

TRANSLIMINALITY AND TRANSCENDENCE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONNECTIONS AMONG CREATIVITY, MYSTICAL  
EXPERIENCE, AND PSYCHO“PATHOLOGY”

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

May, 2016

Nashville, Tennessee

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## GRATITUDE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation “cloud of witnesses,” some of whom have been an integral part of this project, others of whom have cheered me on from the sidelines, and still others of whom have unknowingly inspired me from the shadows of their own paths. My heartfelt thanks is expressed:

To my committee members, Professors Volney P. Gay, Sohee Park, John S. McClure, and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, who embody not only a remarkable breadth of interdisciplinary scholarship but also the invaluable gift of humankindness. And to Evon O. Flesberg and Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, who first inspired and trained me in our sacred profession.

To the Tennessee Association of Pastoral Therapists, for supporting the vital work of pastoral psychotherapy and those who share this calling, and for turning an inauspicious bend in the road into a new pathway for state licensure. Especially to Donna Scott for your generous mentoring and friendship, Ron McDonald for your creativity and vision, and Dick Bruehl for your clinical wisdom (how wonderful to have a supervisor in the direct lineage of Anton Boisen!).

To Charles Davidson and Cliff Edwards, who flew me to Richmond for the honor of participating in their April 2015 Van Gogh panel to speak on transliminality.

To Harry T. Hunt, for your pioneering scholarship and your trust in sending me your life story.

To Lauren Martin, whose brilliant 28-day accountability scheme provided the external structure I needed to write an academic book.

To Coco Greens Vegan Café and Wellness Center and owner, Amy Kiger, for lending me an ideal private practice setting these past three years.

To my treasured therapy clients, for the privilege of knowing, accompanying, and learning from each of you.

To Jon Erdman, who sent me early and enthusiastic feedback from Alaska.

To Libby Maxey, Sherry Cothran, Cindy Mundy Keisler, and Michelle Mundy, who saw the importance of this work and urged me to keep going.

To my parents, Mark and Robin Rosser, for many forms of encouragement through what turned out to be a 7.5-year marathon.

To Carolyn LaBarbera, Donna Michael, Sandra Griggs, Rebekah Jenkins, Myounghun Yun, and Dorothy Dean, for being my much-needed professional and personal support system.

To KCPW, assistant extraordinaire, for befriending me and Wisteria Heights.

To our (never officially named) Enneagroup – Reb Buxton, Doug Taylor, Merrill Farnsworth, Lynnette Davidson, Johnathan Johnson – you all were my knight’s move.

To both Mary M.’s, for a taste of the Divine Feminine.

To Kent Kreiselmaier, who was my colleague before becoming my husband, who first believed I could be a “master psychotherapist,” who helped me find my own voice.

And to Zach, Hannah, and all my other “orange transliminals” whose vibrant, creative spirits compelled me to study this topic before I knew there was a word for it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Equations governing the turbulence of heated gases existed long before the problems of such gases had been precisely investigated. Similarly, we have long been in possession of mythologems which express the dynamics of certain subliminal processes, though these processes were only given names in very recent times.” —C.G. Jung<sup>1</sup>

#### The Problem

In my previous and sometimes current life as a professional pianist, I have had some fascinating friends and colleagues. Immensely gifted, highly intelligent, passionate about their life and their art, with unique perspectives and perceptions often bordering on the mystical, these same individuals were usually eccentric, occasionally manic, often addicted to drugs or alcohol, and frequently depressed, sometimes to the point of being suicidal. Of course, not everyone fit this mold: there were also plenty of “normal” musicians, just as every field—whether or not it is typically considered “creative”—undoubtedly has its high achievers and quirky characters, as well as its share of neurotic and disturbed individuals. Still, my career and social encounters in the arts community tended overall to confirm the stereotype of the “crazy artist,” of tormented souls whose beautiful music belied a depth both of spirituality and of suffering.

From Vincent Van Gogh to Bob Dylan, Teresa of Ávila to Alanis Morissette, highly creative people have embodied strong contrasts of emotional highs and lows, spiritual light and darkness. Many artists undergo mystical or transcendent experiences, on the one hand, and encounter depression and/or psychosis, on the other. Why are some

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<sup>1</sup> 1961/1989, p. 311

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include the late David F. Horrobin, Harry T. Hunt, and the late Michael A.

extremely creative persons able to flourish, while others are not? How can we increase our understanding of the double-edged artistic temperament? Can it be a source of psychological advancement or of theological insight? Are there particular practices that can stabilize its vulnerabilities without sacrificing its unique strengths?

My quest to understand what is going on here led me to pursue graduate research regarding the intersections between creativity, mental illness, and mystical experience. I discovered that while there are large bodies of psychological literature examining “creativity and madness” and “mystical experience and psychosis,” few researchers have attended to the connections between all three.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, controversy exists around how to define “creativity,” “mysticism,” and “psychosis-proneness,” as well as whether these categories are best explained as enduring traits or variable states. Psychiatric liabilities are often ignored or glossed over in the artistic community, even as (or perhaps because) artists are often treated as a conglomeration of symptoms in the psychiatric clinic. Theologians have tended to explore the inner, religious and sometimes psychological aspects of mystical experience with less attention given to their external physical and practical consequences. Meanwhile, the religion-and-health field<sup>3</sup> has focused primarily on the adaptive aspects of religious practice (and sometimes belief) for mental and physical health while neglecting individual differences and subjective experience, as well as evidence that some spiritual practices can lead to potentially harmful consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include the late David F. Horrobin, Harry T. Hunt, and the late Michael A. Thalbourne and colleagues.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Levin (2009) and Hall, Meador, & Koenig (2008).

Given these limitations, in this dissertation I ask: **Can we glean new information by considering creativity, psycho“pathology,” and mystical experience in tandem?**

## **The Project**

### Thesis

My hypothesis is that the concept of transliminality, as posited by the late Australian psychologist Michael A. Thalbourne, provides a way to clarify the frequent interrelationship between creativity, mystical experience, and psychosis;<sup>4</sup> to resolve some of the methodological difficulties surrounding these three areas; and to interpret the lived experience of some key mystics, thinkers, and artists—namely, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Teresa of Ávila, the depth psychologist C. G. Jung, and the contemporary musician Alanis Morissette. Transliminality is “the hypothesized tendency for psychological material to cross thresholds into or out of consciousness” (Thalbourne & Houran 2000, p. 861). The more transliminal you are, the more likely you are to be creative<sup>5</sup> and suggestible, feel an especially wide range of positive and negative emotions, undergo psychosis, recall numinous dreams, have mystical experiences, and experience sensory overload.

If my above hypothesis is correct, we can expect that Teresa, Jung, and Morissette’s temperaments and experiences, as portrayed by self-reports and others’ investigations, will match up with aspects of transliminality that have been established and corroborated by statistical and neuroscientific analysis. Specifically, we can predict

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<sup>4</sup> For more precise definitions of these terms, please see p. 10-18.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am referring to creative personality rather than creative achievement; see p. 10-12.

that our case studies' accounts will reflect an increasing emotional *state* variability in proportion to increased degrees of the *trait* transliminality—in other words, that highly transliminal people tend to exhibit greater extremes of both emotional flourishing (as evidenced by creative achievements) and decompensation (as evidenced by psychopathology).<sup>6</sup> We can also anticipate that their narratives of mystical experiences and “paranormal”<sup>7</sup> beliefs will share elements in common with how these components are qualified in the transliminality literature.

However, I also acknowledge that a psychological perspective, while providing valuable contributions, is insufficient for fully understanding or adequately caring for complex human beings. In order to broaden the depth and breadth of the conversation, I will place the psychological theory of transliminality in dialogue with “thick description” from biographical and autobiographical accounts of three contrasting seminal figures, as well as with perspectives on mysticism from Christian theology and occasionally other spiritual/religious traditions. I expect that this exercise will result in mutual illumination as well as critique: not only will transliminality theory provide a lens for understanding these luminaries' experiences and for shaping theological interpretations of mystical experience, but our “living human documents” will suggest both resonances with, and modifications for, the discourses of psychology and theology. My primary dialogue partners will be Harry T. Hunt, a cognitive psychologist recently retired from Brock University who also has expertise in mysticism as well as Jungian and transpersonal psychology; and the late James E. Loder (1931-2001), a professor of Christian education at Princeton Theological Seminary with expertise in practical theology and

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<sup>6</sup> For a schematic diagram depicting this relationship, please see Chapter 2, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Belief in the “paranormal” is one criterion of transliminality (see below, p. 23). This supernatural domain has some overlap with what other people would consider to be “spiritual” or “religious.”

developmental psychology, wide-ranging interests, and a theological understanding of the creative process informed in part by his own mystical experiences.

### *Transliminality*

Michael Thalbourne (1955-2010) was a psychologist and parapsychologist at the University of Adelaide, Australia, who was trained at the University of Edinburgh, grounded in traditional psychological methods and standards (e.g., statistical analysis, peer review), yet interested in topics considered unorthodox such as telepathy, the possibility of the existence of “psi,” and what sorts of personality traits correlate with some people’s belief in it (Phillips 2010; Thalbourne 2005). It was during the process of investigating the latter in 1994 with Peter S. Delin that the two researchers discovered a single factor connecting “degree of belief in . . . the paranormal, degree of creative personality, mystical experience, and aspects of psychopathology (magical ideation, hypomania, and extent of experience of symptoms resembling mania and depression)” (Thalbourne & Delin 1994, p. 17). They named this entity *transliminality*, “a hypothesized tendency for psychological material to cross (*trans*) thresholds (*limines*) into or out of consciousness” (Thalbourne & Houran 2000, p. 853). Other researchers have also become interested in the topic; a 2010 online search revealed 74 transliminality-related articles (Thalbourne & Storm 2010), and a search I made using Google Scholar in 2014 turned up 186 more.<sup>8</sup> Transliminality is a useful concept in providing a statistically valid, scientific basis for the existence of a linkage among multiple traits that have long been associated anecdotally, for example, in the “crazy

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<sup>8</sup> My Google Scholar search of “transliminality” on 12 April 2014 resulted in 186 more articles published in 2010 or afterward, though they vary in their degree of relevance. Thalbourne and Storm (2010) do not disclose the exact parameters of their online search.

artist” stereotype. As a psychological concept, though, it is limited to the realm of description (fact), raising but not answering prescriptive (value) questions regarding its potential role in human flourishing and suffering, including its aspect of a perceived connection to the divine.

### *The Three Case Studies*

St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), and Alanis Morissette (1974—) are three very different individuals living during three different eras and working in three different domains: Teresa was a pre-modern, medieval Carmelite nun, Jung a modern psychiatrist, and Morissette is a postmodern, contemporary musician. Yet I believe there is evidence that all three possess(ed) a high degree of transliminality, as indicated in their (auto)biographies, other writings, art, and music. In their lives and work we see prolific creativity, transcendent experiences, temperamental fluctuations, depression and perhaps psychosis, unusual sensory perceptions, acute sensitivity, and deep introspection—all of which are thought to be correlates of transliminality. If transliminality is indeed a human personality trait, we can expect it to show up throughout different times, cultures, and settings.

At the same time, Teresa, Jung, and Morissette each have their own interpretations of their temperament, experiences, and choice of career, as well as three rather diverse understandings of the divine. Listening to their own voices will allow us to glean first-person perspectives on transliminality that can expand, corroborate, question, and/or correct the third-person sketches from psychology. I have chosen two women out of a recognition that men have traditionally been the primary subjects for establishing

psychological norms<sup>9</sup> and a conviction that we must include a diverse representation of persons in our research if we hope to learn about a concept presumed to be widespread. Ideally, future case studies would include those from non-Western cultures as well.

### Methodological Approach

#### *Orienting Values*

By combining psychology, psychiatry, auto/biography, and theology, I am using areas of discourse that have widely different aims, methodologies, and epistemologies. Speaking very generally, the sciences tend to *reduce* natural objects into constituent parts in order to conduct ever-more-thorough analysis, while the humanities (including religion) are concerned with exploring questions of meaning and value by *amplifying* various kinds of cultural objects (Gay 1978, 2009). Another way to frame this overarching difference is that science focuses on the task of explanation while the humanities focus on understanding—a difference in emphasis related to the fact/value distinction. Social sciences such as psychology (and by extension psychiatry) include varying proportions of both aims (Hunt 2005b, p. 359).

For the sciences, the question of what constitutes knowledge<sup>10</sup> is relatively straightforward: knowledge advances when some type of causation is established using the scientific method of verification as agreed upon by the scientific community (Gay 2009, p. 52). For humanistic disciplines, the issue is more cloudy and controversial. In this dissertation, I use the guiding principle of *phronēsis*, as evaluated by the criteria of

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<sup>9</sup> Although, as feminist scholar and pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore points out, this choice also carries the risk of reifying the cultural and medical associations of women as being prone to mental illness (2014, conversation with the author); cf. Grundy 2001 on hysteria.

<sup>10</sup> That is, according to the discipline's own standard self-understanding.

pragmatism, to determine what counts as valuable knowledge. *Phronēsis* is the Greek word for practical (as opposed to theoretical or technical) wisdom—a kind of knowledge or reason that is fruitful for humane living, and a key value in practical theology that traces back to Aristotle (Browning 1991, p. 2-3). The idea of *phronēsis* also appears in the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism (a term derived from the same Greek root), in which truth is understood to be that which is most useful. Here “usefulness” means something like “promoting human flourishing” and encompasses such diverse facets as making plausible predictions, explaining multiple phenomena, and fostering emotional health (James 1907).

### *Interdisciplinary Location*

Pragmatism in effect blurs the fact/value distinction. Though this position is open to critique, I find it to be methodologically effective, intellectually honest, and compatible with my self-location as an “integrationist” vis-à-vis religion and science. Here I refer to one of Ian Barbour's four models for relating these two spheres; the other three are conflict, separation, and dialogue (1997, p. 78-105). In distinction from the latter three positions, which “hold religion and science to be separate realms capable of conflict or dialogue,” I understand science and religion to be two different lenses for viewing, or languages for expressing, what is ultimately the same holistic reality.<sup>11</sup>

If we narrow the focus from religion and science to religion and *psychology*, my dissertation contains aspects of three ways these disciplines have been combined.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> If MacPherson & Kelly (2011)'s rather Jamesian hypothesis is correct, though, this inclination may be a result of personal temperament as much as demonstrable credibility!

<sup>12</sup> Jonte-Pace & Parsons (2001) classify the interdisciplinary study of religion and psychological studies into two main categories, “psychology of religion” and “religion in dialogue with psychology.” The latter contains subcategories of “psychology-theology dialogue,” “psychology-comparativist dialogue,” and “psychology as religion.” Pastoral theology in this schema falls within “psychology-theology dialogue.”



beginning section, in which the psychological concept of transliminality is used as a frame for examining mystical (and thus often religious) experience, falls into the rubric of psychology *of* religion. Most of the remainder of the dissertation, however, consists of “psychology-theology dialogue” in which the two perspectives converse without either being predominant. Concomitantly, the project is shaped throughout its various methodological means by a pastoral theological end, using the criteria of Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore: “the focus on living, rather than dead persons and cultures; the focus on the psyche, whether understood as ego, soul, or self; and the focus on the clinical or therapeutic or healing dimension of psyche and living persons” (1998, p. 180).

### *Methods*

In addition to clinical psychology’s methods of controlled experimentation and statistical analysis (in the psychology of religion framework of Chapter 2), I will make use of case studies, thick description, and mutual critical correlation (also known as hermeneutic dialogue). Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will consist of case studies in which three “living human documents” (Boisen 1936, p. 10-11) are described in detail, with an eye toward these persons’ mystical or transcendent experiences, psychological self-understandings, and creative processes. In focusing “on the tangible, . . . the concrete, and the embodied” and using “case study, concrete illustration, [and] thick detail” (Miller-McLemore 2012, p. 30), I draw from methods commonly used in practical theology that, while lacking the generalizability of more circumscribed scientific inquiry, provide the amplification and specificity that can come only from attending to particular human beings and their experiences. By examining “extreme” cases in terms of creative ability and mystical experience (or, as I will argue, very high transliminality), I follow the

example of William James, who studied “‘geniuses’ in the religious line” (1902, p. 24) out of a belief that they had access to a type of expertise less accessible, yet still applicable, to others (p. 368). Finally, I engage in mutually critical, hermeneutic dialogue in which perspectives from psychology and theology contribute to and correct one another's knowledge, and in which the “critical,” normative part is evaluated by *phronēsis* and pragmatism (Browning 1991, p. 71)—while maintaining that this method is a heuristic device, given the overarching reality of theological<sup>13</sup> and scientific integration in on-the-ground human life.

## **The Parameters**

### Definitions

Since our three key areas of investigation and interrelationship—creativity, mystical experience, and psycho“pathology”—have varying definitions, I would like to establish upfront as precisely as possible how I am using these terms.

#### *Creativity*

Generally, within the field of psychology, creativity is examined from a cognitive perspective: to be considered “creative,” an idea, person, object, or process must involve both originality (novelty) and value (often defined as usefulness).<sup>14</sup> The popular culture understanding of creativity, in contrast, is rather murky and often has added associations of artistic domains and emotional valence. Thus, the “creative process” might bring to mind the moody artist or the anguished poet rather than the alien drawings or tool designs

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<sup>13</sup> In the Tillichian sense of ultimate concern, which may or may not be explicitly religious.

<sup>14</sup> For more discussion of the difficulties of defining and assessing creativity, please see Johnson et al. 2012, p. 2-3, and Barrantes-Vidal 2004, p. 59-60.

of divergent thinking exercises that are often used to measure creativity in the lab (see, for example, Abraham et al. 2005). And while most nonspecialists would consider inventors and scientists to be creative, in common parlance creativity is most often associated with the “creative arts” (after all, what is a non-creative art?). As *Boston Globe* reporter Clea Simon noted in 1994, “[t]he gap between these two views [of creativity] – the socially determined macro view and the laboratory-determined micro view – is fuel for some . . . dissent.” In addition to the debates regarding the psychological vs. popular views of creativity and its scientific vs. artistic domains is the issue of whether creativity is considered from a “trait” or a “state” perspective—in this case, whether it is envisioned as a personality characteristic that (some) people inherently possess, or a quality that can only be measured when it results in concrete, quantifiable achievements.

In this dissertation, when I use the word *creativity* I mean the production of, or the attribute which allows a person to conceptualize, something that is arguably novel and contextually valuable. My intent here is to define creativity broadly enough to encompass both its trait and state aspects. The “attribute” part refers to the trait colloquially thought of as “creative personality,”<sup>15</sup> which I will argue is actually a component of transliminality. The “production” part recognizes that a so-called creative person must at some point enter a state in which s/he actually makes, or at least communicates the concept for, a creative object. This creative conceptualization or production usually happens best in an emotional state of mild (but not extreme) elation,

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<sup>15</sup>For instance, being more open to new ideas, more introverted, more driven, or less socially conventional (Feist 1999, p. 290), or motivated more by aesthetic values than by financial stability (Csikszentmihalyi 1994, p. 137).

which is perhaps one reason why “creative types” are popularly associated with emotionality.

Are certain folks just inherently “creative people,” or can anyone be creative? I suspect the answer is similar to the question of whether anyone can be musical, or religious, or athletic: some people do seem to have innate propensities in these areas, while at the same time there are certainly practices and habits that can increase whatever baseline levels of these traits are present in anyone. It appears that there are at least four interrelated features at play: innate factors (such as intelligence, talent, and the personality traits mentioned above in n14), commitment, specific expertise, and practice. For this reason, I refer to “highly creative” people (or sometimes “highly transliminal” people, or specifically “creative artists”) rather than simply “creative people” because we all possess the capacity for creativity.<sup>16</sup> However, my three case studies are on the “highly creative” end of the human continuum in terms of their innate abilities and inclinations and their expertise, practice, and commitment within their particular domain.

### *Mystical (or Transcendent or Spiritual) Experience*

The word “spiritual” is even more contested than “creative.” It has a different connotation and often definition than “religious,” though there is much overlap, and the emphasis shifts substantially when we limit the inquiry to mystical—which many people also refer to as spiritual—experience. Because so much controversy exists around how to circumscribe and research “spirituality,”<sup>17</sup> and because mystical experiences may or may not be considered spiritual (or religious) (Hood 1975, p. 34), I prefer to use the terms

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<sup>16</sup> For theologians such as James Loder (see below, Chapter 6, p. 154), creativity is part of the human spirit and every person’s birthright, because we are created in the image of the *Spiritus Creator*.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Kapuscinski & Masters 2010; Levin 2009, p. 131-133; Hill & Pargament 2008, p. 4; and Csarny 1997, p. 3.

*mystical experience* or *transcendent experience*. Referring to mystical/transcendent rather than spiritual experience is also a way of differentiating this line of research from that of the “‘ordinary’ spiritual experience” studied by Lynn G. Underwood (2006), who created the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES): in contrast to her work, here I am concerned with “the types of miraculous, life-transforming ‘mystical’ experiences that have long been studied by theologians and psychologists” (Ellison and Fan 2008, p. 249)<sup>18</sup> and “are similar to Maslow’s (1964) ‘peak experience’ and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) description [of] ‘flow’” (Hruby & Roberts 1994, p. 3).

There are almost as many definitions of mystical experience as there are researchers who study it. Michael A. Thalbourne, whose transliminality research I will later draw upon heavily, summarizes with Peter S. Delin, “Mystical experience is generally described as an experience of ecstatic oneness with creation (or with God) and as being characterized by a profound sense of peace and an apparent illumination about the meaning of existence (Thalbourne, 1991)” (Thalbourne and Delin 1994, p. 4).

Transpersonal psychologists Lukoff, Lu, and Turner elaborate:

The definitions of mystical experience used by researchers and clinicians vary considerably, ranging from Neumann’s (1964) “upheaval of the total personality” to Greeley’s (1974) “spiritual force that seems to lift you out of yourself” to Scharfstein’s (1973) “everyday mysticism.” A definition of mystical experience both congruent with the major theoretical literature and clinically applicable is as follows: *The mystical experience is a transient, extraordinary experience marked by feelings of unity; harmonious relationship to the divine and everything in existence; and euphoria, sense of noesis (access to the hidden spiritual dimension), loss of ego functioning, alterations in time and space perception, and the sense of lacking control over the event.*<sup>19</sup> Numerous surveys assessing the incidence of mystical experience<sup>20</sup> indicated that 30% to 40% of the population

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<sup>18</sup> Ellison and Fan cite Otto 1923/1958, Underhill 1911/1974, and Hood 1997 as examples.

<sup>19</sup> Lukoff, Lu, and Turner cite Agosin 1992; Allman, De La Roche, Elkins, & Weathers 1992; Hood 1974; and Lukoff & Lu 1988 as sources for their definition.

<sup>20</sup> Citing Allman et al. 1992; Back & Bourque 1970; Gallup 1987; Hood 1974; Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch 1985; and Thomas & Cooper 1980.

have had mystical experiences, suggesting that they are normal rather than pathological phenomena. (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 34-35, emphasis added)

Though mystical experiences are not uncommon, they are unusual, and their highly subjective nature renders empirical study difficult. Typically we must rely on self-reports using questionnaires, the most widely cited of which is Ralph W. Hood's (1975) *Mysticism Scale, Research Form D (M Scale)*. "[D]eliberately developed from a conceptualization of mysticism that is presumably cross-cultural, ahistorical, and unbiased by religious ideology (Stace 1960, 38-40)" (Hood 1975, p. 39), the M Scale contains 32 items, four each for the eight categories of ego quality, unifying quality, inner subjective quality, temporal/spatial quality, noetic quality, ineffability, positive affect, and religious quality (p. 31-32).

An alternative measure is Thalbourne's "Mystical Experience Scale (MES; Thalbourne, 1991, 2004), which . . . was initially compiled on the basis of its author's personal experience and subsequently refined based on" William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1982) (Lange & Thalbourne 2007, p. 122-123). With construct validity established by a Rasch top-down purification measure,<sup>21</sup> the MES results in numerical scoring such that "the lowest intensity levels refer to general experiences of happiness and experiences that are difficult to interpret, intermediate levels are characterized by experiences of love for humanity, and the highest levels refer to having special wisdom and powers of discernment" (Lange & Thalbourne 2007, p. 121).<sup>22</sup> While meditation adepts can learn to induce transcendent states at will, for other people they occur spontaneously, or as a result of using drugs.

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<sup>21</sup> For an explanation of this procedure and its significance, please see Chapter 2, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Lange & Thalbourne 2007, p. 128-129 contains a more detailed summary of mystical experiences' characteristics at varying levels of intensity.

Most of the time, persons who have (and study) mystical experiences “find they are psychologically and socially beneficial” (Hruby & Roberts 1994, p. 4).<sup>23</sup> As Hood describes from his mysticism research, “[w]hat tentatively emerges from these data is a reasonably consistent picture of a person who from a posture of openness to experience in fact experiences the world atypically and who, if [s]he is devoutly oriented, identifies these experiences as sacred and joyful” (Hood 1975, p. 40). In general, “mystical experiences are associated with lower scores on psychopathology scales and higher psychological well-being than are controls (Greeley, 1974)” (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 34-35). Yet despite the impressions of a popular culture enamored with yoga and meditation, transcendence does not always mean goodness and light. There is also the phenomenon known as “the ‘dark night of the soul,’ a profound form of deprivation-caused depression” (Thalbourne & Delin 1994, p. 6)<sup>24</sup> which can bear uncanny similarities to the prodromal period preceding psychosis.

*Psychosis, Psychosis-Proneness, Psycho “pathology”*

*Psychosis* involves a(n often scary or unpleasant) mental “break with consensual reality” (Hunt 2007, p. 215) and can occur due to mental illness, drug use, intense stress, or seemingly on its own. A person undergoing psychosis may exhibit unusual speech or behavior; undergo visual or auditory hallucinations (e.g., seeing ghosts or hearing voices); experience terror, depression, or a feeling of disconnection from their body; have delusional ideas or beliefs; or some combination of the above.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Citing Lukoff & Lu 1988.

<sup>24</sup> The authors reference Goodwin & Jamison 1990, chapter 14; Grof & Grof 1990, chapter 2; and Underhill 1911/1974, chapter 9.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Kay, Fiszbein, & Opler’s PANSS (Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale), 1987.

Just as it sounds, *psychosis-proneness* refers to the personality trait that, in larger amounts, is associated with psychosis but also with other traits such as creativity, magical ideation, and perceptual aberrations.<sup>26</sup> *Schizotypy* is a closely related concept,<sup>27</sup> and the two terms are often used interchangeably in schizophrenia research.<sup>28</sup> While psychosis-proneness and schizotypy represent continuums whose upper ends involve severe clinical disorders, it should be noted that most psychosis-prone people are not severely psychotic, nor are most schizotypal individuals schizophrenic. Later I will argue<sup>29</sup> that transliminality, which correlates significantly with schizotypy,<sup>30</sup> is a more useful term from a clinical perspective.

Finally, we consider someone to have a *mental illness* if s/he experiences persistent emotional and/or cognitive states that interfere with her or his desired life functioning. I will use the word *psychopathology* synonymously with *mental illness* or *mental disorder*, while sometimes placing quotation marks around the “pathology” part to problematize the role of social convention in determining which behaviors and experiences get pathologized and labeled as problematic.<sup>31</sup> For instance, some authors

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<sup>26</sup> For a list of eighteen different psychosis-proneness scales, see Claridge 1994, p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> Some of the overlap traces back to the different etiologies of psychopathology proposed by Kraepelin, who viewed what we now call schizophrenia as a separate disease from the more affectively toned manic-depressive or bipolar spectrum disorders, and Bleuler, who considered these distinct conditions to have some sort of underlying connection (Goodwin & Jameson 2007, p. 8). As a dimensional view of psychosis took hold in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, “schizotypy” was the name given to the personality trait which in high amounts becomes schizophrenia, while “affective temperaments” referred to the trait behind the bipolar spectrums. However, as Barcelona psychologist Neus Barrantes-Vidal points out, “[r]ecent evidence has cast doubt on the sharp distinction between these disorders: they are not so easily distinguishable at the clinical level, something that prompted the creation of an intermediate diagnosis, ‘schizoaffective disorder’ (2004, p. 61; see especially p. 61-62 and 68). “Psychosis-proneness” is more of an umbrella term, with a confusingly similar name to “psychoticism”—a word coined by personality researcher Hans Eysenck for a personality dimension alongside neuroticism and introversion-extroversion (Claridge 1994, p. 156).

<sup>28</sup> Vanderbilt psychology and psychiatry professor Sohee Park (2012, conversation with the author).

<sup>29</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 55-56.

<sup>30</sup> Though schizotypy is not one of its component variables; see Chapter 2, p. 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Foucault’s book *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954/1987) is a classic treatment of this theme. For a clear synopsis of Foucault’s thought, see Townsend 2013, p. 83-87.



such as Julian Silverman (1967) argue that the same person might be considered a schizophrenic in a Western industrialized society and a shaman in a tribal culture (Krippner 2002, p. 965).

Similarly, what a transpersonal psychologist might classify as a spiritual emergency,<sup>32</sup> a psychiatrist might diagnose as the onset of schizophrenia or bipolar depression. As a case in point, I recently played an excerpt for a clinical psychology class from Willoughby Britten's podcast "The Dark Night Project" (2011b),<sup>33</sup> where she describes the symptoms of "stimulus overload," "temporal disintegration," affective extremes, and feelings of electricity that a person often experiences after reaching a certain level of practicing Buddhist meditation. A student who was a few minutes late and had missed the introduction assumed that the topic being discussed was the prodromal phase of psychosis! This assumption, Britten says (2011a), is shared by most Western medical doctors to whom these patients turn for help.

Coming from a Christian mysticism perspective, Harry T. Hunt articulates a similar dilemma, asking the question,

How does it come about that the 'dark nights' of penultimate mysticism and the anhedonias of chronic psychosis are so inwardly alike, especially given that the former is a development within cultural systems seeking a sense of overall purpose and meaning and the latter emerges in the context of a disastrous social withdrawal and personal collapse? (2007, p. 215)

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<sup>32</sup> A term coined by transpersonal psychologists Stanislav and Christina Grof in 1980 to name the distress that can ensue as an unforeseen side effect of spiritual growth, particularly when Eastern practices are imported into Western cultures (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 28).

<sup>33</sup> The name of the first Buddhist Geeks podcast on this topic was "The Dark Side of the Dharma," presumably a play on words from the term "Dark Night of the Soul" coined from St. John of the Cross's poem *The Dark Night*. Where the "dark nights" of the Buddhist and Christian contemplative paths overlap and diverge psychologically is an open question. Due to confusion about the "dark night" wording, Britten's project is now called "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience" (2013), a nod to William James.

Part of the answer, my research has led me to suspect, is that both of these states often entail a predisposition to transliminality.

### Contribution

As an endeavor that encompasses both theoretical and practical domains, this dissertation is a robust model of interdisciplinary discourse in Religion, Psychology, and Culture (RPC) and has the potential to contribute to our field in several ways. Most broadly construed, my project enlarges our scope of understanding people who embody high creativity, a bent toward mysticism, and episodes of so-called mental illness. Most specifically, I advance psychological research in transliminality by demonstrating its relevance to the heavily-studied topics of creativity, psychosis, and mystical experience and by offering a schematic model to conceptualize these interrelationships. In linking psychological theory with biographical reports as well as experimental data, this dissertation helps to ground clinical intuition (and cultural perceptions) about creativity with the latest scientific research *and* with insights from Christian theology and other spiritual traditions. My research contributes clinically to psychotherapy and practical/pastoral theology by suggesting particular therapeutic and pastoral practices to offer (and avoid) with highly transliminal persons. And it highlights the potentially positive aspects of psycho“pathology” by illustrating its often-close connections with creative giftedness and moments of transcendence.

### Limitations

At the same time, as with any inquiry, my project leaves numerous questions unanswered and carries several limitations. First, it is possible that my main hypothesis

may be wrong: there might *not* be a significant correlation among creativity, mystical experience, and psychopathology, or, even if there is, I might discover other as-yet-unknown variables that correlate more significantly. Second, if my hypothesis does turn out to be correct, correlation is not causality—the significant question still remains of *why* some people are more transliminal (are more creative, have more transcendent experiences, are more vulnerable to psychosis) than others; possibilities range from genetic predisposition, to early childhood relationships and experiences, to cultural mores and expectations. Future work could balance this project’s psychological and theological foci with attention to the influences of sociology and culture in encouraging, deterring, or channeling transliminality. Third, I cannot “prove” with brain scans or other technologies that my case studies—at least, St. Teresa and Jung!—fit the patterns of high transliminality shown by other, contemporary individuals; we must rely on similarities of biographical narratives. Finally, the downside to the specificity and “thick description” of case studies is that they lack the generalizability of quantitative research methods. Thus, while I believe that my project is a fruitful investigation, it only represents the first step in what holds the potential to be a new line of research.

### **The Plan**

Now that I’ve described the problem I want to address, the project that follows, and the parameters that give it structure, in Chapter 2 I will cover an in-depth discussion of transliminality—why I believe it is a valid construct and how it helps clarify the interconnection among creativity, mystical experience, and psychopathology. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will cover our three case studies of diverse, yet all highly transliminal people.

After examining their experiences from both a psychological and theological perspective in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 will set forth specific clinical and pastoral recommendations gleaned from my research on how to accentuate the gifts and ameliorate the liabilities of especially creative, transliminal persons.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSLIMINALITY THEORY

“Not Nothing”

A map on tissue. A mass of wire. Electricity of the highest order.  
Somewhere in this live tangle, scientists discovered—

like shipmates on the suddenly-round earth—  
*a new catalog of synaptic proteins*

presenting how memory is laid down:  
*At the side of the transmitting neuron*

*an electrical signal arrives and releases chemical packets.*

What I had imagined as “nothing” are a bunch of conversing squirts  
remaking flat into intimate.

—Kimiko Hahn<sup>34</sup>

### Chapter Agenda

In this chapter I shall endeavor to answer the following questions:

- What is transliminality?
- What evidence do we have that transliminality is a valid construct?
- What mechanisms does it seem to involve, neurobiologically and cognitively?
- What information do we have about its etiology?
- What factors appear to moderate whether transliminal persons flourish and thrive, and/or suffer and decompensate?
- How might transliminality connect with the already-established psychological trait of sensitivity?

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<sup>34</sup> “Not Nothing,” by Kimiko Hahn (2015). Available at <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/not-nothing>>.

- What model or theory am I proposing in which transliminality provides a hypothesized link among creativity, mystical experience, and psycho“pathology”?
- In what ways is this model helpful?

My goal is to establish transliminality theory as a coherent lens through which we can view the lived experiences of St. Teresa, Jung, and Morissette—just as in subsequent chapters, these persons’ lived experiences will provide a lens for understanding, evaluating, and speaking back to transliminality theory.

### **Michael A. Thalbourne and Colleagues’ Discovery of Transliminality**

Transliminality, as such, was discovered by accident. The word “discovered” is not meant to imply that transliminality is a material thing, like a chemical element, that scientists suddenly noticed. Rather, it is a recurring pattern, an overarching relationship among personality traits, that provides a useful heuristic for bringing together and making sense of what are usually thought of as separate tendencies (such as creative personality, mystical experience, heightened positive and negative emotionality, perceptual anomalies, high absorption, and magical ideation). The problem with categorizing all of these traits separately is that they often co-occur as a “package deal” in real people. And the real people who fit this description—who, I will argue, are highly transliminal—are often our best and brightest, *and* they often struggle and suffer in particular, somewhat systematic ways that can be helped. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of this specific type of personality is both needed and merited.

Australian psychologist Michael A. Thalbourne (1955-2010) likely had an intuitive grasp of these interconnections—though his proximal interest was somewhat

different—when he and colleague Peter S. Delin designed the 1994 experiment that resulted in their coining the term *transliminality*. They were looking for what types of personality traits correlated with people’s degree of belief in the paranormal,<sup>35</sup> and the traits they suspected might be thus linked were creative personality, mystical experience, magical ideation, hypomania, and “symptoms resembling mania and depression” (Thalbourne and Delin 1994, p. 17). Their hypotheses were correct: all of these variables did correlate with belief in the paranormal. However, not only did each of these personality traits correlate with paranormal belief, but every trait they’d measured correlated with all of the others, so much so that principal components analysis determined the presence of a single factor linking them all together.

In trying to figure out what this single factor could be, Thalbourne and Delin hypothesized that it had to do with people having conscious awareness of “stuff” that usually remains subconscious—thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, images, ideas, intuitions. They coined the term *transliminality* “from the Latin *trans*, meaning *across*, and *limen*, meaning *threshold*” (Thalbourne and Delin 1994, p. 22) to refer to the phenomenon in “which subliminally processed ideation, often with associated positive or negative affect, crosses the threshold from subliminal to supraliminal [consciousness]” (p. 23).<sup>36</sup> This notion harkens back to Frederick Myers’ concept of a region of “subliminal consciousness” beneath that of ordinary sensory experience (1903),<sup>37</sup> an idea also used (and sometimes called “extra-marginal” or “ultra-marginal”) by William James

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<sup>35</sup> A perennial research interest of Thalbourne, who was also a parapsychologist.

<sup>36</sup> Later Thalbourne and James Houran amended this definition to “a hypothesized tendency for psychological material to cross thresholds into or out of consciousness” (2000, p. 853). What is meant by psychological material moving *out* of consciousness is not clear; all of the *transliminality* articles I have found concern material crossing *into* conscious awareness, presumably due to the methodological difficulties of studying the former.

<sup>37</sup> Cited by Lange et al. 2000, p. 591. This compilation of Myers’ work was published posthumously, hence the later date than that of James who cited him.

(1902/1982, p. 233-234),<sup>38</sup> but which had never been studied systematically before. In the years that followed, Thalbourne worked with various colleagues to elucidate transliminality further, to determine what other traits it might encompass or correlate with, to develop a questionnaire for measuring it, and to refine this scale so that it yielded interval-level data (a process I will explain in more detail below).

So what does a person with a high degree of transliminality look like? He or she probably experiences both positive *and* negative emotions more intensely than most. She is especially good at divergent thinking—free association to a wide range of ideas or possible solutions—an ability that cognitive psychologists commonly test to assess creativity. He tends to become very absorbed in whatever he is experiencing.

Transliminal people are seldom skeptical, instead leaning toward making Type I “false positive” errors, or seeing meaningful patterns where none exist—a tendency sometimes referred to as “magical ideation.” They are very sensitive to perceptual stimuli and may experience sensory overload (hyperaesthesia) or a combining of sensory modalities that most people experience separately (synesthesia), for instance, seeing numbers as having colors or tasting food as having shapes. They have probably had experiences they would describe as mystical or transcendent, during which they felt an ineffable sense of unity with God or reality, and they tend to remember their dreams and to seek meaning from them. A transliminal person is not necessarily bipolar, but likely is vulnerable to hypomania, mania, depression, substance use, or some combination of these.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 591-592.



## **Evidence That Transliminality Is a Valid Construct**

Due to his untimely death in 2010, Michael Thalbourne did not have an opportunity to synthesize the fruits of his transliminality research into a book. However, a handful of scholars continue to cite his work,<sup>39</sup> suggesting its conceptual usefulness, and in 2008 an EEG (electroencephalogram) study showed that there are differences in the brain activity of people who are high and low in transliminality. Below I will discuss the evidence we have so far that indicates transliminality is a valid concept.

### Surveys and Statistics

The process by which transliminality—or any other psychological concept—becomes established as an accepted construct involves several steps: describing and defining the concept, constructing hypotheses about the concept; testing these hypotheses empirically by running experiments; evaluating whether the results are in line with the hypotheses and, if so, to what extent; and then seeing if these results are replicated when other researchers try similar experiments. Along the way, the original idea will likely be adjusted and fine-tuned as more information is gathered. Eventually, once the concept is understood in enough specific detail, a measurement scale can be formed, tested, and replicated.

In an article written in 2009, Thalbourne summarizes what this process entailed for transliminality. I described above how he and Peter Delin first introduced the concept when their 1994 experiment revealed a single factor underlying seemingly different traits. Their next step was to see if this result was coincidental, or would be replicated by

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<sup>39</sup> An 8 March 2016 search for “Thalbourne, M.A.” on Google Scholar yielded “about 1570 results,” the highest of which is listed as being cited by 157 authors.

further experimentation. In order to study a large enough number of people to compare with their 1994 experiment (where N = 241), Thalbourne and Delin “joined forces” with three other researchers (1997, p. 308) to pool data from five different studies. They found that the same common factor emerged—almost. Paranormal belief, magical ideation, manic personality, creative personality, and mystical experience (p. 310) were still all found to be part of the single factor they’d named transliminality. Depressive experience, however, was not (p. 311); it is related to transliminality, but not a core constituent of it (p. 326).<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, Thalbourne, Bartemucci, Delin, Fox, and Nofi (1997) discovered four *more* constituents of transliminality—that is, traits that correlated both with transliminality as a whole and with the five already-known constituent variables. *Schizotypal personality* (or just “schizotypy”) is the trait thought to involve “the personality roots and soft manifestations of both schizophrenic and bipolar psychoses” (Barrantes-Vidal 2004, p. 58).<sup>41</sup> *Fantasy-proneness*, as the name suggests, describes people who demonstrate “a profound involvement in fantasy” (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 314),<sup>42</sup> tend to experience their fantasies as very real, and either “consciously elicit” or “automatically experience” various forms of imagery (p. 314). *Absorption* is “a total attention that fully engages a person” (p. 323), and *hyperaesthesia* is “hypersensitivity to sensory stimulation, such as smell” (p. 323), light, or sound.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Specifically, depressive experience correlated significantly with transliminality and with four out of its five other constituent variables, but not with creative personality.

