



# Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



## Introduction

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The Religious Experience Research Centre celebrates this year its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 1969 Sir Alister Hardy invited scholars to Oxford to discuss whether a scientific approach to the study of religious and spiritual experience was possible. Following this symposium, he founded the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College that then later changed its name to Religious Experience Research Centre before it moved to Lampeter. It is now part of the Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. At the core of the centre is still the collection of personal accounts of spiritual and religious experience that Alister Hardy started five decades ago but we have expanded. The collection includes accounts from India, the USA, Ireland and other countries and has expanded also its research focus. In addition to accounts that address the Alister Hardy question (“Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self”), we have accounts about Near Death experience, Afterlife experience, experiences with Angels and others related phenomena. We are also very proud that it is now possible to research the collection online which has opened the data to many more researchers worldwide. At the core of the centre is still the engagement with the academic study of spiritual and religious experience, launched 50 years ago by Alister Hardy.

This fifth issue of our Journal for the Study of Religious Experience reflects the history of the study of religious experience as well as new directions. The first article is based on the Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture 2018 by Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke. In his paper “Meeting in the Cave of the Heart, The importance of religious experience to theology and interspirituality” Braybrooke reflects on his a memory of Alister Hardy and how he inspired him in his own work. It is a very personal approach to the study of religious experience, which also celebrates the work of Alister Hardy.

The second article by Martin Lockley presents a perfect example how scholars worldwide have used the database. Lockley’s article “Kundalini Awakening, Kundalini Awareness” examines very carefully a specific type of religious and spiritual experience that is associated with spontaneous, enlightening shifts in consciousness. Lockley examined 27 accounts in the RERC archive and discusses them in the wider context of Western and Asian experiences.

The third article moves the study of religious and spiritual experience into very different field, medical anthropology. Simon Dein's article on "God cured my cancer: Assessing the Efficacy of Religious Healing" looks at the links between religion and health which is also the current research focus of the Religious Experience Research Centre. His paper questions biomedical effectiveness and discusses the problems arising from the application of scientific and biomedical categories – a topic close to the heart of Alister Hardy and the current director of the RERC.

The last article approaches the study of religious and spiritual experience from a very different approach. Esyllt George's paper "An Exploration of Spiritual Embodied Practice: Art, Death, Land" explores visual, performative and aesthetic responses to death, grief and loss in the wider context of spiritual experience. The author points us to a new direction and reflects on the continuing significance of the study of religious and spiritual experience.



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### **Meeting in the Cave of the Heart: The importance of religious experience to theology and interspirituality**

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I am very honoured and pleased to have been invited to give this Sir Alister Hardy lecture. I can picture him clearly with his glasses and moustache and tweed jacket when, soon after I had become an Honorary Secretary of the World Congress of Faiths, he gave a lecture to the Congress, of which he had been a member for many years. It was just at the time in 1970 that his article appeared in the *Observer*. I also have happy memories of George Appleton, Edward Robinson, and many other friends.

It has been said that all theology is really autobiography. It's an exaggeration, but some autobiography may help explain why Alister Hardy's work has had a large influence on my thinking. I don't think I have ever not believed in God – partly because of growing up in the country and feeling, as Wordsworth put it in *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, 'a presence that disturbs with the joy of elevated thoughts' and partly because I was brought up in a Christian home, which, despite tensions between my parents, was a home shaped by the values of the Gospels.

The Rector was very liberal. It was a village joke that he had two sermons: one on the 'Fatherhood of God' and the other on the 'Brotherhood of Man.' – forgive the masculines. I have always found it easier to relate to the Jesus of Nazareth, 'the man for others' than to the Christ of the Creeds – partly because of time spent in the Holy Land. My longing, in the words of the Prayer of Humble Access, is that I evermore 'dwell in Christ and He in me.'

Studying theology, I really appreciated the Biblical and historical studies, but the more philosophical discussions were arid. Linguistic Philosophy was in the ascendant, and there were endless debates about whether it is possible to speak about God, if there is a God to speak about.

This is why my year studying Indian religions was so liberating. Spiritual Knowledge (*jnana*) is recognised as genuine – indeed as that which is truly liberating.

You may know the passage in the *Upanishads* when Svetaketu returned home. When Svetaketu was twelve years old, his father Uddalaka said to him, 'Svetaketu,

you must now go to school and study. None of our family, my child, is ignorant of Brahman.' Thereupon Svetaketu went to a teacher and studied for twelve years. After committing to memory all the Vedas, he returned home full of pride in his learning. His father, noticing the young man's conceit, said to him: 'Svetaketu, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unheard, by which we perceive the unperceivable, by which we know the unknowable?' 'What is that knowledge, sir?' asked Svetaketu.' (Chandogya Upanishad. 6:1:1)

It is, of course, spiritual knowledge, *moksa*, release or liberation – based on direct experience.

Alister Hardy's lecture was so important to me because amidst the secularism of the sixties, when 'God was dead,' Hardy was affirming the reality and importance of spiritual experience and knowledge.

What I want to try and share is how this starting point has shaped my thinking in relation to my approach to scripture and the creeds; to how the Christian faith relates to other religions; and awareness that the Ultimate Mystery transcends all words. Finally, I would like to suggest how the unitive experience and inter-spirituality inspire commitment to the search for a world with a heart.

I remember years ago a New Testament scholar saying that the question one should always have in mind when reading scripture was, 'What was it that people who thought like that had experienced and were trying to convey by what they wrote.' The preacher's task was to convey that experience in contemporary language to people who thought very differently. I have never been afraid of Biblical criticism and would usually in a sermon instead of saying 'Jesus said' I would say 'John or one of the other evangelists in his Gospel tells us that Jesus said or did this.' I try to avoid giving the impression that Jesus actually said every word ascribed to him – although I would put more trust in the evangelists than in the accuracy of some newspapers. In any case, the evangelists were not writing a biography of Jesus – but seeking to convey their new-found faith in Jesus. This approach takes for granted that the Bible and indeed the creeds are human constructions. The paradox that Wilfred Cantwell Smith made clear in his *What is Scripture?* (Cantwell Smith, 2000) is that it is the same community that regards a book as 'The Word of God' which is also the community that gives it that authority. Archbishop Michael Ramsey tried to square the circle by saying the Bible is 'self-authenticating.' (Ramsey, 1962).

But this approach to scripture was certainly a minority view for much of the last century – perhaps it still is. Theology for much of the twentieth century was dominated by Karl Barth's insistence on the authority of the Word of God and so-called 'kerygmatic theology.' Barth insisted that there is no way from human beings to God – all we know of God is what is revealed in the Word.

Barth was very critical of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom, you may have guessed I admire. Schleiermacher was an influential German theologian who lived from (1768-1834). His emphasis was on spiritual awareness. Schleiermacher passionately wanted to communicate to those whom he called 'Cultured despisers' of religion. He asked them to think about those moments when they had 'a sense or taste for the Infinite' or in a phrase, he often used, 'a feeling of absolute dependence.' Religion, he

said, 'is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things in and through the infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the eternal.' He scorned the petty divisions in the churches over belief and ritual (Braybrooke, 2016). You can see why Barth was highly critical of Schleiermacher, because Schleiermacher started from human experience not from revelation.

One of Barth's disciples, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) applied the dictum that 'there is no way from human beings to God' to religions and dismissed them as futile human attempts to reach God that were bound to fail. 'Revelation is God's sovereign dealing with man or it is not revelation' Religion is 'unbelief' and 'criminal arrogance against God' (Kraemer, 1956, p. 320).

This was certainly the dominant view in the churches when I went to India and of many of the staff of Madras Christian College, 'Some were very hostile to my wish to visit a Hindu temple.

Several factors made me increasingly unhappy with such a narrow approach. One was that before I was theologically educated to read Barth and Kraemer, I had always assumed – to quote St John's Gospel that the Light manifest in Jesus was 'the light that lighteneth every person who comes into the world.' (John, 1:9)

Secondly, one day in the dusty library at Madras Christian College, I picked up a translation of devotional poems of Manikka-Vacagar. He was one of the Tamil devotional poets of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and one of the few Prime Ministers to have been a saint. He repeatedly tells of God's deliverance:  
Thou entr'ing in stood'st by me, fast bound in sin  
As one who says, 'I'm sins's destroyer, come!  
(Manikka-Vacagar, 1900. Hymn V, XXII, 52).

You could say he was the Tamil's Charles Wesley. There is a Tamil saying that 'anyone whose heart is not melted by Manikka-Vacagar's poems must have a heart of stone.'

The discovery opened up for me the riches of Tamil devotional literature and the *bhakti tradition*. And like Rudolf Otto, who was also amazed by the devotional poems of the Tamil, it made me question the exclusive claim that only Christianity speaks of divine grace. Indeed, Tamil devotees debated whether God was like a mother cat who carries her kittens, who have to do nothing, or like a mother monkey to whom the kittens have to cling – echoes of the argument between Pelagius and St Augustine about salvation: whether it is a pure gift or has to be earned (Otto, 1930).

I was grateful for the chance to study under a leading Saiva-Siddhanta scholar and was becoming convinced that it was not only Christians who might have an experience of God's overwhelming love and mercy. I was later to learn about Pure Land Buddhism.

I was also influenced by the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, to whom my professor introduced me - which are familiar to many of you. Vivekananda was a student at the Scottish Presbyterian College in Calcutta. He asked a number of religious teachers, 'Sir, have you seen God?' He got the evasive



sort of answers I guess you would get if you asked many of staff at a theological college. But the principal suggested to Vivekananda that he should seek out Sri Ramakrishna, who gave him a direct answer, 'Yes, my son, I have seen God, just as I see you before me, only much more intensely.' Sri Ramakrishna, after intense longing, had had a vision of Mother Kali. Later on he followed other spiritual paths including Christianity. 'One day he saw coming towards him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice sang out in the depth of his soul, 'Behold the Christ who shed his heart's blood for the redemption of the world... It is he, he Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate.' Sri Ramakrishna's claim, based on his own experience, was that different spiritual paths lead to 'realisation.' The differences are a matter of culture and language (Ramakrishna, 1942, p.34).

At this time, a few Roman Catholic scholars, with similar experiences, were suggesting that holy people of other faiths might be regarded as 'anonymous Christians' – that is to say they were saved by Christ in whom they would have believed if they had had a chance to do so. If that sounds complicated - it is. It is a way of saying that holy people of other faiths are saved, without compromising the then teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that 'there is no salvation outside the Church.' For example Fr Bede Griffiths, with whom I was in touch, wrote in his *Christian Ashram* in 1966, 'What we can say with certainty is that at all times and in all places God (and that means Christ) is soliciting the hearts and minds of every person' (Griffiths, 1966, p.196).

The difficulty is with that phrase: 'and that means Christ.' Bede's views of course in later writings move beyond this. I was becoming convinced that other religions were themselves Divine Revelations and channels of God's grace, although like Christianity always an inadequate human response to that grace. Some of you will know of Fr Murray Rogers, who spent his last years in Oxford, whom I visited at his ashram at Jyotniketan. He told me of a group who recognised that the true meeting for people of faith was in 'The Cave of the Heart.' It is where, as has been said, 'You tell me your beautiful names for God and I tell you mine.'

This recognition of the spiritual riches at the heart of different religions has influenced my approach to the study of other religions. I want to learn from them and not just learn about them.

The first international conference that I attended was in Patiala in the Punjab held to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth. (It's where I first met Ursula King). Many of the papers emphasised Hindu influences whereas others stressed the influence of Islam – rather as if Nanak was writing a thesis drawing on both the writings of Muslim and Hindus but did not include any footnotes – the sort of Orientalism that Edward Said criticised. Traditional sources, however, suggest that during the three days he was missing, he was taken into the presence of God, who told him to call others to experience the bliss of God's love. That is to say his teaching flows from an over-powering sense of God's presence – and in my paper I compared this to Sir Francis Younghusband's transformative experience in the mountains near Lhasa.

It is the failure to recognise that Islam flows from the Prophet's spiritual experience in the cave on Mount Hira that led Christians in the Middle Ages to brand him as a heretic and extremists today to pervert Islam into an ideology.

If however you recognise other world religions as channels of God's self-revelation, then rather than just learning about them you seek to learn from them. Now, if I read the *Qur'an* or the *Guru Granth Sahib*, I read it with the same hope that I will hear God speaking to me as I have when I read the *Bible*. Raimundo Panikkar's *The Vedic Experience... for modern man*' is a brilliant example of this approach (Panikkar, 1977).

Not all spiritual experiences are as life transforming as those of Guru Nanak or the Prophet or one could add the conversion of St Paul or perhaps the Baptism or Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. But many of the accounts collected by the Religious Experience Research Centre that I have read and nearly all the people about whom I wrote in my book *Beacons of Light – One hundred people who have shaped the spiritual history of humankind* (Braybrooke, 2009) had a life-changing experience and I believe, we are enriched by each person's story.

With this emphasis on the spiritual core of each of the world religions, I responded too to those, like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a Spalding Professor here in Oxford and later to be President of India, who spoke of an emerging world faith as members of different spiritual paths shared their experiences and responded to the modern world to which they all had to relate. I notice that Sir Alister ends his *The Biology of God* with the same hope. He wrote,

Just as science is science in any country of the world, so in the future there may be a faith to bind all people together in a universal recognition that what they in their different ways have called God, Nirvana, Kwoth (an African name for the God of Creation) and other names, is in truth a demonstrable part of the very nature of man – man the religious animal.' (Hardy. 1975, p. 323)

The same hope inspired Sir Francis Younghusband to found the World Congress of Faiths. My own picture 'of the spiritual history of humankind is of a great river with various springs, sources and tributaries, always changing, sometimes dividing, with backwaters, but moving forward and enriching the present by what is carried forward from the past and opening up new vistas for the future' (Braybrooke, 2009, p.4).

This is not a view that is fashionable in interfaith circles at present. The emphasis is more on the distinctiveness of each religion - the mantra is 'Respect for Difference.'

But the coming together of which I am speaking is not an artificial mixture – partly it is true that people of different faiths live in the same world and so there are common problems to which to respond. But for the writers I have mentioned the unity they speak of springs from the mystic's recognition that God transcends all that we can say of the Divine Reality - even if mystics write at considerable length.

The fourth century Cappadocian Father Gregory Nazianzen wrote,  
'By what name shall I call you, Who are beyond all name?  
All names are given to you yet none can comprehend you.  
How shall I call upon you,  
O you beyond all names?

Or Kabir wrote

The moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it,  
 The moon is within me, and so is the sun  
 The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within me;  
 but my deaf ears cannot hear it. (Braybrooke, 2003, p.50)

Or the Syrian liturgy ,  
 O God you are the unsearchable abyss of peace,  
 The ineffable sea of love. (Ibid.)

And, of course, Moses was warned by God, 'No one may see me and live' (Genesis, 33:20).

If the Ultimate Mystery to which the great religions point is indeed a mystery, it means that all are human creeds and dogmas and they have only a relative truth. They are, as a Buddhist saying puts it, 'fingers pointing to moon'.

It is this mystical experience that transcends words that inspired many of the pioneers of the interfaith movement. This is not suggesting that all religions are really the same – indeed it is in sharing their particularity that we are all enriched. In a trusting relationship, frank and critical comment, helps to deepen our understanding of the Divine mystery. I gladly acknowledge how much I have learned from Hinduism; and that immersion in Holocaust studies and reflecting with Jewish friends has changed my picture of God.

Even if we cannot know God in all the Divine glory, some pictures are more adequate than others. I once heard Ninian Smart say, 'God is not literally a father, but God is not even non-literally an onion.' Did God really ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son – even if divine intervention stopped Abraham at the last minute? The philosopher Immanuel Kant, said that Abraham should have known that the command was opposed to moral law and could not have been the true voice of God. The same needs to be said clearly today to all who claim to kill in the name of God. I have always thought of God in personal terms and increasingly have come to see, as the poet Dante wrote at the end of *The Divine Comedy*, that it is 'Love that moves the sun and other stars' – a love, in my picture that knows no limits - which is why I am a universalist in the sense that I trust that in the end all people will be reconciled to God.' For, as the mystic Angelus Silesius put it, 'there can be no heaven, if there is still one soul in hell.'

But should one speak of the Unknown in personal terms. It is interesting that Sankara, the greatest exponent of Advaita philosophy, wrote several hymns of great devotion to God. He recognised that many people had not advanced beyond the need for a personal God.' The great Muslim scholar al-Ghazali insisted that the ordinary person's devotion is as important as the scholar's learning. 'Trust the religion of the old women,' he said at the end of his life.

I will not pursue this now, as you are the experts about the commonalities and differences of peoples' religious experiences. You, I am sure know what the initials SBNR stand for – 'Spiritual but not religious.' I gather that on dating sites you are more likely to get a response if you say you are a spiritual person rather than that you are religious. Saying you are an atheist gets you even less offers.



Personally I am sad about the distinction. Many of the people in my *Beacons of Light* had real problems with the religious authorities – for example, Hildegard of Bingen. Worship should lead us in the presence of God. If not, it is like sitting in an aeroplane waiting for it to take off – only to be told there is no slot. It always interests me that the prophet Isaiah's Vision came as he was sitting in the Temple after the evening worship had finished. But, as Evelyn Underhill, partly because of her discussions with Baron von Hügel, came to see, religion provides a frame-work and a discipline. As she put it earlier on, 'The Church is an 'essential service' like the Post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them' (Armstrong, 1975). I would be more positive – there have been frustrations - but far more wonderful friendships, the beauty of buildings and music, and an ever increasing sense of the overwhelming generosity of God reflected in Jesus Christ. I once heard Edward Carpenter, former Dean of Westminster say, 'I am glad to have been a member of the Church of England, but equally glad to have spent much time outside it.' I believe the spiritual and religious need each other. Incidentally Alister Hardy says some people thought 'Spiritual Experience' would have been a better name for the Unit than 'Religious Experience'. What really matters, however, is not how we describe the experience of oneness but that it is life-transforming for us and contributes to the transformation of our world. That real change, I believe, will come from the visionary sense of 'oneness,' which inspired the interfaith pioneers. Today interfaith work often seems to start from the problem – how to encourage members of different religious communities to live together.

