**Spiritual Emergence or Emergency?**

“In the west we have been living in a society of materialism and rationalism for centuries. Now we are having to look at new ways of making soul contact, in the face of daily life in the 21st century, which is not conducive to spiritual development”, said Courtenay Young, a transpersonal psychotherapist.

So, what happens "When Your World Changes", asks Courtenay Young? Our life as we knew it is no more. At one end of the field of experience it may be extremely dramatic, and our inner life may seem scary and strange. At the other end of the spectrum individuals may be evolving and changing perspective, very gently. Some may live in surroundings where they are learning to meditate, for stress reduction and life is relatively content, with their awareness expanding gently. The spiritual or hero’s journey has its own rules. Growth or spiritual unfolding is not just a logical or cognitive act, it is actually to be experienced and it is by many. The death of the ego, our created conditioned self is required though, before, as Young says, spirit can fully emerge into the human psyche. The inner world change may feel as if parts of us, familial 'stuff' or even karmic patterns, have been left behind, died, or even destroyed, as we struggle to be fully alive, or achieve our innate potential, Rogers (1951). The process may be painful, especially if we do not realize what is happening, and we may want to fight the whole process, indeed someone may have told us to pull ourselves together. However, at the other end of the spectrum there may be some individuals that are lost in egoism and materialism and are seemingly not interested in any spiritual side of the self, inner journey or the call to a spiritual adventure, because it may seem too painful; hocus pocus, and so are quite content to believe the conditioned ego self, is their real person, and their name and curriculum vitae are who they really are.

Others may be searching for something. They do not know who they really are, yet some feel instinctively, there may be something missing in their lives and so are searching for this ‘thing. Whatever, there may have been a call to embark on the inner journey, with some strange experience. Buddhists, Christian mystics of old, American Indians, shamans and other spiritual traditions, work towards enlightened awareness, a gentle unfolding of spiritual life and personal growth and they knew what the spiritual journey entailed and actively sought it.

When Christina and Stanislav Grof wrote the book, 'The Stormy Search For The Self', in 1990, after experiencing, “spiritual emergency”, both personally and professionally, they were really addressing the western person’s ignorance of the signposts and symptoms of spiritual advancement or the hearing of the call. At that time, Christina Grof said, “we didn’t know that people who were awakening to spirit or learning to listen to the voice of the ‘Higher Self’ and align with it, may appear strangely unpredictable, fearful, lost and have bodily symptoms that may appear to be mental health issues, depression, anxiety, and psychotic episodes. Because, as individuals are called to evolve compassionately and rather speedily or earth and something new and powerful is happening, individuals either open too quickly, have no guidance or experience crisis in awakening. A spiritual emergency, as the true self emerges, via meditation, or some other event, be it a divorce/separation, loss, unemployment, an accident, ill health, menopause/childbirth, other trauma, or life event; individuals without support or guidance, may feel they are going insane. But it is not a sign they are crazy, and they do not need medication from a GP, or hospitalization, just a safe space in which to be understood, cared for and nurtured until the emergency is over.
Before the mid-1970s mainstream psychiatry made no distinction between spiritual or mystical experiences and mental illness. Individuals are, sometimes quite frighteningly so, having spontaneous spiritual or transpersonal experiences, Young (1995), and being labelled insane or incarcerated in mental health units against their will.

The mystics of old however, (Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, (1207ce), Yeshe Tsogal (757–817), Teresa of Avila, (1515–1582), St John of the Cross (1542-1591), Hildegard of Bingen (B1098) Buddha, ( circa 563 BCE to 483 BCE), and Shamans, etc), knew all about the spiritual life, enlightenment or the spiritual awakening process. Throughout history people in intense spiritual crisis or emergence, were revered, blessed, and wise and thought to be in direct communication with the sacred realms and divine beings. Their community and immediate cultural group supported and looked after them night and day and through episodes of crisis, offering them sanctuary and suspending the demands of the group. Many in those ancient cultures had gone through their own spiritual awakening and could recognize the signs in another, a dramatic experience, and so the vulnerable were nourished by community, with the hope that they would return to the group with wisdom, awareness, compassion and an enhanced capacity to survive and serve in the community. But spiritual emergence and transformation in western society and traditions is not widely known, understood or recognized, Bragdon (1990).

