

## THE EMERGING FIELD OF EXPERIENTIAL SPIRITUALITY

*Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another. No one has ever found two blades of ribbon grass alike, and no one will ever find two human beings alike.*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

We have reviewed in detail the genesis, methodology, and spiritual implications of techniques in what we have defined as the emerging field of experiential spirituality and social technology. The examples of such practices previously shown are either the most well known, or else some of the most unique and promising. Many of these stand for other approaches that resemble them. Twelve Steps is the larger archetype for all encounter and support groups. Support groups work as shorter versions of the Twelve Steps, in which the higher steps are not taken. Similarly to hospice, we can mention the international residential community settings working with the developmentally disabled, such as Camphill—founded by Karl König and following Anthroposophical principles—or the Federation of L'Arche, founded by Jean Vanier and centered around ecumenical or interfaith spirituality. Here too, as in hospice, the community dimension forms the core of the transformational work. Hellinger's Family Constellations shares common ground with Moreno's psychodrama, with Playback Theater and others. Nonviolent Communication's ideas are echoed in different ways in the Path of Contemplative Dialogue of Steven Wirth or the Rules of Communication of Claude Steiner. We have seen a great number of approaches in the field of organizational learning.

We have selected five examples that cover as vast a field of human experience as possible. We have also left aside important fields that could arguably be included under the umbrella of experiential spirituality. Such is the case of the whole growing field of life coaching, with forms such as co-active coaching and spiritual coaching. In a wholly other direction, we find the new energetic approaches to medicine as they appear most clearly expressed in the Bach Flower Remedies. These remedies are used as helpers in overcoming patterns of behavior. Bach opened the field to what has been called "vibrational healing." Other techniques have been elaborated by Enduvit or by Masaru Emoto's Hado. Finally, there is a fairly new and unique approach to finding the sources of life patterns in the direction of precise events of previous lives. This is the so-called Destiny Learning, developed by Coen van Houten, based on enhanced sense observation, artistic work, and highly specific exercises. While including these approaches and others would enlarge the scope of what we are calling experiential spirituality, the conclusions we would reach would not be significantly different.

Hellinger's systemic psychotherapy is, in many ways, the closest to the field of classical psychology, although in itself a complete phenomenological psychology with a purely imaginative flavor. Twelve Steps may be called a modern nonsectarian path of spiritual development in its own right, appealing both to the individual and the social components of spirituality. Hospice adds the institutional dimension and interdisciplinary team approach in the reconsecration of the experience of death in modern consciousness. Nonviolent Communication focuses on the power of language as the springboard of the experience of self and others; it wants to lead us to the full expression of our needs, and

desires and the realization that they do not stand at odds with anybody else's needs, when all of these are clearly understood. Theory U, Future Search Conferences, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, and other techniques allow organizational change and qualitative shifts even without a preceding individual change. This is done by entering new fields of perception, taking responsibility for collective patterns of behavior, and acting on common ground.

Can we now come closer to defining what joins these approaches to the healing of the psyche under the umbrella, however loose, of experiential spirituality? The first level is the recognition, however veiled, of the spiritual level of reality. This is a movement that has been initiated within psychology itself. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, new schools of thought moved away from the original pessimistic views of Freud and those who followed him. Carl Jung towered far above anyone else in a cognitive perspective that offered powerful insights over the dimension of the spirit. Others like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Erik Erikson helped create approaches that acknowledged and rested upon the human drive toward goodness, beauty, knowledge, and personal development. The emphasis we have just defined underlines all of the techniques to which we have turned our attention. They all draw from the resources of the individual, rather than focusing on the limitations.

What all approaches have in common is a clear departure from the analytical realm. Thorough analysis or a foundation of knowledge has often preceded the work; however, this is not part of the process. Nonviolent Communication may eventually be understood relatively easily from a cognitive perspective. It is, however, quite another matter from an experiential perspective, where its ideas can only be acquired via a continuous practice that alone can undermine and transform deep-seated resistances in our psyche. Hellinger's rich stores of observation are merely general guidelines for practitioner and participant alike; clinging to predetermined dynamics undermines the role of the facilitator and the outcome of constellation work.

