

Humanism and Spirituality: A Psychological Perspective

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THE QUESTION raised by the 6th annual Conference of NACH has been: What is the relationship between Humanism and New Age thinking? I propose to address that from a psychological perspective, as well as a semantic one.

A working definition of New Age consciousness could be the one provided by Khoren Arisian in the last issue of this journal. He states:

New Age spirituality is all over the map, a smorgasbord of Eastern mysticism, Western Occultism, quantum physics, reverence for nature, fascination with near-death experiences, reincarnation, "positive thinking," guided imagery, the oneness of nature and humanity, and the idea of the mind as absolute.¹

What is New Age offering that Humanism is missing? My thesis is this:

I believe that the enormous rise of popularity of the movement referred to as New Age has occurred because: New Age thinking addresses aspects of human experience that are real and that need validation. Human experience is the link between Humanism and New Age. Human experience includes the experience of spirituality, which I will attempt to define in a way acceptable to us as humanists. Humanism, to be a viable movement into the 21st century, needs to expand its parameters to explore, address and

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1. Khoren Arisian. "Moving Beyond Neo-Hellenistic Times." in HUMANISM TODAY, Vol. 6. p. 19.

include this dimension of human experience. It is this deeper dimension, the dimension psychologist Abraham Maslow called "the farther reaches of human nature," that calls us and intrigues us and beckons us. This is the essence of what New Age Thinking is about, and why its writings and music and bookstores and leaders and seminars are drawing so many people.

I must clarify some terms. First, the word "spirituality:" historically, the definition has put it squarely in the camp of traditional, organized religion. That language has been such a turn-off for us as rational, secular humanists that we have tended to discount not only the language and the religious concepts, but also the experience itself. But in popular usage, both among New Age thinkers and throughout the general population, the term "spirituality" has come to refer to the kind of human experiences I want to talk about here.

Secondly, the term "New Age" can mean many things to many people. It is a bit like asking someone, "Have you been to Niagara Falls?" The Falls themselves, the part that is not manmade, but part of nature, are awesome, magnificent. If you have been there, you know. If you have not, the experience of seeing and hearing the Falls is difficult to capture in mere words. But today, built up all around the Falls, is this awful, touristy little town called Niagara Falls. It is filled with fast food places and corny exhibits and tourist junk shops and dumpy places to sleep --so if you ask, "Have you been to Niagara Falls?," what are you talking about? The real inspiration or the commercial bastardization?

I think there can be this same lack of clarity in talking about New Age. So I want to clarify. If I use the term New Age, I am referring to the Falls themselves: to natural human experience, as reported by credible human beings. There is a lot of junk, of fast food places, that have sprung up in the name of "New Age." These take the form of definitive explanations for events that could have many explanations, that have not yet been explained, or are currently being investigated. This is what has turned off humanists the confusion of the tourist trap with the natural event.

Human Science and Spirituality

There are three concepts that are intrinsic to the cutting edge of thought in humanistic research and scientific invest-

igation in the field of human science. These are: holism, consciousness, and embodiment. All three are interrelated, and related to spirituality.

Holism refers to seeing things - and people - in all aspects. You have heard the term applied to health: holistic health recognizes the connection between our minds and our bodies and uses that perspective in helping people stay healthy and to heal from illness. It applies in education: holistic/humanistic educators of children are concerned with their social development and emotional needs and physical needs as well as their intellectual needs. It applies in psychology: it is the basis of humanistic psychology, which is concerned with understanding the whole experience of the whole person. And because this whole experience includes a dimension we call spirituality, that, too, cannot be rationally ignored.

