

INSPIRATION AS KNOWING

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I suspect that you and I have had moments that we would call inspiring. We might recall the power in listening to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, the invigoration that a particular piece of music engenders, a spreading of love and compassion as we witness the purity of a young child's heart, the sense of being uplifted by a selfless act of courage or a heroic accomplishment. These are moments that fill us and move us, providing a kind of psychological or spiritual sustenance. And we are in good company, Hebrew prophets, medieval poets, ancient Greek philosophers, and contemporary artists all describe something similar that is referred to as inspiration. While often associated with the great artist or mystic, inspiration is a term that is regularly used to refer to highly significant moments in the lives of most of us.

This chapter considers inspiration as a specific epistemic event, an activity of knowing. It is one that is distinctly different from the kind of knowing characteristic of the typical normal waking state which is dominated by constant internal dialogue in the form of thinking about the past, anticipation of the future and problem solving in the present. In the normal waking state awareness is subservient to analysis, the possibility of participation in the scene often thwarted by the expectation for observation, and deep contact prohibited by chronic categorizing of the other. This style of knowing is skewed by the acceptance of subject-object dichotomy and of the objectivism that rationalizes this in place. These norms are described as more or less rational, linguistic and empirical (in a narrow sense of the word emphasizing measurement rather than experience). We begin to notice the destruction that emerges out of such a distant "I-it" style of

knowing. When we treat the other as some “thing” that is disconnected from us, it is much easier to propagate violence upon it, whether the other is the natural world, a fellow human or even some disowned part of ourselves. At the same time that this may define our cultural norms with respect to knowing, we see evidence and longing for alternatives. The long tradition of mystic knowing, with its significant resurgence in transpersonal psychology, meditation and everything from urban shaman to angels, may be a sign of cultural recognition of the need for epistemic correction.

This chapter uncovers inspiration as one way of shifting the center of our knowing. Inspiration is described through voices drawn from in-depth interviews that I have conducted (see Hart, 1998), my own experience, and the records of various inspired individuals throughout history.

The understanding of inspiration as a specific non-rational process of knowing is common across cultures and time. The word itself, stemming from the Latin “*inspirare*” implies being breathed into, filled or inflamed. In ancient inspired creativity the Muse are described as whispering, breathing or singing into the recipient, providing the source for music, poetry, and so forth. Related to *inspirare* and perhaps its Greek origin (Heschel, 1962) is “*enthusiasm*” which implies being possessed (by a god) or having a god in oneself. The myth of Dionysus provides a model of inspiration via ecstasy, that is, a contact with or possession by some transcendent knowledge through losing oneself through passionate abandon. Of this path Nietzsche wrote: “The mystical triumphant cry of Dionysus breaks the spell of individuation, opening the way to the Mothers of all Being, to the innermost heart of things” (as cited in Vogt, 1987, p. 34). Nietzsche saw Dionysus as an opportunity for wholeness and unity precisely because he “prescribes” an alternative form of knowing, one that “tears down the barriers that have been

erected by excessive rationality and individuation” (Vogt, 1987, p. 34). Williams (1982) suggests that inspiration exists as a specific mental process; “(it) describes the poet in the process of learning . . . a means of gaining knowledge . . . of achieving wisdom” (p.1).

In accounts of contemporary creativity we seem either to be waiting for inspiration to get us started or for that moment of discovery that will constitute a breakthrough or illumination in the way we have been thinking about a problem. Creativity and inspiration are often thought to be dependent on “encounter”--an intimate relationship with some aspect of the world. “The deeper aspects of awareness are activated to the extent that the person is committed to the encounter” (May, 1975, p. 46). For Rollo May the second facilitating characteristic is receptivity-- “holding (oneself) alive to hear what being may speak. (This) requires a nimbleness, a fine-honed sensitivity in order to let one's self be the vehicle of whatever vision may emerge” (p. 91).

We also use the word inspiration to address issues relating to religion and meaning. We may speak of a revelation or an inspiring prayer that provides hope and perspective. Religionist Abraham Heschel (1962) has written of the concept of inspiration in relation to revelation and prophecy. Underhill (1960) describes inspiration as “the opening of the sluices, so that those waters of truth in which all life is bathed may rise to the level of consciousness” (p. 63). Laski (1968) considers inspiration as a “special immediate action or influence of the Spirit of God (or of some divinity or supernatural being) upon the mind or soul” or “A breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind” (pp. 280-281). Assagioli (1965, 1973) suggests that inspiration occurs when the ego or personality contacts a higher or transpersonal self. Transpersonal experiences are regularly described as including transformative non-rational

learning (e.g., Bucke, 1901; James, 1902; Laski, 1968; Maslow, 1971, 1983; May, 1982; Underhill, 1960; Wilber, 1995).

What is common among all of these explanations is the understanding of inspiration as a specific and non-rational process of knowing. Inspiration is the poet in the process of learning, the prophet beholding the voice of God, and the “ordinary” person becoming, if but for a moment, extraordinary. Inspiration provides sustenance, power and the courage to move beyond where we have plateaued, and takes us down in a instant to what is of most value.

The Experience Itself

Inspiration emerged as a birdsong for Milton, like a dream for van Gogh, “song” for Goethe, a flash of light for Tchaikovsky, a beneficent power for Dickens, as a golden chain linking earth and heaven for Homer, as love for Dante--“I am one who, when love breathes in me, takes note, and in that manner in which he dictates within me, go setting it down” (in Williams, 1982, p. 11). These describe inspiration as ephemeral, often fleeting, making it difficult to articulate directly. But as the experience is revealed further four general phenomenological characteristics emerge that help to identify and define inspiration: contact and connection, energy, opened, clarity. All quotations that are not cited are from my interviews with others.

