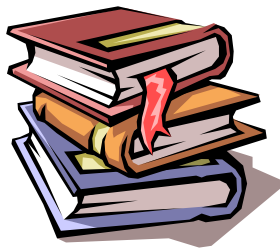




A Sacred Story

My personal introduction to the exciting realm of *transpersonal psychology* began during the spring semester of my junior year at Our Lady of Providence Seminary in Warwick, Rhode Island. I was 20 years old at the time and studying to become a Roman Catholic diocesan priest. I was deep in my study of Darwinian anthropology, Freudian psychology, Biblical religions, existential philosophy, and natural science. Ever since I can remember I have had a burning desire to understand the true nature of human personality and humanity's proper relationship to spiritual reality and to the rest of creation. I thought I had discovered those Truths (capital T) in my academic courses that year of 1970.

What I Learned. I learned in my *anthropology* course about Charles Darwin who spent over half his life proving the validity of his theory of evolution. Generations of scientists since have viewed the natural world through its light, taking Darwinian theories for granted as being a literal interpretation of the origins of species, and attempting to make human nature conform to the picture of evolution as Darwin conceived it. Certainly Darwin's considerable achievement in classifying the different species and in describing their struggle for survival is an entirely true and objective representation of the natural world. I learned in my *psychology* course about Sigmund Freud who invented such a comprehensive system of psychology that it seemed to explain everything about human experience and behavior. Such an all-inclusive and internally consistent theory must be true, I thought, because it possessed such sweeping explanatory power. I learned in my *religion* course about the Old Testament God Jehovah and about Jesus Christ, the Son of the only God, who declared that His was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The Holy Scriptures and the theological doctrines and dogmas of His Church must certainly be divinely true if His Holy Spirit inspired them. I learned in my *philosophy* course about existential thinkers such as John Paul Sartre and Albert Camus who were committed to engaging the painful realities of aloneness and death exactly as they are and refused to gloss over suffering or arbitrarily pretend that life is inherently meaningful. Such a demand for authenticity, freedom, and autonomy must certainly be true and the correct defense against delusion and self-deception, I thought. I learned in my *natural science* course that science, too, seemed committed to engaging reality exactly as it is. Objective, empirical science must certainly be the final arbiter of what is true and real. When I attempted to integrate these diverse beliefs and ways of thinking into a single coherent framework, however, I became filled with feelings of tension and conflict, stress and strain, for *how could they all be true?* As I examined in more detail the assumptions and implications of the course material that I was learning, I gradually began to lose a sense of my own worth and purpose.



What I Came to Believe. My course in *Darwinian theory* revealed our species to be a creature pitted against itself (as ego is pitted against id) and whose nature is amoral (there are no standards of right or wrong as anything goes for survival sake). In the Darwinian world, nature cares little for the individual, only for the species. The attainment of adulthood has little purpose except to insure the further existence of the species through procreation. The species itself appears to have no reason except a mindless determination to exist. Tainted with brutish and destructive impulses, I was the member of a greedy and predatory species, a murderer at heart and nature's despoiler, a blight upon the planet, and the victim of an indifferent Nature that brought meaningless death. I became separate from nature and in competition with all other creatures in an endless struggle for survival. There is no possibility of spiritual survival as far as evolutionary theory is concerned, because evolutionary Darwinian man and woman are not created with a soul. All psychological activity is scaled down in between life and death. Death becomes an affront to life and comes to imply a certain kind of weakness, for is it not said that only the strong survive?



My course in *Freudian psychology* taught me to believe that my unconscious self was certainly devious, capable of the most insidious subconscious fraud, and filled with savage rage and infantile impulses that I could not trust, no matter what I told myself. The unconscious was understood to be a garbage heap of undesirable impulses, long ago discarded by civilization. Slips of the tongue and dreams betrayed the self's hidden nefarious true desires. The spontaneous self, the impulsive portion of my nature, became most suspect, since in my spontaneous acts I could unwittingly reveal not my basic goodness, but the hidden shoddiness of my motives. Programmed and conditioned from childhood to fail or succeed, the heights and depths of each person's soul were seen to be the result of infantile behavior patterns that rigidly controlled us for a lifetime.