<sup>41</sup> For more information, see p. 15-17 in the previous chapter.

<sup>42</sup> Citing Wilson & Barber 1983, p. 342.

<sup>43</sup> The authors’ five studies also found several traits that correlated with transliminality as a whole, but not all of its constituent variables—psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism (p. 313)—and several that showed no correlation. Transliminality was found to be unrelated to intelligence (p. 319), to a tendency to lie on questionnaires in the interest of social desirability (p. 313-314), and, surprisingly, to a measure of creative performance. I agree with the authors’ speculations as to why the latter was the case (p. 322-323)

Meanwhile, in a separate study (1999), Thalbourne and Delin found evidence of additional possible constituent variables: general religiosity,<sup>44</sup> ability to remember dreams, and interest in interpreting one's dreams. So Thalbourne and colleagues' next step was to combine this latest set of evidence—the five already-replicated constituent variables of the single factor called transliminality, the four possible new ones that showed up in the 1997 group of studies, and the three possible new ones from the 1999 study—and see which variables would again correlate with both transliminality as a whole and with each other. The ones that passed the statistical tests were the original five (paranormal belief, magical ideation, manic experience, creative personality, mystical experience); three of the four possibilities from 1997 (absorption, fantasy-proneness, and hyperaesthesia); and one of the three possibilities from 1999 (positive attitude toward dream interpretation)—nine in total (Thalbourne 1998,<sup>45</sup> p. 402).

As is evident from these complicated descriptions, using a factor score to measure something is a cumbersome process: it is more efficient, when possible, to construct a measurement scale for the factor itself instead of having to test every time whether a new entity (or group of people) in question correlates with every single constituent variable of the factor (Thalbourne 2009, p. 122). Thus, after identifying the nine constituent variables of transliminality that stood up to replication, Thalbourne made his first attempt at constructing a transliminality questionnaire. Rather than making up its questions from scratch, his method was to take the items most commonly affirmed by high transliminals from each of the various questionnaires by which he'd measured transliminality's

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and would posit that there is a difference between creative cognition (what the Torrance test measured) and creative *personality*, which also involves temperament and emotion.

<sup>44</sup> The specific items measured are discussed on p. 52 of Thalbourne and Delin 1999.

<sup>45</sup> The study described in the 1999 article actually took place before the one in the 1998 article (which cites the data from the former).

constituent variables (e.g., the Magical Ideation scale (Eckblad & Chapman, 1983), the Absorption scale (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), etc.), using a number of questions from each already-existent scale in proportion to those items' amounts of factor loading (Thalbourne 1998, p. 410).

After the first version of Thalbourne's transliminality questionnaire was published, another colleague, Rense Lange, performed a statistical process called "top-down purification" to improve the scale. This process identified that 12 of the original 29 items could involve gender or age bias, that the remaining 17 questions did indeed measure only one dimension (factor), and that a probabilistic hierarchical model such as Rasch scaling would fit for these 17 items (Thalbourne 2009, p. 122). The significance of using Rasch scaling is that it converts ordinal-level data into interval-level—that is, instead of all the various questions in the questionnaire establishing more or less transliminality but in unknown quantities, a Rasch-scaled questionnaire's questions are able to be scored based on what specific, uniform amounts they measure of the entity being tested (in this case, transliminality). For instance, answering yes to item #16 might be known to "count" for twice as much transliminality as answering yes to item #3, if Rasch scaling has established that transliminal people are twice as likely to experience that particular phenomenon. For this reason Rasch scaling is considered to be "the gold standard of scale construction" (Thalbourne 2009, p. 122)—and once the 12 potentially biased items were removed, the remaining 17 items (now renamed the Revised Transliminality Scale) were found to meet the criteria.

## Baseline EEG Differences<sup>46</sup>

As significant as the top-down purification measures were in establishing that transliminality is a consistent and valid concept, an even more important step forward occurred in 2008, when a group of researchers led by cognitive neuropsychologist Jessica I. Fleck ran an EEG study that showed an apparent physiological basis for transliminality. Electroencephalography (EEG) measures brain activity by recording the electrical voltage changes on the scalp that are correlated with the frequencies of large groups of neurons firing in different regions; these EEG signals can then be plotted onto a topographical map over time. EEG data are typically described in terms of rhythmic activity that is divided into frequency bands. Frequency band ranges are measured in Hertz (waveform cycles per second) and are named after the Greek letters *delta* (<4 Hz), *theta* (4-7 Hz), *alpha* (8-15 Hz), *beta* (16-31 Hz), and *gamma* (32+ Hz). Delta waves are generally associated with sleeping, theta with deep relaxation, alpha with calmness or meditation, beta with active thinking and problem-solving (N. Herrmann 1997), and the more recently-discovered gamma waves are thought to involve higher-order cognition and consolidation of information (C. Herrmann et al. 2010, p. 989).

Fleck and colleagues (2008) took baseline EEG measurements of the brains of people who scored high and low on Lange et al. (2000)'s *The Revised Transliminality Scale* (RTS) and found differences in three key areas: the left posterior association cortex, the right superior temporal region, and the frontal-midline region. The left posterior and the right superior temporal areas showed reduced alpha, beta, and gamma activity in highly transliminal people, while the medial frontal cortex showed increased

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<sup>46</sup> The information and some of the text in this section and the next were first published in Kreiselmaier 2015, p. 168-174.

gamma band activity in high transliminals. One way to interpret these findings is that, as expected, transliminal people tend to have lower-powered frequencies in regions whose associated functions come *easily* to them, like creative problem-solving and synesthesia, and to have higher-powered frequencies in areas that are more *difficult* for them, like processing and organizing incoming stimuli.

Specifically, the left posterior association cortex—one of the areas with reduced alpha, beta and gamma band activity in highly transliminal persons—is a “polymodal association region” (Fleck et al. 2008, p. 7) thought to be involved with synesthesia.<sup>47</sup> The other area, the right superior temporal lobe, is associated with another function probably related to transliminality—insight-based creative problem solving (p. 8). Meanwhile, the brain region where people high in transliminality showed *more* gamma activity than their less-transliminal counterparts is the medial-frontal cortex (p. 9). There are several theories about what sorts of activities this region coordinates—among them “conflict monitoring,” “outcome evaluation,” “risk prediction/error avoidance,” “cost-benefit analysis,” and “regulative control” (Ridderinkhof et al. 2007, p. 262-263)—with the common ground being some sort of executive control, self-awareness and forethought. Given this information, Fleck and colleagues’ hypothesis is that people with high transliminality, who “report an increase in perceptual aberrations and unusual experiences,” consequently have a greater “need to utilize higher-level cognitive control to organize incoming stimuli that would otherwise result in sensory confusion” (p. 9).

In contrast with other studies that associate the personality traits of openness and psychoticism/creativity with increased theta wave activity (e.g., Hunt 2007, p. 221 and

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<sup>47</sup> Unlike hyperaesthesia, synesthesia is not a constituent of transliminality; however, Thalbourne, Houran, Alias, & Brugger (2001) found moderate correlations between synesthesia and transliminality.

226),<sup>48</sup> Fleck et al.'s EEG study “revealed no significant differences between high- and low-transliminality groups in the delta or theta frequency bands” (2008, p. 6). This difference in results could stem from methodological differences in the experiments, or from differences between transliminality itself versus its correlates of openness<sup>49</sup> and psychoticism/creativity; more research is needed to replicate, refine, and interpret Fleck and colleagues' findings. At present we have evidence that highly transliminal people's neuroelectrical activity is indeed different from that of their less transliminal counterparts—and this difference is at a resting state, when they are not even having some sort of heightened experience—but what exactly these variations translate into phenomenologically is still a matter of conjecture.

### **Probable Mechanisms of Transliminality**

Now that I have presented both conceptual and physiological evidence that transliminality is a valid construct, I will discuss some of the mechanisms by which it appears to be operating—that is, what specific biological and cognitive processes accompany the personality trait we are calling transliminality. Just as there are differences in *neuroelectrical* activity (brain waves) between high and low transliminals, there appear to be differences in their *neurotransmitters* and *neurocognition* as well.

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<sup>48</sup> Citing Stough et al. 2001 and Glicksohn & Naftuliev 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Hunt (2007, p. 221) blends the categories of imaginative absorption (Tellegen & Atkinson 1974), openness to experience (McCrae 1993), and creativity/psychoticism (Eysenck 1995; Claridge 1987) due to their overlapping subject matter. Thalbourne 2000a found a positive but small correlation between transliminality and openness to experience; however, the study only included 40 participants.

## Reduced D<sub>2</sub> Gating

By now neurotransmitters are familiar to most people in the mental health field, between the popularity of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) as a remedy for depression and anxiety, and studies linking addictions to altered dopamine circuitry (e.g., Lambe & George 2009). These molecules carry signals from neuron to neuron and are essential micro-messengers for starting the chain reactions (Boron & Boulpaep 2011, p. 331) to organize physical coordination, memory, emotions, language, and all the other functions of our nervous systems. At least three in particular—dopamine, serotonin (e.g., Barrantes-Vidal 2004, p. 74) and norepinephrine (Folley et al. 2003)—are associated with creativity *and* thought to be involved in the psychopathology of mood disorders and schizophrenia; thus they may be connected with the trait of transliminality which seems to predispose people to either or both of these possibilities.

Of the three, the most specific linkage to transliminal cognitive and emotional processes appears to be with dopamine. Dopamine in general, and D2 receptor<sup>50</sup> expression in particular, has been associated for at least two decades with the “divergent thinking” aspect of creativity (Chermahini & Hommel 2010, p. 458-459) that involves free association to a wide range of ideas or possible solutions. (Its opposite process, convergent thinking, uses logic to narrow down options to “converge” upon one best answer.)

In a 2010 paper entitled “Thinking Outside a Less Intact Box: Thalamic Dopamine D2 Receptor Densities Are Negatively Related to Psychometric Creativity in Healthy Individuals,” authors Örjan de Manzano and colleagues describe an experiment in which they moved one step closer to understanding the relationship between dopamine

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<sup>50</sup> One of the subtypes of dopamine



and divergent thinking. Building upon past research linking schizophrenia with altered D2 levels in patients' thalamus and striatum regions, de Manzano et al. decided to focus their analysis upon these two areas (p. 2). They used MRI and PET scan imaging to examine the brains of people who score high on measures of divergent thinking—people we might expect to be creative and transliminal.

While “[t]here was no significant correlation between divergent thinking and D2 B[inding] P[otential] in the striatum” or its subregions (p. 2), the authors discovered that in the *thalamus* regions of highly divergent thinkers there are fewer D2 receptors than usual. This finding is significant because the thalamus is like a relay center, being centrally located and extensively connected to several crucial brain regions—“the associative and limbic areas of the cortex, those that receive input from the cerebellum and basal ganglia and project to the motor regions of the frontal lobe, and those that transmit general and special sensory information to corresponding parts of the sensory cortices” (Donnelly 2014, p. 199)—and “direct causal evidence” has been found that “the thalamus exerts regulatory control over ongoing cortical activity” (Malakmohammadi et al. 2014, p. 9). The thalamus is thought to relay information related to physical movement, vision, hearing, touch, sleep and wakefulness, arousal, and consciousness (Crossman & Neary 2010, p. 122-125). Meanwhile, “[d]opamine D2 receptors *constrain* communication between brain regions” (Grant 2010, p. 24, emphasis added).

Thus, de Manzano and colleagues interpret the finding that highly creative people have fewer thalamic D2 receptors to mean that “the creative bias may . . . bring a risk of excessive excitatory signals from the thalamus overwhelming cortical neurotransmission,

with ensuing cognitive disorganization and positive<sup>51</sup> symptoms” (2010, p. 3). This interpretation is strikingly compatible with Fleck and colleagues’ hypothesis about why very transliminal people have extra gamma frequencies produced by their medial-frontal cortices. Highly transliminal people’s neuroelectrical activity and neurotransmitters appear to be different from the norm in ways that suggest perceptual and sensory overload and an accompanying need for metacognition—just as we would expect from Thalbourne and colleagues’ transliminality research.

### Altered Neurocognitive Patterns

Just as having fewer thalamic D2 receptors to filter out information appears to constitute a *biological* mechanism for how transliminality operates, there are certain *cognitive* processes by which this physiology gets “translated” into patterns of thinking, feeling, and awareness. As with the above section on dopamine receptors, here I am drawing from the psychological literature on “creativity and psychosis,” or, more broadly, “creativity and psychopathology,”<sup>52</sup> since similar research on transliminality itself has not yet been conducted. In general, psychologists’ consensus is that highly creative (and I would posit transliminal) persons’ thought processes are more divergent than convergent, as discussed above. Another way to describe this pattern is that transliminal thinking is more associative than goal-related, with less “‘top-down’ or expectation-driven information processing” (Abraham et al. 2005, p. 523) than in other people.

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<sup>51</sup> In the context of schizophrenia or psychosis, “positive” and “negative” signify “extra” or “missing” phenomena, respectively, rather than whether a symptom is advantageous or detrimental. Positive symptoms refer to hallucinations or delusions, while negative symptoms can include deficits in memory, cognition, or affect.

<sup>52</sup> Please see Chapter 1, p. 10-12, 15-18 for more precise definitions.

Shelley H. Carson has developed a model to help parse out how exactly the same giftedness of creativity carries a predisposition “for certain forms of psychopathology, including mood disorders, schizophrenia spectrum disorders, and alcoholism” (2011, p. 144). Her “shared vulnerability model” encompasses three factors that appear to be inherent to both creativity and psychopathology, and three factors whose ranges determine whether creativity or psychopathology is likely to be dominant in a person. Viewed through the lens of transliminality, then, Carson’s shared vulnerability model suggests three neurocognitive characteristics that are probably mechanisms by which transliminality “operates,” and three characteristics that affect whether and how this trait of transliminality contributes to the creative flourishing and/or emotional suffering of persons who have it. I will discuss the former set of three below and the latter three in a subsequent section.

*Reduced latent inhibition.* The first factor in Carson’s model shared by people who are “vulnerable” to both creativity and psychopathology involves latent inhibition (LI), which is “the capacity to screen from conscious awareness stimuli previously experienced as irrelevant” (2011, p. 147). In high transliminals, with their divergent, free-associative thinking, nearly everything seems potentially relevant; more psychological material stays within the threshold of consciousness. Transliminal people’s LI is thus lower than their less creative/psychosis-prone counterparts’. This reduced-LI tendency is related to scoring high on the personality dimension of “openness to experience” (p. 147).<sup>53</sup>

*Novelty seeking.* Carson’s second “shared vulnerability” factor is the tendency to seek out new and complex stimuli. While this description sounds a lot like the first

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<sup>53</sup> See note 14 above.

factor, lower LI is more a matter of creating greater *availability* of stimuli, whereas novelty seeking involves the emotional predisposition or “intrinsic motivation” to attend to them (p. 147). Novelty seeking is thought to be related to the dopamine system and is associated with creativity, mania, and addictions (p. 147)—all of which are also associated with transliminality.<sup>54</sup>

*Neural hyperconnectivity.* The third factor present in both creativity and psychopathology, or what we may think of as the light and shadow sides of high transliminality, is “an abnormal neural linking of brain areas that are not typically functionally connected” (Carson 2011, p. 147). That highly creative persons have extra neural connections is not surprising, given what we have already seen about their divergent thinking patterns, reduced thalamic dopamine gating, and likelihood of having synesthesia. It also makes intuitive sense that people who are able to see connections that others aren’t, have neurological interconnections that others do not.

### **Where Transliminality Comes From**

From the evidence we have examined so far, transliminality appears to be a valid construct, a “real” trait that some people have, that involves differences in perception, personality, cognition, subjective experience, and neurobiology. What we are less clear about is its etiology—where it comes from and why some people are much more transliminal than most others. As with any trait, a complex interaction of genetic and environmental factors is likely involved.

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<sup>54</sup> Thalbourne and Houran (2005) found that transliminality correlates with drug use, with persons who score high in transliminality and low in happiness reporting more drug use than those high in transliminality who are happy (p. 334). (People with high transliminality are no more likely to be happy or unhappy than the general population.)

Genetically, it seems possible that the catechol-*O*-methyl transferase (COMT) gene is associated with transliminality. COMT is an enzyme that degrades dopamine and other catecholamines (a category of neurotransmitter), and the *COMT* gene has a particular polymorphism that can exist in three genotypes involving valine and/or methionine—Val/Val, Val/Met, or Met/Met—each of which “alters the activity of the enzyme” (Craddock et al. 2006, p. 446). Because COMT affects the same neurotransmitters that are altered by psychotropic medications, its gene has been studied in conjunction with psychosis, schizophrenia, and bipolar spectrum disorder. However, the results are inconclusive; “it has not proved straightforward to demonstrate and characterize a clear relationship between genetic variation at *COMT* and psychiatric phenotypes” (p. 446). One study did find that while the *COMT* locus was not associated with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, it was associated with the subset of patients “who had experienced manic episodes and prominent psychotic features in at least half of all episodes of illness” (Craddock et al. 2006, p. 453), leading the authors to surmise that perhaps its effects are more specific “to an intermediate form of mood-psychosis phenotype” than to bipolar or schizophrenia in general (p. 453). Thus, since manic experience is one of the nine constituent variables of transliminality,<sup>55</sup> it is possible the *COMT* gene could play a role.<sup>56</sup> As with de Manzano et al. (2010)’s study<sup>57</sup> that found reduced D2 receptors in the thalamic brain regions of highly creative people, COMT’s function of catabolizing dopamine may indicate a link between transliminality and dopaminergic activity, though its exact nature is not yet clear.

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<sup>55</sup> Please see p. 27 above for a complete list.

<sup>56</sup> Another one of transliminality’s nine constituent variables, absorption, was found to “be linked to genetic differences at birth” (Jamieson 2007, p. 259).

<sup>57</sup> Please see above, p. 32-34 for discussion.

Environmentally, a significant correlation of .39 has been found between transliminality and experiences of childhood trauma—though it is based on self-reports from 106 participants (Thalbourne et al. 2003) and to my knowledge this relationship has not been studied further. Thalbourne, Houran, and Crawley assume that childhood trauma probably precedes transliminality rather than the other way around, speculating that in such instances transliminality may be an adaptive defense that “promote[s] functional dissociative behavior” (p. 693). However, despite its probable connection with childhood traumatic experience, transliminality was found to be unrelated to persons’ level of adult attachment security (Wilter 2010, p. 77)—so if transliminality does sometimes develop in childhood partly as a defensive style, it appears that much of the time this defense is effective, at least in the significant realm of adult relationships.

### **To Flourish or to Perish?: What Factors Interact with Transliminality to Determine Outcome?**

Returning for a moment to the overall theme of this dissertation, our inquiry into transliminality began because of its potential to offer insight into why highly creative people so often experience such contrasting states of numinous transcendence *and* intense suffering. Creative, highly transliminal persons are of course not the only ones who undergo such powerful experiences. However, as a whole they seem more apt to manifest both extremes of thriving and decompensation. What factors interact with transliminality to influence whether a transliminal person primarily flourishes, suffers, or some of both? The evidence suggests that the answer involves a blend of cognitive capacities (or lack thereof), personal experience (whether beneficial or traumatic), and

social context—in other words, the same elements that affect whether *any* of us flourish or perish—but that fluctuations in these factors affect transliminals in more extreme ways. Developmental psychologists Michael Pluess and Jay Belsky have coined a term for this phenomenon, “differential susceptibility,” in which “individuals vary in the degree they are affected by the environment they are exposed to” (Harper 2015a).<sup>58</sup>

Earlier I introduced Shelley Carson’s “shared vulnerability” model of neurocognitive factors that affect 1) persons’ propensity toward both creativity and psychopathology, and 2) the level of highly creative persons’ vulnerability to psychopathology. I discussed how her first set of three factors—reduced LI, novelty seeking, and neural hyperconnectivity—seem to be inherent to both creativity and psychopathology, or, we might surmise, to the trait that lies behind them: transliminality. The other three factors in Carson’s model are now relevant as we examine what makes a difference in creative, transliminal people’s outcomes.

*IQ level.* What elements affect whether a highly transliminal person with lower LI, novelty-seeking inclinations, and neural hyperconnectivity tends more toward creative flourishing, or more toward psychopathology and/or addiction? The first “protective factor” that Carson identifies is a high IQ, which has been shown to be “necessary but not sufficient to explain [high] creativity” (p. 148).<sup>59</sup> Given research by Barnett et al. (2006) that demonstrates the protective effect of high IQ against severe psychopathology, Carson hypothesizes that increased intelligence allows people with

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<sup>58</sup> See Belsky & Pluess 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Specifically, “[a] body of research indicates that IQ is correlated with measures of creativity up to an IQ score of 120,” but not at IQ levels beyond 120 (Carson 2011, p. 148, citing Sternberg & O’Hara 1999, p. 251-272).

extra neural connections and low latent inhibition “to process and manipulate the additional stimuli rather than becoming confused or overwhelmed by it” (2011, p. 148).<sup>60</sup>

*Working memory.* Also necessary for this extra processing is having sufficient working memory capacity to hold multiple stimuli, ideas, experiences, and so forth in mind simultaneously. Carson speculates that “enhanced working memory” predisposes a person toward creativity (2011, p. 148) by providing the mental scaffolding for disparate ideas to coalesce into relevant insights, while deficits in working memory can contribute to the shifting states of “disordered cognition.”

*Cognitive flexibility.* Related to IQ and working memory, but distinct in its function, is Carson’s third protective factor that predicts whether transliminals tend toward creativity or pathology: cognitive flexibility. Because it entails “switch[ing] mental states” and taking in multiple perspectives and—like reduced LI—is related to “openness of experience” (p. 148-149), cognitive flexibility at first appears to be a feature like divergent thinking that inclines a person toward transliminality in the first place, rather than one that helps regulate transliminal flourishing versus decompensation. However, the key difference between the “switching” of cognitive flexibility and that of low latent inhibition is that the former is under a person’s conscious control. Carson points out that cognitive flexibility allows someone “experiencing magical thoughts or unusual perceptions”—which, as we have seen, are two hallmarks of transliminality—to “disengage[e] attention” from them or to develop a benign interpretation rather than assuming they are going crazy (p. 149). Similarly, research by Emmanuelle Peters and colleagues has shown that lasting psychopathology is not so much a matter of *having* unusual perceptions or experiences, as it is their content, “the extent to which they are

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<sup>60</sup> Citing Carson et al. 2003.



believed, how much they interfere with one's life, and their emotional impact" (1999, p. 92).

More complex, and more difficult to systematize than types of cognitive capacities, is the mixture of personal experience, life history, relational and sociocultural influences that affect whether people (transliminal or otherwise) flourish or perish. We might surmise that such advantages as secure attachment,<sup>61</sup> supportive social context, and a cultural attitude of acceptance toward people outside the societal "norm" would be apt to contribute to transliminal persons' flourishing, increasing the likelihood that they produce creative achievements and have spiritual experiences that are mystical, transcendent, and uplifting—and that such disadvantages as insecure attachment, trauma of all kinds, lack of social support and cultural "fit" would in turn increase the likelihood that they would fall into depression, have disturbing thoughts or perceptions that decompensate into psychosis,<sup>62</sup> turn to addictive substances for self-regulation, and/or experience a "dark night of the soul" or "spiritual emergency"<sup>63</sup> rather than mystical wholeness and connection. Again, the difference between the effects of these environmental circumstances on highly transliminal people versus those who are less so appears to be the increased *degree* to which they affect high transliminals' level of functioning. As I will discuss below, this tendency may indicate that transliminality involves or intersects with the psychological trait of sensory-processing sensitivity.

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<sup>61</sup> "There is primate evidence from Steven Suomi's (2000) laboratory concerning the involvement of attachment in the development of regulatory functions related to both serotonergic and dopaminergic neurotransmitter systems" (Fonagy & Target 2002, p. 314)—reminding us that neurological and environmental/sociocultural factors are not discrete categories, but are in continual mutual interaction.

<sup>62</sup> "[D]istress is an important predictor of onset and relapse in psychosis" (Brett et al. 2014, p. 214). In these authors' study of the outcomes of people who had "psychotic-like anomalous experiences," the "significant predictors of *lower* distress were 'spiritual' appraisals of experiences, greater perceived social support/understanding, greater perceived controllability, and reacting to the experience with a 'neutral response'" (p. 220, emphasis in original).

<sup>63</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 17, notes 32 and 33.

## **Hypothesized Connection with the Already-Established Trait of Sensitivity**

At the same time as I was researching transliminality, one of my therapy clients suggested that I read Elaine N. Aron's work on highly sensitive persons (HSPs) because it had been so useful in helping her understand herself and her partner. I was interested to discover that some of Aron's descriptions of HSPs seemed to have much overlap with my academic research on transliminality, while other parts did not. Below I will discuss the concept of Highly Sensitive Personality and explain my hypothesis about what the relationship might be between HSP and transliminality.

Before beginning, it is important to clarify that "sensitive" in this context is a technical term used to describe a person with a high amount of *sensory-processing sensitivity* (SPS) (Aron et al. 2012).<sup>64</sup> Thus, it is different from the popular usages of "sensitive" to mean kind-hearted ("he's such a sensitive guy") or overly touchy ("she's hyper-sensitive to criticism"), though of course some HSPs in Aron's technical sense do also have these attributes.

### Highly Sensitive Person(ality)

What does it mean to be an HSP, a highly sensitive person? Such persons are part of the 15-20% of (not only humans but) every animal population studied so far that is characterized by greater sensory awareness, responsiveness, and caution than the other

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<sup>64</sup> Elaine N. Aron coined the term "Highly Sensitive Person," abbreviated HSP, with the publication of her 1997 book by the same name, as well as the development of the HSP Scale. More recent authors such as Chen et al. 2011 have used the HSP acronym to stand for "Highly Sensitive Personality," referring to the trait rather than to an individual who has it. "Sensory-Processing Sensitivity" (SPS) is synonymous with Highly Sensitive Personality and carries a more specific description of what it entails—"a more sensitive *processing* of sensory data rather than simply more sensitive sensory organs" (Aron et al. 2012, p. 12). I will use both HSP and SPS interchangeably.

80-85% (Aron 1997, p. 12). Evolutionary psychologists speculate that this variation develops in all known species because its traits are advantageous in certain circumstances—like hiding from predators, or refraining from starting wars—while the majority’s less-cautious and less-reactive tendencies are better at things like adjusting to new conditions and bringing home the bacon.

In people, sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) entails four qualities that can be summarized with the acronym BEDS: Behavioral inhibition, Emotional reactivity, Depth of processing, and Sensitivity to subtle stimuli (Aron et al. 2012, p. 7-11).<sup>65</sup> Highly sensitive persons tend to hold back and inhibit their actions until they have “paused to check” out the situation at hand; their emotions are stronger or more extreme versions (both “positive” and “negative”) of what others tend to experience; they tend to, and need to, process (think about, introspect, assimilate) their experiences, feelings, relationships, thoughts, and circumstances more thoroughly than do others; they can easily become overaroused and anxious from sensory and situational stimulation that the majority of people would find comfortable; and they pick up on subtle sensory and emotional stimuli that most people do not notice. Additionally, in Aron’s initial 39 three- to four-hour interviews with HSPs, “persons across all categories volunteered early that their particular form of spirituality (e.g., ‘seeing God in everything,’ long meditation retreats, a religious vocation) was central to their lives” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 11).

The descriptions of these characteristics come from Elaine Aron’s extensive qualitative research using interviews and self-reports, but concepts related to sensory-processing sensitivity have been studied for decades (Aron 2010, p. v) under such names

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<sup>65</sup> In earlier writings, Aron used a slightly different list of four characteristics with the acronym DOES: Depth of processing, Overarousability, Emotional intensity, and Sensory sensitivity to subtleties (e.g., 2010, p. 24ff).

as “low sensory threshold,”<sup>66</sup> “inhibitedness,”<sup>67</sup> “psychobiological reactivity,”<sup>68</sup> and sometimes introversion (Aron et al. 2012, p. 9). Aron’s 27-item HSP Scale (1996) has been established “as a unidimensional, reliable, internally and externally valid measure of a trait thought to involve a strategy of preferring to process information before acting” (Aron 2010, p. 225), and differences between HSPs and non-HSPs have been corroborated by three fMRI studies (Aron et al. 2012, p. 14).<sup>69</sup> Highly Sensitive Personality appears to be strongly connected with what Jeffrey Gray (1981) called the Behavioral Inhibition System, which is the neuropsychological system affected by anxiety medications and thought to be involved when a person inhibits her or his behavior by first pausing to evaluate and monitor a situation before acting (Aron et al. 2012, p. 7). Two studies have also found tentative connections between HSP and the serotonin<sup>70</sup> and dopamine<sup>71</sup> systems (Aron et al. 2012, p. 14).

Elaine Aron has made significant contributions not only to social psychology but to clinical practice by writing books filled with descriptions, case studies, and carefully considered advice for HSPs on understanding their trait (1997), its effects on their intimate relationships (2001), ways to nurture HSP children (2002), and information for

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<sup>66</sup> Citing Chess & Thomas 1987.

<sup>67</sup> Citing Kagan 1994.

<sup>68</sup> Citing Boyce et al. 1995 and Gannon et al. 1989.

<sup>69</sup> Specifically, in the first fMRI study, “[t]hose scoring higher on the HSP Scale showed dramatically more activation in predicted areas . . . especially those associated with visual attention and visual processing (as opposed to simple visual perception)” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 14). In the second, HSPs “showed little difference [between performance on context independent and context dependent tasks] as a function of culture, whereas low sensitives showed strong cultural differences”; and in the third, HSPs had greater emotional reaction to photos of facial expressions, mostly “in sensorimotor areas and areas associated with empathy” (p. 14).

<sup>70</sup> Licht et al. 2011 found an association between SPS and the short/short version of the 5-HTTLPR serotonin transporter gene, which is associated with “superior performance on an array of cognitive tasks [that seem to indicate] the s-allele [is] linked to greater sensitivity to emotionally salient environmental cues” including “social stimuli” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 15, citing Homberg & Lesch 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Chen et al. 2011 found ten loci on seven dopamine-related genes (out of 98 representative polymorphisms on all major DA genes) to be responsible for 15% of the variance of SPS, with 2% of the variance caused by recent stressful life events.

therapists with HSP patients (2010). As I began reading her books and learning about sensitivity, I noticed that everything she said about highly *sensitive* people seemed also to apply to highly *transliminal* people—depth of processing would go hand-in-hand with transliminals’ bent toward introspection, overstimulation is what is happening with hyperaesthesia, emotional intensity would match up with the “high highs” and “low lows” transliminals experience, and subtle perception could be describing what non-HSPs would call transliminals’ perceptual anomalies. Yet, not all *sensitive* people seem to be *transliminal*; many HSPs do not report the kind of mystical experiences,<sup>72</sup> magical ideation, and divergent thinking that are also part of transliminality. Thus, I started to suspect that sensitivity is a necessary but not sufficient component of transliminality.

If sensitivity (in the technical sense) plus something else equals transliminality, what is the something else? Further complicating the question is that Aron’s and others’ research strongly suggests that sensory-processing sensitivity has a dichotomous, or bimodal, distribution (Aron et al. 2012, p. 12)<sup>73</sup>—that is, people either have a lot of it or not much at all—with the majority of people being non-HSPs. However, transliminality appears to be on a continuum: there is a broad range from low to medium to high, with an approximately normal distribution (Thalbourne 1998, p. 411). So one possibility for the relationship between sensitivity and transliminality is that among the 15-20% of the population who are HSPs, another continuum-distributed trait (or several) determines where these sensitive persons lie on the spectrum of transliminality. In other words, we

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<sup>72</sup> However, HSPs are more likely than the general population to have mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness while in sensory-isolated flotation tanks (Aron et al. 2012, p. 9-10, citing Kjellgren et al. 2009)!

<sup>73</sup> In this aspect, Aron and colleagues’ findings corroborate Jerome “Kagan’s experience with the temperament construct ‘inhibitedness’ that he studies in young children. Using formal taxometric methods, Woodward, Lenzenweger, Kagan, Snidman, and Arcus (2000) found that the trait is distributed more like an approximately dichotomous category variable rather than as a continuum with a normal distribution” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 12).

can make an educated guess that the “something else” we are looking for is continuous rather than bimodal.

### HSP + HSS = TL?

In another part of Elaine Aron’s work I discovered a particular type of highly sensitive person that *does* sound very similar to descriptions of transliminality: an HSP whose temperament also involves a high level of sensation-seeking. People who are high in sensation-seeking become bored easily and enjoy intense experiences that generate high levels of sensation and emotional arousal (Aron 2001, p. 34). For example, items from Aron’s sensation-seeking questionnaire include “I would like to be an explorer,” “I avoid having a daily routine,” “I like substances that make me feel high,” and “I prefer friends who are unpredictable” (2001, p. 17). Just as sensory-processing sensitivity is thought to be linked with the Behavioral Inhibition System, which involves pausing to process information before acting, sensation-seeking is likely connected with the Behavioral *Activation* System, which involves motivation to explore and seek pleasurable rewards (Aron 2006b). Like transliminality and SPS, sensation-seeking appears to be connected to the dopamine system.<sup>74</sup>

It is unfortunate that the names and acronyms for the concepts of sensitivity/highly sensitive persons (HSP)/sensory-processing sensitivity (SPS), on the one hand, and high sensation-seeking (HSS) on the other, look and sound so similar, because they name two very different tendencies that seem mutually contradictory but can in fact coexist in the same person. At first glance it would appear that really sensitive people

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<sup>74</sup> Derringer et al. 2010 found that 12 single-nucleotide polymorphisms (out of 273 tested) on eight dopamine-related genes account for 3.9% of the variance, and 6.6% of the heritable variance, of sensation-seeking.

and very sensation-seeking people have opposite leanings, with HSPs preferring calm, low-key lifestyles and HSS's being thrill seekers. But this is not necessarily the case, because being highly *sensitive* to sensory stimuli doesn't mean that a person doesn't *enjoy* stimulating sensations, only that s/he will have heightened awareness of or susceptibility to them. Some HSPs are also high sensation-seekers, and others are not—just like the non-HSP majority of the population. And unlike the bimodal trait of sensitivity, the trait of sensation-seeking appears to occur on a continuum (Aron 2001, p. 19, 34).

So what does an HSP/HSS—someone who is highly sensitive *and* high in sensation-seeking—look like? These folks have the narrowest bandwidths of optimal arousal. Being very sensitive, they are susceptible to easily becoming over-stimulated, yet when they do not experience enough arousal, their sensation-seeking tendency renders them bored and frustrated (2001, p. 36). The narrow range of ideal stimulation for the HSP/HSS requires someone with this temperamental blend to expend more effort and energy at maintaining emotional regulation than is needed by their less sensitive, less sensation-seeking companions—a situation one of Aron's patients describes as “living with one foot on the gas, one foot on the brakes” (2010, p. 15). Not surprisingly, Aron reports, many HSP/HSS's turn to various substances in an attempt to self-regulate (2010, p. 41).

As we have seen earlier, transliminality has an interesting relationship with negative affect: depression correlates with transliminality, but is not part of the trait itself (as is, for instance, manic experience); and despite the connection between transliminality and depression, transliminality does not have a consistent relationship with happiness or

unhappiness,<sup>75</sup> nor with secure or insecure adult attachment. These findings could make more sense if transliminality is indeed a combination of Highly Sensitive Personality and High Sensation-Seeking, because Elaine Aron and colleagues' research has shed light on the relationship between HSP and negative affect. Basically, highly sensitive persons are more likely to have anxiety, probably due to “a combination of depth of processing and emotional reactivity” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 13b). And HSPs are also more likely to suffer from depression—but only if they report having had a negative childhood environment. In fact, HSPs who did not experience troubled childhoods tend “to score especially *low* on measures of negative affect” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 5a, emphasis mine). So perhaps, as with HSPs, highly transliminal persons are more likely as a group to be depressed, but with much individual variation (due to differential susceptibility) depending upon their childhood experiences<sup>76</sup> and other factors.

### **Synthesis: Transliminality Theory**

After researching both transliminality and sensitivity, as well as the related literature on creativity and psychosis (and, to a lesser extent, mystical experience), I have come to believe that all of these concepts are interconnected in a surprisingly straightforward way. Here I will list the pieces of my working hypothesis, summarize the evidence that leads me to what I am calling “Transliminality Theory,” and present a two-dimensional diagram of my model. Then in the last section of this chapter, I'll explain several potential benefits of this model.

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<sup>75</sup> See above, p. 36, n54.

<sup>76</sup> Please see p. 38 above on the relationship between transliminality and childhood trauma.



## Hypotheses and Evidence

1. As I described above, Elaine Aron's research shows substantial evidence that 15-20% of people (and animals) have a personality trait called sensitivity (or more technically, Sensory Processing Sensitivity = SPS), which involves environmental responsiveness and depth of processing, using the behavioral *inhibition* system to help prevent overarousal. Sensitivity is a dichotomous (bimodal) trait and appears to involve the serotonin and dopamine systems.

2. Another personality trait called sensation-seeking uses the behavioral *activation* system in order to achieve heightened emotional arousal. Sensation-seeking is a continuous (non-dichotomous) trait and appears to correlate with dopaminergic activity.

3. I hypothesize that, *among the 15-20% of people who are highly sensitive persons (HSPs)*, there is a direct correlation between sensation-seeking and transliminality (the tendency of psychological material to cross the threshold into consciousness)—that is, people who are highly sensitive (HSP/SPS) **and** highly sensation-seeking (HSS) will be highly transliminal. I base this hypothesis upon a synthesis of the following evidence:

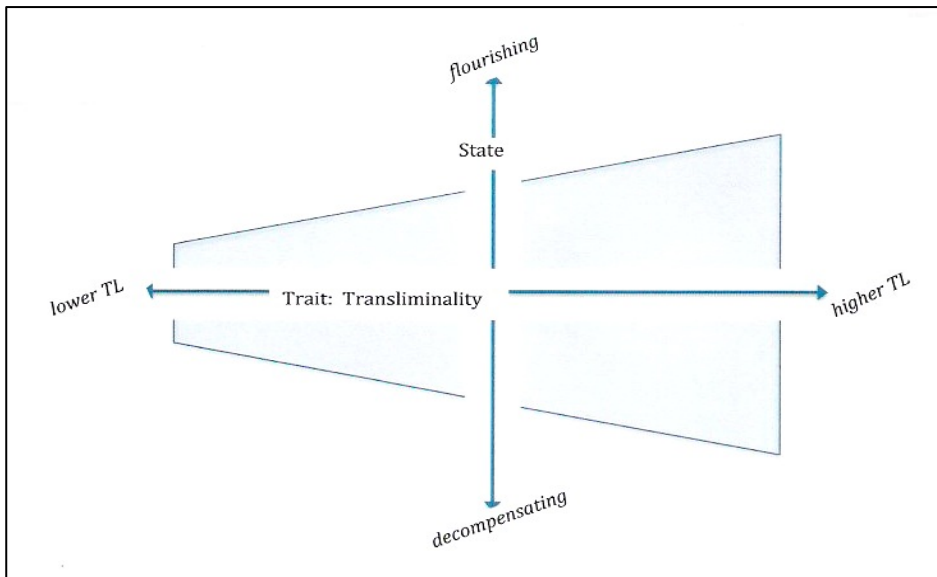
a. Like Elaine Aron's descriptions of HSP/HSS people, highly transliminal persons (TLs) have a limited range of optimal arousal, being vulnerable to both over- (as with SPS) and under- (as with HSS) arousal; otherwise they tend to become depressed, manic, and/or psychosis-prone.

b. Brain research on high TLs suggests heightened efforts to consolidate sensory processing and exert cognitive control over it, as we would expect from Thalbourne and colleagues' work linking TL with hyper- and synesthesia, perceptual anomalies, and magical ideation—and as we would also expect to be the case with SPS.

c. Transliminality, or at least the similar and more extensively researched psychological literature on creativity-and-psychosis, is associated with low serotonin (as is SPS) and with altered dopaminergic activity (as are both SPS and HSS).

d. High TLs are both prone to experience (as we would expect with HSP), and prone to seek out (as we would expect with HSS), altered states of consciousness—thus it makes sense that they would tend to undergo mystical/transcendent experiences.