Contact and Connection

A kind of direct contact and connection occurs in the moment of inspiration. This is accompanied or perhaps accomplished by a shift in a sense of self-separateness. While the degree of expansion or alteration of boundaries varied, connection and contact were described as distinct from a “normal” subject-object dicotomization.

Wilber (1996) describes such contact in witnessing great art: “(It) grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of the self contraction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashes of higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections” (p. 90). Note the epistemic shift that is at the center of this description and the content (truths, revelations, connections) of an inspirational moment that is the result. Heschel (1961) describes this as “a moment of being overwhelmed” (p. 445). “James”, a thirty year old musician described the sense of contact and connection as “coming home” while witnessing a sunset from a cliff on Prince Edward island. “There was a feeling of being at home with the world and myself; a connectedness.”

Contact is not reserved to great beauty. Nobel laureate (in genetics) Barbara McClintock described moments of contact with corn plants when she talked about “a feeling for the organism”, that requires an “openness to let it come to you” (in Keller, 1983, p. 198). The object of contact can be anything generally thought of as an “other”--for example, some aspect of one's own shadow, in Jungian terms. As Jean Cocteau described: “I do not believe that inspiration falls from heaven . . . the poet is at the disposal of his night” (in Ghiselin, 1952, p. 81).

The distance between self and other that is inherent in the observation and analysis of normal waking consciousness is replaced with the intimacy of contact. One woman I spoke with described the following sense of completeness: “I wasn't just a mind thinking thoughts or just a body working hard, I was a totality. My person had expanded to include the friend I was with and the birds and the sunset and even the dock.” The most expansive experiences spoke of a connection with everything--an experience and awareness of the unity of all existence. These are

the numinous experiences often described in mysticism and captured by the following description from a woman I spoke with:

I remember my first realization of everything being connected. I was fifteen or sixteen, sitting in silence in my special spot outside and sort of tuning in to nature, the little birds and insects here and there. Then suddenly I had this realization of everything being connected. Both in the sense of just part of the same but then, what was most amazing to me, was there was also a sense of everything being equal--the majestic mountain, the blade of grass, and me.

The alteration of the relationship between subject and object is a component of transpersonal experience, but the phenomenon is not reserved for higher stages of development, (Although its particular degree or quality of alteration may help to mark these stages, for example, the description immediately above would fall within Wilber's (1995) "psychic" stage of transpersonal development.) but is a characteristic of inspiration at any stage.

For example, other moments also described as inspiration included embracing some aspect of oneself that in turn affected the sense of identity: "I learned that I could trust and accept myself." "I came to recognize my essence." One woman described overcoming her own shyness to have a successful experience working in a shoe store. She did not have a transpersonal experience but claimed new self-efficacy and personal power as she experienced deep contact and awareness with some previously alienated part of herself. Another woman describes a moment of inspiration while vacuuming. "It was a shift from my usual feeling of vacuuming which was just something to get through--a necessary burden to be done as quickly as possible. But then it just shifted, I appreciated the convenience of the vacuum, was in wonder about its technology, I was fully enjoying what it and I were doing. I was really there in the room and with

this tool; I went from drudgery to real enjoyment. It seems trivial that this was an inspiration but that is what it feels like.” I should note that this same woman also described profoundly mystical experiences as examples of her inspiration. At the root of these moments was a shift in the way she knew the world--her epistemic style--moving her from a thinking observer, to a connected, present, aware participant.

Where conventional thinking and perception is often maintained by a belief in objectivism and manifest in the perceived separation between objects, inspiration breaks through those distinctions. Rather than remaining apart from or in distant observation of an “other”, our boundaries are altered as we experience a connection that may be expressed as empathy, understanding, love, and compassion. One woman reported: “A veil was lifted, I saw it all so clearly, I remembered what was most important, I knew what was right to do because it was as if it all fell together perfectly from this view.” We move from categorizing to contact and in so doing practice accommodation (see Hart, 1995). Love and acceptance, trust and appreciation were often the outcome of inspiration and appear to be tied to this degree of connectedness. It was often experienced as a deepening or spreading of love. As one person describes: “I saw how much my loving is what is most meaningful and that it hurts when I feel hardened toward my husband or curt, disconnected from my children.”

Opened

Inspiration is experienced as an opening, as an availability and receptivity which occurred quite unexpectedly and spontaneously for some. I remember a drive I took along one of the Great Lakes last summer. I had just left my wife and children for a few days alone, I was enjoying the freedom of a summer drive without anyone to tell me to turn the radio down or put the window up. I suddenly took notice of the huge cumulous clouds set against a brilliant blue

sky; in that moment I was transported and transfigured--full and free like the clouds, vibrant like the sky; joy, power and peace all at once . . . chest bursting . . . no words, just being and knowing. I felt like my awareness opened into a directness and immediacy, without linguistic preconception or the need for immediate interpretation. This way of being is easily overwhelmed by the rhythms of a busy, responsible, adult day. In this case a break from typical responsibilities and the trigger of a beautiful sky seemed to set the stage for this unexpected opening.

For some, inspiration was a familiar experience that could be prepared for. For example, artists, authors or meditators who prepared themselves mentally, created an inviting environment and focused attention in a particular direction. Whether unexpected or invited, the phrases below emerged consistently from those I interviewed: “available”, “letting go”, “flowed through”, “a channel”, “not in my control”, “Everything in my body just opened up.” As part of being opened there was sometimes expressed a sense of “awe”, even wonder and often thankfulness or relief.

