

Transcendence in the 21st Century

Part One (of Two)

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Ah, transcendence. The Swiss Army Knife of spiritual terms. The dictionary definition provides a starting point — *"existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level"* — but, especially in spirituality, transcendence can mean just about anything a user wants it to. That's not exactly firm ground from which to begin a commentary. So, let me sidle up to this for a page or so.

I'll state unequivocally from the start that "mystical" transcendence holds no interest for me. That would be the kind of transcendence linked with magical powers that supersede the natural laws of the physical universe. No, what I find compelling is the kind of transcendence that comes from sustained work on oneself. That transcendence operates entirely within the natural world, but separates one's personal consciousness from the drone quality of the beehive, ant colony, or human society (all of which show remarkable similarities), to a different status of greater independence. From my perspective, this involves release from the tyranny of the personal ego. Ego has its place in our lives, and transcendence is not an ego-less state, but I regard the exaltation of personal ego as a subtle form of narcissism that is unbecoming to us.

Is this brand of transcended consciousness somehow "higher"? More "refined"? Or more "advanced"? I'm not really comfortable with any of those judgments. I tend to regard transcendence as both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is somewhat less susceptibility to illusion and self-deception, while the curse is greater responsibility that is sometimes difficult to bear and may cause additional suffering.

What then is our ordinary condition? All living organisms on the earth, including humans, experience reality through their own natures. (If any inherently self-transcending species exists — from plants to animals, and from bacteria through primates — I don't know what they are.) We see the world and life through our own natural lenses and filters: biological, cultural, and even mythic, but Life Itself includes infinitely more than any particular species is likely to experience or understand. As organisms, we aren't equipped to perceive or comprehend the whole of reality.

That doesn't mean, however, that we are always and invariably imprisoned by our biology. Numerous spiritual traditions tell us that self-transcendence is not only possible, but may be much more common and frequent than we typically realize. One minute we're our ordinary selves, then the next minute something breaks through the walls of the self and takes us far beyond, into a realm of expanded and more inclusive consciousness. Almost everyone experiences these momentary epiphanies.

The problem is that these momentary episodes of occasional self- or species-transcendence remain sporadic, transient, and seemingly random occurrences that rarely transform us in any permanent way. Instead, they arrive and then leave as only fleeting respites from our normal experience. The sudden illuminations of transcendence — whether gentle, as in a caressing wave, or shocking, like a crackling, sledgehammer lightning bolt — are so different from our habitual states of awareness that maintaining them beyond a very brief interlude is almost impossible. The habits ingrained into our neural circuitry quickly reassert themselves, and we return to "normal." All too often, however, normal is not so great.

Many, perhaps even most (although not all) spiritual teachings are about the process of preparing ourselves for transcendence through disciplines that may allow us to achieve a more substantial, enduring, or even permanently altered experience of Life. Or so we are told, anyway. We can presume that these spiritual teachings regard that change as positive, a bettering of our condition, although after 70 years I'm no longer 100% convinced of that myself. Maybe 75%. Once we find ourselves on the road to transcendence, however, there's no going back, so positive or not becomes a moot point.

Most spiritual traditions include rituals or disciplines designed to open the door to transcendence. Meditation and prayer are examples of disciplines aimed at achieving at least momentary release from the ordinary whose origins arose in antiquity and long predated civilization. Meditation is motivated by the yearning to free one's consciousness from the incessant push-pull of mental chatter.

Prayer is different. As an appeal to a higher power to reveal itself or intervene in mundane affairs, prayer is even more universal than meditation and seems inherent in human nature. In their modern forms, both meditation and prayer tend to be more formal in structure, linked as they are to now longstanding spiritual traditions and institutionalized religions. They are often taught as precise rituals, with prescribed and proscribed attitudes and behaviors (relatively strict do's and don'ts) that vary from one sect to another.

