

Introduction: What TASTE is About

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Instead of a personal account in this issue, we are printing details of a new web site where scientists can post and discuss their transcendent experiences. We recommend that you visit the site for yourself and perhaps contribute to it.

tran-scen'-dent 1 a: exceeding usual limits: Surpassing, b: extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience... 3: transcending the universe of material existence. [from Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1980. P. 1230]

TASTE is an online journal devoted to transcendent experiences that scientists have reported. It lets scientists express these experiences in a psychologically (and professionally) safe space. Science is a wonderful profession: I've worked at it for almost 40 years, and love it. As a process for gathering and refining knowledge, it is so useful! But the process is practised by people, not machines, and we are each affected by the conscious and unconscious hopes, habits and fears of our individual histories and cultural heritages. As Aldous Huxley so nicely put it, each of us is simultaneously the beneficiary and the victim of our culture.

Science and Scientism.

As scientists, we have discovered a body of precisely observed factual data about the world, created a lot of good theories that make sense of much of that data - and we are part of a cultural heritage of scientism. Sociologists coined the term "scientism" back in the 1940s, when they realised that many scientists unthinkingly accepted many scientific theories as simple, unquestioned Truths, just like believers in any "ism," and thus we often acted like any prejudiced "believer," especially outside our immediate areas of expertise.

Transcendent Experiences

This all-too-human narrowness is a significant distorting factor when dealing with the area of life roughly called transcendent, used primarily in the sense of definition 1b above, "extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience." TASTE is primarily about gathering data on transcendent experiences.

Related words which describe the kinds of experiences I am soliciting for posting on this TASTE site are spiritual, mystical, psychic or paranormal, all imprecise ways of describing experiences which seem to transcend the ordinary limits of the physical world. All these terms have multiple connotations and semantic baggage that are often at odds with the scientific process, but they are nevertheless in common use. I would prefer to use the term transpersonal experiences, experiences which involve apparent functioning beyond, trans, the ordinary limits of what we think is possible. Transpersonal has been an empirical and psychological term from its coining by psychologist Abraham Maslow, but it is still not widely enough known. Thus transcendent is the key word for TASTE.

Language Difficulties

Many, if not all, transcendent experiences are "ineffable," i.e. the experiencers feel that ordinary language is inadequate at conveying the full scope and vitality of the experience. But words can have a reminding function or a pointing function: the words resonate with something in the reader's own experiential knowledge and direct attention. The challenge to the submitters is to use their words as best they can to be both accurate and communicative. If this results in some scientists waxing poetic, so be it! And some of what seems ineffable at first glance can be communicated well as we work at it.

Fear of Admitting to the Transcendent

Over the years I have had hundreds of fellow scientists from all sorts of fields quietly come up to me at meetings or write or phone me - when they had decided I was safe - to tell me about their unusual experiences apparently going beyond everyday reality. Challenging our concepts of what the world is. These were experiences that intrigued them and/or were emotionally important to them, but which they could not tell to their colleagues or friends for fear of rejection or ridicule. Without worrying about more formal definitions, these transcendent experiences have included things such as: altered states of consciousness (ASC's), often involving new kinds of apparent knowledge and insights deep feelings of connection with life or the universe the apparent paranormal/psychic overcoming of ordinary barriers to communication various kinds of apparent transcendence of our ordinary physical selves.

Sometimes being able to tell me about such experiences in confidence has got them off people's chests or even been "therapeutic" (although I'm not a therapist). Sometimes I've been able to give scientific information about these experiences that relieves the reporter, producing a reaction something like: "Oh, it happens to other sane people? There's an established name for it? I'm not alone, it doesn't mean I'm crazy?!" And often the reaction is further on the order of "We only know it happens? But we don't know why? Why aren't we intensively researching these things? I ought to research it, but I can't, I would be. . . ." (reasons not to research it have included being laughed at and rejected, thought crazy, not getting tenure, losing a job, couldn't get any results published, etc.).

Purpose

The TASTE project is an attempt to work towards rectifying this strange, scientific situation where too many people are forced to deny or repress parts of their own human experience. These Archives are an online journal performing the essential scientific function of full and honest communication of data in this badly neglected area.

I emphasise the word data: no particular theoretical interpretation will be made at this site, other than that such experiences are important. The point is to let the data come out and stimulate us. Commentaries (mentioned below) are secondary to the data.

Reading the TASTE Site.

Browse the Current Edition of Experiences or the accumulated Archives of experiences of contemporary scientists and see what it's all about. The Current Edition will reflect what has been recently submitted, so browsing the accumulated Archives is necessary to get a picture of the full range of transcendent experiences among scientists.

Submitting Your Experience to TASTE

If you are a scientist (Who is a "Scientist?") and you've had a transcendent experience, I invite you to submit it to TASTE (please visit our Submission Form and our Confidentiality information), either confidentially or, if you feel ready for it, under your own name. By submitting one (or more) of your experiences, you can (1) get it off your chest. (2) help break down the cultural/scientific stereotype that "real" scientists don't have such experiences. (3) contribute to an archive of such experiences that can be researched, and so ultimately help our understanding, and (4) facilitate the development of a full spectrum science of consciousness by providing both data and support for the study of transcendent experiences.

Submitting Commentaries to TASTE

The primary submissions I am looking for as the TASTE site begins operation are accounts of personal, transcendent experiences by scientists who've had them, data. Any scientist may also submit brief commentaries on already published accounts and, if they are relevant and make a contribution to understanding, I will link them with the relevant accounts. I will, however, exercise more editorial judgement (please see My Role As Editor) over whether to publish commentaries than I will over original experience accounts. As part of keeping TASTE a psychologically safe place for scientists to submit their transcendent experiences, e.g., the psychological tone of commentaries must be respectful of the experience and experiencer they are commenting on. All accepted experience accounts and commentaries will be copyrighted by the Institute for the Scientific Study of Consciousness, ISSC, but with a liberal permission policy (see our Copyright Policy). Anonymous email forwarding is available to those who submit an account or commentary to TASTE. See our TASTE Email page for more information.

Scope: Anyone Can Read, Scientists Can Contribute

I am accepting accounts only from scientists on this site, for several reasons. First, scientists are my community, my peers. Second, because we are usually well trained to be careful observers and to not confuse observation with theory and belief, I think accounts from scientists are of an especially high quality for research purposes. And third, this is my way of letting my community express these important experiences. I've been helped by people who listen seriously, I want to perform that service for others. I hope people in other professions will set up similar web sites for their colleagues. All are welcome to read the accounts here, but submissions will only be accepted from scientists. I hope you will find The Archives of Scientists' Transcendent Experiences stimulating!

Web: <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/tart/taste/>