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The New Age Spiritual Life Narrative: New Wine in Old Wineskins?

Abstract: This article sets out to discuss the structure of New Age spiritual memoir as distinct from the Christian spiritual memoir. I look at the notion of spiritual seekership which drives the plots of New Age spiritual memoirs, and the various patterns of seekership that have been identified. Seeing that the major structural difference between New Age and Christian spiritual memoirs lies in the number of turning points (several "awakenings" vs one conversion experience, respectively), I present the most common types of turning points featured in the studied texts (psychedelic-induced and non-dual awakenings, as well as energy-like somatic experiences). The above are illustrated by brief overviews of selected memoirs (by Stanislav Grof, Richard Alpert/Ram Dass, Tony Parsons, Richard Sylvester, and Suzanne Segal).

Keywords: New Age, New Age spiritual memoir, spiritual memoir turning points, spiritual awakening, seekership

The New Age, researched by scholars of religion and sociologists for several decades now (Hanegraaff, *Religion*; Heelas; Chryssides; Hanegraaff, "Movement"; Houtman and Aupers, "Turn", "Revolution"; Bruce; Versluis, *Gurus* 175–236; Ungureanu and Thomassen; DeConick; Possamai; Versluis, *Gnosis*; and others),[1] has

[1] Despite the commonly held view that the term "New Age" is generally used to mean "a vast 'emerging network' of postmodern religion" (Sutcliffe, *Children* 210), it does not refer to a consistent religious or philosophical system. Rather, it is "a diverse conglomeration of disparate practices that are loosely bound by the concept of an imminent or present 'new age' and by a critical reaction against rational materialistic explanations of the universe" (Kline 351). One of the most conspicuous features of the New Age is its worldview referred to as "spiritual but not religious" which rests on three major assumptions: subjectivity, autonomy, and individual aspiration (Heehs, *Spirituality* 12–13, 196).

Although the timeframe for the New Age is still a matter of debate, in my discussion I use the term "New Age" to denote spiritual memoirs written outside the world's religions in the decades

produced a substantial corpus of texts, some of them fully and some—partly self-referential (such as self-help or self-improvement books and the so-called channellings). My preoccupation here is the New Age spiritual life narrative,[2] which mostly takes the form of spiritual memoir, with a focus on its structure—specifically the quantity and types of turning points.

Despite a profusion of New Age spiritual life narratives, to date they have attracted little critical attention. In many classic studies in the history and development of autobiography, discussion of contemporary spiritual life narrative is largely limited to a standard selection of canonical spiritual life writers. This is also true about the few critical studies dedicated exclusively to spiritual life-writing, such as David J. Leigh's *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography*, Thomas Larson's *Spirituality and the Writer: A Personal Inquiry*, and Richard Lischer's *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir.* The spiritual life writers commonly included in such studies are St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, John Bunyan, William Cowper, John Henry Newman, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Gandhi, Malcolm X and Black Elk, and more recently Etty Hillesum, C. S. Lewis, Kathleen Norris, Anne Lamott, and a handful of others (Larson; Lischer). This selection tends to reflect the critical focus on memoirs written within world religions (mainly Christianity), to which some interest in Eastern and indigenous spirituality is added.

1. The structure of spiritual life narrative

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define spiritual life narrative in the following way:

> This mode of writing traces the narrator's emerging consciousness back to "the acquisition of some sort of saving knowledge and to an awakening of an awareness within" regarding a transcendental power (Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit,* 1). Spiritual life narrative typically unfolds as *a journey through sin and damnation to a sense of spiritual fulfillment and arrival in a place of sustaining belief*. Sometimes the journey motivates rededication, intensification, or clarification of spiritual beliefs and values. The pattern of conversion and its aftermath is a traditional feature of spiritual life narratives. (281–82; my emphasis)[3]

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spanning the 1990s until the present day. I am also aware that the term may have a somewhat negative connotation, even when used to discuss mindsets and practices which clearly fall within the scope of what it is commonly used to define.

[2] This article has originated as part of a larger project in which I study over a hundred New Age spiritual life narratives in English in order to map underlying patterns as well as situate them within the broadly conceived memoir genre. An extensive discussion of these and related issues will be included in a book-length study to be published shortly.