4. Furthermore, as Thalbourne’s research indicates, highly transliminal people vary more widely than the general population in their range of psychological/emotional flourishing versus decompensation, as depicted in the following diagram:<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 1. Transliminality Diagram**

<sup>77</sup> First published in Kreiselmaier 2015, p. 174.

I hypothesize that

- 1) unresolved childhood traumata (broadly construed),
- 2) varying cognitive capacities, and
- 3) sociocultural context

serve as moderating factors for this range of variation.<sup>78</sup> I base this hypothesis upon the following evidence:

a. Elaine Aron's research shows that HSPs who experience stressful childhoods are much more likely to experience adult depression than are non-HSPs with similarly stressful childhoods. Concomitantly, HSPs with calm, nurturing childhoods are *less* likely to suffer adult depression than non-HSPs who also had lucky childhoods. Thus, SPS appears to increase the effect of childhood emotional environment (be it beneficial or damaging) on one's adult functioning—so if SPS is indeed part of transliminality, it would make sense that some of transliminals' wide range of psychological functioning could be traced back to variance in early life experiences.

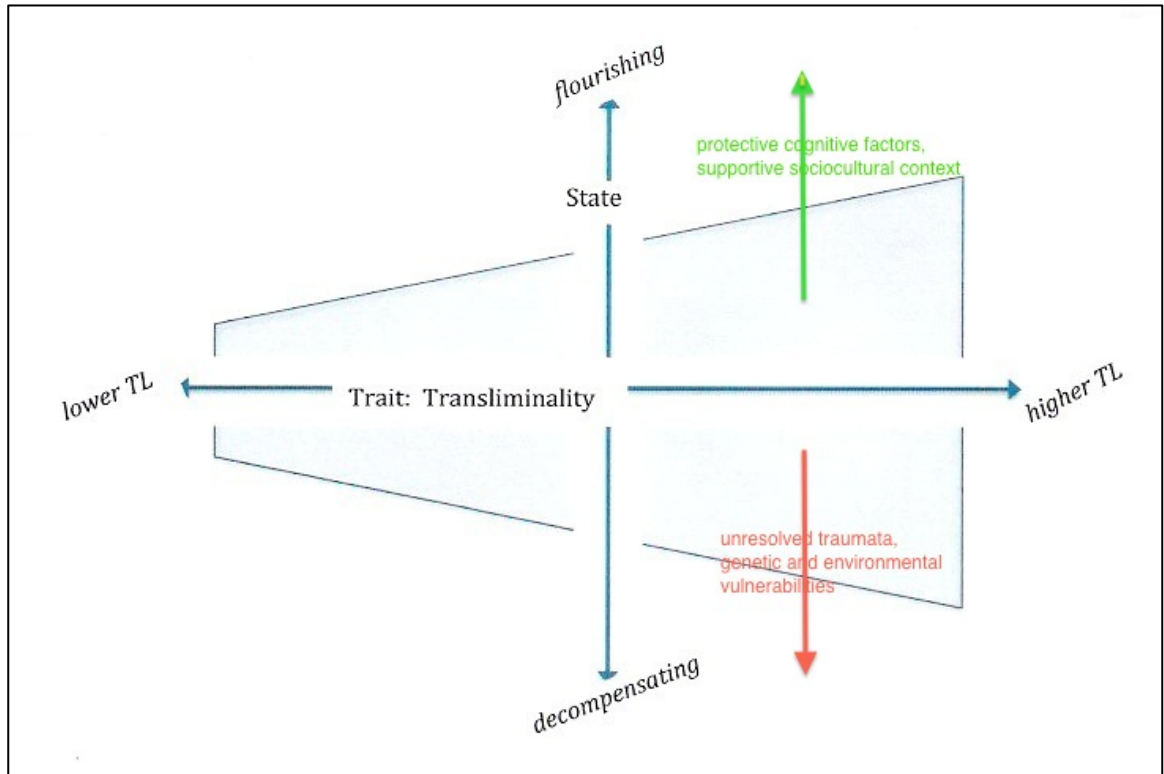
b. Shelley Carson's shared vulnerability model of creativity and psychopathology shows how high IQ, working memory, and cognitive flexibility all serve as protective factors against severe psychopathology.

c. Likewise, Emmanuelle Peters and colleagues' research suggests that cognitive flexibility can help mitigate so-called psychotic hallucinations and delusions and prevent

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<sup>78</sup> Psychoanalyst and religious studies scholar Volney Gay's book *Understanding the Occult* analyzes St. Augustine, C. G. Jung, and Goethe, highlighting the relationship between adult selfobject loss (echoing earlier selfobject loss in childhood) and the experiencing of occult/supernatural perceptual phenomena. Each of his case studies is arguably both highly sensitive and transliminal (as well as very highly intelligent), and all suffer episodes of major depression. While his investigations of these historical figures do not provide primary evidence, they corroborate the possibility of the type of relationship among transliminality, sensitivity, unresolved childhood traumata, adult extremes of both suffering and flourishing, and protective cognitive factors that I hypothesize above.

them from causing lasting psychopathology—as can “greater perceived social support [and] understanding” (Brett et al. 2014, p. 220).



**Figure 2. Transliminality Diagram with Moderating Factors**

Returning to our original inquiry, where would creativity, mystical experience, and psychopathology be located on our now-expanded diagram? *Psychopathology* would map onto the lower portion, as various vulnerabilities lead people into decompensation. *Creativity*, as discussed above,<sup>79</sup> can be used to refer to either creative personality or creative achievement: creative personality, as a core constituent of transliminality, would increase along with it from left to right, while creative achievement would likely map onto the upper right quadrant depicting transliminal people in a state of flourishing

<sup>79</sup> Please see p. 10-11 of Chapter 1, as well as p. 25, n43 above.

(which presumably would create the ideal conditions for creating). *Mystical experience*, while also a core constituent of transliminality, is somewhat different from creative personality in that mystical experience is usually thought of as a state rather than a trait—thus, as part of transliminality it probably means something like “the tendency to have mystical experiences” rather than “having mystical experiences all the time.” When transliminal people do encounter mystical experiences, which tend to be ecstatic and transcendent and integrative,<sup>80</sup> I would map these in the upper right quadrant where creative achievement also occurs. Spiritual experiences that are distressing, however, like those referred to as “the dark night of the soul” or a “spiritual emergency,” would be depicted in the lower right quadrant in which transliminal persons encounter intensely acute suffering.

### **Benefits of This Model**

My “Transliminality Theory” model as described above has several potential benefits. Using it as a point of departure could help streamline temperament studies, clarify ambiguous definitions and interrelationships, provide a testable research platform for several traits, and improve the clinical language we use in working with creative, transliminal people.

*Helps streamline temperament studies.* Transliminality Theory offers a conceptual map by which to organize several categories that are usually thought of as separate. Several authors, among them Gordon Claridge and Harry Hunt, have noted the many different psychological scales that all seem to be measuring a similar thing—some

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<sup>80</sup> Please see p. 12-15 of Chapter 1 for further discussion.

version of psychosis-proneness (Claridge 1994, p. 154), a “proclivity to altered state[s],” absorption, and/or openness to experience (Hunt 1997, p. 221). The potential problem here is similar to what Richard Gorsuch noted in 1984 about “the proliferation of instruments” measuring religiosity: “a large part of the research effort has been given to refining measurement techniques and correlating various instruments instead of examining the development and impact of the religious quality itself” (Csarny 1997, p. 4). If we can combine multiple lines of research under the rubric of transliminality (or whichever preexisting construct is found to be most all-encompassing and accurate), we can focus more of our resources and energies on harnessing the gifts, and mitigating the liabilities, of this trait. Likewise, if transliminality and Highly Sensitive Personality turn out to overlap systematically, much preexisting research in both areas could be combined.

*Clarifies definitions and interrelationships.* We have already seen how commonly used words like “creative” can cause confusion by meaning different things in different contexts—a creative person, a creative temperament, a creative idea, a creative work; a trait some people possess or a state that sometimes possesses people. Transliminality Theory helps elucidate some of the mystique around “highly creative persons” or so-called “tortured, crazy artists” by giving a more precise explanation of what is going on with this type of personality: more information, perception, emotion, and ideation is crossing the threshold into consciousness, which can take several different forms, some of them ecstatic and beneficial, others of them confusing and terrifying. Simply put, transliminality is a *trait* that predisposes people to certain *states*. These states might involve transcendence, creative productivity, or psychosis, but the underlying susceptibility appears to follow a consistent temperamental pattern.

*Provides testable research platform.* Just as Michael Thalbourne and colleagues used questionnaires and statistical analysis to identify the various components and correlates of transliminality, someone could use a similar approach to test whether my working hypothesis is correct, whether highly transliminal persons are inherently also HSPs, whether sensation-seeking is the “missing ingredient” that tilts the balance of turning an HSP into a TL as well.<sup>81</sup> Future research could test whether the theorized connections between transliminality and serotonin and dopamine are correct, whether transliminal people indeed have especially-active behavioral inhibition *and* activation systems, and whether the six elements of Shelley Carson’s shared vulnerability (to creativity and psychosis) model similarly predict a proclivity to transliminality and its outcomes. The extremely broad categories of “unresolved childhood traumata” and “sociocultural factors” could be used as a starting point to examine the many variables that affect transliminals’ flourishing and perishing and to further refine our understanding of how neurobiology, environment, and history interact.

*Improves clinical language.* Finally, I would submit that using the language of transliminality and sensitivity holds the potential to reduce the mutual distrust that is often present between the artistic/creative and the medical/psychiatric communities.<sup>82</sup> The word *transliminality* evokes images of transcendence and liminal space, while similar terms like schizotypy can be easily confused with (and stigmatized like) schizophrenia, and psychosis-proneness involves many other elements besides proneness

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<sup>81</sup> A 2002 study found only a weak .23 correlation between transliminality and sensation-seeking (Thalbourne & Cochrane 2002, p. 686); however, the presence or absence of sensory-processing sensitivity was not taken into account.

<sup>82</sup> I have already found this to be the case in my therapy practice. Clients who chafe at, for instance, a potential bipolar diagnosis instead find it interesting and instructive to consider that their symptoms may come as a “package deal” along with a personality trait, transliminality, that enhances their creativity and spirituality and enables them to see and feel things beyond what others commonly experience.

to actual psychosis. As Elaine Aron argues, our research terminology is not value-neutral; “a name for a trait represents a theory—implicit or explicit, folk or scientific—for explaining an observable behavior” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 17). People who might seem to be shy or neurotic may “in fact only or mainly” be high in sensory-processing sensitivity—just as people who may appear overly imaginative or even delusional might actually have a high amount of transliminality. If we consider that people reporting unusual experiences may have a more permeable threshold into consciousness for material beyond our perception, we are more likely to take them seriously and to reduce the distress that so often magnifies their suffering.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed what transliminality is and how it was discovered, presented evidence that it is a valid construct, examined its possible mechanisms and etiology, and identified several factors that may influence highly transliminal persons’ flourishing and/or decompensation. I then explained the similar concept of sensory-processing sensitivity and outlined my working hypothesis for how transliminality may connect with the well-established psychological traits of SPS and sensation-seeking. I presented a diagram depicting the relationship between larger amounts of transliminality and a wider range of both advantageous and adverse outcomes, and I listed four potential benefits to adopting my model of “Transliminality Theory.”

In the next three chapters, I will use this theoretical framework as a lens to help organize and investigate the fascinating life journeys of three highly transliminal people—St. Teresa of Ávila, Carl Jung, and Alanis Morissette.



## CHAPTER 3

### ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA, MEDIEVAL MYSTIC

“If you want to kiss the sky / Better learn how to kneel” —U2<sup>83</sup>

#### St. Teresa of Ávila

Our first case study, St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), was a nun who lived in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, having mystical experiences and reforming monasteries. Nearly four centuries after her death, she was named the first woman doctor of the Church (Egan 1984, p. 118). Teresa’s book *The Interior Castle* (1577) is considered to be a spiritual classic for its extensive, nuanced descriptions of the inward journey into prayer. As someone who demonstrated delightful creativity in her life and work, continually underwent unusual physical and psychological experiences, and is considered to be an expert in the mystical path, Teresa was likely very highly transliminal. In this chapter I will describe her life story, with special attention given to her creativity, transcendent experiences, possible psychopathology, and her own spiritual and psychological self-understanding and interpretations. Then I will discuss the ways in which Teresa’s experiences may corroborate, challenge, and suggest additions to the “transliminality theory” I set forth in Chapter 2.

#### Her Life

Teresa de Ahumada was born in Ávila, Spain, in 1515—just before the beginning of the Reformation, during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, amid the glory days of

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<sup>83</sup> “She Moves in Mysterious Ways,” by U2, on *Achtung Baby* (1991).

Castilian Spain (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 15). The fifth child of twelve siblings (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, Vol. I, p. 467n2), Teresa came into a wealthy family and was quite vivacious from a young age. Her passionate piety began early: in a famous childhood incident, she and her older brother Rodrigo decided to run away to the Moors (Gross 1993, p. 6-8) in order to have their heads cut off for Christ! Fortunately, their trek seems to have been short-lived,<sup>84</sup> for Teresa was soon back home learning to read.<sup>85</sup> Though she had no formal schooling, she was a voracious reader, especially of “what we would call pulp romances. She and her mother hid these romantic tales of chivalry from a father who disapproved of them” (Egan 1992, p. x).

Teresa’s mother died when she was about twelve years old.<sup>86</sup> When she was sixteen and starting to live a “worldly” youth,<sup>87</sup> she was sent to live with an order of Augustinian nuns in Ávila (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 17). There she found a mentor in Doña Maria Briceño, with whom she loved to talk about prayer, and began considering a religious vocation (p. 18). After Teresa became ill weighing the pros and cons of the decision, her uncle Don Pedro de Cepeda (a religious hermit) introduced her to St. Jerome’s *Letters*, which helped her overcome her ambivalence and decide to become a nun. Her father did not want her to leave him, so she sneaked out of the house at age twenty to run away to a Carmelite monastery. (He then accepted her decision and gave her a generous dowry [p. 18].)

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<sup>84</sup> Though perhaps partly prophetic: Rodrigo was later killed in South America fighting the Araucanos Indians (Welch 1996, p. 49).

<sup>85</sup> When martyrdom did not work out, she and Rodrigo “made plans to be hermits” (1565/1987, ch. 1, 5).

<sup>86</sup> According to her recollection (1565/1987, ch. 1, 7)—but historical records indicate her mother’s death occurred shortly after she signed her last will and testament in November 1528, so Teresa would have been thirteen or fourteen (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, Vol. I, p. 426, n5).

<sup>87</sup> See Lincoln 1984, p. xxxviii-xxxix for a speculative discussion on Teresa’s sexuality.

Two years after moving to the Carmelite monastery of the Incarnation, where she would live from 1535-1562, Teresa again became ill.<sup>88</sup> She underwent various medical treatments and almost died, after which she “was an invalid and paralytic for three years” (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 20) until experiencing a miraculous healing that she attributed to St. Joseph. She suffered many health problems for the remainder of her life, including needing to induce vomiting nearly every night before going to bed (1565/1987, ch. 7, 11).<sup>89</sup> Other than this serious illness in her young adulthood, we do not know much about Teresa’s life during her twenties and thirties, in part because her autobiography deals more with her interior journey than with external events (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 37).<sup>90</sup> One biographer tells us that “Teresa often went out to act as a confidante or companion to actual or potential benefactors of the convent as well as to fund-raising; because of her charming and attractive personality, Teresa frequently had visitors” (Chorpenning 1992, p. 6). Teresa herself describes these years as holding an inner “battle and conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world” (1565/1987, ch. 8, 3).

In 1554, at age 39, Teresa underwent a “second conversion” (Welch 1996, p. 44) event after which her prayer life deepened and her mystical experiences intensified. I will discuss these experiences in more detail later in the chapter; they were often quite dramatic and were often described as “ecstasies” or “raptures” (1577, ch. 20), in addition to numerous visions. Teresa developed a substantial emphasis on prayer (Egan 1984, p. 120-121), gradually coming to the conclusion that the current Carmelite convents lacked

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<sup>88</sup> One medical scholar believes that Teresa was suffering from a bacterial disease called “brucellosis, with complications of meningoencephalitis and neuritis” (Kavanaugh 1984, p. 52). See also Medwick 1999, p. 32.

<sup>89</sup> In citing Teresa’s writings, rather than listing pages, I will follow the *Collected Works* translators’ convention of listing the chapter number, followed by the number of the subsection.

<sup>90</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, the same is true of C. G. Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

the discipline and enclosure to support a sufficiently focused prayer life. In 1562, amid continual opposition, obstacles, misunderstanding, and even litigation, she founded the monastery of St. Joseph's under a more primitive Carmelite rule (Kavanaugh 1984, p. 17) in order to support prayer and contemplation, going on to found a total of seventeen convents for women (Kavanaugh 1984, p. 4).

By the 1560s, Teresa's superiors had begun ordering her to write books (Egan 1984, p. 118-119), a task for which she continually protested she was not equipped. Her first project was her own autobiography, *The Book of Her Life* (1565), followed by a prayer guide for her nuns called *The Way of Perfection* (1566), *The Book of Her Foundations* (1576) describing how monasteries should be run, and her classic *The Interior Castle* (1577), along with several shorter works and poetry. Teresa's confessors likely had an additional motive, however, besides their flocks' edification—having her write these books also served “as [a] prudent defense[] against the ever-vigilant Inquisition” (Hampl 2004, p. viii), which by that time had heard about Teresa's nonconformist ways and had become inquisitive. She was suspected of charges such as being against vocal prayer, promoting pantheism, and focusing on her own experiences to the neglect of Scripture and Church authority; but the matter was later dropped (Williams 1981, p. 96-103).

Teresa's work of expanding “her newly established form of Carmelite life” that she began at St. Joseph's became “her mission until her death in 1582” (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 37), when she succumbed to illness during her travels. She was canonized in 1922 and, in 1970, was made the first female Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI (Williams 1981, p. 103).

## Her Creativity

Teresa of Ávila's creativity comes through vividly in her colorful writings, as well as her often-colorful dealings with priests, fellow nuns, and benefactors. The same lively imagination that in her childhood felt called to run away and be martyred by the Moors, later conjured such delightful phrasings as "I am more afraid of one unhappy sister than a crowd of evil spirits" (qtd. in Martin 2013) and "just being a woman is enough to make my wings fall off" (Teresa 1565/1987, ch. 10, 8). Teresa had a great flair for story-telling (Egan 1992, p. x), perhaps rooted in all the chivalric romances she read with her mother as a child. She was also born at an opportune time, soon after the "invention of the printing press made available translations of the works of the Fathers of the Church . . . and the Italian mystics . . . [during a] movement to disseminate religious literature in Spanish" (Chorpenning 1992, p. 8). However, continues her narrative biographer Joseph Chorpenning, Teresa's writing "style is the antithesis of the humanistic prose of spiritual writers of her day," and instead sounds like the everyday spoken Spanish of her nuns (p. 11).

Teresa's gift for creative communication was not limited to her style of expression, but shines through in her content as well. Her writings are filled with what Donald Schön called generative metaphors, in which a metaphor helps to "account[] for our perspectives on the world: how we think about things, make sense of reality, and set the problems we later try to solve" (Schön 1979, p. 254, qtd. in Flesberg 2006, p. 2). The most well-known of these metaphors is the title of her book *The Interior Castle*, in which she compares the human soul to "a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places"

(1577/1979, p. 6), “and in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place” (p. 7). Each of the seven dwelling places or mansions (*moradas*) proceeds closer to the center of the castle, with specific temptations or challenges that accompany the soul’s increasingly intimate forms of prayer with God. Water is another of Teresa’s frequent illustrative images for prayer; in *The Book of Life* she describes at length how four different ways of watering a garden—by carrying water in buckets from a well, using an aqueduct system for irrigation, water flowing on its own from a stream, and rain falling from the sky—resemble the continuum of effort to effortlessness found in four different types of prayer (1565/1987, ch. 11, 6-7ff). In addition to the interior castle and water metaphors, Teresa’s writings are filled with comparisons of spiritual experiences to everyday items such as caterpillars, trees, birds, jewels, perfume, animals, sealing wax, and dissonant organ music.<sup>91</sup> And erotic, bridal imagery comparing the soul’s relationship with Christ with the union among lovers, the main theme of her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1572?),<sup>92</sup> is also scattered throughout her other works. Teresa’s writings are all the more impressive considering she had no access to a Bible (Kavanaugh 1980, p. 209) and thus was drawing all of her scripture references from memory.

Nor was she limited to writing spiritually educational prose. In addition to *The Interior Castle* and the books she wrote to instruct her nuns on inner and outer life, Teresa also penned at least 31 recorded poems with titles such as “Against an Impertinent Little Flock,” “Another on the Circumcision,” and “Happy the Enamored Heart”

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<sup>91</sup> For more on St. Teresa’s and Carl Jung’s use of images and symbols, see Welch 1982, p. 3-5.

<sup>92</sup> This topic was considered very daring to write on, especially for a woman. Though Teresa did so “with the approval of her confessor” (Kavanaugh 1980, p. 211), a later confessor, Diego de Yanguas, made her burn it. Fortunately, by then several copies were already in circulation (p. 212).

(Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, Vol. III), as well as “A Satirical Critique” of a discussion held by her brother’s spiritual friends (including St. John of the Cross), written in the style of “the kind of satirical ceremony that was at that time held in Spanish universities before conferral of the doctor’s degree” with “festive bantering” (Kavanaugh 1985, p. 357).

Reports of Teresa’s relationships and interactions likewise confirm her gifts of humor and creativity. In the words of her biographer Cathleen Medwick, she had a “flamboyant presence” and “was an extremely businesslike mystic” (1999, p. x) who knew how to use her personality to make connections and come up with solutions. Just as when she didn’t like the advice given to her by one confessor, she would find another (Egan 1984, p. 150), Teresa overcame numerous setbacks to get her first monastery at St. Joseph’s founded with her creativity in courting and procuring new political and spiritual supporters when the first ones didn’t work out (1565/1987, ch. 32, 10-ch. 36). Finally, her creativity is demonstrated by her noteworthy achievement of designing her own monastic rule and implementing it in seventeen different convents throughout Spain.

### Her Experiences of Transcendence

Though centuries later we think of St. Teresa of Ávila as a mystic, this is probably not the primary way she would have identified herself. But the unusual, ineffable, involuntary, often blissful, seemingly supernatural experiences that happened to her throughout her life (especially following her “second conversion” at age 39) sound very much like the kinds of phenomena that psychologists like Ralph Hood or Lukoff, Lu, and Turner are trying to capture in their definitions of mystical experience.<sup>93</sup> These occurrences were so much a part of Teresa’s spiritual life that she spends nearly a quarter

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<sup>93</sup> Please see above, Chapter 1, p. 12-15.

of her memoir<sup>94</sup> discussing them: “one of these favors,” she says, “is enough to change a soul completely” (1565/1987, ch. 27, 9). Teresa’s mystical experiences seem to have occurred in two main forms—visions and raptures (or ecstasies)—along with some locutions (“hearing” words), sensations involving pain and pleasure, and the occasional levitation(!). I will discuss each of these types of transcendent experience below, focusing here on her descriptions of the phenomena and leaving her interpretations of them for a later section.

Perhaps the easiest of Teresa’s types of experiences to conceptualize is her visions. To clarify, these were not “corporeal visions” that she literally saw with her eyes,<sup>95</sup> but rather interiorly experienced “imaginative visions” that were nonetheless just as vivid. Beginning in January 1561, Teresa received an imaginative vision of Christ’s hands, then his face, then his resurrected body (1565/1987, ch. 28, 1-3*ff*) that often occurred to her over the next two and a half years. She also reports that Friar Peter of Alcántara, whom she considered “a very holy and spiritual man” (ch. 27, 3), appeared to her a year prior to his death, “though being some leagues away from here” in a different location—as well as continuing to “visit” her to keep giving her counsel many times after he died (ch. 27, 19). In addition to her visions involving people, Teresa also “saw” religiously significant places and animals. A vision of hell, which was dark, dirty, and constricted (ch. 32, 1), served to put her earthly sufferings in perspective (ch. 32, 5). She also had several experiences of heaven (ch. 38, 1 & 22), though she usually refers to these as raptures rather than visions. One time while in a state of contemplation after Mass, she saw a dove over her head—and, later, a more dramatic dove over a Dominican

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<sup>94</sup> Chapters 23 through 31, according to translator Kieran Kavanaugh’s classification (1976/1987, p. 43).

<sup>95</sup> Teresa says that she never had this sort of vision (1565, ch. 28, 4); she and John of the Cross, in fact, advised skepticism of corporeal visions (Welch 1996, p. 126).



Father's head (ch. 38, 9-12). Teresa explains that she knew these experiences were true visions (rather than delusions) because what she saw was beyond anything she herself could imagine; she compares it to the difference between a living person and a painting (ch. 28, 8 & 11). At times she also received locutions, which we might think of as the auditory equivalent of a vision, when she would "hear" (again, interiorly rather than with her ears) words such as, "No longer do I want you to converse with men but with angels" (ch. 24, 5).

Even more intense than Teresa's visions and locutions were what she calls her "raptures" or "ecstasies,"<sup>96</sup> which at first frightened her as well as her confessors, who ordered her to "resist" these experiences (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 38). (Fortunately, a Jesuit priest with more experience in such matters reassured her that it sounded like they were coming from God rather than the devil [Teresa 1565/1987, ch. 23, 14-16]). In *The Interior Castle*, particularly in the fifth, sixth, and seventh dwelling places corresponding to the most advanced levels of prayer, Teresa describes what a rapture may entail. For a short time, the soul experiences union with God as the faculties (intellect, memory, senses) are suspended (1577/1979, p. 52). "This union is above all earthly joys, above all delights, above all consolations, and still more than that" (p. 54) and leaves a sense of certitude of God's presence in one's soul (p. 56). She compares its bliss to the Song of Songs when the Lover takes the beloved into the wine cellar (p. 57), or to a silkworm that while in its cocoon is transformed into a white butterfly (p. 58-62). There may be an experience of intensely pleasurable pain (p. 78-82). Some raptures "draw [the soul] out of its senses" (p. 94ff) and may involve a loss of body temperature and/or the ability to speak (p. 101). In another kind called "flight of the spirit" (p. 104) or "quick rapture of

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<sup>96</sup> These are not hard and fast categories; sometimes she would experience combinations of all of the above.

the spirit” (p. 107), the soul seems to be carried off somewhere (p. 105), which can be frightening (p. 106).

The most famous of Teresa’s raptures, later depicted in a sculpture by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini (1647-1652),<sup>97</sup> was when she felt a fire in her heart, bringing a combination of intense pain and pleasure, caused by an angel’s dart.<sup>98</sup> In her own words,

I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form. . . . I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. (1565/1987, ch. 29, 13)

At other times, Teresa attests, she would become so enraptured that “it carried off my soul and usually, too, my head along with it, without my being able to hold back—and sometimes the whole body until it was raised from the ground” (1565/1987, ch. 20, 4) such that the other nuns would have to come and hold her down (ch. 20, 5). In each of these accounts, Teresa stresses that the experiences are not voluntary: just as they cannot be induced by an act of will (ch. 22, 13), neither can they be prevented or stopped when God takes hold of both the soul and body (ch. 20, 7).

### Her Possible Psycho“pathology”

Not everyone would view St. Teresa’s mystical experiences as transcendent, coming from or revealing something about God, or even as real experiences outside of

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<sup>97</sup> Located in Rome, in the Cornaro Chapel of the Church of St. Maria della Vittoria; image available online at <http://www.boglewood.com/cornaro/xteresa.html>.

<sup>98</sup> This vivid image of Teresa’s “transpiercing”—when she had the vision and physio-spiritual sensation of an angel plunging a fiery dart into her heart—is not unique to her alone. A strikingly similar image appears in Carl Jung’s *Red Book*, as does a description in modern-day mystic Libby Maxey’s book *I Am Liberty* (p. 237-238), suggesting that perhaps this powerful experience contains archetypal or transpersonal overtones.

her own mind. Such is the difficulty of subjectivity: our perceptions are ultimately our own, and there are many possible ways to interpret them. What one culture may deem a gifted shaman, another may label a disturbed schizophrenic (Krippner 2002, p. 965).

Sigmund Freud's colleague Josef Breuer "dubbed Teresa 'the patron saint of hysteria'" (Medwick 1999, p. xv), presumably due to her emotionality, erotically charged language, highly dramatic experiences, and her tendency towards physical illness. Given her history of health problems and stress-exacerbated symptoms,<sup>99</sup> it does seem possible that Teresa tended toward somatization—the conversion of psychological stress into physical symptoms. However, setting aside the sexist history of the term *hysteria*,<sup>100</sup> if Teresa was a hysteric (today we would say someone with a personality characterized by histrionic defenses),<sup>101</sup> then there were also many other hysterics inhabiting 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. Raptures and ecstasies were not unique to Teresa, but were part of the spiritual repertoire of the *alumbrados* ("enlightened"), a movement that stressed "the importance of mental prayer, contemplation, and the manifestations of mystical phenomena" (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 23).

Moreover, Teresa was well aware that her experiences were unusual and difficult to understand: the fervent nun who proclaimed, "I beg your Reverence that we may all be mad for love of Him who for us was called mad" (1565/1987, ch. 16, 6) also devotes a paragraph of her memoir to explaining how to differentiate raptures from rabies (ch. 20,

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<sup>99</sup> These included fainting spells (Lincoln 1984, p. 25), seizures of rheumatoid arthritis (ibid., p. 148), and heart trouble (Kavanaugh 1984, p. 53).

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Tasca et al. 2012.

<sup>101</sup> For example, repression, sexualization, regression, dissociation, and counterphobic acting out (McWilliams 1994, p. 304-307).

23)!<sup>102</sup> The frequent spiritual “highs” of Teresa’s raptures, along with the high energy level evidenced by her numerous travels and writings, may indicate that she was what we would think of as hypomanic—though neither her writings nor those of others bear evidence of her having the grandiosity, recklessness, or poor judgment that would mark full-blown mania.

Despite the religious self-abnegation that runs throughout her writings, Teresa does not seem to have had a depressive temperament. In fact, her advice for prioresses on dealing with nuns who have melancholy (1576/1985, Chapter 7) is rather strict; she emphasizes several times that they not be given leeway to use their difficulties as an excuse to act, speak, or be treated any differently than the others.<sup>103</sup> (However, she is quite insightful about the harm of depressive rumination—“the greatest remedy [the prioress] has is to keep them much occupied with duties so that they do not have the opportunity to be imagining things, for herein lies all their trouble” (ch. 7, 9)—and the importance of nutrition—“they ought not fast as much as do the others.”)

Depending on one’s perspective, Teresa’s reports of involuntary levitation could be considered delusional, or perhaps some type of out-of-body experience.<sup>104</sup> Also challenging to classify psychologically are what she refers to as torments from the devil. In the most extreme instance, Teresa suffered great physical pain and was “striking myself hard on the head, body, and arms” (1565/1987, ch. 31, esp. 3) so that her nuns had to restrain her. Whatever the source of these attacks, she found a consistently effective

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<sup>102</sup> Teresa explains that raptures, unlike rabies, will leave in their wake “good effects” such as only wanting to do the will of God, or no longer fearing earthly dangers due to having a soul-level perspective (ch. 20, 22-23).

<sup>103</sup> While Teresa recognizes melancholy as an illness, she also differentiates it from “madness” in that people with melancholy still have their reason (ch. 7, 3).

<sup>104</sup> “An out-of-body experience (OBE) is an experience in which the self, or center of awareness, seems to the person having the OBE to temporarily occupy a position spatially remote from the body” (Parra 2015, p. 8).

solution: the devil would go away each time when she threw holy water on him!<sup>105</sup>

Finally, some might interpret Teresa's various "anxious longings for death" (1565/1987, ch. 20, 12ff), which sometimes accompanied the intensely spiritually (and sometimes physically) painful mystical experiences she increasingly had later in life, to be evidence of pathology. I would suggest instead that these longings, whose pain was not unmixed with pleasure (1565/1987, ch. 29, 13), were more about the desire to join her Divine Lover in the hereafter than an expression of a "death wish" or suicidality.

### Her Psychological and Spiritual Self-Understanding and Interpretations

Throughout Teresa's writings, she expresses that she wants to articulate the stages of prayer and mystical experience she has gone through for the benefit of others, as she experienced much confusion from not having a template to understand what was happening to her (1565/1987, ch. 14, 7). At first, when her "[u]nfamiliar, unusual experiences started to occur," she was frightened and sought counsel from many spiritual advisors (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 21), as she was not sure whether they were from God or the devil (Teresa 1565/1987, ch. 23, 2ff). During 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, there was a great fear of the devil (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 21, 25-29), which carried not only spiritual consequences but potential earthly punishment by the Inquisition. There was also a curiosity about uncharted spiritual territory, so to speak, in which Teresa was a pioneer. Historian M. E. Williams explains of Teresa's writings on the interior journey,

there was already a tradition of Christian mental prayer with its established degrees and progressions, and so in this sense, there was no innovation. But what happened was that there was a new outburst of "ways" to union with God. The advances in new techniques in politics, war, architecture, were to be matched by new spiritual techniques. It was as if the maps charted over hitherto undiscovered seas were now being drawn to guide ordinary Christians along the ways of the

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<sup>105</sup> Four such instances are described in Teresa 1565/1987, Chapter 31, sections 2, 5, 6, and 9.

spiritual quest for God within the soul. This great variety of ways was beginning to cause perplexity. Were they all to be trusted? (Williams 1981, p. 89)

It was within this context that Teresa's discernment about such matters, gleaned by trial and error through an evaluation of her own experience, struck such a chord that some of her own spiritual advisors and confessors later turned to her as a source of insight (de Nicolás 1984, p. xiii).

As for the source of her unique encounters and their inner and outer manifestations, Teresa eventually came to the conclusion that they were of God. Keenly aware of the difficulty of distinguishing raptures, visions, and locutions from delusions—including those caused by melancholy (1576/1985, ch. 8, 3)—she became known for having high standards to determine which was which (Welch 1996, p. 135-136). Just as real visions are more vivid than what the imagination could conceive, true locutions are “heard” rather than composed (1565/1987, ch. 25, 3-8), bring a sense of consolation rather than being disconcerting (ch. 25, 10-11), and are in accordance with Sacred Scripture (ch. 25, 13). Likewise, “a good sign of authentic visions is increasing humility” (Welch 1996, p. 131), though it is also important to distinguish true humility from false humility; the former expands the soul and “and enables it to serve God more,” whereas the latter is a temptation that can dissuade one from feeling worthy of prayer and service (1566/1980, ch. 39, 1-2).

Throughout her writings, Teresa attests to the many different forms that mystical experience can take (Egan 1984, p. 153-155). Her autobiographical accounts, as well as the stages she describes in *The Interior Castle*, indicate that these experiences tend to increase in frequency and intensity over the course of a person's prayer life. She advises persons who are undergoing deep rapture for the first time to stop their prayer and take

things slowly, because “the memory and the intellect are left almost delirious and mad. . . especially in the beginning” (1565/1987, ch. 40, 7), and “this state could end up being harmful.” The devil may send attacks of unstoppable laughter, a spirit of anger, or the inability to focus and be spiritually productive (1565/1987, ch. 30, 11-16).

In spite of her own frustrations with confessors who were unable to help her process her transcendent experiences, Teresa stresses continually that people who are experiencing revelations or visions should consult with spiritual advisors for their interpretations (1576/1985, ch. 8, 5). In fact, for “[t]hose who walk the path of prayer,” “the more spiritual they are, the greater their need” (1565/1987, ch. 13, 17). The best spiritual advisors, she says, have studied theology *and* have their own practice of prayer from which to draw. This balanced stance placed Teresa as a rare example of someone who bridged the “deep division” then in Spain between “learned men (theologians and intellectuals) and spiritual men (those with experience in prayer, who nowadays might be referred to as mystics or charismatics)” (Kavanaugh 1976/1987, p. 29-32). While she tended towards self-deprecation about her perceived lack of biblical knowledge or rhetorical skill, she gradually came to trust in her own instincts gleaned from years of firsthand mystical experiences, exhorting potential skeptics:

Let him not be surprised or think these things are impossible—everything is possible with the Lord—but strive to strengthen his own faith and humble himself in that the Lord makes a little old woman wiser, perhaps, in this science than he is, even though he is a very learned man. (1565/1987, ch. 34, 12)

Most importantly, Teresa’s own understanding of mystical experiences was that while they are “a great favor from the Lord” (1565/1987, ch. 29, 4), they are not the same as holiness, and ordinary faithfulness to God is more important (Welch 1996, p. 136). Not everyone is given the gift of contemplation (1566/1980, ch. 17), and it is unnecessary

for salvation or faithful living—to paraphrase her words, we cannot all be Mary’s and need some Martha’s too (ch. 17, 5-6).<sup>106</sup> She advocates for humaneness and balance (1565/1987, ch. 11, 16) in respecting the “many paths” taken by faithful people of different personalities (1565/1987, ch. 13, 13). Notably, as she says at the end of *The Interior Castle*, “what I conclude with is that we shouldn’t build castles in the air” (1577/1979, p. 136). What matters is not only prayer and contemplation, but virtue (p. 132).

### **Through the Lens of Transliminality Theory**

Now that we have examined a brief overview of St. Teresa of Ávila’s life, creativity, mystical experiences, possible psychopathology, and self-understandings, let us turn an eye back to the material in Chapter 2 and see how Teresa’s experiences match up with the components of “Transliminality Theory” and where her voice might offer additional insights to consider. First I will identify the specific ways in which St. Teresa seems to have been extremely transliminal. Then I will discuss the evidence of her creative and spiritual flourishing as well as her seasons of distress, examining the biological, childhood, environmental, and sociocultural factors that may have influenced these outcomes in favor of her overall flourishing. I will end by highlighting a few additional observations about ways in which Teresa’s life and voice offer us insights beyond those offered by Transliminality Theory.

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<sup>106</sup> This reference is to a story described in Luke 10:38-42 in which Jesus went to visit his friends Martha and Mary. Martha complains that her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet rather than helping her with the meal preparations, and Jesus responds by saying that Mary has chosen what is best. Teresa seems to be acknowledging that persons like herself, more suited to a “Mary” temperament of contemplation, could not walk their spiritual path without also having “Martha’s” to attend to the practical realities of life.



### Teresa and Transliminality

Since we cannot go back in time and ask St. Teresa to answer the questions on the Revised Transliminality Scale, perhaps the best way to assess her probable amount of transliminality is to evaluate whether her writings (or descriptions of her by others) show evidence of its nine constituent variables—paranormal belief, magical ideation, manic experience, creative personality, mystical experience, absorption, fantasy-proneness, hyperaesthesia, and a positive attitude toward dream interpretation. Some of these areas clearly match Teresa's temperament, while others require some speculation.

*Paranormal belief.* When Michael Thalbourne and colleagues were evaluating paranormal belief (and along with it, they assumed, probable paranormal experience), the three specific areas they meant were ESP, psychokinesis, and life after death (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 305). Given the myriad passages in her writings about the nature of heaven and hell, longing to die and be with God, and the eternal nature of the soul, it seems certain that Teresa believed in life after death—which, of course, is not only a paranormal notion but is found throughout many of the world's religions and certainly the Catholic faith. Her thoughts about ESP (extrasensory perception) and psychokinesis are somewhat harder to ascertain. If we take ESP to mean knowledge or information that is gleaned by means other than the five senses, then Teresa's many visions and locutions would qualify as ESP, since she understood them to convey knowledge about God, Christ, the afterlife, the state of persons' souls, and other spiritual realities. There is also at least one instance in which she reports a more "traditional" version of ESP. In her words,

One year before [Friar Peter of Alcántara] died, though being some leagues away from here, he appeared to me; since I knew he was going to die, I told him so. When he died, he appeared to me and told me that he was going to his rest. I

didn't believe it, but did tell some persons; after eight days the news came that he was dead, or, better, that he had begun to live forever. (1565/1987, ch. 27, 19)

Psychokinesis, the third type of paranormal belief used in determining the concept of transliminality, involves moving objects with the mind rather than with ordinary physical means. Whether or not we interpret Teresa's descriptions of her occasional levitation during prayer (1565/1987, ch. 20, 4ff) as plausible occurrences, she certainly believed that she had these experiences of psychokinesis with her very own body. It is safe to say that Teresa exhibited much evidence of paranormal belief (as well as experience).