As a consequence of being open or opened there was a simultaneous description of being “filled”, or of serving as a channel or a vessel through which something flowed. As one man reported: “When my writing is inspired it's like automatic writing; it's almost like taking dictation.” William Blake wrote of his poem Milton: “I have written this poem from immediate dictation, twelve sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without premeditation, end even against my will” (in Harding, 1967, p. 14). Puccini wrote: “The music in this opera was dictated to me from God: I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public” (Abell, 1964, pp. 156-157). The filling “substance” was most often described as energy, light, or warmth. Several participants also indicated being filled with a sense of God or spirit as well as with illuminating ideas. Ancient Athenian philosopher Philo wrote: “I have approached my work empty and suddenly become full, the ideas falling from a shower from above and being

sown invisibly” (Heschel, 1962, p. 333). The root meaning of the word inspire, to be filled or infused, expresses this dimension precisely. When the connection is intense enough the container or the self seems to disappear and being filled is experienced as fullness or expansiveness without a sense of being a separate container.

This raises the question of the source of inspiration; to what or whom are we opening? The unconscious, divinity or something else? It has been interesting to watch the proliferation of writings and interest in channeling during the ‘80s and Angels in the ‘90s. While these areas are fertile ground for charlatans on one side and wishful thinkers on the other, at least two aspects of these phenomena speak to the consideration of inspiration. First, the concept of knowing or gaining information from some disembodied source and through some non-rational means represents the precise opposite of the embodied, empirical rationality that has been the modernist's highest knowing. As such, the widespread popularity of the idea of non-rational knowing and of knowing as a contact with some “other” may hint at the need for a culture-wide epistemic correction. While the ancient Greek poets invoked the mythic Muse and Socrates wrote of a divine voice, “daimonion” that names a transcendent power, the idea of a guardian spirit or of divine intercession had gradually become internalized. “Following Greek sources, Roman religion posits that every man has a genius, a familiar spirit; eighteenth century aesthetics maintains that a great poet has genius; and today an extraordinarily creative person is a genius” (Frieden, 1985, p. 15). “The classical conception of a guardian spirit is gradually supplanted by modern ideas of an individual extraordinary mind” (p. 8). We have become epistemically self-sufficient in a style that is centered in rationality. Self-reliance, hyper-individualism, and the like appear as social values emerging from these beliefs; narcissism, disconnectedness and arrogance grow as social epidemics from these assumptions. However, it appears that we are past the apex

of hyper-individualism; hints of this shift come through relational theorists like Gilligan (1982), the rise of the importance of social context in the understanding of human behavior, ecological awareness that recognizes our interconnection with nature, and more recently transpersonal psychology that seeks consciousness of the unity of all life. While the idea of a divinity providing guidance and direction is an ancient one, its reemergence in popular culture helps to adjust contemporary myths about the boundaries of the self, correcting the overly individualistic, independent rational knower that is the hero of modernist mythology.

I should caution that the inside-outside dichotomy elaborated here is a false one, that is, a relative one. It may be valuable in that it suggests the need for opening and making contact beyond our narrowly defined self. However, while the source of an inspiration is often reported to be from beyond us, when our base of consciousness is altered we may experience this differently. If our openness and connection are deep enough, our inside (i.e., consciousness, body, etc.) is no longer distinct from the outside. That is, the source is not perceived as being “outside” or apart from the experiencer. Said another way, when our consciousness expands and experiences deep interconnection we do not experience the other (in this case the source of our inspiration) as separate from us, the experience arises without a distinct origin.

What is common is that the inspiration arises as a result of an opening in our knowing that is distinctly different from normal waking consciousness, whether the source is named God, the subconscious, or remains mysterious. There is a sense that it is opening to an awareness, a state of knowing and being that is there all along--we may think of it as a veil being lifted or a crack in our consciousness that allows in a shaft of illumination.

Clarity

As participants found themselves connected and opened, sensory clarity or vibrancy increased as these descriptions suggest: “I felt every cell of my skin”, “My hearing, my sight became so clear.” “Everything felt so alive.” Rollo May (1975) describes his own experience: “Everything around me became suddenly vivid . . . there was a special translucence that enveloped the world, and my vision was given special clarity” (p. 62). Some degree of a transient synesthetic or merged sensory experience was frequently named. For example, one might describe the texture or the special qualities of a piece of music: "It was as if I could see the different shapes, movement and the color and density of the music." While neuroscience reports synesthetic perception as extremely rare, the evidence of this sensory merging as frequent in the state of inspiration challenges these assumptions. It also suggests that rather than an evolutionary artifact (Cytowic, 1995), synesthetic perception may provide an evolutionary and perceptual advantage or at least a marker of alternative or expanded knowing. Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945) maintained that synesthetic perception is the rule and that “we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking feel, in order to deduce . . . (what we sense)” (p. 229). Synesthetic perception is not, in and of itself, inspiration. It is an experience that results from an expansion of perceptual norms that can accompany or spring out of inspiration. As Blake (1986) wrote: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” (p. 101). Inspiration provides an opening from the cavern.

Inspiration generally includes an expansion of awareness and understanding, although analytic meaning lagged behind, if it came at all. Rather than a decision or answer to a question

emerging directly, the shift was regularly reported as gaining an expanded perspective. “It didn't come analytically, although it made perfect sense, but as a flash of clarity.” Rollo May (1975) reported: “The insight broke into my mind against what I had been trying to think about rationally” (p. 61). Others said: “There is a grasping of unexpected connections or seeing a kind of hidden layer of order of reality”. “Sometimes I see little things, sometimes things I should have seen all along, sometimes I understand the big picture.” In interpreting their experience, some suggested that the insight comes out of a shift from analytic thinking to an intuitive mode. Intuition and inspiration both represent non-analytic knowing, however, in and of itself intuition is not equivalent to inspiration. For example, we may have a flash of intellectual clarity in solving a problem and be relieved or excited about it without an alteration of boundaries and connection. Instead our experience may be quite intellectually contained. Intuition may involve the completion of some gestalt, the coming together of ideas, a “sense” of something but intuition does not consistently enliven us neither is there a shift in self-other boundaries which is a component in inspiration.