The second aspect of human experience that is a way of understanding the spiritual experience has to do with consciousness. Consciousness research is a fast-growing field in humanistic psychology, and among scientific groups exploring links between science and spirituality. The link is within the area of human consciousness. It is hypothesized that spiritual awareness, or spiritual experience, happens when we are in a state of consciousness that is different in degree from our ordinary state of consciousness. In those moments when we feel a spiritual "connectedness," we may be using a different part of our brain, or using our brain in a different way. Research has shown that our brain waves vary, producing what is referred to as "altered states of consciousness." There is much we still do not know about these states, but we do know, through objective scientific measurement, that they exist, and we know subjectively that we feel different and perceive things differently in one state than we do in another.

The third concept is that of embodiment, or embodied experience. The spirituality I am speaking about is not an abstract, philosophical, intellectual concept. It is an experience that you can feel in your body when it happens for you. Just as you feel an emotion in your body. Let me give you an example, an illustration, of the difference between abstract spiritual platitude (the town of Niagara Falls) and an embodied spiritual experience (the actual rush of water that is the Falls.)

Lisa's Story

I want to tell you a story that illustrates these three concepts. I had a client (since Carl Rogers, Humanistic Psychologists have clients, not patients) who had a severe illness that made her housebound. (I will call her Lisa, which is not her real name.) Lisa became completely weakened and for a while was unable to get out of bed. She had been a very active, creative, vital person, and this was a terribly hard adjustment. She spent many months being very ill and confined to bed. Her mother had to come and care for her. Her mother kept saying to her, "Now, you have to think positive thoughts." But that felt to Lisa like a platitudinous belief. It was not useful. When she was retching and fainting, her experience was not positive.

Then one day she felt much better. She felt well enough to walk out into the backyard. And what she felt in her body as she did this simple thing, going into her own backyard, was a suffusion of warmth and joy and well-being. She felt she was truly seeing the green blades of the grass for the first time. She was feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin in a way that made her feel whole and secure and happy. It was Spring, and she could smell blossoms on the apple tree more intensely than she had ever noticed before in ten years of living in that house near that tree.

In that moment, her body felt whole and normal. Her pain went away, her anxiety and worry and anger dissolved. Also, at that moment or shortly following it, she experienced a creative flash in which she saw her life, as it was, from a new and expanded perspective. Lisa saw herself as a traveler in her life. She recognized that her illness was teaching her important things about herself and her life. She knew, in that moment, that her old way of living -- super busy, super productive, -- was also a mode that left no time or emotional energy for her inner life. She saw with a startling clarity, at that moment, the connection between her former life and her illness, rather than seeing her illness and her prior work as two unrelated events.

Then, she told me, when she went into the house she took a can of cleanser and cleaned her bathroom sink -- a very mundane, ordinary act, one which she never enjoyed especially -- but this time she experienced it with a joyous appreciation: that she had the energy to stand up, that she could move her

arm, that she could see the sink transform from grubby to clean. She felt infinite gratitude to life that she could perform this simple act.

Now, she was experiencing in an embodied way the positive shift her mother was talking about in an abstract, sterile way. Lisa had undergone an extended experience which had opened her and stretched her. She had experienced pain, both physical and emotional; had acknowledged and accepted and discharged that pain, had come out the other side, so to speak, and then was open, in her physical/emotional system, to a new and different perception of nature, of her body, of the meaning of events, and of appreciation of the smallest act as imbued with a feeling that was sacred or special. This was a spiritual experience that was embodied, embraced the wholeness and meaning of her life, and came about through an altered perception, or expanded state of consciousness.

I will return to this example later to discuss the meaning or importance of such moments.

Humanistic Spirituality

So we come back to: what is spirituality? This is my definition, based upon reading, research, personal conversations and personal experience:

First, it is a subjective experience as opposed to merely a disembodied idea or belief. Belief may follow, but first comes the experience. Secondly, this experience includes several components:

There is heightened awareness, or a sense of expanded consciousness.

There is a sense of being totally in the present moment.

There is a sense of the interconnectedness between oneself and others, or between oneself and the events of one's life, or between oneself and the world of nature.

There is an almost overwhelming sense of pleasure, or joy.

