

## 5

FROM : R Walsh & F Vaughan (eds) BEYOND EGO:  
TRANSPERSONAL DIMENSIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY.  
Los Angeles: JP Tarcher 1980.

## Transpersonal Psychotherapy

*If our science of mental health is to become more effective, psychotherapists will have to balance their knowledge of psychological concepts and techniques with a contemplative awareness.*

MEDARD BOSS<sup>1</sup>

Transpersonal psychotherapy, as defined by therapists whose clinical practice includes transpersonal work, is the aspect of therapy that goes beyond ego goals and bridges psychological and spiritual practice. Traditionally, Western therapy has been primarily concerned with psychodynamics, behavior modification, and personal growth. A well-adjusted personality has been considered healthy, and the realm of being beyond the personality has been largely ignored. Numerous ego psychologies have developed during the past decades, aimed at helping individuals adjust to society and achieve their personal goals in life. In addition, the existential and humanistic orientations have given the search for meaning and the quest for individual identity a central place. The inner world of the psyche has also been explored in depth by Carl Jung's analytical psychology and others. However, only in the 1970s have Western therapists become interested in personally investigating meditation and other consciousness-altering technologies and begun to incorporate Eastern teachings into the practice of therapy.

Whereas the realm of the transpersonal was formerly the exclusive domain of the guru or spiritual teacher, it has become increasingly evident to therapists working with human problems involving values, meaning, and purpose, that psychological growth beyond the personality invariably

raises questions of a spiritual nature. Psychotherapy for the resolution of psychodynamic conflict and personal growth is often considered good preparation for spiritual disciplines that deal exclusively with transpersonal realms of being. Transpersonal therapy, however, is an attempt to facilitate clients' growth not only in attaining ego strength and existential identity, but also in going beyond ego identity into areas of transpersonal realization and transcendence.

The domain of transpersonal psychotherapy thus extends beyond traditional ego goals and adjustments. While it addresses basic ego needs and aspirations, such as the need for self-esteem and satisfying interpersonal relationships, it does not stop here. It also considers the motives, experiences, and potentials available to individuals who have already achieved a satisfactory coping level in their lives.

In his investigations of such relatively healthy people, Abraham Maslow found a variety of what he called "meta-motives," e.g., pulls toward truth, aesthetics, self-actualization, etc. The term *meta* as it is used here means something higher, beyond, or transcendent, indicating that these motives lie beyond the range of the more basic survival needs and extend to experiences of identity and modes of being not limited by customary ego boundaries. When developed, such motives and experiences are analogous to those described and sought by the great religious and spiritual disciplines, which are now becoming comprehensible in psychological terms. Maslow described the correspondence of meta-motives to transpersonal experience as follows:

Meta-motives are, therefore, no longer *only* intra-psychic or organismic. They are equally inner and outer. . . . This means that the distinction between self and not-self has broken down (or has been transcended). There is now less differentiation between the world and the person. . . . He becomes an enlarged self. . . . To identify one's highest self with the highest values of the world out there means, to some extent at least, a fusion with the not-self.<sup>2</sup>

Transpersonal psychotherapy can thus be said to encompass a wider range of human experience than that which has been the predominant concern of Western psychotherapy in the past. Transpersonal experiences, defined as those that extend awareness beyond ego boundaries, form an integral part of the therapeutic process. The pioneering work of Stanislav Grof in psychedelic therapy in the 1960s and early 1970s was one of the first indicators that transpersonal experiences seemed to be both meaningful and therapeutic and were potentially available to everyone.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, increasing numbers of people had transpersonal experiences outside therapeutic settings, as a result of the widespread use of psychedelics or the practice of disciplines such as yoga or meditation. Those who found such experiences disturbing frequently felt that psychotherapeutic intervention was either inappropriate or detrimental when it did not take the potential value of such experiences into account.<sup>3</sup>

The need for psychotherapists who were knowledgeable in these areas thus became increasingly apparent, and professionals who investigated these disciplines found useful tools for working with clients as well as themselves. Some therapists began to incorporate meditative techniques for relaxation and concentration in their regular practice. Others branched out and began suggesting the practice of disciplines such as yoga as an adjunct to therapy. An expanded appreciation of the importance of treating body, emotions, mind, and spirit as a whole coincided with the emergence of holistic medicine, which also emphasized treating the whole person rather than specific symptoms.

