

Gary Nixon

The Transformational Opportunity of Embracing the Silence Beyond Hopelessness



Gary Nixon, Ph.D., after finishing law school in his early 20s, went on to get his master's and doctorate degrees in humanistic-existential psychology. At this time, Gary also embarked on a quest for wholeness that has now spanned over two decades. After graduate school, Gary worked in mental health and addictions clinical settings as well as private practice. Three years ago, Gary joined the Addictions Counselling faculty at the University of Lethbridge.

MOMENTS OF WORLD COLLAPSE

A prospective client came to see me for counselling as he was recently having some terrifying experiences. After 25 years of teaching at a university, he had just taken early retirement and moved to a new city. A strange thing had been happening to him in his new apartment. In the evening, while alone, a terrifying feeling would come over him. His whole world would deconstruct into a terrifying, bleak emptiness at a cellular level. His heart would start pounding and he would sweat profusely. Nothing in his world seemed real. The ground right from underneath him would fall away. What was so terrorizing was the world collapse that he was feeling was so awesome and powerful. He felt helpless in its midst. He had read somewhere that this was an opportunity but it sure didn't feel like one to him. For the few short moments that he tried to hang in there, it felt like he was losing his mind. To break the spell of annihilation, he would reach for a newspaper or grab the remote and turn on the TV. He needed something to break him out of the grip of this terrifying abyss. If he could keep himself occupied, this terrible, bleak nothingness would eventually go away.

The unsettling part for the retired professor is that he was caught in a limbo state. His ways of occupying himself only postponed the inevitable, as the moment of world collapse would once again return and he was more afraid than ever. Moving forward to meet the abyss seemed impossible. It felt to him that this abyss would drive him "off the deep end." I invited him to sit silently with me and meet the abyss in our session, right there and then. He said he just couldn't. He was too frightened. He would prefer to work on his relationship with his mother. He had been in therapy for many years and thought a re-visiting of the

mother-son relationship might be the answer. "Perhaps my relationship with my mother is upsetting me again" he told me, searching my eyes for some type of consolatory agreement.

The retired professor had vividly described to me his terrifying experience of world collapse. Welwood (1982) described this experience as one that is common to human nature:

Before, we may have been motivated for success—making money, providing for our family, or seeking to be loved. Now, suddenly, in this moment, if not for longer, we wonder why we're doing all of this, what's it all about. We may look around in vain for some absolute, unwavering reason for it all, some unshakable ground, yet all we see is the inexorable passing of time and our hopeless attempts to grasp on to something solid. (pp. 125-126)

In these moments of world collapse, we cannot find an unshakable ground. Nishitani (1982) explained that in these moments "a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use" (p. 3). Heidegger (1962) described this world collapse as existence being held in nothingness. This nihilating moment of world collapse renders meaningless our pre-determined meanings of life.

This moment of world collapse Nishitani (1982) called a "conversion" because it represented a change from our typical self-centered mode of being in which we ask what use things have for us. Wilber (1977) saw this moment as bringing out the fundamental dualism of being and nothingness, which has not been worked out fully in the Western humanistic-existential perspective. The self-created meaning of the humanistic-existential perspective, as Welwood (1982) pointed out, is only a temporary relief against world collapse and existential anxiety as it does not create an absolute ground. We keep coming back to the overpowering moment of world collapse.

MY OWN JOURNEY INTO THE ROARING SILENCE OF THE ABYSS

In many ways, I felt the bearer of bad news to this frightened, recently retired professor. It seemed he was looking for some type of personal retreat away from the emptiness, when I could only offer him a journey into the abyss. For in my own journey, I have found the only real resolution of the world collapse experience is to embrace and accept it.

My own world collapse had started at the end of law school when I decided that my legal career was totally wrong for me. I remember taking long walks along the river, underlining passages from Maslow and Perls. I knew law was not a good fit for me and I had to find a new path. What I did not realize then was that, although I was in a huge crisis, I had not yet fully experienced world collapse. I needed a new career path and resolved this crisis by deciding to embark on graduate work in existential-transpersonal psychology.

