has the body image, the naive perception of the world, the sensations, and the emotions corresponding to the age one was at that time.

The second contrast we see between holotropic states and verbal psychotherapies when working on biographical material is that in addition to confronting the usual psychotraumas, people in holotropic states often have to relive and integrate traumas that were primarily of a physical nature. Many people have to process experiences of near drowning, operations, accidents, and children's diseases – particularly those associated with suffocation, such as diphtheria, whooping cough, or aspiration of a foreign object.

This material emerges quite spontaneously and without any programming. As

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it surfaces, people realize that these physical traumas have played a significant role in the psychogenesis of their emotional and psychosomatic problems, such as asthma, migraine headaches, a variety of psychosomatic pains, phobias, sadomasochistic tendencies, or depression and suicidal tendencies. Reliving of such traumatic memories and their integration can have very far-reaching therapeutic consequences. This contrasts sharply with the attitudes of academic psychiatry and psychology, which do not recognize the direct psychotraumatic impact of physical insults.

SYSTEMS OF CONDENSED EXPERIENCE (COEX SYSTEMS)

Further new information about the biographical/recollective level of the psyche that emerged from my research was the discovery that emotionally relevant memories are stored in the unconscious, not as a mosaic of isolated imprints, but in the form of complex dynamic constellations. I coined for them the name “COEX systems,” which is short for “systems of condensed experience.” A COEX system consists of emotionally charged memories from different periods of life that resemble each other in the quality of emotion or physical sensation that they share. Each COEX has a basic theme that permeates all its layers and represents their common denominator. The individual layers contain variations on this basic theme that occurred at different periods of life (see diagram on p. 9).

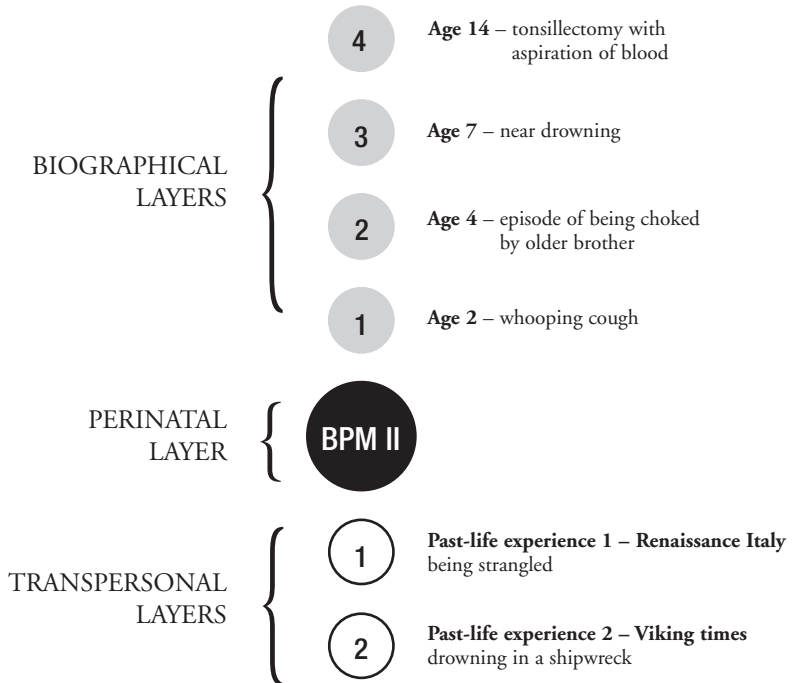
The nature of the central theme varies considerably from one COEX to another. The layers of a particular system can, for example, contain all the major memories of humiliating, degrading, and shaming experiences that have damaged our self-esteem. In another COEX system, the common denominator can be anxiety experienced in various shocking and terrifying situations, or claustrophobic and suffocating feelings evoked by oppressive and confining circumstances. Rejection and emotional deprivation that damage our ability to trust men, women, or people in general is another common motif. Situations that have generated in us profound feelings of guilt and a sense of failure; events that have left us with a conviction that sex is dangerous or disgusting; and encounters with indiscriminate aggression and violence can be added to the list of characteristic examples. Particularly important are COEX systems that contain memories of encounters with situations endangering life, health, and integrity of the body.