There is, or can be, a very positive feeling of unconditional love, not toward just one person, but toward humanity, or toward forgiving oneself, or toward life itself.

There can be a sense of wonder, or awe.

There is an absence of worry, anxiety, guilt and fear. All of these belong to thoughts of the past or the future, and since this is an experience in the present moment, they are absent.

There is a wonderful sense of heightened aliveness.

So, let me attempt a humanistic definition of the above: Spirituality is a profound experience in which the experiencing person, in the present moment, feels expanded awareness, greater aliveness, deeper love, joy and awe, and senses the interconnectedness of his or her life to other people, events and to nature.

This experience may last only a few moments in time, or it may last longer. It may happen once to you, or it may occur often. For some people, who are highly developed spiritually, it is a way of life. They actually live in this state most of the time, yet at the same time are very much in the ordinary world of everyday life.

None of this has anything to do with the supernatural. It happens in childhood, it happens again in adolescence, and it can happen at various times throughout our adult life. And it is not separate from our daily experiences. It happens in them and through them. As in Lisa's extraordinary moment of joy in truly experiencing the trees and grass in her own backyard, the spiritual moment is part of our ordinary world.

Spirituality is not an experience we can make happen. We can't say, "Follow steps A, B and C" and you will become spiritual. Rather, it is something we allow to happen. The potential is always there, if we are open enough to perceive it and to let it into our awareness.

Abraham Maslow called such moments "peak experiences."

Maslow and Peak Experiences

Maslow was one of a small group of psychologists who, in the 1960's, began the movement in the field of psychology that was initially referred to as the Third Force. The "first force," if you will, was psychoanalysis. The second was behaviorism.

This Third Force, which later was named Humanistic Psychology, did not deny the brilliance of Sigmund Freud. It did not deny that behavioral conditioning happened. But they said, "That isn't the whole picture. "

To Maslow and other humanist thinkers in psychology, certain essential questions were not being addressed. What about human values? What about free will? What about the meaning of act or an event to the person doing that act, or experiencing that event? What about the whole experience of the whole person? What about our place in the universe, and how we respond to our perception of that?

Maslow was particularly intrigued by the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people, as well as the experiences of extraordinary people. Psychoanalysis addressed how to move from pathology to "normalcy." What about, asked Maslow, the other end of the human spectrum? What about the heights that we can climb to? What can we learn from people who use all of their capacities, who achieve great things and live well in the process? What does it mean to be fully human?

Maslow studied what he termed "peak experiences:" moments of transcendent joy. In our humanistic understanding of the word "spirituality," a peak experience is a spiritual experience, although there are levels of spiritual experience that go even beyond the peak moment.

Maslow and his researchers asked people, "What was the single most ecstatic, blissful, joyous, happy moment in your life?" They found that quite often people mentioned sex, music and childbirth. Experiences in nature are also triggers into such moments for many people. So is participation in any experience that makes you do more than you ever thought you could do: handling the pain of severe illness; performing a physical feat that filled you with terror; such moments can come in many ways, at the most unexpected times. There are many reports in the literature of people who have been pronounced clinically dead, but lived to tell about it, who report that their inner experience during that brief time period radically changed their perception of their lives in a lasting way. The experience of falling in love opens one to a series of other peak moments. so does the experience of creative inspiration. These last two, falling in love and feeling creatively inspired, are expansive experiences in themselves which then can lead to further expansive or peak moments.

Spirituality: Significance and Semantics

Peak moments, like the experience Lisa had in her backyard and afterward, are powerful experiences because, in the moment they occur, they can alter our perceptions of ourselves and our relationship to the world. If the experience is powerful enough, it can change one's perception permanently. When a person experiences a series of continuing spiritual moments, he or she may find an ongoing and positive increase in awareness of self, relationships and life purpose.