In my discussion here, I dispense with formal distinctions between memoir and autobiography (as discussed by Yagoda and other authors), and use the terms "spiritual memoir" and "spiritual life narrative" interchangeably, where applicable.

[3] William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century,* 1986.

To complement the above, *Reading Autobiography* contains a separate entry on conversion narrative:

> This narrative mode is structured around a radical transformation from a faulty "before" self to an enlightened "after" self. The typical pattern involves a fall into a troubled and sensorily confused "dark night of the soul," followed by a moment of revelation, a life and death struggle, a process of reeducation, and a journey to a "new Jerusalem" or site of membership in an enlightened community of like believers. (266)

Both of these definitions follow the Christian pattern of spiritual life narrative, modelled on St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and so may not be fully adequate for discussion of New Age spiritual life narratives. In an attempt to view spiritual life narrative in an inclusive manner, Elizabeth J. Andrew, a spiritual memoirist and memoir writing mentor, has offered a broader definition: "a genre in which one's life is written with particular attention paid to its mysteries" that "places one's life in relationship to something greater, whether that something be God or oneness or the earth or death", thus giving an individual life "a broad sacred context" (Andrew x–14).

The need for new ways of engaging with contemporary spiritual life narratives has been postulated before. In the late 1990s, David J. Leigh observed that "modern spiritual autobiographers have struggled to find meaning that is not easily provided by religious, social, or philosophical traditions" ("Reading" 226) and so, considering how deeply intertwined the spiritual search for the Absolute and one's own self is with autobiographical acts, the characteristics of contemporary spiritual seekership need to be taken into account as well (Leigh, *Circuitous* xiv). More recently, concern has also been expressed about viewing non-Christian spiritual life narratives (Buddhist ones in particular) through the lens of the conversion narrative plot pattern:

> Scholarly understanding of transformative religious and spiritual experience has been dominated by the study of religious conversion. This topic, in turn, has been defined by a classical Christian paradigm established by Luke's account of Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts, the example of Augustine's *Confessions*, and the characteristics of conversion in evangelistic Protestant traditions. (Barbour, *Journeys* 13)

It is in this sense, as one critic put it, that "[o]ne Christian autobiography is, or at least reads, like any Christian autobiography": in other words, in the classic, Christian, life narrative the climax is the conversion (Larson 57–59), which cuts the narrated life story into two: the separate sinful pre-conversion and holy post-conversion sections. Another problem is that the *sine qua non* of Christian spiritual life and conversion narrative—the notions of sin and damnation, are not part of the New Age focus on expanding one's individual potential. This drive towards "becoming the best version of oneself", as a popular slogan has it, coupled with the largely positive New Age worldview, additionally enhanced by the notion of self-accountability, leaves no room for the idea of everlasting punishment as the motivational factor behind one's conversion. Hence the turning point of conversion,

viewed as the transition from the old to the new self, does not readily apply to New Age spiritual life narratives.

The New Age prioritizes the "self", which is expressed through the belief that the individual, guided by their "higher self" or divine intelligence, is the ultimate authority when it comes to selecting their spiritual path. As a result, the responsibility for one's personal growth and discernment as to how it is to be achieved rests with the individual. At liberty to shape or even create their unique spiritual path, the individual may sample a variety of spiritual modalities, and so any number of turning points may occur, as opposed to only one conversion in Christian spiritual life narratives. This is reflected in the structure of New Age spiritual memoirs, informed by the concept of "spiritual seekership",[4] its trajectories punctuated with numerous turning points, i.e., "awakenings" and peak experiences of various kinds.