It is this vision of Oneness that offers hope for the transformation of the world. It is also a pity that today so much interfaith work starts from the problems of a multi-religious society – rather than from the vision.

Younghusband says of the vision that changed his life that,

The whole world was ablaze with the same ineffable bliss that was burning within me. I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world. What was glowing in all creation and in every single human being was a joy far beyond mere goodness as the glory of the sun is beyond the glow of a candle. A mighty joy-giving Power was at work in the world - at work in all about me and at work in every living thing. So it was revealed. Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity. Joy had begotten love. (Younghusband, 1940, pp.3-5)

Thomas Merton, the guru of so many young Americans in the sixties spoke of the sudden experience when he was shopping in Louisville of 'an over-powering love for all the people there, whose faces were shining like the sun' (Merton, 1966, pp. 140-142). It is an awareness of our oneness with all life and with the Source of Being that will inspire us to help create what Wayne Teasdale described as 'a Civilization with a Heart' (Braybrooke, 2005, p127). This inspiration that needs to be expressed through work for peace, providing food for the hungry, homes for the refugees and sanctuary for all living creatures.

Let us share the hope voiced by the environmentalist Jane Goodall, 'We are moving toward the ultimate destiny of our species – a state of compassion and love' (Goodall, 2000).

May our own experiences, our research and our writings inspire us and those with whom we relate to share in the movement ‘towards that state of compassion and love.’

As Alister Hardy said some fifty years ago, ‘As we feel in touch with a power and a glory beyond ourselves, we can make the world a different place – a new kingdom.’ (Hardy, 1975).

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### **Kundalini Awakening, Kundalini Awareness**

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#### **Abstract**

The Kundalini Awakening is a type of spiritually transformative experience, also referred to as religious, spiritual, mystical or transcendental, that has traditionally been associated with eastern meditative / yogic practices, but recently in the west is often associated with spontaneous, enlightening shifts in consciousness. Subjects report such Kundalini experiences typically involve intense physical sensations associated with the spine and nervous system, and evidently occur most frequently in midlife (modal age ~30-35). They have also been referred to as 'cosmic consciousness' experiences inducing long-lasting, life-changing shifts in intellectual and spiritual sensibilities. The experience may be more common than thought in the west because subjects often did not use the term Kundalini. Nevertheless the term is becoming more often used in western reports. Many consider the Kundalini awakening phenomenon, a natural, evolutionary, developmental phenomenon, not unrelated to the natural energetic dynamics of organic systems, especially the nervous system. Vedantic and Tantric traditions have long recognized the Kundalini as a universal force (energy or prana) that manifests in humans with remarkable physical, psychological and spiritual effects.

**Keywords:** Kundalini, Spiritually Transformative Experience, Evolutionary Dynamics

#### **Introduction**

"We pray to ... [she]...whose substance is the pure nectar of bliss, ...who...rises to that brilliant energy which glitters with the luster of ten million lightnings. May She, Kundalini, who quickly goes and returns from Shiva, grant us the fruit of Yoga!"

Arthur Avalon 1919

"The knowledge that there is a central chamber of the soul, blazing with the light of divine love and wisdom, has come in the course of history, to multitudes of human beings."

Aldous Huxley 1952

The awakening of the Kundalini is a recognized, indeed even a desired objective of certain self-realization practices (i.e., Kundalini yoga) which originated with Vedic (Hindu) traditions dating back to ~1500 B. C. (Avalon, 1919; Krishna, 1967, 1972, 1976a,b, 1993, 1994, 1995; White, 1990; Kiefer, 1996). However, despite evidence of the transformative power of Kundalini awakening on consciousness, and its potential impact on paradigms in western psychology (e.g. Jung, 1996) the phenomenon is still poorly understood in the west. Indeed, to the western mind such practices, if known, much less 'understood' experientially, are often regarded as esoteric. At best they are often treated with caution or misunderstood; at worst they are misguidedly dismissed as delusion, hallucination, mental illness or even insanity. Avalon (1919, p. 4) who translates Kundalini-Sakti as "serpent power" points out that despite the fact that "recently some attention has been given to the subject in Western literature" this has been done "with considerable inaccuracies." No doubt we still have much to learn about the phenomenon, how to control or channel it, and how it affects consciousness (Wilber, 1977, 1997; Vitaliano, 1997). However, there are indications, discussed below, that attitudes towards, and understanding of Kundalini experiences are changing and being drawn to the sphere of the biological and psychological sciences (Kason, 2000; Dixon, 2008).

To date, reliable western case studies show that failure to recognize or explicitly identify the Kundalini Awakening phenomenon (Kundalini Experience) is mostly a matter of ignorance (lack of information), and not the result of the experience being unknown in the west. First hand Kundalini Experience reports, and the serious studies of qualified medical and therapeutic professionals indicate, great internal consistency in 'authentic' reports by subjects who typically regard them as beneficial, enlightening, and positive: i.e., often leading to significant, even radical transformation in physical, emotional and mental health, or what Bucke (1901) described as a great enhancement of intellectual and moral sensibility deserving of the label 'Cosmic Consciousness.' Conversely however, the experiences may be physically intense, and emotionally exhausting in the short-term, making subjects over sensitive, and very conscious of the delicate balance needed to maintain their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual equilibrium. In a minority of cases the experience is frightening and detrimental to health (Galbraith 1999, 2010).

Recent popular Western literature indicates a growing awareness of the Kundalini phenomenon as an intrinsic or latent potential in the dynamic organization of energy in the human body, especially, but not exclusively, in the nervous system (Dixon, 2008). As elaborated below, this energy may be part of a universal energy. The related phenomena of *prana* (energy) and chakras, (Sanskrit *cakras*, meaning wheel and referring to energy centers aligned with the main axis of the body: i.e. the spinal column) has received enough popular press in recent years to provide a useful context for understanding some of the physical symptoms of the Kundalini Experience. The question arises: does this increased awareness means that the frequency of experience is also increasing? If this so there are interesting evolution of consciousness implications (Lockley 2010).

However, the first step is to better understand the Kundalini experience. The raw material used in this study center on reports of the actual experiences of individuals

who have chosen to leave records or convey them to doctors, therapists and others for the archives of what we may broadly, and neutrally, call intense, psychological or spiritually transformative experience. The alternative, labels of religious, spiritual, mystical or transcendental experience also apply to varying degrees. As James (1905) indicates in *Varieties of Religious Experience* he, and his student (Starbuck 1899), regarded this field as worthy of serious academic study, a tradition followed and elaborated by Hardy (1997) and others (e.g., Rankin 2008; Morgan 2015). Alternatives to the adjective 'religious' indicate that 'spiritual' or 'mystical' descriptors almost always apply equally well to similar experiences of the transcendental or 'numinous' (*sensu* James, 1905). Such 'varieties' of experience often include the Kundalini Experience. But as many reports suggest, such experience may be somewhat different from other spiritually transformative experience in manifesting certain *diagnostic and intense physical symptoms*, associated with the powerful flow and redistribution of energy in the body, especially the nervous system. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate explicit descriptions of the Kundalini Experience. Subjective experiences are regarded as primary and provide the data for secondary, objective analysis.

Wilber (1986) noted differences between theory and practice in self realization quests. A first step to practice that may lead to changes in consciousness, may be to read up on the subject. A second or alternate step may be deliberate meditative / yogic practices (e.g., Semple, 2014). However, there are also many cases of spontaneous experience not induced by deliberate praxis or theoretical/academic study, but rather by stimuli such as stress, illness or shock, that were not sought after. All this suggests that shifts in consciousness are emergent properties that may not only be induced, but may also occur quite unexpectedly. They may, as noted below, be part of the ontogenetic and evolutionary development of consciousness. Objective or theoretical considerations propose that different consciousness, structures or states can be classified in various categories (Wilber, 1986) such as the mythical mode, (level 3), the rational mode (level 4) and various higher or integral states (level 5 and above): Lockley (2010). Although consciousness states are notoriously difficult to define or categorize (Wilber, 1986), especially by those not having had similar experiences they can relate to, experience is nevertheless the basis for discussion and subsequent analysis. Therefore, the reader may or may not use such labels when assessing the shifts in consciousness reported by subjects as a result of their Kundalini Experiences. However, subjects consistently report and attempt to describe the intensity, and significant transformations in consciousness that attend such experiences, and we should regard their reports as of prime importance in understanding the phenomenon.

It is perhaps unwarranted to refer to Kundalini "Awakenings" if the individuals having the experience do not also do so explicitly. However, subjects often report that they did not recognize the phenomenon until later. Thus, insightful therapists capable of recognizing the phenomenon may play an important role in retroactively identifying such experiences. Observers may be therapist to the patient, or teacher to the student. Subjects may be so impressed by the experience that they themselves research consciousness traditions until they recognize the Kundalini Experience. Shifts in consciousness are significant factors in making students their own teacher-researchers in subsequent quests to understand their Spiritually Transformative Experiences. Hence they proceed from 'Kundalini Awakening' experience to what I call 'Kundalini awareness' which subjects often describe as significant, life-long shifts in consciousness, manifest as an evolutionary journey in a more spiritual 'direction.'



The upheaval, or ‘growing pains’ that sometimes accompany the experience may involve ‘dark night of the soul’ transformations, often prior to dawn ‘awakenings.’

### 1. On recognition of the Kundalini Awakening phenomenon in western psychology

Certain obvious signs of the influence of eastern spiritual traditions on modern western psychology can be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Muller, 1873, Avalon 1919) and its manifestations in ‘mainstream’ psychiatry (Bucke 1901), psychology (James, 1905; Starbuck 1899) and the more esoteric traditions of theosophy (Blavatsky, 1966; Steiner, 1994) and its more intellectually- and scientifically-compelling offspring—Anthroposophy (Steiner, 1924; Barfield, 1965; Blaxland-de Lange, 2006; Fetterman 2018).

Notwithstanding the much older Vedantic origins, this study owes a conceptual debt to the work of Richard Maurice Bucke. Like James (1905) Bucke (1901) was interested in religious or spiritual experience as a phenomenon amenable to serious psychiatric study at the turn of the century. To this end Bucke compiled reports of experiences both from historical records (some well-known) and from his clinical experience. Significantly, he also had his own spiritual experiences which helped him understand, identify and empathize with the experiences of others. As a result Bucke (1901) made the first ‘scientific’ attempt to synthesize standardized report categories such as age when experience occurred, time of year etc.; also see Starbuck (1899). As a result, Bucke compiled 34 records, from which he extracted data suggestive of a tendency for spontaneous spiritual experience to occur more frequently in midlife (average age of 37), and even in the springtime. Some of these experiences could probably be classed as Kundalini awakenings, although Bucke does not use this term explicitly. Likewise many subsequent students of spiritual experience (e.g., Douglas-Smith 1983) also do not use Kundalini vocabulary.

Three generations passed before any attempts were made to compile similar data. However, as noted by Lockley (2000), compilations by Sanella (1987), Bentov (1977) and Galbraith (1999) as well as Gopi Krishna’s classic on Kundalini Awakening (Krishna, 1967), effectively supplemented Bucke’s records, confirming his observation that such experiences often appear to ‘emerge’ as a spontaneous phenomenon in mid-life, with long term influence on subjects. Galbraith (1999, p.11), who recognized the ‘kundalini energy (KE) rising’ phenomenon by the label “spiritual experience up the spine” (SEUS), reported and tabulated 20 responses to her detailed questionnaire.

A very important source of information resides at the University of Wales, Religious Experiences Research Center (RERC) instituted, via Oxford University, by Sir Alister Hardy. As noted below, this valuable archive contains additional reports of Kundalini Experiences, which were compiled and synthesized in this study. Like Hardy, an increasing number of recent studies recognize that the Kundalini experience can be understood as a *bona fide* biological and psychological (or energetic) phenomenon amenable to scientific investigation, which prefers to support its findings through the observation of repeated patterns of behavior, with common threads: hence the linking of Kundalini Experiences with biology (Dixon, 2008) and the “biology of

consciousness” (Semple, 2014). When the present author first accessed the RERC records, around 2000, the term ‘Kundalini’ was a rarely used, although a few reports noted that experiences had later been identified by subjects as Kundalini awakenings, after researching spiritual literature or otherwise learning about the phenomenon. Such subsequent understanding has crept into the more recent RERC records to such an extent that Kundalini is available as a ‘search’ word, that often supplements and summarizes reports that were previously identified using search words like spine, electric, intense /rising energy etc.,

## 2. Methods

In order to test Bucke’s hypothesis that spiritual awakening experiences leading to intimations or experiences of what he called ‘cosmic consciousness’ occur most frequently in midlife, attempts were made to duplicate his simple compilation methods by recording the age and season (date) when such experiences occur. Although Bucke did not use the term ‘Kundalini,’ recent reports and studies have been more inclined to use Kundalini vocabulary, and at least 40 additional reports were found in RERC archives which explicitly refer to Kundalini. Since the initial compilation, based on 27 reports, was made a decade ago, additional direct experience reports have appeared at various sites on the internet, and there has been a marked increase in sites which discuss the Kundalini release / rising phenomenon. The type and quality of available internet information is variable, but includes case studies. These are not included here, but could be of value to future studies (see Acknowledgements).

As the RERC records are confidential, each case is given a reference number, without personal information that identifies subjects. These numbers are used to identify cases discussed herein (see Appendix). Each record is different, and in many cases the age (or time of year) at which the individual experience occurred is not given. However, in a small majority of cases the age is given precisely or within a few years. In other cases clues allow age to be reconstructed or constrained to a particular decade or phase of life. As age at time of experience is not given in many cases such cases are left out of compilations which chart the age range of experiences (Figure 1).

‘Typical’ Kundalini experiences leave powerful impressions on people, often fascinating and bewildering at first, but later ‘changing the course’ of their emotional, mental and spiritual lives. For example, Caudill (2006) records particularly transformative experiences. This means that such reports may be lengthy, and many were written, or at least reported to the RERC (or elsewhere) years after the experiences. Counter-intuitively, where significant time lapses between experience and reports occur, there is little indication that the essence of the reports is compromised by inaccuracies or deficiencies of memory. On the contrary, the experience often stimulates deep reflection on spiritual matters of fundamental importance in the subject’s life, leading to cogent and often profound insights into the ‘meaning’ of the experiences, which the subject is keen to report and share due to a sense of their ‘importance. Thus, in summarizing reports (see Appendix), as well as recording the age (Figure 1), dates and types of physical, sensory and psychic experience, I have highlighted the stronger impressions and statements made by subjects regarding long-term changes in consciousness, life style and aspiration. In all cases I used the subjects own words and sentiments as much as possible.

Although subjective changes in individual consciousness are hard to analyze 'objectively' using standardized data acquisition techniques, it is helpful to note the frequency with which individuals express gratitude to a higher source for the experience: i.e., they are surprised, 'passive' (sensu James, 1905) recipients of transformative consciousness experiences. Also notable are the frequent reports that the experience is not understood until later. Reports that such experiences are 'beyond words,' and often beyond time, but of a spiritual nature, are common. Subjects may describe a 'peace that passeth all [rational] understanding'— and stress the life-changing, long term fruits of such transformative experience. As noted below, when diverse individuals, unknown to each other, independently report similar life changing experiences, that require vocabularies they grasp for but do not possess, one wonders whether these experiences are similar or consistent. When many of these same individuals subsequently, often after many years, find the best explanations elucidated in the Kundalini literature, the experience has clearly not been consciously influenced by prior knowledge of the Kundalini phenomenon, but rather is symptomatic of a recurrent psycho-somatic phenomenon. Moreover, the consistency of such reports makes them amendable to objective scientific analysis (categorization).

In this author's assessment in order to understand spiritual, including Kundalini Experience, objectively one must seek consistency (common threads, as sought here) in diverse historical reports. The *Perennial Philosophy* (Huxley, 1945) is a recurring theme in humankind's quest for the immanent and transcendent ground of being, and is immemorial, universal and common to all authentic religious and spiritual traditions. Huxley (1952, p.69) stated that "we know... that the ground of our individual knowing is identical to the Ground of all knowing and being; that Atman (Mind...choosing...the temporal point of view) is the same as Brahman (Mind in its eternal essence). "Mystical experiences, theophanies, flashes of what has been called cosmic consciousness— [are] not to be had for the asking" (op. cit. p. 90). That the "ground of the individual soul is identical with the divine ground of all being" (op. cit., p. 92) is reiterated by many who have recognized as a gift of consciousness, shifts, awakenings or "flashes," particularly in Kundalini events, within us, that reveal, beyond us, a greater, higher or transcendental reality, often involving experiences largely independent of space and time. In the Kundalini literature Dixon (2008, p. 96) is even more succinct: "Spirituality is the Realization of the Self as one and not separate from the Universal Organism" (her capitalization).

### **3. The Kundalini Awakening phenomenon as a subset of mystical or spiritual experience**

There is a huge literature on mystical and religious experience which takes us deep into human history. Aforementioned classics by James (1905), Starbuck (1899), Bucke (1901) and Avalon (1919) reveal the subject as worthy of serious investigation by modern psychology. For example, when Bucke (1901) labeled such mystical, religious or spiritual experiences as "cosmic consciousness" he made the case, widely accepted among religious studies scholars, that such experiences have recurred among men and women of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds throughout human history. For example, studies of mysticism (e.g. Stace, 1960) not only recognize common threads in experience among reports from diverse traditions

ranging from Christianity, and Sufism to Hinduism and Buddhism, but generally also regard the messages of authentic mystics as uplifting spiritual 'teachings' that benefit the self-realization quest of aspirants. Many, though perhaps not all mystics, may as a result of their experiences, be more open to viewing the common themes and aspirations of diverse religious and spiritual traditions, and may often turn away from institutionalized doctrines that they consider too restrictive and narrow. One might go further and argue as done by Fetterman (2018) that the shifts in consciousness reported by many who have had such experiences are accessible to understanding by cognitive science, a position that was foreshadowed by Rudolf Steiner (1924, 1991, 1994, 2008a,b, 2009) in his extensive work on Higher Modes of Cognition and his founding of the Anthroposophical tradition or movement which he and his followers describe as "spiritual science" in which cognition is amenable to study.