There is a semantic problem in trying to talk to someone else about your own peak experience. It is this: the quality of the peak experience, which is synonymous, in my terms, with a spiritual moment, is very difficult to capture in ordinary language. It is a risk to try to describe this kind of experience without demeaning or trivializing the experience itself. Something that feels quite profound, shaking one to the depths of one's being, can sound trite when trying to explain it to another person. It is an issue as real as cross-cultural communication. There is a language problem in translating from one level of consciousness to another. This is especially true if the other person has not had a similar experience, or is skeptical or cynical.

Maslow mentions this phenomenon in his early work: many people had this experience, but had never talked about it. This was corroborated recently in a study done with 246 psychology students in Denver. As many as 79% of the respondents indicated having had such an experience, but 50% of them told only one or two people, and 20 percent told no one. The reasons they gave were the ones I just mentioned (they feared their experience would not be understood, or would be not valued, and they could not find the words in which to share it). I have experienced this reticence myself, many times.

Sharing this experience with another person is not the only problem. It is difficult to recapture one's own experience at times. The deep spiritual experience emanates from an altered state of consciousness in which the connections are clear and the experience is profound. When we go back to our ordinary state of being we may find ourselves questioning our own reality at the other dimension. This is supported by studies on what is known as "state-dependent learning:" what we learn in an altered state of consciousness is not always easily accessible to our perception in our ordinary state.

This skepticism and questioning, toward ourselves and toward the reported experience of another person, is very understandable: it is self-protective. The human organism tries to achieve a state of homeostasis, which we might characterize as "don't rock the boat." When we hold a belief that is seriously challenged by a perception, the boat gets rocked quite badly, and we can get very seasick. We human beings do everything we can to avoid that state of discomfort. So, when we are confronted by an experience, our own or someone else's, which

does not fit into our paradigm of how the world operates, our first impulse is to get rid of the intruding experience. We ignore it, ridicule it, question it, call it bad names, or try to prove that it really didn't occur. It is a normal human response toward something that doesn't seem to fit. The group of experiences we label "paranormal," are examples of occurrences that can create confusion in the experiencing person, and disbelief in someone else, when we try to explain them from our rational-linear paradigm of the world.

Self-Actualization and Spirituality

In studying this process, Maslow found that there was not an adequate vocabulary to express what he was trying to describe. So he coined two phrases that now, a quarter of a century later, have become an accepted part of our everyday vocabulary: peak experience, which I have been talking about, and self actualization.

Let's take a look at the findings of Maslow and many others after him, of the characteristics of people who are self-actualized.² Another way of expressing that is to say they are "fully human," or that they are well-developed spiritually. The self-actualized person had a quality of being fully present, both to his or her own experience and to other people. One senses about such people a positive energy, an enthusiasm, and a sense of radiant aliveness. These are people who are real, with no phony facade. They are also people who are able to use all of their abilities, talents and intelligence. They find work that is both creatively satisfying to them and socially useful to others.

Humanism and Transcendence

Maslow didn't stop here, however. He then went on to try to define in naturalistic language the next higher realm of human experience and values, that which goes beyond our personalities and our egos into a deeper connection with the cosmos. And from this grew a school or movement known today as Transpersonal Psychology. It includes everything that Humanistic Psychology includes, and then goes a step beyond,

2. Abraham Maslow. *THE FARTHER REACHES OF HUMAN NATURE*. (N.Y.: Viking Press) 1971.

to acknowledge and to study the nature of human consciousness in states we might call transcendent or mystical.

Maslow wanted to move the spiritual experience away from the association with religion. I do, too. "Spiritual" does have religious overtones, as I said at the beginning. But the word "spiritual" is a part of the vocabulary of the 1990's, and, as humanists, we need to desensitize ourselves and not shudder every time we hear it. "Self-actualized" became the buzzword of the "human potential" movement of the 70's, and some may shudder at that, too. (The "human potential movement" was another Niagara Falls: the intent and the results were valid, but we had to thread our way through tourists and thrill seekers to get to where we were going.).