2. Models of spiritual seekership and common types of turning points in New Age spiritual life narratives

Contemporary seekers openly tend to identify as such, seeing themselves as individuals on a quest, a journey (references to Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" are not uncommon in New Age spiritual narratives), or at least some sort of adventure (Sutcliffe and Gilhus; Sutcliffe, "Seekership"). Sociologists have distinguished three models of individual seekership: single, serial, and multiple. Single seekers are relatively rare within the eclectic New Age context: these are the individuals whose seeking drive is largely confined to the spiritual tradition or religion in which they were raised (Sutcliffe, "Seekers" 106–11). The late twentieth century has been described as dominated by the model of serial seekership, in which one's involvement with a spiritual path continues for any time period, ranging from weeks or months to decades, before being discarded in favour of another path, which pattern may be repeated any number of times. Serial seekers do not tend to engage with more than one path at a time (Sutcliffe, *Children*, 204). Within this model, one conversion-type turning point does not suffice, and both the seeking trajectories and resulting spiritual life narratives are punctuated by a variety of turning points. Last but not least, the multiple model of seekership is a tendency to engage with more than one spiritual modality at the same time, which shifts the focus away from the seeker's desired destination to the quest itself. Needless to say, this synchronic and multi-directional seeking becomes possible due to what has been called the "spiritual supermarket" or "spiritual marketplace", with the seeker turning into a consumer of spiritual goods: a characteristic of

[4] The term "seekership" entered academic discourse thanks to Colin Campbell and his paper "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization". Presently, this term is used in both sociological debates on the New Age, and in popular parlance of "spiritual" circles.

the twenty-first-century New Age (Roof; Sutcliffe, *Children*; Wood; Farias and Granqvist; Partridge; and other authors).

While on the face of it awakening and conversion may appear similar, they are not identical. Either of them may occur as a gradual process or a sudden and dramatic event, but awakening is believed to be of non-conceptual nature. It does not require the seeker to embrace a new set of beliefs. "It's not a shift in *belief* but a shift in *being* and in experiencing the world. If anything, the mind becomes more free of beliefs and concepts. The world is no longer interpreted through the filter of concepts, but in a much more direct and immediate way", transpersonal psychologist Steve Taylor tells us (2011). In general terms, contemporary ideas of what constitutes an awakening, inspired by Eastern spiritualities which have been penetrating the West since the early twentieth century, are centred around an attainment of non-ordinary states of consciousness and often negate the necessity of prolonged contemplative practice. They are informed by immediatism, defined as "spontaneous, direct, unmediated spiritual insight into reality (typically with little or no prior training), which some term 'enlightenment'", an approach very appealing to Westerners living their fast-paced lives (Versluis, *Gurus* 2; see also Fenner 57).

If the New Age spiritual memoirs of the past three decades are anything to go by, on the whole, the most common seems to be the serial mode of seekership, with any number of turning points that mark the seeker's inner transformations and offer the potential of altering or deepening their seeking trajectory, by offering more or less significant insights. These turning points may take the form of any kind of peak experiences (to use a term of Maslow's)—whether mystical or psychedelic, as long as they offer glimpses into "one's true nature". Given the syncretic nature of New Age spirituality, these experiences are often referred to simply as "awakenings" or "shifts", but other terms borrowed from major religious and spiritual traditions are sometimes used as well. They include the Buddhism-inspired "kensho", "satori", or "enlightenment"; the Hindu "samadhi"; or the esoteric "ascension"—depending on what "resonates with", i.e., appeals to, the seeker in question.[5] To complicate the matters further, "awakening" may or may not be synonymous with "enlightenment" (as in "illumination" vs "realization of oneness with all states and all structures that are in existence at any given time", Wilber 38, 241; the "abiding" vs "non-abiding awakening", Adyashanti 18; "temporary" vs "constant" awakening, Siddique).

In the New Age worldview and literature, transcendental experiences of all kinds have long been equated with awakenings, an idea which dates back to *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* by American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910). Such experiences may be

[5] This is because New Agers are partial to perennialist views according to which all religions have a shared core (Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*; Heelas, *The New Age*; Versluis, *Perennial*; and other authors). In this sense it may be said that "awakening doesn't belong to one teaching or tradition, and … once you wake up, you actually awaken out of traditional frameworks" (Bodian).

the result of consumption of mind-altering substances, commonly believed by New Agers to open portals to expanded consciousness as well as offer profound realizations and lead to legitimate awakenings (Ardagh; Alper; and other authors). Whether obtained with the help of psychedelics or not, peak experiences are moments of intense clarity and insight, fleeting and unable to last due to an intensity that cannot be borne over a prolonged period of time (Maslow 37). Such insight may result in the dissolution of the experiencer's sense of the past and the future; transcending the ego, i.e., loss of inhibiting self-consciousness; disappearance of fear, anxiety, problems, conflicts, depression, or physical pain; loosening of one's psychological defenses and inhibitions; acceptance and adopting positive attitudes; and giving up of control and effort (Maslow 61–66). Expectedly, this is reflected in numerous New Age spiritual memoirs, where awakenings are reported. Let us look at some of these texts.