The tolerance and nurturing of individuals in spiritual crisis, from the industrial age to date, has been mostly lost, and acceptable reality was changed to include only those aspects of culturally acceptable reality that were material, tangible and measurable in laboratories. The spiritual self or notions of spiritual reality were, largely banished from the modern scientific world, and what was normal experience and behaviour was set in place by the mainstream medical profession and scientists. Bodily symptoms and experiences had to be controlled with medication, or procedures, by the medical fraternity. The process of awakening, enlightenment, or spiritual emergence with or without a crisis came to be viewed as a mental illness, and in many cases today, it is still seen as the same by those who don`t understand the process or who won`t accept spiritual emergence to be a real phenomena. Many psychiatrists and psychologists frown on the word spiritual and transformational growth. Individuals, in many cases, who present with having had strange experiences, are often considered sick and having a mental health issue and the emerging spiritual state deemed pathological by the medical profession. Stanislav Grof, a psychiatrist who spent over 50 years researching non ordinary states of consciousness, in his book, `Spiritual Emergency, when personal transformation becomes a crisis (1989), has been outspoken about psychiatry`s tendency to pathologise non ordinary states of consciousness in modern society.

However, in recent times, in modern history, spirituality has been re-introduced, because individuals have been experiencing kundalini-type energy flows, psychic experiences, visions, revelations, channelling, mystic and transpersonal events, and they are gradually being validated by transpersonal therapists, like Catherine Lucas, Emma Bragdon, Christina and Stanislav Grof, MD and others that understand these processes and provide support and care, within, for example, The Spiritual Crisis Network UK.
Although many mainstream psychiatrists and psychologists often still dismiss spiritual growth with emerging states, Transpersonal Psychology does acknowledge it and Robert Assagioli did much to bring spiritual emergence and emergency to the fore and not condemn people to locked wards, somewhere in the universe. Roberto Assagioli was one of the first psychologists to reintroduce and recognize, along with humanist psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Carl Jung and Ronnie Laing, that there was a spiritual nature of man, which emerging, may cause unusual states and symptoms, and these challenged conventional psychiatry and ways of caring for individuals going through spiritual transformation.

Because of the gaining recognition of the overlap of spiritual/mystical experiences and mental health problems, in the early 1990s authors Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, made a proposal for a new diagnostic category entitled "Religious or Spiritual Problems". The category was approved by the DSM-IV Task Force in 1993 (Turner et al., 1995, p. 436) and is included in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The inclusion, one would assume, would ease matters within mental health environments, and in theory it marked some professional acceptance of spiritual issues, in the assessment of mental health problems, but not in every case, because it depended upon the agenda of the assessor/diagnostician. So, actual manifestations of spiritual awakening are still and have been mistaken for symptoms of psychosis, insanity, witchcraft, demonic possession or life sickness.

If what a person experiences is outside the bounds of religion or a general practitioner’s remit or if the symptoms don’t fit with the practices of a health care system or the person becomes scared and irrational, then that person is often abandoned or sectioned under the mental health act. Not many people really have great compassion for others, want to know or understand what individuals are experiencing, (or care for them), let alone those experiencing spiritual crisis. This makes the situation worse. These people become the "lepers/outcasts" of a society or community that is supposed to care and support its inhabitants, but often the inhabitants of society are conditional in their liking and acceptance. Their response may be to commit people in mental institutions because they are so called “different” with bizarre behaviour and thinking for a period of time.

**Spiritual crisis** then, is a crisis during spiritual awakening, Lucas (2011) or can be defined as critical and experientially difficult stages of profound psychological transformation and spiritual awakening, which can be terrifying, intense and unmanageable, Grof & Grof 1990. Or, as Emma Bragdon puts it, is "disorientation and an instability that results from intense spiritual experiences which overwhelm the individual’s ego functioning and for which there is no general social or cultural support. A spiritual crisis can happen if someone is engaged in spiritual practice or has had a trauma or life crisis. One’s family may be startled or wonder what is happening, to bring about such changed behaviour in the individual."
The process of spiritual unfoldment can be slow or quick. It can be awakening that is speeded up and driven into an intense state, that is difficult to manage alone and often one can’t function in society until the episode has passed. However, some people do not experience this urgent awakening, but many do today, as more and more workshops and courses emerge that address the spiritual aspect of life. Many experiencing these states have usually been relegated to a unit for those experiencing mental health issues or sent to see a psychiatrist by their general practitioner. Often individuals experiencing these unusual states, such as intense emotions, visions and other sensory changes, unusual thoughts and physical manifestations are said, by those who understand awakening, to be having what St John of the Cross called a “dark night of the soul” or “mystical psychosis”, a spiritual emergence or some other troubling state of being. A crisis may begin, and someone may experience anxiety, panic attacks, intense fear, anger, sadness, depression, strange thoughts or bodily experiences or even ecstatic states, etc, the list is endless. Individuals can be propelled out of their original state into an unknown reality, which can be frightening and lonely, (loneliness is an intrinsic component of spiritual awakening, Christina Grof (1990)), and many individuals sense the sudden departure from previous normalcy and assume they are becoming insane or something weird is happening to them, if they do not get the right support.