Linear Thought vs. Metaphor

It is hard to avoid swimming in the murky waters of semantics. I am looking for an appropriate term to summarize a group of experiences and characteristics of which the Lisa story is only a starting point. Yet, every word I think of comes either from religion or has been appropriated by pop psychology. People who are at the higher point of the continuum of self-actualization or spirituality are also described as awakened (religious); enlightened (pretentious); having achieved realization (awkward); transformed (sounds like magic); mystical (sounds too other-worldly); transcendent (makes it sound as though the person is above the earth, rather than part of ordinary life).

So I am going to continue to use the word "spiritual" or "spirituality" and I hope that as I continue to describe the human qualities of that word you may be able to hear it as a natural progression of human development that is quite compatible even with secular humanism.

Our vocabulary, in English, is generally adequate to describe ordinary, every-day reality. However, there are experiences that other languages have words for that we do not. For instance, the Eskimos have about 14 words for "snow." In English, we have to describe our feelings about our beloved, about our new grandchild, and about a great new restaurant we just discovered, all with the same word, "love." Further, our language is geared toward linear thinking. spiritual experiences are not linear.

When we don't have adequate words, we use metaphor.

When I talk about "heightened" awareness, or "expanded" consciousness, or a "deeper" feeling, these are all spatial words from our everyday, ordinary reality, borrowed to try to describe that which feels almost indescribable. How can I explain the experience of those moments when I have had a sudden expansion of awareness, when I know more, understand more, all in a flash, than I ever did before? I must use metaphor: last year we sat on the main floor when we went to the symphony. The sound was fine but we could see only the string section. This year we moved to the front of the balcony, where nothing blocks our view. Now we can see, as well as hear, the woodwinds, brass and percussion. The total experience has a richer, fuller dimension.

When we hear a symphony orchestra playing, there are two ways to listen. We can hear the blend of all the instruments at once, the total melody and harmony. Or we can pick out certain parts to focus on, individually: now the strings. Now the percussion. Now the woodwinds. And back to the totality. Back and forth. That is ordinary perception, back and forth. You recall the figure we all saw in Psychology 101: now it is a vase, now it is two human profiles, then the profiles - but never both at once.

During a peak experience, or a moment of spiritual awareness, it is possible to see or hear both at once. The phenomenon is one of both/and, rather than either/or. This is a state of non-ordinary consciousness. A great musical conductor, I presume, must live in that state while conducting: being able to hear the parts and the whole simultaneously.

Validating Our Experience

It is part of our birthright as human beings to have the potential to move into deeper states of consciousness. When we have a peak experience, a spiritual moment, a flash of larger awareness of our relationship to our own life: in that moment we have transcended our ordinary, limited awareness. That experience of transcendence is a very real psychological phenomenon and is being taken very seriously these days by researchers. The field of Transpersonal Psychology is concerned with studying "a broad range of states of consciousness, in some of which identity may extend beyond the usual limits of ego and personality." Transpersonal psychotherapy recognizes the validity of transcendent experience. The realm of the

transpersonal includes ego and personality but goes beyond it. A peak moment might be called the first level of transcendence or spirituality.

All of this is of significance to us as human beings on a personal level, a social level and a global level. This importance is what New Age is truly about, and why it draws so many people. Since spirituality is part of all of us, we need to be able to validate this human experience by naming it and talking freely about it. New Agers do this without being defensive. Humanists need to learn to do that, too.

On a personal level: once we have worked out the ego-level issues and relationship issues in our lives, the spiritual stage of growth and development begins to accelerate. As that realm expands, we may experience a greater sense of peace in our lives. There is a deeper ability to give love and to receive love. We find more appreciation for the small, ordinary miracles in life. There is, as I mentioned earlier, less tendency to worry and less anxiety, because worry and anxiety belong to the future while our spiritual dimension teaches us how to live in the present moment. We experience an increased sense of inner security, because we sense our belongingness in the world, and don't worry so much about how other people view us. There is also a greater ability to understand others, and therefore we are less judgemental. Life feels easier, smoother. We feel more fulfilled, more creative, more whole: not all the time, but at the times that we can tap into this deeper part of ourselves.