2.1. Stanislav Grof (b. 1931), *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities* (2006)

Stanislav Grof is a psychiatrist who has been instrumental in the starting of the movement called transpersonal psychology. His memoir, *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities* (2006) documents his "unconventional quest" (xxi), which began when, as a graduate student in Communist Czechoslovakia, Grof took part in an experimental session involving ingestion of LSD. This caused his first transcendental experience of "cosmic consciousness" (xv). Several decades later, he states that this was "an initiation similar to that offered to the participants in ancient mysteries" (xxix): a turning point, not related to spirituality, which made him interested not only in the use of psychedelics, but also in various spiritual practices and rituals believed to invoke similarly altered states of consciousness, comparable to those reported by mystics from various spiritual traditions.

This is not the only awakening that Grof reports. Following are Grof's accounts of the so-called energy-like somatic experiences (ELSEs; I use this term after Cooper et al.). A common one is the so-called rising of *kundalini*, a concept found under a variety of names in Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism (*prana*, *rlung*, *qi*), as well as in New Age spiritualities, and linked to yogic practices (Eliade 245). One of the earliest, now classic, autobiographical texts on this phenomenon and its consequences is Gopi Krishna's *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. When Grof recounts his own experiences of this type (more than one), they usually occur through the so-called *shaktipat* (i.e., direct transmission of spiritual energy by a guru to a disciple) which he receives from Swami Muktananda in San Francisco. Identified by the memoirist as full-fledged awakenings, they are invariably compared to his LSD trips in that they bring about the inner state of emptiness, deep peace, and, as before, cosmic consciousness, as well as bliss (Grof 32–36, 40).

2.2. Ram Dass (Richard Alpert, 1931–2019), *Being Ram Dass*

This posthumously published autobiography of an American spiritual teacher, born in a non-religious Jewish family as Richard Alpert, opens with an account of his childhood. Special attention is given to the summer holidays which were spent on the family's farm, where the memoirist experienced a profound connection with nature. Rather than going to study medicine or law, as was his father's expectation, Alpert took up the study of psychology and his first contact with spirituality occurred when he was spending his time with the family of one of his college teachers, who were contemplative Quakers. In retrospect, he views this as the start of his spiritual search for "something more profound about my own being" (Dass). Following graduation, Alpert pursued his doctoral studies in clinical psychology and education at Stanford, and afterwards became an assistant professor at Harvard. His research interest was psychedelics-induced states of consciousness, and together with Timothy Leary he was part of the Harvard Psilocybin Project.

One of his early psychedelic trips proved to be a major turning point in that it caused Alpert to disidentify from "my Richard Alpert-ness, my basic ego identity" (Dass), as he puts it, and set him on the path of exploration of altered mind states. This shedding of identity was followed by a sense that his body was no longer there—a moment of existential fear, and then—by inner peace deeper than ever before and a "place of awareness beyond form, where 'I' exists independent of social and psychological roles. This 'I' was beyond time and space" (Dass). This experience inspired Alpert to research the application of psychedelics in psychotherapy and personal development. In April 1962, Alpert's research team conducted the Good Friday Experiment to investigate the correlation between intake of psilocybin and occurrence of mystical experiences. As the experiment involved administering drugs to college undergraduates, Alpert and Leary were charged with unethical conduct and made to leave Harvard. Alpert was relieved, his new understanding of himself having already been established: "There were planes of pure being beyond my achievements, prestige, and rational understanding. The realization was cataclysmic" (Dass).