Traditionally, the scientific community has generally assumed hierarchy and dominance in the functional and neurologic relationship between emotion and cognition. That is, emotion and cognition are conceived of as separate phenomena in which intellect dominates emotion. However, recent evidence and argument suggests that this interplay may be quite different. Neurological evidence suggests that the flow of information may actually be dominated by emotion (Cytowic, 1995). Further Ommaya (in press) suggests that a non-linear, non-hierarchical model of brain functioning may be more reasonable and allows for the possibility of more complex relationship between emotion and cognition. Consistent with this likely complexity and interdependence, the phenomenological evidence from the experience of

inspiration shows a simultaneity and qualitative equivalence in emotion and cognition. That is, there is no suggestion that an intellectual insight leads to the emotion or visa versa rather that they are part of the same experience. This might be called emotional-cognition, full-body knowing, or something similar. It may be most accurate to describe this knowing as the byproduct (or intermediary step) of the expansion of awareness and transcendence of self-other boundaries that is at the heart of inspiration.

It is important to note that this expanded style characterized by synesthetic sensory perception and emotional-cognitive understanding exists between the moment of contact and awareness in inspiration and its translation into representational form (e.g., language, art). It serves as a benchmark on the exploration of inspiration, but it would be a distraction if we saw it as some perceptual and cognitive end state. We could simply cultivate synesthetic perception or expanded understanding and never experience the fuller contact and openness that is inspiration.

Energy

A dramatic shift in emotional, physical and “energetic” states are evident in inspiration. The emotional change was not merely feeling better but was an immediate and powerful shift commonly as: “joy”, “elation”, “excitement”, “enthusiasm”, “fulfillment”, “being at peace”. “It was the first time I cried out of joy; I was surprised as I thought that people only cried when they were sad.” Both excitement or an enlivening and peacefulness occurred within the same moment. We normally don't conceive of peacefulness and excitement as components of the same experience but these descriptions suggest otherwise and further appeal for revision of our assumed segmentation of emotional experience. Instead of emotional opposites, the sense of being filled consisted of both an overflowing with joy, love, vitality and a deep satisfaction that many named as peace or calm.

Walsh's (1995) comparative phenomenological mapping of several states of consciousness (Shamanism, Vipassana meditation, schizophrenia) rate the direction of arousal and calm for each state. In each type of experience there is an inverse relation between the two. However, in the experience of inspiration, an increase in both arousal and in a sense of peacefulness (calm) is reported as occurring simultaneously. The arousal is not agitation as with the schizophrenic. It is as if a larger space opens up to contain or receive the energy, and while it is full, even overflowing, the expanded container or conduit allows for more. Following inspiration there is occasionally a more agitated experience as we attempt to find an expression for the insight. It is as if when we shift to our conventional perceptual-cognitive style our container shrinks and may be overwhelmed--we may have trouble containing or channeling the vision we had.

Physically there was an experience of: "renewal", "freshness", "being charged", "energized", "cleansed" and "purified", "uplifted". Regardless of the previous state of health or mind, the inspiration provided a riveting and immediate lift.

Many described their energy being dramatically altered. This may be noted most easily by an associated sensory change. For example, tingling, particularly in the upper body and head or a fullness in the chest, "full of light", "made up of humming particles", "powerful", "An inner push", "jelliness", "I felt juices flowing", "Like a flowering, like streams, It's like bubbling, an up-rising or swelling that travels up." Using a simplified overview of the tantric yoga concept of chakras, the type and quality of inspiration may be linked to the opening of these energy centers. For example, the opening of compassion emerges as the heart center opens, creative inspiration has been associated with the opening of the throat chakra, inspiration as dreams and psychic phenomena through the sixth chakra, and spiritual or mystical inspiration with the opening of the

crown. (see Nelson, 1996 for an expansion of this). In this model we could identify the subtitles of certain inspiration (e.g., hearing a voice, feeling love, feeling like a channel for creativity) with particular centers. We could also consider inspiration as a momentary opening of a higher energy.

This emotional, physical and etheric energy was occasionally translated into immediate action, at other times it was used as an impetus or an affirmation to direct one's energies in a particular direction, for others the impact did not incite action but a shift in their sense of Being.

It may be useful to distinguish two ways that inspiration manifests--into form and into being. The scientist searching for the solution to a question, the artist creating a composition, the student looking for just the right topic for her paper all represent the focus on a problem waiting to be solved--in these and similar realms inspiration manifests in form and often out of seeking form. It is described as a "light bulb" of an idea popping in, or a fleeting image for the potter of "what feet to put on the pot."

