Life's Three Stages:
Infancy, Ego, and Transcendence

Michael Washburn interviewed by Paul Bernstein

[For more information, you may contact the interviewer at pbernste@earthlink.net
or c/o Educational Services, 8 Ferry Street, Chelsea, MA 02150]

I decided to interview Michael Washburn because the outlook presented in his books seems very helpful to people searching and struggling with personal spiritual issues.

Washburn -- a philosopher who integrates psychology with religion -- asserts that who we ordinarily think we are (our ego) is only a part of our experience. The vaster part he calls the Dynamic Ground, in which he unites what others call our unconscious, our instincts, our libido, and the spiritual forces that inspire us. In other words, Washburn insists that Jesus, Freud, Buddha, and even medieval alchemy were all offering us, as closed-minded egos, ways to open up to the realm of the unconscious and spirit -- even though those pioneers and their followers may not have agreed with each other's ways of expressing that understanding.

Further, Washburn wants us to appreciate that we can hardly avoid a spiritual life eventually, because the ego causes its own misery and despair if it remains closed to the world it has made unconscious. The ever-so-common "mid-life crisis" is closely related to the ancient's "dark night of the soul". What's happening in such cases, explains Washburn, is the opening of the ego to the forces it had closed itself off from, in its earlier necessary stage of development.

His model shows us the lifelong see-saw between the larger Dynamic Ground (call it God if you like) and the individual self, who at birth is immersed comfortably in the larger Ground, then gradually develops an identity of *body* as separate, then *mind* as its own, and then as an adult, bumps up against its own limits in so identifying. The ego, Washburn teaches, is good enough at operating in the 3-dimensional world of matter and unilinear time, but cannot of itself encompass the world of eternity in which this 3-dimensional world is suspended. Also, the ego's development from infancy to adulthood inevitably involves traumas that later limit its flexibility in even the 3-dimensional world. In the effort to transcend those limits (to become more effective in concrete goals like work and family) the ego meets opportunities to transcend itself, and so to open up again to the Dynamic Ground. This is the experience we adults have called transpersonal, transcendental, or spiritual. It comes from the same "place", says Washburn, as the libido, our dreams, our demons, our neuroses -- what our culture and our traditional psychologies have perhaps misleadingly labeled as a "lower" rather than the "higher", "more spiritual" realm.

PB: Michael, you assert, more forcefully than mainstream psychologists, that forming a strong ego is not sufficient for us as adults. So instead of regarding people's search for higher meaning as a luxury, a childish self-absorption, or a sign of abnormal personality, you say that such a search is normal. The road may be difficult and at times confusing, but it is a normal, necessary progression. Why do you think this happens? And how did you come to that view?

MW: I think there are two reasons, and you have touched upon one of them. The goals of adult development, as most of us pursue them, advertise more than they deliver. We pursue the course of ego-identity development, we pursue relationships, we pursue careers, we pursue

accomplishments. And I think that implicit in those pursuits is the assumption that if we are successful there, then we will be fulfilled in life.

Intellectually we stand back and say, "No, of course not, we're not that naive." But I think that while we are involved in that kind of project, we really do believe that that is the case -- and therefore we set ourselves up for disappointment and disillusionment. To succeed in our adult, worldly goals and find out that we are still deeply dissatisfied, and that the world somehow just hasn't satisfied some of our very deepest needs, can be a critical, crisis point in our adult life. And for some it can be very severe, I believe, leading to a sense of existential meaninglessness and alienation, leading to questions of "why?" and "what more?" These kinds of experiences typically carry with them the beginning of a real spiritual hunger -- however undefined it may be.

That's one point. A second point -- and here I go back to Jung -- is that the first half of life is the period during which we develop our egos, and establish ourselves in the world. While we are doing that, we typically have a very outward focus, and for that reason we turn our backs on some essential resources of the deep psyche (which Jung refers to as the collective unconscious). Among those resources are such things as instinctuality, much of our affective or emotional life, creative potentials, and spiritual possibilities. So our development during the first half of life tends to be a bit one-sided. If, later in life, we suffer a profound disillusionment in our experience of the world, we may find ourselves turning back towards psychic resources that previously we had repressed. This is the beginning of what I have called "regression in the service of transcendence", which I think most people would know better using the term of St. John of the Cross, "the dark night of the soul". It can be a very long, difficult, and trying period.

For people who find themselves in this passage -- as I did 20 years ago -- it is helpful to know that it is a passage. It's helpful to know that perseverance and patience are important, and that it is a time to grow in faith. Frequently it may not look like faith, because the old idols have disappeared, and the old god-ideas have fallen by the wayside. It therefore can look like a loss of faith, and a loss in one's life-direction generally. But this can really be a turning point in faith, the beginning of a mystery, a movement towards an "I know not what" that, though distressing, can also be the real stuff of spiritual experience and of a spiritual relationship.