*Magical ideation.* Magical thinking or ideation involves a superstitious or irrational belief that there is a causal connection between two events that cannot plausibly be related to one another. In the area of religion, the same phenomena that a secular psychologist might consider magical ideation (for example, a belief in answered prayer, or in catastrophic events happening as a result of disobeying the Bible) would be, for believers, matters of faith. Thus, a skeptic could say that by a strict definition of magical ideation, much of Teresa's entire belief system falls into this category—as would, however, much of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe's! A less controversial example from Teresa's writings that most, though by no means all, contemporary Christians might see as magical ideation is her belief that there is a literal devil causing disturbances, whom one can drive away with holy water (1565/1987, ch. 31).

*Manic experience.* As noted above on page 68, while Teresa might be considered somewhat hypomanic, she does not seem to have had mania or manic-depression as such. However, the “manic experience” component of transliminality does not necessarily refer to actual mania *per se*. This variable, in Michael Thalbourne and colleagues' original research, was based upon a nine-item scale that he, Peter Delin, and Darryl Bassett

(1994) created as an attempt to measure “features typically associated with a history of mania-like phenomena,” with the understanding that such features could “be early indicators of potential cyclothymic or manic-depressive syndrome,” but also of “non-illness forms of similar but attenuated behaviour within the normal population” (p. 205). Unfortunately, these nine items were not listed in their article, and I have been unable to obtain this information.<sup>107</sup> While it is hard to know for sure what exactly they were measuring, it seems plausible that with her raptures and her ecstatically erotic poetry, prayers, and descriptions, Teresa would likely meet the “manic experience” criterion for transliminality, especially if it is interpreted more as “manic-like experience.”

*Creative personality.* This variable, too, is difficult to assess for a similar methodological reason. Thalbourne and Delin (1994, p. 10) explain that in their original transliminality research they used “[a] specially constructed scale to measure creative personality, consisting of nine true-false items, five of which came from the Torrance Creative Motivation Inventory<sup>108</sup> and four of which were constructed specifically for this study.” They note that “[a]s yet, it lacks validity data and should therefore be regarded as an exploratory device.” What then, specifically, were they exploring? Other creativity researchers have described having a “creative personality” as being more open to new ideas, more introverted, more driven, and less socially conventional than the norm (Feist 1999, p. 290), or motivated more by aesthetic values than by financial stability (Csikszentmihalyi 1994, p. 137). While Teresa is described by her contemporaries as having been an extrovert (Medwick 1999, p. x; Chorpenning 1992, p. 6), she certainly

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<sup>107</sup> Thalbourne died in 2005, and I could not find contact information for Delin (now retired from the University of Adelaide, Australia). Dr. Darryl Bassett responded to my inquiry on 4 August 2015 and unfortunately was unable to locate a copy of the material.

<sup>108</sup> Citing Torrance 1971, p. 95-96.

seems to have been open-minded, driven, and socially unconventional—and the aesthetic sensibility displayed in her highly metaphorical writings, along with her commitment (despite being born into wealth) to a life of material poverty, indicates she would meet the last criterion as well. As with the other constituent variables of transliminality we have discussed thus far, it seems Teresa would probably qualify as having a creative personality.

*Mystical experience.* We have already discussed the extensive evidence of Teresa's mystical experiences above (pages 63-66).

*Absorption.* As certainly as Teresa would meet the criterion of mystical experience, she also clearly demonstrates high absorption—a complete immersion in one's experience, “a total attention that fully engages a person” (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 323). Throughout her descriptions of visions, raptures, and complex forms of prayer, she states that it is common to lose one's “faculties”—that is, the memory, intellect, and will. She even uses direct language of immersion and absorption. For example,

[A] feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him. . . . The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost. (1565/1987, ch. 10, 1)

Similarly,

It happens during deep rapture that after the time is past in which the soul is in union (for when it is in union the faculties are totally absorbed, and this doesn't last long, as I said), the soul remains recollected and cannot yet return to itself in exterior things; but the two faculties, the memory and the intellect, are left almost delirious and mad. (1565/1987, ch. 40, 7)

*Fantasy-proneness.* Closely connected with absorption and magical ideation is transliminality's seventh constituent variable, fantasy-proneness. People with this trait

tend to experience their fantasies as very real, and either “consciously elicit” or “automatically experience” various forms of imagery (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 314). Just as what is “magical” versus what is “religious” is debatable<sup>109</sup> depending upon one’s perspective, so too is the distinction between what is a “fantasy” versus what is a prayer, vision, or spiritual knowing. For our purposes, these categories need not be mutually exclusive; and no negation of the validity of Teresa’s spiritual encounters is intended in saying that from a psychological perspective, her intense interiority could qualify as a measure of high fantasy-proneness.

*Hyperaesthesia.* It is uncertain whether St. Teresa experienced hypersensitivity to sensory perception such as light, sound, and smell. She does seem to have been very aesthetically aware, from her references to artwork, jewels, and intricately detailed visions.<sup>110</sup> In the passage describing her terrifying vision of hell, she recounts “dirty, muddy water emitting a foul stench” (1565/1987, ch. 32, 1), though in another occurrence, she says she did not personally experience “the smell of brimstone” lingering after an appearance of the devil as did two other reliable nuns (ch. 31, 6). Whether the vividness of Teresa’s sensory experiences would tilt into hyperaesthesia is unclear but possible.

*Positive attitude toward dream interpretation.* Interestingly, with all of the emphasis throughout the Christian scriptures on the significance of dreams, Teresa seldom speaks about dreams in the traditional sense of dreaming during sleep. She is more likely to use the language of “dreaming” to describe dreamlike states, and she occasionally speaks of feeling, after her transcendent experiences, as if they were a

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<sup>109</sup> See above, p. 74.

<sup>110</sup> She expresses frustration that in her recurrent vision of the risen Christ in his great beauty, she never could figure out his height or the color of his eyes (1565/1987, ch. 29, 2)!

dream; for instance, “[i]t sometimes happened to me in this kind of prayer [of union] that I was so taken out of myself that I didn’t know whether I was dreaming or whether the glory I was experiencing was indeed occurring” (1565/1987, ch. 19, 1).<sup>111</sup> The one specific dream I found is in *The Book of Her Foundations* (1576/1985), when Teresa recounts how Sister Doña Catalina, who very much wanted to become a nun in “the most perfect religious order there was on earth” (ch. 22, 21), dreamt of encountering a discalced friar who took her on a candlelit walk to a convent and showed her its constitutions and rule of life. According to Teresa, when the Sister awoke, “she wrote down what she remembered from the rule” and showed it to a Jesuit priest; the Father recognized its similarity to Teresa’s Carmelite monasteries and placed the two in touch (ch. 22, 22). Later Sr. Doña Catalina said that “the same Sisters she now [saw]” in her new home were the exact joyous, laughing faces from her dream (ch. 22, 21). The implication seems to be that this dream was indeed from God, leading the Sister to where she was supposed to go—so perhaps despite a lack of frequent examples, Teresa may have had a positive attitude toward dream interpretation, or at least an appreciation of their potential significance.

*Highly sensitive personality (HSP) and high sensation-seeking (HSS).* In Chapter 2, I hypothesized that another way of understanding transliminality (besides through its nine constituent variables) is that it is a combination of highly sensitive personality (also known as sensory-processing sensitivity) and high sensation-seeking. While this hypothesis remains speculative, I wish to briefly note that Teresa of Ávila appears to meet both of these criteria as well. Sensory-processing sensitivity is thought to involve behavioral inhibition, emotional reactivity, depth of processing, and sensitivity to

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<sup>111</sup> See also Teresa’s *Spiritual Testimonies* (1560, ch. 1, 22).

subtleties.<sup>112</sup> Teresa's behavioral inhibition is debatable (with evidence of enthusiastic impulsivity along with self-restraint, such as seeking to obey her confessors even when she disagreed with their orders); however, her writings are filled with demonstrations of emotionality, deep processing, and sensitivity to the subtleties and nuances of the spirit. According to Carmelite scholar John Welch's interpretation, she was high in sensation-seeking as well: "Teresa approached the inner journey with the same sense of adventure and the same Spanish temperament as found in her brothers and their service of Spain. If she had not been a woman she might well have joined her brothers," he says, in traveling "to conquer and Christianize the New World" (Welch 1982, p. 48).

#### Teresa's Flourishing and "Perishing"

As transliminality theory would predict, St. Teresa experienced a wide range of flourishing and, if not quite "perishing" (though perhaps her near-death in young adulthood might qualify), at least some profound struggles. Overall, however, the balance of her life tilts strongly toward flourishing, both in her generativity and her subjective experience. She was highly productive, founded seventeen convents, wrote several (solicited!) books, and became known as a source of wisdom for people seeking to understand their own prayer life, mystical experiences, and/or interior journey. She appears to have been very well-connected and well-liked, as well as quite sociable, despite the constraints of monastic life. With maturity, she grew into confidence in her own spiritual experience and judgment, and she seems to have found peace and pleasure in union with God and her chosen way of life.

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<sup>112</sup> Please see above, p. 42ff, for further discussion.

Teresa's life did certainly have its seasons of intense struggle as well—most particularly the period of ill health in her early twenties that brought her to death's door and left her paralyzed for three years afterward. She also refers to the worst year of her life (Egan 1984, p. 121) as the year when she stopped praying due to a sense of unworthiness (1565/1987, ch. 7, 11-17 & ch. 19, 4), though it is unclear in what ways she suffered as a result. Additionally, the long process of the founding of St. Joseph's was filled with setbacks and persecution, including from her own fellow nuns (some of whom thought she should be put in the jail cell [1565/1987, ch. 33, 2]), and there were rumors about her brought to the authorities of the Inquisition. However, despite these obstacles, her continued health problems and her fiery spiritual pain, Teresa appears to have embraced her middle and later decades of life with contentment and inner equilibrium.

#### Contextual Factors

What cognitive abilities, early life experiences, and sociocultural surroundings supported Teresa and helped make possible her ultimate flourishing and contributions to the world? *Cognitively*, Teresa had an excellent memory (despite her self-deprecation of it), as evidenced by the continual biblical references woven throughout her writings when she had no access to a Bible. All of her detailed generative metaphors, many of which extend in layers of depth over multiple chapters, suggest a high IQ as well. And her ability to “hold” the uncertainty and confusion from her mysterious and sometimes scary experiences of transcendence, persistently seeking help and understanding rather than unraveling from them, implies a high degree of cognitive flexibility. As we have seen,<sup>113</sup> a strong working memory, high IQ, and cognitive flexibility are all thought to be

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<sup>113</sup> Above, p. 39-41



protective factors inclining highly transliminal people toward the realm of creativity rather than that of psychopathology.

Overall, Teresa's *childhood* appears to have been positive and happy. In early adolescence, she suffered what was undoubtedly a major loss when her mother died. She had, however, three relationships<sup>114</sup> that perhaps helped ameliorate this bereavement—her father, to whom she was especially close; Sister Doña Maria Briceño, at the abbey where she went to live in her teens, who served as a role model for Teresa of the religious life; and her uncle, Don Pedro de Cepeda, who also had a similarly religious temperament. She was also born into money and thus lacked the stresses of poverty, and from her autobiographical mentions of cousins and friends it seems she had plenty of social acceptance and involvement.

Teresa's *sociocultural context* in adulthood likely contained both benefits and challenges. Her visions and (sometimes public) raptures, while hardly ordinary, were not as unusual during 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain as they would probably be considered today. On the other hand, today they would probably not be attributed to the devil either, which caused her much inner distress and had the potential to place her in mortal danger given the climate of the Inquisition. In terms of psychological and spiritual support, Teresa seems to have benefited from the built-in stable social connection and the shared meaning of monastic life, desiring more discipline and structure in her own later convents rather than less. Whatever their inadequacies, she had available to her relationships with confessors and spiritual advisors with whom she could process her inner journey and seek counsel. She managed to strike a balance between “pushing” the system, norms, and conventions

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<sup>114</sup> In addition to these concrete relationships, Teresa sought and may have found solace in an intangible relationship: after her mother died, she prayed to the Virgin Mary and asked her to be her mother henceforth (1565/1987, ch. 1, 7).

of the Catholic hierarchy, and finding ways to flourish and pursue her own interior castle within them: a remarkable achievement for a medieval woman whose main resource was the “soft” power of her own personality.

### Parting Thoughts

In this chapter I have described St. Teresa of Ávila’s life, creativity, mysticism, possible psycho“pathology,” and self-understandings, from which I concluded that she appears to have been highly transliminal, as hypothesized. This trait likely predisposed her to experience the transcendent states whose elucidation she turned into a spiritual art. There are no obvious ways in which Teresa’s experiences contradict transliminality theory, though as is the case whenever we are using psychology to talk about religious phenomena, categories like “magical ideation,” “fantasy-proneness,” and “paranormal” require nuancing and interpretation.

There are three spiritual and/or psychological “takeaways” from St. Teresa’s life and voice that I wish to highlight only briefly at present and will discuss in more detail in later chapters. First, Teresa emphasizes that the mystical path is not for everyone: there is a paradox between visions and raptures being “a great favor from the Lord” and “a most rich treasure” (1565/1987, ch. 29, 4), on the one hand, while being neither spiritually necessary nor “better,” on the other. We will revisit this idea later when discussing the possible theological implications of transliminality. Second, according to Teresa’s self-descriptions of her relational interactions and to those of her contemporaries, she is a prime example of an extroverted, rather than introverted, HSP (highly sensitive person)—which 30% of HSPs are (Aron 2001, p. 27). While our other two case studies, Jung and Morissette, also make significant creative contributions in

their respective professional domains, Teresa is the only one of the three<sup>115</sup> to have been a social extrovert.

Finally and most significantly, as vivid and powerful as Teresa's mystical experiences were, she understood their true value to lie in the knowledge they conveyed about God, Christ, the human condition, and reality: in this way they were not only spiritual and theological, but also epistemological, events. Her moments of transcendence were often simultaneously reminders of God's immanence, emphasizing God's intimate love for her and the Holy Spirit's desire to dwell deeply and passionately within her in all of her creatureliness. In opening and exposing her to a suprahuman perspective upon such existential realities as the world's finitude, human sin, her own personality, and the Divine love enfolding her, Teresa's transcendent experiences would undeniably qualify as what theologian James Loder has deemed "transforming moments."<sup>116</sup>

In the following chapter, we will turn to Carl Jung as our second case study. While his biography and beliefs are quite different from St. Teresa's, he is likewise a gifted individual whose life held remarkable creativity, intense psychological struggle, and equally intense transcendent experience.

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<sup>115</sup> Though in this aspect she fits in with the majority of transliminals, who are slightly more likely to be extroverted (Thalbourne & Houran 2000, p. 855).

<sup>116</sup> In Loder's conceptualization, one characteristic of such moments is that they are revelatory of the world, the self, the void, and the Holy. Please see Chapter 6, p. 150ff.

## CHAPTER 4

### C. G. JUNG, ARCHETYPAL ANALYST

“The only way out is through” —Alanis Morissette<sup>117</sup>

“Writers don’t have bad days; they just have material.” —Dorothy Dean<sup>118</sup>

#### Carl Gustav Jung

Our second case study, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), is the Swiss psychiatrist who developed what is now known as analytical psychology (sometimes called archetypal psychology). An immensely creative thinker, Jung built upon Freud’s studies of unconscious processes and came up with such concepts as complexes and personality types. He was also fascinated throughout his life with whatever lay outside the realm of “normal,” be it the occult, ghosts, mysticism, alchemy, or numerology (Gay 1984, p. xii-xiii), in part because he himself and other family members had numerous unusual experiences. During the ascent to his highly successful career, Jung went through a several-years-long season of isolation, suffering, and intense interiority that could be classified as psychopathology, yet also held the seeds for some of his most creative ideas and later work.

As in the last chapter with St. Teresa, I will give a brief description of C. G. Jung’s life; discuss his creativity, transcendent experiences, possible psychopathology, and psychospiritual self-understanding; and explain why I believe this evidence suggests he was likely highly transliminal. I will also discuss the contextual factors that enabled

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<sup>117</sup> “Out Is Through,” by Alanis Morissette, on *So Called Chaos* (2004).

<sup>118</sup> Conversation with the author (2016); paraphrasing Garrison Keillor.

him to move from his time of midlife calamity into deepened vocational generativity, ending with a few observations about how these outcomes corroborate Transliminality Theory and illustrate key similarities between Jung and Teresa.

### His Life

Karl<sup>119</sup> Gustav Jung was born in 1875 in the small rural town of Basel, Switzerland. His father, Paul Jung, was a country parson who had married Emilie Preiswerk, the daughter of his prominent Hebrew studies professor at the Evangelical Theological Institute in Geneva. In his autobiography, Jung reports that his “parents’ marriage was not a happy one” (1961/1989, p. 315) and that he grew up in poverty (p. 24), had one sister nine years younger, and was temperamentally similar to his mother, whom he experienced as occasionally “uncanny” (p. 48-50).<sup>120</sup> At the age of three or four he began a lifetime of prolific dreaming (a point to which we will return below) with a dream of an underground phallus on a throne—an image that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life (p. 11-12).

Jung experienced his early student years as boring and tells us he was terrible at math, drawing, and gymnastics (1961/1989, p. 27-29). At age twelve he began having neurotic fainting spells whenever he did schoolwork, but these ended several months later (p. 30-32).<sup>121</sup> From an early age, Jung reports, he had a sense of being two persons—his everyday outer No. 1 self, which struggled to do well in school and with his peers, and an inner, more mystical No. 2 personality where he felt whole (p. 44-45). Despite having a

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<sup>119</sup> The original spelling of Jung’s first name was Karl; he began spelling it with a C as a university student (Bair 1993, p. 8).

<sup>120</sup> Felicity Kelcourse (2004, p. 29) notes that Jung’s mother had an unidentified mental illness.

<sup>121</sup> Jung claims that he banished them by an act of will, thus learning what a neurosis was (1961/1989, p. 31-32).

Reformed pastor father and eight parson uncles, young Jung “found little happiness in the church’s dogmas and creeds and learned early to rely on his own inner resources” (DeGregoris 1990, p. 623a). He criticized his father for wanting him to believe in theological tenets rather than experience God directly (Jung 1961/1989, p. 42-43). Reading philosophy in his late teens, especially that of Schopenhauer and Kant, gave Jung’s No. 1 personality the confidence and grounding that he felt his childhood had lacked (p. 68-70).

As he was preparing for his final university exams, Jung began reading psychiatry and suddenly realized it was the only possible goal for him—the vocation that would unite his two sides, provide a middle ground between his No. 1 “outer” and No. 2 “inner” selves, and merge “the two currents of [his] interest” in nature and spirit (p. 108-109). He had an urge to combine empirical evidence with spiritual significance:

What appealed to me in science were the concrete facts and their historical background, and in comparative religion, the spiritual problems, into which philosophy also entered. In science I missed the factor of meaning; and in religions, that of empiricism. (Jung 1961/1989, p. 72)

And he was quite gifted at his chosen field, studying medicine in Basel, psychiatry in Zurich, psychopathology in Paris, and publishing important papers as early as 1902 (Gay 1984, p. xi). External factors also played a part in Jung’s rise to fame during the early days of psychotherapy. Tall and masculine, he benefited from a Swiss-German pedigree that (according to legend) included Goethe himself; an early professional placement in Europe’s leading psychiatric teaching hospital, the Burghölzli (Kerr 1993, p. 39); and a marriage to Emma Rauschenbach, a wealthy woman whose inheritance left them no worries about material security (Bair 2003, p. 84-85).

Jung's career reached an important turning point in 1906, when he read Sigmund Freud's seminal book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). After he reached out to Freud, the two began a copious correspondence (Freud/Jung 1974) and soon developed a close professional and personal relationship. Freud viewed Jung as his protégé, the Aryan successor who would bring what was commonly thought of as the "Jewish science" of psychoanalysis (Abraham/Freud 1965, p. 34) to a wider global audience: "if I am Moses," he proclaimed in 1909, "then you are Joshua and will take possession of the promised land of psychiatry" (Freud/Jung 1974, p. 196-197). However, Jung's thought increasingly began to diverge with Freud's. In 1913 their connection acrimoniously ended, sending Jung into a six-year period of depression and intense introspection that eventually helped distill his own approach, now known as analytical psychology. I will discuss this formative period in Jung's life further below.

In addition to treating numerous patients throughout his psychiatric career, many of whom were quite severely ill, Jung wrote twenty volumes' worth of essays and books. He had five children and lived through two world wars. During the 1930s, he assumed the presidency of the International Psychoanalytical Association and acquired a controversial reputation as "both anti-Semitic *and* a sympathizer with the Jews" (Havsteen-Franklin 2007, p. 116, emphasis added).<sup>122</sup> He traveled within Africa, the United States, India, and Italy. In 1923 he began building a dwelling tower and added different sections to it, finishing in 1955 after his wife Emma's death (1961/1989, p. 225). He recovered from a heart attack in 1944 (p. 289) and began writing his memoir, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, with Aniela Jaffé in 1957 (p. x). Yet, all the while,

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<sup>122</sup> For more information about this aspect of Jung's life, please see my "Jung and Judentum" paper, available by emailing the author at laurakreislermaier@gmail.com.

another substrate of Jung's life was taking place beneath its surface. Hence the title of his autobiography: memories, dreams, and reflections are not actions performed in the external world, but rather types of internal experience and introspection. "In the end," Jung says,

the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one. That is why I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the *prima material* of my scientific work. They were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized.

All other memories of travels, people, and my surroundings have paled beside these interior happenings. (p. 4-5)

### His Creativity

Jung's bent toward the interior life did not keep him from making myriad creative contributions to the outer world. In fact, his gift for deep introspection resulted in a host of innovations both conceptual and methodological, professional and personal, clinical and artistic. Jung viewed creativity as one manifestation of the libido, which, in contrast to Freud, he understood to be "an energy-value which is able to communicate itself to any field of activity whatsoever, be it power, hunger, hatred, sexuality, or religion, without ever being itself a specific instinct" (1912/1956, p. 137). Given his prolific writings—enough to fill the twenty volumes of his *Collected Works*—it seems that his creative libido was quite high.

Conceptually, Jung came up with a whole new way of understanding the interior human experience, one that required its own language to describe the collective unconscious (or collective psyche) and its archetypes. In his work with psychotherapy patients as well as in his own dreams, he noticed certain universal patterns and symbols that kept occurring—for example, identity-roles such as the "trickster" or "earth mother"



or “wise old man,” the shapes of a cross or a circle, the number four—that also could be found throughout the ancient myths and narratives of cultures around the world. He named these universal patterns and symbols *archetypes* and saw them as “the age-old heritage of humanity . . . which seeks to add itself to our own individual life in order to make it whole” (1961/1989, p. 302).

Archetypes show up in people’s dreams and visions, in architecture and art, and in the feelings and tendencies of people’s everyday lives. Difficult to define precisely,

[t]he archetypes, which are pre-existent to consciousness and condition it, appear in the part they actually play in reality: as a priori structural forms of the stuff of consciousness. . . . They account only for the collective component of a perception. As an attribute of instinct they partake of its dynamic nature, and consequently possess a specific energy which causes or compels definite modes of behavior or impulses; that is, they may under certain circumstances have a possessive or obsessive force (numinosity!). (Jung 1961/1989, p. 347)

Archetypes are closely associated with the *collective unconscious*, the term Jung uses to describe the psychic interconnection he believes exists among people of all times and places. “The collective unconscious,” he says, “is common to all; it is the foundation of what the ancients called the ‘sympathy of all things’” (p. 138). For Jung, these abstract, archetypal concepts, symbols, and images that derive from the collective unconscious are as real as the people and objects around us. He asserts that “the contents of psychic experience are real,” not only personally, “but as collective experiences which others also have” (p. 194), which allows us to observe them empirically, note patterns, and make inductive generalizations about them.

Clinically, Jung’s understanding of humanity’s psychic (or soul-level) interconnectivity meant that his patients’ psychological suffering might not be solely intrapsychic, but could also involve disharmony between one’s present personal

circumstances and cultural context and the deeper, wholeness-seeking forces of our inherited collective psyche. One of his most significant ideas is that each of us contains aspects of masculine and feminine, earthy and esoteric, light and shadow, and that wholeness is to be found through integration of both sides. In recognizing that most people have a temperamental tendency to lean more to one side of a trait than the other—inward- or outer-focused, thinking- or feeling-oriented, gleaning knowledge through one's external senses or internal intuition—Jung formalized the idea of psychological “types” and “functions” (*CW* 6).<sup>123,124</sup> Again, the ideal trajectory for growth is for a person to gradually incorporate her less dominant ways of being<sup>125</sup> as she matures and individuates, gaining greater balance and wholeness.

This emphasis on the integration of opposites and attunement with the collective psyche is not to say that Jung ignored his patients' *personal* psychological “blocks.” Another of his creative innovations was the development, early in his career, of word association tests (Jung *CW* 2). He would read out a list of words to a patient and have him respond with the first association that came to mind. By noting the patterns in the patient's verbal answers, as well as the particular words that elicited pauses before responding or shifts in the patient's body language, Jung could make an educated guess as to what words or ideas were emotionally “loaded” in the patient's unconscious. These emotionally-laden patterns at the roots of a person's psychopathology Jung called *complexes* (from “emotionally charged complexes,” or “a feeling toned complex of

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<sup>123</sup> The types of introvert and extrovert, and the functions of thinking and feeling, sensation and intuition, respectively. Building on the Jungian types and functions, the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator adds an additional category of judging versus perceiving.

<sup>124</sup> I will follow the convention of using *CW*, followed by the volume number, to cite Jung's *Collected Works*.

<sup>125</sup> See Johnson 1998, p. 178-179 for a description of the difficulties of this process.

ideas” [Hopcke 1999, p. 18]).<sup>126</sup> He found that bringing a complex from repression into conscious awareness could result in its partial resolution.

One of Jung’s best-known contributions is called *active imagination*. A creative way of working with dreams, active imagination involves a liminal space “between passive, receptive awareness of inner psychological material and active, elective responding to this material in whatever form” (Hopcke 1999, p. 34). For example, a person might dream that a scary green dragon has taken up residence in her study and is breathing fire, burning up her books. Using the process of active imagination, the dreamer would ask the dragon questions such as, “Why are you here?” and “What do you want from me?” Then she would take on the role of the dragon and answer back, or perhaps the dreamer-as-dragon might want to question or challenge the dreamer-as-ego (one’s usual self) in return. Through this process, different parts of the dreamer’s psyche can come together in dialogue, bringing unexpected insight and integration.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, we cannot discuss Carl Jung’s creativity without including his remarkable, difficult-to-classify work of art and writing that is now available to the public: *The Red Book* (2009). Actually entitled *Liber Novus* (Latin for “The New Book”), *The Red Book* acquired its informal name because of its red leather binding. In it, in the style of a medieval illuminated manuscript, are over two hundred pages of intricate illustrations, colorful mandalas,<sup>128</sup> and metaphysical musings in German, Latin, Greek, and English, written in calligraphy. *The Red Book’s* text was copied by Jung from parts of his “Black Books,” the six journals that he kept from 1913-1917, during the

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<sup>126</sup> Citing Jung *CW* 2, p. 72n and p. 321, respectively.

<sup>127</sup> For more information and a demonstration of this process, see Staples 2000.

<sup>128</sup> Sacred art, often highly complex and usually in the shape of a circle with four symmetrical compartments, found in the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Jung found that drawing mandalas both revealed the state of his psyche and helped him to re-center (1961/1989, p. 195-196).

psychically painful and fruitful years following his break with Freud. Its writings and drawings—remarkable for the quality and detail of Jung’s artwork—illustrate his own active imagination process as he worked with, and worked out, his prolific dreams and fantasies. For decades, Jung’s students and followers knew about *The Red Book*, but did not have direct access to it; it was kept in the Jung family safe, and each year the book was opened for an allotted time period during which students at the Jung Institute could view (but not touch!) only one page (Scott 2015). Through the efforts and negotiations of editor Sonu Shamdasani, *The Red Book: Liber Novus* was finally published in 2009,<sup>129</sup> giving scholars a new and rich resource for perusing hitherto-unknown facets of Jung’s creativity.

Even before this manuscript was available, Jungian psychotherapist Robert H. Hopcke noted that, judging from his writings about modern art (*CW* 15),

Jung seems quite at home with the realization that great artists are almost always exceptional individuals for whom normal psychological categories may not apply. Given Jung’s own copious creative output over the course of his lifetime, the issue of artistic creativity, its psychological cost, and its value for the individual and collective life, was clearly one Jung had lived from the inside for many, many years. (Hopcke 1999, p. 154)

Indeed, in one of his most important works, *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung identifies “the common human problem” as the question, “How am I to be creative?” (1912/1956, p. 49). His own answer was to invent an entire new branch of psychology, one whose concepts and innovations continue to live on within dream groups, psychotherapy, personality typologies, and even clinical pastoral education.

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<sup>129</sup> Among some Jungians, the images in *The Red Book* are thought to hold such archetypal power that when the book was first displayed in a New York City art museum, they had a Jungian analyst on hand in case someone had a psychological experience that they needed help to process (Scott 2015)!

## His Experiences of Transcendence

From an early age, Jung frequently underwent experiences that he felt were transcendent, numinous, or otherworldly. Unlike the type of mystical experience that is usually associated with the term<sup>130</sup> and involves positive affect, Jung's encounters with the transcendent realm were often quite scary and disturbing, at least in part. His first mystical(ish?) experience occurred in early adolescence, his "fallow period" in midlife seems to have held a stream of them, and several more came in his sixties.

When Jung was around twelve years old, he was walking home from school on a beautiful day, past the cathedral square. "The sky was gloriously blue," he tells us in his memoir, "the day one of radiant sunshine.

The roof of the cathedral glittered, the sun sparkling from the new, brightly glazed tiles. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the sight, and thought, "The world is beautiful and the church is beautiful, and God made all this and sits above it far away in the blue sky on a golden throne and . . ." Here came a great hold in my thoughts, and a choking sensation. I felt numbed, and knew only: "Don't go on thinking now! Something terrible is coming, something I do not want to think, something I dare not even approach." (1961/1989, p. 36)

Jung feared that if he were to continue with his thought, he would commit the unpardonable sin and be "damned to hell for all eternity." Throughout that night and the next two days, he suppressed this "forbidden thought," becoming increasingly miserable. On the third night, he wrestled with the dilemma of how this blasphemous thought could be in his mind despite his best efforts to be moral, coming to the conclusion that God must be testing him to see whether he would obey Him by submitting to this compulsive thought He'd placed within him, even if it meant eternal damnation (p. 37-39). Finally,

I gathered all my courage, as though I were about to leap forthwith into hell-fire, and let the thought come. I saw before me the cathedral, the blue sky. God sits on his golden throne, high above the world—and from under the throne an

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<sup>130</sup> Please see Chapter 1, p. 12-15, for more information.

enormous turd falls upon the sparkling new roof, shatters it, and breaks the walls of the cathedral asunder. (p. 39)

After giving in to this ideation, Jung reports, he felt “indescribable relief” and such “unutterable bliss” that he “wept for happiness and gratitude” (p. 40). At the same time, he felt burdened with a sinister secret: the knowledge that “God could be something terrible” and “refuses to abide by traditions, no matter how sacred” (40). His first communion, in contrast, was quite a disappointment, as it held “nothing of the vast despair, the overpowering elation and outpouring of grace which for [Jung] constituted the essence of God” (1961/1989, p. 55).

Over two decades later, following his break with Freud, Jung had another frightening, otherworldly experience that was not theological or spiritual, but could be considered transcendent, in the sense of surpassing normal physical reality. Traveling alone in October 1913, he “was suddenly seized by an overpowering vision” in which “a monstrous flood cover[ed] all the northern and low-lying lands between the North Sea and the Alps,” with “mighty yellow waves, the floating rubble of civilization, and the drowned bodies of uncounted thousands. Then the whole sea turned to blood” (p. 175). This same vision recurred two weeks later, and in the following spring of 1914, he dreamed three times of apocalyptic scenes of dreadful cold descending in the middle of summer, “the whole of Lorraine and its canals frozen and the entire region totally deserted by human beings” (p. 176).

Because he was having these experiences during a season when he was under intense intrapsychic strain, Jung at first thought that he “was menaced by a psychosis” (p. 176). However, on August 1, 1914, World War I began, and he realized that his visions had been premonitions of the coming disaster; somehow his own psyche had been

connected to the situation of the world at large. He took this confirmation as an indication that he was being called to a task: “I had to try to understand what had happened and to what extent my own experience coincided with that of mankind in general. Therefore my first obligation was to probe the depths of my own psyche” (1961/1989, p. 176). Jung tackled this mission by paying close attention to his dreams and fantasies, writing them down, dialoguing with the characters that emerged within them, and in doing so he developed the process of active imagination.<sup>131</sup> He was aided in this journey by a particularly insightful (fantasized) man named Philemon who helped him understand “the [objective] reality of the psyche” and became to him “what the Indians call a guru” (p. 183).<sup>132</sup>

Another twenty-five years later, Jung had a more “traditional” mystical experience involving a vision of Christ on the Cross. It occurred in 1939, after he had given a seminar on St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, and during the time when he was working on *Psychology and Alchemy*. In his own words,

One night I awoke and saw, bathed in bright light at the foot of my bed, the figure of Christ on the Cross. It was not quite life-size, but extremely distinct; and I saw that his body was made of greenish gold. The vision was marvelously beautiful, and yet I was profoundly shaken by it. (1961/1989, p. 210)

He “felt comforted” afterward when he reached an interpretation of his vision as a “central alchemical symbol,” which helped inspire his book *Aion* (*CW* 9).<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Described above on p. 91.

<sup>132</sup> Years later, Jung reports, he was visited by an elderly friend of Gandhi’s who shared that his own guru was Shankaracharya. At first Jung was confused, as this Vedic commentator had died centuries earlier, but then he remembered the role that Philemon had fulfilled for him. His Indian guest said, “There are ghostly gurus too. . . . Most people have living gurus. But there are always some who have a spirit for a teacher” (Jung 1961/1989, p. 184).

<sup>133</sup> *Aion* is about “the age of Christianity and the collective psychic development that Christian symbolism represents. Jung examines Christian symbolism, especially Christ and the symbol of the fish so closely associated with Christ, as a way of gaining a clearer view of what he terms the Self, the God image within the soul, the archetype of wholeness and fulfillment” (Hopcke 1999, p. 176).

The most blissful of Jung's transcendent experiences, though—so significant that they merited an entire chapter, "Visions," in his memoir—occurred in 1944 after he broke his foot, had a heart attack, and nearly died. During this time Jung had a vision of being high up in outer space and seeing a floating stone temple "like a meteorite" that he was not permitted to enter after all, because there had been a protest back on earth against his going away (p. 289-292).<sup>134</sup> He was terribly disappointed to have to return home after the expansiveness of being in space, complaining,

"Now I must return to the 'box system' again." For it seemed to me as if behind the horizon of the cosmos a three-dimensional world had been artificially built up, in which each person sat by himself in a little box. And now I should have to convince myself all over again that this was important! Life and the whole world struck me as a prison, and it bothered me beyond measure that I should again be finding all that quite in order. I had been so glad to shed it all. (1961/1989, p. 292)

Jung shifted in and out of this mystical state over the next several weeks. "By day I was usually depressed," he writes, but by night,

it was as if I were in an ecstasy. I felt as though I were floating in space, as though I were safe in the womb of the universe—in a tremendous void, but filled with the highest possible feeling of happiness. "This is eternal bliss," I thought. "This cannot be described; it is far too wonderful!" (p. 293)

In this description we hear the attributes of ineffability, positive affect, inner subjective quality, and temporal/spatial quality that are among Ralph Hood (1975)'s markers for mystical experience.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, Jung says, "The visions and experiences were utterly real; there was nothing subjective about them; they all had a quality of absolute objectivity" (1961/1989, p. 295), and "I can describe the experience only as the ecstasy of a non-temporal state in which present, past, and future are one. Everything

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<sup>134</sup> My description is very condensed; Jung's own contains the level of intricately vivid detail that St. Teresa claims is the mark of a mystical experience (see Chapter 3, p. 65, 70).

<sup>135</sup> Please see above, Chapter 1, p. 14.



that happens in time had been brought together into a concrete whole” (p. 295-296)—a picture-perfect portrayal of Hood’s “unifying quality,” or Lukoff, Lu, and Turner (1998)’s “feelings of unity” and “euphoria” (p. 34-35), or Newberg’s “Absolute Unitary Being” (p. 147).

### His Possible Psycho“pathology”

However, Jung’s ineffable experiences were not always as ecstatic as these visions he received in the twilight of his life. Following his break with Freud, especially, there was not always a clear line between transcendence and psychosis. Perhaps this vulnerability to eruptions of unconscious material (which, after all, would be expected to go hand-in-hand with transliminality) hearkened back to the inner sense of division that had played a central role in his life since childhood.

As I mentioned earlier, Jung tells us in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, that from age twelve he experienced himself as being two separate personalities—the outer No. 1 who “was the schoolboy who could not grasp algebra and was far from sure of himself” (1961/1989, p. 33), and the secret, inner No. 2 who “was important, a high authority” (p. 34), his “true self,” marked by “peace and solitude” (p. 45) but also prone to depression (p. 63). Though Jung is careful to clarify that this self-perception of inner division “has nothing to do with a ‘split’ or dissociation in the ordinary medical sense” (p. 45), his memories of his childhood and early teen years indicate that he often felt isolated from his peers as well as adults, in part because his No. 2 personality resembled something of an “‘old man,’ who belonged to the centuries” (p. 68)—perhaps the type of depth or perspective we recognize in someone we call an “old soul.” Between ages sixteen and nineteen, Jung says, his “depressive states of mind

improved” as his “No. 1 personality emerged more and more distinctly” (p. 68) and he became more immersed in “[s]chool and city life” (p. 68).

One way to describe Jung’s interior state from 1913 to around 1917 could be to say that his No. 2 personality took over for a long while. Much has been written about Jung’s complex relationship with Freud,<sup>136</sup> which was vitally important to both men and caused them much distress when it ended. Jung had come to differ with Freud, who viewed him as his professional heir but also expected adherence to his psychoanalytic theory, on the then-crucial matter of the nature of the libido. Whereas Freud saw the libido or “life energy” as being sexual in nature, Jung came to interpret it in a more holistic, even religious, light (Kelcourse 2004, p. 30-31)—a view that he articulated at length, and publicly, in his 1912 book *Symbols of Transformation*, solidifying his change of direction from Freud.

Following their breakup, Jung entered into a midlife period of breakdown. In his own words,

After the parting of the ways with Freud, a period of inner uncertainty began for me. It would be no exaggeration to call it a state of disorientation. I felt totally suspended in mid-air, for I had not yet found my own footing. (1961/1989, p. 170)

He soon found himself flooded with fantasies, images, strong emotions, and visions (including the premonition of World War I mentioned above)—a season he describes in his memoir in a chapter entitled “Confrontation with the Unconscious.” Sarcophagi coming to life, apocalyptic visions of floods and ice and bloody seas, underground caves with scarab beetles and “a red, newborn sun” (p. 179), a murderous hunt for Siegfried,<sup>137</sup> a descent into an abyss with a girl named Salome and an old man named Elijah (who later

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<sup>136</sup> See, for example, Kerr 1993, Homans 1979, and Donn 1988.

<sup>137</sup> A Germanic mythological hero portrayed in Richard Wagner’s 15-hour *Ring Cycle* operas.

morphed into Philemon) and a black serpent, all entered upon the stage of Jung's psyche. Later looking back on this time, he tells us, "I lived as if under constant inner pressure. At times this became so strong that I suspected there was some psychic disturbance in myself"—though when he analyzed his childhood trying to find its possible roots, he came up empty, so he decided to "consciously submit[ him]self to the impulses of the unconscious" (p. 173) and follow his instincts. He designed his own sort of play therapy, building a village out of stones from the lakeshore, and drawing the images that he "saw" in what later became *The Red Book*.

Jung was well aware of the fine line he was walking between immersing himself in creative "flow" and giving over to psychotic "flooding." He observes,

It is of course ironical that I, a psychiatrist, should at almost every step of my experiment have run into the same psychic material which is the stuff of psychosis and is found in the insane. This is the fund of unconscious images which fatally confuse the mental patient. But it is also the matrix of a mythopoeic imagination which has vanished from our rational age. (1961/1989, p. 188)

As much as Jung strove to see this period as a sort of experiment with his own psyche, though, being subject to such a torrent of interior material was overwhelming and scary. "I stood helpless before an alien world," he says; "everything in it seemed difficult and incomprehensible. I was living in a constant state of tension; often I felt as if gigantic blocks of stone were tumbling down upon me" (p. 177). At one point he was even afraid he might harm himself. After he dreamed of murdering Siegfried<sup>138</sup> and could not understand the dream's meaning, he experienced such a strong sense of "inner urgency" to make sense of it that he heard a voice within himself saying, "'If you do not understand the dream, you must shoot yourself!' In the drawer of my night table lay a loaded revolver," he recounts, "and I became frightened" (p. 180). Fortunately, Jung was

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<sup>138</sup> Please see n137 above.

able to figure out the dream's meaning<sup>139</sup> and went back to sleep, but this incident illustrates the level of duress he was under during this season.