Often inspiration does not manifest into form (e.g., solution, art, invention) but it does consistently affect what we might call Being, without concern for any tangible product. Inspiration affecting Being is not reserved for the dramatic mystic revelation or the awakening of deep compassion, for example, but may also be seen in the "small moments" and captured by the little stories (Lyotard, 1984) effecting our day-to-day experience. As one parent describes: "My sixteen month old learned how to kiss me the other day, she did this so tenderly that I was inspired; it reminded me of the loving tenderness, of the pure love that I want to express to others." These are moments that involve neither a solution to a problem nor a momentous spiritual awakening. They provide a potent, dramatic, uplifting emotional-perceptual shift. The result is a sense of hope, meaning, value and clarity in life. They have the power to lift us out of

numbing depression or a mechanical routine, energize and animate our actions, expand our perceptions and fill us with vitality and love. These small moments are not necessarily as momentous as the dramatic spiritual epiphany, the unitive experience that has been the ground (and sky) of transpersonal study, but they are perhaps the smaller shifts or reminders of that connection. They seem to bring Being or consciousness into alignment with what we recognize as most important regardless of the stage or level of development. They are often described as Plato's anamnesis--the soul's remembrance of truth. As two people I spoke with described: "It was a remembrance of what I know most deeply"; "It was a recognition of truth." In this way inspiration provides spiritual sustenance through remembrance.

Mental Illness and Inspiration

The opposite of something may give us clues as to its meaning and significance. The opposite of inspiration is: flat, boring, lifeless, ordinary, plodding, stagnant, stuck and empty. When we examine this antithesis we begin to get a sense of the relevance and importance of inspiration to daily living: empty or filled, lifeless or vital, hopeless or hopeful, stagnant or moved, uninspired or inspired. If we consider questions of psychological health and of meaning, inspiration seems monumentally important in order to live with vitality and meaning.

If we consider inspiration as one end of a continuum, toward the other end is a constellation of experiences that have depression as their emotional center. When I asked others to describe the opposite or the lack of inspiration these were typical of the responses: "The opposite of inspiration is depression." "A hopelessness and meaninglessness creep in. Life seems like a great burden." "I feel sick, numb, just going through the motions." "The opposite is dead, dull, low, gray, numb, isolated."

Their answers describe the phenomenological opposite of being connected, energized, open and clear as described above. A heightened sense of self-separateness and with it alienation and isolation emerge: “I close off from the world”; “I feel isolated, alone and (I) don't want to deal with other people.”; “I experience a lack of connection, I'm isolated.” Being energized and peaceful is replaced with descriptions of numbness, flatness and/or agitation and anxiety. “There is worry which breeds anxiety.” “I just muscle through life.” Where inspiration bred openness to experience its opposite was captured in being shut down or closed off. “There is a lack of expansion, a tightness”; “It feels crushing”. Clarity is replaced by worry and doubt: “(I feel) self-doubt.” “(There is) a decrease in physical activity.” and a “lack of trust and faith.”

The epistemic style involves constant thinking rather than open awareness. Worry or mind chatter, often obsessive and circular, characterize this state. Quotes from two women interviewed capture the flavor of this: “The opposite of inspiration is (getting) lost in analytical thought, like when I try to force a decision”. “Worry and inspiration can't exist at the same time. If there is worry or fear or confusion there may be a pulling back from life. Inspiration provides the energy to go forward.” Regrets, self doubts and focusing on memories of the past or worries about the future are typical of the absence or opposite of inspiration. With inspiration, the horizon of one's concerns clears, focus expands but is rooted in the awareness of the present moment. With its opposite focus seems to darken and contract; it is often characterized as dull or plodding resignation, “forcing” of an outcome or a decision, agitation, or a droning hardness.

When considered in the context of contemporary mental health concerns these difficulties: depression, anxiety, alienation, confusion, obsession seem to describe most of the current complaints. What would psychological treatment look like if we saw these clients' difficulties as centered, in part, in a lack of inspiration? As inspiration emerges as a way of

knowing and being, to what extent does our style of knowing effect our psychological well-being? What role does the constricted epistemic style in our contemporary culture have on our mental and spiritual health?

Related phenomena

Briefly comparing inspiration to allied phenomena may give some clearer sense of what it is and is not.

The term inspiration has been used as synonymous with motivation. Motivation is at times the pragmatic, active, operational consequence of inspiration, but the energetic spark and the flow or “filling up” of inspiration is described as a more ephemeral and powerful event; an experience of knowing and being. Where motivation involves applying our will toward accomplishing a goal, the inspiration is a moment of galvanizing energy and insight that may then be consciously distilled into work on some task. Where inspiration provides the illuminating vision and surge of energy, motivation may emerge naturally or willfully as a next pragmatic step in order to get a “job” done. Where motivation is an act of intent that may be catalyzed by inspiration, the inspiration itself is perceived as emerging from a willingness or allowing. Motivation also may be needed for maintaining the focus that leads toward inspiration. This is often described as the perseverance to stay with the frustration or difficulty. As one scientist I spoke with describes: “(In problem solving) you reach points of frustration. It wasn't going to happen in the first ten minutes. It really took a long time to gel. It required preparation and frustration.”

Inspiration as a way of knowing is not a cognitive developmental level such as Piaget's formal operational thought or even a post-formal operation such as Wilber's (1995) descriptions

of vision-logic or the fifth-order consciousness of Flier's (1995) constructive-developmentalism in which mysticism is not other than reason but a developmental perspective on reason. Rather than a cognitive-developmental stage, inspiration represents a style or form of knowing, characterized by the phenomenology mentioned above.

Inspiration is not confined to a particular stage or order of the broader development of consciousness. That is, it may occur as a component of a transpersonal experience, but can also occur at any developmental level. For example, an inspiration may emerge as a strong transcendent connection with nature or an experience of non-duality or an event that fosters a holistic sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Each of these may reflect different developmental stages (in these examples Wilber's [1995] Psychic, Nondual, and Ego/Centauroic levels respectively). These maps may help to locate a stage or order of development in which inspiration manifests, but inspiration is not confined to a particular stage or limited to those who have achieved higher development. While ontological ground is often shifted in a transpersonal experience, in inspiration, only a particular shift in epistemic style is required.