PB: There is a somewhat growing recognition and acceptance of what you're talking about under a label that may not encompass it all -- "spiritual crisis" or "spiritual emergency". Did you write your second book, "Transpersonal Psychology in Psychoanalytic Perspective", at least partly to add such an understanding to conventional psychotherapists, so they might learn how to help people coming to them in this critical stage and be able to give them a lot more than they get from conventional psychologists?

MW: I'm not sure that was one of my intentions, but it has been a gratifying consequence of both of my books. I've been contacted by a number of psychotherapists, some of whose clients have experienced difficulties of spiritual awakening and transformation, difficulties of faith. And they've told me that my writings have been helpful to them in being able to provide a coherent framework and a way of understanding what their clients might be experiencing.

PB: Do you feel there's still a need in professional psychology -- and in our culture generally -- to alert people ahead of time, so to speak, before they even encounter that crisis, with the knowledge that it's something they should expect? And also to have tools available when people do turn to psychologists, to priests, and even to talk radio -- wherever people turn when they feel confused and want guidance? It seems to me that what you wrote would be very effective for people once they read it, but the general culture and the general psychological profession may not yet be acting from that point of view.

MW: Yes, I think that's right. I think that from the point of view of the general psychological, psychiatric establishment, there still is a pathologization of anything that has to do with difficult religious experience. We are overcoming that, I am pleased to say. There is a growing

appreciation that a passage into spiritual life can be psychologically very challenging, and that we should expect it as a common occurrence, and learn better to understand it so we can deal with it when it happens. I think we are in a better situation as far as those possibilities are concerned than we have been in the past. But there's still some way to go.

PB: Another important characteristic of your work is the overlap of different psychologies and religions. You seem very comfortable with such an overlap, even though a lot of other academics, philosophers, psychologists and intellectuals seem reluctant to embrace such a wide variety of perspectives. You seem able to find common core experiences out of which those different traditions and approaches emerged. And also, you seem nicely to construct a common language without using many new terms, without adding jargon, but just broadening and specifying common terms so that, as I sometimes like to list them -- you have Freud and Jesus and alchemy and yoga and existentialism all able to talk to one another! Without them being hostile!

MW: Yes, it is a very odd group! Agreed. I am a philosopher by profession, and though I teach the history of Western philosophy, I also teach courses in Eastern philosophy. So my interest in philosophy really does stretch beyond our own cultural and historical heritage. As for religion, I have a profound respect for all religious traditions without being a member of any one of them. For that reason, I don't feel like I've had to violate any sectarian boundaries. I just simply appreciate all the religions about which I have some knowledge. For me, following a multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural course of study has been very enriching to my own understanding.

PB: Was there a time -- perhaps when you were a teen-ager or a little bit later -- when you first stepped out of whatever religion you were originally raised in? Or were you raised in no religion at all?

MW: Well, I was born in Provo, Utah. My family's background is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons). But I wasn't really raised within that group and faith. Instead, I was raised with a respect for religion without the requirement of religion. I must say that I am pleased that was so, because it kept me curious without narrowing my vision.

PB: Despite your openness to many religions, you reject the concept of "Original Sin" and argue instead for understanding humankind's "fall from grace" through your term "Original Repression". Can you explain that?

MW: My thinking about these ideas began because I was dissatisfied with the two major reasons often given for what might be called humankind's alienated or unenlightened condition. Eastern religions tend to say that our "ignorance" is the cause of our alienated or unenlightened condition, while many Western forms of spirituality say the cause is Sin. I found neither argument appealing or persuasive.

For example, in Zen, other forms of Buddhism, and in Hinduism, we're told that we are already "no-mind", "nirvana", or "atman", and all we need to do is simply awaken to what we already are. So my thinking was, "Gee, what is it I need to do to myself? How do I transform myself? What practices do I enact?" And I was told, especially by people like Krishnamurti (who represents this view in perhaps its most strict presentation), "There is nothing to do. Simply to see. Be who you already are. Awaken and coincide with your already enlightened condition." For some reason I just couldn't profit from or learn from that point of view. It seemed too simple a cause and suggested too easy a solution for a situation of much greater gravity and difficulty.