These years that were anything but fallow intrapsychically have often been called Jung's "fallow period" because he was unable to focus on scientific reading and likewise produced very little professional writing (1961/1989, p. 193, n12). He also felt obligated to forego teaching, as his "own intellectual situation was nothing but a mass of doubts":

The material brought to light from the unconscious had, almost literally, struck me dumb. . . .

I therefore felt that I was confronted with the choice of either continuing my academic career, whose road lay smooth before me, or following the laws of my inner personality, of a higher reason, and forging ahead with this curious task of mine, this experiment in confrontation with the unconscious. But until it was completed I could not appear before the public. (p. 193)

While Jung "began to emerge from the darkness" (p. 195) near the end of World War I, by his own account, it would take him forty-five years to integrate this complex and difficult period of his life (p. 199).

#### His Psychological and Spiritual Self-Understanding and Interpretations

Like St. Teresa, who struggled without a template to understand her experiences of mysticism and prayer and thus strove to articulate such a template for others, Jung found himself encountering psychic and religious realities that did not fit into the usual categories, and he sought to metabolize them with an eye toward what information they might hold for his patients, students, and potentially everyone. "My life," he says, "has been permeated and held together by one idea and one goal: namely, to penetrate into the secret of the personality. Everything can be explained from this central point, and all my works relate to this one theme" (1961/1989, p. 206).

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<sup>139</sup> Namely, that Siegfried represented "what the Germans want[ed] to achieve, heroically to impose their will, have their way"—an attitude that Jung realized "had to be killed" within himself (p. 180).

What is the secret of the personality? “[T]he crucial insight [is] that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life” (p. 183)—a phenomenon that we might call the reality of psychic “facts.” Jung came to this conclusion by listening carefully to his patients, by paying attention to unusual (occult) phenomena that he observed in people’s lives, by reading and collecting copious amounts of information about symbols and narratives that appear over time and across cultures—but especially by surrendering to his own immersion into the intrapsychic realm of image and fantasy, which was not exactly in his original life plan:

As a young man my goal had been to accomplish something in my science. But then, I hit upon this stream of lava, and the heat of its fires reshaped my life. That was the primal stuff which compelled me to work upon it, and my works are a more or less successful endeavor to incorporate this incandescent matter into the contemporary picture of the world (1961/1989, p. 199).

Through his outer and inner work, Jung came to believe that in our memories, dreams, and reflections lie certain universal patterns and symbols (archetypes) that give our lives meaning and direction. He developed a conviction that there is great wisdom to be found in the realm of the interior world, both of individual persons and of humankind as a whole (the collective unconscious)—in dreams, recurring images, symbolic figures, patterns that seem to be universal across cultures—and that tapping into this quality of inner wisdom, listening to its messages and basing our choices upon it, provides the best *modus operandi* for living.

Jung came to view religion as one such “manifestation of the collective unconscious” (Hopcke 1999, p. 68) and was much less interested in concepts and creeds than in rituals and numinous encounters; “[f]or Jung, the heart of religion is experience, not belief” (Homans & Segal 2005, p. 5033a). Like William James, founder of the field

of psychology of religion, “Jung wrote of the transformative personal effects of powerful contacts with unseen, spiritually charged dimensions of the psyche, . . . stressed the primacy of direct experience over the authority of scriptural revelation, and [was] fascinated with the implications of atypical states of consciousness” (Barnard 2001, p. 304). Near the end of his life, he declared, “[t]he decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life” (Jung 1961/1989, p. 325). Jung’s fascination with and respect for the world’s religions, coupled with his unorthodox interpretations of their key elements—for instance, God as an archetype (1961/1989, p. 347-348) who is not all goodness and light, but has a shadow side (p. 216)—gave him a legacy in some circles as a prophetic reinterpreter of Christianity who provided a way to still be religious in an age marked by the loss of traditional religion (Homans 1979/1995, p. 79).

Jungian analytical (or archetypal) psychology itself is also sometimes classified as “psychology *as religion*” (e.g., Barnard 2001, emphasis mine). Unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, with its more modest aims of making the unconscious conscious (Freud 1916-17/1966, p. 541) and turning hysterical misery into common unhappiness (Breuer & Freud 1891/1957, p. 305), Jungian analytical psychology holds out the possibility of pursuing and attaining integration and wholeness (Gay 1979, p. 539)—a function that is usually associated with religion and is even found in the word’s etymology.<sup>140</sup> Two important aspects of this process are meaning-making and growth. We have seen how Jung was able to move through periods of confusing fantasies and imagery by deriving meaning from them; he asserts in his chapter entitled “Late Thoughts” that whereas meaninglessness “is equivalent to illness[. . .] meaning makes a great many things

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<sup>140</sup> Probably from the Latin root *\*leig*, meaning “to bind” (Smith 1998, p. 269).

endurable—perhaps everything” (1961/1989, p. 340). Meaning in itself is not enough, however; the good life according to Jung also has a dynamic flow in a particular direction. The end or *telos* for this movement is the growth of consciousness, a process he calls “individuation” (p. 209). Individuation involves tuning into the archetypes revealed in one’s dreams, desires, fantasies, and everyday life, encountering and integrating the many different aspects of oneself (masculine and feminine, shadow and light, wise and naïve, and so forth), and living from these sources of connection to the collective psyche in an authentic, inner-directed way. Perhaps the most lasting and influential idea that Jung determined through personal experience, then passed along to his patients and students, is that dreams and even neurosis itself are not only regressive, but potentially progressive—times of psychic distress can ultimately lead us forward into healing and understanding, wholeness and growth.

### **Through the Lens of Transliminality Theory**

Having given a broad overview of C. G. Jung’s life events, creative contributions, transcendent experiences, psychological suffering, and self-interpretations, as in Chapter 3 with St. Teresa, I will now discuss in more detail how Jung’s experiences match up with “transliminality theory” as set forth in Chapter 2—both the components of transliminality itself and the contextual factors that likely affected its expression in Jung’s times of distress as well as his considerable flourishing. Then I will end with a few thoughts about the parallels between these two very different, very gifted individuals’ interior journeys.

## Jung and Transliminality

From an assay of Jung's writings, we can find evidence of at least six, and possibly all, of the nine component variables of transliminality.

*Paranormal belief.* While Jung did not venture an explanation of what exactly causes paranormal occurrences to happen, he certainly claims to have experienced many of them and takes it as a given that they exist. He had a lifelong interest in paranormal entities "such as ghosts, apparitions, uncanny visions, mediumistic or spiritualistic demonstrations such as trances, table-rapping, levitation, automatic writing, and what would nowadays be called the channeling of disembodied spirits or deceased persons" (Hopcke 1999, p. 147). In fact, his doctoral dissertation was entitled "On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena" (*CW* 1) and examined his cousin Helena's experiences as a medium.

Jung's memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* contains passages in which he demonstrates all three of Thalbourne and colleagues' specific categories of paranormal belief (1997, p. 305)—ESP, psychokinesis, and life after death. As an example of extrasensory perception (of which he was unaware until afterward), Jung once

recounted the life story of a man without knowing him. . . . I was sitting opposite a middle-aged gentleman with a long, handsome beard, who had been introduced to me as a barrister. We were having an animated conversation about criminal psychology. In order to answer a particular question of his, I made up a story to illustrate it, embellishing it with all sorts of details. While I was telling my story, I noticed that a quite different expression came over the man's face, and a silence fell on the table. . . .

To my amazement and horror it turned out that I had told the story of the man opposite me, exactly and in all its details. (1961/1989, p. 51)



He also claims to have foreknown his physician, Dr. H.'s, death ahead of time due to seeing him in a primal, kinglike form in a vision (p. 293).<sup>141</sup>

During his university years, while at home on summer holidays, Jung experienced two incidents of possible psychokinesis—objects moving physically by nonphysical means. In the first, the top of the Jung family's 70-year-old, solid walnut dining room table suddenly “split from the rim to beyond the center, and not along any joint; the split ran right through the solid wood” (1961/1989, p. 105)—an occurrence that would have made sense if the wood had undergone a sudden change in temperature and humidity, but was extremely unlikely in the middle of this typically warm, humid summer day. Jung's mother felt that it “mean[t] something” (p. 105). Two weeks later, Jung arrived home one evening to find his mother, teenage sister, and their maid “in a great state of agitation”: as with the earlier table incident, there had been a sudden loud sound, and this time they found the steel blade of their bread knife broken into pieces, with the handle in one corner of the bread basket and a piece of blade in each of the other corners. A well-known cutler examined the knife pieces the next day and declared that the blade was “perfectly sound” and must have been broken intentionally (p. 106)—but Jung's mother and sister had been in the room when the sharp sound happened and knew that no one was near the knife, leaving them at a loss to find any logical explanation for the breakage.

Finally, while he is careful to say that he is only speculating and we have no way to know for sure, Jung spends the penultimate chapter of his memoir giving voice to his musings “On Life after Death,” so it is safe to say that this aspect of the “paranormal”

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<sup>141</sup> See above, p. 73-74 for a similar experience of St. Teresa.

held if not his definite belief,<sup>142</sup> his enrapt attention. He suggests that the world's myths and religions, our synchronistic<sup>143</sup> experiences and dreams, and occasions of sensing of the presence of someone who has died, all give us hints about what the afterlife might be like and suggest that there is a dimension to our existence beyond the physical. He also tells of a time during his intrapsychically-focused years when his house was "crammed full of spirits," a "ghostly assemblage" that led him to write the *Septem Sermones* (1961/1989, p. 190-191).<sup>144</sup> Being a psychologist, Jung notes, "No doubt it was connected with the state of emotion I was in at the time, and which was favorable to parapsychological phenomena. It was an unconscious constellation whose peculiar atmosphere I recognized as the numen of an archetype" (p. 191). If "paranormal belief" as a criterion for transliminality means the belief that paranormal phenomena occur rather than belief in their truth-value, Jung certainly fits the bill.

*Magical ideation.* With his interest in paranormal or occult phenomena, we might expect that Jung was prone to magical ideation—the belief in a causal connection between two events that cannot reasonably be causally connected. For instance, thinking of an old friend and suddenly receiving an unexpected phone call from that person, we might be tempted to believe that our thoughts of her somehow caused her to call. Jung's important concept of synchronicity, at first glance, seems to be similar to magical ideation, but actually has one key difference: it specifically refers to an *acausal* connection between two seemingly related occurrences, one in the psychic and the other

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<sup>142</sup> Jung notes, "Parapsychology holds it to be a scientifically valid proof of an afterlife that the dead manifest themselves—either as ghosts, or through a medium—and communicate things which they alone could possibly know. But even though there do exist such well-documented cases, the question remains whether the ghost or the voice is identical with the dead person or is a psychic projection, and whether the things said really derive from the deceased or from knowledge which may be present in the unconscious" (1961/1989, p. 301).

<sup>143</sup> Please see the following paragraph for an explanation of Jung's concept of synchronicity.

<sup>144</sup> "Seven Sermons to the Dead," written in 1916 in the style of *The Red Book* (Jung 1961/1989, p. 378).

in the physical realm. Jungian analyst Robert Hopcke explains that in the aforementioned example of a friend's coincidental phone call, synchronicity as Jung defined it would deem the incident significant because of its psychological meaning to us, not because of a mistaken notion that we caused our friend to call (1999, p. 72-73). From the perspective of Transliminality Theory, it appears that Jung was too sophisticated of a thinker to adhere to magical ideation (at least, consciously and in his public writings). However, he was very interested in the types of content often interpreted that way, and it could be argued that with the idea of synchronicity he was inventing a more thoughtful, nuanced version of this aspect of transliminality.

*Manic experience.* As I explained in Chapter 3, “manic experience” as a component variable of transliminality does not actually refer to clinical mania, but something more loosely categorized as “mania-like phenomena” and never fully defined (Thalbourne, Delin, & Bassett 1994, p. 205). We do not have evidence that Jung exhibited such symptoms of mania as minimal sleep, hyperactivity, or irritability, and other factors such as a high energy level and creativity seem to have been his normal state already. His “fallow period” of vivid fantasies and active imagination described above could be interpreted (and, in fact, was at times by Jung himself) as evidencing an interlude of psychosis, but seems to have involved more anxiety and confusion than the affective “high” typically associated with mania.<sup>145</sup> Perhaps the closest approximations to “mania-like phenomena” are the visions he experienced in 1944 following his heart attack, with their accompanying ecstasy and euphoria. To what extent Jung meets the manic experience criterion of transliminality is difficult to establish.

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<sup>145</sup> For a creative reinterpretation of bipolar disorder through the lens of Jungian archetypes, see Thompson 2012.

*Creative personality.* If we use Gregory Feist’s characterizations of the “creative personality” as being more open to new ideas, more introverted, more driven, and less socially conventional than most (1999, p. 290) to evaluate whether Jung embodied this aspect of transliminality, the answer is an almost definite yes. He was certainly open to new ideas, be they intellectual concepts like synchronicity or the collective psyche, or the ideational content of his own internal fantasies. By Jung’s own admission in a 1955 interview, “Everybody would call me an introvert” (qtd. in Mehrtens 2011/2013),<sup>146</sup> which meshes with his lifelong propensity for solitude. It seems he was probably indeed more “driven” than most, especially to understand his and his patients’ experiences and to derive meaning from them, and he pursued this quest even when it took him well outside the norms of convention—inhabiting rather than suppressing his fantasies, building miniature villages on the lakeshore (Jung 1961/1989, p. 174), erecting a stone dwelling tower on his property. Though Csikszentmihalyi’s additional “creative personality” quality of being motivated more by aesthetic values than by financial stability (1994, p. 137) is more difficult to evaluate, given that Jung married into wealth and did not have to make this choice, he so clearly matches the other attributes that it seems certain Jung possessed what we commonly think of as a creative personality.

*Mystical experience.* We have already discussed Jung’s transcendent experiences and their commonalities with descriptions of mysticism above (pages 92-97).

*Absorption.* Jung’s life and work demonstrate a tremendous degree of absorption—a complete immersion in one’s experience, “a total attention that fully engages a person” (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 323). He had frequent vivid dreams, engaged in (often personalized) rituals, and (reports that he) spent much of his time

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<sup>146</sup> Citing Black 1977.

reflecting upon the inner meaning of intrapsychic as well as external events. His propensity toward total absorption comes through most clearly in his description of his externally “fallow,” but internally satiated, years when he immersed himself in his “confrontation with the unconscious” (Jung 1961/1989, p. 170-199).

*Fantasy-proneness.* It is clear from Jung’s self-descriptions and writings that he embodied this aspect of transliminality—experiencing his fantasies as very real, and both “consciously elic[it]” and automatically experienc[ing]” various forms of imagery (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 314). In his account of the period after he parted ways with Freud and began a “steep descent” (Jung 1961/1989, p. 181) within his psyche, he explains, “An incessant stream of fantasies had been released, and I did my best not to lose my head but to find some way to understand these strange things” (p. 176-177)—a process that led to his development of the technique of active imagination. Later he notes, “I frequently see extremely vivid hypnagogic images” (p. 210). In fact, some of the tenets of analytical psychology, such as the concept of the *anima*,<sup>147</sup> were a result of interactions with characters Jung first encountered in the realm of fantasy.

*Hyperaesthesia.* Judging from his *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, it seems plausible that Jung at times experienced hyperaesthesia (hypersensitivity to sensory perception) or synesthesia (a combining of senses that are usually processed separately). His account of his efforts to transcribe the archetypal language he “heard” while in a state of fantasy is as follows:

[S]ince I did not know what was going on, I had no choice but to write everything down in the style selected by the unconscious itself. Sometimes it was as if I were hearing it with my ears, something feeling it with my mouth, as if my tongue were formulating words; now and then I heard myself whispering aloud. *Below*

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<sup>147</sup> The (hypothesized) unconscious feminine side within a man. Its counterpart, the *animus*, refers to the unconscious masculine side within a woman.

*the threshold of consciousness* everything was seething with life. (1961/1989, p. 178, italics added<sup>148</sup>)

In a later episode, during the period of ecstatic visions following his broken foot and heart surgery, Jung describes a strong perception of holiness<sup>149</sup> in olfactory terms:

For me the presence of sanctity had a magical atmosphere . . . I understood then why one speaks of the odor of sanctity, of the “sweet smell” of the Holy Ghost. This was it. There was a *pneuma* of inexpressible sanctity in the room, whose manifestation was the *mysterium coniunctionis*. (p. 295)

While he may have been using this synesthetic language metaphorically, it is also possible that he was recounting his literal sensory perceptions.

*Positive attitude toward dream interpretation.* That Jung possessed this component variable of transliminality is as certain as his fantasy-proneness. A “positive attitude toward dream interpretation,” in Thalbourne and colleagues’ usage of the phrase, involves both an ability to remember one’s dreams and an interest in interpreting them (Thalbourne and Delin 1999, p. 59). Jung exemplified both. His autobiography, as suggested by its title, is filled with accounts of the vivid dreams he had throughout his life—the index lists forty-two (p. 416)—and his emphasis on dream interpretation was so influential that it remains a key part of Jungian organizations’ activities today. Like Freud, who famously viewed dreams as “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious” (1909, p. 33), Jung held that because “[t]he psyche is distinctly more complicated and inaccessible than the body” (1961/1989, p. 132), one way of gaining access to it is through paying attention to the unconscious material that surfaces to our conscious awareness through dreams. As we would expect from his concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious, Jung went one step further and posited that

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<sup>148</sup> An interesting connection between these synesthetic descriptions and the concept of transliminality itself!

<sup>149</sup> He felt “such sanctity in the room” that he feared it would harm the nurse (p. 295)!

dreams reflect memories and hold guidance, not only of and for individuals, but pertaining to humankind as a whole. He placed such weight on dreams that he believed in their usefulness to unravel neurosis and help guide his patients in difficult decisions:

A psychology of consciousness can, to be sure, content itself with material drawn from personal life, but as soon as we wish to explain a neurosis we require an anamnesis [remembering] which reaches deeper than the knowledge of consciousness. And when in the course of treatment unusual decisions are called for, dreams occur that need more than personal memories for their interpretation. (Jung 1961/1989, p. 206)

Jung's autobiographical descriptions, then, demonstrate strong evidence of most of the nine core correlates of transliminality—paranormal belief and experience, creative personality, mystical experience, absorption, fantasy-proneness, and dream interpretation—with less evidence for manic experience, and magical ideation and hyperaesthesia somewhat open to interpretation.

*Highly sensitive personality (HSP) and high sensation-seeking (HSS).* If we consider the alternate (hypothesized) understanding of transliminality as a combination of highly sensitive personality<sup>150</sup> and high sensation-seeking, we find that these qualities too seem to describe Jung. High sensory-processing sensitivity, as discussed earlier,<sup>151</sup> is thought to involve behavioral inhibition, emotional reactivity, depth of processing, and sensitivity to subtle stimuli (Aron et al. 2012, p. 7-11). Behavioral inhibition is sometimes conceptualized as a “pause-to-check” tendency (Aron 2006b), as opposed to jumping right in to engage with an unfamiliar situation. From his determination in his youth to discern God's nature from personal experience rather than accepting his father's or the church's word on the matter, to his carefully subjecting occult phenomena such as

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<sup>150</sup> As Elaine Aron notes, Jung originally used the term *sensitive* for what he later deemed *introversion*, the latter of which in Jung's usage is less about sociability than a style of information processing (2006a, p. 15-16, esp. n1).

<sup>151</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 42ff.

suddenly-shattered tables and knife blades and family séances (Jung 1961/1989, p. 106-107) to as much empirical investigation as possible, to his placing his career advancement on hold for a few years until he felt he had a better understanding of the psychological material emerging from his unconscious (p. 193), we see Jung demonstrating behavioral inhibition. His “well-documented shabby treatment of” and “dubious relations with women” (Diamond 1999, p. 15) and the extent of his devastation after his break with Freud suggest a relatively high level of emotional reactivity. Jung’s depth of processing is clear in the time and effort he invests in reflecting upon the many possible layers and meanings of his (and others’) dreams and “inner experiences,” which are for him “the only events in my life worth telling” (1961/1989, p. 4), and his sensitivity to subtle stimuli comes through in the intricately detailed accounts he gives of his many dreams, visions, and actively-imagined fantasies. His level of sensation-seeking is more difficult to assess, but it seems likely that this too was fairly high, judging from his enjoyment of extensive travel and cultural exploration, his choice to work as a psychiatrist at the Burghölzli with quite challenging clients (many of whom were at a more disturbed, psychotic level than the mostly neurotic patients Freud worked with), and his continual thirst for intellectual stimulation.

### Jung’s Flourishing and “Perishing”

As we would expect for someone with a high degree of transliminality, C. G. Jung’s life reflects a wide range of emotional functioning. Overall, he seems to exemplify flourishing: he had a career as a prominent psychiatrist, founded a new branch of his professional field, authored numerous publications, traveled the world, and was highly sought after as an analyst, teacher, and lecturer. Yet, as we have discussed



throughout the chapter, he also experienced a significant season of anxiety and confusion from around 1913-1919 during his “confrontation with the unconscious”—an encounter that involved episodes of psychosis, or something close to it. And while he describes moments of beauty and pleasure during his childhood, its general tone seems to have been lonely and often unhappy, with feelings of isolation and alienation from his family, peers, and church.

However, in the years following both of these difficult periods, during his late teens and in his early forties, Jung was able to make a strong “comeback.” All the introspection of his childhood led him to pursue an integrative medical career in psychiatry, and he eventually won his midlife wrestling match with his own psyche, after which he resumed his teaching and writing, traveled to America and Africa and India, founded the Jung Institute in 1948 (at age 73) to train others in analytical psychology, and appears to have found his way to a place of internal integration and readiness for his own (life after?) death. Below I will briefly speculate upon the elements of Jung’s biological constitution, relationships, and culture that may have contributed to—and sometimes challenged—his resilience.

### Contextual Factors

As we saw in Chapter 2,<sup>152</sup> cognitive capacities such as a high IQ, working memory, and cognitive flexibility seem to increase the likelihood that a highly transliminal person will tilt more toward creative achievement than toward psychological suffering and addiction. Jung was gifted with all three of these capacities. His theories and writings attest to his astute intelligence, and he had an incredible working memory

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<sup>152</sup> See above, p. 39ff.

complete with an encyclopedic knowledge of world literature and mythology. For instance, his pivotal book *Symbols of Transformation* illuminates the psyche of an almost-schizophrenic patient and her potential journey into healing and wholeness with references ranging from Goethe's *Faust* (Jung 1912/1956, p. 82-83) to *Cyrano de Bergerac* (p. 111) to the Gilgamesh Epic (p. 200), to name just a few. His movements back and forth between the personal and the collective unconscious, the synchronicities between internal and external events, and the continual integration of opposing qualities illustrate a mind steeped in cognitive flexibility.

Elaine Aron and colleagues' (2012) research<sup>153</sup> has shown that highly sensitive persons who experience stressful childhoods are much more likely to experience adult depression than are less-sensitive people with similar levels of childhood stress. Jung's life history seems to fit this pattern. Psychoanalyst and scholar Volney P. Gay's reading of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* leads him to observe that Jung's formative early childhood years were marked by "his mother's inability to care for him and sustain him during moments of anxiety" (Gay 1989, p. 116); when young Karl needed comfort, he turned not to his parents or caregivers, but to his own solitude and imagination, to a secret place in the attic (p. 120) and a secret manikin he had carved (p. 124). Jung also describes his difficulty getting along with his peers and teachers, who "thought [him] stupid and crafty" (1961/1989, p. 44). Neither could he derive a sense of belonging from his familiarly and culturally inherited Christianity: his intense dreams and personal experiences of the divine left him unable to stomach his pastor father's tepid faith and outmoded theology (p. 54-55), and after the disappointment of his first Communion he started "cutting church as often as possible" (p. 75). It is probable that these early

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<sup>153</sup> See Chapter 2 above, especially p. 48.

experiences and the internal subjectivity they created of being an outsider were never fully covered over by the social and professional, even international, prominence that Jung later achieved, leaving him more vulnerable to depression and the possibly psychotic decompensation that marked his years of midlife crisis after the break with Freud.

Yet, as we have seen, Jung was able to discover a way to work through this challenging period and assimilate it into his future work, founding a new school of psychology in the process. Jung himself attributes his sanity during that time to the vital grounding of his family and his career: “It was most essential for me to have a normal life in the real world as a counterpoise to that strange inner world” (1961/1989, p. 189).

He continues,

My family and my profession remained the base to which I could always return, assuring me that I was an actually existing, ordinary person. The unconscious contents could have driven me out of my wits. But my family, and the knowledge: I have a medical diploma from a Swiss university, I must help my patients, I have a wife and five children, I live at 228 Seestrasse in Küsnacht—these were actualities which made demands upon me and proved to me again and again that I really existed, that I was not a blank page whirling about in the winds of the spirit . . . No matter how deeply absorbed or how blown about I was, I always knew that everything I was experiencing was ultimately directed at this real life of mine. I meant to meet its obligations and fulfill its meanings. (p. 189)

This testimony corroborates Brett and colleagues’ (2014) finding that social support has an important impact on whether “psychotic-like anomalous experiences” result in later mental illness or turn out to be only transitory occurrences. It seems likely that Jung benefitted from a synergistic combination of innate intelligence, meaningful work, plentiful resources, sufficient solitude, and supportive connections with family and colleagues that helped make possible his ultimate flourishing. He also lived amidst a “vortex of counter-cultural movements active in turn-of-the-century Germanic Central

Europe” (Barnard 2001, p. 305) such as Theosophy, Spiritualism, and the life philosophy movement that helped provide fertile soil for his groundbreaking ideas.

### Parting Thoughts

In this chapter I have given an overview of Jung’s life, his creative contributions, his experiences of transcendence, his season of psychological suffering, and the interpretations he formed from his own and his patients’ interior journeys. I have also discussed the evidence that, as expected, Jung was probably highly transliminal, with more a permeable threshold into (and out of?) his conscious awareness than most. While his challenging and lonely childhood may have left him with a psychic vulnerability that contributed to his midlife period of breakdown, several protective factors such as his intelligence, family, resources, and vocation helped enable him to process his experiences in a way that eventually led to some of his greatest breakthroughs.

In closing, I want to highlight a few brief “takeaways” from this examination of Jung’s life journey. First, many of Jung’s experiences of transcendence, especially during the first half of his life, were often scary and disturbing rather than involving the bliss and light usually associated with mystical experience. Second and relatedly, Jung underscores the importance, when experiencing frightening or confusing states, of seeking meaning within them. Describing the intensity of his “confrontation of the unconscious,” he says,

I stood helpless before an alien world; everything in it seemed difficult and incomprehensible. I was living in a constant state of tension; often I felt as if gigantic blocks of stone were tumbling down upon me. . . . But there was a demonic strength in me, and from the beginning there was no doubt in my mind that I must find the meaning of what I was experiencing in these fantasies. When I endured these assaults of the unconscious I had an unswerving conviction that I

was obeying a higher will, and that feeling continued to uphold me until I had mastered the task. (1961/1989, p. 177)

As with St. Teresa of Ávila, Jung found a way to be generative by using his personal experiences to form a “map” for others: where she developed the metaphor of the “interior castle” to describe a person’s spiritual journey through prayer, he came up with the language of individuation to describe a psychological growth process leading to wholeness. Jung also used his time of psychic openness to experiment with and hone practices that could help with the “working through” process—exploring images, creating mandalas, sand play, building, and active imagination.

Finally, and again like St. Teresa, Jung had a midlife turning point that shifted and intensified the content of his life’s work, deepened an already-chosen vocation into a soul-level journey, and resulted in the gestation of new ideas and the writing of pivotal texts. That frightening yet fecund period took the rest of his life to metabolize; in 1961 he declared,

All my works, all my creative activity, has come from those initial fantasies and dreams which began in 1912, almost fifty years ago. Everything that I accomplished in later life was already contained in them, although at first only in the form of emotions and images. (1961/1989, p. 192)

Jung’s own intrapsychic excursions cemented his respect for the generative contributions that can come from the episodes of extremity or so-called mental illness that creative people are apt to have: rather than pathologies to be fixed, they may be sources of archetypal wisdom, artistic inspiration, and even theological insight. His journey through swirling disintegration onward into wholeness, so intricately revealed in his writings and teachings and art, gives witness that from out of our depths may come our depth.

## CHAPTER 5

### ALANIS MORISSETTE, SPIRITUAL SONGSTRESS

“A musician is a person who lives to make music; an Artist is a person who lives to experience things like pain, sexual pleasure, depression, confusion, and fresh basil. A person who is most fundamentally an Artist may also be a musician, but a person who is most fundamentally a musician cannot also be an Artist. Artists generally have little interest in gear, technique, popularity, money, security, health insurance (except for some older Artists), marriage, and the government. Musicians (and this goes for others in the ‘Arts’ as well, such as writers, painters, poets, dancers, sculptors, actors, filmmakers, so on) are interested in their gear, their technique (or lack thereof), receiving acclaim, getting paid, winning awards, and most of the rest. I am an Artist, an Artist who makes music, drawings, films, poems, stories, pork loins, and many other things.” —Chuck Dodson<sup>154</sup>

#### Alanis Morissette

Our third case study, multi-platinum singer-songwriter Alanis Morissette (1974-), may at first glance seem to be a surprising candidate for epitomizing transliminality. Yet if transliminality is indeed a human personality trait, we can expect that it will occur in people of different eras, cultures, and vocations. Given our hypothesized strong linkage between transliminality and creativity, it seems fitting that we examine someone who has excelled in a creative field—just as our first two case studies’ professions aligned closely with transliminality’s other aspects of mysticism (St. Teresa) and a particular psychological profile (Jung)—and that we choose someone living in our own era.

Undoubtedly any number of contemporary artists, musicians, and writers could meet these criteria; why Alanis Morissette? I at first selected Alanis because the contours and contrasts of her life and work, often shared quite publicly, illustrate such a rich and evolving psychospiritual journey. Having heard enough excerpts from her wildly popular

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<sup>154</sup> “The Difference Between Musicians And Artists,” by Chuck Dodson, of Hot Springs, AR. Downloaded from his former website ([www.chuckdodson.com](http://www.chuckdodson.com)) circa 2005.

1995 *Jagged Little Pill* album during my then-conservative teen years to associate her with raw honesty and scathing anger, I was startled and intrigued several years later to discover her singing a song called “Mercy” in Hungarian on a worldwide musical compilation called *The Prayer Cycle* (Elias & various artists 1999). Then in 2007 I noticed Alanis had written a guest column in *Spirituality and Health* magazine describing her relationship with feminism and embracing the divine feminine, all the while her music was expanding and deepening to reveal a profound quest for personal, relational, and spiritual integration. What, I wondered, was bringing about this transformation from anger and anguish to devotion and peace?

Later, as I began researching transliminality, it occurred to me that Morissette probably embodies a high amount of this trait, from what I had read about her struggles with depression and disordered eating as well as her transcendence-filled time in India. Not long after I formed my hypothesis that transliminality is in effect a combination of high sensitivity and high sensation-seeking,<sup>155</sup> I discovered that a documentary was being produced about Elaine Aron’s research with Highly Sensitive Persons—*Sensitive: The Movie* (Harper 2015b)—featuring none other than Alanis Morissette. That Alanis self-identifies as an HSP lends further support for my contention that she is very transliminal and that these two traits are closely connected. Below I will follow the same format as in the two preceding chapters, discussing her life, creativity, psycho“pathology,” experiences of transcendence, and self-understandings; the evidence that she is highly transliminal; and the myriad factors that may have shaped her suffering and fostered her flourishing.

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<sup>155</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 46ff.

## Her Life So Far

Alanis Nadine Morissette (named after her father, Alan) was born June 1, 1974, in Ottawa, Canada, to a French-Canadian father and a Hungarian-born mother, both of them teachers. She has an older brother, Chad, who is an entrepreneur, and a twin brother, Wade Imre, who is a professional kirtan<sup>156</sup> singer and yoga teacher. They were raised Catholic, and the family moved frequently, living from 1977-1980 in Germany where Alan and Georgia taught at a military school. At age six, she wrote in her journal that when she grew up she “wanted to be involved in medicine, music, dance, comedy, acting, writing, student-ing, and teaching” (Morissette 2015b). That year, she began playing the piano and soon thereafter was writing her own songs (Rogers 1996, p. 7). Acting came next, when she landed a starring (though short-lived) role on Nickelodeon’s “You Can’t Do That on Television” at age ten. She saved her paychecks and used the money to record her first single, “Fate Stay with Me” (Coles 1998, p. 10), just after turning twelve.

This first commercial attempt did not pan out. Alanis received disheartening rejection responses from several record labels, since, as her biographer Paul Cantin notes, “Although the songs were aimed at the adult market, their singer was clearly still a child. She couldn’t be marketed as a child and she couldn’t be marketed as an adult” (1997, p. 24). However, in the meantime she had formed local connections with several adults involved in the entertainment industry. Dominic D’arcy, known in Ottawa as the Singing Policeman, got her gigs at local community groups and taught her how to take a compliment (Cantin 1997, p. 17). Ottawa entertainment organizer/producer Stephan Klován “took her under his wing” and began booking her to sing the Canadian national anthem at major sporting events, which gave her experience and confidence in “singing

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<sup>156</sup> A type of devotional, call-and-response singing based on ancient yogic chants.



in front of thousands of people” (Rogers 1996, p. 7). Leslie Howe, a professional musician with a recording studio, spent long hours collaborating with young Alanis (Cantin 1997, p. 36) and balanced out Klován’s focus on her performance exposure with his emphasis that she needed to be writing and recording (p. 45).

Both Klován and Howe made it possible for Alanis to fly to Paris and film a stand-out music video in front of the Eiffel Tower for her song “Walk Away” (Rogers 1996, p. 12). Their plan worked: the video got Alanis signed by MCA to record her first commercial album, *Alanis*, at the ripe age of fourteen (an endeavor that required she drop out of singing with her cover band, the New York Fries). The ten-track dance/pop album unexpectedly “went gold<sup>157</sup> within three months of its May 1991 release” (Cantin 1997, p. 76), resulting in a 1992 Juno award (Canada’s Grammy equivalent) for Most Promising Female Vocalist of the Year. Alanis worked hard to help with its promotion, balancing high school with numerous public appearances such as “showing up for the morning shift to work a McDonalds drive-thru window for a charity fundraiser” (Cantin 1997, p. 76). Her second album, however, *Now Is the Time*, “a Janet Jackson *Rhythm Nation* type self-empowerment album,” sold only 50,000 copies (Rogers 1996, p. 15). Scott Welch, Alanis’s new manager, advised her not to release her first two albums in the U.S., but to “get out of the house” and take in “new surroundings and new life experiences” (Rogers 1996, p. 20) as fodder for future songwriting. Alanis took his advice and moved to Toronto, but her two years there were disappointing, filled with numerous co-writing sessions that did not pan out.

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<sup>157</sup> That is, sold over 500,000 units. *Alanis* eventually went double platinum, with sales of over two million.

So, when she was twenty, Alanis moved to L.A. (and was promptly robbed at gunpoint). There, her publishing company MCA arranged for her to meet songwriter and producer Glen Ballard, who “had worked with the likes of Quincy Jones; Barbra Streisand; Earth, Wind and Fire; and Aretha Franklin; he also cowrote the Michael Jackson hit ‘Man in the Mirror’” (Rogers 1996, p. 20). Despite their very different stylistic backgrounds, the two formed an instant connection that began what Ballard called “a genuine and artistic awakening,” as they wrote and recorded song after song in a state that was “very accelerated and stream of consciousness” (Rogers 1996, p. 23). The result was one of the most successful albums in music history: *Jagged Little Pill*. Its first single, the sexually explicit and anguished post-breakup anthem “You Oughta Know,” took off by word of mouth after the L.A. alternative radio station KROQ started playing it, before the usual record label marketing had even gotten going (Cantin 1997, p. 145). Morissette’s rise to celebrity status happened so quickly that while on her 18-month promotional tour during 1995-96, “[t]he star of the show was still so unrecognizable that ticketless fans were approaching her outside her own gigs to ask not for autographs but for any spare tickets she might have for sale” (Rogers 1996, p. 36). *Jagged Little Pill* (*JLP*) would go on to sell over 33 million records, landing Alanis four 1995 Grammys, an article in *Rolling Stone*, worldwide fame (as well as some infamy<sup>158</sup>)—as well as struggles with anxiety attacks, disordered eating, and exhaustion.

After the *JLP* tour ended, Morissette spent six weeks in India, which would prove to be a transformative experience. “By the spring of 1997, Alanis was on an extended vacation from the music business” (Tomashoff 1998, p. 168). She bought a house in L.A.

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<sup>158</sup> Rogers’ 1996 biography notes, “The Internet has a site solely committed to disliking the singer/songwriter called People Against Alanis Morissette’s Music (P.A.A.M.M. to insiders)” (p. 44).

and a new home for her parents in Ottawa, saved most of her money (p. 169), and competed in several triathlons. Her second international album, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, was released in 1998, with the eight precepts of Buddhism on its cover (Bateman et al. 2008/2015); though often criticized as overly wordy (Fournier 2015, p. 69), it sold seven million copies. She performed at Woodstock '99 and toured with Tori Amos that summer. A “dispute with her record label . . . ultimately resulted in a renewed contract,” the result of which was the February 2002 release of *Under Rug Swept*, “the first [record] for which she was also the sole songwriter” (Bateman et al. 2008/2015).

The year 2004 was especially busy for Alanis. She hosted the Canadian Juno Awards in Edmonton, where she gave her first performance of “Everything,” the lead single from her latest album, *So-Called Chaos*; hosted a televised rally in Ottawa for the Dalai Lama of Tibet; and toured that summer with the Barenaked Ladies. In 2005 she released *Jagged Little Pill Acoustic* and *Alanis Morissette: The Collection* and became a U.S. citizen (while also retaining her Canadian citizenship), and in 2006 she narrated the climate change documentary *The Great Warming* with actor Keanu Reeves. During these years she had been dating actor Ryan Reynolds, but in 2007 she called off their engagement. This time of “personal unraveling of significant relationships in [her] life” (Herndon 2008) resulted in the material for her next album, *Flavors of Entanglement*, released in 2008.

In 2009, Morissette, who had long been interested in fitness and nutrition, ran her first marathon to raise money for the U.S. National Eating Disorders Association. The following year she married Mario “Souleye” Treadway, a rapper, and their son Ever Imre

Morissette-Treadway was born on Christmas Day 2010. She released another album, *Havoc and Bright Lights*, in 2012, to mixed reviews. Recently, she was featured in the Oprah Winfrey Network's *Super Soul Sunday* (2014) and *In Deep Shift* (2015) series with in-depth interviews about her spiritual journey. She also writes frequently on her website blog and in October 2015 began a podcast series. For more information about her life outside of the public eye, we shall have to wait on her upcoming memoir, due to be released soon in late 2016.

### Her Creativity

If creativity is understood to be a combination of originality (or novelty) and value (or usefulness),<sup>159</sup> Alanis Morissette's music certainly embodies both qualities. Her 16 Juno Awards and 7 Grammys attest to the respect her work has garnered from professionals within the music industry. Yet her international emergence with *Jagged Little Pill* became such a cultural phenomenon not only due to her talent, but to her ability to give voice in her message and mode of expression to a complex array of emotions, roles, and experiences shared by multigenerational women (and some men) near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: sexual expression and exploitation, spiritual evolution, struggles with appearance and societal expectations, and a gamut of feelings ranging from grief and rage, to passionate longing, to forgiveness and contentment.

Biographer Kalen Rogers describes Morissette's "multiplatinum album *Jagged Little Pill* [as] a therapist's dream, an ex-lover's nightmare, and a best friend for anyone who's ever felt confused and confounded" (Rogers 1996, p. 4). *Rolling Stone* called it

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<sup>159</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 10 for further discussion.

a 1990s version of Carole King's *Tapestry*: a woman using her plain soft-rock voice to sift through the emotional wreckage of her youth, with enough heart and song craft to make countless listeners feel the earth move . . . The jagged little Canadian with the jagged little voice manages to make sensuality and rage act like kissing cousins. (Bateman et al. 2008/2015)

These accolades are all the more impressive when we realize that *JLP* “is actually the sound of two writers [i.e., Morissette and Glen Ballard] in the full flight of collaboration. A rough version of the music and a one- or two-take vocal were recorded within minutes of completing the songs,” with “instrumental details . . . filled in later by session players” (Cantin 1997, p. 126-7). Instead of going back and polishing the vocals, Alanis opted to keep their original rawness, which captured the experiences and emotions she had found words for only moments earlier. And despite the reputation she gained with *JLP* for embodying the “angry female,” even her most scathing song, “You Oughta Know,” is marked by a multiplicity of feeling; in addition to anger, Alanis’s singing conveys grief and wailing, with all three types of vocalizations that anthropologist Greg Urban classifies as “icons of crying” (Fournier 2015, p. 50). While her songwriting varies in structure and content from album to album, she has developed a trademark style whose creative expression involves a “freeform, ‘conversational’” approach to lyrics (Fournier 2015, p. 67) “deriv[ing] primarily from stream-of-consciousness internal conversations and from personal journals” (Bateman et al. 2008/2015); a tendency to emphasize particular words by stressing usually-unaccented syllables; and vocals that sweep from “sweet, breathless nothings [to] head-long howls of abandon” (Rogers 1996, p. 4). Her innovations and artistry are considered so influential that in 2014, just after turning forty, she was named as the recipient of the Gershwin Award for Lifetime Musical

Achievement, which honors “a significant contribution to American popular music” (Fournier 2015, p. 145).