The development of rational and philosophical disciplines to open the doors to transcendence is a more recent phenomenon, dating back only five or six millennia, well after civilization had become the dominant form of social organization. The ability to think logically and use reason as a guiding principle

no doubt helped to kick start science, which has clearly reshaped civilization, but science's industrial advancements and technological innovations have so far achieved only minimal success (if even that) as disciplines of transcendence. Time and again in culture, the great hope of "intelligence" as a path to enlightenment has proven false. Much of the cutting-edge brain research confirms that the reasoning neo-cortex is still little more than a servant to the iron grip of the midbrain (particularly the amygdala), with its immensely powerful emotional dictates.

I'm not suggesting that intelligence doesn't matter, nor that education makes no difference in our lives. But there are many forms of intelligence, and rational abilities are probably the least significant in terms of real maturity. A high I.Q. might make one a more formidable person, and education enhances one's chances for success in the marketplace, but I see no indication that either will necessarily make us more mature and loving human beings. Quite the contrary, some of the most despicable sociopaths and psychopaths among us are wicked smart.

All the various disciplines for achieving transcendence are no guarantee of success. Pitfalls abound. Detours, obstacles, and hazards, like sand traps and water holes on a golf course. Disciplines of transcendence may initially appear straightforward, but later reveal themselves to be maze-like labyrinths. Some passages turn out to be dead ends. Others appear to lead forward (or inward to the sacred gazebo), but then circle back, leaving us where we started. In 1973, I heard a radio broadcast of a recorded public talk that Ram Dass had given. In it, he said something I've remembered ever since. I can't recall the exact quote, so I'll paraphrase it: *"You work for a long time to achieve a little true humility, but the minute you do, your ego reappears, pats you on the back, and says, 'Pretty good!'"* One step forward, two steps back.

Beyond the uncertainties of reaching transcendence are the difficulties of recognizing it in others. Nothing is more common among certain people of a spiritual bent than the pretense of transcendence. This group includes a certain percentage of poseurs, liars, con men (or women), and snake oil purveyors on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a larger segment of people who are completely sincere and well-intentioned, but self-deluded, having bought into some fantasy version of transcendence, such as the perverse belief that spirituality is about getting what we want.

The opposite can also be true. We may not recognize someone who is, in fact, transcendent. There's an old spiritual adage that *"he who knows does not say."* In centuries past, Sufis spoke of the village blacksmith who appeared to be perfectly ordinary, just a regular blacksmith in the village, but was actually a Conscious Master (i.e., someone who had actually achieved transcendence). The smithy didn't reveal himself to ordinary villagers, but if he met an adept who was ready, he'd fess up.

And then there's the relative isolation and occasional loneliness on the path. Throughout human history, transcendence has always been inherently personal. Looking to others to provide valid models is never failsafe; the encouragements and manipulations of culture are largely unreliable as spiritual maps. Even being an upstanding member of a church or sect among supposedly like-minded seekers may not provide a real or enduring sense of belonging. In short, we are on our own. Almost without exception, transcendence happens privately, one person at a time. By contrast, politics and business — the backbones of civilization — are inherently collective. They are group endeavors. What government and commerce produce ripples outward to affect everyone.

These two realms coexist, but there's not much crossover. That wasn't the case in so-called "primitive" cultures, where the mundane was infused with the sacred, but something happened along the way to change that. In modern civilization especially, the two worlds have been divided, sometimes moving in parallel, other times in conflict, but, with only minor exceptions, not intertwined. Whether in the personal realm of spirituality or the more collective pursuits of regular life, whatever occurs in either arena of human endeavor has tended not to have much effect in the other arena. Sure, organized religion became a dominant historical force that exerted tremendous influence in politics and economics, but the Church was never really about spiritual transcendence.

I think we've reached a point where the separateness of the two realms needs to change. To continue moving forward, we need to go back. Way back.

[In next week's second installment of this two-part commentary, I'll explore why I think that spirituality, in the form of personal transcendence, needs to merge with the more ordinary realms of politics and commerce.]