But when I turned to the West's major answer, namely Sin, it seemed as though we got too much cause! And too harsh a cause. In the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, we're told, at least allegorically, mythologically, that our most remote ancestors committed a sin; they turned away from the sacred. And because they did that (at least some of the traditions say) this sin is re-

perpetrated with each succeeding generation. They teach us that we are inherently guilty in our existence. So that to overcome alienation and achieve some kind of realization, wholeness, and enlightenment, is going to be harder than is necessary. So I was discontented with both those traditional views and hoped that there was some middle ground.

What's true in the traditional notion of "Original Sin" is that we are predisposed to turn our back on -- or to repress (to put it psychodynamically) -- the sacred within us. I believe that this happens very early in the history of individual development, much as the Biblical symbols suggest it happened very early in the history of humankind.

When it is very young, the emerging ego finds itself both attracted to the Dynamic Ground and fearfully dependent on it. This relationship is mirrored in the young toddler's external reliance upon the mother as both the primary source of love and the primary source of frustration when the child is not fed, held or otherwise cared for. In order to achieve some measure of independence from these prodigious, awesome experiences, the young ego inevitably seeks to buffer or separate itself. It does that by reducing both its interpersonal intimacy with the mother (or primary caregiver) and its acceptance of the internal flows of feeling that I call the Dynamic Ground. It creates a Primal (or Original) Repression. Repression is not a sin when committed at this age. It is a necessary part of the development of the ego. It adds something positive to our overall development. It gives the ego an independent space in which to grow. It's not a crime, it is a developmental necessity.

PB: Yet you also say that the continuance of this repression into adulthood can lead to behaviors that people may more understandably call sin, or evil?

MW: Yes, although those are still extremely harsh words and I'd prefer other terms.

Although repression is not a sin at first, but is rather a necessary infrastructure for the development of the ego, there comes a point when, as adults, our ego is mature and strong and no longer needs to be separated from the spiritual power of the soul. It therefore is able to reopen itself to what I call the power of the Ground. But in some of us, the ego clings nevertheless to its separateness. And if the ego doesn't summon the courage to reopen itself, to release the bonds of Original Repression, it then takes on a different character. It's no longer an ego that needs the protection of Original Repression for its own growth, but is now an ego that uses repression as a protection from its further growth. I think that's when we begin to experience profound alienation. Is that sin? That's still a very harsh word, but we are now in some respect obstructing and retarding the possibilities of our own transcendence and spiritual growth.

PB: And maybe the mature ego's reluctance does relate in another way to what people call sin. When an adult repeatedly avoids certain experiences because of traumas laid down during childhood, he may wind up committing behaviors that are ordinarily called sinful. He may find himself deceiving others and himself. He may find himself acting out of cowardice instead of courage.

Yet from your point of view we're still not saying that he's a bad person. We're saying that his ego, by not re-opening to the Dynamic Ground, cannot become aware of the childhood memories locked away in the unconscious, and therefore cannot release itself from their grip. One can think of examples of selfishness, or domination of others, or a whole category of behaviors called sin that -- when one looks at the psychological motivations of the person committing them -- do come from a fear of pushing through what that person expects to be the same kind of painful experience they had as a trauma, as a child. As a result, it does cause damage to themselves, and to others. And that's when society, and the moral traditions who aren't necessarily keeping an eye on the Dynamic Ground, come along and simply judge them, saying "We see some damage happening here, this is a bad act, this is a person committing a sin."

You see, one of the ways I slightly rephrase your framework is to say that *expanding beyond the limitations* of one's ego is the key developmental need for a person. And when they open to spiritual resources as a way to do that, they have the most success. The problem is not the ego per se, but rather its limitations which were effective defenses in younger life but which now confine the person. To transcend those limitations becomes the need, so transcendence, including spiritual transcendence, becomes the necessary program.

MW: That's very well spoken. I agree with that entirely.

The ego is called upon to let go, to expand, and that requires, in Tillich's expression "the courage to BE". The ego is now ready to face a wider range of realities and resources and potentialities and relationships -- if only it has the courage to do so. Yet it doesn't always find that courage.

So sometimes it retreats, into a smaller self, a former self, a previous routine. And frequently in retreating, it retreats also into perverse behavior. It is less than it could have been, and it acts in ways less than it could. So in a certain sense it's committing a sin against its own greater possible selfhood. And therefore against the greater possible relationships with other people.

PB: And against its own potential to feel more at peace in the world. Because it maintains these fears as "clothing" which it can then drape around the next experience it thinks is related to that, and it will then have another fearful experience.

MW: Absolutely so. I couldn't agree more.

Life's 3 Stages:
Infancy, Ego, and Transcendence
Michael Washburn interviewed by Paul Bernstein

Part Two

PB: You describe the human condition as an interplay between our individual self as ego (the self we think we are), and a larger realm of vital, spiritual, and often unconscious forces you call the "Dynamic Ground". How did you come to this term, "Dynamic Ground," and what does it include?