Nor is Morissette’s versatility confined to the musical realm. She has also pursued an acting career with appearances in film, television, and stage productions, playing roles ranging from God (in Kevin Smith’s 1999 movie *Dogma*) to a wrongly accused Death Row survivor (in the 2003 off-Broadway production *The Exonerated*) (Fournier 2015, p. 92-94). The MTV theater critic Michael Alex described Morissette’s performance in Eve Ensler’s play *The Vagina Monologues* as “‘hilarious, poignant, disturbing and outrageous’ and concluded that as an actor, she is ‘brilliant’” (Fournier 2015, p. 92). I would posit that her ability to keep expanding her career and public image throughout the seasons of her life as artist, actress, and activist<sup>160</sup> is another indication of her creativity.

### Her Experiences of Transcendence

Though she does not typically use language such as “mystical” or “transcendent,” Morissette’s descriptions of her spirituality seem to indicate that she has often accessed these kinds of states, sometimes through the creative process, sometimes by other means. She has referred to the process of co-writing the songs for *JLP* with Glen Ballard during 1994 as a “spiritual experience” (Rogers 1996, p. 4), with its stream-of-consciousness flow and the artistic freedom both musicians felt with one another. A few years later, in the late 1990s, she told a reporter,

I do a lot of yoga. Getting centered. It takes me to what I call the fourth dimension, it brings me back to the truth. And the truth is not what has come

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<sup>160</sup> Causes she has championed include artist royalties, cultural exchange, censorship, and environmental and women’s issues (Fournier 2015, p. 92-95).

along with all this craziness. The external world is not the fourth dimension, it's a lot of illusion. (Coles 1998, p. 73)

It is difficult to know exactly what the fourth dimension means, but her account echoes Michael Thalbourne (1991)'s definition of mystical experience as involving "a profound sense of peace and an apparent illumination about the meaning of existence," as well as the altered time and space perception mentioned as a mystical attribute by both Ralph Hood and Lukoff and colleagues.<sup>161</sup>

An especially significant milestone in Morissette's spiritual journey took place when, after being "catapulted to international fame at the age of 21" with *JLP* and facing "the intense pressure from a grueling 18-month tour around the globe" (Elrod with Morissette 2015), she left the public eye to spend six weeks in India. Like the Beatles three decades before her, Alanis "travelled to India on a quest to attain spiritual health through inner peace," needing "an escape from the prying eyes of fans and the media and in search of a refuge where she could contemplate life and the future of her career" (Fournier 2015, p. 72). Rather than following a guru,<sup>162</sup> though, she opted to study "Iyengar yoga, whose poses force their practitioner to focus inward on timing, breathing, and body alignment as a way to change her physical, mental, and spiritual states" (p. 72).

Nearly twenty years later, Morissette recalls her time in India as evoking deep feelings of spiritual connection. She explains,

It was the first time that I got really, really, really, really quiet, because I had always been in semichaotic environments . . . I think because spirituality is such a throughline to their entire culture, it was very validating for me. Because I've always thought of myself as a little God girl, but I would always hide it or joke about it or, you know, just keep it to myself, basically. But in India, that's just very normal. (Elrod with Morissette 2015)

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<sup>161</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 13-14.

<sup>162</sup> For Morissette's ambivalence about the role of gurus, see her lyrics to "Baba," on her *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie* album (1998).

The lyrics to one of her most popular songs, “Thank U,”<sup>163</sup> reflect her gratitude for this experience:

Thank you India  
Thank you terror  
Thank you disillusionment  
Thank you frailty  
Thank you consequence  
Thank you thank you silence (Morissette & Ballard 1998a)

Over “a month of bliss” there, she says, “we were meditating, we were in that transcendental place” of “seeing through the illusion . . . of our separatism” (Winfrey with Morissette 2014)—more descriptions reminiscent of scholarly depictions of mystical experience, with its “ecstatic oneness with creation (or God)” (Thalbourne 1991, qtd. in Thalbourne and Delin 1994, p. 4) or “feelings of unity; harmonious relationship to the divine and everything in existence” (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 34).

Morissette’s experiences of transcendence seem to be less dramatic, more serene and peaceful, than many of those described by Teresa and Jung. The sense of bliss she acquired in India, when she “would meditate for four hours” near the ocean (Winfrey with Morissette 2014), was something she hoped would continue when she returned to her regular life and career in America. While this blissful state lasted only about a month after her return, she has since continued to nourish her spirituality with rituals and practices that deepen her sense of felt connection with the Divine:

Spiritual life is an inner and outer dance. From sacred silence to more obvious forms of letting life and god course through us. From shavasana to ecstatic dance. From channeling music to holding a loved one. From showing up to taking a nap. From loving to being loved. Somewhere within all these delicate and colorful human acts, I find my connection to spirit. For all of us, perhaps

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<sup>163</sup> Brilliantly placed in the soundtrack to the movie “The Way” (Estevez 2015), in which an assortment of characters make the historic Catholic pilgrimage El Camino de Santiago.



our greatest spiritual practice is built right in—the in-breath and the out-breath that inextricably links us to that which breathes life into all. (Morissette 2015e)

### Her Possible Psycho“pathology”

However, along with her times of connection and transcendence, Morissette has also encountered a sizable share of emotional suffering. She has been courageously open about her struggles, noting that “I’ve been in and out of depression for most of my life” (Elrod with Morissette 2015), as well as undergoing anxiety attacks, disordered eating, troubled romantic relationships, and workaholism. Her first emotional “breakdown” occurred in 1992 during her late teens. She attributed it to “the stress of repressing her true feelings,” feeling the need to please instead the many adults who had been trying to mold her since age ten (Cantin 1997, p. 85); after this incident she began going to therapy and ““became almost as addicted to that as I am to music”” (p. 85).

Morissette’s commitment to therapy and self-care likely helped her manage, though did not prevent, her continuing emotional struggles. Given that she spent much of her youth in the public eye, followed by her sudden catapult to international fame when barely out of adolescence, Alanis’s psychological stress is not surprising. In her lyrics to the song “UR,” she points out that what is actually more surprising has been her ability, overall, to hold herself together:

burn the books they’ve got too many names and psychosis  
all this incriminating evidence would surely haunt me  
if someone broke into my house . . .  
we’re surprised you’re not in a far-gone asylum  
we’re surprised you didn’t crack up  
lord knows that we would’ve (Morissette & Ballard 1998b)

After she moved to L.A. in 1994 and experienced a mugging at gunpoint in a friend’s driveway, Morissette began having episodes of convulsing sobs and fainting spells that

were later diagnosed as anxiety attacks (Cantin 1997, p. 124). “As she would tell *Details* magazine in its October 1995 issue, when these attacks came on ‘I just bawled my eyes out and started shaking and wanted to faint. It scared the living shit out of me.’” (Rogers 1996, p. 23).

Biographer Karen Fournier explains that “[t]he origins of [Morissette’s] anxiety would eventually be traced back to the self-perfectionism and the obsessive work ethic that were exhibited in her teens” (2015, p. 39), patterns which also manifested in disordered eating. Morissette said in a 2013 interview that

through my teens . . . I had anorexia and bulimia, so I was doing both depending on when you caught me. Then I’ve had varying numbers on the scale over the years. Being in the public eye, there’s a lot of bullying that goes on online in general, but then specifically about what we look like in Hollywood. (Richter 2013)

It did not help that “a male record executive told her she needed to lose weight if she wanted to succeed,” an “experience [that] made her ‘covert, lonely and isolated’” (Bateman et al. 2008/2015). Morissette has also disclosed that “in her teens, she was trying to protect herself from ‘men who were using their power in ways I was too young to know how to handle,’” including the confusion caused by “a years-long affair with an older record executive that began when she was 14” (Bateman et al. 2008/2015). It seems likely that this experience contributed to what she later deemed an “obsession with romantic partnerships [that] often led to poor choices in men, which in turn led to a loss of identity and a diminished sense of self-worth” (Fournier 2015, p. 136).

Morissette has also described herself as a workaholic, noting that this particular addiction is culturally ego-syntonic: “If I told someone I did heroin until 4 a.m. there would be this massive intervention, but if I tell someone I was working on a deadline

until 4 a.m. they'd pat me on the back" (Abber 2015). This drivenness appears to stem from her having a deep sense of obligation from her awareness of the many blessings in her life. In her song "Offer," she asks,

Who  
Who am I to be blue  
Look at my family and fortune  
Look at my friends and my house  
Who  
Who am i to feel deadened  
Who am i to feel spent . . .  
Is it my calling to keep on when i'm unable (Morissette 2002)

Similarly, despite wanting very much to be a mother, Morissette suffered from postpartum depression following the birth of her son, Ever Imre Morissette-Treadway, on Christmas Day 2010. She "felt like I woke up underwater every day and that tar was being poured all over me, and I just didn't want to be alive" (Elrod with Morissette 2015). Fortunately, her psychological awareness, as well as a daily meditation practice (Cieplinski 2015) and other forms of self-care, appear to have sustained and given her perspective to cope with these challenging seasons and aspects of her life.

#### Her Psychological and Spiritual Self-Understanding and Interpretations

Alanis Morissette once said, "If I wasn't a musician, I'd be a psychologist" (Coles 1998, p. 43), and nearly twenty years later, "I'm obsessed with psychology and spirituality books" (Elrod with Morissette 2015). Her introspective nature and fascination with the interior life—both individually and in relationship with another—are evident throughout her lyrics, a feature that has sometimes garnered criticism for being too navel-gazing, yet is the same quality that has given her music such resonance with millions of listeners for over two decades.

Morissette's form of spirituality, like many of her contemporaries, is a different entity than organized religion. Whereas St. Teresa's deep spirituality flowered within orthodox Catholicism, so much so that she is deemed a saint; and Jung, though his spiritually oriented version of psychology went well beyond the bounds of traditional theology, remained keenly interested in all the world's religions; Morissette is probably best described as "spiritual rather than religious," or at least "more spiritual than religious." Though some websites classify her as Buddhist, perhaps because she practices yoga and meditation, she explains,

The spirituality that I experience sometimes touches on religion, in that I resonate with the thread of continuity that permeates through all religions. But in terms of it being a concretized, organized part of my life, it's not. It's kind of outside of and within religion, my sense of spirit. (Steel 2012)

In her 1995 song "Forgiven," Morissette describes the struggles and confusion she dealt with in connection with her Catholic upbringing:

You know how us Catholic girls can be  
We make up for so much time a little too late  
I never forgot it, confusing as it was  
No fun with no guilt feelings  
The sinners, the saviors, the loverless priests . . .

I sang Alleluia in the choir  
I confessed my darkest deeds to an envious man  
My brothers they never went blind for what they did  
But I may as well have . . .

What I learned I rejected but I believe again  
I will suffer the consequence of this inquisition  
If I jump in this fountain, will I be forgiven . . .

We all had delusions in our head  
We all had our minds made up for us  
We had to believe in something  
So we did (Ballard & Morissette 1995)

These days, though she has since “rejected the whole concept of organized religion” (Coles 1998, p. 7), Morissette is an ordained minister with the Universal Life Church (Bateman et al. 2008/2015) and has participated in events alongside such popular spiritual teachers as Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilbur, and even the Dalai Lama—small wonder, then, that the Oprah Winfrey Network decided to give one of their interview episodes with her the subtitle of “God Girl” (Elrod with Morissette 2015).

Judging from her writings and comments, several of Morissette’s core values are genuineness, self-awareness, and purpose. When she was inducted into the Canadian Hall of Fame in 2005, she stated that her

life purpose is to inspire courage and compassion and the raising of consciousness on this planet so then every little thing that I do—whether it’s a conversation I have or a relationship that I nurture, a tour that I go on or a song that I write—serves me to see how in alignment it is with my purpose. My choices are a lot easier to reference. (Fournier 2015, p. 120)

Like Jung, she speaks often of integration and wholeness. Other frequent themes in her blog<sup>164</sup> include healing in relationships, attachment theory, feminism, body products and practices, and, of course, spirituality. More accurately, Morissette considers all of the above to be spiritual in the sense of helping her connect with the Divine. In one entry she gives an eclectic list of “Top 16 Ways I Connect With God-Presence” (2015c), with practices ranging from being present with her son, to reading scripture, to energy medicine, to grooming. While she acknowledges that her “life challenges and griefs and goals . . . continue[] to present themselves,” in another recent post she waxes poetic about having gradually learned experientially to connect with Spirit, life, the earth, others, and the many parts of herself—an integrative process that leaves her with deep appreciation:

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<sup>164</sup> Available at <http://alanis.com/blog/>

With gratitude and bowing, I see all that I have learned has been blending together in my psyche and mind and body and my soul. That I have been adding and expanding and generating my own “take” on it all—channeled and intuitive and learned and personalized. All through this filter I call “me.” (2015b)

### **Through the Lens of Transliminality Theory**

Now that I have described Alanis Morissette’s first four decades of life, her creativity, experiences of transcendence, psychological suffering, and self-understanding, as with St. Teresa and Carl Jung, I will discuss the links between Morissette’s personality and “Transliminality Theory.” There is indeed evidence that she is highly transliminal, and we can make some educated guesses about the contextual factors that have influenced her periods of occasional “perishing” and her present-day flourishing. At the end of the chapter I will make a few observations about emerging similarities between Morissette and our other two transliminal case studies.

#### Morissette and Transliminality

My research suggests that Alanis Morissette exhibits at least six, and possibly more, of the nine constituent variables of transliminality.

*Paranormal belief.* I was unable to find direct information regarding Morissette’s belief in the paranormal, or at least the three features that Thalbourne and colleagues meant by this category—ESP, psychokinesis, and life after death<sup>165</sup> (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 305). She has claimed, “I’ve often felt telepathic and receptive to inexplicable

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<sup>165</sup> An Internet source for “Alanis Morissette” and “life after death” only yielded a website surmising, due to similarities in facial features, that she may be the reincarnation of Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (<http://personalityspirituality.net/2011/08/03/alanis-morissette—the-reincarnation-of-ser-gei-prokofiev/>)!

messages my whole life” (Fournier 2015, p. 132),<sup>166</sup> which could be a way of referring to the paranormal aspect of extrasensory perception.

*Magical ideation.* There is, however, quite a bit of evidence that Morissette demonstrates what most people would consider to be magical ideation, or magical thinking—the nonrational belief that there is a causal connection between events that cannot plausibly be interrelated. One example is a blog post on her website that discusses methods of divination, which she defines as “a form of energetic communication—the ancient practice of seeking knowledge, guidance, messages and inspiration from spirit or higher consciousness” (Morissette 2015d). The “top ten favorite tools and methods” of divination she lists are: “1. pendulums, 2. tarot cards, 3. Numerology, 4. I Ching book and coins,<sup>167</sup> 5. crystals, 6. essential oils, 7. stream-of-consciousness writing, 8. signs and signals, 9. opening a book on a random [page], and 10. animal messages” (Morissette 2015d). Also loosely suggestive of a tendency toward magical ideation is biographer Stuart Coles’ observation that in the late 1990s, “[h]er conversations were littered with the words ‘aura,’ ‘energy,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘spiritual’” (1998, p. 73), which at times could be off-putting to reporters.

*Manic experience.* Morissette likely does not have mania—I have not found evidence for the overspending, under-sleeping, sexual promiscuity, and so forth that are typical manic behaviors—but at times she seems to have exhibited the manic-like behavior that Thalbourne and colleagues (1994) seemed to mean as a component variable of transliminality. Her intensity when performing onstage, especially in her younger

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<sup>166</sup> Morissette goes on to explain that this perception is heightened when she smokes marijuana. “I can stave those [messages] off when I’m not high. When I’m high—well, they come in and there’s less of a veil, so to speak” (Fournier 2015, p. 132).

<sup>167</sup> Michael Thalbourne was also quite interested in the *I Ching*; see Storm & Thalbourne 2001a and 2001b.

years, could fall into this category, as could the “very accelerated” process of some of her songwriting. When writing and recording *Jagged Little Pill*, sometimes “she claimed to finish a song at four in the morning and be so overwhelmed by the creative experience that she was giddy and physically unwell” (Coles 1998, p. 34). It seems plausible that this type of experience would be an example of “non-illness forms of similar but attenuated [manic] behaviour within the normal population” (Thalbourne, Delin, & Bassett 1994, p. 205).

*Creative personality.* As I explained in Chapter 3, the exact meaning of “creative personality” as it pertains to measuring transliminality is uncertain,<sup>168</sup> so as with Teresa and Jung, I am using criteria from creativity researchers Gregory Feist (1999, p. 290) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1994, p. 137) instead to gauge whether Morissette demonstrates this trait. The answer is a resounding yes: Alanis demonstrates evidence of being more open to new ideas, more introverted, more driven, less conventional, and more motivated by aesthetic values than are most other people. Her openness to new ideas is shown in the adaptability and evolution of her musical style, as well as her insatiable interest in psychological insight and spiritual growth. She is a self-described introvert (Cantin 1997, p. 130), which made her move from Ottawa to L.A. quite difficult. Her drive was evident from an early age: Rich Dodson, who helped her with her first demo at age eleven, says, “She wanted to be a big star. No doubt about it. She was very aggressive. Very dedicated” (Coles 1998, p. 12). Morissette has tended to dress, sing, write, perform, and express herself in ways that are generally considered unconventional, and her being motivated more by aesthetic than financial values can be inferred from her careful attention to creating beautiful, peaceful surroundings while

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<sup>168</sup> Please see p. 75-56, above.



spending so little of her fortune that her manager used to “laugh[] at me because I still shop like I’m poor” (Tomashoff 1998, p. 169). While Morissette’s degree of paranormal belief and manic-like experience are debatable, her expression of creative personality, as with magical ideation, is clear.

*Mystical experience.* We have already discussed Morissette’s transcendent experiences and their similarities to classic descriptions of mysticism above (pages 126-129).

*Absorption.* Alanis also appears to possess a high degree of absorption, with “total attention that fully engages a person” (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 323) apparent in her intense performances, her passionate quest for understanding relationships, her sessions of meditating for four hours at a time (Winfrey with Morissette 2014), and especially her “stream of consciousness” songwriting process. Biographer Paul Cantin notes that during the process of writing the music for *Jagged Little Pill*, when she and Glen Ballard “really got rolling, Alanis would fall into a kind of trance-like state” (Cantin 1997, p. 126), coming up with songs so quickly that she sometimes had no memory of them even minutes later.

*Fantasy-proneness.* Less clear is Morissette’s degree of fantasy-proneness; that is, whether she experiences her fantasies as very real and either “consciously elicit[s]” or “automatically experience[s]” various forms of imagery (Thalbourne et al. 1997, p. 314). The only information I found regarding her attitude toward fantasy was a post on her blog recommending a book by Wendy Maltz called *Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women’s Sexual Fantasies* (Morissette 2015f). Alanis’s interest and appreciation of this topic provides a suggestive, though uncertain, indication of a propensity toward a rich

fantasy life, as does her comment that she has “a rich inner world that I dwell in as often as possible” (Richter 2013).

*Hyperaesthesia.* It does appear likely that Morissette has hypersensitivity to sensory perception such as light, sound, and smell. Ambience is very important to her, so much so that when on tour she requires that her backstage dressing room have a specific, tranquil atmosphere:

At most rock concerts, backstage is normally a smoky, drug- and alcohol-fueled whirlwind of roadies, groupies, record company hangers-on, and the like. Not so at an Alanis performance, where backstage was more like a reception for an author at some New Age bookstore. The air in her dressing room would be thick with the scent of aromatherapy candles. Tables were filled with fruit and vegetables. . . . (Tomashoff 1998, p. 144)

Another author recounts how “venue owners rushed around madly filling their grotty backrooms with incense, wall hangings, foliage of all descriptions and perfumed candles” (Coles 1998, p. 58) when Alanis was on the way. In her 20<sup>th</sup>-anniversary reminiscences about the writing of *JLP*, Morissette recalls, “I walk into Glen Ballard’s studio in Encino, and his space is impeccable and glowing with a golden hue. And most importantly to my deeply sensual and sensitive self and nose: everything SMELLED GOOD” (2015g). She is known for hosting parties lit only by candles (Cantin 1997, p. 120), and scents are so important to her that she devotes an entire wall of a room in her home to her collection of essential oils (Abber 2015).

*Positive attitude toward dream interpretation.* As with fantasy-proneness, I could not find direct evidence indicating Morissette’s thoughts on interpreting dreams. When the word “dream” shows up in her song lyrics, it appears to refer to the metaphorical sense of a hope or aspiration, rather than a literal dream experienced while asleep. She does have a blog post with a three-minute video called “Let the Dream Guide You,” with

a note for readers to “Watch and listen” (Morissette 2015a). The ethereal video encourages viewers to “let the dream guide you to a place you thought you had long forgotten, a place of eternal beauty, hoping to find the answers that are waiting for you at the end of the dream”—but its point seems to be that we must carry our dreams into our waking life, as “maybe the answers cannot be found in this dream itself” (Da Capo 2011).

Alanis Morissette’s ability to remember her dreams and her interest in interpreting them (Thalbourne and Delin 1999, p. 59) are unknown, along with her fantasy-proneness and her degree of paranormal belief—all seem probable, but are unclear. The other six constituent variables of transliminality, however, are quite evident in her writings, self-descriptions, and behavior.

*Highly sensitive personality (HSP) and high sensation-seeking (HSS).* If Morissette demonstrates at least two-thirds of the core components of transliminality as it has traditionally been conceptualized, she epitomizes even more closely our alternate hypothesis of transliminality as a combination of HSP and HSS. She self-identifies as a highly sensitive person, so much so that she has become a spokesperson for the trait in *Sensitive: The Movie* (Harper 2015b), and was already describing herself in these terms two years earlier:

My temperament is highly sensitive. I could speak for hours about what that means, but how it shows up for me is that I’m very attuned to very subtle things, whether it’s food or minerals or lighting or sound or smells; overstimulation happens pretty easily. (Richter 2013)

This account speaks to the “sensitivity to subtleties” aspect of HSP that is evident from Morissette’s acute attunement to aesthetic nuance (and probable hyperaesthesia). She also shows indications of the other three aspects—behavioral inhibition, emotional

reactivity, and depth of processing<sup>169</sup>—as well. Filmmaker Brian Bowie, one of her first L.A. friends and also originally from Ottawa, described her as “an old soul” whose “quiet confidence” sometimes made her seem like a wallflower at parties, but said that when they spoke via phone, “[s]he gets very deep very quick,” pondering philosophical topics and the meaning of life (Cantin 1997, p. 120). Her intense emotionality manifests in over two decades’ worth of music and lyrics that express feeling-states ranging from anger and anguish, to ecstasy and bliss, to wistfulness and regret, to acceptance and gratitude. Meanwhile, her world travels—not only to India, but also Cuba, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, earning her a Global Tolerance Award from the United Nations (Bateman et al. 2008/2015)—suggest she also has a high degree of sensation-seeking, as does her penchant for pursuing creative endeavors outside her primary expertise. For example, early in her career she claimed that she wanted to get back into acting because

I’ve gotten so far away from it that it scares me again. I love doing things that scare me. Because it makes me feel alive and challenged. It makes me feel like I’m growing. That comfort-zone area, I hate it. . . . For whatever reason, I’m happiest when I’m out of my comfort zone. (Coles 1998, p. 79)

### Morissette’s Flourishing and “Perishing”

At age forty-one, perhaps near the midpoint of her life, Alanis Morissette gives every indication that she is flourishing. “[T]he most successful female debut artist of all time” (Coles 1998, p. 51) now appears to be enjoying family life with her husband and young son, as well as thriving in the balance she has created for her public life as both musical artist and spiritual seeker-turned-teacher. While undoubtedly there are struggles that she chooses not to share with the world at large, Morissette seems to have learned how to manage her highly sensitive (and probably highly transliminal) personality so that

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<sup>169</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 42ff, for more information.

its depressive tendency is attenuated. Her self-described “addictions” in the areas of eating, working, and relating (Fournier 2015, p. 136) now seem to have mended into parts of life that she simply stays conscious of and keeps well modulated. Below I will speculate about the cognitive, childhood, relational, and other contextual factors that may have enabled her to move through times of pain and “perishing” and helped lead to her present-day psychospiritual flourishing.

### Contextual Factors

As we have seen,<sup>170</sup> cognitive factors such as a high IQ, working memory, and cognitive flexibility are thought to confer a protective effect, increasing the likelihood of highly transliminal individuals’ creativity rather than psychopathology. While it is difficult to gauge Morissette’s working memory capacity, it seems likely that she has a high IQ judging from her intellectual curiosity, the vocabulary of her song lyrics (which are based on her journal entries [Bateman et al. 2008/2015] and routinely include such words as “ingratiating,” “entanglement,” “protégé,” and “appendage”), and her wide range of interests and reading material. It also appears that she possesses a high level of cognitive flexibility, considering her adaptability—she is only midway through her life, but has been in the public eye for most of it, and rather than rest on her laurels, has continually kept moving and growing and reinventing herself.

We have also seen how highly sensitive persons are especially shaped by their childhood experiences, whether for good or ill. Morissette appears to have benefited from a close-knit family life during her early years, with lots of parental attention and no

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<sup>170</sup> Chapter 2, p. 39ff; above

known overt childhood trauma. She has referred to her parents as “very free-spirited, curious people” (Coles 1998, p. 9) who

attended Catholic mass every Sunday, and every night, the family gathered together to share their personal thoughts and observations of the day. To make their children feel special, Alan and Georgia would individually devote a day or evening to one-on-one activities with each child—whether it was seeing a movie or playing catch or going shopping. (Cantin 1997, p. 7)

In a later passage, biographer Paul Cantin describes how Alanis’s early mentor and first manager, Stephan Klovan,

often stayed for dinner after rehearsals at the Morissette home [and] witnessed the family’s peculiar ritual of taking turns sharing their thoughts and feelings at the end of each day. “If you weren’t used to it, you might think it was kind of weird,” he concedes. But he admired the Morissettes for their openness and enjoyed being in their warm and loving family environment. (Cantin 1997, p. 32)

However, all of this family togetherness came with its own set of pressures. Morissette has reflected as an adult that she “pretty much grew up in a family of very passionate alphas,” and her “role in the family was very much to be the therapist and the objective eye” (Elrod with Morissette 2015).

As Alanis entered early adolescence as well as her professional music career, she was surrounded by several key adults who recognized and believed in her talent and served as mentors for her—Lindsay Morgan, a family friend and member of a Canadian folk duo who helped her with her first demo record and professional photo shoot (Cantin 1997, p. 12-13); Dominic D’arcy, Ottawa’s “Singing Policeman” who booked local music gigs for her (p. 17); Leslie Howe, a pro musician who shared his recording studio and songwriting skills with her (p. 36); and especially Stephan Klovan, who not only got her gigs, but “worked on her image by persuading local retailers to donate trendy clothes for [her] to wear while performing” (Rogers 1996, p. 12) and arranged funding for her to

travel to Paris to record the demo that got her signed to a major record label. Yet Morissette has also referred to feeling intense performance pressure during her teenage years, with so many adults’ “professional and financial welfare depend[ing] on her” (Cantin 1997, p. 67). Meanwhile, she often experienced envy and estrangement from her peers at school (p. 68). And, as mentioned above, she appears to have been pressured into a sexual relationship at age fourteen with someone at her record label (an experience that later informed the lyrics of her song “Hands Clean”), which surely added another layer of complication to her adolescent development.

What helped carry Morissette through her years of anxiety attacks, disordered eating, and romantic angst that were understandably fueled by the complex pressures she faced while still at a young age? In addition to the protective factors of cognitive gifts and a generally positive childhood, I would guess that the same creative career that contributed some of her stressors also provided her with a regular means of “working through” her issues (such as tumultuous relationships, constraints of her Catholic upbringing, struggles with depression, eating, workaholism, and being in the public eye) via her music—both the introspective processing of songwriting and the emotional release of performing to like-minded crowds. Morissette also often acknowledges the healing power of relationships. She credits her spiritual mentor, Neale Donald Walsch, with “helping her through some pretty dark times” (Elson with Morissette 2015), speaks of her marriage as a source of safety, vitality, and growth (Morissette 2015h), and her 2012 song “Empathy” expresses her gratitude for being seen and understood within an emotionally intimate relationship. Additionally, I imagine that she derives a sense of connection from the fortuitous “fit” between her personal music and its cultural context—

not only the resulting success and acclaim, but the satisfaction of striking a chord and giving voice to so many of the shared emotions and issues of her generation.

### Parting Thoughts

In this chapter we have examined Alanis Morissette's life thus far, her creativity, experiences of transcendence, psychological struggles, self-understanding, and the evidence that she is probably quite transliminal (though where she falls on three of its nine constituent variables is not yet known). As Transliminality Theory would predict, she demonstrates a wide range of emotional functioning, with susceptibility to depression and addictive behaviors but also a strong capacity for elation, productivity, and joy. Morissette's family and other close relationships, innate intelligence, creative endeavors, and overall sociocultural support have all contributed to her reaching what seems to be a midlife place of flourishing and contentment.

As we conclude this chapter on Alanis Morissette and with it, the case study portion of my project, I wish to draw attention to three observations. First, Alanis places great emphasis on cultivating what she has called "mindfulness somatic practices" (Abber 2015) such as yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, healthy cooking and nutrition (she is 80% vegan [Richter 2013]), and observing silence, even finding spiritual meaning in her daily grooming (Winfrey with Morissette 2014). This bodily awareness and attention is a theme to which we will return in Chapter 7.<sup>171</sup> Second, though a thorough exploration of Morissette's thoughts on feminism and femininity is beyond the scope of this project, it is striking that she has written of the importance of the Divine Feminine and of integrating our feminine and masculine aspects both personally and culturally

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<sup>171</sup> See especially p. 192, 198.



(Morissette 2012; see also Morissette 2007). In this way she echoes Jung, who saw integrating masculine and feminine elements as a key part of individuation and who protested the suppression of the feminine aspect of God,<sup>172</sup> as well as Teresa, whose recurrent mystical bridal imagery also implies masculine and feminine integration and who is often viewed as an embodiment of the Divine Feminine.<sup>173</sup> Finally, Morissette shares an additional quality with both Teresa and Jung: all three give testament to the importance of working through suffering and confusion through active meaning-making, and the fruits of their introspective processes of prayer, active imagination, and songwriting have provided insight and companionship for many others who have embraced their own interior journeys and sought to incorporate them within an active exterior life.

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<sup>172</sup> A theme he takes up in *Answer to Job*, found in *CW* 11.

<sup>173</sup> See, for example, Starr 2015.

## CHAPTER 6

### PSYCHOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSLIMINALITY: A CORRELATIONAL CONVERSATION

“In *Die Elixire des Teufels* (Part II, p. 210, in Hesse’s edition)—a novel rich in masterly descriptions of pathological mental states—Schönfeld comforts the hero, whose consciousness is temporarily disturbed, with the following words: ‘And what do you get out of it? I mean out of the particular mental function which we call consciousness, and which is nothing but the confounded activity of a damned toll-collector—excise-man—deputy-chief customs officer, who has set up his infamous bureau in our top storey and who exclaims, whenever any goods try to get out: “Hi! hi! Exports are prohibited . . . they must stay here . . . here, in this country. . . .”’”

—E. T. A. Hoffmann, qtd. by Sigmund Freud<sup>174</sup>

#### Review

In our quest to elucidate the apparent interconnections among creativity, mystical experience, and psycho“pathology,” we have made a thorough exploration of a hypothesized personality trait called transliminality, with an eye toward how it interacts with contextual factors to produce a wider-than-usual range of flourishing versus decompensation. We have examined the lives of three creative case studies, giving a close reading to these “living human documents” to gain thick descriptions of what it is like to be a highly transliminal person. Now it is time to circle back to some of our original questions regarding what we are to *do* with this information. Can the “double-edged artistic temperament” of transliminality be a source of psychological advancement? of theological insight? How can we mitigate its vulnerabilities and steward its strengths?

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<sup>174</sup> “The Uncanny,” by Sigmund Freud (1919), p. 233n1 in the *Standard Edition*: “Under the rubric ‘Varia’ in one of the issues of *the Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* for 1919 (5, 308), the year in which the present paper was first published, there appears over the initials ‘S.F.’ a short note which it is not unreasonable to attribute to Freud. Its insertion here, though strictly speaking irrelevant, may perhaps be excused. The note is headed: ‘E. T. A. Hoffmann on the Function of Consciousness.’”

To address the first two questions, in this chapter I will introduce two more scholars into our interdisciplinary conversation—a theologian, James E. Loder, and a psychologist, Harry T. Hunt. I have chosen these two thinkers as dialogue partners to help provide a wider perspective on transliminality because their writings frequently encompass the same issues of creativity, mysticism, and psychopathology that we are exploring in this project. Also, while they represent different disciplinary locations, both Loder’s and Hunt’s works encompass a wide-ranging synthesis of academic fields, key concepts, and major theorists. Both were influenced by Jung and Kierkegaard, among many others, and are concerned with questions of spiritual meaning and human flourishing. Yet, as we would expect, Loder and Hunt are writing from different angles and with different questions and purposes. Each has insights regarding experiences of transcendence—which Loder calls transforming moments, Hunt radical experiences—that expand upon and sometimes challenge the other’s point of view. Additionally, while Loder and Hunt provide further ways of conceptualizing the lives and experiences of our three highly transliminal case studies, St. Teresa, Jung, and Morissette reciprocally suggest specific ways in which transliminality, whether viewed psychologically, theologically, or both, can be generatively embodied “on the ground.” By correlating theological and psychological viewpoints on transliminality and then placing all of our conversation partners in hermeneutic dialogue, we emerge with a deepened, more integrated sense of what this trait might mean.

Below I will give a brief overview of James Loder’s and Harry Hunt’s lives and main ideas, particularly those that have direct bearing upon transliminality. Afterward I will discuss points upon which they agree, followed by some key areas of difference.

Then I will suggest ways in which our case studies' experiences expand upon Loder's and Hunt's thoughts and upon the initial version of "Transliminality Theory" that I set forth in Chapter 2.

### **James E. Loder**

#### His Life

I first became acquainted with James Loder (1931-2001) because of his place in my intellectual lineage as the professor of two of my professors.<sup>175</sup> He spent his nearly forty-year teaching and counseling career at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he held the Mary D. Synnott Chair of the Philosophy of Christian Education and also taught in the Department of Practical Theology. While earning a Th.M. and a PhD from Harvard as well as holding a Danforth scholarship at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, Loder had the opportunity to "engage[ with] some of the greatest minds of the day in theology and the human sciences" (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 14), such as Talcott Parsons, Paul Tillich, Seward Hiltner, Paul Pruyser, and Robert Bellah. A "charismatic Presbyterian,"<sup>176</sup> Loder was profoundly influenced by the Danish existentialist philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, to whom he had been introduced during seminary, and by the Hungarian-British scientist Michael Polanyi, who stressed that knowledge cannot be separated from the person doing the knowing.<sup>177</sup> With his wide-ranging, interdisciplinary mind, Loder reconceptualized Christian education,

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<sup>175</sup> Barbara J. McClure, now at Brite Divinity School in TX, and John S. McClure, Charles G. Finney Professor of Preaching and Worship at Vanderbilt and third reader of this project.

<sup>176</sup> John McClure, personal conversation.

<sup>177</sup> See, for example, Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 5.

human development, and the field of practical theology based on a Chalcedonian<sup>178</sup> understanding of Divine/human interaction—that is, the idea that there is a “bipolar, differentiated, relational unity” (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 8) between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit woven throughout reality.

This conviction of Loder’s, which permeated his renowned teaching and counseling, was not only theoretical, but based in two transformative life experiences. The first occurred in his early twenties, after his father’s sudden and untimely death to brain cancer. In desperation, Loder cried out for God to “Do something,” and his prayer was answered by unexpected means—a warming Presence enveloped his body, bringing such joy and assurance that he broke out singing the hymn “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine,” subsequently recognizing the truthfulness of what he had just experienced upon reading Emil Brunner’s book *The Scandal of Christianity* (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 13). Loder’s second “transforming moment” came almost fifteen years later in the summer of 1970. Driving out of town on vacation with his wife and daughters, Loder stopped to help two women at the side of the road with a flat tire. While he was changing the tire, a trucker fell asleep at the wheel, and in the accident that ensued, Loder was crushed under the car, dragged some distance, and almost died. Before emergency surgery could take place, however, his lung stopped bleeding on its own and his oxygen level returned to normal—a result he attributes to the simultaneous prayer of his father-in-law’s church (Loder 1981/1989, p. 12). He soon regained his health, and with it came a new awareness of the Spirit’s presence throughout all of life, as well as an appreciation of the power of such transformative experiences to bring human beings to a new level of

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<sup>178</sup> The 451 C.E. Council of Chalcedon was instrumental in establishing standardized Christian doctrine, such as the dual nature of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine.

spiritual consciousness. No longer was he content with “business as usual” in psychoanalytically-based theories of human development or cognitively-based methods of Christian education: instead, his work was permeated by a conviction of the active, creative role of God’s Spirit as driving and inspiring these processes of human healing and growth (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 15-16ff).

### His Thought

To further elucidate Loder’s thought, I will summarize the themes of three of his major books, which build chronologically upon one another: *The Transforming Moment* (1981, with a second edition published in 1989), *The Knight’s Move* (co-written with W. Jim Neidhardt in 1992), and *The Logic of the Spirit* (1998). Then I will briefly name three points at which his thought directly connects with our investigation of transliminality.

#### *Main Ideas*

*The Transforming Moment*, whose original subtitle was “Understanding Convictional Experiences,” is about just that. Using as exemplars his own transformative experiences and those of others (seminal figures such as Kierkegaard, Martin Luther, and Jung as well as case studies from his counselees), Loder proposes that they have a logic or grammar all their own, a consistent pattern to how they operate. Transforming moments have five temporal, usually chronological stages—conflict, interlude, eureka, energy release, and interpretation (1981/1989, p. 37-40). They involve four interwoven “dimensions” of being (the lived world, the self, the void, and the Holy), instead of our usual day-to-day immersion in world and self only (p. 69-71ff). The type of convictional

knowing and insight we experience in transforming moments is woven into the fabric of reality—for example, this transformational logic is how we shift developmental stages, receive creative insights, or undergo therapeutic healing. Transformational knowing has its own epistemology that, Loder argues, goes beyond the reductionism inherent in so-called “objectivity” (p. 30) and openly incorporates the personhood and the existential concerns of the knower (a stance bearing echoes of Michael Polanyi). Its *telos* is to move “from negation to love.” Negation, Loder says, is built into being human from our early infancy, when we learn that our mother’s face, the organizer of our psychic being, is interspersed with absence, and we defend against the ensuing dread by what is usually thought of in positive terms as ego development—but which serves to relegate to the unconscious our need for orientation to, and mirroring by, a Face of Love (p. 164-166). It takes transformative experiences—through the initiation of God’s Spirit—to negate this negation and return us to the way of love, of undefended, intimate relationship with God and others.

