

The Psychological Foundations of Transpersonal Coaching: Why and How it Works

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As a certified transpersonal coach, I have found the field of transpersonal coaching to be an exciting and stimulating practice that offers opportunities for profound self-exploration, learning, and transformation. Unlike many forms of coaching, which rely on cognitive-behavioral techniques to shift attitudes and habits, transpersonal coaching is based on both psychological and spiritual tenets that empower both coach and client to connect with deeper, more creative, and more peaceful and powerful aspects of ourselves through engaging with the unconscious.

In practice, transpersonal coaching not only helps clients to overcome limiting beliefs, difficult emotions, and negative reactions that can stand in the way of happiness and success, it also helps them create new possibilities in their lives (Dangeli, 2018). As a relatively new field, it draws on a variety of theories and techniques embraced by transpersonal counseling, including mindfulness, meditation, intuition, somatic practices, ritual, and shamanic perspectives, among others (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016). This unique combination of transpersonal ideas and focus makes transpersonal coaching a deeply creative process that stimulates and engages each individual on multiple levels of mind, body, and spirit.

In my transpersonal coaching practice, I rely largely on the prolific ideas of two important pioneers whose work has done much to shape the field of transpersonal psychology, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) and Stanislav Grof, a contemporary psychiatrist who co-founded the field of transpersonal psychology (along with Abraham Maslow and four others) in the late 1960s (Grof, 2007). In fact, Jung may have been the first to use the term “transpersonal” in his writing (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013), and because both men emphasized the importance of soul in their work, transpersonal psychology is arguably, by

design, a soul-centered psychology, and transpersonal coaching, therefore, a soul-centered approach. In the following pages, I will describe some of the major contributions these two important innovators have made to the field of transpersonal psychology, and share some of the specific ways I integrate their concepts into my transpersonal soul-centered coaching practice to bring about the best opportunities for new insights and growth.

The Importance of Soul as a Paradigm in Transpersonal Coaching

The word “psyche” actually means “soul” in Greek (Hillman, 1989), and the Greek philosopher Heraclitus posited the importance of the soul as long as 2500 years ago (Hillman, 1995). C. G. Jung, widely acknowledged alongside well-known pioneers like William James and Sigmund Freud as one of the founders of the field of psychology, emphasized the importance of soul in his work—so much so that the Index to Jung’s *Collected Works* devotes seven columns to the heading “soul.” In his seminal tome, *Liber Novus*, also known as *The Red Book* (2009), Jung describes his unique encounters and engagement with an aspect of his psyche he referred to as the “anima,” the Latin word for “soul.” Jung defined the soul as “a kind of life force,” a “moving force,” and “a healing force,” which is “timeless,” “eternal,” and “the source of our sense of meaning in life as well as our creativity” (Mehrtens, n.d.).

James Hillman (1989), a contemporary psychologist who studied at and later headed up the Jung Institute in Zurich, declared that “Soul is the imaginative possibility of our natures” (p. 21). From this, we can begin to perceive the value of integrating a soulful perspective within a transpersonal coaching practice, as it enables a life-enhancing exploration of our relationship with something larger than our everyday ego self, with all its shortcomings and limitations.

In fact, one definition of transpersonal psychology is that it “focuses on experiences, states of consciousness, and ways of being in which the sense of identity extends beyond the individual or personal to include wider aspects of humankind, nature, or cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, p. 3). Further, nonduality, the recognition that each person or part belongs to a much larger, more comprehensive whole, is a fundamental concept in transpersonal psychology (Davis, n.d.), which suggests we are not silos, isolated, alone, and acting in a vacuum, but rather each of us is part of a vast interconnected system. Therefore, the concept of soul provides the context that gives us meaning.