Following this breakthrough, Alpert continued his experimentation with mind-altering substances at a hippie commune where he also began to learn about Eastern philosophies from the Buddhists and yogis who came to visit. Consequently, he started looking for a teacher who would help him advance his understanding of human consciousness. He travelled to India as a tourist, but confesses that he was soon shaken out of his Western sense of superiority when, in Benares, a young girl's dead body happened to be thrown into the boat which he was taking along the Ganges. This moment becomes to Alpert "a true initiation into impermanence" (Dass).

Alpert, determined as he was to find a spiritual teacher, was now becoming conflicted about it. At this point he considered himself a Buddhist, looked down on Hinduist beliefs, and entertained plans of returning home. Yet, somewhere in

the Himalayas, he came across an outdoor scene in which a group of locals, centred around an old man, performed what looked like some religious ceremony, bowing to the old man and touching his feet. Sceptical and reserved, suddenly remembering his identity of a Harvard professor, Alpert kept his distance. But when the old man mentioned some details related to Alpert's mother's death which he could not possibly know, Alpert lost some of his reserve and became interested in the old man's alleged paranormal skills. Soon after this, the reader is told, Alpert felt a sharp pain in his chest, which from his retrospective stance is presented as the opening of his "spiritual heart", i.e., another awakening, which culminates in an experience of "unconditional love", the signature theme of his subsequent spiritual teachings:

> I realize he's just loving me with pure unconditional love. … Something inside me shatters. Or melts. Or dissolves. My spiritual heart cracks open, and something deep within, the part of me that has been hidden, releases in my chest, the heart chakra. I am pulled into my soul. (Dass)

With the conviction that he has found a way home, Alpert's spiritual seeking ends. He stays with the guru, whose name is Neem Karoli Baba (1900–1973), undertakes to study yogic practices and learns that they can easily produce altered states of mind not dissimilar from those induced by LSD. Less and less inclined to return to America, Alpert officially embarks on his new life when his guru gives him his new spiritual name of Ram Dass, "the servant of God". In 1968, Alpert is sent back to the West to teach and then return to the guru after two years. The remainder of the memoir follows Ram Dass's career as a popular spiritual teacher, writer, and public figure, his subsequent projects and trips to India and Nepal, with even more peak experiences. Notwithstanding all the awakenings and spiritual experiences, from his later vantage point, Dass views this period of his life as dominated by the egoic "idea of being a great world teacher" (Dass).

3. The less common type of turning point: The non-dual awakening

Less frequently featured in New Age spiritual memoirs is yet another type of turning point, namely the non-dual awakening, also referred to as awakening into non-duality—one rarely mentioned before the 1990s, unlike the already discussed transcendental experiences, whether induced by mind-altering substances or brought about by close proximity of a spiritually advanced person. Deeply rooted in contemporary immediatism, the non-dual awakening is different from the previous two and, when reported, radically alters the plot trajectory of a spiritual life narrative.

When this type of awakening occurs, the seeker's autobiographical self (see Eakin, "What Are We"; *Living*), i.e., "what you think you are, … an ongoing story that you are always telling yourself in your mind", which "requires constant

embellishment and propping up as it believes itself to be … an actual entity" (Greenwell), disappears. More importantly, one's past and future cease to matter and a sense of a separate self or "me" to which they can become attached is, supposedly, no more. In consequence of this type of awakening, autobiographical acts no longer seem attractive: there is literally nothing to write about autobiographically (for a discussion of similar issues faced by Buddhist seekers of *anatta*—no-self—and their travel narratives see Barbour [*Journeys* 17; 281]). If, prior to the experience, the seeker has been focused on spirituality, collecting transcendental experiences and learning new methods of how to procure them, these tendencies disappear and the seeker's personal identity is irreversibly obliterated. No wonder that there are not many accounts of the non-dual awakening, and those that there are tend to be rather terse. In most texts which feature this type of turning point, very little is said about the seeking trajectory which preceded the awakening, and few, if any, earlier breakthroughs or insights tend to be mentioned. Likewise, the narrator's life after the awakening is not given much attention, and reflections or teachings on non-duality are usually offered instead. Indeed, many memoirists who report this type of awakening afterwards become non-duality speakers, which is what they prefer to call themselves—rather than spiritual teachers. However, in order to make their message appeal to wider audiences, these authors sometimes integrate very concise outlines of their life stories into their books of teachings. It is common for these writers to refer to themselves as "an apparent person", "this character", "this body-mind" or "here", and to their lives, particularly before the awakening—as "story". As before, let us look at some texts which make use of this pattern.