Even in the other processes, as expected, analysis once formed the support for action. Bill Wilson and other members of the early Alcoholics Anonymous undertook a profound study of the stages of transformation of the alcoholic—the ability to move away from dependence on others to reliance on the Higher Power. These principles became enshrined, in an intuitive fashion, in the twelve steps. It is not analysis that allows the process of healing, but rather the process of admitting one's own weaknesses and trusting in the help of others. Hospice work is also based on a very deep experiential analysis of the process of dying. We are all more or less familiar with the five stages of grieving, as they have been popularized. The power of hospice work lies, however, in the body of social interaction between the dying and their extended circles of family and friends, as much as the professionals and volunteers. Theory U pivots around the momentous notion of presencing, the place in which we can sense emerging futures and what is asked of individuals and organizations in order to manifest new realities.

At a first level, the leap between psychology and experiential spirituality lies in the clear recognition of the spiritual dimension of the human being. Psychology, as a science, can only postulate spirit. Experiential spirituality, as a practice, can more openly recognize spirit as a driving force, even if only from some basic assumptions.

Immortality of the soul is a central idea to the work of both hospice and Family Constellations. Hospice promotes familiarity with the spiritual dimension of the

experience of the dying person, who lives in two worlds. For the dying, the spiritual becomes so tangible that it is not always discernable from daily reality. Hospice work also leads us to inquire about the first steps in the link between living and departed souls. This aspect is taken further by Hellinger's work. Here, in an existential way, we come to terms with the idea that human relationships do not end with physical existence; nor does the progress of the soul end after death. The acceptance of the transcendence of life is the goal of Twelve Steps, in its declared aim of moving away from dependence on human beings to dependence on a Higher Power. The spiritual dimension of human relationships appears somewhat more subtly, and through continued experience, in the practice of Nonviolent Communication. It is expressed as the desire to allow the expression of life's energy moving through us. Theory U and social technology point to the spiritual dimensions of the New Science, and to the power of awareness—particularly dialogue—to shape new emerging realities. Presencing cannot be defined otherwise than a moment of great spiritual awareness.

Another defining dimension of all the forms of experiential spirituality is their ability to work from the perspective of the higher self in conjunction with our ordinary ego. It is this approach that can promote a nondogmatic exploration of spirituality and/or religion. This is also the avenue to reconciliation of the dialectic of opposition—good and bad, right and wrong, dos and don'ts—that enables us to work from the perspective of the resources inherent in each human being rather than from their problems or limitations.

Twelve Steps does not speak of a higher self per se. Nevertheless the prerequisite of turning to a Higher Power, recognizing our powerlessness, and turning to prayer and meditation are the landmark attributes of reaching toward the true self. Nonviolent Communication's distinction of the possibility of "giraffe behavior" and its equal emphasis on honesty and empathy leads to a reconciliation of opposites only possible from the perspective of our true nature. In a more general way, hospice promotes this paradigm shift through tolerance and encouragement of all religious and spiritual approaches to the spirit, and surrender to the experience of death. Hellinger's psychotherapy recognizes the same basic idea through the fact that everyone, whether one appears a villain or a saint, has a place in the family system. Nothing portrays this better than the facilitator's dedication to standing by someone excluded and recognizing even that higher self that may be completely hidden from view. Social technology expands this same view when it seeks to integrate all stakeholders in the search for an optimal, stable, long-term solution.

The above approaches move away from notions of conventional morality. They encourage us to rediscover the universal element of morality that lies deep in the foundations of the soul and that each one of us is called to recreate anew, rather than relying on external codes of conduct.

