

SYMPTOMS OR TYPES OF SPIRITUAL EMERGENCE PROCESSES OR SPIRITUAL EMERGENCIES

“The common denominator of all crises of transformation is the manifestation of different aspects of the psyche that were previously unconscious.”

Stan & Christina Grof: *Stormy Search for Self*

The following list is not intended to indicate that the various types of processes appear discretely or are neatly differentiated. Nor are the following examples completely inclusive. The psyche is a multi-dimensional and many-layered continuum with few boundaries. Often aspects can appear together, or in succession, or cyclically.

Opening to Life Myths or Archetypes

Where one perceives one's environment and one's own process in terms and symbolic images relating to much larger perspectives. Issues of power thus become Dreams of Kingship. A cave represents an Entrance to the Underworld. Decision-making becomes the struggle between Good and Evil. Other examples include: Communing with Nature; that one has a Mission in Life. All these sorts or any sort of experiences fall into this category; and you can almost hear the 'capitalization' of the words.

Shamanic Journey or Crisis

Where elements of the person's transformational process relate to similar experiences that are often found in earlier, tribal, or more primitive societies; like perhaps the Native American Indian. Experiences such as vision quests; the appearance of spirit guides or allies; preparations involving fasting & purification; journeys to the underworld or spirit world, often involving total annihilation or death followed by resurrection and re-birth to celestial realms or contact with ancestors, or the Great Spirit; special connections with natural elements or an identification with particular category of animal; development of different healing powers and certain types of spiritual illness all can form a part of this classification.

Communication with Spirit Guides or Channeling

Where someone is giving out informational material that seems quite disconnected from their persona, or normal self, and has a strong consistent spiritual quality and often is

couched in teaching or guiding terms, either for the individual concerned or often for people in general. Sometimes the 'channel' is in a trance (more like a medium) and unaware of this material, or sometimes they are acting more consciously. The information can be relayed by speech, in trance, or by automatic writing, telepathic transfer, visions, etc. Well-known examples include Alice Bailey, Eileen Caddy & Dorothy McLean (Findhorn Foundation); the Hindu Vedas & Upanishads, the Book of Mormon, The Course in Miracles, Seth Speaks, RA Material, etc.

Near-Death Experiences

Where people's experiences of being close to death or even of dying and coming back to life nearly always lead to a spiritual opening and a transformational process. Consciousness can detach from the body and float around an accident scene or a hospital surgery or distant locations (often to see a loved one); or where there is an experience a passage through a tunnel to a brilliant & beautiful source of light and there is a presence of love as well with a message that one needs to return.

These elements are the most common and not confined to those people from any particular religion. All these elements can often result in a profound subsequent shift in perspective and a new determination for the individual to live their life in a much more congruent way, often dedicated to the service of others.

Kundalini Awakening

Where powerful body energy is flowing, often in episodes, sometimes quite surprisingly. This can take the form of cycles of jerking, shaking or sweating; spontaneous movement into yogic positions; rushes of energy, often up the spine; hypersensitivity to stimuli; powerful waves of accompanying emotion; a decreased ability to control their body voluntarily; sensory manifestations - seeing bright lights, hearing inner sounds, smelling fragrances, sometimes intense sexual or orgiastic feelings; what is sometimes called "satori"; or an experience of the powerful opening the chakras (energy centers) of the body; and, more worryingly, possible simulation of, or stimulation of, severe medical problems. It can also be seen as a spiritual purification of your body as this powerful energy sweeps (or blasts) away, cell by cell, the detritus that has accumulated over the years.

Episodes of Unitive Consciousness or Peak Experiences

Where the person experiences being at one with other people; or other things; or the whole world; or the cosmos; or merging with God. There is a sense of transcending space & time and there can be an experience of infinity or eternity. "The emotions associated with this state range from profound peace and serenity to exuberant joy and ecstatic rapture." Grof: *Spiritual Emergency*. Abraham Maslow described these states in depth, calling them Peak

Experiences. They are not a form of mental disease. The eastern philosophers refer to something like this as "samadhi," and this type of experience typically leads to better functioning and his goal of "self-actualization".

Emergence of a Karmic Pattern or "Past-Life" Memories

Where experiential sequences occur of what seem to be 'past-life' situations or encounters (often connected with partners, parents or experiences of death) ... Beliefs in reincarnation exist in nearly all major religions, except Muslim and Christian (post 553 AD).. These are however quite definite experiences or sensations for many people in this category. They frequently have a powerful transformative or therapeutic result and can often "explain" otherwise incomprehensible difficulties in their life up to this point. They can intrude quite powerfully and cause considerable confusion unless integrated.

