PERSONAL PROBLEM-SOLVING EXPERIENCES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

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Abstract

This study explored the nature of personal problem-solving experiences. These were defined as experiences which resolved personal problems in people's lives, and which occurred outside of a formal helping relationship. The data was collected with the help of five co-researchers, using a semi-structured interview method. A critical events analysis was employed to determine if a paradigmatic model of a problem-solving experience could be constructed. The variety of the experiences reported precluded constructing a model. However, a number of common elements emerged. Significant elements included (a) problem awareness, (b) distress about the problem, (c) spirituality, (d) openness, (e) prayer, (f) interdependence, (g) awareness of mortality, (h) symbolism, (i) coincidence or synchronicity, and (j) change in view of self and self-in-the-world. The theoretical and counselling implications of the significant elements were discussed. Support was found for the theoretical work of Carl Jung and George Kelly. Also supported was Willard Frick's work on the Symbolic Growth Experience.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the mechanics of experiences which have turned around people's lives. During our lives we sometimes encounter difficulties that bring us to a developmental or existential halt. To get out of this rut can be a central challenge in our lives that demands most of our energy and resources. Sometimes we can make our way back to a place that feels more on track with a certain amount of effort. Other times we may completely re-evaluate ourselves and our priorities, and move on by approaching life in a new way. We might also turn to counselling in an attempt to better understand what is happening, and to find a way out of the rut that we are in. Sometimes however, the solution is dramatic.

For some of us the impasse is resolved through an event or a series of events. The experience can be quite startling and magical, and can have a profound effect on our lives (Frick, 1990; Jung, 1960). I decided to study these experiences because the magical aspect of them held an intrinsic appeal for me, and because illuminating something of their nature would be worthwhile. Researching extraordinary experience may be considered valuable because it informs us as to what is possible. The more we understand about life and its possibilities, the freer we are to live a life filled with personal meaning. On another level, I hoped that researching natural experiences that resolved significant problems in
people's lives would yield useful information for counsellors. We often hope that our sessions will be just such an experience for our clients.

My literature review turned up almost no research about the personal problem-solving aspect of extraordinary experiences. Given this, I decided that exploratory research into the subject would be the most beneficial course to take. I looked at those instances when people have overcome significant personal problems through a critical life experience, as opposed to working through it cognitively, or seeking help from a formal helping relationship (e.g., counsellor, minister, parent, etc.).

Since I wanted a rich description of a lived experience, I used interviewing as the data collection method (Gorman, 1993; van Manen, 1990; Weiss, 1994; Yin, 1984). In particular, I used a semi-structured interview method because it allows the co-researcher to recount the experience in depth, while ensuring that central questions are addressed (Weiss, 1994; Yin, 1984).

What I was interested in discovering from the data (aside from a general interest in increasing awareness of life's possibilities) was whether or not there were essential, universal elements that could be identified within this kind of experience. To that end, I used a critical incidents method of analysis (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). I hoped that this would allow me to construct a paradigmatic model of
a 'working' experience. What I found was that although each experience was too unique to permit building this paradigmatic model, there were some common elements between experiences. It was hoped that the information from this study would enable counsellors and lay people to better understand personal problem-solving experiences.

As I alluded to above, there was nothing in the literature specifically about the personal problem-solving aspect of extraordinary experiences. However, there were discussions of various types of extraordinary experience, and these discussions sometimes included examples of problems being overcome via the experience discussed. Three of these areas of the literature will be introduced next.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section will introduce three types of experience that have a personal problem-solving component. These are: (a) the Symbolic Growth Experience (Frick, 1990), (b) Peak Experience (Maslow, 1970), and (c) Synchronicity (Jung, 1960a).

The Symbolic Growth Experience

Willard Frick has written a series of articles on what he calls the Symbolic Growth Experience (SGE). This is "the conscious, symbolic interpretation of immediate experience leading to heightened awareness and personal growth" (1983, p. 109). That is, when a person becomes aware that what they are experiencing "clearly stands for something 'beyond itself'" (p. 111), the "'objective' structure and content [of the experience] are transcended" (p. 111), opening the possibility of "new awareness...insight that holds immense significance for the person at that precise moment in his or her life" (p. 112). For Frick, an experience which has symbolic potential for an individual has the "power to transform" (p. 111), if it is opened up to and experienced deeply.