Loder’s theory of transformational logic expands to new levels and contexts in his next book, *The Knight’s Move*, co-written with physicist W. Jim Neidhardt in 1992. This fascinating interdisciplinary book constructs a theology-and-science dialogue in such a way that the conversation itself demonstrates the methodology it is setting forth: that is, a bipolar, asymmetrical relationality. This type of dynamic interrelationship, epitomized at the highest level of reality by the *perichoresis* (interpenetration)<sup>179</sup> in the Chalcedonian understanding of the Trinity, also characterizes the “lowest” subatomic level of reality according to what we know of quantum physics (p. 68ff). Articulated by Kierkegaard in

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<sup>179</sup> Please see Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 23 for a fuller explanation of this term and its role in Trinitarian theology.

his writings about how, to be a human spirit/self, one must encompass both the intrarelativity among one's aspects of consciousness *and* the interrelational grounding beyond the self in the Divine (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 292), this mode of being involves transcending our usual dualistic, ego-bound perspectives with a surprise—the knight's move. Like the “strange loop” of a Möbius strip, whose two “sides” actually form a single surface;<sup>180</sup> or the knight's move in chess, which bypasses the usual linear motion to go around corners; or quantum physics' complementarity theory, in which light is both a wave and a particle; this *modus operandi* involves a transformational logic all its own, one which Loder and Neidhardt argue appears to be woven into the fabric of the universe. Enter here the five-step process that Loder developed years earlier in *The Transforming Moment*. The third step, where a “eureka” or “hallelujah” moment of discovery happens, corresponds to this “knight's move” or “strange loop.” It happens by means of a process of “intensification” in which passion serves to bridge the everyday gap between left and right brain hemispheres, analysis and imagination (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 272), resulting in the kind of visionary epiphanies that can heal psychological wounds, produce great art, advance science, even revitalize cultures—and overcome existential despair by grounding human beings in the Presence of God (p. 283). Indeed, the authors emphasize, from the behavior of subatomic particles to the mysteries of human consciousness and the dynamics of societal change, “*the core reality of human existence is relationality*” (p. 285, emphasis in original).

Loder's last published book, *The Logic of the Spirit* (1998), provides a fuller articulation of his earlier themes of transformational logic, the relational nature of reality,

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<sup>180</sup> See Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 41, Figure 4a; many depictions of a Möbius strip can also be found online.



and the active participation of God in human life, this time focused around the realm of human development. This book examines human development through the lenses of two key questions: “What is a lifetime?” and “Why do I live it?” Written in part as a respectfully critical response to the cognitive-centricity of James Fowler’s influential book *Stages of Faith Development* (1981) (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 19), *The Logic of the Spirit* is explicitly theological and confessional, emphasizing the Chalcedonian relationship between Holy Spirit and human spirit, both of which drive human development through the life cycle (Loder 1998, p. 33-36). This process occurs by means of the “transformational logic” that Loder spelled out years earlier in *The Transforming Moment*. Loder traces out each stage of human development, from infancy to beyond age 65, in terms of traditional, psychological ego development (such as Eriksonian stages and tasks) as well as possibilities for theological, Spirit-led action and meaning-making, ultimately arguing that linear, chronological stage development is not truly “normal”; the true norm is coming to know and participate in God’s love (p. 277-278) through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, who negates the existential negation of the human ego and provides through Jesus Christ a means of integration and sacrificial love.

#### *Relevance to Transliminality*

James Loder’s writings are relevant to our study of transliminality because they are directly concerned with the “logic” of creativity, mystical experience, and (to a lesser extent) psychopathology. In setting forth the theological position undergirding his 1998 book *The Logic of the Spirit*, Loder posits an

analogy between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. The similarity lies in the transformational pattern that characterizes the dynamics of each spirit as it operates through time. . . . This similarity can be briefly noted in that the human spirit is inherently creative, and the Holy Spirit works in human history as *Spiritus Creator*, where creativity is understood transformationally. The dissimilarity in the analogy lies in the fact that the human spirit is rooted and grounded in the human psyche, but the Holy Spirit is rooted and grounded in God. (Loder 1998, p. 35)

In other words, God's creativity is echoed in human creativity, both of which happen by means of the same transformational logic. "Transformation," he says, "is defined as follows: when within any given frame of reference hidden orders of meaning and coherence arise to call the axioms of that frame into question and reorder its elements accordingly, transformation has occurred" (p. 35). To be human is to create, to participate in the ongoing re-making of the world, through moments of aesthetic knowing that break through mundaneness to joy and meaning (Loder 1981/1989, p. 55-56).

Similarly, transcendent or mystical experiences often overlap (though are not synonymous) with what Loder calls transformative or convictional knowing. His book *The Transforming Moment* examines the "grammar" of such experiences—their phases of movement, context of meaning, and results in the spirit and psyche of the human being who undergoes them. He considers these experiences to be "signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God" (1981/1989, p. 19), though he does not explore whether there are patterns in the sort of person to whom these signs are more apt to occur. While Loder is not interested in addressing psychopathology in a systematic way, he does make periodic references to transforming moments gone awry, such as when a seemingly mythic image (instead of opening new horizons) takes over one's sanity (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 248). On the other hand, he is quick to point out that psychospiritual wholeness does not necessarily look like psychological normalcy: what can appear to be pathological

behavior or fantasy content might actually follow the logic of transformation (1981/1989, p. 134, 145), which can be discerned by whether the result is healing or harm.

## **Harry T. Hunt**

### His Life

Our other dialogue partner, academic psychologist Harry T. Hunt, was born in 1943. In a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reflective essay written for his fellow Harvard Class of 1965 graduates, Hunt shares that the trajectory of his future career was set in place during his undergraduate years, when his Professor Edward Tiryakian encouraged him

to read to a degree that now astonishes me in its depth and range all I could humanly manage on the interface of mystical experiences, Max Weber's sociology of religions, psychoanalytic object relations theory, the later Heidegger and his comparison with Jung, and whether or not a separate philosophy of science was needed for the human sciences. (Hunt 2016, email correspondence with the author)

Hunt “read and read and read, never so intensively again in my entire life,” and the result was a thesis applying the above areas of thought to the life and systems of the Russian mystic and philosopher George Gurdjieff (Hunt 2003, p. xi). Hunt's interest in altered states of consciousness—and the question of whether they entailed regression (as in traditional psychoanalytic thought) or higher cognition (as in transpersonal notions of spirituality)—led him to pursue graduate studies at Brandeis University in Boston, Massachusetts, where Abraham Maslow was then a professor. While his experiences there proved disappointing, he had found a question whose exploration would continue to guide his career.

Hunt landed a professorship at Brock University, a small Canadian school that “proved safe for [his] ‘left wing’ writings on consciousness” (2016, email correspondence), and was more than ready to emigrate from the U.S. to Canada, having lost a close friend killed in Vietnam. He taught at Brock for nearly four decades, eventually publishing three books and numerous articles and being named Professor Emeritus upon his retirement. For many years he had difficulty finding support for his research interests, which (like Michael Thalbourne’s) involved using traditional, empirical psychological methods to study not-so-traditional topics such as meditative and transpersonal states of consciousness. Over time, however, “some of the split between mainstream academia and the more experiential California institutes filled in—with more interest in theory and research in the latter, and a new, admittedly left wing, multi-disciplinary consciousness studies movement in the former” (2016, email correspondence), and Hunt’s phenomenological and philosophically integrative work began to be recognized.

### His Thought

Of Harry Hunt’s many writings spanning such subjects as dreams, consciousness, mysticism, and synesthesia, three articles are especially helpful for our purposes: “Experiences of Radical Personal Transformation in Mysticism, Religious Conversion, and Psychosis” (2000); “The Truth Value of Mystical Experience” (2006); and “‘Dark Nights of the Soul’: Phenomenology and Neurocognition of Spiritual Suffering in Mysticism and Psychosis” (2007). As with Loder, I will summarize these excerpts from Hunt’s work to demonstrate his main ideas, lifting out several direct connections with transliminality.

### *Main Ideas*

Harry Hunt's 2000 article "Experiences of Radical Personal Transformation in Mysticism, Religious Conversion, and Psychosis," subtitled "A Review of the Varieties, Processes, and Consequences of the Numinous" explores mysticism's "problematic relation to parallel phenomena in psychosis" (p. 353) and sets forth several major ideas directly related to transliminality. After giving a brief historical survey of writings on this mysticism/psychosis conundrum and describing the phenomenology of mystical experience, Hunt points out that while mystical and psychotic experiences can appear very similar at "the more 'molecular' level of specific transformations in attention, perception, thought, and emotion" (p. 360-361), their "molar" level outcomes are quite different. "The primary question in evaluating any state of consciousness," he says, is "whether it opens the person to a greater fullness of felt meaning and spontaneity or whether it fixates and shuts down. Bliss and dread, by themselves, can do either" (p. 363). Hunt lists five "fruits" of altered-state experiences that are transcendent rather than psychotic—purposefulness, autonomy, authenticity, compassion, and clarity (p. 365)—noting that "the distinction between integrative and dissociative absorption/psychoticism is partly mediated by individual differences in physical balance and visual-spatial skills" (p. 383), a point he will continue to unpack in future writings. Additionally, numinous experiences hold the potential to "accelerate normal life-span development" (p. 371), can be considered cognitively noetic (a means of knowing) (p. 375), and tend to "occur at the extremes of physiological arousal" (p. 376). And the variously named, "bi-valent dimension of personality" (with one side "more synthesizing and 'holistic,' the other

traumatized and ‘dissociative’” [Hunt 2000, p. 382])<sup>181</sup> that predisposes people toward such states, sounds almost exactly like our conceptualization of transliminality, with its sideways-V-shaped diagram<sup>182</sup> of outcomes.

In Hunt’s 2006 article “The Truth Value of Mystical Experience,” he begins by asking the question, “Can mystics intuit something of what modern physicists calculate?” (p. 5) and makes a case that the answer is yes. Like Loder and Neidhardt in *The Knight’s Move*, Hunt is interested in establishing a relationship between quantum physics and human consciousness (2006, p. 7). In contrast with Loder and Neidhardt’s models of strange loops and Chalcedonian *perichoretic* relationality, Hunt—using complexity theory’s assumption that “consciousness . . . cannot be ultimately inconsistent with the *system* principles of the universe that generates it” (p. 9-10)—bases his argument on the structure of metaphor itself. Simply put, all human conceptual thinking depends on metaphors that are derived from spatial perception (depth, center, path, part/whole, balance, force, etc.), which is both necessary for human survival (p. 16) and correspondent with physical reality. Therefore, the ways and means of the macro- (sentient) and micro- (subatomic) levels of existence, are of a piece (p. 19). So in this way mystical experience, as a “maximal[ly] intensifi[ed]” (p. 9) form of consciousness, fulfills the correspondence criterion of truth<sup>183</sup> by corresponding (via metaphor) to spatial, physical reality. Recognizing, though, that this kind of truth isn’t what most people mean when they ask whether mystical experience is true(!), Hunt also evaluates it in terms of William James’ “pragmatic concept of truth value” (p. 9)—whether it is true in the sense of being helpful for living. Here again, the answer is yes, because mystical

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<sup>181</sup> Citing Roche & McConkey 1990.

<sup>182</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 50.

<sup>183</sup> See Popper 1963, p. 202ff.

experiences typically entail a deeply felt sense of direct connection with Absolute Being that results in such qualities as faith, compassion, gratitude, and freedom. This aspect, too, could be understood as proprioceptive in that a transcendent encounter provides the one who experiences it with a locative, “X marks the spot” or “‘you are here’ [mapping] in relation to a sensed encompassing totality” (p. 36).

Our third article, “‘Dark Nights of the Soul’: Phenomenology and Neurocognition of Spiritual Suffering in Mysticism and Psychosis” (2007), was my first introduction to Harry Hunt. A fascinating synthesis of ideas, it is an exploration of the topic of his 2000 article by means of the spatial/metaphorical lens he developed in his 2006 article. In it Hunt asks two questions: 1) How is it that mystical states bear such a resemblance to psychotic states, when the affect and context are so different? (p. 209), and 2) How is it that we can experience mystical states (with their immediate felt sense of Being-Itself) in the first place? (p. 210). To address the first question, he returns to the idea that there is “now considerable evidence of a single dimension of individual difference for proclivity to altered state experience” (p. 221), and this time transliminality is one of several questionnaire measures he lists that describe this bivalent trait.<sup>184</sup> Hunt then draws upon Paul Schilder (1928, 1935, 1942, 1953)’s work observing that in pathologies such as schizophrenia where the felt sense of “self” is damaged (either terrifyingly diffuse or paralyzingly hyper-aware), there is concurrently a sense of spatial disorientation with symptoms such as dizziness, postural distortions, or vertigo (p. 222-223). Placing this research in tandem with other evidence showing “superior performance in physical

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<sup>184</sup> Others are imaginative involvement (Hilgard 1974), fantasy proneness (Lynn & Rhue 1988), and imaginative absorption (Tellegen & Atkinson 1974)—the latter two of which are core components of transliminality, as discussed above in Chapter 2, p. 27. See Hunt 2007, p. 221 for additional references in the psychological literature for altered state experience, openness to experience, and creativity/psychoticism.

balance and spatial-analytic abilities” during “creative, integrative, and/or spiritual” states (p. 223), Hunt hypothesizes that the higher-level analogues in consciousness for these proprioceptive deficits and profusions, respectively, are the depleted sense of self in psychosis and the expanded/connected sense of self in mysticism. When people have experienced the expansion of transcendent states via meditation or other spiritual practice and then descend back from such a “delicate level of psychophysiological attunement” (p. 227) to their more usual equilibrium, the result can be “the frustration and loss of meaning” associated with “the classical ‘dark night’” of the soul.

#### *Relevance to Transliminality*

Since Harry Hunt’s writings are so often directly concerned with transliminality (or other ways of naming the dimensional personality trait that predisposes people to have mystical and/or psychotic experiences), as described above, I will not repeat those observations here, other than to point out that his curiosity about the frequent gray area between such disparate states aligns closely with the core question of this project.

#### **Loder and Hunt in (Imaginary) Dialogue**

Both James E. Loder and Harry T. Hunt have demonstrated a lifelong interest in human-Divine encounters, altered states, and experiences that go beyond the ordinary: what Loder calls “transforming moments” often sound very similar to Hunt’s “experiences of radical personal transformation.” If Loder, overall, was more interested in transcendent experiences and creativity than in psychopathology (though he does mention it at times), Hunt is more interested in transcendent experiences and



psychopathology than in creativity (though he is quick to acknowledge the crossover of the altered consciousness involved with both creativity and mysticism). Thus, our correlational conversation to follow will engage more directly with transcendent, mystical experiences than with creativity and psychopathology, while continuing to observe the interconnections among these three aspects of consciousness.

Before we engage with Loder's and Hunt's positions (explicit or implied) regarding transliminality and transcendence, it may be helpful to locate them within the context of their interdisciplinary methods. Their scholarly work dealing with religion and psychology takes us into the heart of a broader, perennial question—how to juxtapose the discourse of religion with the very different discourse of science, within which psychology falls. Are these two separate realms, or do they have some sort of connection, and if so, what is its nature? Ian Barbour's comprehensive book *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* details the many answers scholars and cultures have posited to this question. He groups these views into four major categories: science and religion as worldviews in conflict (Barbour 1997, p. 77), independent spheres with their own purposes (p. 84), different approaches that can be brought into dialogue (p. 90), or two languages speaking of the same integrated reality (p. 98). Loder's and Hunt's writings place them both somewhere between the "dialogue" and the "integrationist" categories.

If we narrow the lens within the sphere of science to the field of psychology, Hunt, as a psychologist, tends to view religion from a "psychology of religion" (or sometimes a psychology of spirituality) perspective. He is primarily using the empirical methods of psychology to investigate the phenomenology of religious and/or spiritual

experience,<sup>185</sup> rather than the other way around. Yet as a transpersonal psychologist, he also holds great respect for and interest in spirituality, and at times he comes closer to a method of “religion in dialogue with psychology,”<sup>186</sup> especially in his later writings. Meanwhile, Loder, as a practical theologian who greatly valued the contributions of psychology (as well as other realms of science such as physics), writes from a “religion in dialogue with psychology” position where religion, or more specifically Christian theology, is ultimately the prevailing dialogue partner (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. xiv). He views science and theology as complementary (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 2), with psychology illuminating the ways of the human spirit yet needing “a theological frame of reference that grounds and guides” it (Loder 1998, p. xiii).

Having set the stage with a sketch of Loder’s and Hunt’s biographies, bibliographies, and methodologies, I will now seek to expand our understanding of transliminality by correlating Loder’s and Hunt’s sometimes-compatible, sometimes-divergent views on the “transcendent experience” aspect of it. To help organize this imaginary hermeneutic dialogue, I will first discuss the *ontos* of transcendent states—that is, the nature of their “being,” what and how they “are”—followed by their *telos*, meaning their (potential) “end” or purpose. We will see that Loder and Hunt are usually in agreement about the broader contours within both of these categories, but sometimes have quite different understandings of the specifics.

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<sup>185</sup> This “psychology of religion” or “psychology of spirituality” method was my approach above in Chapter 2 setting out Transliminality Theory, insofar as the mystical experience aspect of transliminality is concerned. Please see Chapter 1, p. 7-10, for more discussion on how I identify the methods I use throughout this project.

<sup>186</sup> Please see Jonte-Pace & Parsons 2001 for further differentiation of terms, as well as p. 8, n11 in Chapter 1 above.

### The Nature of Transcendent States or Transforming Moments

If we examine Loder's and Hunt's writings with an eye toward what and how transcendent experiences tend to be, we find them in striking agreement about four qualities. First, the heightened states involved with transforming moments or radical, mystical experiences entail a certain pattern of physiological arousal. Second, the prototype for their emotional timbre can be found in early maternal mirroring and nurturing. Third, these experiences often occur after significant loss, and fourth, they reflect some other type of reality.

*Physiological arousal.* The first characteristic of transcendent, transformative experiences that both Loder and Hunt address is biological and uncontroversial, as well as suggesting an avenue of further research regarding the physiology of transliminality. Simply put, "mystical, creative-visionary, and psychotic experience[s] occur at the extremes of physiological arousal" (Hunt 2000, p. 376), either very high or very low. This observation is of interest, since if transliminality is indeed a combination of HSP (highly sensitive personality) and HSS (high sensation-seeking), these combined "brakes" and "gas pedal" traits are thought to compete in modulating optimal levels of arousal in people whose HSP entails a lower-than-normal threshold, and HSS a higher-than-normal preference, for it.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, it "seem[s] that the felt meaning and physiological sides of numinous experience are inseparable" (Hunt 2000, p. 379). Both Hunt (p. 377) and Loder also cite evidence that these experiences involve "signs of 'paradoxical' sympathetic and parasympathetic discharge." Usually our autonomic nervous system's interlocking subsystems, the sympathetic ("fight or flight") and parasympathetic ("rest and digest") systems, maintain inversely proportional functions. However, under certain

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<sup>187</sup> Please see Chapter 2, p. 47.

conditions of emotional intensity, a progression can occur in which one of these systems becomes so activated that they *both* start occurring at the same time (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 270-272),<sup>188</sup> and this phenomenon appears to be when a trance, ecstasy, vision, or insight occurs.<sup>189</sup>

*Prototype in early mirroring.* Loder and Hunt also agree that the core of compassionate love encountered in a transformative, transcendent experience reflects the feeling from human infancy of being nurtured, safely held, and having one's face and emotions mirrored by a caregiver, usually one's mother. While some theorists take this connection to indicate that mystical experiences are psychologically regressive, Hunt disagrees:

If the deepest structure of the symbolic capacity is a dialogic organization rooted in mother-infant mirroring, then maximum expressions of presentational consciousness will entail that this dyadic nurturant pattern becomes part of the actual form of awareness—not as a regression but as the internalized matrix for all symbolization. (1995, p. 216)

Loder, who is knowledgeable about this concept from his expertise in developmental theory, takes it a step further, asserting that “the primal experience of the [loving other's] face as actual presence and in its significance as symbolic expression provides a prototype for the convicting Presence of God” (1981/1989, p. 263).<sup>190</sup> Hunt in turn agrees with the connection between mother-infant mirroring in human development and “Christianity's understanding of the reciprocal love and forgiveness between believer and God” (2012, p. 17), but seems to view the origination as the other way around—rather than the Divine mirroring being a prototype for the human, he sees the theological idea of

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<sup>188</sup> Citing Lex 1978, Gellhorn 1967, Gellhorn & Kiely 1972, et al. See also Gellhorn & Kiely 1973.

<sup>189</sup> Cognitive neuropsychiatrist Sohee Park notes that it is likely that these trance states also involve the synchronization of brain oscillations (waves)—which is a different matter than when all neurons fire simultaneously as in an epileptic seizure (2016, note to author).

<sup>190</sup> See also Loder 1998, p. 90-91, 110-111.

Christian Agape as emerging from “an amplified and objective perception” (p. 18) of the intricate environmental “holding” inherent in all forms of organismic life.

*Occurrence after loss.* Not stated directly as such, but present throughout Loder’s books, is the observation made by Hunt in his 2003 book *Lives in Spirit* that there is a “striking” link between later numinous experience and early childhood loss. “Most of our major precursors of inner-worldly spirituality and/or transpersonal psychology,” he points out, “had deeply conflicted relations with their mothers, with indications of her emotional coldness and distance, or a smothering, negative-merging quality” (p. 306). As we have seen, such was the case with Jung.<sup>191</sup> Hunt also highlights that the beginnings of numinous experience are often triggered by a significant loss in early adulthood.<sup>192</sup> This pattern certainly seems to hold true with Loder: recall that his interest in “transforming moments” began with two of his own, the first after the loss of his father when he was a young adult, and the second as an auto accident appeared to be bringing the loss of his own life. Loder’s three books also contain numerous (compiled) case studies in which a transcendent encounter with God’s Spirit occurs following a death, crisis, job loss, or other type of emotional wounding.

*Reflective of other level(s) of reality.* Part of what transcendent, transformative experiences “are” for both Loder and Hunt is a sign of other levels of reality. As we can expect from their different interpretations above of the connection between mystical experience and early maternal mirroring, Loder goes in a different direction than Hunt as to what these others levels of reality, he believes, reveal. For Loder, an experience is only truly transformative—which he equates with being “of Christ”(1981/1989, p. 196)—

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<sup>191</sup> See Chapter 4, p. 114.

<sup>192</sup> For an exploration of this theme in the lives of St. Augustine, Freud, Jung, Goethe, and others through the lens of self psychology, see Gay 1989.

if it places the person having it into a more conscious awareness of four existential facets: oneself, the world, the void, and the Holy. Specifically, such an experience “will open up the self to itself, put one deeper into the world, and expose evil even as it reveals God’s nature” (p. 196), which is sacrificial love. Thus, transforming moments are “convictional” because they bring about a compelling, convincing disclosure of theological reality (p. 14). That this disclosure is theological, for Loder, does not make it any less practical or more abstract than any other aspect of reality: indeed, he says, we humans are as “wired” to have “visions of new order regarding the proper place of humanity in the universe” as we are wired to do mathematics (1998, p. 63). Hunt, on the other hand, understands the reality reflected by transcendent experience to be what lies underneath “the conceptual metaphysics” given to it by religious and “cultural traditions”—a shared, cross-cultural, sense of vital presence and Being that can be communicated socially by spatial-temporal metaphors, but is no more caused by our interpretations “than a telescope causes the stars” (1995, p. 213).

#### The (Potential) Purpose of Transcendent States or Transforming Moments

Now that we have examined Loder’s and Hunt’s thoughts on what transcendent experiences are and how they tend to be, we will turn to these authors’ understandings of what they can *do* for the person who has them (or perhaps, more accurately stated, is had by them). What do Loder and Hunt observe about the potential *results* of transforming moments and/or transcendent, mystical experiences, which could in turn be suggestive of their purpose? While they again differ in the specifics of how they comprehend these areas, Loder and Hunt align in seeing five positive effects that come from heightened transliminal states. First, these experiences can deliver a new type of knowledge.

Second, they can bring consolation. Third, they can increase the openness and freedom of the one who undergoes them. Fourth, they can help foster human developmental processes, and fifth, they can result in spiritual virtues or qualities of character.

*Noesis*. Closely related to the quality described above of transcendent experiences being reflective of other level(s) of reality, is their function of providing a qualitatively new kind of knowledge. Loder believes this knowledge to comprise “the logic of the Spirit,” whereas Hunt sees it as a form of spiritual intelligence. In his preface to *The Transforming Moment*, Loder asserts that

Transforming moments need to be recognized as sources of new knowledge about God, self, and the world, and as generating the quality and strength of life that can deal creatively with the sense of nothingness shrouding the extremities and pervading the mainstream of modern living. (1981/1989, p. xi)

This form of knowing “challenge[s] the assumptional world of the human sciences” and holds the capacity to make a person “more fully oneself” (p. 17). Later Loder notes that “one cannot make history without ecstasy; that is, without in some sense standing outside it [history] and apart from its determinants” (p. 22). In other words, ecstasy—or what we are calling mystical or transcendent experience—allows for a discovery of the Divine Presence at the “extremities” of life, which in turn brings a more vivid awareness of God’s Presence in the center of all of it (p. 18). Hunt agrees with Loder that “mystical and conversion experiences are . . . inherently noetic” (Hunt 2000, p. 375), but rather than focusing on the content of this *noesis* (Divine or otherwise), he is more interested in its process. Coming from a psychological perspective, Hunt views the knowledge of mystical experience as an advanced type of cognition, “an emergent intelligence beyond the reversibility and novelty of Piaget’s abstract formal operations”—in fact, he says, “spiritual realization involves the rare achievement of formal operations within what

Piaget termed the ‘affective schemata’” (p. 375). Piaget, Hunt explains, “concluded that affective schemata could not reach formal operations because they lack the fixed point of accommodation provided by physical reality for the ‘intellectual schemata.’<sup>193</sup> On the contrary, the sustained concentration of [long-term] meditation”—which Hunt sees as the formalization of the mystic path—“can be postulated as creating just such an unwavering point to which released subjective states must gradually accommodate” (p. 375-376).

*Consolation.* Another potential purpose of transcendent, transformational experiences is that they are often a source of comfort and consolation, whether viewed as sent directly from God or understood in a more indistinct, transpersonal sense. As mentioned above, this type of experience frequently occurs in people who have suffered significant loss, particularly in early childhood or early adulthood. Hunt seems to interpret this phenomenon as being psychologically compensatory, with “spiritual realizations” holding the potential to help “resolve . . . early emotional deficits” (2003, p. 306). In the psychobiographical portions of his book *Lives in Spirit*, he discusses examples such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who after a year of “shattering” grief from his young wife’s death suddenly underwent a transformative experience leaving everything “enhanced and significant, with a special aliveness full of possibility” (Hunt 2003, p. 151), and Abraham Maslow, originator of the term “peak experience,” who emerged from a damaging childhood with a distant father and a mother who killed his kittens, through years of disillusionment and exhaustion, to a period marked by “unaccustomed vitality” and an “expansiveness of essential strength and joy” (p. 145). Loder, I imagine, would further posit that such consolations stem from the loving, active Spirit of God. In his own first transforming moment, he had just lost his father, he “searched in vain for

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<sup>193</sup> Citing Piaget 1962.



consolation and comfort in the midst of this meaningless tragedy” (Wright with Kuentzel 2004, p. 13), he called out in desperation for God to “Do something!,” and God came through with such blessed assurance that he started singing the hymn of the same name. In Loder’s second transformative experience, during his near-fatal injury in the auto accident, he reports that he felt “two solid assurances” (1981/1989, p. 10)—the depth of his love for his family, and the conviction “that this disaster had a purpose.” Though he almost died, Loder recalls that his “life “was never in doubt” because “life was pouring into me from a gracious source beyond the power of that accident to damage or destroy me” (p. 11).

*Openness and freedom.* Perhaps the element of the *telos* of transcendent experience about which Loder and Hunt are most closely in agreement is its capacity to increase a person’s openness and freedom. For Loder, “[t]he freedom generated by genuine insight”—which he sees as one form of “the knight’s move” or a transforming moment—“draws disparate elements together. This movement toward coherence is matched simultaneously by an open-ended expansion of consciousness and the power to choose—even *against* the convergence attained, or *for* it.” (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 248). Hunt likewise names an attribute of openness as one marker that differentiates the sometimes psychotic-like phenomena of a mystical experience from that of mental illness, which tends instead to result in a sense of stasis (2000, p. 362). “Transpersonal openness,” or the “positive movement toward the full openness of the numinous,” conveys “an ineffability and ‘not knowing’” that is “the very opposite of the stasis and stoppage inherent in both a fixed artistic product and in the characterization of any

specific experience as ‘this is it’” (p. 388). Both Loder and Hunt see a dynamism and movement in this type of openness.

*Developmental progression.* The sense of movement brought about by transformative experiences is not only dramatic, as in an unexpected “knight’s move,” but often entails helping foster “normal” human development—whether this process is understood psychologically or theologically. Hunt notes that “the common conclusion of Boisen, Bowers, and Starbuck [is] that numinous experience, whatever else it involves, unblocks and/or accelerates normal life-span development—especially in the identity and relatedness issues of early and mid-adulthood” (Hunt 2000, p. 371). He cites the early psychologist of religion Edwin Starbuck’s conclusion that adolescent conversion experiences, for example, “can lead to ‘the formation of a new ego, a fresh point of reference for mental states . . . . The individual learns to transfer himself from a centre of self-activity into an organ of revelation of universal being, and to live a life of affection for and oneness with the larger life outside’” (Hunt 2000, p. 376).<sup>194</sup> Similarly, laced throughout Loder’s book on human development, *The Logic of the Spirit*, is the conceptualization he and Jim Neidhardt first set forth in *The Knight’s Move* that human “spiritual development consists in increased access between the ego and the Divine center” (1992, p. 284) and that transformative spiritual experiences can increase this connection, sometimes exponentially.

*Spiritual character.* Finally, both Loder and Hunt agree that the ultimate *telos* of a transcendent encounter is the spiritual fruits it produces in the life of the person afterward. Hunt, in describing the differences between the outcomes of mystical experiences and (the sometimes phenomenologically similar-looking) psychotic episodes,

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<sup>194</sup> Citing Starbuck 1899, p. 130, 147.

portrays the former as involving a “lived moral dimension” signified by “the attitudes of spontaneity, ‘letting be,’ and compassion,” by “‘redemption’ where the person finally comes into harmony with his/her highest values” (2000, p. 364)—or, to use “the language of Boisen (1936), . . . the phenomena of ‘spiritual victory’” (Hunt 2000, p. 355).

Drawing upon classic writings by William James (1902), Marghanita Laski (1961), Abraham Maslow (1962), A. H. Almaas (1988), and Michael Washburn (1994) on mystical and conversion experiences, Hunt gives “a compendium of . . . claimed changes in sense of self, conduct, and value” (2000, p. 365) that can follow in their wake:

- 1) An attitude of equanimity and acceptance, or ‘yea-saying,’ with a resulting appreciation of life . . . as a . . . gift . . .
- 2) A sense of autonomy and detachment . . .
- 3) An authentic and spontaneous allowing of oneself to be seen by others as one truly is . . .
- 4) A change in values . . . toward altruism and compassion . . . [and]
- 5) A felt cognitive enhancement and clarity . . . (Hunt 2000, p. 365)

In his 2006 article exploring “The Truth Value of Mystical Experience,” he names several times the potential results of increased freedom, gratitude, compassion, and faith. Loder would probably heartily agree with all of these qualities and would consider them all to be signs of the “way of love” that “Christocentric transformation” brings (1981/1989, p. 176-177). His own description of this redemptive process of convictional knowing is that the person is

disclosed in one’s central self-contradiction, . . . [yet] find[s] this very condition indwelt and suffused with the potentiality of new being; . . . then, comes the consummation, and with it a new integration of the self-conflicted fragments of the original disclosure: the Knower [God in Christ], who repeatedly brings something out of nothing, resolution out of dissolution, beauty out of chaos, and healing out of brokenness, constitutes the self in *himself* and the self’s world as *his* own. . . . to be known is to experience the deep release of self-destruction destroyed, and the positive power of new being. . . . to affirm and celebrate with others the self as spirit, . . . the void as the dark chrysalis of new being in the face of the Holy One whose love persistently ‘lets be.’ (1981/1989, p. 179-180)

Loder adds that “the only way to abide in the transformation” is “to continue to love as one has been loved”; “the only way to participate in it is to give love as it was given” (p. 180).

#### Further Distinctions between Loder and Hunt

Looking back over the previous two sections covering James Loder’s and Harry Hunt’s thoughts about the nature and (potential) purpose of transcendent, transformative experiences, one way to summarize the discussion is that both Loder and Hunt view these experiences not as an end in themselves, but as a means for something else, something (or things) potentially very good. However, they hold different understandings of what this particular means *means*. These different interpretations both stem from, and align with, their different theological and methodological contexts. For Hunt, mystical experiences, which tend to happen to transliminal people, help make explicit the “dimensions that are actually implicit within all human experience” (2006, p. 33). For Loder, they are all that and also much more.

One way of articulating Loder’s and Hunt’s divergence upon this point is with the question Hunt asks in his 2006 article. “If,” as it seems, the kind of life, love, and bliss that can be accessed through mystical experience is “a ‘gift,’ must there be a ‘giver?’” (p. 20). He goes on to state his answer: “Not necessarily.” Later he explains further that he is coming from a similar place to William James’ famous caution in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) “that all specific doctrines that seek to represent conceptually the felt sense of the sacred amount to ‘over-beliefs’—overly specified ‘whats’ that must ultimately fail to capture a primary ‘that’” (Hunt 2006, p. 29). This stance does not mean that Hunt is claiming transcendent experience does *not* come from a

transcendent God (however named), or that he would say Loder's theological beliefs about the Holy Spirit's agency in giving transforming moments are wrong; instead, he is intentionally remaining agnostic, reminding us that this sort of "over-belief" is nonfalsifiable and therefore unprovable (Popper 1963, p. 48). In his earlier 2000 article, Hunt, again drawing on James, warns of

avoiding the twin dangers of false reductionism ('medical materialism') and 'over-belief.' . . . Those concentrating on the existential manifestations of the spiritual need to recall that such experience taken 'literally' is over-belief and that not all talk of 'mediating processes' is reductionistic. Those centering on 'process' need to be clear, with James, that no findings with respect to arousal, dopamine, or cross-modal synesthetic metaphor can prove that the experiences so mediated are, as such, either illusion or truth. (Hunt 2000, p. 390-391)

Loder, however, as a theologian and minister, could be viewed as having unique expertise in such "over-beliefs." Gauging from his writings, it is likely he not only would not have shied away from the "over" part, but would have heartily and unapologetically agreed that over-belief is his methodological intention in more ways than one. After all, part of his carefully delineated, Chalcedonian model for relating theology and science is that it is *asymmetrical*: for all of Loder's deep respect for the human sciences, just as he was known for having profound respect for the human spirit, he viewed scientific psychology (whether human developmental psychology or the psychology of religion) as ultimately subordinate to theology even as the human spirit is a sacred yet subordinate reflection of the Holy Spirit (1998, p. xii-xiii, p. 35)—because in his theocentric convictional understanding, science, physics, psychology, human beings, and their transformative experiences are all relational revelations of the Divine. Thus, the "over"-beliefs, the "higher" spiritual level of reality, are intricately intertwined with, and necessary to fully

understand, the “lower” levels of their material manifestation in a way that is reciprocal but not reversible (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 54-57).

In addition to Loder’s and Hunt’s different methodological and theological positions, there are two further points in which their thoughts on transcendent, transformative experiences diverge in ways that are relevant to our exploration of transliminality. The first is that Hunt’s writings, especially his 2007 article on “Dark Nights of the Soul,” remind (and warn) us that radical, seemingly transcendent experiences are not all goodness and light—a point also borne out by both Jung’s and St. Teresa’s autobiographical descriptions. “Spiritual metapathologies,” which, Hunt emphasizes,

can be specifically stirred up by intense spiritual/mystical experiences[. . .] can show the same inner dynamics and phenomenology as schizoaffective conditions—including grandiosity, painful social withdrawal, and especially . . . despair and loss of all sense of meaning. (Hunt 2007, p. 209)

Similarly, transpersonal psychologists have repeatedly found “that high levels of genuine meditative realization often lead to emotional crises related to unresolved narcissistic and psychodynamic issues,” making it difficult even “for many advanced practitioners to tell the difference between ‘transcendence and dissociation’” (Hunt 2000, p. 386). I imagine Loder would stress that these types of experiences are very different from what he is talking about in his investigations of knight’s-move epiphanies and transforming moments, and that when an outcome involves despair and meaninglessness, we are dealing with an unusual event caused not by the Holy Spirit’s creative love but by psychosis. Even so, it is striking that while some psychiatric patients do have “spontaneous remissions . . . immediately after white-light experiences,” which are presumably mystical and transformative, in other instances, “meditative practitioners”—

who appear to start out mentally well and are actively seeking something like the Divine or pure reality—“might ‘go insane’” (Hunt 1995, p. 214). Loder does not address this difficult reality in his writings, though it is possible he might be thinking of this sort of scenario when he discusses how the powerful contents of one’s imagination cannot be taken at face value but require evaluation as to their truth-content (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 242). He would likely interpret despair and meaninglessness as signs of the void, yet does not discuss the problem presented when the void occurs without being perceptibly accompanied or transcended by the Holy, albeit in the wake of seemingly spiritual experience.<sup>195</sup>

The second remaining point upon which Loder and Hunt do not overlap is the question of whether there are individual differences in what kind of person is more apt to undergo radical, transformative experiences. As discussed above, Hunt states in several of his articles that there is a variously-named personality dimension involving some combination of psychosis-proneness, absorption, and fantasy-proneness—what I am hypothesizing is best understood as transliminality—that seems to increase the likelihood that a person will have transpersonal, mystical, and/or psychotic altered-state experiences. He also, intriguingly, draws upon research connecting the transcendent versus dissociative outcomes of these states with “individual differences in physical balance and visual-spatial skills” (2000, p. 383),<sup>196</sup> though the causal direction is unknown. Loder, though he does write of the vital importance of the human capacity for imagination (e.g., Loder & Neidhardt 1992, pp. 239-249), does not engage much with the

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<sup>195</sup> Loder does consider briefly the crucifixion-like experience of “the ‘dark night of the soul’” in 1981/1989, p. 121 and n13, but stresses its relative and temporary nature, which does not always appear to be the case.

<sup>196</sup> See also Hunt 2007, pp. 222-227.

notion of individual differences in personality or capability. I imagine that perhaps this line of inquiry simply lay outside his primary interest in “[h]ow the Holy Spirit teaches, comforts, afflicts, and leads into ‘all truth’” (Loder 1981/1989, p. 20). It is also possible that focusing on temperamental or aptitudinal factors could have veered uncomfortably close to the question of theodicy, in this case, of why God’s Spirit appears to intervene in powerfully transformative ways in some people’s lives and not others’; and Loder “tend[s] to agree with those who say theodicy is presumptuous” (p. 13). My own stance on the matter is that even if the *whys* cannot be known—why some people are more transliminal than others, more resilient than others, why some people have the higher IQs and other cognitive factors that seem to slant their unusual experiences in a mystical rather than psychotic direction; why, for that matter, some people, transliminal or not, have disastrous childhoods and others enjoy parenting and cultural contexts that allow their full creative potential to blossom—we can help propagate “the way of love” and human flourishing by learning as much as we can about the *hows*: how these combinations of experiences manifest in the brain and body, how they tend to occur in patterned ways, how this particular kind of personality can steward its considerable gifts and steer clear of its considerable vulnerabilities. Perhaps this work, too, using psychological information for pastoral theological ends, probably a little less asymmetrically than Loder would like and a little more confessionally than Hunt would prefer, is guided by a Spirit who transforms and leads into truth not only instantaneously but incrementally.



## St. Teresa's, Jung's, and Morissette's Contributions to the Conversation

From our case studies we see examples of both approaches. All three of our transliminal “geniuses” share in common a combination of instantaneous, life-changing, rare, and sometimes transcendent experiences—and of finding ways to slow down and channel the new layers of being that were opened up by these experiences into the more incremental, ritual practices of Christian contemplation, active imagination, or embodied meditation. As we discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, Teresa, Jung, and Morissette also each benefit(ed) from considerable inherent abilities, supportive selfobject relationships, and, conceivably, the resilience conferred by having to overcome challenges in childhood. Each of these factors likely contributed to the ego strength allowing them to metabolize their transliminal experiences into creative, spiritual, and/or psychological generativity. In this way (and the ways described in detail in preceding chapters), our case studies have confirmed much of what we expected based on Chapter 2's attempt to formulate some of the tenets of “Transliminality Theory.” Now, just as James Loder and Harry Hunt have given us additional theoretical lenses from theology and psychology to help understand the “ways and means” of the transcendent experiences transliminal people are likely to have, how does the (auto)biographical material from our case studies offer even further insights? How do St. Teresa of Ávila, C. G. Jung, and Alanis Morissette each expand and contribute to Transliminality Theory?