Psychic Opening or The Awakening of Extra-Sensory Perceptions (ESP)

The emergence of certain paranormal abilities is quite common and quite powerful, and thus is also potentially quite difficult to deal with. It is easy to get "hooked into the symptom" and forget that this is just one aspect of a much deeper spiritual awakening process. And this is where power can easily be abused. Out-of-body experiences, telepathic or empathic abilities, spiritual or psychic healing powers, pre-cognition, communication with other dimensions (nature spirits, devas, etc.), mediumistic identification, synchronistic experiences and many more, all form quite common aspects of this category. Sometimes these abilities are feared and thus rejected, either by the person or by those around them. Alternatively, they can become "Glamorous Powers"⁶ and be abused by the recipient.

Experience or Close-Encounters with UFO's

Irrespective of whether or not this type of experience has actually happened, or whether aliens spaceships exist, and irrespective of whether or not the person is judged by others as being insane or not; peoples' descriptions of these types of experiences, and their attitudes to these experiences, and the way these experiences are subsequently incorporated into their lives, and the resulting transformational changes that occur as a result, allow these experiences to be included with the others. Examples also include 'experiences' of alien abduction, or insemination.

Psychological Renewal through a Return to the Center

The deep "renewal process" is where the psyche appears to be involved in a battlefield where the archetypes of Good & Evil, Light & Dark fight it out: *Lord of the Rings* stuff. There is a pre-occupation with themes of cosmic struggle and death. There is a fascination with opposites and polarities. People having these experiences: "... experience themselves as the

center of fantastic events that have cosmic relevance and are important for the future of the world. Their visionary states take them farther & farther back - through their own history and the history of humanity, all the way to the creation of the world and the original ideal state of paradise. In this process, they seem to strive for perfection, trying to correct the things that went wrong in the past." Grof: *Spiritual Emergency*

Things then start to get a bit better. Quite often they might get involved in a form of "sacred marriage"; either in imagery or even in reality – possibly even projected onto someone else - and then things become fantasized as "ideal". They have supposedly now integrated their masculine & feminine. However, the crisis is by no means over, even though everything now seems wonderful. Nothing has been really integrated or worked through, just experienced. Some of these attitudes can be found in certain "New Age" therapies, such as "Soul Renewal" or Re- birthing.

Possession

This is where the individual seems to take on the characteristics of a totally different personality or becomes "possessed" with an interest in a particular field. Sometimes there is a "shadow" element in this. It can be seen as "evil". It can also be compulsive. It can also be someone who is dominated by their environment or surroundings. e.g. the Army martinet who will only ever do things by the "book".

There has been a lot of work being done with Multiple Personality Disorders - called work with "possession states" though I might disagree as MPDs could equally well be the splitting up of the personality into fragments under situations of intolerable psychic stress in order to preserve aspects of the Self and then creating a personality around that fragment as one is unable to integrate otherwise.

Integration work could center around the topics of respecting the personality, validating it and dis-empowering the process or the need to maintain the separation. "The remedy is always inside the experience itself". Wilhelm Reich said: "*The way we got in (to the trap) is also the way out.*" Howatch, Susan: *Mystical Paths* (Fontana) 1992: pp 457-8

Another description of possession is "*that we can distinguish it from mental illness because the sufferer is sane; he feels he's periodically being invaded by a malign force, but this isn't a delusion stemming from paranoia. However, the condition is extremely rare and the resemblance to some forms of mental illness makes it difficult to diagnose. ... The classical exorcism of a possessed person requires extensive preparation and an army of helpers - ... a psychiatrist, a psychotherapist and possibly a social worker in attendance along with at least three strong men, all of whom, ideally, should be priests.*"

Synthesis of forms: Several of the above experienced simultaneously or serially. Remember this accumulation of events, in itself, can push someone into a crisis: one can

cope with one of these situations; by two or maybe three might cause the lid to blow, or a psychotic depression to set in if your psychic boundaries cannot expand to incorporate these, your limits have been overwhelmed, or your sense of yourself flooded.

This is the end of the Grof's list.

Other Possible Circumstances and Symptoms

• Addictions, Drug and Alcohol Dependency

Christina Grof also lists these as a possible form of spiritual emergency, from her own experiences, and from others, and devotes a whole chapter to it in their book, *Spiritual Emergency* (see Book List). She states that the craving for the drug, or whatever, is often a craving for transcendence, the Higher Self, or God, but in a lost and inappropriate form. They also state that addictions can be developed during spiritual emergencies as a way of easing the stress. Many addicts have highly developed intuitive senses, or visionary and precognitive capacities, and this has given them many troubles and even contributed to their addictive behavior as they try to avoid difficulties with their psyche.

