



COLLEGE OF **COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE**

explore - learn - restore

NAVIGATING LIFE THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES

Transpersonal psychology and modern life

We live in times when it is difficult to establish clear markers for our journey through life.

These themes were explored in the excellent Australian movie, *Lantana*. Barbara Hershey playing a celebrated psychiatrist haunted by the murder of her daughter, addresses a crowd at the launch of her book. She raises the simple questions:

- Why do we find it so difficult to establish a stable identity?
- Why are purpose and meaning elusive?
- Why have the churches failed so many in our current world?



Perhaps this sounds trite. Or perhaps it sounds like issues that belong to benighted times such as world wars. However, the obdurate truth is that these are concerns that are amplified in the community to which we belong right now.

In the midst of our optimism and enviable creativity as a nation, there are deep tides of depression that have rolled across our psychological landscape. Our youth have lost direction. In some considerable measure, this has to do with rapid social change in which social rules and patterns dissolve and re-form at a rate that is difficult to accommodate.

But it also has to do with a mass, consumer society in which social success is sold as an image. The famous psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton, called this an image hunger that absorbs the personality and, ultimately, the person. This movement outward is matched by a corresponding distance from our inner life ... the world of feelings, body sense and wisdom, symbols and dreams, the arena of personal possibility which the ancient Greeks referred to as the Daimonic. In other words, in the midst of a busy life in which we go about our everyday activities, we can be lost. We can be lost in the world and we can be lost within our selves.

THE ANSWERS ARE WITHIN

Anchorage in a rapidly transforming world is challenging, but looking within and finding little to sustain the body or spirit for the journey, discovering a void perhaps, is far more frightening. We can be, it seems, strung between two impossible poles of experience.

One of the wonderful things about human beings is that we are so resourceful and adaptable. At times when we seem to be hopelessly trapped in some existential dilemma, there is something else that can be brought into play for our healing. There is always a way of navigating out of such troubles. For example, Viktor Frankl survived a Nazi concentration camp and was fascinated by the fact of his and others' survival to the extent of writing several books based on his experiences. Within this dreadful situation, Frankl discovered the will and ability to create meaning where none seemed possible, to create hope when it seemed wasted or dead, and to see the thread of a life story moving to germinate and new identity beyond the horror.

What human beings seek in all times, especially those fraught with these deadly tensions are a map and a compass. Where am I in all of this? And how can I navigate through it all? To find these things, we usually need to step outside of our usual ways of perceiving things, into an expanded view of the world.

Myths and fairy stories are full of such things. The hero or heroine is lost in the woods, in the dungeon, in the castle, and there is a turning point wherein some new knowledge is delivered [the way out, a neglected tool or weapon, a guide or inspiring being]. This is a metaphor for our unrealised potentials, the things that we are not aware of because they lie beyond the lens through which we ordinarily look.



THE TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Beyond the ordinary lens is the transpersonal.

Transpersonal experience covers an immense area, including a vast range of states of consciousness which have their own resources and intelligence [as in hypnosis, trances used in healing, dreams incubated for insight, and so on], myths, symbols, our ability to heal ourselves and others, our creative imagination, our sense of play and transcendence. Transcendence is captivating for it is what makes us unique as a species. We can know ourselves through time, recovering and imagining our birth and what lay before it, through our entire lifecycle to death and beyond.

We are, as Jung said, mythological beings who are connected in a space and time which is non-ordinary. Myths are maps for the territories that we as human beings traverse through life. They contain a compass [directional markers, instructions for the journey]. They have guided human beings for millennia from the stone age to now.

Transpersonal work is about all of the ways in which we can explore and engage these intelligences which lie in different states of consciousness, in life stories and myths, in dreams and symbols, in healing methods which are as old as human society. It shows us how human vision is capable of extending back and forward in time, beyond our ordinary senses, inwards and outwards across the horizons of space and separation.

It is challenging yet exciting, mysterious yet promising in its potential for creating new ways of healing and personal growth. It unites the modern fascination with the quest for wholeness and self-actualisation with the ancient philosophies of the great and small spiritual traditions. In transpersonal work, we see the intimate relationship between the shaman squatting in a hut deep in the forest, invoking the journey to other worlds to heal and save a client and the contemporary doctor and therapist who seeks to augment healing through exploring the territory of dreams, images, myths and deep relaxation and meditation. We see it, explore it and use the lessons for now.

We learn how to navigate in difficult times. From the transpersonal point of view:

- Everyone is richer in resources and potentials than our experience has led us to believe
- Everyone can discover a meaningful place in the world and the cosmos
- Everyone can create a meaningful and fulfilling personal identity, life story and personal mythology
- Everyone can learn to navigate through life through discovering sources of guidance and inspiration
- Everyone can engage the ultimate ability to transcend limitations of life's situations.

It is not magic; it is the creative imagination. All significant events in life reflect a deeper sense of purpose, meaning and direction in life ... the spiritual or transpersonal dimension of human experience!

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