Darwinian and Freudian concepts were also reflected in my *Bible studies*. Given the earth as living grounds by a capricious and vengeful God, who would one day destroy the world, I came to believe that our species was bound for ultimate tragedy and extinction. Born blighted by original sin, created imperfect by a perfect God who then punished me for my imperfections, and who would send me to hell if I did not adore Him, I came to see myself as an innately flawed and sinful self, a creature bound to do wrong regardless of any strong good intent. Being the member of a species of sinners, contaminated by original sin even before birth, innately driven by evil, and sometimes demonic, forces that must be kept in check by good work, prayer, and penance, I came to distrust my inner self and to fear my own spontaneity. How could I be "good" when my self was "bad"? The conditions of life and illness were seen as punishment sent by God upon his erring creatures, or as a trial sent by God, to be borne stoically. Life was indeed a valley of sorrows.



My course in *existential philosophy* was simply a variation upon the theme. It convinced me that life was an unpleasant and inherently meaningless condition of existence from which release was welcomingly sought and that the end justifies the means, especially if that end is Man. Life was replete with guilt, pain, suffering, and death, and in the words of Woody Allen, “was over much too quickly.” One is born alone and dies alone. There is no escape from this condition of isolation for the self who perceives the universe and everyone else as “not-self” and “other” (“Hell is other people”). Jean Paul Sartre’s novels, *Nausea* and *No Exit*, persuaded me that I was born without reason (because “existence precedes essence” and no *a priori* meaning or purpose could be assigned to my being since nothing is pre-given but must be created), that I prolong myself out of weakness (because I do not have the courage to commit suicide), and that I will die by chance in an ultimately meaningless universe. Belief in God, in the existence of spiritual realities, and in an afterlife may serve as a consolation to the ego faced with the threat of nonexistence, but I must not deceive myself. The separate self is eventually overcome by death. The skull always grins at the banquet of life. Everyone must die; everything gained must eventually be relinquished. Nothing lasts; everything changes. Eventually I must confront the threat of my own extinction and refuse to pretend that things can get better. Try as I may to create meaning through my individual actions, even the most heroic actions cannot overcome feelings of existential dread and ontological anxiety. Like a character in one of Pirandello’s novels, I was a personality in search of an author. Like an actor in one of Beckett’s plays, I was waiting for a Godot who would never arrive. Even love itself seemed only a romantic illusion.

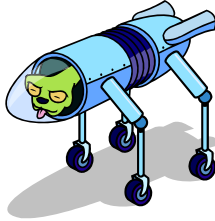


My *natural science* course had the most impact of all. Science led me to suppose that my exquisite self-consciousness and all of life itself was nothing more than an accidental by-product of inert atoms and molecules and the chance conglomeration of lifeless chemical elements, mindlessly coming together into an existence that was bound to end in a godless, uncaring, and mechanical universe that was itself accidentally created. The emotions of love and joy, the virtues of kindness and generosity, all thoughts and wisdom, religious sentiments and consciousness itself were merely epiphenomena of the erratic activity of neural firings, hormones, and neurotransmitters. Consciousness was the result of a brain that was itself nothing but a highly complicated mechanism that only *happened* to come into existence, and had no reality outside of that structure. The self was simply the accidental personification of the body’s biological mechanisms. Feelings of conscious choice were only reflections of brain state activity at any given time. The great creative, individual thrust of life within each person became assigned to a common source in past conditioning or to the accidental nature of genes or reduced to a generalized mass of electrochemical impulses and neurological processes.



Projecting these ideas upon nature at large, the *natural world* appeared equally explainable, dangerous, and threatening, especially the *non-human animal world*. Given to humans to do with as we wished by our specieistic God, animals were in a “natural” subordinate position in the Great Chain of Being. Lifted up above the beasts at the pinnacle end of a great evolutionary scale, only humans possessed consciousness and self-consciousness, intellect and imagination, emotion and free will, and the dignity of a spiritual life. Only humans were to be granted souls or a rich psychological life. Animals were mere electrochemical machines that operated solely by the mechanism of instinct. Being creatures literally without a center of meaning, animals were to be regarded simply as physical objects, like rocks and stars, blind alike to pain or desire and without intrinsic worth or value.