When I first described the COEX systems in the early stages of my psychedelic research, I thought that they governed the dynamics of the biographical level of the unconscious. As my experience with holotropic states became richer and more extensive, I realized that the roots of the COEX systems reach much deeper. Each of the COEX constellations seems to be anchored in a particular aspect of the birth trauma. But a typical COEX reaches even further. Its deepest roots

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lie in various forms of transpersonal phenomena, such as past-life experiences, Jungian archetypes, and conscious identification with various animals. Today, I see the COEX systems as general organizing principles of the human psyche. The concept of COEX systems resembles, to some extent, Jung's ideas about psychological complexes and Hanskarl Leuner's transphenomenal dynamic system, but has many features that differentiate it from both these concepts.

A HYPOTHETICAL COEX SYSTEM DIAGRAM



Example of a powerful COEX system underlying psychogenic asthma

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The COEX systems play an important role in our psychological life. They can influence the way we perceive ourselves, other people, and the world, and how we feel about them. They are the dynamic forces behind our emotional and psychosomatic symptoms, difficulties in relationships with other people, and irrational behavior. A dynamic interplay exists between the COEX systems and the external world. External events in our life can specifically activate corresponding COEX systems – and, conversely, active COEX systems can make us perceive and behave in such a way that we recreate their core themes in our present life.

THE “INNER RADAR” OF HOLOTROPIC STATES

Before continuing our discussion of the new, extended cartography of the human psyche, it is important to briefly mention a very important and extraordinary characteristic of holotropic states – one that played an important role in charting the experiential territories of the psyche, and that is also invaluable for the process of psychotherapy. Holotropic states tend to engage something like an “inner radar,” which automatically brings into consciousness the contents of the unconscious that have the strongest emotional charge and that are most psychodynamically relevant at the time.

This represents a great advantage compared to verbal psychotherapy, where the client presents a broad array of information of various kinds and the therapist has to decide what is important, what is irrelevant, and where the client is blocking. Since there is no general agreement about basic theoretical issues among different schools, such assessments will always reflect the personal bias of the therapist, as well as the specific views of his or her school.

The holotropic states save the therapist such difficult decisions and eliminate much of the subjectivity and professional idiosyncrasy of the verbal approaches. This automatic selection of relevant material also spontaneously extends beyond the biographical level and directs the process of self-exploration to the perinatal and transpersonal levels of the psyche. These are transbiographical domains not recognized or acknowledged in academic psychiatry and psychology. The phenomena originating in these deep recesses of the psyche have been well known and honored in ancient and preindustrial cultures of all ages. In the Western industrial civilization, they have been erroneously attributed to pathology of unknown origin, and considered to be meaningless, erratic products of cerebral dysfunction.

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THE PERINATAL LEVEL OF THE PSYCHE

When our process of deep experiential self-exploration moves beyond the level of memories from childhood and infancy and reaches back to birth, we start encountering emotions and physical sensations of extreme intensity – often surpassing anything we previously considered humanly possible. At this point, the experiences become a strange mixture of the themes of birth and death. They involve a sense of severe, life-threatening confinement and a desperate and determined struggle to free ourselves and survive.

This intimate relationship between birth and death on the perinatal level reflects the fact that birth is a potentially life-threatening event. Both child and mother can actually lose their lives during this process. Some children are born severely blue from asphyxiation, or even dead and in need of resuscitation. The reliving of various aspects of biological birth can be very authentic and convincing, often replaying this process in photographic detail. This phenomenon can occur even in people who have no intellectual knowledge about their birth, and who lack elementary obstetric information.

We can, for example, discover through direct experience that we had a breech birth, that a forceps was used during our delivery, or that we were born with the umbilical cord twisted around the neck. We can feel the anxiety, biological fury, physical pain, and suffocation associated with this terrifying event, and even accurately recognize the type of anesthesia used when we were born. This experience is often accompanied by various postures and movements of the head and body that accurately recreate the mechanics of a particular type of delivery. All these details can be confirmed if good birth records or reliable personal witnesses are available.