MW: Actually, it took me ten years to write the book, *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground*, and I didn't come up with the title until I was very nearly done. So I was pleased when the concept and the title finally fell into place. I use the word "Ground" straightforwardly to refer to the underlying basis or seat of the psyche. The Ground is the fundamental source of spontaneously active psychic potentials, including such things as instinctual impulses, feelings, and even our creative, imaginal and intuitive cognition. And because this seat or source of our psychic life is not static, but is alive and spontaneously active, I call it the *Dynamic* Ground.

I understand the Ground also as a source of energy, by which I mean not just instinctual libido or psychic energy, but also spiritual power. It's my view, therefore, that our psychic life is not divided into two antithetical kinds of powers, libido and spirit, at war with one another, but that basically there is a single power which can express itself in our sexuality or instinctuality -- and also freely and fully in our spiritual life.

PB: Now that's a bit surprising. Most traditions see those as two opposed forces -- the "id" versus the "superego", the profane versus the sacred, "demonic forces" versus "angelic". What led you to be unwilling to keep those things separate, to reject that traditional dualism?

MW: That's an extremely important question. There are Gnostic and dualist traditions that look at religion basically as an otherworldly, disembodied affair and regard instinctuality on the one hand and spirituality on the other as being in conflict. They assume that both powers vie for the allegiance of the ego and its will.

That is not a picture of the psyche and its movement towards spirituality that I find very integral or holistic. I prefer a view that sees spirituality and embodiment, spirituality and sexuality, as being at home with each other. And I view fulfilled spirituality as spirituality above all in the body, with the body as the temple of spiritual power. Our sexual life, robust and healthy, is entirely in harmony with our spiritual outreaching towards others in generosity of heart.

PB: You always put the term "Dynamic Ground" in capital letters. Does that mean it includes -- or stands for -- God?

MW: It could, but I don't know. I don't really know what the sources of our spiritual life are. It may well be that what I call the power of the Ground, which we experience within the context of our own psyche, has its ultimate source beyond the psyche. The power of the Ground may in fact be the spirit of God, as we experience it within the intimacy of the soul, and within the intimacy of our relationships with other people. But I don't know whether it originates outside the psyche. I suspend judgment on its ultimate source because a judgment on that isn't needed, as far as the theoretical position I'm trying to formulate is concerned.

PB: In one of your books you have a chart that shows this surprising range of our personal experience of the Dynamic Ground -- from the lowly id all the way to God, so to speak -- as we grow up from infancy into old age. I want to present that chart here in a simplified form so you can trace the human life cycle with our readers.

MW: Well, Paul, that is a pretty ambitious suggestion. It could lead to a very technical and convoluted response on my part, and I could end up confusing myself and everyone else! But let me see if I can say a few things about the major turning points in life. I do believe that the power of the Dynamic Ground -- the very stuff of spirituality that emerges within our soul, even if its ultimate origin is beyond our soul -- does manifest through our life in a wide variety of ways which are nonetheless coherent.

How we Experience the Dynamic Ground throughout Life

Age	Our experience of the Ground	The ego's situation
Pre-birth	Womb/Universe	Embedded -- ego has not yet emerged
Infant	Great Mother	"Body Ego" emerges, unresistant to Ground
Toddler	Good Mother & Terrible Mother	Intense ambivalence
-------Original Repression----------		
Childhood, latency	The Unconscious; source of dreams; occasional moments of marvel alternating with fearful imaginings.	"Mental Ego" now exists, feels separate, but needy. Locks away traumatic incidents from conscious memory.
Adolescence and Adulthood	Sexual impulses, ecstasy of orgasm; occasional “peak experiences” in aesthetic and athletic activities, and in intimate relationships.	Ego obtains mastery in external activities: physical, social & work skills. Ego identifies with its thoughts; remains largely alienated from emotional self-knowledge.
Mid-life Crisis or “Dark Night of the Soul”	Incursions of previously repressed fears, ambitions, transporting impulses.	Alienation becomes intolerable. Old certainties give way to strong doubts. Identity weakens. Original Repression loosens; ego feels assaulted.
Regeneration in Spirit	Ground appears increasingly attractive as source of holy, comfort, guidance.	Ego able to discern and utilize impulses from the Ground, and rely on them.
Integration	Strong intuitive voice or visions. Feelings of unity with the cosmos, nature, and humanity.	Ego subordinates to the Ground; “attuned to one’s true inner voice”. Ego has choice, but knows that the cost of resisting or ignoring the Ground will be needless injury or waste.

