

**THE EMERGING FIELD OF EXPERIENTIAL SPIRITUALITY**  
(from Revolution of Hope to be published in early 2008)

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. The examples of such practices previously shown are the most well-known or else some of the most unique and promising.

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 restorative justice, particularly in its most community-oriented forms such as Peacemaking Circles, or 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. Finally, there is a fairly new approach to finding the sources of life patterns in the direction of precise events of previous lives. This is the approach of Destiny Learning, developed by Coen van Houten, based on enhanced sense observation, artistic work and exercises. While, including these approaches would enlarge the scope of what we are calling experiential spirituality, the conclusions we would be able to 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 of a purely imaginative flavor. Twelve Steps may be called a modern non-sectarian 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 re-consecration 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 feelings, needs and desires and the realization that they do not stand at odds with anybody else's, when all are clearly understood. Prayer and spiritual healing work via the spirit in the human being and the acknowledgement that each one of us is the vehicle of forces that

work beyond self, and operate beyond the physical. The spiritual level is acknowledged as the ultimate source of health.

Can we now come closer to defining what joins these approaches to the healing of the psyche and eventually the body under the umbrella, however loose, of experiential spirituality? The first level is the one that has appeared since our introduction — the recognition 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 pre-determined 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 dependence 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 charm of hospice work lies, however, in the body of social interaction between the dying and their extended circles of family and friends, as well as the professionals and volunteers.

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.

Immortality of the soul is a central idea to the work of Hospice and Family Constellations. Hospice is familiar 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 recognizable 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 immanence of life is the goal of Twelve Steps in its declared aim of moving away from dependence on human beings to dependence on Higher Power. Energy healing can be accomplished only from the perspective of a dimension of reality all other than the physical. The spiritual dimension of human relationships appears more subtly, and through continued experience, in the practice of Nonviolent Communication.

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 non-dogmatic exploration of spirituality and/or religion. This is also the avenue to reconciliation of the dialectic terms of opposition: good and bad, right and wrong, do's and don'ts, that enables us to work from the perspective of the resources inherent in each human being rather than from their problems/limitations.

Twelve Steps does not speak of a higher self per se. Nevertheless the pre-requisite 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 turns to that 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 everybody, whether one appears as villain or saint, has a place in the family system. Nothing portrays this better than the facilitator's role of standing by someone excluded and recognizing even that higher self that may be completely hidden from view. The above approaches move away from notions of conventional morality. They encourage us to rediscover that 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/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 needs to be acknowledge if we want to acquire a giraffe perspective. Not denying but educating the lower self is the object of the practices of moral inventory, and for this reason, offering apologies to those we have hurt has such a central importance in Alcoholics Anonymous. Energy healing often recognizes a link between illness and the errors of our lower nature, but this is not a clearly specific tenet, nor is the proposition of the double clearly discernable in hospice philosophy.

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. We have seen the earnest path of Agnes Sanford, a pioneer in spiritual healing. Her case culminated in an NDLE that can be defined as a clear Christ experience. 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. 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 other spiritual experiences. Neither Wilson nor Kübler-Ross called themselves Christian, nor did they belong to organized religion. They had nevertheless 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.” And Bill Wilson, considering the same topic of life after death closely echoes 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 that 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.”

Saunders’ 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 the Christ, through which she could effectively embrace ecumenism. Hellinger came to his lifework after a conscious dedication to a religious path. 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.