

And then what? How to assimilate Extraordinary Experiences, and why

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This paper explores what the Religious Experiences Research Centre (RERC, Lampeter) calls the ‘fruits’ of extraordinary experiences. i.e., their value to us as evolving human beings. In particular it will examine not so much the extraordinary experience itself but the period after, be it of hours, days or longer, during which we assimilate that experience; or not. In it I propose a ‘two-facet’ model for transcendence that offers an explanation as to how we assimilate and then benefit from our extraordinary experiences.

Key to my hypothesis is the idea, generally agreed upon at the First EtE Conference (York, 2009) that, rather than a dualistic view of the extraordinary (something is either ‘ordinary’ or ‘extra-ordinary’) it is more useful to consider a spectrum of experiences from the mundane to the profound: with many degrees and variations of experience in-between.

In theology and psi studies, for example, the term ‘transcendent’ is usually applied only to experiences that are numinous, ineffable or otherwise obviously of a different nature to conventional, rational, consciousness. In normal usage however, ‘to transcend’ means ‘to rise above: to surmount: to surpass: to exceed: to pass or lie beyond the limit of’.¹ Thus whether or not an experience is transcendent or not depends upon our starting point: what ‘limit’ we decide upon. Taking this idea, and embracing something of the ‘Integral Theory’ of Ken Wilbur², I define and describe a ‘mental transcendence’, wherein we accept the possibility of rising above conventional mental constructs (such as dualism) whilst staying within our rational mode of thinking.

Such acceptance, I contend, opens our minds to further transcendent experiences with both mental and numinous facets. The concept and practice (from psychoanalysis and mindfulness studies³) of ‘Critical Acceptance’ is also discussed. This suggests that if we commit to an acceptance process and work through it, so we may feel long-term benefits. These may take the form of an ability to fully engage more deeply in the day-to-day reality of life, with consequent greater sense of fulfilment. This ‘transcendence process’ as I call it, is seen to equate directly to the healing processes so often urged by wisdom traditions and psychotherapists alike.

To illustrate these hypotheses, this paper includes accounts of a number of first-hand transcendent experiences and their effects. My emphasis is on the practical value of the transcendence and assimilation process, in helping us to acknowledge and dissolve our mental blocks and thus enabling healthier, happier individuals.

¹ Chambers English Dictionary, 1990.

² Wilbur, K. (1996) *A Brief History of Everything*, Dublin: Gateway, 2001.

³ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005) *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, London: Piatkus, 2005.