The strong representation of birth and death in our psyche and the close association between them might surprise traditional psychologists and psychiatrists; but it is actually logical and easily understandable. Delivery brutally terminates the intrauterine existence of the fetus. He or she “dies” as an aquatic organism and is born as an air-breathing, physiologically and even anatomically different form of life. What is more, the passage through the birth canal is itself a difficult and potentially life-threatening process.

SEXUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE PERINATAL DOMAIN

It is not so easy to understand why the perinatal dynamics also regularly include a sexual component. And yet, when we are reliving the final stages of birth in the role

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of the fetus, unusually strong sexual arousal typically occurs. The same is true for the mother, who can experience a mixture of fear of death and intense sexual excitement during delivery. This connection seems strange and puzzling, particularly as far as the fetus is concerned, and certainly deserves a few words of explanation.

There seems to be a mechanism in the human organism that transforms extreme suffering, especially when it is associated with suffocation, into a particular form of sexual arousal. This experiential connection can be observed in a variety of situations other than birth. People who had tried to hang themselves and were rescued in the last moment often report that, at the height of suffocation, they felt an almost unbearable sexual arousal. It is known that males executed by hanging typically have an erection and even ejaculate. The literature on torture and brainwashing reveals that inhuman physical suffering often triggers states of sexual ecstasy.

In a less extreme form, this mechanism operates in various sadomasochistic practices, including strangulation and choking. In the sects of flagellants (who regularly engage in self-inflicted torture) and in religious martyrs subjected to unimaginable torments, extreme physical pain at a certain point changes into sexual arousal and eventually results in ecstatic rapture and transcendental experiences.

BIRTH AS A GATEWAY TO TRANSCENDENCE

The experiences of the unconscious perinatal domain are not limited to the emotions and physical sensations connected to biological childbirth. They also involve rich symbolic imagery drawn from the transpersonal realms. The perinatal domain is an important interface between the biographical and transpersonal levels of the psyche. It represents a gateway to the historical and archetypal aspects of the collective unconscious, in the Jungian sense. The specific symbolism of these experiences originates in the collective unconscious, and not in our individual memory banks. Therefore, it can come from any geographical and historical context, as well as from any world spiritual tradition, quite independently of our racial, cultural, educational, or religious background.

Identifying with the infant facing the ordeal of birth seems to provide access to experiences of people from other times and cultures, various animals, and even mythological figures. It is as if, by entering the experience of the fetus struggling to be born, one reaches an intimate, almost mystical, connection with the consciousness of the human species and with other sentient beings who are or have been in a similar predicament.

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This experiential confrontation with birth and death seems to result automatically in a spiritual opening, which leads to discovery of the mystical dimensions of the psyche and an encounter with the mystery of existence itself. It does not seem to make a difference whether this encounter with birth and death occurs in actual life situations (such as in delivering women or during near-death experiences) or is purely symbolic. Powerful perinatal sequences in psychedelic and holotropic sessions or in the course of spontaneous psychospiritual crises (the “spiritual emergencies” described earlier) seem to have the same effect.

THE STAGES OF THE BIRTH PROCESS

Biological birth has three distinct stages. In the first, the fetus is periodically constricted by uterine contractions. There is no chance of escaping this situation, since the cervix is firmly closed. Continued contractions pull the cervix over the head of the fetus until it is sufficiently dilated to allow passage through the birth canal. Full dilation of the cervix marks the transition from the first to the second stage of delivery, as the head descends into the pelvis and the fetus begins its gradual, difficult propulsion through the birth pathways. Finally, in the third stage, the newborn emerges from the birth canal. After the umbilical cord is cut, he or she becomes an anatomically independent organism.

Observations from holotropic states indicate that, at each of these stages, the baby experiences a specific and typical set of intense emotions and physical sensations. These experiences leave deep unconscious imprints in the psyche that later in life play an important role in the life of the individual. Reinforced by emotionally important experiences from infancy and childhood, the birth memories can shape our perception of the world, profoundly influence everyday behavior, and contribute to the development of various emotional and psychosomatic disorders.

All of this unconscious material can surface and be fully experienced in holotropic states. When our process of deep self-exploration takes us back to birth, we discover that reliving each stage of delivery is associated with a distinct experiential pattern. Each of these patterns is characterized by a specific combination of emotions, physical feelings, and symbolic images. I refer to these patterns of experience as “basic perinatal matrices” (BPMs).