MW: At the very beginning of life, I consider the infant to be embedded in the Dynamic Ground, and to be very much absorbed in its numinous power. The baby can hardly distinguish between feelings that arise from within its own body and feelings that come from its interaction with Mother (or whoever is the primary caregiver). But after a few months of experience, the infant begins to discover that some things are connected to its body (like its fingers and toes) and other things are not (like mother's breast and the bars of its crib). The infant begins to locate a boundary between its physical self and the rest of the world and this begins the emergence of our "Body Ego", our division of the world into "self" and "other".

Nevertheless, this self and other are still warmly contained within an intimate, cherished relationship of the infant with the caregiver. The baby still experiences the outer object (the mother or other primary caregiver) along with an inner correlate, a sort of inner womb along with the outer womb. Besides enjoying the embrace and nurture of the outer caregiver, we still feel immersed in the inner ground of our being.

Then, as psychoanalytic object-relations theorists have explained, the baby begins to realize how acutely its safety and well-being depend upon actions of the caregiver and finds itself in what might be called an acute approach-avoidance, ambivalent relationship with the caregiver. On the one hand, the infant is committed to exploring the world, and to enjoying its independence as a separate being (ego). On the other hand, it still wants delicious intimacy with the caregiver. This ambivalence -- wanting to be independent from and merged with the same Mother -- becomes intolerable, so the child decides that there are two Mothers, the "Good Mother" and the "Terrible Mother".

PB: One could say that the Good Mother is the image the baby creates inside his mind when the real mother holds him lovingly when he wants, and lets him move independently when he wants. And the Terrible Mother is the image the baby creates when the real mother ignores him or when she restricts him?

MW: Yes. And because the relationship between the child and its primary caregiver is experienced at the same time internally as a relationship between the ego and the inner ground, this depth dimension of experience also splits dramatically into two sides, light and dark. Yet such a split becomes intolerable for the ego -- so it ignores or represses its inner split core, perpetrating the first or "original" act of repression. This repression, on balance, plays a positive role for the future development of the child. The ego becomes viable. It's no longer caught in a Manichean world of good versus evil. It has firm ground now, and clear air; it can develop in the peaceful conditions of latency.

PB: But this separation from the anxiety of its dependency is won at a certain cost?

MW: Yes. To make the passage I am talking about involves serious loss; not just the loss of intimacy in relationships but also the loss of contact with inner spiritual resources. The two go hand in hand. So if we are never again as open to interpersonal possibilities after original repression, neither are we ever again as open to our inner spiritual resources.

PB: And what happens after "original repression"?

MW: After repression, the power of the Dynamic Ground is rendered dormant for the most part. Original -- or as I now prefer to call it, following Freud, "primal" repression -- reduces the Dynamic Ground to the power of the "unconscious". Perhaps it's re-experienced in our dream life at night -- which does have a numinous, powerful aspect to it. Otherwise, I think -- and this is to speak in an old-fashioned psychoanalytic way -- the power of the Ground is reduced to a latent, primarily instinctual organization. During the latency period, the power of the Ground is dormant.

I don't want to say that it's rendered completely dormant, because the power of the Ground is still active in diminished form as psychic energy. Moreover, we do have peak experiences; there are still episodes of transporting creativity. We still experience moments of numinous awe. But these experiences tend to be rare -- they tend to be just that, "peak" experiences. For the most part, we look back at the wonders of childhood with nostalgia, as if something profound had been lost along the way.

Then, during puberty, sexuality is awakened, and though it's probably not an acceptable idea to many, I wonder if the ecstasy of sexual orgasm is not in its own very limited way a manner in which we as post-adolescents and adults begin again to experience the power of the Dynamic Ground.

PB: Yes. It's pretty clear that the moment of orgasm is a release from entrapment within the ego and a re-opening to the eternal, and to energies of transport and union. But immediately after that moment, people tend to hurriedly withdraw back into their egos. The cliche question of two lovers in bed, "Was that good for you?", is a question framed by the ego, not an expression of being-here-now!

So would you say that for adults to end the loneliness they feel from confinement within the once-safe boundaries of the ego, by risking intimacy with somebody else, means forcing open those gates of primal repression? And is that why it's so hard for people to sustain intimacy and why, in the process of trying to make a relationship work, they often have to go through a psychotherapeutic process? It would seem that reaching out to others in intimate honesty often requires undoing the early repression. And doing so can be so fearful and difficult that we turn to therapy to help guide us through. The defended boundaries that earlier protected us as children, now restrict us as adults. And adults who choose not to burst those boundaries we observe as rigid indeed, and unhappy, confined.