The Pioneering Contributions of Carl Jung

Thanks to Jung and his colleague, Sigmund Freud, contemporary coaches and psychologists have developed an understanding that both the personal unconscious (Freud’s theory that each of us is affected by everything we experience and may have repressed or suppressed), and the collective unconscious (Jung’s (1969) notion of the “whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution”(para. 342), which encompasses the soul of humanity at large, and is “born anew in the brain structure of every individual” (para. 342)). Both the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious play a critical role in our developmental process and our capacity to break through to a new understanding of the soul. So, if transpersonal psychology engages the soul, and soul is what helps us make meaning of our suffering, then transpersonal coaching offers a soul-centered approach that relies on plumbing the depths of the unconscious (both personal and collective) in order to make meaning and help clients transform.

Jung’s Concept of the “Self”

Beneath all of our learned behaviors, unconscious conditioning, and unhealthy coping mechanisms we developed, often in early childhood, in order to feel safe and seen, there is an authentic self that carries an essential understanding of our spirituality. French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1999) stated that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but

rather spiritual beings having a human experience. Jung posited the notion that there is a “religious function” of the psyche that compels us to seek relationship with something bigger than our everyday ego selves (Corbett, 2004). This means that human experience presents endless opportunities for us to learn and grow if we can learn reconnect with a sense of the sacred and to identify, observe, and hold our experiences with presence and awareness. Transpersonal coaching provides an important opportunity to learn and practice this life-changing skill.

Jung (1964) deemed this authentic self (which he called the “Self,” spelled with a capital “S,”) as an ordering and unifying principle that directs the process of psychological development. Jung also coined the term “individuation,” a process he believes to be the unfolding of the Self’s plan for wholeness (Kalsched, 1996). “Only a unified personality can experience life,” Jung (1968) wrote, “not that personality which is split up into partial aspects that bundle of odds and ends which also calls itself ‘man.’” (para. 105). Additionally, Jung developed an important map of the psyche by giving us concepts like the shadow; the persona (the mask we wear to face the world); and the anima and animus (our inner opposites of a contrasexual nature). He also coined the terms “introvert” and “extravert,” and devised his own theory of personality, which later led to the development of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Hopcke, 1999). Helping clients understand this framework empowers the important work self-exploration and understanding how and why we do what we do, and offers pathways for growth.

Archetypes

One of Jung’s (1970) most valuable premises theories was that of archetypes, which he defined as “systems of readiness for action, and at the same time images and emotions” (para. 53). According to Jung, archetypes are organizing patterns that are the same across cultures and eras, which is why we recognize them in common images or concepts such as “mother,” “hero,” victim,” “king,” and many more, including the ego and the Self. Jung believed that archetypes were the building blocks of the

collective unconscious and could possess us if we are unconscious of them, since they influence us below the level of our awareness. Once we begin to understand the unconscious patterns that work us, then we can instigate change.

Jung (1969) also fostered the theory of “complexes,” knots of psychic energy instigated by wounding that are formed around an archetypal core (Stein, 1998). While Jung’s own typology provides an important perspective, I have been fascinated by another personality typology system called “the Enneagram” for over 20 years, because of its ability to provide an archetypal lens for coaching. And, though its evolution as a system (some say over centuries) is not specifically entwined with Jungian psychology or archetypes in any way, in my view, the Enneagram reveals a specific set of coping mechanisms that empower users to identify archetypal patterns at work (Riso & Hudson, 1999). Thus, the childhood wounding, conditioning, or developmental trauma we all experienced in the normal course of being human may be identified with labels that appear to be highly archetypal, including the Perfectionist, the Achiever, the Giver, the Observer, and the Adventurer, to name a few. When we begin to consider our childhood wounding and the specific coping mechanisms that emerged in order for each of us to feel safe or seen as tiny children, the archetypal angle that the Enneagram provides becomes quite compelling, and it is an approach I have found to be highly useful in the coaching process.

Indeed, as a transpersonal coach, I have realized that Jung’s psychological tenets provide a firm and helpful foundation so both clients and coaches can map and track their experiences according to their relationship with what Jung called “the Self.” Additionally, I believe the capacity to work with a client to identify archetypal patterns at work in his/her life is crucial. It enables us to not only detect and understand some of the ideas and behaviors that lead to limiting habits and beliefs, but it also endows us with the capacity to shift the archetypal energies in service of the Self by instigating new patterns and actions that can free

us and make us more healthy and whole, with all that it entails.

