



Global Crisis and Transformation: From Spiritual Emergency to Spiritual Intelligence

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Here Mick Collins expands on the idea of spiritual emergency and its relationship to spiritual intelligence as a feature of our current global transformation where emergency is a symptom of emergence.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in the phenomenon known as spiritual emergency in recent years, following the pioneering work of Stanislav & Christina Grof and others (Grof & Grof 1989). Furthermore, developments within the psychological and psychiatric literature have noted the complexities and possibilities for differentiating religious and spiritual problems from mental health problems (Lukoff *et al.* 1996). These important developments have provided a context for people to share their personal narratives of transformation following encounters with spiritual emergencies (Collins 2007a, 2008a). However, whilst discussions about spiritual emergencies within the health professional literature are highly important, there is also a corresponding need to consider the meaning of spiritual emergencies in light of the current global crisis, and the implications they may have for inspiring transformations within collective consciousness (Collins 2008b).

The scale of the current global situation has been well documented in a report by the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA): *State of the Future* (Glenn *et al.* 2008). This report has highlighted the need to urgently tackle issues such as climate change, the effects of an increasing global population, and an ever growing demand for resources such as food, fresh water and fuel. The report has called for deep and radical change in human behaviours, which, if acted upon, could become a tipping point for transformation rather than destruction. It is instructive to note that the current global crisis has been described as a state of emergency (Laszlo 2009), which may be revealing the presence of a collective spiritual emergency (Laszlo *et al.* 2003). Spiritual emergencies connect people to a transpersonal dimension of consciousness that goes beyond conventional notions of identity (Collins 2007a), which may also reveal intimations of life's interconnectedness. Moreover, these types of transpersonal encounters could be significant for evolving human consciousness.

The current global state of emergency has many resonances with the experiences of spiritual emergencies, in that they both pose challenges for transforming human consciousness. This transformational focus locates spiritual emergencies as part of the solution for establishing deeper

levels of psycho-spiritual engagement and adaptation within consciousness (Collins 2001, 2008a, 2008b). In this essay I propose that human's possess the reflexive capability to engage more deeply with transpersonal states of consciousness, through the use of spirituality as intelligence; thereby facilitating change – from the current global and spiritual states of emergency – towards the creation of an improved future.

Spiritual Emergencies and the Current Global Crisis

The concept of spiritual emergency was based on the realization that people's journeys of spiritual emergence could sometimes result in spontaneous transformational crises (Grof & Grof 1989). The recognition of these spiritual crises has provided greater awareness for how people's sense of self can be overpowered when encountering transpersonal experiences (Collins 2008a). These transpersonal encounters have the potential to be so overwhelming that they can result in people receiving treatment from the mental health services (Collins, 2007a). Correspondingly, there have been important developments within psychology and psychiatry that have provided greater differentiation and clarification between mental health problems and spiritual problems (Lukoff *et al.* 1996). However, at a collective level, the awareness of spiritual emergencies could be developed further, in terms of the meaning and resonances that these transpersonal states have with the current global crisis. Spiritual emergencies may well be revealing a growing edge within collective consciousness, which, if integrated could help to challenge the established norms that inform the boundaries of consensus opinion (Collins 2008b).

Spiritual emergencies present mainstream societies with a transpersonal view of reality (Collins 2008a), which could create a shift in collective consciousness and the qualities of people's lived experience (Collins 1998), thereby, stimulating new perceptions, connections, and meaning in life. For example, the antecedents for experiencing spiritual emergencies are often linked to people's natural sensitivities with non ordinary reality, which can include feeling at one with the universe, or experiencing a strong inner knowing

(Grof & Grof 1989). These transpersonal experiences often provide powerful intimations of being part of an interconnected cosmos, as opposed to the overly self-referential modes of identity and functioning that are evident within modern societies (Collins 2007a). Essentially, transpersonal experiences can act as powerful catalysts for developing deep transformative potential. My own experience of a spiritual emergency in 1986 resulted in a profound shift in consciousness, which has resulted in a life-long exploration of spirituality, meaning, and a deep respect for the transformative value of such experiences (Collins 2008a).

It took me over 22 years before I found the words, and to a greater extent, the courage to tell my story of spiritual emergency and transformation (Collins 2008a) due to fear of being misunderstood and misinterpreted. However, my position changed radically after reading a transcript of a dialogue where Peter Russell, in conversation with Ervin Laszlo and Stanislaw Grof, declared that modern western consumer orientated culture appears to be in the midst of a collective spiritual emergency (Laszlo *et al.* 2003). This assertion is difficult to refute when viewed from the perspective of the WFUNA Report (Glenn *et al.* 2008), which has highlighted the destructiveness of human actions in the modern world. Spiritual emergencies may possess great untapped potential for supporting and inspiring collective transformations in consciousness, due to the powerful way that they can reveal intimations of unity. However, a key issue is whether human beings are committed enough to change from self-centred ways of living to more enlightened modes of consciousness (Russell 2009). Transpersonal experiences of consciousness may be pivotal for facilitating such a change and transformation. For example, the depth and value of transpersonal encounters are revealed in the words of a research participant who said:

My senses were heightened ... I had an acute sense of being a part of every-thing. It was an instant that didn't last long, but it was beyond time it was endless.