Another common, but not universal, feature of experiential spirituality is the idea of working with the double or shadow. This goes from a clear definition to an only vaguely implied level of meaning. The dialectic regarding lower and higher selves is playfully placed at the center of NVC's definition of giraffe and jackal behaviors. Neither term of the equation is glorified or denied; jackal talk and behavior need to be acknowledged if we want to acquire a giraffe perspective. Not denying, but educating the lower self is the object of the practice of the moral inventory, and for this reason, offering apologies to those we have hurt has such a central importance in Alcoholics Anonymous. Social

technology hinges upon the critical need of acknowledging differences and areas of conflict, but the emphasis is placed on working on areas of common ground. No work is done with the collective shadow. The individual, especially the leader, is encouraged to work on himself.

From this brief and far from systematic overview, we have discerned the role that spirituality plays in all these approaches. It is not surprising that it played a central role in the life of the founders of many of these techniques, or of those who played a central role in their proliferation. Bill Wilson's life was clearly marked by his spiritual experience of 1934. His formulation of the Twelve Steps was anchored in many ways to this defining moment in time. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross linked the power of her convictions and the strength of her work to the attainment of the certainty vouchsafed by her various near-death and similar spiritual experiences. Neither Wilson nor Kübler-Ross called themselves Christian, nor did they belong to organized religion. Nevertheless, they both had a keenly personal understanding of what the life of Christ meant for humanity. Here is Kübler-Ross in her own words: "And Easter is the most important day in our lives—whether you know it or not. . . . Every day in my life—and that to me is what Good Friday is all about—Good Friday is viewed by many people as a sad day because of the crucifixion. But without the crucifixion we wouldn't have had the resurrection. And without the windstorms in life my patients would not die with peace and dignity and really knowing what we need to know at the moment of our death."<sup>1</sup> And Wilson, considering the same topic of life after death, closely echoes her in his own words: "Everything considered, I feel that proof of survival (after death) would be one of the greatest events that could take place in the Western world today. It wouldn't necessarily make people good. But at least they could really know what God's plan is, as Christ so perfectly demonstrated at Easter time. Easter would become a fact; people could then live in a universe that would make sense."<sup>2</sup>

Saunders's deep experience of the grief in dying, and her after-death communications (at least in the case of David Tasma) led her to a deeper understanding of Christ, through which she could effectively embrace ecumenism. Bert Hellinger came to his life's work after a conscious dedication to a religious path. Marshall Rosenberg extended his views of psychology when he embarked on the study of comparative religion. He formulates his spiritual commitment in terms of the divine energy that flows between human beings and the endeavor to support all that is life-giving. Joe Jaworski indicates in his biography how leadership skills evolved from key experiences, such as a sense of familiarity with the site of Chartres, and the after death communication received from his nephew David. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose work offers new glimpses at the direction that hospice work can take in the future, stands as the representative of the second phase of growth of hospice, its growth into a movement that is actively shaping its own spirituality and contribution to modern culture.

Darkness and light form the polarity of the dilemma that lies at the center of experiential spirituality. Darkness and light have been at the center of our study as well. To the first, we have devoted primarily the second chapter with the experiences pointing to life before birth; to the second, we have devoted our chapter on life after death. The archetypal experience of meeting with our shadow or double is accompanied by the

recognition of our personal darkness. The light of unconditional love is the experience of all forms of NDEs, whose ultimate archetype is the meeting with the Christ in the Light. In this contrast stand our lower selves and higher selves, whose interplay defines each human biography in endless variations. It is not surprising that the experience of the higher self becomes the defining turning point of inspiration for individuals such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Bill Wilson, Cicely Saunders, or Joe Jaworski.

We are coming closer to what may be experiential spirituality's two central tenets: the individual's responsibility in shaping one's life, and the sacred dimension of human relationships. Over and over again we are told that supposed "accidents" or life crises have a reason. Alcoholism is not simply a genetic disease passed down through generations; death can be looked squarely in the eye; the pain of traumatic events can be integrated within the family system; organizations can overcome deeply-seated dysfunctional and hurtful patterns of behavior. In all these approaches, we recognize that there is no solution to the problem without an acceptance of the consequences of our actions and inclusion of all the people who play a part in our lives, or in the sphere of influence of an organization. Alcoholism or other kinds of addiction cannot be tackled without looking at those we have hurt. Death becomes much easier to confront if we face it with courage, accompanied by caring professionals and by those we cherish and love. Difficult situations in a family can be overcome by integrating and acknowledging all of its members, no matter how painful the initial confrontation may be. By taking responsibility, we can break the pattern of compulsion; destructive and inherently violent habits in our thinking and language can be overcome.