Image and Symbol

Jung also took up a compelling idea dating back to ancient Greek philosophers—that image is the language of soul (Hillman, 1982)—and he advocated that we could come into a new relationship with aspects of ourselves that have been hidden, repressed, or split off in times of stress or trauma by working with symbols that arise from mythology, stories, dreams, art, and somatic sensations and symptoms in the body and psyche. “In psychological development, the ability to symbolize is paramount in the development of soul,” Jung (1961/1989) wrote. “Symbolic work with an image is the mysterious process of seeking the essence of an image and understanding its subjective impact upon oneself, as meaning” (p. 70). Further, Jung believed a symbol is the expression of a complex that the conscious mind has not fully apprehended (1916/1958). He suggested that “the symbols of the self arise in the depths of the body and they express its materiality every bit as much as the structure of the perceiving consciousness. The symbol is thus a living body” (Conger, 1988/2005, p. xxi).

Intuiting the meaning of a given object beyond what we already understand it to be is the idea of *symbolic thought* (Whitmont, 1969). Recurrent patterns of symbolism and visionary experience also underlie the practice of shamanism. Robert E. Ryan (2002), who authored *Shamanism and the Psychology of C.G. Jung*, calls the symbol both the guiding force that opens the portal to the archetype as well as a vehicle to navigate the deeper parts of the unconscious. Jung (1964) strongly promoted living the symbolic life: that is, taking symbolic experiences seriously. According to Jung:

The powerful symbols emanating from this imaging faculty of the soul mysteriously attract all with whom they come into contact and, awakening them to the heritage of the collective unconscious, allow them to experience and express symbols with a similar numinous power of attraction. (Ryan, 2002, p. 80).

Finally, and perhaps most applicable to the coaching process, Jungian analyst Edward Whitmont (1969) clarified that symbols allow the emergence of themes from the unconscious in an attempt to reconnect us with past experiences from which we have become disconnected. He asserted that it isn't critical to distinguish whether our experiences have taken place unconsciously or consciously, because images give us "symbolic keys for an understanding of the way the archetypal energies of which they are the representational aspects tend to motivate us as patterns of emotion and behavior" (p. 108).

Accordingly, Jung's visionary work in depth psychology provided a legacy that enables us to work the imaginal in a transpersonal coaching context—that is, with image, symbol, and story—by dialoguing with images to ascertain and integrate their meaning, a process he termed "active imagination." Jung's interest in symbols that emerge from dreamwork, mythology, literature, and art offers plenty of fodder from the unconscious on which to engage the practice of active imagination.

Alchemy

Jung is also widely renowned for adopting the practice of alchemy as a metaphor for individuation. For him, alchemy reflects the process of personal transformation vis a vis the metaphor of transmuting base metals into gold, and by understanding the stages of alchemy, we can identify those psychological processes that allow us to work with previously unconscious (and therefore previously unworked material) in order to uncover our essential self. Identifying the stage of the alchemical process a client may be experiencing can provide context and initiate meaningful transformation.

In addition, Jung took an intense interest in cross-cultural customs, including those of indigenous peoples, shamanistic traditions, and ritual practices, and he promoted the value of holding a deep connection to nature and the earth, evidenced in many of his writings. Jung put his interests, experience, and scholarly works in these many areas into practice (Sabini, 2005). He ultimately referred to his contributions as analytical

psychology, and integrated them through talk therapy in a practice that came to be known as Jungian analysis (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). Many of these theories and concepts shaped critical tenets of transpersonal psychology which emerged a few years after Jung died in 1961, shaping the trajectory that has led to the advent of transpersonal coaching.