The first perinatal matrix (BPM I) is related to the intrauterine experience immediately preceding birth. The remaining three matrices (BPM II – BPM IV) refer to the three clinical stages of delivery: confinement in the contracting uterus; passage through the birth canal; and emergence as a physically autonomous

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being. In addition to replicating the original situation of the fetus at a particular stage of birth, each basic perinatal matrix also includes various natural, historical, and mythological themes accompanied by similar experiential qualities drawn from the transpersonal realms.

The experiences of the consecutive stages of biological birth and various symbolic images associated with them demonstrate very specific, consistent connections. Conventional logic cannot explain why they emerge together. However, that does not mean that these associations are arbitrary and random. They have their own deep order, which can best be described as “experiential logic.” This means that the connection between the experiences characteristic of various stages of birth and the concomitant symbolic themes are not based on some formal external similarity, but on the fact that they share the same emotional feelings and physical sensations.

The first basic perinatal matrix (BPM I). While experiencing the episodes of undisturbed embryonal existence, we often encounter images of vast regions with no boundaries or limits. Sometimes we identify with galaxies, interstellar space, or the entire cosmos. At other times, we have the experience of floating in the ocean or of becoming fish, dolphins, or whales. The undisturbed intrauterine experience can also open into visions of Mother Nature – safe, beautiful, and unconditionally nourishing, like a good womb. We can see luscious orchards, fields of ripe corn, agricultural terraces in the Andes, or unspoiled Polynesian islands. The experience of the “good womb” can also provide selective access to the archetypal domain of the collective unconscious and open into images of paradises or heavens, as described in the mythologies of different cultures.

When we are reliving episodes of intrauterine disturbances, or “bad womb” experiences, we have a sense of dark and ominous threat, and often feel that we are being poisoned. We might see images of polluted waters and toxic dumps. This reflects the fact that many prenatal disturbances are caused by toxic changes in the body of the pregnant mother. The experience of the toxic womb can be associated with visions of frightening demonic figures from the archetypal realms of the collective unconscious. Reliving of more violent interferences during prenatal existence, such as imminent miscarriage or attempted abortion, is usually connected with a sense of universal threat or with bloody apocalyptic visions of the end of the world.

The second basic perinatal matrix (BPM II). When the experiential regression reaches the onset of biological birth, we typically feel that we are being sucked into a

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gigantic whirlpool or swallowed by some mythical beast. We might also experience that the entire world – or even the cosmos – is being engulfed. There may be associated images of devouring or entangling archetypal monsters, such as leviathans, dragons, giant snakes, tarantulas, and octopuses. The sense of overwhelming vital threat can lead to intense anxiety and general mistrust, bordering on paranoia. We can also experience a descent into the depths of the underworld, the realm of death, or hell. As mythologist Joseph Campbell so eloquently articulated, this is a universal motif in the mythologies of the hero's journey.

Reliving the fully developed first stage of biological birth – when the uterus is contracting, but the cervix is not yet open (BPM II) – is one of the worst experiences a human being can have. We feel caught in a monstrous claustrophobic nightmare, suffer agonizing emotional and physical pain, and experience utter helplessness and hopelessness. Our feelings of loneliness, guilt, absurdity of life, and existential despair can reach metaphysical proportions. We lose connection with linear time and become convinced that this situation will never end and that there is absolutely no way out. There is no doubt in our mind that what is happening to us is what the religions refer to as hell – unbearable emotional and physical torment without any hope of redemption. This experience can actually be accompanied by archetypal images of devils and infernal landscapes from different cultures.

When we face the dismal situation of no exit in the clutches of uterine contractions, we can experientially connect with sequences from the collective unconscious that involve people, animals, and even mythological beings in a similar painful and hopeless predicament. We identify with prisoners in dungeons, inmates of concentration camps or insane asylums, and animals caught in traps. We might experience the intolerable tortures of sinners in hell, or of Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the mountain in the deepest pit of Hades. Our pain can become the agony of Christ asking God why he has abandoned him. It seems to us that we are facing the prospect of eternal damnation.