However, there are potential problems with Frick's method of data collection. Frick formulated his ideas with information gathered from discussions, literary works, and "solicited personal accounts" (1990, p. 67), as part of an "heuristic inquiry into the phenomenon of the SGE" (1990, p. 78). He does not list these sources, or how the information
was gathered. His conclusions come across as a fait accompli that the reader must more or less take on faith. In his defence, Frick (1990) does make an attempt to establish the trustworthiness of his conclusions by providing information about the nature of his heuristic inquiry. Frick also provides examples from his data to illustrate his points. It is possible however, that his data collection methods had an effect on the information he received.

For example, Frick (1987) stated that the example he gives of a SGE was obtained during a SGE workshop. This being the case, the very title of the workshop may have 'framed' the way this woman related her story (she stated that she saw a shattered Christmas tree as symbolic of her life). As the symbolic is the key element in Frick's theory, there is the possibility that his conclusions about how the experience 'works' - the individual interprets an experience symbolically - are seriously confounded.

Frick felt that the SGE "is a natural healing and growth-enhancing agency within the personality system" (1990, p. 77), and that it "emerges naturally and spontaneously as an authentic expression of the developmental trends and current needs of the personality" (1983, p. 112). He stated that the relationship between these developmental trends and needs, and the outer event, bears a strong resemblance to Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity (Frick, 1983).

Frick (1990) also wrote that the SGE "establishes both
integration and stability and promotes change and growth within a single experience. Depending on the needs of the personality...one of these dynamics may appear to be more forceful and dominant than the other" (pp. 71-72). He listed the integrative functions as follows: (a) "integration of the preconceptual, unarticulated growth forces and the more cognitive and conceptual powers of consciousness" (p. 72); (b) "integration of life's time dimensions" (p. 72); and (c) integration of the person and the environment (transcending subject-object dualism). In its corrective aspect the SGE "initiates a resolution to emotional or developmental stalemates and provides an essential corrective experience when one's life is off course, immobilized by conflict, or when, for any reason, the integrity of the personality system is threatened" (p. 74). Frick (1990) proposed that a powerful process for personal growth and for dealing with emotional or developmental stalemates is a natural part of our 'personality system.'

Peak Experience

Abraham Maslow (1968) based his writings about peak experience on information gathered from interviews, letters, literature, a survey of 190 college students, and personal experience. Maslow (1970) wrote that during a peak experience the "whole universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole...one has [one's] place in it - one is part of it, belongs in it - [this] can be so profound and shaking an
experience that it can change the person's character and [her or his] Weltanschauung1 forever after" (p. 59).

Maslow (1970) stated that this experience is often accompanied by surprise or "aesthetic shock" (p. xv) due to the sheer (and potentially overwhelming) enormity of it. He felt it to be a "perfectly natural" (p. 20) occurrence, and that it included revelations and mystical illumination. The following definition by Davis, Lockwood and Wright (1991) succinctly summarizes much of what Maslow wrote about peak experiences:

Peak experiences have been defined as the best, happiest, most wonderful moments of one's life. A peak experience has some (but usually not all) of the following characteristics: an almost overwhelming sense of pleasure, euphoria, or joy, a deep sense of peacefulness or tranquillity, feeling in tune, in harmony, or at one with the universe, a sense of wonder or awe, altered perceptions of time and/or space, such as expansion, a feeling of deeper knowing or profound understanding, a deep feeling of love (for yourself, another, or all people), a greater awareness of beauty or appreciation, a sense that it would be difficult or impossible to describe adequately in words (p. 88).

Maslow (1970) stated that in this experience we learn that life can be worthwhile, beautiful, and valuable. Because

1'A German word meaning outlook on life, or philosophy of living.
the self is often understood to be a part of the whole that is life during the experience, it too can come to be seen as worthwhile and valuable.

Wuthnow (1978), in a survey study of a systematic random sample of 1000 residents of the San Francisco - Oakland area, found that people who reported having peak experiences were more likely to say life was meaningful and that life had a purpose than people who reported they had not had a peak experience. These 'peakers' also reported being less concerned with material things and with social status when compared to 'non-peakers,' and more concerned about social change and helping others (again when compared to the non-peakers). Thus, as Maslow (1962) wrote, it seems that a peak experience can be a "highly therapeutic" (p. 14) event.