3.1. Tony Parsons (b. 1933), *The Open Secret* (1995)

This book of about fifty pages contains a very brief account of Tony Parsons's awakening. It happened as he was walking across a park and was suddenly hit with a realization that the person with whom he had until then identified suddenly stopped existing: "Oneness with all and everything was what happened. I can't say I was at one because I had disappeared. I can only say that oneness with all and everything was what happened. … I looked at grass, trees, dogs and people, moving as before, but now I was their essence, as they were mine" (Parsons 19–20). Other than cursory references to his childhood sense of oneness with the world and his later failed attempts to recreate it through pursuit of religious and material goals, there is nothing about Parsons's life story that can be learnt from his published writings. Occasionally he discloses some more personal information in online interviews, but even that is very little. This is typical of non-duality speakers, who tend to include a most concise version of their life story in one of their books of teachings, and on the whole refrain from explicit story-telling as a matter that does not merit their, or their followers', attention.

3.2. Richard Sylvester (b. 1945), *I Hope You Die Soon: Words on Non-Duality and Liberation* (2006) and *Confessions of a Seeker* (2018)

The mode of very limited self-referential narrative introduced by Parsons in *The Open Secret* seems to have inspired another non-dual speaker, Richard Sylvester's presentation of his own awakening into non-duality. From his first book, *I Hope You Die Soon*, the reader learns about how

> at a central London station on a warm summer evening the person, the sense of self, suddenly completely disappears. … There are no flashing lights, no fireworks, none of the whirligig phenomena of LSD or hallucinogenic mushrooms. … Here is the ordinary seen as the extraordinary, arising in oneness with no one experiencing it. (15)

While this turning point is explicitly referred to as awakening, it is a year later followed by another instance of "the person" vanishing completely, this time "in a shop in an ordinary country town" (21).

Interestingly, Sylvester's most recent book, *Confessions of a Seeker*, is one of the very few spiritual memoirs by non-dual speakers, detailing his decades-long spiritual seeking. A gifted and entertaining story-teller, Sylvester takes the reader through his numerous spiritual adventures that occurred during LSD trips, various meditative practices under a number of Eastern gurus, explorations of his past lives, visions, transpersonal therapies, dissolutions of personality, altered mind states, and many other experiences. It is not always clear whether all these were happening serially, or perhaps some of it at least—at the same time, but one thing is certain: it would be hard to name a New Age modality or practice which Sylvester has not tried in his seeking days. Yet, importantly, in view of his eventual loss of personhood, he distances himself from all that came before it by means of the following question and answer:

> So what?
>
> There had always been someone there, having the spiritual experience. A person, no matter how refined, had always been present. These events had all happened to "me". (Sylvester, *I Hope* 18)

A major breakthrough, Sylvester tells the reader, came when he met Tony Parsons in 2002 and heard the non-dual message, which he did not grasp immediately, but which was to bring him to the end of his spiritual search. In that, if read together, Sylvester's texts follow the pattern of conversion narrative: the turning point of meeting Parsons, while not an awakening, clearly divides Sylvester's life into two parts. One is the hilarious, though confused, past of a somewhat naïve spiritual seeker, and the other is the non-personal present aftermath of the real awakening that followed:

> Once upon a time I was a busy seeker, meditating sincerely, being careful with my karma, receiving *shaktipat*, having my chakras opened and cleansed by blessed gurus, thinking I was going somewhere.
>
> Then catastrophe struck. I met Tony Parsons. And that was the end of what I thought had been my life. Tony, who hugged me at the end of one of his meetings and said to me "I hope you die soon." (Sylvester, *I Hope* 29)

This is how the personal spiritual journey ends for the memoirist: his identities drop, including that of the spiritual seeker. The actual awakenings are recounted in a book of teachings, and a separate volume is dedicated to Richard Sylvester, the individual who used to define himself with these words: "I grit my teeth and persevere because I am a seeker, and seekers have to seek" (66).