It may be somewhat fruitless to differentiate religious, spiritual or mystical experience as all three adjectives may be largely synonymous, all describing transcendence. The subject's choice of words may reflect, religious upbringing, education, experience etc., Mystics, although often associated with well-established religious institutions, frequently find that the intensity of their experience, and in particular the sense of direct contact with 'God' or the divine Ground of all being leaves them at odds with other members of their religious establishments who have not shared similar experiences. Historically, those reporting or manifesting such experiences may have been regarded by others as being heretics or worse: possessed either by the holy spirit or, worse, the devil (Huxley 1952). Such contrasting interpretations are still seen in contemporary cases. But interpretations of others are today considered secondary, and distinct from, the subjective reports of those undergoing the experiences. For example, Flanagan (1989) has suggested that the 12<sup>th</sup> Century German mystic Hildegard of Bingen suffered from migraines. In her day the interpretations of others (i.e. the Church, as self-appointed guardians of spiritual matters) were of much greater import! It is always risky to reinterpret the 'subjective' experience of another. However, even when ill, a genuine experience can occur as evident from a minority of reports in the RERC library under the category of mental illness (see Galbraith 1999; Dixon, 2008, for further examples). Germane to this point is the obvious connection between severe illness and Near Death Experiences (NDEs), documented by Rivas et al., (2016). Despite frequent NDE reports of the heavenly, positive and restorative aspects of transcendence, including a sense of immortality and universal consciousness, the physical realities of life-threatening illness may in a few cases lead to negative experiences.

Generally speaking intense mystical and religious experiences defy words, or at least are difficult to express easily in everyday language. (A narrower worldly consciousness structure is suddenly expected to describe a transcendental universal structure). Likewise, efforts to use analytical, scientific language, especially to describe another's experience, may result in, or generate, cumbersome technical, even ambiguous or inappropriate vocabulary that only a few specialists understand, *from their analytical viewpoints*, and not from the perspective of the experiencer. For example, the language used by Steiner (1924, , 1991, 1994, 2008a,b, 2009) although he considered it thoroughly scientific, and most accessible through deliberate practice, has proved difficult for many to comprehend, even though, in his case, he both experienced higher modes of consciousness and wrote extensively and analytically about them. Thus others, (e.g., Fetterman, 2018) review his work applying cognitive studies vocabulary.



In short, technical language, even if appropriate, might not make sense to those who have had the ‘experience.’ Conversely, those who take the bold step of trying to report their experiences offer us fascinating, often poetic and spiritually-uplifting commentaries, which in turn may inspire others to regard them as spiritually literate, even enlightened— Hildegard being a case in point. Such inspiring commentaries may in some instances be supplemented by darker reports of fear and disequilibrium. However, these constitute a minority of negative cases. Experiences may be unreported, thus evading the archives, or seriously misunderstood, leading to charges of delusion, hallucination, lunacy and/or heresy. In this regard the objective analyst may find subjective reports too poetic and lacking in the type objective vocabulary they can understand.

In short spiritual experiences are individualized and atypical to some extent, and so do not easily compare with milder or mundane experiences of well-being or the satisfying sense of communal membership in a religious congregation or spiritual community. Although such generalizations are open to criticism, some account must be given as to why the different terms (religious, spiritual, mystical and Kundalini experience) are used in different contexts. The position adopted here is that the four terms, and others like transcendence, form a loose or near-synonymous assortment of terms comprising a continuum or gradient encompassed by the term “spiritually transformative experience” (STE), a general term, which also includes NDEs. Kundalini experiencers may report experiencing a form of death and rebirth.

This position may be validated, by noting that more people objectively understand or even subjectively claim some degree of mild or moderate religious, spiritual or mystical experience, whereas a lesser number report intense Kundalini Experiences. For example, out of a total of ~6660 reported (recorded) religious experiences recorded at the RERC, (**see acknowledgements**) only about 40 individuals have so far been identified who explicitly identify theirs as a Kundalini Experience. While this may be in part a semantic problem of definition, it may also reflect significant differences in the intensity or nature of the experience (degree and/or kind). For example, Spilka et al. (1992) appear to use the term ‘religious mystical experience’ as a synonym of ‘religious experience’ without any knowledge of or reference to the Kundalini phenomenon (Spilka personal communication, 2007). In their study 194 seminary students, church members, college students and clergy reported having had a ‘Christian mystical experience.’ Thus, in their study the sample comes from a rather well-defined, non-universal, religious community, with the experiences evidently reflecting membership or affiliation with that religious denomination: see Shusan (2018) for overview of the ways culture is thought to influence [spiritual] experience.

In contrast, many reports of Kundalini Experience appear quite independent of institutionalized religious influences, both in terms of the context in which they occur, and in terms of the more-universal, non-denominational content of the experience. Likewise subjects seem to have very diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. (Mystics come from all spiritual traditions). The same also appears true of a subset of mystical experiences which are associated with the ‘natural world’ (Marshall, 2005). Thus, in general, all such psycho-spiritual experiences tend to be similar in that they are associated with pronounced temporary, and long term, shifts in consciousness. Different individual experiences, although imprinted with universal themes, reflect the



historical, cultural and educational context in which individuals find themselves.

Despite the differences in definition surrounding diverse reports of religious, spiritual mystical and Kundalini experiences, it is important to stress that they share many common threads. The aim of this analysis is primarily to highlight awareness of the Kundalini phenomenon among individuals reporting what they would otherwise, more generally, refer to as religious, spiritual, mystical or other transformative consciousness experience categories.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *The numbers*

As noted above, the number of experiences explicitly identified as Kundalini awakenings so far gleaned, by this author, from the RERC archives is only 40, about equally divided between males and females (Table 1). 36 of these are plotted (Figure 1) where age is known to the nearest 5 years, along with 73 other spiritual experience reports ( $n = 109$ ) many of which are also described as Kundalini experiences (Krishna, 1967; Bentov, 1977; Sanella, 1987; Lockley 2000; Lockley and Morimoto, 2010) or 'spiritual experiences up spine' (Galbraith, 1999). The results indicate that the modal age for such experiences is indeed in the 30s. This result is consistent with the claims of Bucke (1901) that the Cosmic Consciousness experience most often occurred in midlife (around age 37). It is also interesting to note that the result is consistent with those of Douglas Smith (1983) who also reported two modal peaks, for spiritual experience – one at aged 35 and the other at aged 19 (Figure 1). Many more reports probably need recording in order to help distinguish age frequency patterns and to establish whether Kundalini awakenings occur with frequencies similar to more general reports of religious, spiritual and mystical experience. The 320 reports ( $109 + 211$ ) that form the basis of the compilations given in Figure 1 do not include several dozen convincing reports of Kundalini experiences from the Near Death Experience Research Foundation website <https://nderf.org/index.htm>. However, not all reports provide comprehensive details on the age of subjects when they had their experiences, or the date the experiences occurred. Nevertheless as research into spiritual experience progresses the databases grow and become refined. For example the RERC website now has a separate NDE category.

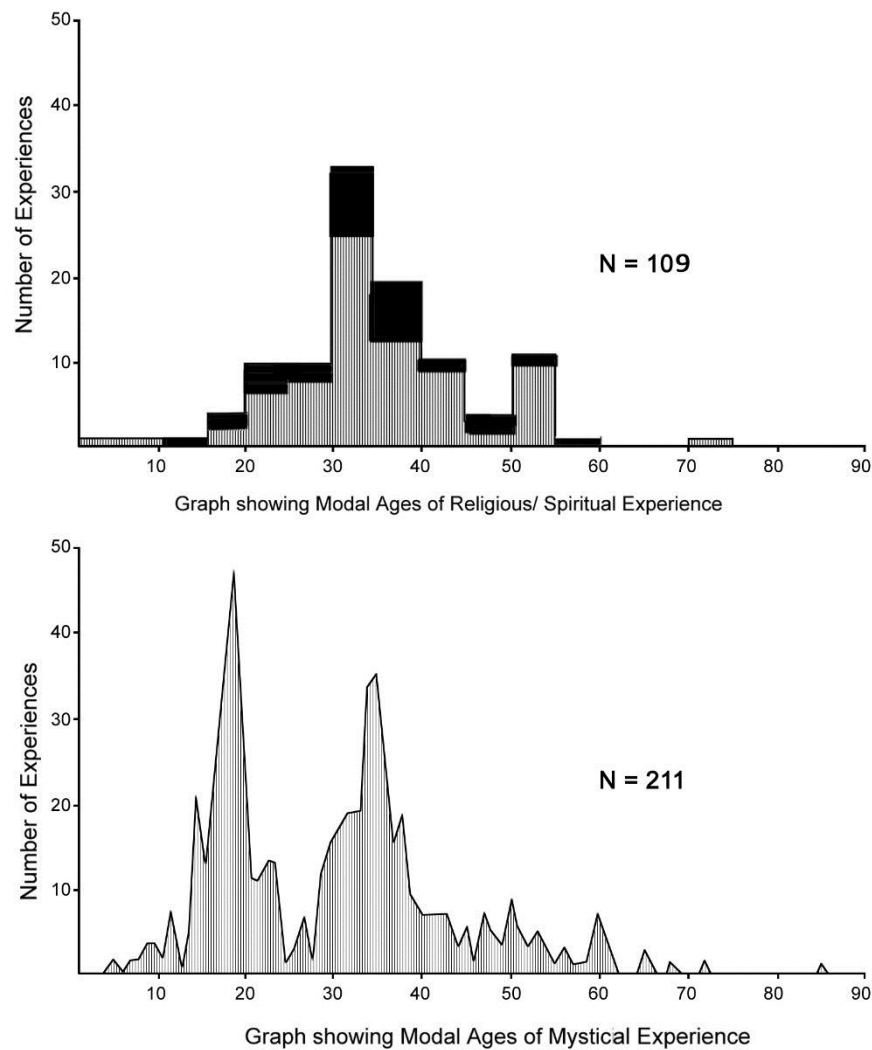


Figure 1. Plots showing age of reported spiritual experience: modified after Lockley and Morimoto (2010). Upper graph, compiled from various sources, includes a subset (black) specifically labeled as Kundalini Awakenings. Lower graph redrawn after Douglas Smith (1983) deals only with cases labeled as 'spiritual experience.' See text for details

#### **4.2 Physical manifestations of the Kundalini Awakening**

The physical manifestation of Kundalini awakening are remarkable, both for the intensity of the experience, and for the consistency of reports that deal with the energizing of the spine, nervous system and whole body. I have extracted and summarized the following 18 examples from the appendix, and note that in the RERC sample of 40, 33 individuals, or 82.5%, reported such intense physical sensations: see Table 1.

**CASE 001046.** 'Later noticed lump at the base of spine.'

**CASE 001082.** 'I was conscious of a movement at the base of the spine and the Hindu Kundalini (as I now know it) began to move up the spine traveling up the neck to the base of the brain'

**CASE 002547** 'I had a sort of volcanic eruption of mystical experience... A severe spinal curvature since childhood, has gone completely.'

**CASE 002607** '[a] great spasm of electrical energy discharging from the base of my brain down through my spinal cord [cord] which trashed like a snake inside me'

**CASE 003315** 'my back straightened out, my whole body filled with electricity.'

**CASE 003422** In dream 'at the bottom of my spine something was uncurling upwards towards my head ...it was a monstrous snake.'

**CASE 003487** 'I felt the "serpent of Kundalini" move up and around my spinal chord.'

**CASE 004435** 'Suddenly I felt a spasm of pure pleasure, starting in my solar plexus and expanding to fill my whole body.'

**CASE 005167** 'I clearly felt an influx of energy through the top of my head'

**CASE 005342** subject 'started to have what I can only describe as full body orgasms...a warm rushing waves of tingling energy, beginning in my upper thighs, spreading quickly across my torso, and back and forth across my chest and stomach.'

**CASE 005371** 'I had a Kundalini serpent rising up the spine.. [a]nd burst out through the head...so powerful ... everything all at once.... There is a cosmic consciousness'

**CASE 005549** 'some tremendous force seemed to unleash itself from about the base of my spine, shot up my spine and exploded in my head'

**CASE 005458** 'a very powerful surge of energy coming from the base of my spine, up through my body to my head and beyond.'

**CASE 100001** 'an ENERGY hit .. something like a real living fist hit ... I involuntarily shouted and jerked and stumbled.'

**CASE 100006** 'There seemed to be a current of energy running through my body... The energy rose to my brain'

**CASE 100041** 'a feeling of infinite space moving up through spinal column'

**CASE 100043.** felt 'tingling rays shooting up from the lower part of my back... a great pulsating force ...a pulsating sensation along my spine'

**CASE 200019** 'at the top of my vision came a bright white sparkling ball made up of silver white rays/blades of light flickering.. The physical sensations intensified over my whole body ...and the electricity was intense. Then a few minutes later, a massive surge of upwards energy towards this light actually made me stand up from a sitting meditation as I felt that I was being shot up out of my body.'

While Taylor (2009 p. 11) claims that "spiritual experiences are overwhelmingly positive," and we may include Kundalini experiences in this otherwise broad category, they are not always so. Galbraith (2010, p. 31) disputes Taylor's assertion with the simple statement that they "are not overwhelmingly positive experiences." Taylor admits that such experiences are often triggered by depression and despair, but nevertheless calls them "awakening experiences" that lead to peaceful breaking of old attachments and liberation similar to the new spiritual outlooks gained by Near Death Experiences (NDEs). Likewise Caudill (2006) cites her own difficult transformative Kundalini experiences, which followed earlier shifts in consciousness. At times her experiences made her "a total mess, barely functional" as if she had almost "tipped over the edge of psychosis." (p. 144). But she was rescued by a friend who suggested she "might be undergoing a Kundalini awakening" (p. 145). She found

and cited an article that stated “Many individuals whose Kundalini has been unexpectedly unleashed *do not know what is happening...* the risen Kundalini flings open gates to all sorts of mystical, paranormal and magical vistas but few realize it can also dramatically impact the body.” (p. 145, original italics).

Here we see an example of both the negative (disorienting) and positive consciousness transforming aspects of the Kundalini experience, almost always occurring in this ‘happy ending’ order (not vice versa). As noted below both aspects are often reported in varying intensities. We may perhaps note a parallel with a remark made by Steiner, quoted in Fetterman (2018) to the effect that without the ‘cognition’ to understand the experience, the subject is like one staring at writing one is unable to read. To continue the analogy recognizing the Kundalini Experience phenomenon is akin to finding the language in which the experience is conveyed (the language of consciousness) but that does not mean the experience is deeply understood in terms of its cognitive, psychological, energetic or spiritual import or complexity: see Dixon (2008) for complex analyses.

#### ***4.3 Sense of divine bliss, and other sublime, transcendental attributes of Kundalini experience***

Just as there is consistency in the reports of physical experience and sensation, so too we find considerable consistency in the emotional reports of bliss, well-being and the sense of light, enlightenment and love that defies language. These experiences were most intense at the time of awakening or soon after, but sometimes recurred later and at unexpected times. At least 28/40 subjects, or 70 %, reported sublime, transcendental feelings, clairvoyant visions, clairaudience etc., (See Table 1). A representative sample of twelve cases is presented in the following list, with the additional case of Richard Maurice Bucke from the year 1872 at the top of the list. Bucke wrote of his experiences in the third person, and it must be acknowledged that the experience, while spiritual or mystical in nature, Bucke and subsequent commentators have never explicitly described the experience as a Kundalini awakening. However, his references to a lightning-flash of Brahmic Splendor indicate both an awareness of the eastern traditions and one of the typical Kundalini attributes – the sudden flash of pure light.

**BUCKE.** (1901, p. 9-10) ‘It was in the early spring, of his thirty sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning and especially Whitman. They parted...his mind deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading...All at once, without warning or any kind, he found himself wrapped around as if it were by a flame colored cloud...the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning flash of Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thence-forward for always an aftertaste of heaven... he learned more within a few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study.’

**CASE 002329** ‘suddenly surrounded by a large circle of golden light’

**CASE 003205** ‘felt as if the top of my head had opened up...a brilliant white light came through ... the light beyond description.’

**CASE 000554** ‘a sublime consciousness of a personalized sustaining power which defies description.’

**CASE 000593** ‘feeling of blissful transcendence.’

**CASE 001046** ‘peace not of this world’

**CASE 003315** ‘filled with tremendous feeling of love’

**CASE 005046** ‘Love radiates Love creates Love manifests worlds and Planets Love unconditionally IS’

**CASE 005342** I know that I am an embodiment of the forces of life, love. As we all are

**CASE 005549** ‘the true meaning of ‘the peace that passeth all understanding,’ was made known to me’

**CASE 100041** Personal revelations came very quickly with crystal clear dreams, sudden insights, finding the right books and people...I had a vivid impression of the angel putting a comforting arm around my shoulders and I felt a deluge of calming energy rush through my whole body...’

**CASE 100048** saw everything alive with radiant energy and light. The spring buds had golden auras and banks of flowers erupted like a bubbling, vibrant slow motion display of fireworks. Spring buds had golden auras.

**CASE 200019** ‘I had a completely overwhelming sense of bliss/love. It was awesome- it made everything else I had ever experienced pale into [sic.] comparison.

#### **4.4 Long term effects**

Given the profound impact Kundalini Awakening experiences appear to have on the subjects surveyed in this sample, it is perhaps logical to conclude that the experience or experiences would be remembered long after they occurred. However, memory of the experience is not the only a factor at play in many of these cases. It appears that subjects frequently report marked shifts in consciousness typically initiated at the time of their experiences but almost invariably sustained as a life-long spiritual transformation processes, even after the more extreme sense of transcendental bliss has faded. These spiritual growth and maturation processes are often described as ‘evolutionary’ and expressed, as the following examples indicate, in such a way as to suggest that emergence of a new or ‘different person’ with subtler, more humane and compassionate sensibilities and even the ability to heal. The following examples are typical:

**CASE 001847** ‘it was like meeting life and death all at once- to me life has never been the same since’

**CASE 004435** ‘the incident had greater importance later in life than at the time.’

**CASE 004814** ‘the greatest event of my life.’

**CASE 004827** subject reached a “plane of unconditional love and acceptance...the most transforming of all my experiences ... Today I am a different person ... transformed... .. beginning the journey of joy” ...

**CASE 100048** The whole experience was life changing ... the subject professes gratitude for the enriched insight that has steadily developed.