Along with graduate school, I plunged into the psycho-spiritual quest. I now became a determined seeker. I tried every type of meditation conceivable. First, I started with transcendental meditation, then breathing meditations, followed by darkness meditations, dancing meditations, long-distance running meditations, candle meditations, mindfulness meditations, and death meditations. As I began to see that understanding might be more important than a technique of meditation, I tried to understand the existential keys to existence from "I am the answer" to "I am not the answer," from trying to be a fire of energy to being hopeless, from realizing there is no answer to realizing there is no question. I kept myself busy searching for the secret answer of existence.

Over time, a state of intense exhaustion and disillusionment set in. Now, to my astonishment, I began to see that not much had changed in my life between my law school days and my days spent seeking the spiritual. In both cases I was intensely seeking validation for my egoic efforts. My narcissism was just now more subtle. At the time, I remember reading a passage from Trungpa (1991) on absolute hopelessness that shocked me. He said, "There is no ground, so there is no hope" (p. 84). All of my efforts had been to establish hope and I actually had nothing to stand on. Rather than fighting this groundlessness which I had been avoiding for years, I surrendered to this sense of absolute hopelessness. I let go into the moment and relaxed into the abyss.

In the silence of absolute hopelessness, a paradoxical transformation occurred. As I sat there in the silence of my own pervasive hopelessness it felt as if I had discovered the true magic of the present moment for the first time. It was not a feeling of negative emptiness but to my shock I felt the eternal connecting consciousness and the roaring silent fullness of the present moment. All of a sudden, I felt healed as I connected with existence in the present moment without my future-oriented hope projects. This was the first time I could understand the Eastern mystics' emphasis on "this is it." The answer was in the silence of the present moment.

WORKING WITH CLIENTS

Since my personal transformational realization and experience about five years ago, in therapy work with clients, I look for opportunities to facilitate the journey of clients from deficient emptiness to the roaring silence of the present moment. As Almaas (1996) explained:

When the [person] finally settles into this experience of deficient emptiness, allowing it without judgement, rejection or reaction, she sees that it is a state of no self, or, more specifically, no identity. When we fully experience this state of no identified self, it transforms naturally and spontaneously into a luminous vastness, a deep spaciousness, a peaceful emptiness. (p. 336)

The trouble, though, is that there is no nice way around this negative emptiness other than through. We have to be able to stop judging this emptiness as being an

awful experience and begin to be at one with it in an embrace of being and non-being. Eastern mystic philosopher Krishnamurti (1970) stressed over and over during his life the importance of dropping the ideal and embracing what is: "If there is no yardstick at all—in other words, if there is no mind that is always comparing and measuring—you can observe the 'what is', and then the 'what is' is no longer the same" (pp. 228-229). The opportunity, therefore, lies in the silence of "what is."

A TURN TO TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

To facilitate this journey of embracing the silent "what is" of emptiness, world collapse, and hopelessness, I have turned to a strand of Western psychology that has developed in the last 30 years to incorporate the full spectrum of psychospiritual development. Maslow (1968), as the founding father of the "transpersonal psychology" movement, pointed out that religious experience is a higher or transcendent possibility occurring at the further reaches of human nature. This necessitated, in his view, the development of a fourth psychology, "transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like" (pp. iii-iv). Extensive work has now been done in the area of self-transcendence in Western psychology (Assagioli, 1971; Boorstein, 1996; Grof, 1985, 1988; Hixon, 1978; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, 1993; Washburn, 1988, 1994). Much of the pioneering work in transpersonal psychology has been done by Ken Wilber (1977, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2000) who has tried to create a spectrum of consciousness development by synthesizing psychology, philosophy, and religion from both Western and Eastern perspectives.