Synchronicity

During the course of his clinical practice and other investigations, Carl Jung "kept on coming across connections" (Jung, 1960a, p. 437) which he could not explain as mere chance. What he found were coincidences "which were connected so meaningfully that their 'chance' concurrence would represent a degree of improbability that would have to be expressed by an astronomical figure" (p. 437). Through careful reasoning, he also ruled out these incidents being caused by some kind of transmission of psychic energy. Therefore it was not "a question of cause and effect, but of a falling together in time, a kind of simultaneity" (p. 435).
Jung thus picked the term 'synchronicity' "to designate a hypothetical factor equal in rank to causality as a principle of explanation" (p. 435).

Jung grouped synchronistic phenomena into three categories: (a) the "coincidence of a psychic state in the observer with a simultaneous objective external event that corresponds to the psychic state or content (e.g., the scarab [see example below: author]), where there is no evidence of a causal connection between the [two];" (b) knowledge of an event(s) outside one's field of perception; and (c) knowledge of future events (1960b, p. 526). As an example of synchronicity, Jung (1960b) offered the following:

My example concerns a young woman patient who, in spite of efforts made on both sides, proved to be psychologically inaccessible. The difficulty lay in the fact that she always knew better about everything. Her excellent education had provided her with a weapon ideally suited to this purpose, namely a highly polished Cartesian rationalism with an impeccably "geometrical" idea of reality. After several fruitless attempts to sweeten her rationalism with a somewhat more human understanding, I had to confine myself to the hope that something unexpected and irrational would turn up, something that would burst the intellectual retort into which she had sealed herself. Well, I was sitting opposite her one day, with my back to the
window, listening to her flow of rhetoric. She had had an impressive dream the night before, in which someone had given her a golden scarab - a costly piece of jewellery. While she was telling me this dream, I heard something behind me gently tapping on the window. I turned round and saw that it was a fairly large flying insect that was knocking against the window-pane from outside in the obvious effort to get into the dark room. This seemed to me very strange. I opened the window immediately and caught the insect in the air as it flew in. It was a scarabaeid beetle, or common rose-chafer (*Cetonia aurata*), whose gold-green colour most nearly resembles that of a golden scarab. I handed the beetle to my patient with the words, "Here is your scarab." This experience punctured the desired hole in her rationalism and broke the ice of her intellectual resistance. The treatment could now be continued with satisfactory results (pp. 525-526).

Jung (1960a) defined synchronicity as "the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state - and in certain cases vice versa" (p. 441). He elaborated (as was noted above), that the inner state and external event are "causally unrelated" (p. 441). The 'vice versa', a psychic state appearing as a meaningful parallel to an external event, strongly suggests Frick's SGE.
Discussion

The SGE, peak experience, and synchronicity are all experiences that can be 'therapeutic' (Frick, 1990; Maslow, 1962; Jung, 1960b), and the authors quoted above all felt these experiences to be a part of everyday life. Indeed, Wuthnow (1978; cited above) found that 88% of his respondents reported having experienced at least one of the types of peak experience listed on the survey. Why then do we not hear more frequently about this kind of occurrence?

Several reasons have been given. Frick (1990) and Jung (1967) fault current societal conventions, while Maslow (1970) faults the individuals who abide by these conventions. Two studies to be introduced below cite embarrassment (Laski, 1961), and the personal nature of the experience (Davis, Lockwood, & Wright, 1991) as possibilities.

Frick (1990) explained that our society has "discouraged the development of our symbolic, intuitive, and imaginative resources" (p. 78). He wrote that we engage in a "socialization process that limits our vision and effectively diminishes our capacity to explore and contact the various 'realities' possible within our experience and existence" (p. 78).

Maslow (1970) felt the reason was that people with a rational, materialistic, or mechanistic world view or "character structure" (p. 22), suppress or deny peak experiences. He felt that for this kind of person the
experience is insane, out of control, or overwhelming. They tend to be frightened and "fight them off" (p. 22), or do their best to forget about them.

Jung stated that it was difficult to estimate the "regularity" (1960a, p. 511) of synchronistic events because "one is as much impressed by the disharmony of things as one is surprised by their occasional harmony" (p. 511). He did however write that, "our culture, however, has neither eyes nor heart for these things. Anything that comes out of the psyche is regarded with suspicion at the best of times, and if it does not immediately prove its material value it goes for nothing" (1967, p. 310).