It is difficult to assess the frequency of long term effects on subjects who reported Kundalini awakening experiences to the RERC. This is simply because some subjects reported their experiences soon after having them, rather than with the benefit of years, even decades of hindsight, as in other cases. Therefore, the number of subjects (20/40 = 50 %) reporting such long term effects is probably too low. Such potential biases creep into any survey based on a single sample point, in time, without the possibility of follow up surveys that can monitor long term changes in subjects.

Anyone familiar with the work of psychiatrist Ian McGilchrist (2009) in his acclaimed book *The Master and Emissary* may note the tendency of such transcendental experiences to reorient subjects to a more overtly spiritual interests and awareness of love, compassion and the unity of all things, is consistent with a shift in emphasis from left to right brain functions. Not only does such a supposition underscore the importance of such shifts for psychological and healthy cognitive balance, with implications for consciousness studies, it is also consistent with McGilchrist's thesis that such balancing shifts are needed in a world where left brain 'functions' predominate and are too heavily emphasized as objective and scientific. Note the resonance of this exposition with the famous, if controversial, thesis of C.P. Snow (1959) that, much to its own detriment, western culture is split into *Two Cultures*: i.e., the sciences and the humanities.

RE Center number and gender	Research Case and	Intense sensations in spine, nervous system & physical body	Sense of bliss, visions, lucid dreams	divine love, voices, etc.,	Life-changing results, new directions, healing gifts etc.,
000554	male		x		x
000593	female		x		
000146	female		x		x
001082	female	x	x		
001847	female	x	x		x
002245	female				x
002329	male		x		
002547	female	x	x		x
002607	male	x	x		
002806	female				
003205	female	x	x		
003315	female	x	x		
003339	male		x		
003422	male	x			
003487	male	x	x		
004435	male	x	x		x
004814	female		x		x
004827	female	x	x		x
004857	female	x			
004903	male	x			
005046	female	x	x		x
005149	male	x			
005167	male	x			x
005371	male	x	x		
005386	male	x			x
005432	male	x	x		x
005458	male	x	x		
005541	male	x	x		
005549	male	x	x		
005555	male	x	x		x
005562	male	x			
100001	male	x	x		x
100006	female	x	x		x
100015	male	x			x
100041	female	x	x		x
100043	male	x	x		x
100048	male	x	x		x
100072	female	x			
200019	male	x	x		
300274	female	x			x
<b>Number of reports 40</b>		<b>33/41 = 82.5 %</b>	<b>28/40 = 70%</b>		<b>20/40 = 50%</b>

Table 1. Generalized summary of symptoms and after effects experienced by subjects (23 males and 17 females) reporting Kundalini Awakenings, based on 40 reports

gleaned by the author from the literature and RERC archives through 2009. See text for details

## 5. Synthesis

It is clear that the Kundalini awakening experience is often associated with intense physical sensations affecting the nervous system, and often leading to heightened visual and auditory sensitivity. Sensory and psychological experiences such as the sense of inner and external light, remote viewing, telepathy, divine voices etc., are shared to various degrees by those reporting religious, spiritual and mystical experiences, including NDEs and OBEs (out of body experiences) not labeled as Kundalini phenomena. However, this does not mean that they are necessarily of a wholly different kind, only that the degree of intensity and impact on different sensory organs is different. Thus, the Kundalini experience may just be a rather unusual and physically intense species of religious, spiritual or mystical experience. It has even been suggested that some spiritual experiences may be remembered parts of unremembered NDEs (Robert Mays personal communication, 2018).

Subjects reporting religious, spiritual, mystical and Kundalini experiences may be equally likely to report 'expanded' or 'raised' consciousness – what Bucke described as an enhancement of intellectual and moral faculties. Put another way, the experience brings enlightenment or illumination that subjects, and many outside observers may recognize as a transformation, growth or maturation of the higher faculties. The abruptness of the emergence of different consciousness structures may be seen as analogous to the monumental shift that takes place when children pass from the state of simple consciousness to self consciousness (Lockley 2000; Lockley and Morimoto, 2010): a phase shift in consciousness involving the awakening of latent faculties, arguably one of the aspects of organic evolution. At this early stage in childhood development infants are acquiring language and the ability to walk erect (Piaget, 1976; Konig, 1969). It could be argued that transformative religious, spiritual, mystical and Kundalini experiences represent an analogous shift from ego-centered self consciousness to ego-softened sage, cosmic or Super Ego consciousness, a stimulus or awakening of higher-self faculties. This shift also involves changes in the mode of self expression and language. According to Steiner (2009) and others (see Gebser, 1986, and Wilber 1986 for summary), humans also went through a transformation 'into' self-consciousness from a pre-self-consciousness structure. In the vocabulary of the latter two authors the spiritual experience phenomena may represent a shift from the "mental-rational" to the "integral" consciousness structure.

Beyond this suggestion it is outside the scope of this analysis to find objective criteria to support the idea that individual Kundalini awakening experiences represent a part of the broader evolutionary trajectory of the human species as a whole. Nevertheless we can point to certain analogies that make such inferences plausible, and it is significant that Krishna (1967) and other consciousness researchers and observers, including some of the subjects considered herein make the evolutionary argument explicitly. In recent years, a number of professional scientists are also

inclining to this, or a similar, view and seeing the Kundalini phenomenon as a legitimate field of study for mainstream biology, psychology and cognitive science (Kason, 2000; Dixon, 2008; Semple, 2014, and aforementioned authors such as Bentov, 1977 and Sanella 1987). All normal humans go through the childhood shift from simple to self consciousness. So it follows that rapid or abrupt developmental shifts in consciousness are a normal psychological phenomena, and, arguably, little different in principle from physiological and biological changes such as tooth replacement, puberty and menopause. If they occur in ontogeny, why should they not occur in phylogeny?

The link between physical and psychological experience is significant, especially involving reports that serious physical disorders may sometimes be healed almost instantly. First, it suggests that the body-mind is an integrated entity. Second it suggests that the body's natural power to heal itself, may be enhanced and accelerated in circumstances where vital energy is intensified. Although rare, spontaneous healing is dramatic in a minority of NDE cases (Rivas et al., 2016). Rapid shifts in bodily or somatic growth, may be uncommon, but they are not inconsistent with biological evidence. Indeed our biological and evolutionary science recognizes naturally-occurring instances of rapid growth known as 'sports' or 'mutants,' and the theory of 'punctuated equilibrium' allows for the rapid appearance of new species (even if the 'mechanisms' are not completely known). Advances in the scientific investigations of biophysical organization in organisms converge with the idea of morphogenetic fields proposed by Sheldrake (1981), and morphodynamic, non-Darwinian evolutionary dynamics (Verhulst, 2003; Lockley 2010; Schad, 2018). Simply put, the biophysical dynamics responsible for guiding or organizing organic growth from the genetic and molecular level, up to the level of organs and whole organisms, could under the right conditions of Kundalini, or nervous system activation, lead to rapid and unexpected, reorganizations and transmutations analogous to natural growth spurts. Even though conjecture about such rapid physiological changes may be challenged, the science of chronobiology, dealing with the functions of organs on different time scales from milliseconds to years, is well established (Rohen, 2007). Dixon (2008, p. 82) makes the interesting observation that Kundalini experiences may more often occur after "full myelination" of the nervous system which does not occur until the 20s (27-29) and may occur about 7 years after (age 34-36) as an "individuation crisis," an "organic process... an alchemical upheaval and restructuring of the brain." Certainly, subjects who have experienced Kundalini awakenings often feel they were propelled into a physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth spurt or quantum evolutionary leap, and find such terms the best descriptors of their experiences. If these propositions are plausible, then the intensification of vital evolutionary energy 'within' us might explain certain otherwise 'supernatural' reports of miraculous healing (e.g. Semple, 2014). Certainly increased 'awareness' of the Kundalini Awakening phenomenon, promises researchers in the fields of biology, psychology and religious studies fertile ground for further investigation.

Finally, given that the whole concept of Kundalini awakening originates in the eastern Vedantic and Tantric traditions (Avalon, 1919) it is worth noting the observations of Scott (2005 p. 23) that "far from being a force confined to the human body the scope of Kundalini is universal." Energy (prana) acts at the physical level to create "more and more complex life forms from the amoeba to the whole vegetable kingdom." Subsequent levels of "mental prana required Kundalini to devise forms capable of

mediating the energies of mind” which was accomplished by the evolution of the higher organisms and the human vessel. As Scott puts it “in order that the divine may manifest on the physical plane Kundalini must first provide structures that can respond to pressure from above.” This is clearly what would be described as a top down creation or activation of matter by spiritual forces. This echoes ancient and modern wisdom traditions, including Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy in which the lower mineral and vegetative, and the higher sentient animal and human consciousness realms are seen as manifestations of different evolutionary dynamics, consciousness structures and potentials. Regardless of whether Kundalini energy is regarded as a universal force or one centered in, or having a special resonance with, the human nervous system, (and there is no reason to consider the domains as separate) it appears that there is a remarkable convergence in focus when it comes to understanding the Kundalini as a phenomenon of special evolutionary significance with respect to consciousness.

## 6. Conclusions

A number of conclusions and inferences can be drawn from these preliminary results.

- 1) The Kundalini Awakening Experience is a type of spiritually transformative experience that has attracted much interest among students of the evolution of consciousness.
- 2) The Kundalini Experiences discussed herein mostly involves intense physical experience associated with energizing of the spine and nervous system, as well as other organs of the body.
- 3) The Kundalini Experience tends to occur most frequently in midlife: i.e., the modal age is between 30-35. In this regard it appears to occur with a frequency similar to that reported by other investigators using the more general labels ‘spiritual experience’ and ‘cosmic consciousness.’
- 4) Those reporting the Kundalini Experience, claim it is mostly a positive experience inducing long-lasting, life-changing shifts in intellectual and spiritual sensibilities.
- 5) Kundalini Experiences are still infrequently reported in comparison with other religious, spiritual or mystical experiences. This may reflect the rarity of the experience. However, the experience may be more common than suspected because subjects unfamiliar with the phenomenon report it using different vocabularies that omit the term ‘Kundalini.’ Moreover the number of reports now being added to internet websites is growing steadily, as is associated literature.
- 6) The Kundalini Experience, may be a natural evolutionary phenomenon of unusual intensity, but no different in principle from other relatively rapid biological and psychological developmental transformations, even ‘growth spurts’ recognized by biological and evolutionary science, and in many cases forced by stress, crisis, or even illness, the latter clearly associated with NDEs.
- 7) Vedantic and Tantric traditions have recognized the Kundalini Experience for millennia and hold that it is a universal force (energy or *prana*) that helps shape the evolution of life forms on the material plane: i.e. manifesting in evolution. In humans it is recognized as having mental/cognitive/psychological



manifestations, as well as physical effects, that are mostly experienced as spiritually meaningful shifts in consciousness.

- 8) It is anticipated that reports of Kundalini Experiences will continue to be reported, probably with increased frequency. This predicted trend may be attributed to better understanding of the phenomenon, enhanced by new books and media, an increase in the frequency of experiences, deliberate kundalini raising practices, a natural acceleration in evolutionary rates surrounding kundalini energy releases, or a combination of all these factors. In any event, the increase in “kundalini awareness” promises opportunities for future research.

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**APPENDIX.** Excerpts from RERC reports of Religious experience that specifically mention (or strongly imply) the Kundalini phenomenon. **Commentary in bold.** Subject's own words "in quotes" with omissions (...) shown. The author is responsible for edits and suggests other researchers consult the full original case texts for full details and contexts.

**CASE 000554. Male. Experience in 1966 (as adult possibly in midlife). Experience changed life. Left his job because he could not relate to co-workers/job. Went to India and was writing about life changing experiences 32-33 years later.** "a sublime consciousness of a personalized sustaining power which defies description... Mental perception and originality of thought were heightened...Continuing gratitude for experience even if it is now no more than a memory... Reading Tom Aston's details of the Kundalini experience I realize that this explains my experience in 1966. Kundalini and what Christians call the Holy Spirit are one and the same."

**CASE 000593. Female. Experience in 1955 at the ages of 13-15. Writes of a "feeling of blissful transcendence... No barrier [to] one great being ... can't put it into words....no one around me understood my experiences...I recognized 'Kundalini' and many others" Her G. P. "diagnosed me as dangerously ill with Schizophrenia... later present husband diagnosed me as more of a 'mystic.'" Subject could induce a trance state easily.**

**CASE 001046. Female. Experiences at 25, 38, 40.** "Dual locality consciousness. Sensation of "peace not of this world." Was in bed and "saw coiled whitish serpent on the floor ...confused, afraid but nevertheless bearing goodwill ... I attempted, rather terrified to pat it on the head. Immediately ...it was seemed ... in front of me... it "entered" into me seemingly in the region of the solar plexus. I remember thinking, ... of the words "pristine force." Later was "greatly interested to hear of the Kundalini."

**CASE 001082. Female. Experience in 1942 at age 31.** "All at once the room was full of life... I felt physically alert, fresh and full of wonderful rest , peace and reassurance...When the peace reached its climax I was conscious of a movement at the base of the spine and the Hindu Kundalini (as I now know it) began to move up the spine traveling up the neck to the base of the brain. A voice then said audibly..."you see pain and suffering belong only to the physical world" ...I saw a blue void and felt my own primordial basic spirit entity...I had never heard mention of the Kundalini before that day."

**CASE 001847. Female Experience at age 32. Doing Bakti yoga** "on path of self realization... sat in chair doing office work...one single straight bar supporting my back ...was constructive in arousing the kundalini in my spine." **Then had a frightening experience – words don't suffice – subject would paint experience if she could** "It sounds like a dream... **but subject was** ...wide awake and experienced this most wonderful and beautiful experience...The spiritual body was like an X ray of the whole nervous system...Dear Reader, it was like meeting life and death all at once-to me life has never been the same since."

**CASE 002245. Female. Experience in 1934. While walking along street a voice said "THIS IS NOT REALITY"** Later had buzzing in ears. Read about "the Serpent

Power by Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe)"... and ..."peculiar buzzing ... referred to the awakening of the Kundalini and its ascent up through the chakras"

**CASE 002329. Male. Experience at age 54. An experienced meditator tried Kundalini 'Hindu' method very cautiously only five times. Also prayed for guidance. In the middle of the night got up and was** "suddenly surrounded by a large circle of golden light."

**CASE 002547. Female. Experience in 1972.** "I had a sort of volcanic eruption of mystical experience." **Person could visit sick people telepathically, and they would recognize that she had visited them. Her short/long legs grew to equal length and lost stretch marks after 30 years** "A severe spinal curvature {sic} since childhood, has gone completely, ...all this is very joyous to me... in Hindu philosophy it is ... Kundalini - the evolutionary life force."

**CASE 002607. Male. Experience at age 37, in 1946 heard** "A voice said 'He's coming' ... woke up in ecstasy [ecstasy], great spasm of electrical energy discharging from the base of my brain down through my spinal cord [cord] , which thrashed like a snake inside me {cf. kundalini, Diana Hasting 15, ix 1999} ... then subsided leaving me perfectly happy and relaxed ..."

**CASE 002806. Female. Experiences at ages 16-17, 31(9) 44. Aged 16-17 saw Annie Besant** 'in cloud of white light'

**CASE 003205. Female. Experience in March 1970 at age 34. Lying in bed** "Suddenly I felt as if the top of my head had opened up...a brilliant white light came through ... the light beyond description...after much reading ... I believe it to be a Kundalini, as described by Gopi Krishna, or perhaps a brief glimpse of Cosmic Consciousness as described by Dr Bucke."

**CASE 003315. Female. Experiences at ages 44/45 (also 47/23). Sitting getting ready for bed saying** "our Father... after a few words ...my back straightened out, my whole body filled with electricity, and then I simply lost the feel or awareness of my body completely...'filled with tremendous feeling of love... God's love ... I ...am aware of Kundalini awakening in me"

**CASE 003339. Male, born 1911, had experiences at age 8 and again aged 45 (3-9) 47. Poor family miserable peasant child in Poland. Aged 8** "in deep meditative mood ... as I suffered in silent desperation ... saw a great white cloud in the sky... became calm ...lost all feeling of hopelessness." **In 1956 in Chicago had** "another vision... the message was very distinct "everything will be alright ...I was attempting to understand ... that the seat of this power [love] lies in that gland ... I think ... the pineal gland (I wonder if this is a positive to the negative in 'Kundalini,' at the base of the spine)."

**CASE 003422. Male. Experiences at aged 5, 17.** "awoke in terror because at the bottom of my spine something was uncurling upwards towards my head... **[Kundalini] told himself** ...it was a monstrous snake... **Had dream** ...in it, my "I" was rising up above a grey area which softened into a blue, vast sea...I felt, not heard the words: "in time, In Time" ... As for the snake ... [it is] ... in Gopi Krishna's work n



the oriental 'fire-serpent' that rises up the spine: Kundalini."

**CASE 003487 Male. Reported experiences of "timelessness [and] crystal clear peace...** Although I could not move I felt the "serpent of Kundalini" move up and around my spinal cord."

**CASE 004435. Male, born 3-10-46 had experience in 1972 (aged 26).** Reports that after he had "rushed my yoga exercises...suddenly felt a spasm of pure pleasure, starting in my solar plexus and expanding to fill my whole body... **The experience was** ...connected with vision, with a clarity of perception... The loss caused me to cry, so intense was the sense of having been diminished... the incident had greater importance later in life ..."

**CASE 004814. Female aged 16. Subject writes of meeting Yogananda** "the greatest event of my life... **Subject had** ...led a repressed life.. **and developed a hobby of health and nutrition and read** ...about an oriental exercise ... I did not know it was Lauliki Mudra to raise Kundalini. I tried it and soared... Selfishness completely disappeared. *I was awake when asleep. And I had no fear.* (Original italics) ... I often sang a popular song. "Why is the sky bluer? Why is my heart truer... Why is the sun brighter? Why is my heart lighter? "It took months to fade. "Wherever I sat... I held my spine straight."