Wilber (1986) mapped out ten principal levels of psyche in a developmental, structural, holarchical, systems-oriented format. He synthesized the initial six stages from cognitive, ego, moral, and object relations lines of development of conventional psychology represented by such theorists as Piaget (1977), Loevinger (1976), and Kohlberg (1981) and the final four transpersonal stages from Eastern and Western sources of contemplative development such as Mahayana, Vedanta, Sufi, Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Yoga, Aurobindo, and Zen. Wilber's model is unique in that not only is it a developmental spectrum of pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal consciousness, it is also a spectrum of possible pathologies as there are developmental issues at each stage.

A singular point stands out from Wilber's model in dealing with the client problem of world collapse, emptiness, and pervasive hopelessness, and that is the existential realm is only the sixth realm of ten. It is the best that conventional Western psychology has to offer. Wilber (1986) goes beyond the existential realm to describe four levels of transpersonal contemplative development.

The first level beyond the mind-body integration of the existential level is what Wilber (1990) called the "psychic," which is epitomized by the opening of the "third eye." In this phase, one sees a switch in a person's cognitive and per-

ceptual capacities, which used to be narrowly personal and individual, to a more pluralistic and universal perspective. Patanjali had an entire chapter of his Yoga Sutras devoted to this plane. This stage represents a preliminary stage of meditation in Hinduism and Buddhism as well as in Eastern philosopher Aurobindo's developmental perspective (Wilber, 1986).

The next phase is what Wilber (1990) called the "subtle realm." The deep structure of this realm is archetypal form: "It is marked by transmental illumination, intuition, and beginning gnosis, which brings a profound insight into the fundamental or archetypal forms of being and existence itself" (p. 92). In certain traditions, such as Gnosticism and Hinduism, this is the level of direct phenomenological apprehension of personal deity-form (Wilber, 1986). This realm has also been referred to as pseudo-nirvana and refers to the realm of illumination, rapture and transcendental insight (Goleman, 1988).

The subtle attachment to form in the subtle stage is transcended in the next level, called the "causal level." This is the realization of the unmanifest source or transcendental ground of all the lesser structures. In various different traditions, it is referred to as the abyss (Gnosticism), the void (Mahayana), and the formless (Vedanta) (Da Free John, 1977; Goleman, 1988; Kapleau, 1965; Wilber, 1986). Here, all manifest forms are radically transcended so that they no longer need to even appear or arise in consciousness. Thus, there is transcendence and release into boundless radiance and formless consciousness where there are no subjects and objects apart from consciousness.

Wilber's developmental spectrum does not stop here, as there is one more level that needs to be integrated. The final stage is the "non-dual," which is an integration of form and formlessness; "the center of formlessness is shown to be not other than the entire world of form" (Wilber, 1990, p. 99). The extraordinary and the ordinary, the supernatural and the mundane are precisely one and the same. In this level of complete integration of formlessness and form, the former seeker is now able to enjoy the "suchness" of all levels (Wilber, 1986).

Wilber's four levels beyond the existential level are progressive stages of letting go of the separate self sense. The existential confrontation as exemplified by the retired professor's confrontation with world collapse and nothingness offers a terrorizing invitation to go beyond the existential level to embrace existence in the moment. This moment of world collapse, described by Nishitani (1982) as "an awakening to a nihility within human nature that lies beyond the reach of reason and constitutes the very ground on which we stand" (p. 54), is a pivotal point of transformational opportunity. Paradoxically, the road through this deep feeling of negative nothingness is to stop trying to save the self from this terrorizing emptiness. Unfortunately, in the opening example the retired professor preferred to retreat back to a conventional Western psychology approach and resume work with a family-of-origin therapist. I, on the other hand, with the experience of my own journey have recognized the importance of embracing the roaring silence of the abyss.