The Visionary Work Stanislav Grof

Meanwhile, Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof (1998) is lauded as "the world's leading authority on the deep exploration of the mind and soul" for having provided immense insights into the value of non-ordinary states of consciousness or expanded states of awareness, a result he achieved in great part by conducting nearly 5,000 individual clinical sessions of patients who ingested LSD. Grof's work with altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness, inspired him, in part, to adopt Jung's work as a fundamental framework of Transpersonal Psychology. "Grof finds in Jung's psychology an exceptionally strong correspondence to the domains of psychedelic experience he has mapped in his own extensive investigations," affirms Scott Hill (2013)

Holotropic States

After clinical trials with psychedelics were prohibited in the U.S. in the late 1960s, Grof (2000) went on to develop holotropic breathwork with his wife, Christina Grof, as a way for laypeople to access non-ordinary or expanded states of consciousness. Grof coined the term "holotropic" to describe a process of moving toward wholeness, not dissimilar to Jung's concept of individuation. Holotropic breathwork is a method that can facilitate profound holotropic states through conscious breathing, evocative music, and focused bodywork (Grof, 2000), and is a practice I find to correlate well with the aims of transpersonal coaching.

Grof's work also emphasizes how important it is that we recognize that each individual has their own "inner healer" that holds the solutions to any given challenge. Within the practice of holotropic breathwork, facilitators create a protective environment that supports clients to enter a holotropic state. Once that occurs, the healing

process is guided from within by the clients' inner healing intelligence and facilitators support what is happening (Monaghan, 1994). Transpersonal coaches contribute tremendous value through their capacity to do the same. In fact, clients may be guided by what anthropologist Michael Winkelman (2010) refers to as "the mind's innate holotropic drive toward health and wholeness" (p. 75). Winkelman suggests that "one of the most hopeful of all contemplative and clinical discoveries is that the psyche is inherently self-organizing and self-optimizing, and under supportive conditions, it can be not only self-healing but also self-actualizing, self-transcending, self-awakening, and self-liberating." (p. 75)

For my part, I have trained extensively in holotropic breathwork for many years, and in a coaching capacity, I appreciate the profound value of guiding clients into holotropic states through expanded states of awareness in which the mind can identify new insights and solutions to their challenges. In other words, their inner healer can emerge and do its work. The process of Open Awareness (Dangeli, 2019), potentially of Buddhist origins in its earliest form, is one strategic tool I rely on to aid the process of helping clients gain a broader perspective. I also variously implement music, somatic techniques and focus on the breath in client sessions to help them shift their state in a positive way.

Biographical, Perinatal, and Transpersonal

Among his many invaluable contributions to the field, Grof (2010) posited that psychological and somatic disorders of all kinds might be traced to difficult or traumatic experiences, often unconscious, in three different ways: biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal. Biographical experiences refer directly to one's personal biography.

Perinatal experiences are comprised of all the activity that occurred around an individual's birth, including the stages of being in the womb before contractions began, of moving through the birth canal, and of actually being born. Grof (2019) has established a model he calls the Birth Perinatal Matrix, BPM for short, consisting of four stages

associated with the birth process. Each stage, according to Grof, is associated with specific archetypal images, which can offer insights into some of challenges and limiting patterns and beliefs an individual may experience at any given time.

BPM 1 refers to the prenatal state just before the onset of delivery. Positive prenatal experiences may be associated with blissful experience without the concept of time, and evoke experiences such as floating in the sea, identifying with various aquatic animals like fish, jellyfish, dolphins, or whales, and even becoming the ocean. It could also offer archetypal images from nurturing nature, such as ripened fruit or fertile fields, or mythological celestial images. Negative or toxic experiences in utero may lead to dark and ominous sensations, images of toxic waters or waste dumps, or a sense of all-pervasive evil (Grof, 2019).

BPM 2 is the stage where contractions have begun, but the cervix is not yet open. Reliving the biological experience of this stage may lead to a sense of being sucked into a whirlpool, being engulfed, or devoured by entangling animals or mythological beasts such as leviathans, dragons, whales, giant snakes, octopuses, or tarantulas. Individuals may identify with prisoners locked up in concentration camps or asylums; with trapped animals; with mythological figures cursed to experience torment; or even have the sense of descending into Hell (Grof, 2019)

BPM 3 designates the struggle to be born as the fetus moves into the birth canal. The intensity of the movement and the increasing complications of the fetal experience as it navigates the enormous power of contractions, shifts in blood circulation, and organic matter in the birth canal may create archetypal images of the titanic fight, scatological encounters, and fiery conflagrations. Images from nature may emerge in the form of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tidal waves, or storms; or images related to war, such as tanks, rockets, and atom bombs. Destructive impressions such as suicide, genocide, torture, and mutilation may also arise (Grof, 2019).