**CASE 004827. Female aged 30. Report made in 1987. Subject writes a piece on experience of awakening the Kundalini.** "I activated the energy within and without myself that I now term "the kundalini energy... this began an altered state of consciousness.... **Subject learned from a lecture given by a psychiatrist on the subject** ...Kundalini, inspiration or madness" **and had to draw on inner strength to prevent** "going over the edge." **Subject became a healer and clairvoyant counselor and has reached a** "plane of unconditional love and acceptance...the most transforming of all my experiences."

**CASE 004857. Subject 66 years old (born 1921).** At age 32 "born again." **At age 66 the subject writes** "The other night a vivid scary dream awoke me. I could feel the Kundalini Fire raising in and to the heart area."

**CASE 004903. Male born 1950 experiences in mid 20s, at 30, 32/33 and 47. seems to involve negative Kundalini experience-** "cool energy" in spine "bolts of energy" from cerebellum to cerebrum- "once saw white energy coming from a dried snakeskin." "Dr [X] ...analysed his brain activity and found it like others with Kundalini activity." **Subject laments lack of information on** "anyone undergoing similar experience related to Kundalini."

**CASE 005342. Male aged 33-38. Date of reported experience 2002.** "in the Spring of 2003 ... I started to have what I can only describe as full body orgasms...a warm rushing waves of tingling energy, beginning in my upper thighs, spreading quickly across my torso, and back and forth across my chest and stomach...Then the 'orgasms' started to happen when I was out dancing.. ...about 13 or 14 times ...an especially intense bubbling of energy ... very intense and can last for minutes on end ... like an awakening of nerve endings...I think I have experienced a kundalini awakening...I know that I am an embodiment of the forces of life, love. As we all are."

**CASE 005458. male** “was experiencing a wonderful, though overwhelming, welling up of my spirit, and was finding it very difficult to accommodate the feeling. I asked my friends if they could drop me off at the local cathedral. On entering...I sat, ...experiencing a very powerful surge of energy coming from the base of my spine, up through my body to my head and beyond... as if my crown had spiritually dissolved , with an inexplicable shaft of ecstatic energy... (*I once read something of the ‘chakras’ and the ‘kundalini spirit’ which reflected this experience accurately.*) [original italics]... noticed a young man nudge his friend to look in my direction... I wondered if the energy ...I was giving out was somehow responsible.”

**CASE 100015 Male, had experience in 1972. Subject** “felt lightness in abdomen which ... I much later came to realize was the kundalini experience.”

**CASE 100041. Female aged 38 had** “powerful experience in which with my inner eye, I could see my doorway to the absolute as Jesus Christ...but insisting he was not God...I felt a deluge of calming energy rush through my whole body... I was assailed by a phenomenal amount of sexual energy. I was slightly prepared for this because I had learned about Kundalini, the force that brings enlightenment... I think that Kundalini energy actually changes the way the brain and nervous system operate – making us more naturally inclined to have a world view that considers the collective need as much as the personal. Loving ones neighbour becomes easier...Kundalini experiences felt like immensely strong sexual energy ... moving up through spinal column.”

**CASE 000043. Male born 1944. Subject was a** “serious, determined ‘searcher’ ... **In 1993 he** ...experienced strong spasms at night and did not sleep for 5 nights. **He considers in retrospect that** “sensations like mine are ‘pranic energies’ associated with ‘the awakening of the kundalini’ .” **Subject experienced vibrations inside the body** “intense pulsating pressure ...imagine being softly kissed on the neck by a lover.” **His wife gets a mild shock of she touches his chakra locations. Subject concludes that** “Cosmic consciousness is massive, intricate multidimensional and transpersonal...Spirituality involves exhausting work” and requires **your total ego demolition** (bold font original).

**CASE 000048. Male born 1950. 18 page report on experiences in 1987 at age 37, summarized in 3<sup>rd</sup> person as follows:** a “Kundalini release” ...peak experience partially documented by the subject and qualified medical practitioners in [Spring] 1987. The ...experience of pure white light, was shared, at least peripherally, by the [subject’s] young daughter. The experience left the author with a changed state of consciousness,” **The report** “is, in part, a medical case history regarding an unusual and short-lived, but life changing ... Kundalini ... experience” **where the subject speaks of** “the dreamy richness of vision” and states “I am eternal... The power is great use it wisely ...” [**and speaks of a**] “belief in the power, glory and energy of the universe,” observing that “the vital energies of the Kundalini had been unchained, and pure energy had run rampant through a body and brain. But the energy seemed to know what it was doing, even though [at the time] it mystified the patient and his doctors.” The subject noted that ‘soon after the 1987 kundalini episode the subject began to feel an overwhelming sense of joy. Joyous songs, including “Amazing Grace” and Stevie Wonder’s “There’s a place in the sun,” came spontaneously to mind, and

he sang and hummed them with unconcealed rapture, and beaming smiles.”

**CASE 200019. Male had experiences at ages 22 and 33. While meditating,** in 2004, in a “deep state of concentration... noticed white lights at the side of my vision ... I experienced a lot of physical sensations like electricity/tingling over my forehead and ... at the top of my vision came a bright white sparkling ball made up of sliver white rays/blades ...The physical sensations intensified over my whole body to such a degree that I felt numb...and the electricity was intense...at this moment I had a completely overwhelming sense of bliss/love. It was awesome- it made everything else I had ever experienced pale into comparison. Then a few minutes later, a massive surge of upwards energy towards this light actually made me stand up from a sitting mediation as I felt that I was being shot up out of my body...I believe that I experienced a Kundalini awakening where the Kundalini energy shoots upwards toward the crown chakra. An amazing experience.”



## God Cured My Cancer: Assessing the Efficacy of Religious Healing

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### Abstract

While the literature examining the links between religion and health has grown exponentially in the past decade, rather less attention has been given to the topic of religious healing, and more specifically whether it 'works' or not. To date anthropological work in this area has largely focused upon its symbolic aspects arguing that its efficacy is mediated by the manipulation of religious symbols and the experiential changes consequent upon this. After discussing what we mean by efficacy and the differences between healing and curing, I pose the question of biomedical effectiveness- can religious healing result in biomedical cure and what problems arise from the application of scientific and biomedical criteria to religious healing? I illustrate the talk by discussing three healing contexts: Intercessory prayer; Pentecostal healing and healing at the Catholic shrine of Lourdes.

### Introduction: The question of efficacy in medical anthropology

The medical anthropological literature is replete with examples of traditional healing and as Waldram (2000) notes, ethnographic narratives often suggest that such practices are effective without discussing what criteria are deployed to assess efficacy. Building upon the distinctions between disease -organ and biochemical pathology- and illness -the social response to disease ( Eisenberg 1977, Kleinman 1980 and Young 1982), medical anthropologists differentiate between *curing* – the removal of pathology or the repairing of physiological dysfunction –and *healing*- repair of the affective, psychosocial and spiritual aspects of ill health. However as Waldram (2000) points out, it is erroneous to maintain that biomedicine cures disease and that traditional medicine (and as I shall discuss subsequently religious healing) only heals illness. All medical systems involve both healing and curing. This assumption arises from the emphasis in traditional healing on its ritual and ceremonial aspects and the symbolisations associated with them. This detracts from the possibility that any curing

does in fact occur. Furthermore healing takes account of the social, economic, may extend beyond the individual patient to his or her family and to the wider community or various aspects of the cosmos. Whereas biomedical treatment generally focuses upon the individual patient, by contrast traditional healing focuses upon the collectivity and the social realm. Understandings of efficacy are likely to be embedded in these processes. Healing can still occur while the underlying pathology remains unchanged.

Authors have defined efficacy in diverse ways. For instance Young (1983:1208) speaks of medical efficacy as 'the capacity of a given practice to affect sickness in some desirable way', as 'curing disease... or healing illness'. He differentiates between material proofs tied to the real world, 'scientific proofs' confirmed through applying scientific methods and finally 'symbolic proofs' related to ordering events and providing meaning in individual episodes of sickness. Nichter (1992:226) uses the term 'curative efficacy' to denote 'the extent to which a specific treatment measurably reduces, reverses or prevents a set of physiological parameters in a specific context'. By contrast healing 'involves the perception of qualitative change in the condition of the afflicted/or concerned others. Healing efficacy pertains to the symbolic aspects of treatment and includes placebo responses. For this author healing may or may not entail curing. Non-biomedical traditions may be concerned with 'curative efficacy' ie with physiological change, although it may not be understood in the same way as in biomedicine. He asks whether curing and healing efficacy can be distinguished. In his view efficacy may be differently defined by practitioner and patient and efficacy is something that needs to be negotiated between them both in biomedicine and in traditional healing. Waldram (2000: 613) states:

'Determinations of efficacy, then, are made in different ways by different actors in the sickness episode. Each actor occupies a unique position, with unique and often very personal perceptions, experiences, and motives from which he or she draws as efficacy is negotiated.' In line with this Kirmayer (2004) notes that efficacy of a healing practice may be assessed in different ways in diverse cultural groups and it must be understood in a wider cultural context. Whereas in biomedicine efficacy denotes recovery, improved function and diminished suffering, in other healing systems healing refers to repairing broken relationships with the family, community or cosmos including relationships with higher powers like gods or spirits. Finally even if the 'patient' remains symptomatic other members of the family or wider community are helped or social conflict is reduced.

An illustrative example of differential understanding of sickness and cure is that of the Navaho who commonly attribute cancer to lightening, an aetiological factor which is not accepted by the biomedical community (Csordas 1989). Among this group diseases are classified by aetiology rather than in terms of symptoms. For them cancer has a mythic origin caused by lightening which is outside the parameters of biomedical thought. Lightening is seen as a weapon used by deities as a tool or weapon and in Navaho mythology refers to snakes, arrows and other shooting phenomena. Whereas Navaho medicine is concerned with the removal of causes of disease, biomedicine is more concerned with removing the disease itself. Thus the biomedical concept of cure is dissimilar to the Navaho and Csordas questions whether we can legitimately apply biomedical criteria and standards to Navaho treatments. Among the Navaho the standard 'cure' for lightening is the Shooting Chant.



Anthropologists have frequently deployed biomedical or scientific approximations in traditional cultures (eg Ackernecht 1971, Devereux 1940, Kleinman 1980, Singer and Baer 1995). However there are epistemological differences between biomedicine and various forms of traditional healing and there are issues applying the so called 'culture free' scientific standards to the latter in the belief that these standards are universal for defining cure. While traditional practitioners, influenced by globalisation, may use biomedical language, this does not necessarily reflect their understandings of biomedical concepts. As Waldram (2000:607) asserts: Even the basic concepts of traditional and medicine are fraught with Eurocentrism and English-language biases, and they may be little more than very crude approximations, at best, of complex indigenous thought.'

### **Religious healing**

While the past few decades have seen increasing academic attention given to the complex relationships between religion and health, the topic of religious healing has received relatively less attention. By religious healing I refer to a healing brought about by faith or prayer. Vellenga (2008) notes: 'Religious healing assumes the presence of a supernatural power which can restore the natural order, whereas biomedicine presupposes a natural order that can be studied by natural and biosciences. Csordas and Lewton (1998) in their comprehensive review of religious healing cross culturally note that the question of efficacy is often an afterthought and taken for granted. Few authors take up the question of the efficacy of religious healing as a central concern nor do they address the biological or physiological aspects of therapeutic efficacy. Instead their concern is with the symbolic healing aspects involving the manipulation of signs, the phenomenological aspects of performance and subjective experience, provision of meaning and cognitive order, and the resolution of social conflict or the reordering of social roles. Often psychological mechanisms like trance, dissociation, catharsis and suggestion are uncritically evoked to account for therapeutic efficacy.

There is some agreement among anthropologists that religious healing, shamanism and psychotherapy are all versions of symbolic healing which involves the manipulation of healing symbols (eg Dow 1986, Moerman 1983, Kleinman 1988). In Dow's schema symbolic healing results from four structural processes. First a symbolic bridge must be built between personal experience, cultural meanings and social relations. All forms of symbolic healing originate from a mythic world –a shared model of experiential reality which comprises symbols linking the social system to the self of the sick person. The healer and the patient particularize a segment of this mythic world to heal a patient. Second, the healer attempts to persuade the sick person that their problem relates to some aspect of that mythic world. Third the healer changes the patient's emotions by the use of transitional symbols which are particularized from the general meaning system. Here the participants share mutual expectations about healing of the illness. Finally in the confirmatory stage the healer confirms that the particularized symbolic meaning has been transformed eg that a spirit has now been exorcised. This transformation can have a significant effect upon the way in which the sick person experiences his/her illness and can have important physiological effects.

Csordas (1994) in his study of Catholic Charismatic healing proposes a 'cultural phenomenological theory' of religious healing grounded in embodiment- the immediacy of bodily experience and orientation. The healing involves an imaginal encounter with Jesus as a healing power. For him sensory imagery and performative utterance- both embedded in the Charismatic sense of meaning- transform the self and cultivate a sense of sacred self. In his view the imagery of Jesus in Charismatic healing transforms orientations towards others and towards the self and the self - processes include emotion, self -creation, imagination and memory. The experience of 'being slain in the spirit' where participants fall backwards and are caught by other congregants produces a sense of being overtaken by Divine power. Furthermore the motor, emotional and sensory changes evoked by ritual produce in participants experience of a direct relationship with Jesus who possesses an all- encompassing and omnipotent power which surpasses any human relationship. The sense of bodily self -awareness engendered through ritual engagement is interpreted by ritual participants as the presence of divine power.

But can religious healing bring about physical effects on the body? Kirmayer (2004) notes how healing rituals and other symbolic practices can directly impact physiology, experience, and interpersonal interaction. For him the metaphorical transformation of the quality of experience is at the heart of symbolic healing. Authors have often associated biomedical healing with physiological changes, whereas the effects of symbolic healing are viewed as purely psychological. Kirmayer makes the important point that a distinction between biological and symbolic healing cannot be easily made. Symbolic healing may have physiological effects. Symbolic stimuli and psychological expectations can significantly impact physiology and all interventions will have effects dependent upon the meaning for the patient receiving it. Finally Moerman (2012) relates symbolic healing to meaning responses –for him a positive response to meaningful experiences facilitates human healing. He reframes the placebo response as a meaning response “the physiological or psychological effects of *meaning* in the treatment of illness” ([Moerman, 2002](#), p. 14).

Is there evidence that religious healing has biological or physiological efficacy? In this paper I focus on Christian healing in three contexts: intercessory prayer; Pentecostal healing and Catholic healing at the pilgrimage site of Lourdes.

### **Biomedical aspects of healing: The Clinical trial as Western-centric**

The clinical trial is held in biomedicine to be the gold standard for evaluating efficacy. This involves the random allocation of patients to treatment and control groups, the double blinding of both patients and researchers and the use of statistical methods to look for significant differences. Human experience is generally ignored. Such research studies look for indicators of efficacy which are different from those that are sought by patients and healers in traditional medicine. Furthermore the healing process is decontextualized and taken out of its cultural context. As Good (1994: 23) argues: "grounding cross-cultural analysis on practices current in contemporary biomedicine may produce findings more apparent than real". Furthermore subjecting traditional healing to clinical trials might abolish the placebo effect which as many have argued (eg Laderman and Roseman 1996, Moerman 1983, Dow 1986) plays a significant role in the efficacy of traditional treatments. Kaptchuk (2002, p. 817). bemoans the fact that

dismissing placebo effects “diminishes our knowledge of important dimensions of health care” As we shall discuss below there are significant scientific and theological issues in the application of clinical trials to religious healing, particularly prayer (Andrade and Radhakrishnan 2009).

The use of clinical trials and the deployment of scientific methods generally to assess claims of religious healing relates to the wider question of the limits of science and the ways in which scientists draw the boundaries of what phenomena scientific methods can and cannot investigate (Lamont and Monar 2002). Do science and religion differ in terms of what they define as evidence? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the scientific method for studying religion? As will be discussed, there is controversy among scientists pertaining to the role of clinical trials in intercessory prayer. Finally if controlled trials were to demonstrate positive effects of intercessory prayer on health what are the implications for the authority of religion?

### **Intercessory prayer**

The study of intercessory prayer has captured much academic attention in the past two decades or so. In a typical study one group of medically ill patients receives prayer and the outcomes are compared with another group who do not. Recipients are randomised to one or another group. The majority of studies find no significant measurable difference in the improvement in health status of individuals who have been prayed for, versus those people who have not been prayed for (Masters et al. 2006). In fact some studies demonstrate worse outcomes in the prayed for groups (Byrd 1988, Benson 2006). A meta-analysis found “no discernible effect” (Masters, Spielman and Goodson 2006). A systematic review of intercessory prayer stated that, while 7 of 17 studies demonstrated “small, but significant, effect sizes”, the most methodologically rigorous studies did not produce any significant findings (Hodge 2007).

Gunther Brown (2012) argues that we need to incorporate theological ideas into scientific studies of religious phenomena in order to enhance construct validity and ecological validity. While scientific empirical methods can legitimately be deployed to examine religious healing, they cannot comment on the interpretations of religion. While it is possible to demonstrate changes in organ pathology before and after prayer, the actual cause and effect is beyond the remit of ordinary clinical research methods; science cannot comment on the supernatural which by definition is beyond the boundaries of empirical science. Gunther Brown asserts: “To ask the question of whether science can prove or disprove the healing power of prayer points toward the unparalleled cultural authority of ‘science’ in the modern Western world.” (p276)

The study of intercessory prayer has its supporters and its opponents. Detractors derive from both the scientific community and from the religious community. Richard Sloan and Rajasekhar Ramakrishnan (2006) assert, “Most of the scientific community has objected to giving serious consideration to such research, but we live in an era of growing irrationalism.” These authors aver that the methodology of studies on religion and prayer is highly problematic and further assert that such studies should conform to the high standards of science. They especially point out the fact that investigators cannot control and measure the exposure to prayer and specific outcome variables

cannot be identified and to this extent such studies can never be conclusive.

Gunther- Brown (2012) details the potential sources of bias in healing prayer studies. It is near impossible to achieve pure control groups in a prayer experiment, since patients assigned to the control group may pray for themselves, or their friends and relatives may pray for them. *Placebo effects*— *psychosomatic* improvements which result from the fact that subjects believe they are receiving a therapeutic intervention, can never be completely eliminated regardless of whether or not that intervention has any intrinsic therapeutic value. *Empathy effects* arise from the concern and attention shown by a medical or religious healer. *Hawthorne effects* refer to short-term improvements arising from the motivation evoked by the attention paid to subjects during a study, regardless of the nature of the experimental intervention. Sloan and Ramakrishnan (2006) bemoan the fact that in IP trials there is limited control of the exposure of the active agent. They note that in typical RCTs it is the investigator has control over the exposure to the active agent.