Individuality is only one part of the equation. The natural complement to the experience and challenge of individual responsibility lies in recognition of the sacredness of human relationships. It is this realization that emerges for many as the surprising spiritual element of Nonviolent Communication, which can become a new form of consciousness after being used as a simple tool. Reaching clarity about our own feelings and needs progressively awakens us to knowing ourselves in a spiritual fashion, but so does the ability to reach a quality of relationship hardly present in common life. Consider the richness of Twelve Steps and the function of the group in the recovery of an individual. The same is true of hospice and the weaving of relationships that derives from its interdisciplinary approach. The practice of Family Constellations is vitally linked to the participation of all the representatives, who often derive as much benefit from the experience and the repeated exposure as do the individuals staging their own family constellations. Exposure to social technology, such as a Future Search Conference, models new ways of dialoguing and interacting. Repetition over time crystallizes into new social practices and more inclusive decision-making processes.

Our personal darkness is a necessary stage to a progressively unfolding knowledge of the divine light, as it is typified in an emblematic fashion in the now-common phenomenon of near-death experiences. That this kind of practical spirituality has emerged in the twentieth century is another of these synchronistic events. Only at present, in the new emerging spiritual dimension humanity is traversing, can the ideas of personal responsibility and higher selves acquire more meaning and reality. This study has tried to give these experiences a name and find the source from which they derive.

We are now living at a time when it is harder to keep the balance and harmonious

separation between what is sense-perceptible experience and what can be called a psychic or spiritual level of experience. One level of reality impinges on the other without our always being able to control the situation. Most of us will need help, at one point or another in our lives, in integrating experiences that leave us disoriented or that we cannot comprehend. Psychotherapy started along the premises that there was a specialist and a patient—one who knows and one who needs help. A century later into the practice of practical spirituality, perceptions have shifted. The expert is now more of a facilitator. In Twelve Step programs we have a continuum: The recovering alcoholic starts at the lower rungs, calling for help and relying on others. Once through the process, the alcoholic is ready to facilitate it for others. Although we still have leaders and those who are led, this definition of roles is much more fluid. Even the expert in the case of Family Constellations is subordinated to something larger. Hellinger's work cannot be led to an intended solution. It is the "greater soul" of the patient and the family that determines the outcome, which the facilitator merely draws out.

The thread that unites all of experiential spirituality at the core lies in the quintessential experience of listening, which can take many form. This is what defines leadership, or rather facilitation, and takes many forms. In Family Constellations, where factual input is minimal, we are asked to listen within our hearts, and the facilitator strives to encompass an understanding of the family system that is only partly based on logical input. Communication is at the center of most techniques, and listening takes on many forms. It goes from the willingness to engage in earnest debate—although this is just a passing stage—to the ability for empathic listening. Finally, listening acquires another dimension in presencing, where it is no longer confined to the immediate human dimension. Presencing, or listening to the "voice in the middle of the room," implies the willingness to listen to an emerging future that calls us to action.

Group work is another key component of experiential spirituality. If destiny is the kernel of the problem, then the approach can only be a group approach. Recognizing the modern idea of destiny—or the notion of individual responsibility alone—is the gateway for an acknowledgement of spiritual laws that influence groups or individuals. Twelve Steps does it by turning to individual morality. Through the exertion of the will, the recovering alcoholic takes responsibility where he once used to blame others. This can be done only by confessing the limitations of the ego and seeking our true self in "God as we understand Him." Hospice work reveals that the individual has to find acceptance of the most significant spiritual threshold—death—and this can be done only by turning to the spirit, with the help and support of a new community. Obviously the same reality of spiritual awakening may be expressed in a variety of ways. For some, the reality of love in personal relationships is the gateway to the spiritual; for others, it may be through meditation or prayer.