MW: An excellent point. That is indeed an implication. Deep interpersonal intimacy is at the same time deep psychodynamic opening. And they both are experienced as threatening, unfortunately, as much as we may desire them.

PB: That may also explain why many spiritual traditions find it helpful to lead somebody through that re-opening of the primal repression by establishing a warm, trusting, personal, intimate relationship, either in the "teaching religions" like Hinduism and Zen with their gurus and sensei-masters, or in some forms of Christianity where the first step expected of someone is to develop a personal relationship with Jesus -- not to think of him as the entire Dynamic Ground, so to speak, the entire universal God, but just as another person, to get a trusting sense of intimacy in their internal, spiritual life.

MW: Yes, I agree entirely. At those junctures in our life when it seems as though we're opening both to deeper interpersonal intimacy and, correspondingly, to deeper intrapsychic opening, we are vulnerable. And, therefore, we need wise, consistent, and nurturing leaders. Moreover, it's at exactly these times that object-relationships laid down in early years of life are re-awakened and projected onto the people who are entering our life. So we are vulnerable to the replay of early relationships with our parents and how we internalized them.

PB: Besides intimacy, another way that you emphasize for adults to let in the Dynamic Ground is meditation. Indeed, you call meditation the "Royal Road to the Unconscious" -- reapplying Freud's famous label for our dreamlife.

MW: Yes, a question I asked myself was, "Once repression has succeeded in walling off the ego from the Dynamic Ground, how can the ego still access the unconscious?" One answer is: by quitting the posture that separates the ego from the unconscious -- a posture of repression and alienation. And that is accomplished, I suggest, by the practice of steadfast attention -- by NOT DOING. Not-doing helps to dismantle the resistances by which the ego keeps itself closed to the influences of the unconscious. And the practice of not-doing is especially effective when it is combined with a sense of humble, grateful reverence.

But that's only one direction. I also asked myself, "How does the unconscious contact the ego?" And here I think we can talk about dreams, about neurotic symptom formation as Freud and Jung did, and about the therapeutic practices of "free association" and "active imagination". Also, altered states of consciousness are ways in which the deep unconscious communicates with the ego.

PB: When you studied these various methods for reopening communication with the Dynamic Ground (the unconscious), did you read about them only, or did you also try to experience them personally?

MW: My experience was, I think, typical for the time in the late 60s and early 70s. Eastern spirituality was popular and, yes, I practiced meditation and yoga for many years. Indeed, the initial ideas of the book grew out of a transformative process I began to undergo about twenty years ago, a process that could well be called "a dark night of the soul". It was a difficult period in my life. I experienced openings which were painful and challenging.

In the midst of that process, I was urgently motivated to understand what was happening to me, both in terms of the psychology behind the process and the spiritual potentiality inherent in it. I strongly hoped that the process was a developmental passage and not just a psychological problem. I prayed that the pain I was experiencing was part of a growth process which would ultimately lead to greater wholeness.

So the original motivation for me to begin this research and writing was, as it were, to look ahead into the future of my own transformation, so that I might understand where I had been and where I was going, to understand its ensuing, unfolding stages. I felt a need to find a place for my experience within a coherent theoretical perspective. That's what I did in my first book in its first edition,* I believe, and I've been trying to extend and enrich that perspective in the writings I've done since that time.*

---

*[Editor's Note: Michael Washburn's first book is *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground*, and his second, *Transpersonal Psychology in Psychoanalytic Perspective*. Both are published by the State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 12246.]

Life's 3 Stages:
Infancy, Ego, and Transcendence
Michael Washburn interviewed by Paul Bernstein

Part III: Applying this Viewpoint

PB: If the very fact of growing up and building secure egos causes us to cut ourselves off from the spiritual resources and personal truths of the Dynamic Ground, is there no way that we can remain open to the Dynamic Ground during the growing-up process? Could parents, perhaps, do something along the way, so that when their children reach adulthood the task of re-opening to the Dynamic Ground would be less arduous? Or to put this another way, can you tell us how long must a child, adolescent, or young adult build up their ego before they can benefit from opening up -- or before their ego is ready to open up -- again to the Dynamic Ground?

I'm reminded of how important this issue is whenever I hear of gifted healers or artists whose abilities were plainly apparent when they were kids but who were discouraged or even punished for exhibiting those abilities by their fearful or well-meaning parents. So the children repressed those abilities. Then decades later, as adults, they found themselves with a friend or two who had the same ability, and they let it come back. Would there be a way to keep open that connection between the ego and the Dynamic Ground if the adults around a developing child had themselves already integrated and understood all this? Or must the ego in its own development create such secure boundaries and such serious, effective repression, that only painful incidents in later life can open it up?