Marghanita Laski (1961) conducted a survey study of ecstasy. She defined ecstasy as "a range of experiences characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued, and extraordinary to the point of often seeming as if derived from a preternatural source" (p. 5). Laski stated that in the initial stages of the interviews for the study she and the respondent often felt some embarrassment. The reasons she gave were: "many amateurs interested in subjects which go by names such as this hold views which are widely regarded as eccentric or silly" (p. 8), and "people would like to be able to believe without being forced to defend" (p. 8).

Finally, a study by John Davis, Linda Lockwood, and Charles Wright (1991) investigated the issue of people not telling others about their extraordinary experiences. Their
study was based on the results of two separate surveys, with a total of 246 college students participating. The surveys asked students if they had experienced a peak experience, using the definition given above. If so, they were instructed to write down a description of the event. The students then answered the following questions: (a) "What was it like?" (b) "What effect did it have on you?" (c) "How many people have you openly discussed it with?" and (d) "Why have you not told more people?" The students were also given a checklist of possible reasons for not telling people, and asked to indicate whether a given reason was a major factor, a minor factor, or not applicable in terms of not discussing their experience with others.

A full 79% of the students reported having had a peak experience. On average they told five to seven people about it, however half the students had told two or fewer people. The main reasons given for not telling more people were: (a) It was a very special, intimate, and personal experience which I wanted to keep for myself; (b) I felt that others would not appreciate or value the experience as much as I did or that they might put it down; (c) I did not feel I could describe it in words.

In summary, these authors considered extraordinary experience to be an everyday occurrence. However, they concluded that people in western society are either reluctant to discuss it openly with others (Davis, Lockwood, & Wright,
1991; Laski, 1961), or reluctant to explore 'unusual' experience in general (Frick, 1990; Jung, 1967; Maslow, 1970). These authors gave many examples of the potential benefits of extraordinary types of experience. Therefore, it was hoped that this study would encourage the exploration of extraordinary experience by making it seem less 'unusual,' and more accessible.
Chapter 3: Method

Co-researchers

The co-researchers for this study were five individuals from Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, three of whom were known to me. Two individuals were recruited through an advertisement placed in the Georgia Straight magazine, and three acquaintances expressed an interest in participating after hearing me describe the research. All potential co-researchers went through a screening interview by telephone or in person. The following selection criteria were used: (a) that there was an experience (or series of experiences) that could be remembered and communicated clearly; (b) that the person had a reasonably significant personal problem prior to the experience (in a common sense way, most people hearing the problem described would find it reasonably significant); (c) that there was a positive change in actions, thoughts, and/or feelings that occurred after the experience and could be communicated; (d) that the experience did not occur within the six months prior to the interview (a period of time longer than six months was deemed necessary to allow time for integration of the experience).

People were excluded from the study if they were: (a) seeing a psychiatrist; (b) taking psychotropic medication; (c) a minor; and (d) unable to give informed consent for reasons of language, mental condition, or other reasons.
I received approximately six phone calls in response to the advertisement (which I ran twice), and six inquiries about participation in the study from acquaintances. Five individuals met the criteria for participation (as explained above) and agreed to take part in the study.

**Data Collection**

The phenomenon was studied through two semi-structured interviews (for a list of topics covered during the interview see Appendix A). In four of the five cases the first interview was conducted in the participant’s home and took about one and a half hours. The exception to this was Mark’s first interview (his story is presented below) which was a brief conversation. Mark’s schedule did not permit a lengthy in-person interview. Therefore most of the information for his story was taken during a second interview by phone of approximately 25 minutes.

During the second brief interview which was conducted by telephone or mail approximately two weeks later, I gave the co-researchers an opportunity to add new information or clarify details. Finally, I provided them with a draft copy of their interview and my analysis of it in order for them to check for errors in either their story or its interpretation. Any necessary changes were then made.

The interview framework was tested in two informal pilot interviews with acquaintances. These proved invaluable in helping me refine the interview so that it would grasp the
essence of the experience (van Manen, 1990). This process of refining continued on a smaller scale between the actual research interviews as well.

The interviews were intended to begin with a discussion of the experience itself. This was because Lori Truant (1991) found that co-researchers may have "less energy to fully relate" (p. 62) the experience if the interview begins with some kind of history taking for example. However, this proved unnatural, and the co-researchers seemed to prefer launching into their stories from their own point of departure. No detrimental effects on the quality of information obtained were noted.