MARTIN'S JOURNEY: ACCEPTING THE SILENCE OF A SEEKER'S HOPELESSNESS

I would now like to explore a case example of transformational clinical work in the area of the silence beyond hopelessness. For two years, I worked with a client who worked to go beyond the existential level of Wilber's spectrum of development. Martin was a high school teacher who had been a basketball star in university but had found the transition to a settled high school teaching career very unsatisfying. In fact, when Martin first came to see me, he was processing his existential decision to leave his conventional high school teaching position, which included coaching the senior boys basketball team. Because he could see no way of being able to fully plunge into his spiritual quest when his days were consumed with teaching duties and the "Vince Lombardi," win-at-all-costs flavor of coaching urban basketball, he had in fact resigned from his position only a few days before our first session.

Through our weekly sessions over the next six months, we initially processed his decision to leave his teaching position and then we moved on to process issues of his spiritual quest. I spent time bringing into Martin's awareness his "messiah" complex, which he spent a lot of time fixated upon. The previous summer, Martin had read Matthew Fox's study (1988) of the cosmic Christ and he had been spellbound. He was drawn to this prophetic vision and was unconsciously driven into displaying cosmic Christ qualities himself. Jungian analyst Edinger (1972) observed that Christ consciousness can be seen as a paradigm of the individuating ego, and "the ultimate goal of Jungian psychotherapy is to make the symbolic process conscious" (p. 113). Thus, I did not shy away from this Christ preoccupation in our sessions but worked with Martin to bring this fascination with the Christ archetype into his conscious awareness.

Rather appropriately, along with this Christ archetypal fixation, Martin had developed into an "energy phenomenon." He loved going to bars and coffee shops and talking to people and displaying his intense "spiritual" energy while pointing out the meaninglessness of people's typical pre-occupations. In session, I invited Martin to process the underlying motivation behind his behavior. In my mind, it looked as if Martin's behavior was really only an egoic display, or what Wilber (1986) called "psychic inflation" of the beginning spiritual practitioner. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Trungpa (1973) coined the phrase "spiritual materialism" to describe this type of egoic, self-aggrandizing behavior and saw the overcoming of this tendency as being central to spiritual practice:

It is important to see that the main point of any spiritual practice is to step out of the bureaucracy of ego. This means stepping out of ego's constant desire for a higher, more spiritual, more transcendental version of knowledge, religion, virtue, judgement, comfort or whatever it is that the particular ego is seeking. One must step out of spiritual materialism...Our vast collections of knowledge and experience are just part of ego's display, part of the grandiose quality of ego. We display them to the world and, in so doing, reassure ourselves that we exist, safe and secure, as "spiritual" people. (p. 15)

So much of spiritual practice is just an affirmation of personal ego.

It was actually Martin's suffering which finally provided the catalyst for growth here. His attempts at displaying spirituality were met with much resistance around him. Friends and strangers alike sabotaged Martin's efforts to establish his spirituality, and at other times Martin had little energy to bedazzle anybody. He found this very painful. One day, in session, Martin said to me, "I'm beginning to feel all of this talk about my big spiritual experiences and how asleep everybody seems is just my own ego talking." I let his sentence hang there in the silence of the moment, and then I smiled and said, "Join the club." We both laughed hilariously.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

After this, Martin was able to develop an awareness of his psychic inflation, a "confusion of higher or transpersonal realms with the individual ego" (Wilber, 1986, p. 139), and how most of his efforts to date had been plagued by spiritual materialism. As time went on, however, in our sessions the mood changed as we were forced to process, much to Martin's chagrin, the more difficult issue of the "dark night of the soul." Over the last couple of years, Martin had experienced some very blissful "white light" experiences through his meditation and awareness practices. However, he had been reduced to an almost "drug-users" mentality of anxiously pursuing these blissful highs. This made the pain of ordinary banal life more intense for Martin. In short, he was caught in pursuing "what ought to be" instead of being aware of "what is."