MW: I have two answers to this question. First, I think that some people repress the Dynamic Ground and the creative resources of the deep psyche less severely than do the rest of us. For various developmental and parenting reasons (which I'll get to in a moment), these people have remained able to access the deep unconscious even while they focus primarily on ego development, on establishing themselves in the world. For them, as in the example that you cited, there are times and periods, peak experiences, certain psychic gifts or spiritual graces, that they experience throughout their lives. They don't have one, grand, punctuated awakening later on at mid-life, as others may.

PB: But sometimes it seems that no matter how much of a spiritual environment a person is raised in, the ego's will to establish itself will rebel against any practice that even a kindly older person might offer them. We all can recall cases where the child or adolescent regards the spiritual tradition being offered to them by the older generation as repulsive and not liberative. I wonder if there's almost a kind of minimal threshold of closure by the ego to the Dynamic Ground that would seem to manifest in ANY person. I'm seeking here almost a quantitative answer: if the ego doesn't have to close its circular boundary a full 360 degrees to insulate itself from the Dynamic Ground, then how much does it have to close off, in every one of us? For example, just yesterday I was talking to a woman who had tried as a child to obey her "inner voice" and not follow the materialist path her parents wanted. As an adult she tried to serve others and rely on her attunement to her unconscious. That helped the organization that employed her -- but she encountered an ethical crisis there and still had to let go of the whole ego she had constructed along those lines in order to create a much more peaceful and fulfilling life. So it seems as though there's almost no getting away from this.

MW: Well, I fear that might be true. Clearly, strong and loving parents from beginning to end are the best possibility of our weathering the difficulties of ego development in a way that does not separate us from our spiritual resources. Nevertheless, I think that for the great majority of us, we do lose contact. And therefore it's difficult really to say what advice should be given to parents -- my advice would be on the one hand extremely abstract, and on the other hand very

specific! On the abstract side, I would take D.W. Winnicott's advice to heart and say we should strive not to be *perfect* parents but to be "good enough" parents, respecting the developmental needs of our children at each stage. In the first couple of years, the two primary developmental needs are the consolidation of the bond of love, and encouraging the child's movement towards separation and individuation. And those two are not opposites. The bond of love is the *basis* for a healthy separation and individuation of the young child.

Then in the so-called latency years, perhaps from age 5 to 12 or 13, to be good enough parents means again providing for two simultaneous needs: education and play. We need to give our children the best possible primary education we can, while at the same time not making their lives overly disciplined, and allowing them -- encouraging them -- ample opportunity for exploration and play.

Moving to adolescence, a very challenging time for both children and parents -- I speak with some experience --

PB: You have teenagers at home?

MW: Well I have had, in the past. My three daughters are all wonderful adults now, as they were wonderful children then. As adolescents, though, they presented special challenges, as all adolescents do. In adolescence, the two developmental needs for parents to attend to are sincere respect for their children's identity experimentation and struggles for independence, and balancing that with setting consistent boundaries and realistic expectations.

And finally, once your children are ready to cease being your children, and are ready to become adults through picking their own primary other (no longer their parent), and perhaps enter a career that will establish them independently in the world, we need to simply let go of them as our children, and begin to enjoy them as our adult friends.

That's very abstract, I realize, but I don't see how we can do better for our children than attending to their developmental needs in each stage. Because that, I feel, strengthens their egos and personalities while still leaving their options open, their spiritual options as well as their practical-life options. Now, in that regard I do have one specific piece of advice. It seems to me that parents oughtn't be too impatient if their children don't share their own particular brand of spirituality. Clearly, spirituality needs to grow from the inside out. And sometimes that just does not happen until after the agenda of adolescence and early adulthood has been completed. Parents have a responsibility to *introduce* their children to religion. But I think it's almost always a mistake to *impose* it upon them oppressively.

PB: One thing that also seems important to me, that children be offered from a fairly young age, is help in expressing their most painful, their most fearful experiences -- abreaction is the technical term. But parents often get upset hearing their child express anger or other strong emotions, so the parents become defensive. Yet the child (and certainly the individual as she gets older) needs to know not to repress that healing process, or she'll become crippled. Did you find ways to facilitate this during your own parenting? Or do you think that it is better confined to the psychotherapeutic milieu?

MW: I think it points to an extremely important dimension of the parent-child relationship: open communications, not only about ideas and interests but about feelings. Hurt feelings are often very difficult to express. Especially if the parent is seen as the cause of the hurt, it is very difficult for those feelings to be aired without the parent becoming defensive, as you indicated. Although the things that I've written about don't bear specifically on this issue, it seems a very important area, perhaps one of the most important areas, for healthy parenting.