This state of darkness and abysmal despair is known in the spiritual literature as “the dark night of the soul.” From a broader perspective, despite the associated feelings of utter hopelessness, this state is an important stage of spiritual opening. If it is experienced to its full depth, it can have an immensely purging and liberating effect on those who go through it.

The third basic perinatal matrix (BPM III). The experience of the second stage of birth related to this matrix – the propulsion through the birth canal after the cervix opens and the head descends – is unusually rich and dynamic. Facing the

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clashing energies and hydraulic pressures involved in the delivery, we are flooded with images from the collective unconscious portraying sequences of titanic battles and scenes of bloody violence and torture. It is also during this phase that we are confronted with sexual impulses and energies of problematic nature and unusual intensity.

It has already been described earlier that sexual arousal is an important part of the experience of birth. This places our first encounter with sexuality in a very precarious context: a situation where our life is threatened, where we are suffering as well as inflicting pain, and where we are unable to breathe. At the same time, we are experiencing a mixture of vital anxiety and primitive biological fury; the latter being an understandable reaction of the fetus to this painful and life-threatening experience. In the final stages of birth, we can also encounter various forms of biological material: blood, mucus, urine, and even feces.

Because of these problematic connections, the experiences and images that we encounter while reliving this phase typically present sex in a grossly distorted form. The strange mixture of sexual arousal with physical pain, aggression, vital anxiety, and biological material leads to sequences that are pornographic, aberrant, sadomasochistic, scatological, or even satanic. We can be overwhelmed by dramatic scenes of sexual abuse, perversions, rapes, and erotically motivated murders.

On occasion, these experiences can take the form of participation in rituals featuring witches and Satanists. This seems to relate to the fact that reliving this stage of birth involves the same strange combination of emotions, sensations, and elements that characterizes the archetypal scenes of the Black Mass and the Witches' Sabbath (Walpurgis Night). It is a mixture of sexual arousal, panic anxiety, aggression, vital threat, pain, sacrifice, and encounter with ordinarily repulsive biological materials. This peculiar experiential amalgam is associated with a sense of sacredness or numinosity, reflecting the fact that all this is unfolding in close proximity to a spiritual opening.

This stage of the birth process can also be associated with countless images from the collective unconscious portraying scenes of murderous aggression, such as vicious battles, bloody revolutions, gory massacres, fiery explosions, and genocide. In all the violent and sexual scenes that we encounter at this stage, we alternate between the roles of perpetrator and victim. This is the time of a major encounter with the dark side of our personality, Jung's "Shadow." As this perinatal phase is culminating and approaching resolution, many people envision Jesus, the Way of the Cross, and crucifixion; or they may even actually experience full identification with Jesus' suffering. The archetypal domain of the collective

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unconscious contributes heroic mythological figures and deities. Typically, these figures represent death and rebirth, as do the Egyptian god Osiris, the Greek deities Dionysus and Persephone, and the Sumerian goddess Inanna.

The fourth basic perinatal matrix (BPM IV). The reliving of the third stage of the birth process underlying this experiential pattern – of the actual emergence into the world – is typically initiated by the motif of fire. We can have the feeling that our body is consumed by searing heat, have visions of burning cities and forests, or identify with victims of immolation. The archetypal versions of this fire can take the form of the cleansing flames of purgatory or of the legendary phoenix, dying in the heat of its burning nest and emerging from the ashes reborn and rejuvenated. The purifying fire seems to destroy in us whatever is corrupted and prepare us for spiritual rebirth. When we are reliving the actual moment of birth, we experience it as complete annihilation, followed by rebirth and resurrection.

To understand why we experience the reliving of biological birth as death and rebirth, one has to realize that what happens to us is much more than just a replay of the original event of childbirth. During the delivery, we are completely confined in the birth canal and have no way of expressing the extreme emotions and sensations involved. Our memory of this event thus remains psychologically undigested and unassimilated. Much of our later self-definition and attitudes toward the world are heavily contaminated by this constant deep reminder of the vulnerability, inadequacy, and weakness that we experienced at birth. In a sense, we were born anatomically, but have not really caught up emotionally with the fact that the emergency and danger are over.