Many more find themselves at the medics’ door, seeking help. So with the help of many in the medical profession, thoughts of insanity can be confirmed, with toxic medication administered to control and suppress the symptoms, which, the unaware, unsupported individual accepts, because to be symptom free, it is thought, must be healing for the diagnosed sickness. From the perspective of spiritual growth, as Lucas 2011 says, it can be a paddle down a gentle stream or a rough ride in a speed boat on choppy waters. It is a mystical experience, you might lose your egoic self, experience the divine, feel waves of bliss, awe or fear, Lucas (2011) or end up misdiagnosed within hospital care.

So, spiritual emergence, once triggered by meditation, yoga, qigong, martial arts, trauma, childbirth/menopause, divorce, loss, accident, surgical operation, unemployment, financial problems or some other last straw event, signals the individual is ready for the natural spiritual unfolding or inner transformation, which must not be suppressed, denied, or dismissed as insanity. When we start to open up to the transcendent, any unresolved aspects of self come to the surface. All wounding, any past trauma, or repressed parts of the self (known as the shadow) come to the fore, demanding attention, and ask to be healed or resolved, Lucas (2011). Christina Grof (1990), discloses in her book, her experiences of emergence and emergency, her heart was pounding with fear and anxiety, especially at night, when she tried to meditate her heart would race further, her body would shake, she felt waves of energy within the body, she would see visions, felt she was losing control, scream with anger, and she perspired a lot, also she had overwhelming bursts of energy and ran around manically doing work. Her teacher informed her it was the working of the Kundalini Shakti and the spiritual transformation process.
In this modern society we are expected to carry on functioning, working or playing, however many find it difficult to cope with every day tasks, concentrate, remain steady or engage with society, when spiritual emergence/emergency occurs. Even washing and cooking for the self may feel too much on some days. If this state is recognized for what it is and not pathologised, spiritual emergence and emergency, can be seen as a natural healing process, that is taking individuals to a wholeness and evolution, and fulfilling one’s potential as a spiritual being. Spiritual emergence and emergency are not to be underestimated or dismissed. As Lucas states there are thousands of individuals who have been though the mental health services who have not had the spiritual aspect understood, and acknowledged, but overshadowed by the medical model interpretation of individual’s who are actually experiencing spiritual emergency, and not insane Lucas (2011).

We desperately need a spiritual frame of reference, a safe community that is compassionate, and understands, cares for and nurtures individuals. Having a spiritual frame of reference and an understanding and observation of what is happening, for Catherine Lucas, (who is the founder of the UK Spiritual Crisis Network and accredited Mindfulness trainer), has an impact on how an individual fares in life, or in spiritual crisis and emergence. For Lucas, having experienced crisis, and tasted the freedom of emptiness and the egoless state, and heard the inner silence, she says it is understandable that many may want to deepen their inner life’s journey like her, after a liberating experience. She feels that Mindfulness practice is the answer to emergence, for her, it is a daily practice of grounding, and embodiment, whilst at the same time an opening of the heart more and more to the present moment, awakening to what is and welcoming the amount of spiritual energy the planet is showing individuals.

Lucas further says, that spiritual emergency, the whole period of change and integration can take many years. One needs to find a safe community and the language to articulate the process, for it can help us to make sense of the process, and ground the experience in reality. The hero’s journey expresses the different stages we go through during a crisis or spiritual awakening. Once we have recovered from the most challenging part of the crisis, we may well be left with a need to make sense of it all, or we may feel stuck somehow, unable to go back to previous ways of life, people may be yet unable to move on, or unsure how to do so. Or we may even be embarrassed at our past behaviour, or be experiencing a particular painful aspect of what we have been through, which may require further assistance.

So if you are going through crisis, it may be useful to keep a journal and write down experiences such as, what did your previous world look like? Were you working, studying. Single or in a family or relationship? Where were you living, did you change locality, suddenly, or run out on someone. What were/are your states of mind or behaviours?. If you are looking back to your previous life, how do you feel now? Or are you still in the process of putting a new life together for yourself. This change, this spiritual emergence can take some time so be patient and gentle with yourself.
Once an individual, a hero on the journey, having faced various stages of spiritual development, a final challenge awaits, that is to see whether you have retained what you have learned on the journey, and whether you are able to apply knowledge learned to service in the world. So have you been re born, and can you be of service to others? It may indeed be a balancing act to stay well, resourced and of service to the self and others. Mindfulness plays an essential role in helping individuals look after themselves. The heightened self awareness that comes with a regular practice means you can observe much earlier if you are getting out of balance. Above all raise awareness with family, friends and health professionals about spiritual emergence and emergency and that the process has not got to be suppressed.

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