The data collection methods described above were used to help ensure that the data gathered was 'trustworthy' (Krefting, 1991). All the steps helped to make the data more trustworthy by safeguarding against lying (although outright lying is considered rarely to be a problem), shading/omitting, and/or forgetting on the part of the participant (Weiss, 1994).

The trustworthiness or robustness of the study was also addressed by establishing a good interviewing partnership, and asking for concrete details where possible (Weiss, 1994). I also tried to develop an interview framework that I hope was unbiased, and tried to avoid such problems as leading questions during the interview, and an overly encouraging attitude toward responses that supported presuppositions
As was written above, I chose interviewing as the method for gathering information about problem-solving experiences (Gorman, 1993; van Manen, 1990; Weiss, 1994; Yin, 1984). David Gorman (1993) compared interviews to checklists and concluded that interviewing is "sensitive to the subtleties of life events and should be the preferred method when data of any precision and accuracy are required in an empirical study" (p. 66). The semi-structured interview in particular allows space for rich description of the event, while ensuring that central issues are addressed (Weiss, 1994; Yin, 1984).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was a critical events analysis (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986), and was done in part directly from the audiotapes because "the additional non-verbal cues provided by the voice sometimes make the incident clearer" (Woolsey, 1986, p. 248). Each experience was divided into a series of elements where appropriate, and these elements were analyzed for the presence of a "logical structure" (Tesch, 1990, p. 88) in which the elements could be placed. It was hoped that by creating a chart of the elements within an experience, a 'typical' experience would emerge. Ongoing with this was an analysis of the events leading up to and following the experience, in an attempt "to effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78).

The critical events analysis took place within a
multiple-case study design as the replication of results across cases would provide further support for any findings (Yin, 1984).

Pre-existing Assumptions

I examined my assumptions before and during the initial stages of the study. I realized that: (a) I was expecting to find that co-researchers became more open to experience in general before the positive change occurred; (b) I felt that changes to the individual's values and beliefs would be necessary for there to be any lasting (long-term) effects from their experience; (c) I expected to find an identifiable sequence of precipitating circumstances, experience, and change within the experiences; and (d) I thought there would be an 'aha moment' within the experience.
Chapter 4: The Stories

What follows are the co-researcher’s stories. Each of the stories will be presented in turn with an accompanying analysis. In the analysis the significant events of the story will be explored in more detail. Each analysis will also contain a discussion of the elements which made up the story. The elements were divided into background (pre-experience) and experience (during experience) elements. The stories will be looked at as a group in the discussion section of the paper. Author’s notes are inserted into the text of the stories within hard brackets.

Julie’s Experience

1 "I drank my way through university [as a theatre major] and years subsequent to university. I quit in my fourth year on a coke high...I really messed things up there and in my home town to the extent that I felt it necessary to move away."

2 Julie was a 29 year-old woman in good physical health working as an actress, singer/songwriter, and occasionally as a writer. She was born and raised in Canada. Her father worked as the vice-president of an oil company, and her mother worked as a nurse. Julie was the middle child of five (one older brother and sister, and one younger brother and sister). When she was a child she and the family had attended a Ukrainian Catholic church.

3 Julie said that prior to her experience she had been
aware she was abusing drugs and alcohol, and that she had felt she should change. Before her experience she had taken some tentative steps towards sobriety, but she had not been successful at giving up alcohol or drugs.

4 Just before her experience she met a man who was earning a decent living, and who was into drinking and drugs in his spare time - "just what I wanted in a boyfriend." Julie started to spend a fair amount of time at his place. Her boyfriend would leave her some marijuana or money for alcohol while he was at work. He became quite serious about her and started asking her to move in with him.

5 About this time Julie quit her job (weekend night attendant in a group home) after receiving "a few weird phone calls" at work, and feeling that someone was watching the group home. She said that she had started to drink at work, so she did not know how real this threat actually was. The result however was that she was now "completely dependent on this guy to feed my habit etc."

6 Julie said that she had been in a creative vacuum for quite some time. She was feeling her self-esteem dwindling and her life closing in. Then her boyfriend proposed. She responded that she didn’t know him well enough and they fought. What follows is her story.