Although the word *psychotherapy* originally meant the nurturing or care of the breath or the spirit (soul), it has come to be associated with medical practice.<sup>4</sup> Transpersonal psychotherapy does not exclude "getting better" in traditional ways, but also includes a wide range of techniques for working with the body, emotions, mind, and spirit, drawn from both Eastern and Western psychology. Thus a transpersonal therapist might work with dreams and imagery, yet also suggest that diet and exercise be taken into consideration in the course of treatment. Although no single practitioner is likely to be an expert in all areas, an appreciation for the value of body work, meditation, and attention to consciousness in daily practice frequently results in recommendations that may be viewed as adjuncts to psychotherapy, but are nonetheless an integral part of the search for health and well-being. A transpersonal therapist may be eclectic in the employment of various techniques in therapy, yet claim a transpersonal orientation derived from the context within which the techniques are employed. A transpersonal context is created by the values, beliefs, attitudes, and views of human nature that the therapist espouses as givens in the practice of psychotherapy. Every transpersonal therapist may therefore be expected to examine the beliefs that determine the nature of his/her work.

A transpersonal context provides an expanded vision of the human potential for well-being. A perspective of psychotherapy based on this vision is presented by Walsh and Vaughan in their article "A Comparison of Psychotherapies." In describing some of the major dimensions of transpersonal psychotherapy and comparing them to other major schools, it places transpersonal therapy in perspective in terms of its relation to earlier attempts at approaching the perennial questions of psychological well-being. It is inconclusive insofar as it recognizes that there is more to be learned in this area, yet it provides a practical working model for current practice. Although transpersonal theory is in its infancy, this paper provides a useful starting point for the reader who is interested in understanding the relationship of transpersonal psychotherapy to other approaches.

In "The Transpersonal Stance," James Fadiman points to the spiritual traditions, Sufism in particular, and what they have to teach us about

mental health, particularly with respect to treating the whole person rather than the ego or personality. By using the term *stance*, Fadiman underscores the fact that this is a particular position, context, or viewing frame, within which various methods may be employed. His perspective lays the foundation for further integration of Eastern and Western perspectives in working with consciousness.

In "Transpersonal Psychotherapy: Context, Content, and Process," Frances Vaughan spells out the difference between transpersonal context (created by the values and attitudes of the therapist) and transpersonal content (what the client works on in therapy), and examines the process of shifting from personal to transpersonal work. The article helps readers clarify these distinctions and determine whether this approach would be appropriate for their own work.

James Bugental points out in *Being Levels of Therapeutic Growth* that attaining a measure of personal sovereignty means recognizing both the enormous issues confronting human beings and the astonishing achievements that have been made. He writes: "Until men and women accept their own natures and fully realize that they are the authors, not the victims, of their destinies, all their efforts are foredoomed."<sup>5</sup> Bugental emphasizes the centrality of process in therapy and calls attention to the importance of the relationship between therapist and client. The passages selected for this section reflect the depth and clarity of his insight into the nature of this process, and provide a succinct and comprehensible discussion of those issues that are particularly relevant to transpersonal therapy.

In attempting to encompass a wider range of human experience, transpersonal psychotherapy adds to traditional psychological concepts of health those aspects associated with transpersonal levels of being. Each of the articles herein provides a unique perspective. Each gives the reader a different viewing frame from which to consider the options available for approaching personal transformation. The combination of theory provided by Walsh and Vaughan, process as emphasized by Bugental, and method as described by Fadiman, enables the reader to focus on different views in a rapidly expanding field of applied transpersonal psychology.

## Notes

1. Boss, M. *A psychiatrist discovers India*. London: Oswald Wolff, 1965.
2. Maslow, A. H. *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York: Viking, 1971.
3. Grof, S. *Realms of the human unconscious*. This volume.
4. Bugental, J. *Psychotherapy and process: The fundamentals of an existential-humanistic approach*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978. p. 7.
5. *Ibid*, p. 131.