The "dark night of the soul" has long been recognized as a terrible problem along the crossroads of spiritual awakening. Accounts of how St. John of the Cross or Phillip Kapleau weathered this phase are recommended as being helpful (Wilber, 1986). At this time, the seeker can have experienced subtle pseudo-realizations that are extremely pleasurable and seductive, making ordinary life appear as meaningless suffering (Vaughan, 1991).

In working with Martin, I invited him to explore the psychological reality of his more typical ordinary existence and to let go of his preoccupation with how to get blissfully high once again. With this encouragement, Martin began to explore issues of his typical constricted beingness. He began to see that he was constantly caught in self-judgment and negative-self talk. He also began to realize that rather than fixating on intense white-light experiences he needed to be open to a whole range of experiences, including being more aware and present in ordinary experiences as well as being open to the full range of dark or twilight mystical experiences. He realized that he had been automatically negatively judging darkness as being bad or evil. I invited Martin to explore the Essene meditation of merging with the black darkness around him at night and being one with the black space that fills the cosmos. Through this, he began to realize that by focusing only on white light, he had cut himself off from at least half of the possible spiritual experiences available to him as well as being caught in a dual-

istic rejection of much of life. Thus, Martin began to work through his "dark night of the soul" by seeing that there is much in darkness to work through, and also that to become "whole" one must integrate both white and dark qualities. At this time, Martin left for a questing trip in Australia and New Zealand, and I did not know if I would see him again.

MARTIN'S ABSOLUTE HOPELESSNESS

About eight months later, I received one of those dreaded phone calls that therapists shudder about. Martin phoned me on a Friday night and announced that "I've had enough." Evidently, Martin's dark nights were not over. I tried to reassure him that he could handle this and he was to do nothing until our session that we scheduled for the following afternoon.

After leaving his teaching job the previous winter and working part-time for a while, Martin had gone on his spiritual trek for six months before returning a couple of months earlier. He had come back from his trek much wiser about his seeker's mentality and really wanting to dive into his own awareness work. He also had become involved in a new romantic relationship and began to see that this was a fertile path. After being back in town for two months, and intensely meditating and reading, Martin was overcome with an intense nihilistic feeling of being at the end of the line. He began to see that all of his seeking was hopeless. His existence seemed "doomed."

The next afternoon when Martin came to see me he was at the end of his rope. "Nothing satisfies me," he said. "I've worked so hard over the last three years to develop myself spiritually and it has all been for nothing. I feel like pulling the plug! Life is just too much for me. All of this mystical questing is just a 'bunch of crap' and just another way for me to deceive myself." It was just too painful for him to go on living this doomed existence. As I looked over at Martin I took a deep breath. This moment presented the start of a new phase of counselling between Martin and myself. Now, as a transpersonal therapist, I had a choice of attempting to rebuild Martin in some form of Western self-intervention or I could treat this crisis as an opportunity for Martin to go deeper into the existential realities of existence. I knew from my own journey the importance of embracing the abyss, so I chose to proceed with this path.

Thus, in this new phase of our counselling, I invited Martin not to prematurely judge this feeling of utter dissatisfaction and hopelessness. Instead of consoling him or offering him some sort of retreat into a technique, I invited him to go into this feeling of hopelessness even further. "Surrender to this feeling of hopelessness" were my words. I suggested that we just sit in the silence of this hopelessness for a few minutes together. As Martin was already in it, he agreed to this proposal. So, we sat there in our blue Lazy-Boy chairs and just allowed ourselves to be in this feeling of hopelessness. I wanted Martin to see that there was an ecstatic fullness beyond hope and hopelessness in the silence of the present moment. A few minutes into it, Martin asked me, "There is no answer, is there?"

I just smiled in reply. We remained in the silence of the moment. And as we sat there in the hopelessness, a change came over Martin as he began to feel the energy of the present moment, the energy that he had been missing by all of his grasping and seeking. Within 15 minutes, he was illuminated in his being. He said to me, "It's right here." I smiled and said, "Yes. All that seeking was so you could come to the point of realizing, it's right here." We sat there for a few more minutes and enjoyed the energy of the abyss in the present moment. As we wound up the session, I just asked Martin to stay with this realization and contemplate it over the next few days.