4. Problem awakenings as turning points

Not all New Age spiritual life memoirists present their stories of seeking and awakenings in ways as unperturbed as these previously discussed. Some memoirs document unsolicited awakenings which can dramatically upset entire lives in an instant, to the point of the experiencer's needing to seek mental health support. The question that naturally arises is whether such occurrences can be classified as spiritual awakenings or rather as symptoms of depersonalisation, derealisation, or dissociation, as listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. To answer this question, it is necessary to determine whether the so-called "positive depersonalisation" has occurred, i.e., whether the experiencer has gone through positive inner transformation and his/her social functioning has been enhanced. If this has not occurred, mental disturbance may be suspected (Yaden and Newberg). Some New Age spiritual memoirs famously depict such borderline cases.

4.1. Suzanne Segal (1955–1997), *Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self* (1996)

Collision with the Infinite is one such memoir. It tells the story of a very dramatic awakening into non-duality which caused the memoirist long years of fear and anxiety. The text gained popularity in non-dual circles, where it is read as an account of a spontaneous non-dual awakening which failed to receive adequate support from mainstream mental health professionals.

Segal's memoir is prefaced by Stephen Bodian, a psychotherapist and former Buddhist turned non-dualist, who recalls his meeting Segal in 1992 when she was searching for a diagnosis of what she perceived as an abnormal mental state. Bodian claims to have recognized her mental state as that of non-duality, and referred her to his own spiritual teacher for confirmation of this, which was duly given. Bodian's detailed account of Segal's experience is meant to present the state which Eastern spirituality views as profound self-realization, as opposed to Western psychology and psychiatry according to which living without a sense of personal self indicates mental derangement. For all that, the narrative itself, despite similarity to those already discussed, follows a different plot pattern.

Segal's *Collision* opens with a recollection of her childhood fascination with her own name, which she enjoyed repeating until she was no longer identified with it:

> [t]he name became a word only, a collection of sounds pulsing in a vast emptiness. There was no person to whom that name referred, no identity as that name. No one. (1)

At college, Segal learned about Transcendental Meditation (TM), the method introduced to the West by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, received a mantra for personal use and enthusiastically began practising, together with her brother and a group of friends. Before long, she had very vivid meditation experiences. They included being sucked into a tunnel of light at the end of which the entire creation exploded and turned into emptiness, losing the sense of having a body, as well as changes in her visual perception. During the TM teacher training programme held in an Italian village, some participants developed symptoms of mental imbalance, and Segal's own meditation experiences intensified too, as she faced infinite emptiness and worried that "I would never come back and that someone would find my body sitting on the bed days later, empty" (Segal 18). When she confided her fear in Maharishi, she was reassured that using his method for six to eight years is guaranteed to produce enlightenment, in accordance with his teachings on three stages of enlightenment: cosmic consciousness, God consciousness, and unity consciousness. Despite her attraction to these teachings, Segal grew sceptical about certain eccentric practices allegedly aimed at developing superhuman abilities, such as flying, in TM practitioners. Eventually she abandoned the TM organization and its practices, returned to college and graduated with a degree in English literature.

She then travelled to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, where she met her future husband. Soon it became apparent that her married life failed to make her as happy as her spiritual practice used to. During her pregnancy, despite no longer practising meditation, she began to experience worrying episodes of her body losing its boundaries, dissolving into light, and merging with its surroundings. These episodes grew longer and caused Segal to panic. No physical problems, however, could be identified as possible causes of her condition.