The “dying” and the agony during the struggle for rebirth reflect the actual pain and vital threat of the biological birth process. However, this is different from the ego death that immediately precedes rebirth. This “death” reflects the demise of our old concepts of who we are and what the world is like, which were forged – as were the physical impressions – by the traumatic imprint of birth.

As we are purging these old programs from our psyche and body by letting them emerge into consciousness, we are reducing their energetic charge and curtailing their destructive influence on our life. From a larger perspective, this process is actually very healing and transforming. Yet as we are nearing its final resolution, we might paradoxically feel that, as the old imprints are leaving our system, we are dying with them. Sometimes, we experience not only a sense of personal annihilation, but also the destruction of the world as we know it.

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While only a small step separates us from the experience of radical liberation, we have a sense of all-pervading anxiety and impending catastrophe of enormous proportions. The impression of imminent doom at the ego-death stage of the spiritual journey can be very convincing and overwhelming. We might well need much encouragement and psychological support at this point. The predominant feeling is that we are losing all that we know and that we are. At the same time, we have no idea what is on the other side, or even if there is anything there at all. This fear is the reason that many people desperately resist the process at this stage if they can. As a result, they can remain psychologically stuck in this problematic territory indefinitely.

Immediately following the experience of total annihilation – “hitting cosmic bottom” – we are overwhelmed by visions of a supernaturally radiant, beautiful light that is usually perceived as sacred. This divine epiphany can also generate displays of beautiful rainbows, diaphanous peacock designs, and visions of celestial realms with angelic beings or deities appearing in light. It is at this time that we can experience a profound encounter with the archetypal figure of the Great Mother Goddess or one of her many culture-bound forms.

The experience of psychospiritual death and rebirth is a major step toward weakening our identification with the body and ego, and reconnecting with the transcendental domain. We feel redeemed, liberated, and blessed; we have a new awareness of our divine nature and cosmic status. We also typically experience a strong surge of positive emotions toward ourselves, other people, nature, God, and existence in general. We are filled with optimism and emotional and physical well-being.

It is important to emphasize that the positive experience just described is typical of a biological birth whose final stages followed a more or less natural course. If the delivery was very debilitating or confounded by heavy anesthesia, the experience of rebirth does not manifest this quality of triumphant emergence into light. It is more like awakening with a hangover: dizzy, nauseous, and mentally clouded. Much additional psychological work might be needed to work through the issues involved, and the positive results are much less striking.

The perinatal domain of the psyche represents an experiential crossroads of critical importance. It is not only the meeting point of three absolutely crucial aspects of human biological existence – birth, sex, and death – but also the dividing line between life and death, the individual and the species, and the psyche and the spirit. Full conscious experience of the contents of this domain of the psyche,

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with good subsequent integration, can have far-reaching consequences and lead to spiritual opening and deep personal transformation.

THE TRANSPERSONAL DOMAIN OF THE PSYCHE

The second major domain holotropic research has contributed to the cartography of the human psyche is called “transpersonal,” meaning literally “beyond the personal” or “transcending the personal.” The experiences originating on this level involve transcending the limitations of body and ego, and of three-dimensional space and linear time. Transpersonal experiences are best defined by contrasting them with our everyday experience of ourselves and the world – how we have to experience ourselves and the environment to pass for “normal” according to our culture’s standards and Newtonian-Cartesian psychiatry (that is, a model of the human psyche limited by conventionally measurable phenomena).

In the ordinary or “normal” state of consciousness, we experience ourselves as Newtonian objects existing within the boundaries of our skin. Our perception of the environment is restricted by the physiological limitations of our sensory organs and by physical characteristics of the environment. The writer and philosopher Alan Watts referred to this experience of oneself as identifying with the “skin-encapsulated ego.”

We cannot see objects from which we are separated by a solid wall, ships beyond the horizon, or the other side of the moon. If we are in Prague, we cannot hear what our friends are talking about in San Francisco. We cannot feel the softness of lambskin unless the surface of our body is in direct contact with it. In addition, we can experience vividly and with all our senses only the events that are happening in the present moment. We can recall the past and anticipate future events, or fantasize about them; however, these are very different experiences from an immediate and direct experience of the present moment. In transpersonal states of consciousness, however, none of these limitations is absolute. Any of them can be transcended.