• Social Forces

Alternatively, these sorts of processes can be 'acted out' on a sociological level involving us all. We have mentioned the fascination with (and possible proliferation of) serial killers. For many the emergence of childhood sexual abuse out of the closet into open discussion and eventual acceptance was like a revelation: we did not now have to struggle against the disbelief of society that "this sort of thing just couldn't happen in our family". It often did.

With the advent of globalization, such social forces have an exaggerated effect on the whole planet. We need to consider the wider aspects. Now we are seeing again the renewal of the demonization of the 'enemy': Saddam Hussein has been called "The Butcher of Baghdad" and there is "an Axis of Evil" and a "War against Terrorism". The tabloid newspapers and Hollywood often fuel such perspectives, and maybe occasionally even help us on towards a collective form of Spiritual Emergence process whereby the exotic lives of their "stars" become more normal and accepted. They can also work the other way and demonize. Films portray subjects like contact with the dead; star gates; the development of psychic phenomena; possession; shape-changing; etc. and so begin (in a perverse way) to normalize some of these processes. Such imagery is very powerful and works on the collective. We can even see whole groups caught up in such processes, where literally hundreds of cases of child abuse with satanic rituals are diagnosed mostly erroneously. To

the individuals caught up in such social forces, these can trigger off a Spiritual Emergence process.

Another form of spiritual emergence process, in the social field, could be the Olympic Games: the 'winner' is crowned with laurel leaves, is treated like a God (on Mount Olympus) and has achieved "gold" status (gold often being a synonym for spiritual transcendence. Sportsmen and women often describe the process of 'going through the pain barrier', working with their inner self, facing their fear of failure (daemon), and other experiences in terms very similar to descriptions of a spiritual journey.

• **A Psychotic Episode**

This can be an extraordinary shake-up to the whole person's system. Sometimes the person involved cannot contain their increasing spiritual energy within the bounds of their own psyche, so their psyche overloads, or floods, and they have what is essentially a psychotic episode: a real one, not a mis-diagnosed spiritual emergency. But this psychotic episode can, in itself, also be a very significant part of their spiritual journey. In the episode itself, there is almost no meta-communication; but there is often a significant period of isolation away from work, family and friends. There is quite often a sense of ego-destruction and a realization that you don't really know yourself at all. You may not also have realized significant aspects of the society you lived in and the people around you, and how their attitudes to you changed dramatically when you changed. Pain can be caused and damage can be done, by the process itself, and also according to the type of 'treatment' and the length and severity of the psychotic episode. Once the episode is over and the person has recovered and is restored back into their society, their spiritual emergence process can then proceed more or less unhindered. They will have to integrate this psychotic experience and also work against the 'shock', the 'shame' and the 'black-listing' of having become psychotic; any damage that may have been caused by psychotropic medication; or guilt caused by them causing others distress. This is also a type of spiritual emergence process that it is not advisable to repeat.

• **Major Illnesses and Accidents**

These often result in an enforced period of reflection, a dramatic change of behavior, and an extended process of recovery that can be cumulatively transformative, and they sometimes have a profound spiritual component. Often, for the first time we are faced with the very real & immanent possibility of our death. Of course, not all the people suffering from these illnesses and accidents are having a spiritual emergency, but it is a significant life crisis, and the opportunity to develop spiritually is there, as ever. The essential parameters all exist, and it is often used as such. People pray for the first time seriously; they confront their mortality; and their belief systems about a life after death, a larger cosmology, or the purpose and value of their life to date. If we are to normalize this process of Spiritual Emergence, then we must include the ways most 'normal' people actually

change their lives. These experiences happen to very normal people and many of them happen; just read the *Reader's Digest* regularly and find out what people write.

• **Direct Religious Experience or Conversion**

This is a form of experience where, quite naturally, and well within socially accepted formats, people have these sorts of direct experiences, usually connected to an established religion. Leonard Cheshire, a famous war-time RAF flying officer, read the Bible one night, had a religious experience, converted to Roman Catholicism, and went and founded the Cheshire Homes; a number of charitable nursing homes for ex-service men and women. Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus had a vision of Christ, whose followers up to then he had been persecuting. He then converted to Christianity, became the Apostle Paul and wrote a number of books (of the Bible) and many letters to other people, becoming a major force in the early Christian church – though not always for its ultimate good. Joan of Arc, a French peasant girl, heard angelic voices, which told her to save France, and so she goes and does the unthinkable, for a girl then, guided by her voices. She puts on male clothing, goes on a journey to see the king, and then raises an army which defeats the English. There are many examples of this type of religious or spiritual emergence process. The hundreds of thousands of other men and women who have been struck by a direct religious experience, or who have received a vision, and have been transformed by such an experience, have changed their lives and have devoted their energies to the service of others: dare we really say these experiences were not aspects of their spiritual emergence process?