There are issues in defining the quantitative aspects of prayer. What constitutes prayer 'dose' –is it the length of the prayer, the underlying enthusiasm? What is the influence of their moral attributes like kindness, altruism? What about their levels of belief? How do qualities of the person praying influence outcome? Is it ever possible to equate prayer in different faith conditions- eg is Muslim prayer the same as Christian prayer? It is impossible to measure all the variables involved in the prayer process.

Members of religious communities often oppose the study of intercessory prayer labelling it as blasphemous or even sinful. Their primary bone of contention pertains to subjecting God to empirical testing. There are problems from a theological perspective? Can God be coerced into answering prayers? Why would a benign, all loving God favour one group rather than another? Is it unethical for a Christian to pray for one group and not another, both of whom are suffering. Andrade and Radakrishnan (2009) pose two significant questions pertaining to God's role in healing: 'If research on intercessory prayer is positive, does it suggest to us ways and means by which we can manipulate God or make his behavior statistically predictable?' And 'Why would any divine entity be willing to submit to experiments that attempt to validate his existence and constrain his responses?'

Having examined the issues involved in assessing biomedical efficacy of intercessory prayer I now move onto Pentecostal healing.

### **Pentecostal Healing**

Candy Gunther Brown (2012) has provided an excellent discussion of Pentecostal Healing and the discussion below is informed by her work. From its inception Pentecostalism underscores the healing power of the Holy Spirit both for physical and for psychological problems and healing is therefore central to the movement and is responsible its wide appeal. From its inception Pentecostalism drew upon the power of the Holy Spirit for physical, mental ('inner healing' of emotions and relationships) and social healing. Often discernment is deployed to establish the role of evil spirits causing illness which, if present, may give rise to an exorcism. Finally the expression

of an individual's testimony- a description of their life pre salvation- is considered as a potent emotional healing strategy.

In the Pentecostal Movement healing always 'works' as a spiritual experience through bringing subjects closer to God. While physical and social- emotional healing are hoped for, they are secondary aspects. The removal of perceived barriers to divine intimacy including personal sin and demonic influence, as Poloma (1998) notes, constitutes 'spiritual healing' for them.

Is there evidence that Pentecostal healing is effective in the biomedical sense? Pentecostals are ambivalent about subjecting their healing practices to biomedical scrutiny. Sometimes doctors are enlisted as an apologetic strategy to demonstrate healing authenticity. In other cases Pentecostals are wary of biomedical assessment, arguing it indicates lack of faith and is possibly dangerous for it. Some early twentieth Century Pentecostals have eschewed the use of medical cures arguing that biomedicine can interfere with faith, even to the extent of equating medicine with unbelief and maintaining that medical assessments will disconfirm 'miraculous' healing rather than corroborate them. Others have deployed medical technology like X rays to support their assertions that prayer is superior to medicine.

Arguing that medical documentation in these contexts is often sketchy and ambiguous she states: "medical documentation ... cannot prove—though in certain cases it may disprove—that prayer heals anybody" (p. 153). She examines how Pentecostal Christians perceive healing and asserts that: "*perceived* divine healing experiences have the potential to exert lasting effects—not only on the person claiming healing but also on family members, friends, and even on individuals with whom network connections are strikingly weak, indirect or transitory" (p. 274). For her interactions with the Divine result in emotional changes that themselves impact mental and physical health. In her view healing works as a spiritual experience –becoming closer to God and physical and psychological healing are secondary. As John Wimber (1987:66), a charismatic pastor and a founder of the Vineyard Movement, asserts:

'The healing of our spirit, in which our relationship with God is renewed and restored, is the most fundamental area of healing. Without doubt the healing of our spirit is the lynchpin around which all other areas of healing revolve.'

In another review of the area Gunther Brown (2015) points out that little has been published relating to biomedical support for healing in Pentecostal groups (see Keener 2011:1-2). She makes the important point that those who pray are more concerned with receiving healing than with the need to document their recovery. After it takes a lot of effort to follow up individuals who have been healed and it detracts from the actual task of healing. Furthermore even if prayer does result in healing, patients generally do not feel the need to return to doctors to prove it. Yet even so, testimonies of successful healing are commonplace among Pentecostals. But, as she notes, it is high profile Pentecostal groups who circulate the most successful healing narratives who are the most reluctant to follow up their followers from a biomedical perspective.

Compared to the Catholic Church which is keen to demonstrate biomedical healing efficacy, in contrast Reformation era Protestants are suspicious of such healing claims even in the presence of supportive medical evidence. In some instances celebrated



healers like Oral Roberts and Kathryn Kuhlman have deployed the use of medical records to document changes in health status. Kathryn Kuhlman insisted on the use of medical documentation to corroborate her healings. Carefully selected healing testimonies were compiled by her into a number of books including *Nothing is Impossible for God* (1974). Cases ranged from metastatic cancer, disappearance of goitres, recovery of blindness and the reappearance of decayed bones.

As in Catholic healing at Lourdes, she deployed criteria from the Lourdes Medical Bureau to confirm a healing as 'miraculous'. First the illness had to originate from an organic or structural problem. Second healing of the disease must occur too rapidly for psychosomatic processes to account for it. Third it was necessary for the patient's primary physician to verify the healing. Fourth, the healing could not be accounted for by remission of the disease. But as Gunther Brown (2015) rightly points out medical evidence can never prove the permanence of cure and furthermore, absence of medical evidence does not demonstrate the absence of healing. Medical documentation is often incomplete making it impossible to be certain that biomedical healing has definitely occurred. The most the documentation can show is that a medical expert diagnosed the patient with a disease, no medical interventions expected to cure the disease were administered, this expert can no longer detect signs of that disease, the recovery is deemed sufficiently rare in practice, and finally there is no evident medical explanation for the 'cure'.

In a similar way to Kuhlman, Benny Hinn, the Canadian American televangelist, published *Lord, I need a Miracle* (1993) with a forward written by Donald Colbert who confirmed that he had personally read the medical files for each patient. Despite recent advances in medical technology including imaging, recently Pentecostals have not been keen to use medical documentation to confirm their healings. Instead they deploy postmodern criteria of healing- sensory changes like visions, skin sensations, feelings of heat or diminution of pain as 'evidence'.

### Healings at Lourdes

A number of authors have examined narratives of healing among Roman Catholics (eg Duffin 2008 on Vatican sources on 1400 miracles from six continents and spanning four centuries; Harris 1999 on healings at Lourdes). Here I focus specifically on alleged cures at Lourdes in France.

Following miraculous sightings of the Virgin by the peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, Lourdes in the foothills of the Pyrenees rose to prominence as a healing sanctuary and today is a major Catholic site of pilgrimage hosting about six million visitors yearly. It is a place of healing ritual and the spring water from the grotto there is held to have health related benefits. Francois, Sternberg and Fee (2014) point out that:

'Significant mental factors are present in Lourdes: anticipation and hope, belief and confidence, fervor and awe, meditation and exaltation, and these are compounded by the spiritual atmosphere of the place, ritual gestures, hymns, and prayers. The reactivity and sensitivity of patients to these mental states may well be determinants of the cures and are likely to explain why the cures seem to occur at random and vary in timing, place, modes, and ways.'

From its inception the Lourdes sanctuary was subject to intense medical scrutiny and the Lourdes Medical Bureau functions to transfer medical investigations of alleged cures to the International Medical Committee of Lourdes. It is estimated that about thirty five claims of miraculous healing yearly are taken to the Lourdes Medical Bureau. Of these, three to five are subject to more intense medical investigation through examination of the patient, case notes, and test results including X rays and CT/MRI scans. If a decision is made to further investigate the data is sent to the International Lourdes Medical Committee comprising around twenty experts in different medical specialties. One expert is allocated to more fully examine the case including detailed reading of the literature pertaining to this specific disease. Stringent criteria are required for define a 'cure' as medically inexplicable:

- The original pathological diagnosis must be confirmed beyond any doubt
- The patient is viewed as "incurable" with current medical treatments
- The cure must be associated with the visit to Lourdes, either while the patient is in Lourdes itself or else within the vicinity of the shrine.
- The patient's cure should occur immediately and rapid resolution of symptoms and signs of the illness should take place.
- There should be no residual impairment or deficit remaining ie the cure must be complete
- There should be no signs of recurrence of the illness over time ie the cure is permanent.

However, only the Church itself can decide whether or not a cure is 'miraculous'. This decision is outside the remit of medical authorities. If the cure is thought to be medically inexplicable the case is referred to the Bishop of the Diocese where the cured patient resides and together with the Vatican both pronounce that the cure was indeed miraculous.

Sixty-seven Lourdes cures have been officially recognized as miraculous by the Roman Catholic Church including: seven in 1862, thirty-three in 1907–13, twenty-two in 1946–65, and five in 1976–2005. While the types of diseases allegedly cured a Lourdes are quite diverse tuberculosis and neurological conditions appear most frequently. Other cures include partial blindness, total blindness with meningitis, throat cancer, renal failure, angina and edema, damaged heart valves, and cure of intestinal fistulas and abscesses. In recent decades the number of reported miraculous cures has considerably declined. However in July 2008 a French nun who suffered with sciatica for decades, was wheelchair bound, and taking morphine, made a sudden recovery after returning home from Lourdes. She was pain free, could walk and was able to stop her analgesia. She reputedly said: "Then I heard a voice saying 'Remove the apparatus'. What happened? I don't know. I don't know. In February 2018 this healing was officially declared a miracle by the Catholic Church. The question arises however whether these alleged cures were divine in origin or resulted from some poorly understood psychosomatic process. They argue that if we do not understand how the healing came about, it cannot automatically be attributed to some divine intervention.

## Discussion

This paper has focused upon healing in three Christian contexts: Intercessory prayer,

Pentecostal healing and at the healing shrine of Lourdes. Christianity has had a longstanding concern with the health and healing of the mind, bod and spirit. In terms of healing we might argue that all forms of Christian healing provide symbolic resources for repairing the relationship between Man and God and bringing them into a more intimate relationship. This aspect is beyond the remit of science. In terms of illness religious healing can bring about experiential changes and affect the illness experience. But what about cure from the biomedical sense? Furthermore while clear phenomenological changes have been documented as a result of healing (eg Csordas 1994), these changes may indirectly impact physiological states, for instance the immunological system, even if the underlying disease is not eliminated.

Despite the time and money invested into intercessory prayer research overall there does not appear to be any benefit from the biomedical point of view. More so it is almost impossible to use double blind controlled trials in this area given the fact we can never be certain who is actually praying for the patient. Investigators cannot control and measure the exposure to prayer and specific outcome variables cannot be identified.

Authors writing on Pentecostal healing underscore the ambivalence of member of these congregations to biomedical assessment with some pointing out that biomedicine can undermine faith. When biomedical documentation is deployed, often as an apologetic strategy, it is often sketchy and ambiguous and impossible to argue from this that a biomedical cure has in fact come about. Finally it is important to note that Pentecostals are far more concerned with receiving healing than documenting it and persuading others that it has in fact occurred.

It is perhaps Catholic healing at Lourdes which has attracted the most rigorous biomedical assessment and deployed stringent criteria for assessing that biomedical cure has occurred. However even if this is the case it does not necessarily implicate some divine action. It may mean some hitherto now unknown force is responsible for this.

What is often ignored is that religious healing at the least has a strong placebo effect. Biomedicine generally ignores the placebo effect (Kaptchuk 2002). It is not only the religious intervention which might have some psychological effect-eg prayer or laying on of hands, but also the socio cultural context in which it occurs ie among the religious congregation and in a church and involving a specific relationship between the healer and the patient. Activities within the prayer service like singing may heighten this placebo effect. As Csordas (2017) rightly argues, a placebo is never purely inert and has both psychological and physiological actions. In this respect Kohls et al ( 2011) argue that spiritual experiences may predict their placebo response and bring about self -healing. These authors assert:

‘although there is consensus within the philosophy and psychology of religion that spiritual experiences—like all other types of experiences—are largely dependent on social, cultural or religious context , it is also important to recognize these experiences as psychophysiological events that involve, and are mediated by, peripheral and central neural (and neuroendocrine and/or neuroimmunological) substrates. ‘

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## **An Exploration of Spiritual Embodied Practice: Art, Death, Land**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will explore visual, performative and aesthetic responses to the theme of death, grief and loss in relation to spiritual experience. Religious experience will be aligned to a concept of spiritual expression involving creative responses to themes of death and grief with a potential of bringing together people of all faiths and none. Creativity, and the use of the creative imagination is explored as central to this lived spiritual experience. It is explored how this creative spiritual expression can co-exist as part of and also as transcending specific religious dogma. The paper will include reflections on theory about death and grief, incorporating artistic, performative and relational perspectives regarding these theories. There will be an interdisciplinary approach in evaluating contemporary research, identifying gaps in research, and providing new interdisciplinary frames of reference in developing and extending contemporary discourses. The work will add to as well as make links between contemporary writing on these subject areas.

The paper will start with an overview of core themes and research, followed by an explanation of framework of interdisciplinary research perspectives drawn upon. I will go on to discuss the links between a range of theorists and practitioners, particularly within the fields of performance art and ritual, death studies, spiritual psychology and sociology. I will draw upon the work of spatial geographer Avril Maddrell regarding her research and writing on relationship of religious experience to spiritual expression through ritual. The summary and final part of the paper will link further key themes of the research and their interwoven relationship.

### **Introduction**

Contemporary research indicates a revival of community interest in the theme of death, in searching beyond a purely medical, clinical approach (Walter, 1994; 1999; Valentine 2008). Imaginal, spiritual and symbolic visual image, has been explored by Carl Jung as providing a healing process in integrating a spiritual awareness of death within day to day life (Jung, 1986 edition). Ritual, enactment and public sharing of art

practice about death have been seen as tools of community therapeutic engagement (Schef, 2001; Bell 2009), bringing a sense of belonging within personal and public exchange, where artistic or creative expression assists a process of psychic integration (Turner, 1982). Engagement and public ritual through art practices about death can provide this cathartic sharing and positive relational exchange, which can also lead to therapeutic interaction and community engagement, including acknowledgement and development of positive continuation of bonds with dead loved ones (Fitzpatrick, 2012), within a context of contemporary community interest in the 'revival of death' (Walters, 1994).

My research develops these theories further to look at performative art ritual practices about death, dying, and grief in relation to a range of psychological, sociological, spiritual and philosophical reflexive methods and contexts, combining Social Interactionist theory (Charon, 1998), with Psychological Active Imagination (Jung 1983/1996 editions); (Romanynshyn, 2013), Heuristic (Hiles, 2002) and Relational Aesthetic discourses ( Bourriard, 1998) , together with Phenomenological approaches (Manen, 2014) and Personal Narrative frameworks ( Valentine,2008; Fitzpatrick,2012) My research explores embodiment as central within an intersubjective responsiveness to lived experience, which involves awareness of the presence of death in life. Connections are made between theory within death and grief studies with performance art theory and practice stemming from performance art interventions of the 'Happenings' movement of 1960's and 70's, the paratheatrical work of Grotowski, land art movement, including spiritual expression through art practice, particularly in relation to works of contemporary performance artist Ana Mendieta. Performance art is examined alongside relational process, (Bourriard, 1998), where relatedness between self, other, environment and theme of mortality are central. Connections are made between performative expression and interdisciplinary approaches regarding the body in relation to visual kinaesthetic of relationship within a sense of 'being in the world' (Merleau Ponty, 2008 edition). Jungian active imagination methods (Jung, 1986 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013), phenomenological perspectives (Manen, 2014; Carman, 2008) and narrative research methods (Valentine, 2008) are particularly utilised as reflexive methodologies.

Exploring performativity of the living body in relation to visual culture of sacred environments will be developed both in theory and practice, to include concentration and focus on specific works by performance artist Ana Mendieta. This will be centred within a contextualisation of contemporary community 'revival of death' (Walters, 1994). Theoretical underpinning to this includes analysis of and development to studies of contemporary theories related to death, grief, continuing bonds and spiritual expression, incorporating teleogenic plot theory, spatial geography, and use of personal narrative, phenomenological, Jungian embodied active imagination, and relational art theory as key interwoven concepts.

Exploration of the visual and embodied through performance art and ritual are seen to be a tool for spiritual and therapeutic exploration of psychological and aesthetic integration, involving awareness of relationship of life to death as part of creative expression in community, which is accessible across and beyond distinct religious expression. Furthermore, the work examines relationship between academic writing, the body, performativity and visual image, as spiritual response to environment.

## **Research Perspectives**

My research methodology involves interdisciplinary and self reflexive methods, with theoretical contextualisation on personal narrative (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012), relational art (Bourriard, 1998), spatial geography (Maddrell, 2010, 2009, 2016) and phenomenology (Manen, 2014), as well as psychological and sociological perspectives (Jung, 1986 edition; Chiron, 1998). Linking these methodologies from a diversity of disciplines and perspectives, I build on an interdisciplinary approach, and bring into further focus a combination of reflexive methods emphasising relationship between embodiment, visual image, spirituality, and personal narrative. There follows an overview of key theories which inform this methodology.

A phenomenological emphasis on lived experience and physical relatedness between self, other and environment informs my work, linking to relational perspectives within visual art theory. Merleau Ponty's phenomenological work is key, emphasising embodied relationship between self, other and environment within our 'being in the world' with emphasis on a pre cognitive state of wonder and being of children as also vehicle of wisdom for the adult, (Carman, 2008) and which also has relationship to a spiritual pantheistic approach (Wordsworth), that 'the child is the father of the man' (Wordsworth, 1967 edition). Merleau Ponty speaks of touch, textural relationship and direct communication between self and environment, with art being described 'as a bodily act' (Carman citing Merleau Ponty p.184). In his emphasis on flow of sensory experience, presence, embodiment and interconnection we link phenomenological perspectives and performative art; self, body and environment being in continual presence of dialogue (Manen, 2014 p.131).