In entering the methods of experiential spirituality, many of us recognize the necessity of two dimensions of spiritual work—what we may schematically call vertical spirituality and horizontal spirituality. Vertical spirituality refers to the axis of individual–God/Higher Power. Horizontal spirituality connects us to each other in society. The second seems to be the more specific goal of a more experiential and practical spirituality. Since all of its techniques are nonsectarian, our relationship with the spirit is strictly the domain of our conscience.

Knowledge of the laws of karma and the practice of experiential spirituality reinforce the dimension of horizontal spirituality. Here is a dimension of spirit that is acknowledged to be an increasingly problematic area of life. There is a profound yearning visible everywhere in society to re-enliven a dimension of life that has undergone such profound devastations with society's exponentially growing transformation—the destruction of traditional structures happening at a much faster pace than the formation of new alternative social structures. The dating frenzy promoted by myriad agencies and the fragility of intimate relationships are only the most visible tip of the iceberg. A horizontal spirituality, clearly acknowledged and embraced, is almost an imperative for those who seek spiritual growth in the modern world. This does not imply dependency on outer structures. Most of the “social therapeutic” approaches we have described can either be interiorized after a time or be used only according to need—for example, when fighting an addiction, facing death, or other traumatic events. The necessity of a conscious integration of horizontal spirituality will be ever greater for those who want to work in the social field and/or the renewal of culture. Central to this practical approach to spirit is the ability to evolve a truly universal and completely individual elaboration of a new, nondogmatic morality. This is the needed antidote to the proposed restoration of worn-out codes of morality, which are revived beyond their usefulness in a time of cultural crisis, and which often turn into fundamentalism.

Through the recognition of the horizontal dimension, experiential spirituality can attain the furthest reaches of its meaning. It is not solely about bringing healing to individuals, but also about bringing it to groups of people. Alcoholism or other kinds of addictions are best healed in groups. From the groups that are formed emerge different kinds of relationships than the ones that existed in the dysfunctional settings of addicts. A slow but steady modification of the social environment is the final result of the work of AA or any other Twelve Step group. The hospice movement likewise affects large groups of people. Suffice it to think of the widespread diffusion of bereavement groups offered to those who mourn for a loved one. The number of new social relationships formed within such groups cannot be quantified. However, the most visible result appears now after more than thirty years of hospice work. The perception of death itself has shifted from a completely taboo topic to one that more and more people actively acknowledge, or even study with great interest. This is again a ripple effect that reaches across society, not just individuals. The same can be said about Family Constellations. It is spectacular in Hellinger's work, when healing can be brought to the realm of the dead with further effects among the living. Nonviolent Communication applies not only to two individuals, but also to opposing groups, parties, ethnicities, or religions. NVC carries enormous promise in the educational realm, where it aims at creating a new way of being among the new generations. It has also been used as a tool for social transformation in areas most affected by ethnic and/or religious wars. Finally, change has almost spectacular dimensions when carried to the level of organizations or communities as it is possible through all the tools of social technology. Here we can touch with the tips of our fingers direct social change at the macro level, and are able to visualize what it would take for the gradual emergence of a society in which all stakeholder needs are equally validated.

Experiential spirituality has its greatest potential as an instrument for bringing about social and cultural renewal. What can start as a separate practice involving a few hours a week or a separate workshop during the year can gradually be incorporated in the work of

organizations and movements for social renewal. All the examples quoted form a beginning for what is bound to expand much further in the next century, with the potential to positively affect larger segments of the social body. We will now turn to this larger perspective of change.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) "To Say Yes to It," lecture given to the Edgar Cayce Foundation, Virginia Beach, in 1985, in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Insights on Living and Dying* (New York: Marlowe and Co., 1999).
- 2) *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1984), 374.