7 "He said something in the conversation which kind of blew my mind. He said that you know you’re like a bird in the house. You keep banging against windows and walls...and you
just don't know how to break out. The words just reverberated in my head [Julie remembered from somewhere that a bird coming is the symbol of death, therefore 'you're just like a bird in the house' meant to her that she, herself, was the symbol for death]. It just spoke to that place inside me that always felt like I was gonna die soon, that was constantly frightened ...because every day I was killing myself a little bit. The death wasn't just physical, it was the slow dying of my creative life. The older I got it seemed like I was slowly weaning people out of my life. I had no real close friends except for this one...there was the death of that, there was the death of all my dreams...everything was dying. I got up and I went into another room and I brought my guitar with me. I shut the door and locked it, and I sat down and I wrote a song called Bird in the House. It took about 10 minutes. There was no scratching out of words, there was no playing with rhymes...it just went [out of me and onto paper - this was a gesture with her hands]. Then I picked up my guitar and played it.

Then I told him to take me home, and I was just so pleased and grateful that I'd been able to write a song. I paced my floor and I thought about what had become of my life. I was jobless...I really didn't have much...here I was, golden opportunity, marry someone who can give me anything I want. All the booze, all the drugs...and he said he was supportive of anything I wanted to do musically etc. etc. And I didn't
want it, and I was going like what am I going to do with my life, what am I supposed to be doing? I know I have to quit booze and I know I have to quit drugs but I just can't.

I paced my floor, I paced this carpet. I paced and I cried and paced and cried and I tried not to drink that night. I wasn’t able to. I went and got myself a six pack and drank about two of them and it just made me feel sick. I paced and cried some more and finally I just fell down on my knees and started praying. I said, 'God I know I have to change my life. I can’t do this myself. I just cannot do this myself. There’s nothing I can do. I can’t quit booze. You’re going to have to make me quit booze. I can’t quit drugs. You’re going to have to make me quit drugs. I can not do it.' And you know I’m lying there, literally I’m prostrate on the floor...weeping, weeping, weeping. All of a sudden I just got this really weird feeling like, like there was something in the room. And it was like not just in the room it was in myself, it was everywhere, and all by despair just washed away like that - boom. It was gone from despair to peace in a split second. I couldn’t have done it. I don’t know where it came from. And I just had this feeling that everything was going to be alright. I didn’t know how. I still didn’t think I was going to be able to quit drinking, but I just had this feeling like everything is going to be alright.

The next morning I woke up and I still had four of those ciders left. All day long I kept telling myself, 'you’re not
going to drink today'. Then came the late afternoon when I would usually start drinking if I didn't have to start drinking as soon as I got up. And I still had those four ciders, and it was, am I going to start on these or not? And I did, I cracked one open and I took a sip and the phone rang, and it was [my boyfriend]. 'Come on over,' he says. 'Having a big barbecue tonight. There's gonna be lots of booze, lots of drugs. Bring your guitar, there's going to be some musicians here. It's gonna be a really good party.' I'm like 'No, I'm not coming over, I'm changing my life. I'm not gonna drink. I'm not gonna drug.' And here I am sitting there with this open cider on the table in front of me. But he kept bugging me...and I'm thinking well jeez. The more he kept bugging me and complementing me, and 'Oh, I love you, and please come over it would be so much fun, and don't give me that crap about changing your life.' I started to waver. And I'm thinking to myself, I'm just about to tell him 'yes, ok, come get me.' And thinking to myself that feeling last night was a lie. Talking to him on the phone and looking at the carpet and this little grey bird walks across the carpet...

And I'm like 'X [boyfriend's name], there's a bird in my house' [Her boyfriend seemed to understand the significance of this. With very little protest he hung up.]. I'd played the song for him and I don't know. Like he wasn't a very sensitive person, but I guess he clued in that he wasn't going to be able to argue with this bird. And this little bird
walks across my carpet ... looked up at me and I was just [awestruck - this was indicated by a facial expression], and walks under this recording equipment... and stares up at me like this. And he didn't appear at all perturbed."

12 Julie went out to find a friend who lived in the same building to show him the bird. He said that it was just a coincidence and suggested that she take the bird outside. She came back in the room and the bird was sitting on the shoulder of a jacket she had hanging in the corner. It was a jacket she had hand painted for a singer/songwriter showcase, which coincidentally, she had won.

13 The bird sat calmly through a number of events which followed, "it was just too bizarre." Finally, her friend convinced her to use a broom to guide the bird out. Julie got it to the top of the stairs leading to the street, and gave it a push. She regretted this because the bird banged itself a couple of times flying down the staircase.

