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**Final Paper**  
**Residential Intensive in Transpersonal Psychology I**  
**July 16, 2002**

**Sangha**  
*-a community of people sharing the same journey-*

Having never experienced the concepts of transpersonal psychology, at least not in an explicit way, in a formal setting, I was not sure what to expect from the week. I only knew words on a page—abstract descriptions of what people thought the term to mean. In my mind, I formulated a loose definition. I described it as psychology with a healthy dose of spirituality. I said that it strays from the traditional heavy-handed, blame-oriented styles of psychotherapy. Transpersonal psychology does not wish to blame a person's parents or an overactive Id. It attempts to meet the person at the point where s/he is, in the unique reality of each individual. Part of my fascination with transpersonal psychology was that it attempted to go much further beyond facades. "Transpersonal means literally 'beyond the mask'" (Davis, 2000). Perhaps I could go beyond my mask, as well as the defense posture I had put up when I entered the working world.

Much of my undergraduate work, both in philosophy and literature, centered around existentialism and the continuous railing that we are ultimately alone in this world and in the Universe. Understandably, much of my thinking is tethered to those many years of study. One vital concept I learned in this course, early on, was that in most ways, we are not alone. We are all inextricably linked; we are woven together in the fabric of the transpersonal and the ecosystem. As much as humans may wish to remove themselves from the collective, to subscribe to the rugged individualism philosophy, we

all must come back to the fact that we are together. We experience the anima mundi, the soul of the world, and it experiences us. I witnessed this clearly through our experiment in spontaneous movement: we are never simply observers, for the fact that we have reactions to the world in front of and around us makes us part of the experience, part of the process. “The core concept in transpersonal psychology is nonduality, the recognition that each part (e.g., each person) is fundamentally and ultimately a part of the whole (the cosmos)” (Davis, 2000).

This master’s program, in particular, would feel horribly disjointed if not for this important week spent knowing each other in our own realities, all while in the context of the Naropa and Boulder realities. One of the birds I met on my medicine walk revealed important wisdom to me when I asked out loud why I was alone in the world. “You are never alone,” it chirped. The leaves in the trees rustled and other birds squawked out approval of the statement. This particular moment with nature, almost as if experienced on a foreign planet, introduced me to a new kind of knowledge—an intrinsic and powerful knowledge.

In our first council meeting, I described for the group my most profound mystical experience, the touch of the transpersonal in my life. I was four years old. One typically windy spring day, I went outside to play with my Wiffle ball and bat. (Cheyenne, Wyoming is *always* windy, so that part was not out-of-the-ordinary.) I looked to the sky and noticed a face staring back at me. It was a clear day, and this face had not formed with the help of clouds or other explainable atmospheric phenomenon. Rich, full colors appeared, and the heavy eyes in this face lovingly looked down upon me. We half-smiled and held each other’s gaze for a while. The event had an eternal quality; I could

not sense time accurately. It seemed like I was there staring for twenty minutes. In actuality, it was probably more like sixty seconds. What I told our council group was at that moment, I *knew*. This is not to say that I knew facts or quantifiable data. I just *knew*. It was almost as if a transference had occurred, the face placing some type of profundity in my brain. “Formerly I had assumed that deeper wisdom was attained through the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. However, now I was forced to consider the possibility that we already possess the requisite knowledge, that our usual state represents an actively and defensively contracted state, and that higher states are attainable, not by the acquisition of something new, but by the release of current defenses and the resultant expression of already existing capacities” (Walsh, 1980).

Since recalling my own mystical experience, I have been on a mission to unlock the treasure chest that (perhaps only metaphorically) was placed inside me. Amazingly, I repressed this most intimate encounter for many years, but every bit of contact I had with Naropa seemed to bring me closer to unlocking the wisdom—from the opening application essay to my first steps into Paramita Hall, something was whispering that I was closer to uncovering the knowledge I already have but have been unable to access. Virtually everything that happened during the course of the week affirmed my own beliefs and values. I believe that a community only functions properly when all of its people have equal opportunity to be heard. Council practice helped make this possible for our group. I have always had an eye toward the Universal—to the things in the world that tie us all together. Our experiences together, as well as the thorough discussion of *anima mundi*, solidified this concept in my mind.

I also knew our group would be meditating—a lot. Being new to the practice, this was a slightly daunting, yet intriguing piece of the course. I was eager to learn. Coming to a campus that embraces contemplative practice made more sense to me as the hours went by. “How can we free ourselves from awareness-limiting automatized behaviors and perceptions? One answer is to bring mindfulness to our conditioned responses and witness them in a non-reactive way” (Davis, 2000). Having a hyperactive mind, I found it difficult at first to quiet my thoughts and be present with my breath. In the abstract, and on an intellectual level, I could see the benefit of meditation and contemplative practices. “This demonstrates one of the differences between meditation and most psychotherapies. Whereas the latter attempt to change the content of this experience...meditation is also interested in modifying the perceptual-cognitive processes by which the mind produces such experiences” (Walsh, 1980). One of the great challenges, I found, was overcoming the compulsive desire to achieve something, to experience something profound. I suppose it is yet another Western fallacy—believing that one can meditate and receive a gift of enlightenment, spontaneously, while on the cushion. I was disappointed to learn that we were not trying to achieve an altered state, or even to find something in particular. I learned that we are just attempting to *be*. Difficult? Strangely enough, it is. It would have been nearly impossible if we were not committed to a full week of intensive activities. I have a feeling that being a “weekend meditator” would not be enough.