An individual animal's existence could have no higher meaning or purpose than to be a resource for human use or consumed as mere foodstuff in a daily tooth-and-claw struggle for survival that was everywhere beset by the threat of illness, disaster, and death. The sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of animals became justified if it was a means toward the goal of protecting the sacredness of human life and the survival of the human species, regardless of the consequences.



Becoming the Self I Thought I Was. Unknown to me at the time, my academic course work was indoctrinating me into what transpersonal psychologist Charles Tart (1992, Chapter 2) calls the “Western Creed” – a set of *implicit* assumptions about the nature of the psyche and the nature of reality that have come to characterize much of the modern secular world, that have practical consequences on the human spirit, and that block progress in understanding the spiritual side of ourselves. Operating for the most part outside of my conscious awareness, these psychologically invisible beliefs programmed my experience to such an extent that they took on the appearance of fact. Interpreting the private events of my life in light of these assumptions about the nature of physical reality and human personality, I unconsciously put together my perceptions so that they seemed to bear out those beliefs. My beliefs selectively structured my experience so that experience came to fit the beliefs I had about it. Perceptions and beliefs became mutually and selectively reinforcing. What I believed to be true became true in my experience. Imagination and emotion, following the contours of my beliefs, not only colored and intangibly structured my subjective experience, but also conditioned me to act in certain ways in accordance with those beliefs. Believed in fervently enough, they came to act like powerful hypnotic suggestions that triggered specific actions strongly implied by the beliefs. The end result was a set of unexamined structured beliefs that were automatically acted upon. I created events that more or less conformed to those beliefs, and thus became the self that I thought I was.



“Science Loves Skepticism Except When Skepticism is Applied to Science.” There always remained lingering doubts, however, about what I had come to believe. I found it ironic that the basis of the scientific empirical method and the framework behind all of our organized structures of science, rested upon a subjective reality that was not considered valid by the very scientific institutions that were formed through its auspices. How could such a vital consciousness as my own even suppose itself to be the end product of the chance meeting of inert elements that were themselves lifeless, but somehow managed to combine in such a way that our species attained culture, technology, philosophy, science, medicine, literature, and space travel? Science almost made me believe in magic! What a cosmic joke that the atomic and chemical composition of my own brain was somehow intelligent enough to understand the irony of its own meaninglessness. Certainly a brain that could conceive of purpose, meaning, and creativity somehow had to emerge from a greater purpose, meaning, and creativity. Certainly it was not *purposelessness* that gave us the design of nature, the well-ordered genetic activity, or the elegant sequences of molecular structures that support the creation of amino acids and proteins that sustain physical life. Certainly it was not *meaninglessness* that gave rise to the creative drama of our dreams. Certainly it was not *genetic chance* that is responsible for the precision with which we grow spontaneously, without knowing how, from a fetus to an adult. Certainly it was not *environmental necessity* that caused the existence of heroic themes and quests and ideals that pervade human life. Surely all of these give evidence of a greater meaning, purpose, and context in which we have our being.

How could atheistic science, I wondered further, stress the species' accidental presence in the universe and the belief that we owe our physical existence to the chance conglomeration of atoms and molecules and still expect our species to be the most moral of creatures or to feel that one's life has meaning or purpose? How can we trust ourselves and look at ourselves with self-respect and dignity and live lives of honor, or expect goodness and merit from others, if we believe we are members of a species in which only the fittest survive through a struggle of tooth-and-claw, as implied by the theories of evolution? One question led to another. Yet while referring to the Big Bang *theory* or to the *theory* of evolution, my teachers seemed to accept them as facts about existence. It appeared almost heretical to express any skepticism that threatened the given wisdom of those theories that served to provide our culture's "official" version of events.