The climax occurred one day, after a childbirth class, when she was waiting for a bus at a bus stop. In a passage read by some as the very moment when Segal lost her sense of self, and by others as a clinical depiction of dissociative disorder, she recalls the arrival of the bus:

> I lifted my right foot to step up into the bus and collided head-on with an invisible force that entered my awareness like a silently exploding stick of dynamite, blowing the door of my usual consciousness open and off its hinges, splitting me in two. In the gaping space that appeared, what I had previously called "me" was forcefully pushed out of its usual location inside me into a new location that was approximately a foot behind and to the left of my head. "I" was now behind my body looking out at the world without using the body's eyes. (49)

Understandably, Segal was taken over by intense fear as she failed to force herself to return to the body which suddenly did not seem to be hers. For a moment, she remembered the stage of enlightenment which her guru had called cosmic consciousness, but instead of spiritual bliss, she only felt panic and frustration.

However, the reader is told, the awakening process, once begun, appeared to progress according to her guru's description: the next stage is the dropping of the observing function, often referred to as "witness" by meditators. "In the dissolution of the witness, there was literally no more experience of a 'me' at all. The experience of personal identity switched off and was never to appear again", says Segal (54): her body and mind were empty of the person she had previously considered to be herself. With time, the memoirist discovered that she was still able to perform her daily activities, although she was troubled by questions about who was performing the activities, if it was not her. When she finally confided in her husband, who suggested that she should seek medical help, this started her twelve-year-long search for her sense of self. The array of mental health professionals that she consulted over these years offered a variety of diagnoses, some of them suggesting that Segal's case may be a dramatic spiritual awakening, yet no one seemed able to help her. This put a strain on Segal's marriage, culminating in divorce and her return to the US. With no hope for improvement in her condition, Segal embarked on her own study of dissociative disorders and eventually obtained a PhD in psychology. But it was not until she found information on Buddhist non-self and emptiness teachings that she felt relief. Now it appeared that for over a decade she had been experiencing the Buddhist enlightenment, the ultimate goal of meditative practice. It is at that point that she met Bodian who congratulated her on her spiritual attainment, confirmed by several more or less renowned spiritual teachers. Segal's quest ends with that realization that what was needed all along, was acceptance of her state rather than pathologizing it. With that, the peace of mind returned, but the sense of self was not to be recovered. Segal concludes that she has attained the highest level of enlightenment as preached by the guru of her youth: unity consciousness, i.e., "what remains when there is no self" (132). It is in this sense that she refers to herself as "this human circuitry" or "this life". Needless to say, as attested by Bodian, she was not very interested in sharing the details of her life story in the form of a memoir. It was Bodian, acting in his capacity as the coaxer of her narrative and later the editor, encouraged her to depict details from her personal life which she was unwilling to do, being no longer identified with it (Bodian, Foreword ix). During the final couple of years of her life, in order to make best use of the traumatizing aftermath of her awakening, Segal went to become a non-dual teacher and psychotherapist trainer. In 1997 she died of a brain tumour.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the above examples illustrate the typical plot patterns of New Age spiritual life narratives. Whichever mode of spiritual seekership lies at their core, the turning points come in various quantities and forms. If the narrative includes an account of a non-dual awakening, this type of turning point frequently obliterates

the course of spiritual seeking that preceded its occurrence as the emphasis is on the instantaneous annihilation of the memoirist's personal self. In that, this type of New Age spiritual life narrative comes closest to the classic conversion narrative as only one turning point is highlighted, and all others, if any, downplayed. Consequently, the focus here is on the paradoxically non-existent I-now, as opposed to the conventional I-then, in the pre-awakening part of the memoirist's life narrative. Such a clear-cut division into two parts cannot be found in those narratives whose plots meander from one awakening, insight, or peak experience to another, as an ongoing journey of self-discovery and self-revelation. While in most of the studied narratives, at every turning point, the memoirist declares themselves to be awed and clearly enriched by the experience and resulting new insights, often planning to embark on a career in researching states of consciousness or in spiritual teaching, it is not always the case. Those New Age spiritual life narratives which recount unsolicited spiritual awakenings, follow a plot trajectory which may be viewed as a reversal of the standard pattern, i.e., progression towards some positive outcome. Suzanne Segal, whose life before her alleged enlightenment may have been, for the most part, rather conventional, as opposed to the long, troubled years which followed, is a case in point. Yet even her memoir ends on a positive note, as she comes to accept her unusual condition and draws on it to help others avoid possible difficulties.

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