(Elam 2005, p.55).

These types of transpersonal experiences could reflect a powerful force for change in human consciousness (Laszlo 2009). However, there has to be more recognition that transpersonal experiences may also result in crises of transformation, or spiritual emergencies, which need to be supported more fully in modern societies. The tensions between the inner experiences of consciousness and the outer challenges of a fast changing modern world are set to become more amplified in the current global context. Therefore, humans will need to evolve new ways of participating and engaging in lives that are more connected to deep reflexive approaches (Collins 2001). In this way, transpersonal experiences could be valued for their contribution to creating powerful shifts in collective consciousness.

Spiritual Emergencies and the Trans-reflexive Imperative

Spiritual emergencies are threshold experiences that offer a radical revision for how human beings can restructure their lives (Collins 2007a). The following proposition has identified the value of exploring the boundaries of what it is to be human:

It is my thought that to formulate new conceptions about what it is to be human, or that which consciously is at the very edge of ourselves as a species, we cannot simply theorize or extrapolate but must explore the limits of our subject matter with the growing edge of our individual selves.

(White 1993, p.47).

Mainstream reactions to spiritual emergencies have previously resulted in their transformative potential being split-off and not valued within modern societies (Collins 2008a, 2008b), which has revealed a collective growing edge towards engaging the complexities of human consciousness. The reflexive task for humanity is to wake up to the transformative value of these deep transitional states of consciousness. For example, research carried out into people's exceptional human experiences have identified the positive benefits associated with sharing narratives about transpersonal encounters, where participants expressed feelings of transformational change, meaning, and well-being (Palmer & Braud 2002).

There is a need to deepen the dialogue about the value of transitional and transformative states of consciousness and how these can be used to facilitate change within the context of ever increasing global and spiritual states of emergency. An important first step for transforming consciousness is dependent upon a collective recognition that the current global crisis is also a collective spiritual emergency, which calls for a radical revision for how we live our daily lives. The function of transformative reflections has to be centred on recognizing the deep potential that human's possess for engaging change (Collins 2001). Indeed, the journey of reflection holds great potential for transforming people, inclusive of their spiritual development (Wright 1998). Although, it must be recognized that deep journeys of reflection also risk the possibility of triggering transformational crises.

The transformative connections between reflection and spiritual development (Wright 1998) have highlighted intriguing questions for how the insights gained from people's journeys through spiritual emergencies can be factored into collective understandings about transforming consciousness. Thus, spiritual emergencies pose a problem-setting agenda within collective consciousness, which challenge modern societies with the task of finding appropriate reflective methods for transforming consciousness. The exploration of deep transformative states of consciousness will undoubtedly confront modern societies with a 'reflexivity of discomfort', which in the context of the current global and spiritual crises looks set to increase:

Thus a reflexivity that pushes toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable, cannot be a simple story of subjects, subjectivity and transcendence or self-indulgent telling. A tracing of the problematic of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices.

(Pillow 2003, p.192).

I propose that one of the central confounding disruptions of our era, concerns the collective understanding of spiritual emergencies in relation to the global state of emergency. If spiritual emergencies are important indicators that reveal the growing edges of collective consciousness and transformative potential, then a central question has to be concerned with *how* such reflexivity can be developed?

The root meaning of the modern word reflexivity is associated with the Graeco-Roman term *Parrhesia*, which is concerned with 'truth-telling' (Bleakley 2000, p.14). The act of reflection encourages people to take responsibility for their life stories, the structures surrounding those stories, and their subsequent actions in life (Bolton 2006). However, reflection in the context of global and spiritual states of emergency requires two key conditions for change. The first is the necessity for honest reflection about the scale of human destruction in the modern world. The second

concerns the acknowledgement of our transpersonal potential, which not only focuses on self-responsibility, but also about our attitudes towards one another, and all life forms. These two conditions could encourage people to engage in transformative narratives (Collins 2008a) that support deep collective shifts in attitude and meaningful changes in consciousness.