THE THREE CATEGORIES OF TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Transpersonal experiences can be divided into three large categories. The first involves primarily transcendence of the usual spatial barriers – the “skin-encapsulated ego.” Such experiences include merging with another person into a state that can be called “dual unity”; assuming the identity of another person; identifying with the consciousness of an entire group of people (e.g. all

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the mothers of the world, the entire population of India, or all the inmates of concentration camps); or even experiencing an extension of consciousness that seems to encompass all of humanity. Experiences of this kind have been repeatedly described in the world's spiritual literature.

Similarly, one can transcend the limits of the specifically human experience, and identify with the consciousness of various animals or plants. This awareness can even extend to inorganic objects and processes. In the extremes, it is possible to experience consciousness of the entire biosphere, our planet, or the whole material universe. Incredible and absurd as it might seem to a Westerner committed to monistic materialism, these experiences suggest that everything we can experience as an object in everyday consciousness has, in nonordinary states, a corresponding subjective representation. It is as if everything in the universe can be described simultaneously in both objective and subjective terms, as described in the great spiritual philosophies of the East. (In Hinduism, for example, all that exists is seen as a manifestation of Brahman. Taoists describe this same phenomenon as a transformation of the Tao).

The second category of transpersonal experiences is characterized primarily by overcoming temporal boundaries – by transcendence of linear time. We have already talked about the possibility of vividly reliving important memories from infancy and the trauma of birth. This historical regression can continue further, to involve authentic fetal and embryonal memories from different periods of intrauterine life. It is not even unusual to experience, on the level of cellular consciousness, full identification with the sperm and ovum during conception.

But the historical regression does not stop here. It is possible to have experiences from the lives of one's human or animal ancestors, or even to encounter what seems to be the racial and collective unconscious, as described by C. G. Jung. Quite frequently, the experiences apparently reflecting other cultures and historical periods are associated with a sense of personal remembering. People talk about reliving memories from previous incarnations.

The transpersonal experiences described so far involve elements of the everyday familiar reality: other people, animals, plants, materials, and events from the past. What is surprising here is not the content of these experiences, but the fact that we can witness or fully identify with something that is not ordinarily accessible to our experience. We know, for example, that there are pregnant whales in the world; but we should not be able to have an authentic experience of being one. The fact that the French Revolution occurred is readily acceptable, but we should

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not be able to vividly experience lying wounded on the barricades of Paris. We know that there are many things happening in the world in places where we are not present, but it is usually considered impossible to experience these events, except perhaps by watching them on television. Another surprising aspect of transpersonal experience is the ability to find consciousness associated with lower animals, plants, and even inorganic nature.

However, the third category of transpersonal experiences is stranger yet. Here, consciousness seems to extend into realms and dimensions not considered “real” by Western industrial culture. Numerous visions of archetypal beings and mythological landscapes arise in this realm, along with encounters or even identification with deities and demons of various cultures. Communication with discarnate beings, spirit guides, suprahuman entities, extraterrestrials, and inhabitants of parallel universes are also typical of this category.

In its further reaches, individual consciousness can identify with cosmic consciousness, or the Universal Mind known under many different names: Brahman, Buddha, the Cosmic Christ, Keter, Allah, the Tao, the Great Spirit, and many others. The ultimate of all experiences appears to be identification with the supracosmic and metacosmic Void: the mysterious and primordial nothingness that is conscious of itself and is the ultimate cradle of all existence. It has no concrete content, yet it contains all there is in a germinal and potential form.

TRANSCENDING THE LIMITS OF SELF

The many strange characteristics of transpersonal experiences shatter the most fundamental metaphysical assumptions of the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm and the materialistic world view. Researchers who have studied and/or personally experienced these fascinating phenomena realize that the attempts of mainstream science to dismiss them as irrelevant products of human fantasy or as hallucinations – erratic products of pathological processes in the brain – are naive and inadequate. Any unbiased study of the transpersonal domain must conclude that these observations represent a critical challenge, not only for psychiatry and psychology, but for the entire philosophy of Western science.