PB: Let me move on to what *religious* practitioners -- ministers, rabbis, pastors -- might gain by understanding the *psychological* dynamics involved in a person who comes to them with

emotional needs, perhaps even with a spiritual crisis, because again, those two worlds are often kept separate in our culture. The religious world doesn't get much into the psychological, while the psychologists may be fearful of involving themselves in talk that might encourage their patient towards spiritual categories of experience. Yet you've made the point so well that these are one and the same, or at least that the overlap is so enormous, that regardless of whichever institution or authority the average Joe or Jane turns to, be that a psychological clinic or a spiritual counselor, it seems they'd be a lot better served if the practitioner receiving them appreciated this overlap. How do you imagine that can happen? -- that ministers, pastors, rabbis, could benefit by understanding that their client's ego is opening up to the Dynamic Ground, rather than such clergy restricting their understanding to traditional religious categories which, after all, come from millennia ago when the religious founder (whether Jesus, Buddha, Moses or Mohammed) did not use the vocabulary of our modern psychology?

MW: Paul, this is a very important matter. I do feel that it would be helpful if religious officials showed greater respect for other spiritual traditions, as expressions of the human relationship to the Divine, and if ministers, rabbis and pastors would have a better understanding of the mystical bases of religion and a better understanding of the psychology of religious experience, both its ecstatic and its darker sides, its spiritual raptures and its dark nights. If they did, there would probably be a significant group among their congregations whom they would be better able to understand and to mentor. So we can and should move in these directions. I hope that is something that will happen, even more than it already has.

PB: There is of course the realm called "pastoral counseling" which seeks to combine the insights of psychology with the principles of religion. People spend years being trained in that profession. Wouldn't that seem to be a perfect place to apply your framework? I suppose if I had a banner to carry on this issue, I would carry it to them first!

MW: Well maybe this is happening in seminaries and other places of that sort. But I'm not in a position to know. I hope so.

PB: To move to another area where I think your viewpoint applies, the field of physical health and medicine. One of the ways our very materialistic, rationalist -- I guess we could say ego-dominated and ego-centered -- public culture has begun to relax its reluctance to accept spiritual things as real is in the area of medicine, because evidence is piling up about spiritual experiences leading to healing in cases where physical medicine had already given up. To me, the place where such cases of mind/body healing overlap most with your work are cases of certain AIDS and cancer patients. They describe a change in their *identity*, from what you call the body and mental ego, to identifying as *spirit*, merely inhabiting a diseased body. They lose the fear of death, and their body responds differently after they have that epiphany. Their immune system starts to recover and effectively battle the HIV or cancer cells. Interestingly, these patients usually describe their identity transformation as not just one of self but of cells. Every cell in their body, they say, was infused with their new awareness, and a new level of energy. They don't have the sophisticated vocabulary of professional psychology, but they describe a transformation that comes after an arduous letting go of many of their ego-defenses. In some cases that was accomplished through confronting their subconscious in dreams, in other cases through meditation or prayer.

MW: I'd be delighted to hear about those stories. The whole growing, burgeoning field of complementary, holistic, or integrative medicine is extremely important. It seems so evident that our lifestyles, our attitudes, and our relationships to the sacred are essential not only to our psychological but to our physical health. And I think that you have focused in at the exact point where my work would apply or have implications. There are energies dormant in the body, not just instinctual but spiritual energies, that are resident in the Dynamic Ground, which can be awakened, just as you describe occurred for these patients. Then they realize, "Well, I'm no

longer just my previous, ego-bound, identity-framed self. I'm now in the context of a larger spiritual life. And this larger spiritual life is concrete; it's in me. It's in my body; it moves through my body. It enlivens my body." That does seem to me to be a very important point: that we are most healthy and most whole when we realize that our physical life and our spiritual life go hand in hand. When our spiritual life is awakened, not just in a posture of faith, but when it is awakened as an enlivening and guiding force within our very bodies, palpably so.

PB: It would be exciting to pursue this area of research. In terms of your own research, or areas of uncertainty that you want to pursue, as you develop this framework, what are you exploring now? What might you be writing in the future -- what subject matter, what points most intrigue you?

MW: I'm currently working on a book, whose title is *Embodied Spirituality in a Sacred World*. In this book I argue for the sensuously embodied, this-worldly character of mature spirituality. I agree with Nietzsche that much of religion, regrettably, is hostile to the body and to the earth. And so I defend the view that spirituality leads ultimately not to some otherworldly, disembodied realm, but rather to this very earth and to our embodied lives on earth. The sacred is sensuously embodied, I believe. It is here and now.

PB: Well, I certainly look forward to reading that.

MW: Thank you.