14 "I thought to myself, why am I chasing this bird out of my house. You know? Obviously this bird wants to stay... he likes me. By this time the bird is already at the bottom of the stairs, and this is the most amazing and beautiful part, is that me and [her friend] are standing at the top of the stairs looking at this bird down there, and this bird starts hopping up the stairs.

15 Then one of our buddies who we smoked dope with came in from the bottom of the stairs and saw this bird there... and
pushes it out onto the street, and the bird flies away. That summer that that bird came to my house...two more birds came in. A few weeks later I had this woman over who I got to be my sponsor, and this bird flew in while she was there, and the bird landed right on her head. And then another time this seagull came in, and the seagull had a broken wing."

Describing the experience Julie said, "It was a miracle. To me it was like an answer to a prayer. I asked for help and I got it." At the time of our interview it had been two-and-a-half years since the experience, and Julie had been clean and sober for a year-and-a-half.

Analysis

I will start by discussing three of the events within Julie's experience in more detail. The first event is the statement by her boyfriend, "You're just like a bird in the house" (see paragraph 7 in Julie's story). This seemed to precipitate an experience that had elements of both a peak experience and peak performance (Privette, 1983). The second event is her prayer (para. 9) which seemed to precipitate a peak experience. The third event is the bird showing up in her apartment (para. 11) which again seemed to precipitate a peak experience.

I will examine these three 'precipitating' events in more depth, then discuss (a) what Julie considered to be the most essential elements of the experience, (b) the short-term effects of her experience, (c) the long-term effects, and (d)
the experience as a whole.

Symbolic statement: "You're just like a bird in the house." When her boyfriend compared her to a 'bird in the house' Julie received a shock (para. 7). She described having goose bumps and wanting to run and hide. She took her guitar along with her into the other room "as protection" from the intensity of what she was experiencing. She said that as she wrote down the words of the song, the knowledge that she was going to break up with her boyfriend and try to change her life "solidified and became stronger." However, at this point she still had no confidence that changing her life was possible. What follows is a more detailed description of what she was experiencing.

"It was the goose bumps. It was almost like all of a sudden I saw things differently. Everything looked different. It was either like somebody had changed a light bulb and put a different colour in or something. And I felt calm actually... it was almost like despair...surrender. I had to be alone and think about the rest of my life."

Julie said that after her boyfriend's statement there was what seemed like a long pause during which she experienced the goose bumps. "They were the truest words that had ever been said. It felt almost like I was hypnotized, everything for the next couple of days was like a dream almost. Everything that I looked at was painful. Beautiful things were 10 times more beautiful and 10 times more painful, and things that were
ugly were 10 times uglier and 10 times more painful." Julie described a "painful clarity" of perceptions.

Julie felt that in some way she was not in charge of herself at this time. "I felt almost like I was a robot that had been reprogrammed. I wasn’t doing it." I asked who was doing it. Julie replied, "God?" When I asked whether this was something outside or something that was a part of her she added, "It felt like the very realest part of me that there was."

Transcending an egocentric view: The prayer. When she got home Julie thought to herself "If I go back to drinking, none of this will mean anything." She still had the clarity (everything was "too real"), and felt like she was hypnotized. Slowly the clarity began to "crumble," and she despaired because she was unable to maintain it. She alternated crying and praying for about an hour, finally thinking that "I’m just an alcoholic, there is no real person under here." This led to a "total surrender." Julie was face down on the carpet and prayed the "most wholehearted prayer of my life." She said, "I can’t do this by myself, you’ve got to do this for me." Here, the peace washed over her. It was "sort of like the clarity, but nicer." She said that a felt knowledge came into her that "everything is going to be okay...like someone else is telling me and I believed them" [When I asked if this meant short-term or long-term she said the sense was that things would be okay indefinitely]. At this, she "relaxed all over."
She said she could "sense the beauty and the order in the universe. That beauty and order existed for me. I was a part of it today, right here and now, and that told me it was going to be alright."

In the morning, the clarity, relief and peace were gone. There were just twinges left. She had proof that these feelings had been real in the song that she had written, but wondered, "How is this going to affect the rest of my life?" She said that she felt guilty about drinking, like she was "shitting on whoever gave me that gift." That afternoon there was the phone call, and the bird strolled in.