Although transpersonal experiences occur in the process of deep individual self-exploration, it is not possible to interpret them simply as intrapsychic phenomena in the conventional sense. On the one hand, they clearly arise from the same individual psyche that yields personal information about one’s biographical and perinatal experiences. On the other hand, they seem to be able to tap directly – without the mediation of the senses – sources of information that are clearly

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far beyond the individual's conventional reach. Somewhere on the perinatal level of the psyche, a strange flip seems to occur: what was, up to that point, deep intrapsychic probing becomes an extrasensory experience of the universe at large.

These observations indicate that we can obtain information about the universe in two radically different ways. Besides the conventional process of learning through sensory perception, analysis, and synthesis of the data, we can also find out about various aspects of the world by direct identification with them in a nonordinary state of consciousness. Each of us thus appears to be a microcosm containing, in a holographic way (i.e. reflecting the whole in its entirety), information about the macrocosm. In the mystical traditions, this has been expressed by such phrases as “as above, so below” or “as without, so within.”

Subjects who have reported experiences of embryonal existence, the moment of conception, and elements of cellular, tissue, and organ consciousness have consistently offered medically accurate insights into the anatomical, physiological, and biochemical aspects of these processes. Similarly, ancestral, racial, and collective memories and past incarnation experiences quite frequently provide very specific details about architecture, costumes, weapons, art forms, social structure, and religious and ritual practices – or even concrete historical events – pertaining to the culture and historical period involved.

People who have experienced identification with existing or past-life forms not only found them unusually authentic and convincing, but often acquired in the process extraordinary insights concerning animal psychology, ethology, specific habits, or unusual reproductive cycles. In some instances, their reports were accompanied by archaic muscular innervations uncharacteristic of humans, or even such complex behaviors as enactment of a courtship dance.

The philosophical challenge associated with these observations is formidable all by itself. Even more provocative is the fact that transpersonal experiences accurately reflecting the material world, as described above, are often interwoven with other experiences containing elements considered “unreal” by the Western industrial world. Examples include experiences involving deities and demons from various cultures, mythological realms such as heavens and paradises, and legendary or fairy-tale sequences.

For example, one can have an experience of Shiva's heaven, of the paradise of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc, of the Sumerian underworld, or of one of the Buddhist hot hells. It is also possible to communicate with Jesus, have a shattering encounter with the Hindu goddess Kali, or identify with the dancing Shiva. Even these

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ostensibly fantastic episodes can impart accurate new information about religious symbolism and mythical motifs that were previously unknown to the person involved. Observations of this kind confirm C. G. Jung's idea that we can gain access, not only to the Freudian individual unconscious, but also to the collective unconscious that contains the cultural heritage of all humanity.

The existence and nature of transpersonal experiences violate some of the most basic assumptions of mechanistic science. They imply such seemingly absurd notions as relativity and the arbitrary nature of all physical boundaries; nonlocal connections in the universe; communication through unknown means and channels; memory without a material substrate; nonlinearity of time; and that all living organisms – and even inorganic matter – manifest consciousness. Many transpersonal experiences involve events from the microcosm and the macrocosm (realms that cannot normally be reached by unaided human senses), or from historical periods that precede the origin of the solar system, the formation of planet Earth, the appearance of living organisms, the development of the nervous system, and emergence of homo sapiens.

Thus, research of nonordinary states reveals a baffling paradox concerning the nature of human beings. It clearly shows that, in a mysterious and yet unexplained way, each of us contains information about the entire universe and all of existence, and has potential experiential access to all of its parts. In a sense, then, each of us is the whole cosmic network, even though we are just an infinitesimal part of it; a separate and insignificant biological entity. The new cartography of the transpersonal paradigm reflects this fact, and portrays the individual human psyche as essentially one with the entire cosmos and the totality of existence. This idea might seem absurd and implausible to a traditionally trained scientist and to our common sense; yet we can relatively easily reconcile it with new, revolutionary developments in various scientific disciplines. These are usually referred to as the “new (or emerging) paradigm.”

The expanded cartography I am proposing is of critical importance for any serious approach to such phenomena as shamanism, rites of passage, mysticism, religion, mythology, parapsychology, near-death experiences, and psychedelic states. This new model of the psyche is not just a matter of academic interest. It has deep and revolutionary implications for the understanding of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, including psychoses, and offers radically new therapeutic possibilities.

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