The initial meditative work, coupled with my continuing practice, has already helped me stay connected and present in my life. I have observed myself during conversations. In the past, I would tune in and out, focusing more on the “white noise” in

my head than on the person who was speaking. Now I am able to be fully present, attuned to the story being told. I even find myself a bit upset when the other person does not show me the same level of mindfulness. Of course, just the fact that I am aware of that, feeling its power on my emotions, shows that I am progressing in my daily contemplative practice.

One of my most surprising discoveries during the week, more specifically the weekend anima mundi workshop, was that my kinesthetic intelligence is much stronger than I had given myself credit. When Michael first asked us to chart how we perceive our levels of intelligence, I scored myself low for kinesthetic. For years, I have tied body to “sports ability.” Since I am not particularly athletic (which, in this country, has become more a measure social standing rather than of physical ability) I thought I did not have much kinesthetic intelligence. This changed suddenly, as we began to move in the spontaneous movement exercise. I felt my body become an artist’s brush, passionately stroking paint upon a canvas. “Where was this coming from?” I thought to myself. More importantly, how could this body, this disenfranchised part of me, be moving so eloquently through space and time? I knew then that my body, too, was intelligent. Which made me later think about our society and how we detach many of our children from their bodies, making them feel uncomfortable in their own skin. In my profession, I deal with a large population of young people with eating disorders and/or body image issues. I thought, “That’s it! That’s what these kids are missing—a feeling that their bodies are okay, that they can do beautiful things with their bodies, that they can trust their bodies.” If I think back through my body’s history, I see a violent chasm appear at the base of puberty (the worst time of all for it to appear.) In elementary school, we

would have gym class every week. We would also run around on the playground, learning new movements and skills via our bodies. Once middle school arrived, we lost recess, and gym class became more of an exhibition for the more developed boys to show dominance. Add that to the growing awkwardness with an adolescent body—voilà—self-body-loathing. As time goes on, young people suffer from further de-emphasizing of the body and more messages about why their bodies are strange or ugly or imperfect. Why do I tell this story? I tell it because it not only reflects the feelings of many students I encounter, but it also shows how we are becoming further and further disconnected from the whole and a smaller physical version of the whole, our bodies.

Overall, my experience in the residential intensive was priceless. Almost immediately, I felt parts of my core, my deepest inner-being come alive. As I remarked to a close friend, “I felt the dormant, yet vital, sub-sections of my personality awaken and show themselves.” Much of my life recently has been lived as if looking out a tiny window, thinking extraordinary bits of my personality had left me forever. At one point, Jed commented to me, “Everything I needed to know about you, I learned when I saw you dance around the circle today (during our drumming exercise).” It was true; I had come alive, revealing my true personality.

The setting made it incredibly easy for me to crawl out of my cave and live deliberately. The combination of factors helped me “saddle up” and give all my energy to the events, to the week, to the experience: an immediate comfort with the place and the people, a non-judgmental atmosphere, a place perform, and the flow of energy to carry me through these actions.

My energy throughout was rather high, though admittedly, it dropped off when the weekend workshop began. Being an internal processor, I was feeling the need for time off, to think and work through some items. One night, I had shadow dreams—expressions of my fears about subtle insincerities or facades that may have been distorting my perception. The following day, I was more resistant than earlier in the week, almost afraid to commit fully to the experience. I felt as though I had been through the first two months of a relationship with a fabulous new lover; we had been through the initial ecstasy and had begun recoiling a bit—partially embarrassment for letting ourselves be so exposed and partially a defense mechanism in case our partner’s love was waning. Thankfully, though, after a long weekend and an even longer week, I came back to a center and felt love. Some of my reductionist friends would poo-poo the feeling, explaining it away as a strong chemical reaction to unusual stimuli. I know better, though. *I know*. I felt the transpersonal principles coursing through me, though everyone in the room. This is an important journey. I am relieved and joyous that we, a group of people who would normally only meet serendipitously, this sangha, are all crossing the threshold together.

## References

Davis, J. (2000). We Keep Asking Ourselves, What is Transpersonal Psychology? Guidance and Counselling, 15 (3), 3-8.

Walsh, R. (1980). Things Are Not as They Seemed. In Walsh, R.N. & Vaughan, F. (Eds.), Path Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.\*\*

\*\*I am not 100% sure that the piece is from this book. The reading was from a section of our supplemental readings for the Personality Theories class. No detailed bibliographical information was supplied. This is my best educated guess, though. If, in the meantime, I am able to get confirmation of the original source, I will send it.