When the full weight of these unanswered questions and unquestioned beliefs finally fell upon me, a sick and sinking feeling began to well up in the pit of my stomach. Amid such a conglomeration of negative beliefs, the idea of a good and innocent inner self seemed almost scandalous. To encourage expression of that self appeared foolhardy, for it seemed only too clear that if the lid of awareness were opened, so to speak, all kinds of inner demons and enraged impulses would rush forth. This webwork of beliefs had deprived my mind and body of the zest and purpose needed to enjoy pursuits or activities and made any endeavor appear futile. I began to feel adrift, without a higher goal or vision. I felt suspicious, frightened, angry, aloof, and alone. In this confusion of thoughts and fears, I felt my life to be meaningless and hungered for something more sustaining. I was experiencing what William James (1902/1936, Lectures VI and VII) called "soul sickness."



The Kite as My Symbol of Transformation As I lay exhausted upon my bed one spring afternoon in 1970, I slipped into a trance-like state and had a waking dream. My confused and disordered mind suddenly symbolized itself as a kite connected to a long string held by mental hands. The kite was fluttering in fits and starts, buffeted about by turbulent gusts of inner wind that threatened to tear it to pieces. "How can I stop this violent commotion of my mind?" I thought aloud. "Cut the string," an inner voice replied. "But if I do that, then I'll lose my mind," I answered back, fearing that if I cut that string I would release my mind to fly off into some dark, unfathomable and limitless recess of the psyche, forever swallowed up by my own subjectivity. "What else can I do?" I implored. "Pull the kite in," an answer came. Slowly I began to tug on that mental string, but the more I pulled, the more wildly did that kite toss and turn. Thrown about by the tumultuous energy of some wild psychic wind, my mental kite threatened to tumble and shatter onto that inner landscape. I was at a loss at what to do to end this turmoil of body, mind, and spirit. I feared that I was losing my mind.

At this point, my mind suddenly opened up and leaped beyond itself. Some indescribable element, some spiritual intangible, touched me and said: "If you want to save yourself, you must first lose yourself. If you want to hold onto yourself, then you must let yourself go." All at once I knew what I had to do. In a moment of faith, instilled by an unaccustomed sense of trust and safety, I slowly let the string out so that the kite ascended higher and higher until it found its way up through the turbulence and turmoil into the calm and peaceful sky above. My mental kite now floated easily and gently with a newfound sense of ease and freedom. I was suddenly filled with an additional energy, a new buoyancy and joy. Sitting up in bed and opening my eyes, I sat transfixed. Another world seemed to shimmer within and around whatever I looked at. Everything seemed to be what it was, yet somehow more. A change had occurred in me. I felt my personality click into a new focus and become lined up with an invisible part of my own reality that I had barely sensed before. The entire feeling-tone of my personality was changed. In that brief moment of intense, expanded consciousness, I felt and experienced directly a Presence so creative, understanding, and lovingly permissive that its good nature and loving intent could indeed create and maintain worlds. In a way quite difficult to describe, I felt myself to be a part of nature's framework and one with nature's source.

My earlier psychological reality became meaningless to me. It was superseded by a biologically and spiritually rooted faith that my existence was meaningful precisely because of my connection with nature and with that greater indefinable framework of existence from which all life springs, even though that meaning was not intellectually understood at the time. I felt deeply within myself that the quality of identity and the nature of existence were far more mysterious than I could presently understand.



Epiphany. Looking inward and remaining open to my intuitions, I felt deeply within myself indivisible connections not only with the earth itself, but with deeper realities. While in the throes of what seemed to me to be inspiration of almost unbearable intensity, I got the idea that the universe was formed out of what God is, that it was the natural extension of divine creativity, lovingly formed *from the inside out*, so to speak. I felt that in certain basic and vital ways, my own consciousness and being was a portion of that divine gestalt. As philosopher-theologian John Hick (1999) in his book, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension*, put it:

There is an aspect of us that is ‘in tune’ with the Transcendent. This aspect is referred to as the image of God within us; or as the divine spark spoken of by Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Suso, Tauler and many other Christian mystics; or as ‘that of God in every man’; or as the *atman* which in our deepest nature we all are; or as our ‘true self’, the ‘selfless self’, or as the universal Buddha nature within us. It is this aspect of our being that is affected by the ultimately Real to the extent that we are open to that reality. (p. 41)

I became aware that God (or whatever term you wish to use for Nature’s source) is so much a part of His (or Her or Its) creations that it is almost impossible to separate the Creator from the creations, that each hypothetical point in the universe is in direct contact with God in the most basic terms, and that this indissoluble connection can never be severed. I got the picture that there is a portion of God that is directed and focused and residing within each of us that is more intimate than our breath. It is the force that forms our flesh and our identities in that it is responsible for the energy that gives vitality and validity to our unique personalities. I perceived all Being to be continually upheld, supported, and maintained by this ever-expanding, ever-creative energy that forms everything and of which each human being is a part. As physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne (1998) in his book *Belief in God in an Age of Science* put it:

Our moral intuitions are intimations of the perfect will, our aesthetic pleasures a sharing in the Creator’s joy, our religious intuitions whispers of God’s presence. The understanding of the value-laden character of our world is that there is a supreme Source of Value whose nature is reflected in all that is held in being. (pp. 19-20)

I also felt the inconceivable vitality of a God that is truly multidimensional -- a God that is a part of creation and yet is also more than what creation is, in the same way that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. His nature transcends all dimensions of activity, consciousness, or reality, while still being a part of each. Yet this is no impersonal God. Since its energy gives rise to you and me and all human personalities, how could this be? This portion of God that is both aware of itself as you, that is focused within your existence, and that is also aware of itself as something more than you, is a loving and creative, redemptive God that is both transcendent and personal. This portion of God cherishes and protects you and looks out for your interests and may be called upon for help when necessary in a personal manner through prayer that always contains its own answer if you believe and desire to receive it (Mark 11:24).

It is very difficult to try to assign anything like human motivation to God. I can only say that that initial experience revealed the existence of a God who was possessed by “the need” to lovingly create from His own being – to lovingly transform His own reality – in such a way that even the most slightest thought that emerged within His infinitely massive, omnipotent, superlative, and creative imagination attained dimensions of actuality impossible to describe. This was no static, impassible God that I perceived. It was a vision and version of a God who, seeking to know Himself, constantly and lovingly creates new versions of Himself out of Himself (or Herself). This “seeking Himself” is a creative activity, the core of all action; God acting through *creatio continua* (see, for example, Peacocke, 1979). Each creation carries indelibly within itself this characteristic of its Source. Just as one’s awareness and experience of God constantly changes and grows, all portions of God are constantly changing, enfolding and unfolding as the universe does (see, for example, Bohm, 1980).



The loving support, the loving encouragement, the need to see that any and all possible realities become probable and have the chance to emerge, perceive, and love – that is the intent of the divine subjectivity and creativity that I perceived in that state of expanded consciousness. I felt deeply that our closest approximation of the purpose of the universe could be found in those loving emotions that we might have toward the development of our own children, in our intent to have them develop their fullest capabilities. And God loves all that He has created down to the least. He is aware of every sparrow that falls because He is every sparrow. Everything that was or is or will be is kept in immediate attention, poised in a divine context that is characterized by such a brilliant concentration that the grandest and the lowest, the largest and the smallest, are equally held in a loving constant focus. His awareness and attention is indeed directed with a prime creator’s love to each consciousness. God IS Love (1 John, 4:8, 16).