The reflexive value of transformative narratives – from the personal to the transpersonal – is their ability to convey accounts of change that go far beyond individual interest. However, it has to be stated that transformative narratives have little value if they are viewed as a curiosity, rather than a catalyst for promoting deep change. For example, it has been suggested that autobiographical reflexive narratives provide opportunities to ‘problematise and interrogate the status of the author.’ (Bleakley 2000, p.12). Yet, the converse is also true, whereby the transformative narratives of people’s spiritual emergencies pose counter-reflexive questions that interrogate the status of collective consciousness in the modern world. Thus, the reflexivity associated with *truth-telling* could help to draw out the collective attitudes, beliefs, and values that are resistant or fearful of change and transformation. Therefore, if all experiences can be storied, then deep reflections can lead to further questioning about human thoughts and actions, including the political and cultural contexts in which they occur (Bolton 2006).

In discussing the need for a transpersonal approach to reflexivity, it is evident that people’s non ordinary experiences of consciousness (Grof 2000) will require the development of a *trans-reflexive* position within consciousness (Collins 2008a, 2008b), whereby, the very act of reflection can deepen people’s awareness and connection to nature, other species, and the planet as a whole. This trans-reflexive position is concerned with developing a greater capacity within personal and collective consciousness (Collins 2008a), which supports changes in people’s perceptions and actions (Collins 2007). There is no escaping the fact that the current socio-political mind-set in the modern world is woefully underprepared to take full advantage of the transformational shift in consciousness that is both waiting and needing to happen. In the next section I discuss how spirituality as intelligence encompasses human beings’ reflexive and problem solving capacities, which could be used to engage people’s transformative capabilities.

From Spiritual Emergency to Spiritual Intelligence

So far in this essay I have highlighted that the current global state of emergency is also a spiritual emergency. I now go on to discuss how spirituality as intelligence could help to solve the problems that are posed by the global and spiritual challenges that are confronting humanity, including the integration of transpersonal experiences of consciousness into daily life. Spirituality as intelligence is a capacity that could be cultivated within modern societies (Wilber 2005), which may enable people to reflect on the personal and collective impact of the current global and spiritual crises, thereby recognizing how we have been cut off ‘from the deep centre of ourselves through fragmentation, one-sidedness, pain and obstruction.’ (Thorne 2007, p.218).

It is instructive to note that there are clear resonances between spirituality as a state of emergency and spirituality as intelligence. For example, spiritual emergencies are crises of transformation precipitated by a transpersonal encounter for which people are often unprepared. Whereas, spirituality as intelligence is a conscious engagement with the transpersonal dimension that connects people to a ‘wider stream of life.’ (Zohar & Marshall 2000, p.4). There is an evident relationship between the unexpected transpersonal experiences that can trigger spiritual emergencies, compared to the conscious use of spirituality as intelligence, in that, they both reflect a deep potential for encountering transpersonal states of consciousness. It is therefore pertinent to consider that the integration of spiritual emergencies in a collective context can be furthered by exploring the meaning, value, purpose, and function of spirituality as intelligence.

Whilst there appears to be no agreement for a universal definition of spirituality it has been proposed that investigations into spirituality as intelligence should be exploratory rather than definitive (Vaughan 2002). The following four propositions have provided a foundation for considering spirituality as intelligence (Emmons 2000):

- The capacity for transcendence.
- The ability to enter into heightened spiritual states of consciousness.
- The ability to invest everyday activities, events, and relationships with a sense of the sacred or divine.
- The ability to utilise spiritual resources to solve problems in living.



The four propositions outlined above (Emmons 2000) have considered the various ways that spirituality requires some form of intelligent engagement to facilitate new patterns of living within daily life. However, the four propositions for spirituality as intelligence do not make any direct reference to spiritual emergency, yet, it is evident that the problem solving elements of engaging spirituality as intelligence have resonances for addressing such transformational crises. Spirituality as intelligence offers a way of reflecting on our capacities to engage more deeply within everyday life, thereby enabling people to question the nature of reality and what it means to be human (Grof 2000). Thus, spirituality as intelligence has great significance for engaging people's psycho-spiritual development and transformation (Grof, 2000).

Transpersonal states of consciousness can confront people with an expanded view of self, other, and world (Vaughan 2002) which can pose challenging questions such as Who am I? (Collins 2001). Thus, the collective integration of transpersonal experiences within modern societies will require greater recognition for how transformational crises are linked to transformations in consciousness. Deep reflection is an essential starting point for an intelligent understanding of what spiritual emergencies could mean to collective consciousness, especially in the context of an ever growing global and spiritual crisis.

Conclusion

Spiritual emergencies are threshold experiences in human consciousness that require intelligent integration into daily life. These transpersonal encounters have the potential to lead individuals and societies to discover new ways of doing, knowing, being and belonging in the world. However, human beings need to reflect upon the mainstream attitudes that have pushed spiritual emergencies to the margins of collective consciousness. The ability to tackle the global and spiritual states of emergency in the modern world will require human beings to integrate transpersonal consciousness within daily life. This process of change could begin with people reflecting on the tensions that are experienced between spirituality as a crisis, and engaging spirituality as intelligence.

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