Jungian concepts of active imagination, individuation, archetypal connectivity, the spiritual, numinous, and creative dialogue between conscious and unconscious, are widely documented within contemporary psychological research and writing (Storr, 1983; Romanynshyn, 2013). Jung highlighted the importance of the visual symbol and image as a way to access spiritual and inner truths (Jung, 1966 p.77). Jungian based researcher and writer, Robert Romanynshyn, in his internationally acclaimed work 'The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind', develops and applies Jungian theories to research (Romanynshyn, 2013). Centering academic research within an embodied, imaginal and spiritual self reflexive position, he explores a phenomenological sense of self as applied to Jungian individuation of having a capacity to be present to grief, mourning and death as central to life. Roamanynshyn points to the archetype of the Orphan within this individuation process of adult self awareness, as an archetype which connects us to the sense of grief of an adult being in the world which is a necessary part of life. It is possible to link this to performative spontaneity of organicity explored by Grotowski and the performance art Happenings movement; an expressive authentic response to experience in stripping away masks of the world as a return to authentic being (Richards, 1995). Romanynshyn develops a concept of 'reverie' in describing Jungian active imagination processes within an embodied visual and spiritual approach to academic research. He brings the organicity of performance art found in the art of artists such as Ana Mendieta and Bourriard's relational aesthetics work, and applies this to the field of academic research and writing. Romanynshyn speaks of research being a searching into what has been lost in connection to the wisdom of the ancestors and the collective unconscious 'We work in the ambience of their dark-light,...one sets a place for the ancestors who gather

around the writing table...this ancestral audience for whom the work is done' (Romanynshyn, 2013 p.313)

Inevitably linked to the embodied, imaginal individuation process of sense of self in the world is a personal narrative frame of reference. Personal narrative methodology has been central within contemporary death studies discourse, (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012), bringing into focus the individual making sense of their own reality through individual life narrative in community which continues to change and evolve, and which has an ongoing bond of connection to the past and others who have died. Within performance art practice, the embodied narrative of the individual artist in direct relationship to other and environment is central. Within performance art and ritual practices exploring death and grief, the body of the artist is present within embodied narratives where death is explored as part of this performative relatedness of authenticity in living. My research explores personal narrative and includes teleogenic plot theory as having a central role in defining and shaping narrative (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Teleogenic plot emphasises a cyclical and continuous shaping and re shaping of narratives which both flow into the future and simultaneously stay connected with past roots, which also have capacity of flow and change in relation to the present. There is a sense of the past informing the present, while also being re shaped by it, and so in return identity and relationship does not stay in the past realm but in a flowing timeless present. 'the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle' (Paley, 2009, p.21 citing Brooks, 1985) Within continuing bonds bereavement theory there is an ongoing bond between individual and those who have died, while the relationship is also dynamic and shaped by life in the present, and within performative and relational art practice the emphasis on authentic movement and connection means there is a continued re discovery of past memories in the lived present which reminds us of a sense of continued spiritual bond and relationship of past and present, between the living and ancestors. An example of this is when the performance artist Paul Hurley in his work 'I Fall to Pieces' (Hurley, 2016) is moving his body in the lived experience of grief felt at the death of his friend, there is a re shaping and re configured physical as well as emotional and spiritual relationship between his body and felt experience.

My research links this work of continuing bonds within death studies to relational aesthetic perspectives (Bourriard, 1998), where artistic expression provides opportunity for intersubjective connection in community and authentic relatedness. Within this artistic expression is defined by intersubjective encounters between self, others, environment and community (Bourriard, 1998, p17.). Similarly to continuing bonds frames of reference and community connectivity through ritual expression in death studies, relational aesthetics sees artistic expression as the shaping of social bonds and a non-commodifying means of creating dialogue between people and environment. This non commodification focuses on social interaction as emotionally creative significant connectivity. This shaping of authentic dialogue connects performative artistic expression within phenomenological, narrational and imaginative exploration of relationship between self, community and environment, where death is an inevitable aspect of this expression. The materiality of an aesthetic object is framed within this interpersonal encounter, where dialogue takes place within a 'social intersice' of connection, an intersice being an interaction which is outside commodification and consumer based dialogue (Bourriard, 1998 p.16) which links us with the spiritual. A visual ritual emerges of intersubjective connection as embodied art.



It has been important to combine and interweave these research methodological perspectives within my work, being complementary to each other and providing depth of connection.

### **Death and Dying in relation to Visual Art and Performative Expression**

My research connects contemporary theories of death and dying to potential of visual arts practice as healing community processes. This can act as a means of assisting the living to integrate and incorporate awareness of death, grief and dying within social and personal life, involving continuation of bonds to loved ones who have died (Walters, 1992, Fitzpatrick, 2012, Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996)

A relational perspective to visual arts has a capacity to connect people in community, with potential to produce a healing catharsis, living with death as part of life, which includes forming a relationship with the past as part of an embodied awareness of the present moment, as work of a range of artists have demonstrated (Holbin, 2012; Walsh, 2011, Hurley, 2015). My research identifies performance art as having a particular capacity to engage in embodied holistic responsiveness to the subject of death through visual mediums (Bourriard, 1998; Mendieta, 1981; Abramovic, 1995).

Furthermore, exploration of telegenic plot theory within interspatial geography discourses can highlight and expand awareness of visual and performative expression in providing healing connections of death to life (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Maddrell, 2010; Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe, 2010) This takes my argument a stage further, in exploring grief and death awareness within visual embodied presence which has a capacity for spiritual alchemical transformation. This embodied transformation involves an interplay between both joy and grief in personal and collective narratives of mourning. This structural reformation of narrative involves a reconfiguration of self in relationship to others and environment. An embodied awareness of the flow of grief within the body as connected to the visual, moving body and the land, is symbolised through relationship between sacred architecture and landscape representative of death and the living body in spatial connection to time and place. This has a contextualisation within phenomenological, narrative, relational and imagistic frames of reference

Telegenic plot theory examines the nature of relationship and change with a continued attachment and flow of narrative between the present and the past, between the embodied life of the living and to people who have died and to ancestors (Fitzpatrick, 2012). There is a capacity to embrace change in the present while acknowledging relationships and attachment to the past which have energy and which continue to have value and presence for the psyche in the present moment. This telegenic plot structure of narrative is in contrast to Kubler Ross's popularist theory of bereavement and adjustment to death, where change is viewed as necessitating a break with the past in order to go forward into the future. (Kubler-Ross, 2008). Telegenic plot incorporates the past into dynamic relationship with present and future, in a flow of energetic connection, involving both change and ongoing integration within a nonlinear journey of relatedness. This can be connected with an interspatial geography perspective of relationship in time and space, which brings into focus the importance of psychical and embodied spatial relatedness to place, there is both a reformation



and ongoing relationship within a restructuring of energetic dialogue between time, body and place in community. (Ortega, 2004; Woodthorpe, 2010; Madrell, 2010) Contemporary research has indicated a dynamic of relationship within an interspatial and telegenic plot context, of dialogue between self, land and living energy of the past as seen and felt through earth and natural materials like stone. 'Landscape has been variously read as aesthetic, historic record and symbolic text, but rather than being seen merely as a cultural product, landscapes are increasingly recognised as polyvocal, dynamic, cultural processes which are experienced through embodied performance' (Maddrell (2010) p. 138). 'Deathscapes' interspatial researcher Avril Maddrell explores deep mapping of geographies of grief, which includes physical, emotional, symbolic, and virtual mapping,... the invisible topography of grief, a form of emotional deep mapping...' (Maddrell, (2016), p.169)

Theories of grief and loss can be energetically connected to performance art theories and practice. Performance art with roots in art 'Happenings' as a genre, have reference to visual performativity as relationship between people, land, the past (Pearson and Shanks, 2001), and the domain of grief (Fitzpatrick, 2010, 2012). This is now linked to exploration of Jungian alchemical psychical processes in relation to alchemical transformation of fear and mourning as playful embodied connection in community, within imagistic relationship. This paper also explores this with particular reference to the performative art practice of Anna Mendieta. Performance art has a historical context which challenges conventions of bureaucratic systems, bringing people together within relational connection. The embodied presence of the artist points towards what ultimately is of value and worth in contemporary society beyond market force consumption and mechanised authority (Bourriard, 1998). Contemporary research within grief and loss emphasise an individual need to challenge assumptions of structures which de value direct emotional engagement and authentic relatedness, bringing about individual connectivity in community, and presence within the living moment of what incorporates past and present within the flow of time (Walter, 1994, 1999; Fitzpatrick 2010, 2012).

### **Ritual and Performance Art in relation to Spirituality and Death**

My research observes links in visual culture, performance art practice, ritual, death, and spiritual expression (Jung, 1986 edition; Hillman, 1991; Pearson, 2001; Walter; 1994; Kuspit, 2000; Turner, 1982). There is a liminal space of connection and awareness through ritual expression as a space of bringing people together to experience life's relationship to death (Turner, 1982; Bell, 1992; Schef, 2001). The liminal space can be seen as a spiritual realm where a mystery of the unseen and everyday sense impressions meet (Campbell, 2008 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013). Performance art practice has a capacity to bring people together within this liminality with a heightened emotional presence in space and time, where there is capacity for creativity, art and life to come together (Ortega, 2006, p.34; Gritzner, 2011) 'Ultimately, this is where the field of psychology, ecology and art overlap' (Gablick, 1995 p, 382) Gritzner, in her extensive contemporary research about art and the spiritual, explores relationship of the word spirit, spiritual and art practice. She speaks of entering into a spiritual realm through art and performance as ...'gestures towards a kind of positive transcendence of negativity, for example, of death' (Gritzner, 2011 p.88)

Carl Jung's spiritual approach to psychology has been very influential to twentieth and twenty first century psychological, sociological and spiritual discourses. Jung challenged a Freudian view of human nature to also incorporate the numinous, mysterious, archetypal, and spiritual as being of utmost value in human expression and making sense of the world. (Jung, 1983 and 1986 editions) His work emphasises creative expression and self awareness through dialogue with inner visual image. Jung places the visual symbol as central to an understanding of spiritual aspects of psyche; and imagination as key to people reaching their potential. He developed the concept of individuation and active imagination, pointing to a need for the self to be aware of death as ever present in life. Active imagination introduces visual image as a means of connecting conscious and unconscious processes within individuation. Romanynshyn, contemporary Jungian scholar and academic researcher, relates individuation to the adult self becoming aware of the archetype of the Orphan within the psyche, as part of our connection with the earth and with death (Romanynshyn, 2013). He describes the capacity of the imagination as bringing together the world of the physical and the world of the spiritual, linking the sensory and spirit realm. Archetypal connection with the ancestors and through them the presence of death is central to this work. Jung and his followers such as Romanynshyn have much to contribute to spiritual exploration within death studies and continuation of bonds contemporary discourses and in linking the visual image and spiritual expression. In being in touch with the mourning body through symbol and imagination, the spiritual individuation journey brings embodiment to the archetype of The Orphan in performative self-expression, connecting us teleogenically with the ancestors and the past in a flow of relationship to the present moment. This captures a phenomenological embodied presence of relationship between past and present, contained within imaginative self awareness of interplay of life and death.

In her studies into spatial geography, grief and death, Avril Maddrell has researched the importance of the spiritual and sacred in relation to expressions of grief, undertaking research analysis with people in the UK, and concludes that even though formal religious worship has been in decline in recent years, nevertheless a form of spiritual belief is high among the UK population, which seeks self-expression (Maddrell, 2009, 2016). In her research into the creation of a contemporary architectural visual ritual site at the 'Witness Cairn' in Whitorn, Scotland, she explores a present day community performative intervention of expressions of shared rituals of grief and sharing connecting to past spiritual rituals and community pilgrimage (Maddrell, 2009).

A modern day cairn has been constructed by the community, where people can share personal narratives and create sacred performative actions through the placing of stones and pebbles as memorialisation for the dead. It is a sharing for all, where people from all faith and none participate. Adding decorated stones and pebbles to the cairn marks for people a dynamic of remembrance, witnessing presence or making a pledge. It is an interactive site of sharing and recognition of those who have died, in a continuation of bonds. Many of the stones have inscriptions of the dead, some have photos, some messages and some are purely left without a mark within remembrance and ritual (Maddrell, 2009, p.677) The community and visitors to the cairn are involved in a physical performative act of connection both to the presence of themselves in the landscape and to dead loved ones, in relationship to past and present. 'It was chosen because it was an embedded structure as well as a participatory one' (Maddrell citing

Brother Stephen Smyth, interview 2009, p.683). People are engaged in ‘a performative physical process’ ( Maddrell, 2009 p.684), where through making a sacred mark with the earth, the community are using performative actions and ritual in ‘living with grief as opposed to seeking an end to it through closure’ ( Maddrell 2009 p.685), thus the continuation of bonds is felt as living connection. She explores a definition of the sacred as ‘...that which is valued most highly and brings meaning to lives....’ (Maddrell, 2009 p.677), and within a broad definition of the spiritual which incorporates people of all religions and none, she also explores faith in itself as having a relationship to liminal and dynamic states of being, not as something fixed or unchanging. Her arguments link to a telegenic plot structure of personal narrative of grief, in a fluid structure of belief and meaning which changes within relationship to the past continually reforming in the present.

Maddrell’s research develops and builds on research into connections between visual performative expression, space and time, and sacred sites commemorating death. There is a connection to Mike Pearson’s work on performance art, the numinous, spiritual and ancient sacred monuments in the landscape, ‘...I stress that temporality be described as actuality, the return of the past in the present, but in a different guise...’ (Pearson, 2001 p15). Maddrell also connects us to Fitzpatrick’s research of ‘gifting’ bereavement objects at the Vietnam wall war memorial, and the importance of relational aesthetic objects within continuing bonds (Fitzpatrick 2012). In bringing together the research of Maddrell, Pearson, and Fitzpatrick within a performance art and ritual context, this paper demonstrates how visual performative actions in the landscape can be formed as healing rites of passage, where there is embodied mourning as performative ritual, which incorporates spiritual expression.

### **The Living and Grieving body within work of Ana Mendieta**

The performative work of Ana Mendieta will now be explored, highlighting and contextualising her work in relation to my wider research concerning death, grief and visual culture, within a relational embodied framework connecting people with death and land. Ana Mendieta explores space and time in relationship to the temporal body and the earth, there is a telegenic narrative to her embodied story of ever present connection with the archetypal feminine form, which is both womb and grave as represented by the earth (Ortega, 2006). There is a return to a geography of relatedness with people and environment, this interrelatedness of human beings in space within visual performativity as demonstrated in her work provides an ‘existential spatiality’ (Ortega, 2004 p.27) which connects our experience of life and death, and which link to the wider context of this research within death and visual culture.

Mendieta’s practice will now be explored further, by focusing on specific work of her ‘Siluetas’ series, ‘Imagen de Yagul’ and ‘Burial Pyramid Yagul’.

These works particularly highlight connection with the earth as symbolising both womb and grave, exploring this as sense of homecoming between the artist’s body and sense of belonging with the earth. Her work demonstrates an interplay of death as an inevitable aspect of being alive ‘Death, as a demonstration of the vulnerability of the body and, at the same time, an occasion for psychic resurrection...are her constant concerns...she performs the body and both death and living memory, a surviving silhouette, a transfigured body’ (Kuspit, 2000 p. 213)

Mendieta conducted her 'Siluetas' series of interventions in Iowa and Mexico from 1973 to 1980, simultaneously working on related performance of 'Imagen de Yagul' in 1973 and performing and filming 'Burial Pyramid Yagul' in 1974. What emerges in this work is an ongoing dialogue between her body as a medium of living sculpture and a liminal space between life and death, body and shadow embodied as part of the earth in a '...space which claims both presence and absence...fuelled by nostalgia..' (Ortega, 2004 p.25). An organic visual ritual emerges in her work, which Mendieta termed 'earth-body' work and 'earth-body' sculpture (Mendieta, 1981). This work relates to 'gifting' rites of passage of a mourning body, as described by Fitzpatrick (2012) and Maddrell (2009, 2016). Her embodied narrative of grief through her practice in expressing feelings of exile from her motherland reminds us of feelings described by Valentine's work on personal narratives of bereavement (Valentine, 2008). Mendieta speaks about this ritual of embodied mourning 'I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body based on my own silhouette...I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb, nature. My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth. (Barreras and Perreault, (1988) p.10 citing Mendieta)

'Image from Yagul' produced in 1973 marked the beginning of the 'Siluetas' series. (Rosenthal, (ed), 2013 p.78). Mendieta's naked body is placed in what appears to be a shallow grave in the earth, and on her body, as well as between her arms and legs, are placed streams of white flowers. Through the means of a photograph of her performance work, viewers share in the experience of being present with the artist's body, alive and still, covered with flowers, contained in the womb and grave of the earth. Morgan speaks of the profundity of work connecting both spiritual and physical expression, (Morgan,2015), and we are reminded of the work of Turner in describing organic ritual between self and environment providing a creative release and a sense of connective spiritual 'communitas' (Hughes 1998 p 2-3)

In her performative work 'Burial Pyramid Yagul' which was filmed (Mendieta, 1981), we see her lying in a grave like enclosure on the earth, with stones covering her naked body. Through the moving image the viewer can see the subtle movements and living relationship between the stones and her living body. There is movement with the artist's breath which shapes relationship with the stones with which she is covered. The work speaks of dynamic responsiveness between self, nature, life and death. This is reminiscent of teleogenic plot theory within death studies, in continuation of bonds to the earth, within embodied narrative of both permanence and change co existing, connected to both vitality and vulnerability (Fitzpatrick, 2012), which contrasts with the idea of death as something to be feared by the living. Within this dynamic of the living body in relationship to death and the land, Mendieta explores the female form within dynamic visual and textural relationship with the living earth, not as an object in society which 'buries it alive' (Kuspit 2000 p210). Kuspit describes her relationship to the land as 'sacred space...inscribing her body in the earth', and through this 'she performs the body and both death and living memory' (Kuspit p.213) It is interesting to note how the use of film in recording Mendieta's work brings a further vitality of presence to the work rather than technological distraction. Within a recent exhibition of the restored films of Mendieta, her god daughter, Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, speaks of the process of using modern technology as a restorative technique of assisting access to the vitality of



Mendieta's work, with the act of digital restoration as being purifying and cleansing in terms of both inner and outer image, assisting us to be aware of that, 'every time the film is played, in that moment is alive' (R.C.Mendieta, 2016)

In response to this body of work by Mendieta the viewer has experience of witnessing a healing connection of the body to its source within the earth. This is reminiscent of death rituals and ritual connectivity of both birth and death (Bell, 1992). Mendieta uses her own creativity and originality to create ritual structures which have their roots in archetypal ancient traditions created anew through the artist's imagination. The research by Walters (1994, 1999) and Valentine (1998) of a twenty first century 'revival of death', where ritual structures of religion are re invented within creative individual expression and attachment to community can be paralleled with her work. The work can also be linked to Jung's individuation process of the psyche witnessing mortality through vitality of imaginative integration, visual symbol connecting conscious and unconscious processes (Jung, 1983 edition). We are also reminded of Turner's liminality of ritual space (Turner, 1982), a liminal space where there is a transcendence from duality incorporating both life and death within psychic wholeness.