Aftermath. The highly charged energy generated by this experience was enough to change my life in a matter of moments. The insights that I received strongly clashed with previously held ideas and beliefs, giving the experience its initial explosive, volatile, and intrusive quality. I had been led by my experience beyond the framework of beliefs that had given it birth. My task was now to correlate the new intuitive knowledge with the beliefs of the Western Creed that I had so willingly accepted before, and to reform my knowledge frameworks to make them strong enough to support the new insights. Accepted frameworks and answers now made little sense to me. I could no longer accept answers given by others, but now insisted upon finding my own. I could no longer continue to think about God in the old ways, for the experience had brought me far beyond such a point. I had now to free myself and be true to my own vision. Shortly thereafter I left the Seminary to see the world firsthand, driven by a fine impatience, a divine discontent that drives me on even today. I felt immeasurably strengthened and supported by an inner certainty that instilled in me a sense of safety, optimism, and trust in my own nature and in that unknown source in which we all have our being and from which our vitality springs daily. I knew somehow that my existence has a meaning and purpose even if that meaning and purpose is not intellectually understood.



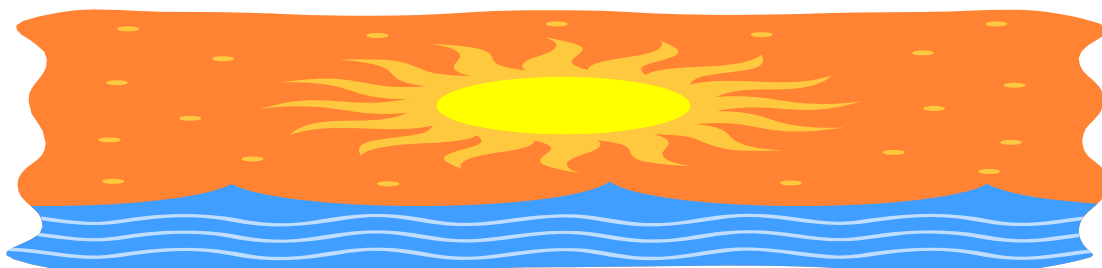
Expanding the circle of compassion. The insights that I received during that state of expanded consciousness required me to become more responsive and responsible in my behavior. It also brought with it a sympathy with life that had earlier been lacking, especially for animals – a sensitivity that remains strong, challenging, and intense to this day. I understood for the first time that my humanness did not emerge by refusing my animal heritage, but upon an extension of what that heritage is. It was not a matter of rising above my animal nature to truly appreciate my spirituality, but of evolving from a fuller understanding of that nature. I am not separated from animals and the rest of existence by virtue of possessing an eternal inner consciousness; rather, such a consciousness is within all life, whatever its form. The consciousness that exists within animals is as valid and eternal as my own, for each individual being is

A vital, conscious portion of the universe [that] simply by *being*, fits into the universe and into universal purposes in a way that no one else can... an *individualized segment* of the universe; a beloved individual, formed with infinite care and love, uniquely gifted with a life like no other. (Roberts, 1997a, pp. 147-148)



I also came to understand the symbolism of my kite experience: *There is a portion of universal creative energy that becomes individualized to form my being and that sustains and nourishes my existence, and when I become too intent in maintaining my own reality I lose it, because I am denying the creativity upon which it rests.*

The farther reaches of transpersonal psychology. When my formal training as a psychologist began, I was constantly on the outlook for some kind of framework that would help me translate that spectacular inner vision into terms that made psychological sense. Transpersonal psychology and the writings of gifted writer and mystic Seth-Jane Roberts (Roberts, 1966, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1977a, 1977b, 1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, 1979d, 1981a, 1981b, 1982, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b) has helped me to make that translation in a way that is psychologically sound and faithful to the underlying complexity of the original experience. Arguably transpersonal in origin, “the basic firm groundwork of the [Seth] material and its primary contribution lies in the concept that consciousness itself indeed creates matter, that consciousness is not imprisoned by matter but forms it, and that consciousness is not limited or bound by time or space” (Roberts, 1997c, p. 312). The writings of Jane Roberts hint at the multidimensional nature of the human psyche and identify potentials of exceptional human experiences and transformative capacities that are a part of our species’ heritage. In my view, systematic study of *The Seth Material* has the potential of offering the field of transpersonal psychology an opportunity of initiating its own further development, truly making it the “‘higher’ Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like” (Maslow, 1968, pp. iii-iv) that Abraham Maslow envisioned it to be.



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