Therefore, we want to tap into this inner state more often, and stay there longer. This requires a great deal of self-discipline. It takes hard work, and the ability to endure painful emotional and physical states. Remember, we don't find spiritual bliss without embodiment, and embodiment includes the pain in life. Lisa's story is a small example of the complementarity of the two states of pain and joy. We need darkness to understand the experience of light.

Besides hard work and discipline, we need a time and place for inner quiet. That becomes more and more difficult as we live in this culture. We are continually pulled away from ourselves by the blazing lights and blaring noises of the city, and the hectic schedules all of us lead.

One of the ideas in New Age thinking has been this: each of us, individually, has the potential to expand ourselves into this realm of consciousness that we can call transpersonal,

or transcendent, the realm where spiritual experience happens in our lives. As more and more of us become more expanded, we experience our connectedness to one another. Then, not only do we stop feeling so isolated at a personal level, but this results in greater social consciousness and social action. Not only is there individual expansion, but expansion at social and global levels. We see examples of this consciousness in the past couple of decades in the movements to end sexism and racism, and in the peace movement. We become more aware of the fragility of our planet, and we work together to preserve the forests, oceans and wild life. As we feel, individually and collectively, more connectedness and more love toward others, our compassion extends beyond our geographic boundaries to help people in crisis and catastrophe in Cambodia in Ethiopia and Eastern Europe. The growth of an organization like Amnesty International is not unrelated to the spiritual impulse of caring and connectedness. We act, not out of guilt or social obligation, but out of a very real experienced sense that we are truly one global family, and that what happens to anyone of us affects us all.

The Challenge of Transformation

The examples I have given of peak or transcendent moments are not far out, not far removed from everyone's ordinary experience. The difference is in the quality or intensity or depth of those moments, and in the potential they hold for transforming our awareness. If we have many such moments, and we pay attention to what we learn from them, we begin a process of inner change. We begin to expand our consciousness in a way that deeply affects how we live and relate to every aspect of our lives. This expansion has been referred to by the terms transformation, transformational awareness or transformational journey. It is an aspect of our human development that includes but goes beyond peak moments. It is self-actualization leading toward a fuller and more complete humanness. It does not have a known endpoint. It is not a linear journey. We may weave in and out of it for years, or all our lives.

New Age thinking recognizes and addresses the transformational journey. Some of the assumptions and explanations may be erroneous, but, like individual peak moments, the experience is real. Again, we are talking about not confusing the town of Niagara Falls with the Falls themselves. The

transformational journey happens to us not in isolation, but in community. We need the presence of others with whom we can talk about it, to validate what is happening for us and for them, to create dialogue and acceptance. It is a challenge for the Humanist movement of the future to be open to a paradigm that can include all of human experience.

I would like to close with a quote from Julian Huxley, author of *RELIGION WITHOUT REVELATION*, who spent 40 years of his adult life trying to bring together the ideas of science and spirituality. He wrote that:

... the well-developed, well-integrated personality is the highest product of evolution, the fullest realization we know of in the universe. ³

He goes on to say that

the exploration of human nature and its possibilities has scarcely begun. A vast new world of uncharted possibilities awaits its Columbus. ⁴

If Humanism, as a movement, is to be viable into the 21st century, it must be willing to acknowledge the many possibilities of which human consciousness is capable. We must build on, not diminish, the ideas of Maslow and Huxley. Ultimately, this is what New Age thinking can offer Humanism: nothing less than the full, unleashed power of Niagara Falls.

3. Julian Huxley, *RELIGION WITHOUT REVELATION* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press) 1979, p.191

4. *Ibid.* p.192

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