• **Ritual Initiation**

In some cultures and societies, every person is still seen as a potential initiate. At some point in their development, often around puberty, they are removed from their normal society (parents, village, etc.) and put into the hands of others: (the men, women, elders or priests). They are given a prolonged experience of teaching, often frugal feeding, nearly always extended isolation, the experience of personal surrender, isolation, and often an experience involving a high degree of pain. There may be a form of circumcision, breaking the hymen, or ritual scarring.

They are also encouraged to share their dreams or visions. They are sometimes given a new name. This is the way they become an adult: in that society, and thereafter they can hunt, kill, heal, or bear children. The formats differ from tribe to tribe, but the basic pattern is always there. This process is specifically designed as a transformative and initiatory experience. It is not just developmental or sociological; it is also often personally developmental and deeply spiritual. In our culture, this type of initiatory ritual is found often still in some private secondary schools, military academies or 'boot camp', the priesthood (of course), and medical doctors also go through something similar in their training.

• Culture Shock

For some people it is the direct experience of being projected into another culture that is the essential trigger. This can also be a culture within their own culture, a sub-culture, that they had not experienced before: someone who is suddenly arrested and put into prison; the shock of being a new parent and realizing that 'mothers' are a sub-class of society; of becoming retired, or fired and unemployed and being devalued as a person because one is not in 'productive' work; or one is just doing something different, but unacceptable to the rest. These shocks to the system, the lifestyle, have the effect of shattering many previously held assumptions, and this can be enough to trigger such a spiritual emergence process. Of course, in many cases it doesn't, and we just have to cope. For other people, it is sometimes the impact of experiencing, for the first time, something like grinding poverty. Many missionaries did not get their true conversion until well into their tour of duty in another continent. The different smells, climate, food, mores, and customs are all a shock to our systems – often a much greater one than we realize. Sometimes something in this new medley of impressions then gets through to us, and our spiritual emergence process starts.

• Burn-Out

This is the latest addition to the list, even though it has been implicit for a long time. There is a new book out by Dina Glouberman, a psychotherapist and founder of the Skyros Centre, called *The Joy of Burnout*, where she writes that often we ignore our 'soul-whispering' against an unhealthy job or relationship. *"Your heart has gone out of something but fear, often of the loss of your sense of identity, drives you to work even harder or give even more."* Recently surveys by the UN International Labor Organization in Britain, the US, Germany, Finland and Poland discovered that workplace stress, burnout and depression "are spiraling out of control" and affecting, on average, one in every ten workers. In the UK, it is three out of ten employees that suffer mental health problems. And 100 million workdays are lost each year due to stress, at a cost of \$5.3 billion.

Burn-out is often not publicly or socially acknowledged because of the various associations with a mental breakdown. Society also seems to encourage this form of process by (almost deliberately) not educating people in simple stress reduction techniques: The Protestant work ethic reigns supreme! This sort of crisis situation that arises here can become a transcendent opportunity to break out into a different pattern of work, or of newly creative work, or through into a different way of being.

• Other Crisis Events

For many others, there were experiences in the most extreme of situations; in concentration camps; when facing death on a mountain; during war time; in a shipwreck, a car accident, an earthquake; or some such similar event, where they have a direct religious or spiritual experience: it becomes an apotheosis. The fear of death goes. They experience,

at that moment, often a deep sense of peace. There is often a sense of contact with 'something much bigger than themselves'. They are uplifted and transformed by this experience. They now know or have had direct experience that there is something "other" than themselves. The horror or danger around them is then viewed totally differently. Their future life is also often changed radically. By all accounts, they are calmer, less angry, and more open, at least. They may also do more good deeds, kind work, and showing a dedication and caring for others. These types of events should be included as well in the list of Spiritual Emergency symptoms, I believe.

- **Normality**

Finally, as mentioned before, there are the hundreds of thousands of people who evolve naturally and easily through their own life experiences, the joys and the sorrows of normal existence, and develop a deep and lasting spirituality. Sometimes this is within their established religion and culture, and sometimes they gently change it, or move into a new society, or marry into a new culture and find themselves that way. There are perhaps no epiphanies, no visions, no psychotic episodes, no dramatic changes. These people vastly outweigh the ones we are writing about, but they don't talk about this much; it has been natural for them. They go to church; they pray; they help others; they give to charity; they contribute in many unseen ways to the betterment of their society. They lead a truly natural spiritual life.