BPM 4 is the actual birth itself, emergence into the world, and is recreated through the archetypal

images of death and rebirth. This stage may be associated with physical destruction, total annihilation, or spiritual damnation, but also with images of divine white or golden light, rainbow or peacock colors, and even the archetype of the Great Mother Goddess herself (Grof, 2019).

Transpersonal experiences refer to those that reach “beyond the personal” (Grof, 2019). In other words, visions relating to archetypal and mythological beings and realms; ancestral or extraterrestrial encounters; karmic or past life experiences; identification with plants or animals; meeting spirit guides; or encountering psychic, paranormal, or energetic phenomena all belong to transpersonal perspectives that offer rich fodder for excavating new understanding of one’s psyche.

Grof offers up the example of someone who is experiencing asthma to illustrate how these three aspects of experience can contribute important insights to a given disorder. Looking archetypally or symbolically at the biographical experience, a client may begin to understand that asthma may have developed as a result of the client nearly drowning as a youth or being strangled by his older brother during a conflict. From a perinatal perspective, the client may have taken in amniotic fluid or had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck at birth, leading to critical loss of air. From a transpersonal point of view, the client may believe himself to have been hung in a past life. Exploring such images from a symbolic and imaginal perspective may shed light on existing challenges for clients, and then help them make a desired shift.

Conclusion

In short, transpersonal coaching involves creating a container in which each client can explore unconscious aspects of himself, garnering an increasing understanding of the invisible underlying patterns in the unconscious. In essence, the coach provides a helpful perspective, drawing on one or more of the various frameworks provided by a transpersonal view, such as shamanism, alchemical tenets, mythology, indigenous perspectives, perinatal experiences, etc. As a coach, I then engage the client in opening their awareness (Dangeli, 2019), helping them to drop into an expanded state

of consciousness in which to engage with the unconscious material as it comes to light in the form of somatic sensations, images, or both. This aids in creating psychic space in which the process can flow, and building a bridge from consciousness to the unconscious material, while allowing images to manifest in various forms.

Of course, a client may arrive at a session with an image already apparent. Images often originate from dreams, myth, or story; a waking experience; a memory; literature, film, or art; tarot cards; somatic symptoms or experiences; and countless other sources. Alternatively, a coach and client may look toward generating one or more images during the session, either through a process of visualization or by working with tarot (or other kinds of) cards. In this type of transpersonal soul-centered approach, the coaching process involves working imaginally—that is, identifying, involving, and interacting with the images in ways that allow the client to come into some new relationship with the unconscious material. The idea is to stay with the images that arise and work with them until something shifts: somatically, energetically, emotionally, or mentally. These shifts may arise in the form of insights, or a change in state (often emotional), or a release of blockages of some kind that have been holding the client back.

Any of the following methods of working together in the coaching session may generate further access to the unconscious: dialoguing (active imagination) with images or symbols that show up via dream images; visual meditation processes; journaling; movement work; somatic techniques such as Focusing (created by Eugen Gendlin); shamanic journeying; breathwork (especially holotropic breathwork); and drawing, painting, modeling with clay, or some other kind of creative expression.

Finally, as a transpersonal coach, I usually work with the client prescriptively to identify together a manner in which the client can begin to integrate the shift into their everyday life once the coaching session is done, whether through additional explicit creative expression, movement work, ritual, or additional methods of accessing the

unconscious such as those listed above. Ultimately, a firm foundation in psychology and the exploration of what is unconscious within us provides a treasure trove of material to explore in the practice of transpersonal coaching, and these transpersonal

theories, with their complementary tools and techniques, allow us to find more wholeness, to come home to ourselves, and to connect with our innate gifts in new and compelling ways.

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