Flier (1995) reminds us that mysticism is a way of knowing, not something to be known. But we may be absorbed or seduced by the content of such knowing, focusing on some tangible product (e.g., idea, insight) rather than the process itself. However, it is not the product that is the most valuable aspect of inspiration, it is the immediacy and vitality of the activity of knowing--the experience itself, not the outcome. The value of the insight or creative product is its ability to move us and remind us into this state of knowing.

What is the relationship between inspiration and peak experiences? "Moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" was an acceptable definition of peak experiences for Maslow (1962, p. 69). Obviously this very broad definition captures a wide range of experiences. Maslow

compiled a list of nineteen phenomenological characteristics, later refined into clusters, which formed a prototypical or perfect peak experience. However, he reported that no one reported all of these characteristics. Some later work (Panzarella, 1980) has attempted to bring more specificity to the phenomenological make up of peak experience while transpersonal psychology has attempted to understand the "higher end" experiences. This work on inspiration also attempts to look inside subjective experiences, but rather than considering the very broadly defined "peak" experiences as a whole, inspiration considers a more specific process of knowing that may be part of many peak, plateau or other experiences. Maslow recognized that peak experiences did not always have a noetic or cognitive element and in some later work, suggested that peak experiences are transformative only when they contain a cognitive component (Krippner, 1972, p. 115). In this he hints at the importance of the process of knowing that I have tried to uncover here.

Many, but not all, peak experiences may have behind or within them the epistemic motor of inspiration.

Like inspiration, the shamanic journey involves an altered state or an epistemic shift as a means of obtaining knowledge. Shamanism has enjoyed renewed interest through the work of Eliade (1963), Goodman (1988, 1990), Harner (1980), Larson (1976), Perry (1974), Walsh (1990), and others. Shamanic experience typically includes an alleged vacating of the body and the soul traveling to other spirit domains. By contrast, in inspiration the Muse, divinity, an idea, etc. visits us. We remain embodied, a radio receiver that may tune in one direction or another, or may spontaneously receive a welcome signal, while the shaman is more like a probe traveling to other domains. Using Walsh's (1995) phenomenological mapping we can further, if briefly, differentiate inspiration from shamanic journeying. The ability of the experienced shaman to

leave and enter shamanic states at will is not as typical for the inspired individual, although there can be some proficiency developed in welcoming inspiration, but not in willing it. I have found that the use of brief shamanic-like ritual, drumming, chanting, etc. can open one's availability to inspiration as well as to shamanic journeying. Perhaps some experiences of the shamanic workshop participant are actually experiences of inspiration. They should be easily differentiated from one another as the following brief comparison identifies. Walsh suggests the shaman maintains partial control of the content. The only sense of control of content with inspiration is occasionally in the initial direction of focus (i.e., toward a particular issue, question, or form) but there is no sense of shaping the material itself. Awareness of the environment decreases in shamanic journeying but is heightened in inspiration. Unlike shamanism, during inspiration arousal and calm increase as mentioned above, and there is no ecstasis or out of the body experience, we remain embodied, however the sense of self is expanded, sometimes tremendously.

We see the shamanic journey and inspiration representing two modes of acquiring knowledge through non-rational means. While both may prove valuable, inspiration may have some distinct advantages. First, there is no cultural barrier in inspiration which has sometimes been a complaint of the use of shamanic experience out of its cultural context. While it may be possible to invoke a core shamanic experience that does not require shared culture legacy, there remains some reasonable doubt about this. Inspiration also appears available to a wider range of individuals. Even in cultures where shamanism is part of the mainstream, it is usually undertaken by an elite group who may have special skills, lineage or status. Inspiration appears egalitarian in that it takes some form in nearly everyone.

Welcoming Inspiration

Listen for the song that sings through you. This song breathes the crisp air that pours through a mountain gap and down into the valley of our existence. When we keep the door of our self closed this air passes us by. It is through living and moving through the walls of our self that allows the air to awaken and renew us. This comes from opening the heart, suspending what we know, trusting, meeting. When we rise to meet the mountain air we welcome our highest self, and even become the air itself.

Inspiration can not be willed but it can be wooed and welcomed. Three general aspects impact the emergence of inspiration: setting, set and mystery.

Setting

Inspiration emerges in a wide range of contexts including situations involving: helping others, acts of creativity, moving beyond some personal challenge or limitation, love, meditation, etc.. While specific events do not cause inspiration, there were some common “triggers” that were associated with the experience including: nature, love, suffering and/or courage, ideas, music, exercise, beauty or quality. But the value of this information is quite limited in two ways. Many of these same triggers could be found if we asked about peak, mystical, happy or similar experiences (see Laski, 1968; Nelson, 1990), and virtually anything could be found to be a trigger. If we are in a particularly open, available state we find ourselves able to make contact be inspired in nearly any setting. However, most of the time we are so immersed in our normal waking state that it takes a strong magnet, such as great art or music, to attract our attention.

One woman reports: “When I listen to Puccini I get inspired; it happens almost every time if I pay attention.” Does everyone get inspired by Puccini? Probably not. Our individual meaning structures and experience make certain events, acts, sights more salient to one person

than another. While the longing, love and beauty in much of Puccini's work, for example, may be particularly inspiring to one person, it may, given the right internal conditions, inspire a great many. It appears that some events, ideas, music seem to resonate through most of us if we are paying attention, are present or are open to the experience; that is, our mind-set effects our availability to our setting.