This turned out to be a monumental breakthrough for Martin. He could see that he had been caught in the demands, complaints, and fantasies of the voice of his separate self ego. He felt all of his efforts should be rewarded. He began to see that his tremendous misery was being caused by his existential demands and judgments. He did not have to look to the future; he could enjoy the silence and healing of the present moment. So, rather than retreating from the abyss, he just needed to allow himself to enjoy the sublime silence of the moment with no predetermined formula or answer of any kind.

Simultaneously with this relaxation of effort, Martin resumed his teaching career as a substitute teacher. Remarkably, his efforts to focus in his teaching on moment-to-moment awareness and on his relationship with his students had a tremendous impact. He was offered numerous teaching positions but took the challenge of an overseas contract instead. He sent me this note a few months into his new position:

Gary, there is no point in anything—that is becoming more and more clear every day, every time I just sit and chill and listen to what is going on in my sphere of energy, in and around my body, every time I sit and listen to the universe I see the futility of every attempt, every intention. It is all soooooo hopeless!!! I can't believe it, I had glimpses before, but now I see it much more intensely. This doesn't mean that I am free from desire or anything, but I grasp the futility and hopelessness of EVERYTHING, and at the same time, I am juiced by the realization and relaxation of life in the present moment.

Martin appears to be at the cusp of understanding the futility of all of his spiritual efforts. With this realization, he has the opportunity to relax and enjoy the openness, blissfulness, and silence of the present moment. We are usually caught in trying to escape from hopelessness. We, like Martin, are always trying to find some answer to create hope. The contemplative wisdom approach would suggest that this is the wrong approach, as there actually is no way out of this hopeless situation for our separate egoic selves. Seeking leads us away from the healing silence of the present moment.

One can see that there is a paradox to the embrace of absolute hopelessness that we saw Martin going through. By letting go of our self-created hopeful efforts, we can tune into the pregnant silence of the present moment. As Zen mystic Osho (1977) observed:

There is nowhere else to go and there is no other space and no other time to live, only this space and this time, here and now. Life has to become very intense in this moment...Happiness means intensity, tremendous depth. If you spread your hope into the future, life will become very thin. It will lose depth. When I say drop all hope, I mean be so intense in the moment that there is no future. Then there is a turning, a transformation. The very quality of time changes for you, it becomes eternal. (p. 194)

In this case example, I invited the client to sit in the hopelessness of personal effort right in the session. The transformation took place right within the therapy session. The client, by accepting the hopelessness in the present moment, discovered the pregnant healing silence of the present moment. As Almaas (1996) described, a client's embrace of hopelessness and emptiness can lead to a discovery of the boundless, pure, infinite presence of the present moment. The silence of the moment can become a sanctuary.

CONCLUSION

The journey beyond the existential realm of Western psychology involves a progressive relaxation of the separate egoic self sense and a journey into the abyss. As was evidenced with the case study of Martin, the transition to the psychospiritual stages of development is fraught with difficulty. Instead of pleasant experiences, life can bring moments of world collapse, dark night of the soul, spiritual materialism, and culminate in absolute hopelessness. However, the way through these experiences is not to retreat to a consolidated egoic self but to progressively work through and accept. As exemplified by Wilber's emphasis on "non-dualism," the transformational paradox of accepting and surrendering to the silence of the moment can lead to a fullness and ecstatic experiencing of previously feared states.

Therapists can use the paradoxical transformational opportunity of the silence of the present moment in their sessions, particularly when clients are feeling absolutely hopeless in their seeking. The essential requirement is that the therapist himself or herself feels at home in the roaring silence of the abyss. Embracing the silence beyond hopelessness can be a tremendous gift for clients.

School of Health Sciences
University of Lethbridge
4401 University Drive
Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 3M4
Canada

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