

## **Spiritual Highs and Lows**

Many and varied are the ways we connect with spiritual experience; whether through meditation, devotion, service, childbirth, lovemaking, sport, moments of wild wonder in nature, losing oneself in acts of creativity or simply whilst standing at the kitchen sink. We can also experience deep connection in times of pain, loss and extremis. Some of the most powerful spiritual times of my life were witnessing the death of my sister and later my parents; especially afterwards when I felt their presence communicating the mystery of passing over that particular threshold. There are endless interpretations of what is meant by spiritual experience and this article does not pretend to answer such questions, only to share with you a small piece of my own.

When I was younger I would briefly find myself in a blissful state with a sense of “alrightness” that evaporated my daily struggles with an anxious, self-doubting, frustrated and sometimes depressed personality. Suddenly I was able to lift myself beyond to an absolute certainty of being loved and accepted. I experienced deep understanding and sense of meaning and wonder. Sometimes I heard comforting and wise messages from what felt like guides or spiritual friends. I might experience a string of synchronous events that seemed sure evidence of a supportive universe.

Naturally I longed to hold onto those precious moments, seeking to sustain them by reading books, doing courses on enlightenment and needless to say, through the use of recreational drugs. Inevitably I would crash and my depression would grow more acute. “Beam me up Scotty!” I’d pray, in the time honoured Star Trek way. It made no sense that such genuine moments of awakening could not only disappear, but immediately plummet me into periods of despair. It felt like punishment for daring to find happiness and of course that is exactly how my low self-esteem interpreted it. Was it really worth a few hours of bliss to then endure months of agonising despair and emptiness?

Some of the courses I took did manage to sustain my connection for longer periods, but inevitably the chasm of emptiness would swallow me again. And of course when you are immersed in the “glass half empty world” you are convinced that that is reality and the other was just a fond illusion. The message of the poem “Footprints” was all very well but I definitely did not feel I was being carried by God.

When I encountered Psychosynthesis and studied to be a psychotherapist I got some answers to this painful quandary. Assagioli the founder of Psychosynthesis was very helpful in describing some of the spiritual pitfalls we encounter in our search for wholeness. Quite simply, “What goes up must come down!” Far from being a personal conspiracy it is simply the fact of energy rebalancing itself. It is just the natural cycle of energy progression.

However the crux to this painful seesaw between high and low, is how much we identify with either polarity. In other words if we are convinced that we should be up there all the time, then life has to rebalance our picture. And equally if we are over-identified with the lows then the peaks and troughs will continue to be extreme. Assagioli said that we can

climb a mountain but it would be foolish to expect ourselves to live at the summit all the time. We have to come down to catch our breath.

Not that I wish to give the impression that spiritual connection is all about 'being up'. This too I have learned is an illusion, some of the darkest most empty moments of my life when I believed all was lost and wasted, (in hindsight admittedly) were some of the most formative times of my life and led to writing a book. Sometimes we are called to the underworld journey of depression to redeem unloved, unwanted aspects of ourselves. If we can engage fully with this then it eventually leads to a far greater wholeness than all the blissed-out moments put together.

If we can transform our perception of the pit of despair into one of a womb of gestation we can emerge stronger and certainly more compassionate. If we can bear to sit with the empty times it can allow the ground of our existence to be revealed. Our unborn self may emerge to fill the well of our being.

For me the key to those empty times was cultivation of compassion, both for myself and all the thousands of people who must have been experiencing similar pain at that very moment. Tough times test and strengthen our compassion, our understanding, our equanimity, our resilience, our faith and our love. Peak times are like trailers for the main feature. Those blissful periods expand our awareness allowing us to recognise the existence of other realities beyond our daily existence.

I do not wish to promote the idea that pain and darkness is "the way". Over-attachment to pain and negativity can be just as much a trap luring us into morbid self-dramatisation. In the end, all of it, the entire panoply of experience is grist for the mill. This includes times when we do not feel connected to any sense of spirituality, when those particular doors seem closed to us and that is probably most of the time. We feel disinclined to tune in, however much we appreciate its value and we may feel stuck in the routine of ordinary life.

Every day is a miracle, just to be able to walk without harassment, to be able to see the return of spring. Isn't this enough? It has taken me till recent years to reach such acceptance, to be able to quietly love the ordinary days shopping and chatting in the weekly market here in Glastonbury, just as much as amazing moments of deep connection with sacred mystery like an encounter with Goddess in the Knossos throne room last year. Appreciate them and then let them come and go.

Sometimes we are awake and sometimes we are sleeping and perhaps that is just fine. It's all part of the dance, the endless parade of being human; sometimes glorious, sometimes shameful and often dull. Sharing does seem to help, sharing our questions and experiences with each other, learning from each other.

It is pointless to berate ourselves for not being awake, that would be counter productive. The fact that I am still alive, feeling the joy of exploring these ideas with you, the boredom of sometimes not knowing what to do with myself, or the contentment of sitting

on the sofa squeezed between my cats watching something on the tv ; all of it is an opportunity to experience our connection. And perhaps age does have something to do with it an aging body can limit our capacity for intensity, challenging us towards contentment, towards acceptance and gratitude for the little things. And isn't this the point? What use is all the seeking and communing with angels, past lives, enlightenment, shamanic revelations and transformation, wonderful as it may be, if it does not enhance the simple act of living through the day.

I wish you well.

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