Certain people are inspired in certain directions. For example, a woman who overcame abuse and describes herself as strong and self-reliant finds the highest level of inspiration in events and music that reflect and express power. A self-described artist finds beauty and creativity as most moving; the meditator describes states of particular mystic awareness as the most salient moments. None of these is exclusive; that is, the initial apparent preference or availability does not preclude inspiration from other ways but it may suggest a front door into their experience.

Inspiration emerged frequently out of frustration or difficulty. Paradoxically, while a loving, secure, or beautiful setting may at times be conducive to inspiration, moments of difficulty, vulnerability, frustration or struggle were often the ground from which inspiration sprang. It may nudge a shift in our typical state of knowing.

We also find inspiration as consuming and contagious, cultivated by our mere association with something or someone. In Ion Plato writes that the Muse is “a divine power, which moves you like . . . a magnet . . . the Muse inspires man herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain.” (lines 533, D-E). Whenever inspiration was described in a context where there were others around there was frequently a propagation of the experience. Whether hearing a Martin Luther King speech, or during a papal visit (see Biela and Tobacyk, 1987) or even at a Nazi Nuremberg rally,

inspirations seems to have a contagion like quality. Although the mere wild or Dionysian-like frenzy of a group is not the same as inspiration. We can have enthusiasm, or passionate abandon without the expanded sense of knowing that is characteristic of inspiration. In addition, the great work of art or musical composition or speech has that same power to move us as the presence of another person. I suggest that a work of art, food, music and so forth that was brought forth through a process of inspiration becomes the contagion itself. If we are open it resonates the particular qualities from which it was formed through us. We are invited into the common ground from which it emerged.

We often seemed pulled to the level of those around us. We may find that with a good tennis opponent, the quality of our game is raised. The same kind of shift can occur when we are around someone who is particularly healthy or holy. We may unintentionally be dragged down or raised up depending on our diet of company we keep. Parents of teenagers often become poignantly aware of this. With respect to inspiration, we discover that our own inspiration may catalyze another person's experience and their inspiration may move us. The inspired teacher effects the student, the therapist who is engaged in this altered way of knowing seems to speed up his or her client's understanding. In such an exchange there appears an expansion or elevation to inspiration's broader cognitive-emotional style. Since inspiration not only provides valuable knowledge or perspective but also becomes self-reinforcing, our use of it as an intentional catalyst may open some possibilities in helping and teaching roles.

Set

Even in the midst of the greatest beauty we may be unable to appreciate it. Our awareness may be absorbed by some worry or concern. At other times, in the midst of the mundane, we

may have a moment of inspiration. With respect to welcoming inspiration, the scene, setting or environment is a distant second in importance to the internal state of the individual.

Four characteristics describe the internal “set” for inviting inspiration: focus, trust, letting go, listening. This, of course, only invites it, and does not create or construct an experience. Assessing our ability on each of these aspects may suggest a means for growing in graciousness toward welcoming inspiration. It may also be described as a way of honing our skills of knowing.

A change in focus involves unhitching from the train of normal waking consciousness. Focus often emerges out of conscious and deliberate intent, sometimes initially as an invocation of sorts. This takes the form of prayer, meditation, or formulating and asking a specific question—directing one's attention in a particular way or toward a particular object. For example, In contemplation I throw my attention toward something, knowing Mother Mary, for example, and if I am paying attention and do not try to grasp this too tightly, in time I notice a difference, a swelling in my chest, a kind of seeing or knowing that I had not been aware of in the previous moment. The power of ritual, personal or collective, is common to many styles of focusing. The ancient Greek poet asks the Muse for insight, the devout or desperate pray, the religious service attempts to funnel us into a partially common experience through liturgy, communion, common words and actions, the scientist reviews the data and frames the question that is most appropriate to answer, the artist prepares his or her physical and psychological space and directs her energies toward a project.

This is a delicate act in that too much willful focus may enamor us with the apparent control or power of our act of directing, preventing us from moving beyond this set. Too narrow a focus may frame the question too tightly, not allowing room for what may come. Without

adequate presence or focus we may spin from one thing to another keeping inspiration at bay. An experienced meditator hints at the role of sustaining attention in facing some uncomfortable area of his own existence: “Sometimes I deliberately try to stay focused on the painful area. There is a natural tendency to want to shove it aside and attend to something else. But I know when I immerse myself in it, stay focused on it, there can be a kind of softening, loosening it up. I can't make it happen. You have to hang in there. It does its thing.”

Reaching out is another way to name this focusing. Husserl describes an “emotive and cognitive reaching out to the other in a self-transcending empathic understanding” (Kohak, 1984, p. 206). This implies an intentionality, direction or a desire to make contact with some “other” (e.g., a part of self, an idea, a person). This too is a delicate move, as our reaching out may become compulsive and our attention obsessive, degenerating to an addictive grasping or attachment that “must have” the outcome and as such makes it difficult to allow or let go. Dossey (1993), in reviewing research on prayer and healing, summarizes an interesting observation that healing may be most likely to occur not when a particular outcome is prayed for but when the focus is in the spirit of “thy will be done.” While presence or focused attention is critical, the “need” to have a particular outcome may get in the way.

While our intent often sets the stage, at times our focus is narrowed for us. A riveting event such as a death may suddenly catapult one into a clearing which inspiration visits.