From St. Teresa, whose writings give us a taste of what it was like to be a gifted and highly transliminal nun many centuries ago, we receive the idea that there is “*method to the madness.*” Teresa provides us with detailed descriptions of a wide variety of possible manifestations of mystical or psychotic experience (or, in her context of

understanding, visions from God/Christ or of the devil), of the creative inspiration and spiritual growth that the former can bring, and the confusion and distress of the latter. And she provides a specific “technology” through her self-tested method of contemplative Christian prayer that is potentially valuable for anyone seeking intimacy with God, but also especially helpful in navigating the unusual perceptual events that often happen to someone with a receptive, transliminal temperament. Her orderly, systematic stages of prayer—the “mansions” or “rooms” a person can expect to encounter when entering the “interior castle” of the soul—offer grounding and context for the seeming *disorder*, the struggles (temptations) or chaos, that each phase of spiritual interiority can bring. Teresa’s classic text *The Interior Castle* as well as many sections of her other books provide a valuable resource to answer Harry Hunt’s critique that Christianity asks its adherents to “act in terms of an image of full spiritual realization for which they cannot possibly be ready” without offering them the technologies needed to acquire this level of development, analogous to Eastern religions’ “difficult but step by step techniques of meditation” (2012, p. 16). Furthermore, in addition to creating a methodical model of prayer particularly suited for her fellow high transliminals, St. Teresa implicitly reminds us of a simple, but important, principle to keep in mind: just as this mystic Doctor of the Church is careful to emphasize that mysticism is not given to everyone, and is not better or “higher” than other ways of being faithful,<sup>197</sup> our consideration of transliminality’s potentially increased access to a certain type of theological, transformative knowledge should be balanced by the realization that this type of temperament is neither “better” nor intrinsically “more spiritual” than any other variety of human personality.

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<sup>197</sup> See above, Chapter 4, p. 71-72, 82.

From Carl Jung's personal and professional experiences as a transliminal psychiatrist with many transliminal patients, we gain the assurance that there is "*meaning to the madness.*" Thanks to Jung's development of archetypal (or analytical) psychology, transliminals can be encouraged that the "extra" images, ideas, and perceptions they are accessing are not simply random, and perhaps not even confined to the workings of their own unconscious, but may hold a connection to the collective psyche (or collective unconscious) and reflect broader, cultural themes to which those with extra-crossable thresholds into consciousness are uniquely attuned. While not everyone will agree upon how to interpret potentially-archetypal percepts—Loder, for instance, praises Jung's "genius" in "disclos[ing] an order of the human personality that runs deeper than the study of ego development" (Loder 1981/1989, p. 145) but critiques Jung's view that "Christ is a symbol for the self" as an epistemological reversal (p. 139)—the notions of archetypes, individuation, integration of opposites, and active imagination provide a context for transpersonal meaning as well as the possibility of gaining some control over seemingly involuntary, sometimes scary, "shadow" processes. In other words, transliminal experiences (especially those involving psychosis) are not just phantasms that happen, but psychic events that can be moved through actively and volitionally, sometimes to extremely creative ends. Jung's contributions suggest that the trait of transliminality, rather than being a passive, innate characteristic that one either has or one doesn't, can be worked with, enhanced, or contained.

And finally, from our sensitive, transliminal artist Alanis Morissette, we garner the conviction that there is "*music to the madness.*" Morissette, through trial and error, has carefully crafted her life around what we might call an aesthetic spirituality, with

flavorful cooking, feng shui, essential oils, and even personal grooming all forming part of her day-to-day spiritual practices. Having encountered early in life the bliss of creative, transcendent flow states as well as the suffering of being over-attuned both to others' expectations and to the collective emotional timbre of her generation, she set out to understand her personality and relationships and to use her public platform to share her learnings with others. The same sensory sensibility that enabled her to compose diverse, multi-platinum albums of hit songs, she now also channels into creating an internal and external environment that provides her with much-needed solitude, physical grounding, and beauty. Like Kierkegaard's knight of faith,<sup>198</sup> who "manifests a detached involvement with his world that allows him to have a non-possessive delight in particularity and a fascination with the ordinary as a bearer of the extraordinary" (Loder & Neidhardt 1992, p. 279), Morissette has "return[ed] transformed" from the "intensification[s]" of fame, breakdown, India, heartache, marriage and motherhood "to reappropriate the Aesthetic . . . in light of [her] vision." Her emphasis on balance and embodiment—which aligns with Harry Hunt's observations about the importance of these aspects in atypical experiences that are auspicious rather than dissociative—highlights for us that transliminality is not just about internal, psychological states and perceptions, but can be affected and supported by the physical, the particular, and the concrete.

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<sup>198</sup> An image used throughout Kierkegaard's writings, particularly *Fear and Trembling*, which Loder and Neidhardt (1992) in turn incorporate into their expositions of intensification (p. 279), transparency (p. 100-101), and particularity (p. 104-105), as well as the title of their book.

## Summary

In this chapter I have described the lives, writings, and thought of the late practical theologian James Loder and the academic psychologist Harry Hunt. Both scholars were deeply interested in transformative, transcendent (and we might posit transliminal) experiences and their effects upon people's lives. I have attempted to construct a correlational dialogue around Loder's and Hunt's understandings of transcendent experiences' nature (*ontos*) and potential purpose (*telos*), noting their considerable agreement upon broad phenomenological aspects as well as their divergence in how they have interpreted their observations coming from different disciplinary and theological standpoints. Then I incorporated additional contributions from the lives of our three case studies, St. Teresa, C. G. Jung, and Alanis Morissette, who teach us that there is method, meaning, and music to the apparent "madness" that often accompanies transliminality.

Our next and final chapter will unpack these ideas further, describing the deepened, more integrative understanding of transliminality we have now gleaned and identifying several major practical implications in doing clinical work and pastoral care with highly transliminal people.

## CHAPTER 7

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

“I learned to keep my head from something Paul said / About keeping the fruit of the Spirit from the chorus down to the hook” —M. Ward<sup>199</sup>  
“Don’t you ever tame your demons / But always keep them on a leash” —Hozier<sup>200</sup>

Our investigation into transliminality was launched from a very practical concern: can examining the connections among creativity, mystical experience, and psycho“pathology” help people with this temperament to ameliorate its vulnerabilities so that they encounter less intense suffering, and so that they and the world can benefit from their often prodigious gifts? Both research and clinical experience encourage me that the answer is “yes.” In this final chapter, I will summarize the more complex understanding of transliminality we have attained from combining personality theory and neuroscience, three case studies’ lived experiences, and psychological and theological interpretations. Beginning here is important because understanding informs action: how we think about something affects what we do. I will then give eight specific recommendations for how pastoral caregivers and psychotherapists can use this information to guide their work with people who are highly transliminal.

#### **A Deepened, Integrative Understanding of Transliminality**

From looking at personality theory (as in Chapter 2), we gained an understanding of transliminality as a measurable personality trait encompassing paranormal (or we

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<sup>199</sup> “Epistemology,” by M. Ward, on *Hold Time* (2009).

<sup>200</sup> “Arsonist’s Lullaby,” by Hozier, on *From Eden* (2014).

might say supernatural) beliefs, magical ideation, manic-like experience, creative personality, mystical experience, imaginative absorption, fantasy-proneness, hyperaesthesia, and a positive attitude toward dream interpretation—in short, different manifestations of a heightened tendency (or a narrowed, more crossable threshold) for psychological material to move in and out of consciousness. I have additionally speculated that transliminality might be viewed as a combination of high sensory-processing sensitivity (also known as highly sensitive personality, HSP) and high sensation-seeking (HSS). From neuroscience, we acquired evidence that highly transliminal people have different resting-brain EEG patterns, reduced dopamine gating, and altered cognitive patterns as compared with less transliminal individuals. From St. Teresa, Carl Jung, and Alanis Morissette, we have seen the wide range spanning from creative, spiritual flourishing to severe, even psychotic suffering—a combination of extremes that appears to be typical of transliminals; and we have witnessed the personal importance and sociocultural generativity of their finding method, meaning, and music amid the “madness.” From academic psychologist Harry Hunt we have gleaned a healthy respect for the “dark side” of transliminal, transcendent experience, an appreciation of its heightened mirroring of the spatial metaphors that construct our consciousness, and an awareness of the role of balance and proprioception in whether altered states ascend into the mystic or disintegrate into psychosis. And from practical theologian James Loder, we have attained a metaphysical model for how the creative, transformative moments so accessible to transliminals exemplify the “logic” of the Holy Spirit and serve as microcosms for the relational nature of reality opening human beings to the way of love.

Transliminality offers one possibility for merging a “Freudian” awareness of psychobiological factors in religious experience with a “Jungian” approach to taking it seriously as a potential source of meaning. On the one hand, people who exhibit high levels of transliminality appear to have certain temperamental and neurobiological characteristics such as acute environmental responsiveness, a divergent thinking style, a wide affective range. On the other, most transliminals perceive their experiences to be primarily positive in nature, a source of creativity, meaning, and sometimes religious numinousness. A combination of perspectives that merges 3<sup>rd</sup>-person psychological measurement with 1<sup>st</sup>-person subjective experience need not conflict, but can offer two alternate lenses for understanding a type of phenomena present, in differing degrees and forms, throughout human life. Likewise, theological and psychological interpretations can challenge and inform one another. Theology, for instance, suggests that creativity is not purely about cognition and emotion, but also a social and quite possibly spiritual process. Psychology indicates in return that if mystical experiences are at least as connected with a physiological propensity (temperament) as with religious or spiritual depth or maturity, we ought not to assign inherent value (or danger) to them. Instead, their value is in their practical consequences, just as we assess creativity by its results rather than its potential.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner believed that “the mystics are like us in kind but not in degree. They have the same humanity we have, the same basic psychological structure, but their particular sensitivity to the transcendent and the intensity of their religious experiences set them apart” (Welch 1996, p. 136). His use of the word *intensity* is striking, as one way of conceptualizing transliminal persons is that they are more apt



than most to undergo the type of intensification process that Loder and Neidhardt describe in *The Knight's Move* (1992, p. 267-275). In this intensification model, derived from social anthropologist Anthony Wallace's writings on prophetic revitalization movements and neuropsychologist Barbara Lex's studies on the biological mechanisms of insight, Loder and Neidhardt propose that eras of cultural stagnation and disillusionment proceed until a visionary prophet or leader emerges (p. 269) who can usher in a gestalt shift. This person's "vision, generated with sufficient personal depth and intensity by one who has taken into himself [sic] the ills of his society, mediates a new world with power to heal that entire society" (p. 270).<sup>201</sup> While such a powerful macro-outcome is surely statistically rare, the micro-level processes by which certain individuals experience the kind of visions and insights that bring an unpredicted "knight's move" to their milieu appear to involve a passion-fueled, simultaneous sympathetic and parasympathetic autonomic activation sequence whose intensification "presses unification and gestalt-like manifestation upon awareness" (p. 271) in the ways that transliminal individuals so often describe. The manner of mind that is "wired" this way, as Harry Hunt points out, may be prone to illusion—or it could be "just the sort of telescope needed to see spiritual truth" (1995, p. 219).

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<sup>201</sup> Elaine Aron hypothesizes that the apparently consistent minority of highly sensitive persons throughout history have been the "priestly advisors" who offset the "warrior kings." Today they are often "counselors, historians, teachers, scholars," "upholders of justice," "writers," "philosophers, judges, artists, researchers, theologians, therapists," and "plain conscientious citizens" (1997, p. 17-18).

## Tending the Transliminal Temperament<sup>202</sup>

Now that we have developed an in-depth understanding of transliminality from a multidisciplinary perspective, what do we *do* with this knowledge? This is not just an academic question. Providing insightful psychotherapy and pastoral care with transliminal people matters because we have lost far too many of them to suicide.<sup>203</sup> Psychosis, depression (bipolar and otherwise), and addictions may merely be words on a page when discussing disordered thought patterns and dopamine regulation, but in real life they are devastating, sometimes even deadly. Those of us who are practitioners can walk a tightrope between over-pathologizing unconventional experiences or behavior, on the one hand, and, on the other, failing to take deep human pain seriously because we are blinded by the giftedness that accompanies it. Either error can bring serious consequences, and we need more research in this area to increase our *phonēsis* (practical wisdom).<sup>204</sup>

As a professional pianist and pastoral psychotherapist living at the buckle of the Bible Belt<sup>205</sup> in Music City,<sup>206</sup> transliminal artists—or people with an “artistic temperament,” or “highly creative individuals”—are my community. Yet, aside from various resources on using creative practices as a tool for psychotherapy, little has been written about the dynamics and implications of practicing pastoral care and counseling *with* people who are extremely creative. My hope is that this project can provide a

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<sup>202</sup> An earlier version of the following section was first published in Kreiselmaier 2015, p. 176-182.

<sup>203</sup> I speak here from raw personal experience, but the list of creative, probably highly transliminal people in the public eye who have died from drug overdose and/or suicide is long—Robin Williams, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Winehouse, Heath Ledger, Kurt Cobain, to name but a few.

<sup>204</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 7-8.

<sup>205</sup> A colloquial term for the Southeastern United States, whose public culture tends to be more explicitly Evangelical Christian than in other regions of the nation.

<sup>206</sup> A historic nickname for Nashville, Tennessee, due to its significance in the country music industry.

starting point to help address this important lacuna. In one way, just as highly transliminal persons embody more intense versions of qualities that all human beings share (such as emotional highs and lows, effects from early childhood conditioning, protection from cognitive strengths or vulnerability from a lack thereof), the things that high transliminals need for mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing are the same things we all need: supportive relationships, regular physical movement, communities of shared meaning, solitude and “down time,” opportunities to use our capabilities in a fulfilling way. However, my research also leads me to believe that there are particular approaches that can be especially helpful, as well as caveats we ought to be aware of, when we have an opportunity to practice soul care with transliminals. Just as highly sensitive or “[r]eactive’ children have . . . been found to benefit more from interventions” (Aron et al. 2012, p. 6), highly sensitive, transliminal adults are usually very responsive to their relationships and environments, so that well-timed, thoughtful interventions hold the potential to prevent serious suffering and bring significant benefits.

Below I offer eight specific recommendations, the first four addressed to pastoral caregivers (but applicable to everyone) and the latter four primarily for psychotherapists, regarding how we might apply the findings of the previous chapters in our efforts to help transliminal persons thrive.

### Recommendations for Pastoral Caregivers

Long before the evolution of contemporary psychotherapeutic modalities, a vast body of clinical wisdom accumulated over multiple millennia within the world’s spiritual and religious traditions—many of which have a long history of working through “dark

nights of the soul” and living out the awe, ecstasy, and meaning of transcendence. My first suggestion is simple, yet can be immensely helpful:

1. *Take transliminal persons’ unusual experiences seriously and connect them with resources in their faith tradition.*<sup>207</sup> Part of pastoral care with mystic, artistic, and other transliminal folks in our communities involves matching them with resources that can increase their wellbeing. Thus, offering pastoral care to people of this type of “unequal temperament”<sup>208</sup> includes introducing them to biographies of Mothers and Fathers in the faith who had similar inclinations and experiences, and who learned to channel their energies and interpret their perceptions using spiritual disciplines. St. Teresa of Ávila’s *The Interior Castle* (1577) or St. John of the Cross’s *Dark Night* (1578-79) and *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* (1581-85) can provide companionship from kindred souls, as well as templates for processing the different seasons and phases they encounter in their journey of spiritual formation. Using the prayer practices of Christian mystics, such as following St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* (1533) or listening to the beautiful hymns of St. Hildegard of Bingen,<sup>209</sup> may resonate with the introspective, aesthetic nature of many transliminals.

However, it is also vitally important for spiritual caregivers to remain aware that meditative practices can pose certain risks for transliminal persons. Hence, my second recommendation:

2. *Encourage contemplative spiritual practices, but with certain precautions.*

With highly transliminal people’s sensitivity to all kinds of stimuli, whether sensory,

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<sup>207</sup> For a remarkable example of creativity and flexibility in integrating faith with treatment, please see Bilu et al.’s 1990 article, “Paradise Regained: ‘Miraculous Healing’ in an Israeli Psychiatric Clinic.”

<sup>208</sup> For an explication of this metaphor, please see Kreiselmaier 2015, especially p. 163-166.

<sup>209</sup> For a full discography, see Roberge 2013. Recordings of many of Hildegard’s chants are also available at song shaman Norma Gentile’s website, <http://www.healingchants.com/hct.html>.

spiritual, or unconscious, they are more likely to be overwhelmed by material (for example, feelings, phrases, ideas, images, sensations) that arises during prayer or meditation. This pattern has been observed primarily in the context of Eastern religions, particularly when they are transplanted into Western cultures (Grof & Grof 1989; Britten 2011a, 2011b), yet my hunch is that there are enough similarities between the practices of, for instance, Buddhist insight meditation and Christian centering prayer, that transliminal people who practice extended forms of contemplation may open themselves to certain “symptoms” regardless of the spiritual tradition of their context.

In 1980, transpersonal psychologists Stanislav and Christina Grof created the term “spiritual emergency” to name the distress that can ensue as an unforeseen side effect of spiritual growth. More recently, clinical psychologist and advanced Buddhist meditation practitioner Willoughby Britten of Brown University has founded the Dark Night Project, now called “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience” (Britten 2013),<sup>210</sup> to track and study these types of spiritual emergencies. Some of the symptoms commonly reported by people going through “the difficult stages of the contemplative path” (Britten 2011a) include an “increased sampling rate of reality,” “stimulus overload,” cognitive disorientation, depersonalization, losing one’s sense of time and self, “existential primal fear,” manic euphoria, depressive nihilism, feelings of electricity or vibrational energy, other perceptual changes, and usually “a de-repression of [whatever] psychological material” a person carries (2011b). Similarly, Harry Hunt has observed that “the meditative path [can] exacerbate narcissistic and schizoid dilemmas in the [person’s] sense of self,” resulting in “withdrawal, emotional flattening, and personal inflating and

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<sup>210</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 17, note 32 above.

grandiosity, along with . . . anxieties concerning disappearing, bursting, and fragmentation” (1995, p. 215).

Many sufferers of such “spiritual emergencies” are diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder by Western doctors unfamiliar with the pitfalls of the meditative path (2011a). While Britten and her team’s research has not yet elucidated why some people are more vulnerable to these experiences than others, or why some spiritual emergencies last much longer than others, they have found that the average duration for a “dark night” stage so severe that it interferes with normal life/work functioning is an astonishing 3.4 *years* (2011b)—enough to give any spiritual (and/or mental health) practitioner pause. It would stand to reason that highly transliminal people, whose thresholds into conscious awareness are already very open, may be especially susceptible to entering these complex, overaroused states.<sup>211</sup>

While passing through the dark night may be unavoidable if one is to experience spiritual growth (Britten 2011b),<sup>212</sup> psychologists like Britten, Grof, and Grof are committed to making sure that people who suffer these devastating seasons find the support they need to come out on the other side. Strikingly, I have yet to come across a researcher in this area who recommends that people discontinue their spiritual paths altogether, though temporary breaks from introspective practices are sometimes advised (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 41, citing Grof & Grof 1989). Likewise, my suggestion here for pastoral care would be to make sure that people who seem especially transliminal have

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<sup>211</sup> For helpful information in discerning whether someone’s symptomatology reflects a spiritual emergency or an impending psychotic break, please see Lukoff et al. 1998, especially p. 39-40.

<sup>212</sup> A Buddhist teacher answered Britten’s question of how many practicing meditators undergo harrowing experiences, “100%.” This answer is only one teacher’s opinion, and again, it is uncertain how far the phenomenon extends to Christian contemplative practice. Yet the decades-long dark nights of Mother Teresa and, of course, St. John of the Cross come to mind.

some sort of close-knit community support—or, if possible, an experienced spiritual director—before beginning in-depth engagement with contemplative prayer practices. It also seems advisable to share information with them upfront about the physiological “side effects” that can sometimes come upon sensitive people as they move through intensive spiritual practices. And attending shared rituals within one’s faith tradition, such as the centuries-old Christian services of the Daily Office, can help offset dramatic interior events with the calming rhythms of community worship. These suggestions also overlap with my third recommendation for pastoral care with transliminal people:

3. “*Ground*” *esoteric perceptions in the body, nature, and community*. Though it is seldom precisely defined, the notion of grounding appears in many authors’ writings on how to offset the interior, often abstract, pull of transpersonal experience and come back “down to earth,” so to speak. Here St. Teresa of Ávila’s 16<sup>th</sup>-century advice still holds—go where you can “see the sky and take a walk” (Matz 1996). Grof and Grof similarly suggest “regular light exercise” and gardening, as well as a change of “diet to include more ‘grounding food’ (such as red meat)” (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 41). Another way of grounding the self in the body is through singing, which requires whole-body coordination;<sup>213</sup> many spiritual communities provide opportunities for the centuries-old spiritual practice of singing hymns and chants. An additional ancient Christian practice combining body, mind, and spirit is to prayer-walk around a labyrinth,<sup>214</sup> a structure resembling a combination of mandala and maze in which an intricate pathway winds around, eventually leading to the center.

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<sup>213</sup> Dr. Sohee Park points out that singing in effect conveys an antipsychotic function: “Because singing a song involves vocalization and language areas of the brain, it ties up the language production system and effectively shuts down auditory hallucinations”—in other words, “when you sing you cannot hear voices” (2016, note to author).

<sup>214</sup> For a brief history, see <http://www.creativeprayer.com/labyrinths/history-of-labyrinths/>.

It is possible that the kinesthetic practice of walking a labyrinth may be beneficial for an additional reason. As I discussed in Chapter 6,<sup>215</sup> Harry Hunt makes a strong case that the emotional timbre of unusual psychological states rises or falls proportionally with one's "sense of embodiment" and spatial orientation or lack thereof. Hunt theorizes that the therapeutic effect of bodily "grounding" involves the vestibular balance system, which was observed by Paul Schilder in 1942 to have specific deficits in people suffering from "psychiatric hallucinatory syndromes," and his research shows that "the more integrative transformations of consciousness associated with spontaneous mystical experiences, meditative states, and lucid and creative/metaphoric forms of dreaming are correlated with superior performance on . . . measures of physical balance and spatial skills" (Hunt 2007, p. 220-221). Thus, I suspect that bodywork practices such as yoga, Feldenkrais Method, and the Alexander Technique (a mind-body method found in many music schools that promotes subtle relaxation through retraining kinesthetic awareness) may exert additional prophylactic benefits on high transliminals by indirectly strengthening their sense of ipseity (selfhood).

4. For specifically Christian pastoral care contexts, I have an additional, possibly controversial suggestion: *Dare, following the example of Jesus, to use suggestibility and altered states in God's service.* These characteristics may not fit into our current cultural milieu as naturally as in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine, but they are part of how some people are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14)—and just as we encounter unexpectedly rich musical nuances when we bypass the modern standard of tuning keyboard instruments to "equal temperament," we open ourselves to gifts of spiritual

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<sup>215</sup> Please see above, especially p. 198.



sensitivity, intuitive depth, and transcendent experience when we seek to understand the transliminal artists among us and use this understanding to inform our pastoral care.

The authors of the New Testament gospels tell us that during the three or so years of Jesus' ministry, he went around healing people, performing miracles, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. The context of many of his miracles involves conditions where people would be in a more vulnerable or "open" state of consciousness (similar to where extra-transliminal folks live much of the time?): for instance, when he raises Lazarus (John 11:1-45), a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), and Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:49-56) from the dead, their families and communities have already entered into grief and mourning, with the scriptural accounts describing emotional weeping and wailing. When he walks on water out to his disciples' boat (Matthew 14:22-36, Mark 6:45-56, John 16:21), it is in the middle of a frightening storm, and the disciples' fear has them in such a state of overarousal that at first they think they are seeing a ghost. After each of these events,<sup>216</sup> word spreads, and people come to believe in and follow Jesus, bringing more people to him for healing and exorcism. Additionally, before the excruciating events of his torture and crucifixion, Jesus brings his closest three disciples onto a mountaintop where they see his clothes become blindingly white as he begins a conversation with the long-dead seminal prophets Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10, Luke 9:28-36)—an altered state of consciousness if ever there was one!—perhaps to impress upon their minds an indelible image of his glory that they can hold onto during what lies ahead.

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<sup>216</sup> Except for the healing of Jairus' daughter, which is one of the times Jesus tells witnesses not to say anything about what they've seen (Mark 5:43, Luke 8:56)—although if Matthew's account (9:26) is correct, apparently this admonition did not work!

In seven out of his eighteen recorded healings, Jesus declares to the person, “Your faith has made you well (Norberg & Webber 1998, p. 42). To the paralyzed man lowered through the roof, prior to telling him to take up his mat and walk, Jesus affirms, “Your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2-8, Mark 2:12, Luke 5:17-26). We do not know the causes behind the illnesses and paralyses cured by Jesus, but if there were psychosocial factors involved (for example, a psychosomatic element of being “paralyzed” by guilt), it appears that Jesus—like shamanic healers and psychotherapists the world over (Frank & Frank 1991)—used the gateway of suffering persons’ suggestibility, their vulnerability, their openness to a new and better experience, to transmit divine restoration. Was the means of healing something we do not yet understand? Was it a form of energetic touch or a sophisticated placebo effect? The answer is a holy mystery. But I would assert that making use of placebo and the power of suggestion in our pastoral caregiving need not be feared, only respected and used through prayer, if the fruits these may yield are faith, healing, and freedom.

#### Recommendations for Therapists

While pastoral theology suggests that healthy faith communities hold the potential<sup>217</sup> to provide the kind of “grounding” social and spiritual context that benefits highly transliminal people like St. Teresa, there are times when they may need additional companionship and expertise from trained practitioners in the mental health professions. I offer the following four additional recommendations for psychotherapists who encounter transliminal patients, particularly when they are facing decompensation but not severely enough to require hospitalization.

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<sup>217</sup> Though, as we have seen in Jung’s and Morissette’s experiences, this potential is not always actualized.

5. *Balance an appreciation of the transliminal personality with an awareness that pathology may also be present.* Not all persons with high levels of transliminality are renowned mystics, groundbreaking psychiatrists, famous artists, prolific writers, or powerful shamans. Particularly where there are not enough “cognitive protective factors”<sup>218</sup> or sufficient ego strength to mitigate the effects of a sensitive personality overwhelmed by various traumata, persons who are very transliminal may present with and require treatment for psychological disorders. This reality should not stop us from, and in fact it may be quite clinically useful to, look past patients’ apparent delusions and/or hallucinations to their possible roots in transliminal “over-consciousness.”<sup>219</sup> Sometimes apparent psycho“pathology” is only apparent.

On the other hand, because working with transliminal, highly creative individuals can be so appealing, interesting, and even inspirational, it can be tempting to become seduced by our high-functioning transliminal clients’ gifts to where we underestimate their levels of suffering and vulnerability. As Harry Hunt points out, “To the extent . . . that there have been early deficits/traumas in sense of self and self esteem, then meditative and spontaneous self actualization”—the peak experiences or altered states of consciousness to which transliminals are so prone—“will exacerbate these vulnerabilities in a more overtly schizoid and narcissistic fashion” (2000, p. 370-371). Jung’s difficulties during the years of World War I following his break with Freud might be understood in this light.

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<sup>218</sup> See above, Chapter 2, p. 39-41.

<sup>219</sup> Psychoanalytic therapist and psychiatric nurse practitioner Jennifer Scroggie has observed (2014, personal conversation) that in psychodynamic terms, high transliminals find it easier to bypass the repression barrier.

Just as whether a phenomenologically similar altered-state experience goes in the direction of psychosis or mysticism depends in part upon social status (Hunt 1995, p. 214), a transliminal person's eventual outcome or prognosis can often be predicted by her or his "early personal history and characterological dynamics" (Hunt 2003, p. 5).<sup>220</sup> As Hunt describes in his "Dark Nights of the Soul" article,

We get a picture here of a background, partly genetic, predisposition to a sensitive "openness,"<sup>221</sup> which crossed by trauma is more likely to lead to dissociative vulnerability, while with familial support, and in the absence of major developmental destabilization in sense of self, will be more constructively used in the context of creativity and spirituality. (2007, p. 222)

This observation matches Elaine Aron and colleagues' research showing that highly sensitive persons (which, I am hypothesizing, would include but not be limited to, high transliminals) who report negative childhood environments tend to score high on measures of adult negative affect, whereas those without troubled childhoods conversely show *less* negative affect than average adults (Aron et al. 2012).<sup>222</sup>

6. *Consider therapeutic alternatives to medication.* Sometimes pharmacological treatment is clearly necessary and beneficial, as when a patient is suffering from schizophrenia or severe bipolar disorder (manic depression). However, patients are often reluctant to take psychoactive medicines because they feel that these dampen their emotional range and/or limit their creativity—a claim for which there is much anecdotal evidence.<sup>223</sup> From her research dealing with highly creative individuals, as well as her personal experience as a writer who has manic depression, psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison concludes that

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<sup>220</sup> See Hunt 2003, *Lives in Spirit*, for several psychobiographical examples.

<sup>221</sup> Citing McCrae et al. 2001.

<sup>222</sup> Please see Chapter 2 above, p. 48, for further discussion.

<sup>223</sup> Aron has also found that HSPs tend to be very sensitive to medications, often responding well to subclinical dosages but "develop[ing] unpleasant side effects at a dosage closer to 'normal'" (2010, p. 119).

Artists and writers represent a group at high risk for affective illness and should be assessed and counseled accordingly. Ideal treatment requires: a sensitive understanding of the possible benefits of mood disorders to creativity, as well as the severe liabilities, including the risk of suicide and of untreated depression and mania; use of available medications with awareness of side-effects potentially damaging to the creative process; minimization, whenever possible, of drug (especially lithium) levels; the recognition and sophisticated use of seasonal patterns in moods and productivity (for example, through self-charting moods with a visual analogue scale); and sensitivity to the possible role of alcohol and drugs in inducing, maintaining, or exacerbating mood states. (1989, p. 133)

Similarly, creativity researcher Shelley Carson explains,

Because highly creative people may rely on the cognitive manifestations of shared vulnerability to access altered states of consciousness that inform their work, they may be better served by treatment goals that aim for partial rather than complete neutralization of psychopathology symptoms. Creative people may prefer to tolerate higher levels of symptomatology in exchange for lower dosages of creativity-killing pharmaceuticals. They may also respond well to cognitive-behavioural interventions that target the interpretation of psychotic symptoms rather than the removal of such symptoms. (2011, p. 151)

However, I would add that cognitive-behavioral therapy is only one among many potentially helpful methods for exploring interpretations and meanings, and it seems likely that emotive, sensory-oriented, self-aware transliminal persons might respond best to more affectively toned, integrative, introspective approaches. Bilu and colleagues have demonstrated the potential of creative, metaphor-based therapy that, however unorthodox, is “sufficiently sensitive to the patient’s mythic world” (1990, p. 105) to enter into the meaning system of the patient and help bring about resolution of even the most severe, seemingly intractable, symptomatology. Likewise, Harry Hunt asserts throughout his writings that the “higher states” explored and encouraged by transpersonal psychology—and, we might presume, experienced by transliminal people—can stir up “fears, despair, grief, and hatreds,” “frustrations and confusions,” that can be ameliorated

and made “more comprehensible” by engaging in object-relational psychoanalysis (2003, p. 305).

If Hunt is correct about the role of spatial awareness and proprioception in altered-state experiences (as discussed above),<sup>224</sup> we can expect that highly transliminal persons would also benefit from physical exercises requiring coordination (ball games, juggling, etc.) and from bodywork therapies, particularly those that increase kinesthetic and/or proprioceptive awareness—that is, consciousness of one’s bodily movements and their spatial location. Hunt believes that “certain therapeutic techniques common to both bioenergetics therapies<sup>225</sup> and the more recent Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing<sup>226</sup> (EMDR)” (Hunt 2007, p. 225) may work for similar reasons. While scholarly opinion is mixed regarding so-called complementary and alternative medical (CAM) practices, and they have been critiqued for being “New Age” or Eastern-derived substitutes for traditional religion,<sup>227</sup> they can also be a source of life-changing healing for people who are suffering. With their keen awareness of their own physiology, creative, transliminal people tend to be the proverbial “canaries in the coal mine” who notice slight symptoms of dis-ease earlier than most.<sup>228</sup> It makes sense that persons with heightened sensitivity as well as suggestibility would benefit from modalities that are said to involve subtle energetic shifts and clearing.

7. *Give extra attention to emotional regulation.* Since emotional reactivity and a tendency toward overarousal are key features of highly sensitive personality (HSP),<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> See p. 192, recommendation #3; see also Postmes et al. 2014.

<sup>225</sup> Citing Reich 1949.

<sup>226</sup> Citing Shapiro 1995.

<sup>227</sup> For a non-biased empirical approach to this trend, please see Heelas & Woodward 2005.

<sup>228</sup> I am grateful to holistic physician Dr. David Forbes, MD, of Nashville Integrated Medicine for this insight during a conversation in 2006.

<sup>229</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 42ff.

and HSP appears to be part of being transliminal, helping highly transliminal persons learn how to navigate their affect regulation is often a crucial part of psychotherapy. Elaine Aron's work providing Jungian analysis to HSPs leads her to believe that "in general their foremost need is simply gentle, calm, kindly attunement to their emotional states" (2006a, p. 37). She suggests being intentional about creating a therapeutic relationship and holding environment that facilitate affect regulation (p. 32-34), using the inevitable periodic moments of overarousal as "opportunities for soothing abilities to be internalized" (p. 34), and explicitly teaching HSP patients coping strategies for their often-intense, but predictably so, emotional reactions (2010, p. 59-64). Her attentiveness to "avoiding overarousal" (2006a, p. 34) while at the same time maintaining enough emotional engagement for therapeutic action (2010, p. 113-117) is reminiscent of Harry Stack Sullivan (probably an HSP himself)'s concept that the therapist's job is to modulate anxiety (1953). Psychotherapy with transliminal clients, who not only have HSP (and thus are easily over-aroused) but also HSS (making them also easily under-aroused), often requires some trial and error to discern what level of intensity and emotional engagement is ideal for effective processing (working-through).

8. *Aim not for "normalcy," but flourishing.* Contrary to common psychiatric practice, the assumption that the ideal treatment goal is normality can in fact harm transliminal individuals, who will probably never fit into many culturally accepted norms—nor would they want to do so. (What if St. Teresa, Carl Jung, or Alanis Morissette had been "normal"?) Better therapeutic goals than symptom relief or normalcy are "soul healing" (which, after all, is the etymology of the word *psychotherapy*) and "meaning-making." Simply introducing clients to the concept of

transliminality<sup>230</sup> can create a frame of reference that shifts from a model of illness and pathology to one of personality and potential strengths, and “research demonstrates that a focus on strengths can enhance therapeutic outcomes” (Johnson et al. 2012, p. 2).<sup>231</sup>

Another research-driven finding is that “spiritual” attribution of anomalous experiences benefits outcome (Brett et al. 2014, p. 220). Since mystical experiences or psychotic breaks often (but not always) involve spiritual overtones to the person going through them,<sup>232</sup> it makes sense that some of the most effective remedies are also spiritual. Psychologists and psychiatrists who are unfamiliar with spiritual approaches would do well to remember that “individuals in the midst of a tumultuous spiritual experience (a ‘spiritual emergency’) may appear to have a mental disorder if viewed out of context, but are actually undergoing a ‘normal reaction’ that warrants a nonpathological diagnosis” (Lukoff et al. 1998, p. 25-26). What is needed are knowledgeable practitioners who can help a “spiritual emergency” turn instead into “spiritual emergence” (p. 38-39). Here pastoral therapists, with their roots in the care-of-souls tradition and their foliage colored by psychodynamic theory, have considerable expertise to contribute.

In the end, the particular “active ingredients” of any given intervention may be less efficacious than the total milieu surrounding it.

After studying both Western and indigenous health care practitioners, [psychiatrist and schizophrenia researcher Edwin Fuller] Torrey (1986) concluded that an effective treatment reflects one or more of four fundamental principles: a shared worldview between practitioner and client, certain qualities of the practitioner, positive client expectations, and procedures that engender a sense of mastery on the part of the client. (Krippner 2002, p. 971)<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 55, note 82.

<sup>231</sup> Citing Berk, Berk, & Castle 2004.

<sup>232</sup> For a classic example, see Boisen 1936/1952.

<sup>233</sup> See also Frank and Frank (1991).



Whatever their theoretical orientation, if therapists can assist their highly transliminal clients in the meaning-making that is so crucial for moving through the scarier, more confusing types of unusual experience, they will do a tremendous amount of good. Finally, soul care with transliminals would not be complete without helping them discover outlets for the interpersonal generativity that is such an essential part of human flourishing.

### **Remaining Questions and Future Work**

As this project draws to a close, for all of the multidisciplinary research we have examined and synthesized, plenty of unanswered questions about transliminality still remain. While it does seem to constitute a stable personality trait, why do some people have so much more of it than others? What causes it in the first place? Do we socialize people to be less transliminal, for example, through our conventional educational system? Are transliminals who lack the protective factors of a high IQ, working memory, and cognitive flexibility doomed to remain especially liable to psychosis? Among the most gifted transliminals who produce works of creative genius, is the “dark side” of transliminality (as experienced through a crisis in identity, relationship, vocation, spirituality, or all of the above) necessary for this level of creative achievement to emerge? Is the eventual generativity *because of* or *in spite of* the anguish? (And if the answer seems to be “because of,” what might this reveal about the nature of God—as Creator who (some say) suffers along with creation, and as Source of human creativity-that-may-well-require-suffering?)

Now that we have gained an in-depth, yet still early, understanding of transliminality, I would like to offer a few directions that I perceive as holding potential for fruitful future work. Specifically, we need more psychological investigation, more theological exploration, more pharmacological research, and more clinical feedback. Further *psychological* investigation could test out my hypothesis that transliminality consists of a combination of high sensory-processing sensitivity and high sensation-seeking, examine the connection between transliminal personality and the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, and begin refining the broad categories of “unresolved childhood traumata” and “sociocultural factors” that moderate (everyone’s but especially transliminals’) flourishing and perishing. Future *theological* exploration could continue James Loder’s groundbreaking work on how transcendent, transformative moments embody the “logic of the Spirit,” expanding his contributions on creativity and imaginative *noesis* with a greater consideration of how we might interpret the “dark side” sometimes involved with (or following in the wake of) such experiences. We need more *pharmacological* research adjusting lithium and antipsychotic medications so that they regulate the moods and emotional states of persons on the bipolar and schizophrenia spectrums without having such a dampening effect on their transliminality. And we need more *clinical* feedback from therapists and pastoral caregivers who work with highly transliminal people, as well as from transliminals themselves, about how they understand this personality trait and about what practices and approaches they have found to be helpful and harmful to their wellbeing.

## Conclusion

My starting question for this project was whether we could glean new information by considering creativity, psycho“pathology,” and mystical experience *in tandem*—for this trio that so often occurs in the same human beings has seldom been systematically studied in combination from a theoretical perspective. My hypothesis was that the concept of transliminality, as posited by the late Australian psychologist Michael A. Thalbourne, provides a way to clarify the frequent interrelationship between creativity, mystical experience, and psychosis; to resolve some of the methodological difficulties surrounding these three areas; and to interpret the lived experience of some key mystics, thinkers, and artists—namely, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Teresa of Ávila, the depth psychologist C. G. Jung, and the contemporary musician Alanis Morissette. We have found that transliminality has indeed enabled us to accomplish each of these objectives. In doing so, we have formed bridges connecting the psychological concept of transliminality with pastoral theology and care, neurobiology with religious experience, and have enlarged our scope of understanding toward the people our culture colloquially views as “crazy” artists or visionaries.

In this dissertation, **I have proposed a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model for understanding the types of phenomena that people with large amounts of the trait known as transliminality often encounter and for informing a holistic, empathic, effective clinical and pastoral response.** I have incorporated the experiences and self-understandings of three exceptional, highly transliminal case studies, each from a different historical era and vocational area, and have compared and contrasted the additional points of view of a Kierkegaardian practical theologian and minister and a

Jungian(ish) academic psychologist and meditator. We have emerged with a better grasp of the transliminal temperament, its often-transcendent experiences, and what practices can encourage its flourishing and reduce its suffering.

The late James Loder has challenged the notion that transformative, transcendent experiences are solely personal or psychological, asserting instead that they are (or can be) brought about by God, and in fact reflect the very fabric of reality. Though such an interpretation remains in the realm of faith rather than falsifiability, we have seen from St. Teresa, Jung, and Morissette how transcendent encounters have resulted not only in interior openings and resolutions, but in momentous spiritual and creative contributions to the world. Loder's conviction brings to mind the insight of another James: that *if* God were going to communicate with humans, transliminality is exactly the kind of temperament through which She or He could get through. Thus I end this exploration of transliminal experience with an observation from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by (the probably also transliminal) William James. In affirming that every type of personality has its issues and that "our very infirmities help us unexpectedly" (1902/1982, p. 30), James defends "the neurotic temperament" of most geniuses and mystics as just the thing that might bring the greatest access to divine inspiration:

In the psychopathic temperament we have the emotionality which is the *sine qua non* of moral perception; we have the intensity and tendency to emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigor; and we have the love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world. What, then, is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe, which your robust Philistine type of nervous system . . . would be sure to hide forever from its self-satisfied possessors? (p. 30-31)

He continues, “If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament”—or, rather, I submit, the transliminal temperament—“would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity” (p. 31).

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