Mendieta's *Siluetas* and related works indicate how memorialisation through gifting of aesthetic object (Fitzpatrick, 2012), can be focused as archetypal mourning of gifting of the body itself in creative transitional space between life and death. The transitional aesthetic object is removed and the body itself embodies this gifting relationship in reverence with the earth. Attachment within transitional space of life and death connect with a teleogenic plot relationship between change and permanence of continued bonds. Eminent psychologist Winnicott's attachment model (Winnicott, 1971) becomes a lived experience of body and the earth, as the living body enters into a liminal ritual space which is a relationship with both life and death. Attachment is explored in being both permanent and transitory simultaneously, as embodied transience within time. This reminds us of spatial geography discourses of interspatial connectivity between physical, spiritual and psychological space and time. (Woodthorpe, 2010; Maddrell, 2016)

Mendieta takes the cultural act of burial and shapes within this act a performative expression of individual relationship between self, nature, and viewer. This can be referenced to Walters' exploration of a need of ritual community sharing within death awareness. In her practice the vitality of the human body is placed within the context of death, immersed within the natural world, and retaining its vitality while in immediate dialogue with death. Sometimes this image is her actual body, sometimes her shadow form as transient image of self in silhouette. Within contemporary spatial geography discourse about death and relationship to space and time, a spirit of place is explored in relationship between body and place, with spirit being viewed as a transcendental union between the two. (Davies, 2010 p. 208). This vitality of relationship can be perceived as sacred embodiment of relationship between life and death. In his writing about spirit and spatial geography, Davies explores the image of the breath while contemplating death; he speaks of a 'symbol of such vitality is 'breath', this ancient sign of 'life' (Davies, 2010 p.208). Davies goes on to speak of Melanesian rituals of connectivity to the presence of those who have died, celebrated as part of the living breath of those who continue to live, and is an aspect of joy in life rather than a depressive dwelling on the past 'Through this emotional nexus bereaved people are provided with a cultural resource for developing their identity, a time of positive



opportunity...’ (Davies, 2010 p.218). Within this we are reminded of Jung’s exploration into alchemy and the possibilities of transformation integrating polarised states of being. Through Mendieta’s practice, we witness visual embodied practice within this integrated awareness of death and life in immersive relationship to nature ‘the analogy was that I was covered by time and history’ (Mendieta, cited by R.C Mendieta, 2016). It is of current interest to note, in linking her work to continuing bonds and death, how in June 2016, at the opening of the new wing of the Tate Modern in London, a group of women performed a symbolic action of defiance, by circling together in the Tate with symbolic blood strewn across their bodies, as performative demonstration to the gallery of not exhibiting Mendieta’s work. Chanting ‘Where is Ana Mendieta’ the women grouped together as mark of female bonding and continuing bond of strength in acknowledgment of Mendieta’s practice beyond her death.

### **Summary**

The journey of my research has involved an interdisciplinary approach to focus on the healing and transforming potential of visual and performance art and ritual practices when addressing themes of death, grief and dying. The work has been contextualised within diverse disciplines related to death and visual culture, incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluation of theory and practice. This has brought together and developed aspects of contemporary writing and research, and interconnected a range of perspectives from visual arts, sociology, spiritual psychology, death studies, spatial geography, relational aesthetics and philosophy. The work has examined relationship between ritual, rites of passage and memorialisation within a visual arts context, with a focus of this in relationship to performance art and relational art practice. Religious experience is explored within a context of embodied creative spiritual expression which can be experienced both as part of and beyond religious dogma.

There follows a summary in relation to core themes of the research. The first section ‘Performance Art, Ritual, Visual Culture and Death’, will provide an overview of the work, following this and linked to it, will be sections encompassing themes of ‘Embodiment’, ‘Spiritual Expression’, ‘Play’ and ‘Continuation of Bonds’

### **Performance Art, Ritual, Visual Culture and Death**

This research has identified ritual and performance art as being highly significant to contemporary dialogue about death and grief. Ritual theory (Scheff, 2001; Bell, 1992; Turner, 1982 ;) has been studied alongside contemporary theory and practice regarding memorialisation ritual about death, grief and of continuation of bonds (Maddrell, 2009, 2010, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2012). This has been further contextualised within relational, performative and performance art theory and practice (Richards, 1995; Kaprow, 2003; Bishop, 2012; Bourriard, 1998), with reflection on work of specific performance artist Ana Mendieta. Performance art as a genre has been interlinked with ritual and other visual art forms; it has been recognised that many artists, such as Mendieta, have not defined themselves exclusively as performance artists, and use a wider vocabulary to describe their practice. Jungian active imagination methods (Jung, 1986 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013), phenomenological perspectives (Manen, 2014; Carman, 2008) and personal narrative research methods (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012) have been particularly utilised as reflexive methodologies within this

contextualisation

This research has contributed to current writing and practice in documenting and evidencing the capacity for dialogue and convergence between a wide range of disciplines to inform and add to contemporary current discourse within these subjects' areas.

This includes an inevitable interplay of relationship, structure and meaning between ritual and performance art, (Pearson and Shanks, 2001), The work of Maddrell (2010, 2016), Fitzpatrick (2012) and Woodthorpe (2010) have been influential to this work in exploring memorialisation ritual regarding death and continuation of bonds, and have been studied in conjunction to works by Ana Mendieta. Linked to this Pearson and Shanks provide a connecting link between performativity, ritual and visual language of living archaeology within memorialisation and performance, connecting memory, self-identity and landscape (Pearson and Shanks, 2001). Contemporary interspatial geography research adds to this work in exploration of interplay of self and space to form a fusion of inner and outer 'Deathscapes' (Madrell, 2010; Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010). These works have been connected to writings of pantheistic poets such as Wordsworth, in exploring memory and visual image related to connectivity of continuing bonds with the past, merging inner and outer landscapes within a timeless connectivity of bonds. Through this relationship between inner and outer image and land, interconnection of both mourning and joy, has been explored, connecting to 'the still, sad music of humanity' (Wordsworth, 'Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey' 1967 edition)

### **Embodiment**

Embodiment within creative expression and visual arts practice has been central to my work. Contextualised within visual culture and death studies theories, the living body and visual embodied expression has been explored in relation to death and the liminal domain of connectivity to those who have died (Maddrell, 2010, Fitzpatrick, 2012.) Inspired by performance art's emphasis on live art practice as authentic expression, particularly works by Mendieta, my research has developed an emphasis on embodiment within memorialisation as ritualised expression. This adds to current research in its emphasis on the living body within memorialisation dialogue.

Phenomenological perspectives of embodied relatedness of 'being in the world' (Carman, 2008), have been explored, alongside aesthetics of the inter-relational (Bourriard, 1998) and interspatial dialogue (Maddrell, 2012). Personal narrative structures of individual meaning making in community have been considered (Valentine, 2008) and been developed within an embodiment of personal narrative in relationship with the earth. Influenced by artist Ana Mendieta, this has led my research to focus on visual moving body in relationship to physical personal narrative of connection between past and present.

The memorialisation and continuation of bonds studies of Fitzpatrick (2012) and Madrell (2016), exploring gifting ritual memorialisation of exchange, have been examined, exploring centrality of emphasis on embodiment of gifting within dynamic memorialisation. There is direct exchange and dialogue between the living body, land, and ancestors. An emphasis on the physical narrative of visual gestures, as influenced

by Grotowski and the performance art movement of the Happenings, assists in creating a liminal space within physicality of relatedness, where structure is fluid and physical exchange can be recreated organically and spontaneously within a ritual structure.

An interface between the living body, visual image, land and connection to those who have died, brings an alchemical dynamic relationship between the unseen, death, mourning and the living body (Romanynshyn, 2013). My work develops Romanynshyn's Jungian based research further, in focusing on the centrality of visual body in motion bringing into physical awareness a continuation of bonds with those who have died.

This centrality of focus on the living body in motion re configures aspects of contemporary research within death and visual culture. My research argues that this focus on embodiment within memorialisation invites a potential alchemical transformation through interplay of image, body and earth, bringing mourning and joy into emotional co-existence of the mourning body in relation to land. A vivid image emerges of the living body connected both to grief and memory in relationship to the land, while intimately connected both to joy of immediate presence and continuation of bonds with those who have died.

This work on embodied practice led me to examine further the relationship between art practice and academic writing. Jungian contemporary researcher and writer Romanynshyn, explores academic research as creating relational affective bonds through image and reverie, using visual, embodied and imagistic Jungian active imagination within this interplay (Romanynshyn, 2013). His work has informed my own research and writing, including utilising embodiment of feeling when writing, as a guide for my work. At one stage in my research, I felt unwell and disconnected to the work. This changed when writing about an embodied performance art practice about grief, which in turn led me to change focus in my research. Thus an awareness of responses in my own body and feelings became very influential to my academic writing. The latter stages of research, particularly in both reading the work of Maddrell, developed a connection into my own physical mourning related to land and continuation of bonds. My reflections on an alchemical transformation of grief into connecting with joy, containing mournful sadness as an integral part of this joy, is a result of these embodied responses as well as to theory, during which academic research and writing have co-existed hand in hand with direct performative embodied presence and reflection.

### **Spiritual Expression, Death and Visual Culture**

Spiritual expression has been identified as central to my practice and research. This has included reflection on similarities and distinctions between religious expression and spiritual expression within ritual and performativity (Schef, 2001, Maddrell, 2010). Rites of passage and ritual have been noted as having benefits to community sharing, which is not possible within a purely mechanised clinical approach to death. Within this religious rites often do not provide space needed for individual creativity (Walter, 1994). It has been argued in my work that there is a contemporary need for community spiritual expression of rite as distinct from rite of religious dogma, an acknowledgement of 'multiple expressions of the sacred' (Maddrell, 2009 p.689).

Works of Ana Mendieta have connected to this sense of the sacred and spiritual within performance art practice, such as Mendieta's explorations of sacred relationship between body and earth 'Her art is informed by a strong sense of the necessity of the sacred... Mendieta wants to re consecrate the body... restore the sense of it as a miracle' (Kuspit, 2000). Carl Jung's work, explores relationship between the spiritual, the psyche, synchronicity and visual image as symbol of unconscious processes (Jung, 1983 and 1986 editions). My research into memorialisation within death studies theory also point to the importance of spiritual expression in contemporary life regarding death and bereavement (Walters, 1994; Maddrell, 2016, Fitzpatrick, 2012). A sense of the sublime through visual symbol in connecting the present to the past and to death has been explored within a context of individuation rites of passage and a spiritual liminal space of change, transitions and transformation of death and mourning. This sense of a liminal space of change and exchange has been witnessed as an aspect of Mendieta's 'Siluetas' series of work. Jungian theory on visual symbol has been linked to performance art and ritual, recognising importance of ritual and symbol in bringing psychic balance of awareness of death and grief as an essential aspect of life (Jung, 1983 editions; Romanynshyn, 2013). Jungian visual active imagination has been utilised in my work within creating ritual and performative work. This exploration of spiritual expression documents ritual and performance art practice in relation to places associated with spiritual expression. Body and place as sacred is in contrast to a mechanised, purely functional relationship between self, other and environment. This sense of value outside a commodification culture of exchange, as authentic state of being is at the heart of much of the performance art movement since the 1950's (Bishop, 2012)

An observance of the importance of everyday subtleties together with heightened emotional awareness can be likened to spiritual observation, as is documented in Mendieta's work which combines detail of the everyday, with a focus on sanctity of relationship to the land and ancient structures of death, as spiritual homecoming with the earth.

Avril Maddrell's work within spatial geography provides quantitative and qualitative data about contemporary spiritual expression regarding death and mourning (Maddrell, 2010, 2016). This points to a further need for connective spiritual expression in Western contemporary society outside the confines of religion, as an important aspect of performative expression within memorialisation activities in the landscape (Maddrell (2010) p.125). My research has documented and explored performative interventions as non-religious specific means of spiritual expression; acts of the sacred not confined to set religious dogma, and with roots in spontaneous creative expression which connect to continuation of bonds to the dead and bringing together the visual with the unseen. Indeed, this paper argues that the exploration of these themes through ritual and performance art practice can develop spiritual expression as art practice, where practice can become synonymous with a creative narrative of worship. There is need for further practice led research work in developing these themes further, which would contribute and develop current research, particularly that of Walter (1999), Maddrell (2010) and Fitzpatrick (2012)

### **Play and Solemnity**

The juxtaposition of both ritual play and ritual solemnity regarding the theme of death

have been important elements in my work. The practice of 'Happenings' performance art interventions and their predecessors brings to the forefront childlike play, connecting people with each other and environment within an organic kinaesthetic responsiveness, as seen in works such as Lygia Clark's *Rede de Elásticos* and *Corpo Coletivo* (Clark, 1974). This responsiveness through play can be linked to Winnicott's research regarding creativity, play, bonding and self awareness 'It is in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (Winnicott, 1971 p54). This exploration of play as relationship relates to Bourriard's relational aesthetics discourse, of 'art ..as a state of encounter' where there is a playful approach in use of relational art object and personal connection to others in relationship (Bourriard, 1998 p. 15). This also links to Fitzpatrick's research of the gifting of memorial objects within a relationship of continuing bonds. These works demonstrate the intertwining of play within ritual processes which combine a solemnity of ritual focus with the imagination and joy of childlike play.

This playful approach towards the subject of death has influenced my own research practice, following on from Roamanyshyn's writing in 'The Wounded Researcher' (Roamanyshyn) in utilising emotion, self-reflection and impact of embodied memory as part of my research. Intellectual scrutiny is bound together with the act of research as playful adventure and childlike exploration through use of the senses, emotion, spiritual connection and creativity in exploring a living texture to research about the subject of death. The work of Mendieta brings this sense of playful adventure into structures of ritual interaction within the land and body, and her work involves a transformation of associations of what constitutes mourning, birth and death and response to this within environment. A focus on embodied presence of playing as connected to death, grief and visual culture, develops contemporary academic writing on these subjects, and a need identified for further research in this area, including research into relationship between visual symbol, reverie and embodied play.

### **Continuation of Bonds as Embodied Living Relationship**

Integral to my research has been exploring and developing work regarding the concept of continuing bonds within contemporary death studies (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick; 2012; Walter, 1999). Continuation of bonds between those living and those who have died, incorporate a personal narrative approach to death and mourning. This places importance on individual meaning making within community regarding continued emotional relationship to those who have died, recognising 'the existence of enduring rather than just temporary bonds with the dead'(Walter, 1999 p.105). My own research has framed this argument within a visual performative context of embodiment of personal narrative as core to this bonding. Furthermore, my work has developed an additional emphasis on continuation of bonds within an archetypal ancestral realm. Jungian concepts of visual image as related to archetypes and the collective unconscious have been explored within a wider connectivity of societal bonding (Jung, 1966, 1983, 1986 editions). Relationship with visual image, symbol and heritage of architectural ancient sites of death in the environment have been connected to teleogenic plot theory, in which connectivity brings a dynamic sense of belonging in the present as linked to the past, where past and present are in a flow of intertwining connection, which is also continually linked with the future (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Performance art and ritual have been explored as assisting within expression to a



continuation of bonds as part of life (Mendieta, 2013; Pearson and Shanks, 2001).

Exploration of bonds bring into focus a merging of personal loss with a wider approach to grief and mourning, as incorporated through relationship to the land as home and to wider ancestry through ancient and sacred sites of death. This develops further Walters' work in identifying need for community connectivity through contemporary rituals of death, emphasising links to a community of ancestors within visual presence of prehistory in the landscape, and creating further bonds between living present community and the past as lived present. A performance art and ritual perspective to this relationship brings an embodied visual dialogue to the heart of relationship with ancestors, death and the past. My work argues that this gives rise to a potential shift within personal mourning, through containment within a wider connectivity, as transforming an individualised grief into shared meaning making not only with an immediate living community but also within an awareness of bonds over time with lives and deaths of ancestors as symbolised in the land. Emotional connectivity brought about through a connecting to bonds with ancestors as well as personal memorialisation, has a capacity in bringing feelings of a joy of connection within personal mourning.

In exploring embodied connectivity between groups of people honouring the dead in sacred landscapes, a potential for organic community exchange has been identified, a connectivity of the living body in relation to other living bodies in community as well as to landscape and material and visual memorialisation of death. This work recognises a domain of loss within the living body in relation to grief, as well as shared embodied experience with others and sacred environment, which develops healing relationship of the living body with others in community and to the dead. This work contributes and adds to Fitzpatrick's writing in exploring the domain of loss (Fitzpatrick 2010, 2012), who describes domain as a region of space exclusively relating to the expression of loss. My work highlights this space and transforms it into a connectivity of embodied relationship as an aspect of creative visual expression of acknowledgment to loss. Connected to this has been an examination and exploration of continuation of bonds within an attachment model of human behaviour (Winnicott, 1971; Bowlby, 2005). My work has highlighted a gap within contemporary writing to include more work on attachment and bonds between the living in relation to those who have died, and exploring this within considerations of healthy attachment in contemporary community. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between psychological attachment, individuation and continuation of bonds through aesthetic and relational meaning making. This could involve further research between early life attachments and attachment in relation to grief and loss within the latter stages of life, relating this to Jungian individuation models.

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