Beyond focus is trust, which is a belief or attitude that appears essential for this process. The trust or faith is in a non-rational, post-reflective way of knowing, although it is sometimes personified (e.g., faith in God) or otherwise explained (e.g., the benevolence of nature, knowing my deepest self). The trust was sometimes weakened by an almost exclusive dependence or faith in rational-sensory knowing and was strengthened by experiences of inspiration: “This reminds

me that ultimately the world is trustworthy and that I can trust myself and the natural order of things.” “I remembered to trust myself”; “I recognized the inherent wisdom . . . that I knew was there all along”; “I think it is an affirmation of something I already know, but that I usually forget.” In this way faith or trust is not a theoretical belief but . . . “begins as an experiment and ends as an experience” (Inge as cited in Wilber, 1995). The interviews I conducted ended by asking participants what advice they had for themselves in relation to inspiration. Consistently, the majority of responses looked like this: “trust myself”; “trust the benevolence and wisdom of the spirit”; “trust and stay attuned with the spirit”; “Letting myself be vulnerable . . . trusting that an answer will come.”

Gerald May (1982) uses the term “willingness” to describe an attitude of trust and allowing and suggests that our overly willful, in-control cultural norms often exclude the possibility of constructive surrender. I argue that this style of control is held in place by our narrow epistemic norms.

“Letting go” or “allowing” follows naturally from trust, but while trust or willingness implies an attitude, letting go is closer to an action. It is paradoxical in the sense that we must be intentional (willful) as we move toward letting go, but we let go in this moment of surrender. This has been referred to as “releasement” (Heidegger), “detachment” (Eckhart), “wuwei” in Taoism. It occurs subtly, unexpectedly, often with a “give” and requires an attitude of non-attachment or no-grasping.

We often have insights and inspirations that go unused or seem wasted. That is, our recognition is fleeting, a glint that is easily clouded by the haze of hurried everyday events. As such there may be no translation into a creative product or no sustained shift in our perspective or our self. How many good ideas or expansive views slip away before we are filled by them?

While inspirations are somewhat harder to ignore than intellectual insights, they are delicate experiences that require psychological space if they are to come to full bloom. Within the allowing or letting go we must pay attention or listen. “When Michalangelo did the Sistine Chapel he painted both the major and the minor prophets. They can be told apart because, though there are cherubim at the ears of all, only the major prophets are listening” (Gowan as cited in Harman and Rheingold, 1984, p. 8). It is this listening or paying attention that enables us to be meaningfully affected, allowing the inspiration its flowering. Listening involves expanding and opening one’s normal awareness.

Finally, an inspiration comes to fruition when it is manifested or expired--breathed out. In creativity this is usually thought to be some product such as a painting, poem or invention. In this sense the ability to translate the vision into form is critical and may require technique that lives up to the promise of the new perspective. This may be a source of frustration as one’s abilities groan and strain under the power of the vision. But even technique, while often requiring hard work and intentional effort to develop, seem to be elevated by the inspiration, if it is not forced. One seems to paint better, write better, compose better than they thought they could. And in finding the conduit through which to express, the velocity of the inspiration may increase and pull on us like a child that demands our attention. As mentioned earlier, a creative product is not the only way that inspiration breathes into existence through us. An act, an attitude, an insight, a spoken word may express an inspiration and a shift in our being. A change in the way I treat my children is just as legitimate (maybe more so) an expression of inspiration as is a work of art. This reminds us that inspiration is especially for the living canvas of our lives and not relegated to a few with specialized talent or interest.

Mystery

Despite our best efforts and intention, inspiration often comes unexpectedly and out of our direct control. It remains, at times, mysterious. I am reminded of how the action of subatomic particles is described by the quantum physicists. While probability may suggest where and when the next “sighting” may occur, it cannot predict or make it happen, and so is the case with inspiration. Using other language, it is sometimes experienced as a grace, as free giving of a gift which implies the direct control is not fully ours.

Focus, trust, letting go, listening, and also ability to manifest--the extent that these are present in all our activities is reflective of the degree to which we feel the benefits of inspiration in our lives: uplifted, clear, connected, peaceful and loving, although certainly not without struggle and suffering. Development in each of these dimensions relates to the regularity of inspiration in our lives. And such regularity may alter the experience a bit. For example, the intensity that was often associated with the first remembered events of inspiration mellowed a bit for those in whom this experience became more common. “My early experiences were more like rapture, ecstasy. Now it is more like an incredible sense of well-being, of clarity and lightness.”

Someone suffering from mental difficulties may not only lack the direct benefits of inspiration but also the prelude to it, the set or techniques that welcome it. This suggests that both the experience itself and the understanding of the mechanism or process that invites inspiration may be facilitated and be useful in helping others. Assessing one on each of these dimensions may provide some direction for therapy or other growth work. For example, we might find our ability to focus and be present, or to still our minds and listen, or our faith or trust in the viability of this process, may keep inspiration at bay; developing practical skills in the needed area may help to invite inspiration.

Conclusion

Inspiration is about being filled and being moved. It provides psychological and spiritual sustenance and provides an education in values by reminding us of what is most important. Inspiration does not take us away from the mundane but brings us most fully into the heart of it, begs for our full presence, and transforms it before our eyes.

I still get chills when I hear Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech." Perhaps you do too. This is an indicator that in that moment we have begun to shift and open to an aspect of our consciousness that resonates and is awakened by King's words of justice. Of course we may also be moved by such things as beauty, compassion, courage and so forth. And simply that momentary recognition and contact can be sufficient to take our breath away forcing the next breath to be a deep awakening. While inspiration has most often been thought of as an infrequent experience and one reserved for the gifted few, it is revealed here as an experience that all of us may have a taste of and be able to invite.

The evidence of inspiration as frequent and significant helps to shift the center of gravity away from the exclusivity of the normal waking state and with it a narrow form of rational-empiricism as the only viable source of knowing and being. As we re-member our ways of knowing, we may reclaim the significance of inspiration in our own lives, recognizing that the way we deal with our family, work or our even our next meal is as much an opportunity to be inspired as are our sacred practices of art or religion.

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