**Synchronicity: The bird in the house.** At this point I should mention that for the bird to come in to Julie’s studio, it had to enter the building from a busy downtown street, go up a staircase, across a landing, up another shorter staircase, then down a hall and into her place. There were no other windows or doors that had been open in the building (Julie checked), so this was the only possible route. The bird looked like a sparrow only smaller and just walked calmly across the carpet, "as if it owned the place."

Julie’s first reaction was shock, "my jaw literally drops." The goose bumps were back again, and she was could not hear the voice on the phone or speak. This was different again from the other experiences. This was "awe." The alcohol she had drunk felt "disgusting" inside, and she remembered wanting it out of her. There was the clarity of
the day before "times 10," and disbelief. She had the realization that "things inside of us can affect the entire universe, and the entire universe it's like it's a two-way street. I was just this tiny little part of an entire symbiotic thing that was...way, way, bigger than me. I was like humbled by the workings of the world, the universe. It was like having the most amazing surprise just for you. The joy was so much bigger than anything that's earthly."

The feeling lasted for a few hours afterwards, and Julie said that she felt, "overwhelmed," "undeserving," and "a bit manic." She also felt terrified "because I knew that my life could never be the same." The sense of joy from the experience remained longer than the other sensations and perceptions (lasting about two months), and the "rest of the world has slowly seeped back in." Julie went to her first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the very next day.

Most essential part of the experience. "The bird showing up. Because it was tangible and real and it was outside of myself, and yet it appeared connected to what was going on right inside of me. It was like the outside world connecting with the inside me, and showing that there was some sort of symbiotic thing going on there. I wanted to participate, I wanted to do right by the God that created that miracle for me. And I was afraid of the results if I didn't. [I thought] this is your chance to get out of hell...you better take it." Julie also noted that if this had not been set up by the
boyfriend's statement then it would not have held any particular meaning.

Short-term changes. In the very short-term Julie experienced an intense clarity to her perceptions and a feeling of interconnection, of being a small part of a larger ordered whole. Julie also stated that she felt joyous and free after her experience. It seems she was freed of her perception of herself as someone who had to drink everyday, and was now free to explore new possibilities for herself and her life. The feeling of joy stayed very tangibly with her for about two months, but as she said above, "the rest of the world has slowly seeped back in." That joy has not however disappeared entirely, and seemed to remain as a quiet background to her present life.

Other short-term changes besides starting to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings were that she broke off her relationship, got a job, started writing songs, and that she felt like there was "a real me."

Long-term changes. Since the experience Julie has in particular been "trying to find the real me." She said: "I'm part of the big huge whole. What I do affects the entire universe. Now, I know that. And I have to get this particular piece of machinery working as well as possible for the good of the whole." Previously, Julie had been concerned mainly with herself. Since the experience, she has gradually become concerned about all things. Julie said that she
perceives things in a different way now, she sees connections and 'coincidences.' Everything to her is connected, beautiful, and miraculous. Being able to see in this way "sustains" her. She said that her emotional muddles are now often reflected symbolically in her environment.

Other long-term changes have been an exploration of values, re-exploration of religion (beginning with Catholicism), and becoming employed in creative fields (acting, singing, writing).

**Discussion.** Several elements form a background to Julie's experience. She had (a) a significant personal problem, (b) a recognition the problem existed, (c) a willingness to attempt to change, (d) an openness to a symbolic dimension in experiences, (e) a spiritual nature, (f) an awareness of her own mortality, and (g) a moderate level of emotional distress about the problem that increased in severity as the experience progressed. These background elements seem to have played a role in setting the stage for her problem-solving experience. For an outline of the experience, see Figure 1.

As counsellors, we can recognize the importance of the first three of these in the overcoming of personal problems. Obviously, if a person has no problem to begin with they will not need help with it. Also, if the person is unaware of the problem, or is not attempting to change, the problem-solving process becomes much more difficult. Julie was aware that she
had a problem with drugs and alcohol, and wanted to change.

**Background elements**

| significant recognition of attempts to open to symbolic problem problem change dimension in experience |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| problem                                          | problem                                         | change                                          |
| spiritual awareness of mortality                 | distress about problem                           |                                                 |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Julie's life and self closing in</td>
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<td>(no job, low self-esteem)</td>
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<td>symbolic statement by boyfriend; shock</td>
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<td>confusion</td>
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<td>(later by herself at her apartment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>despair</td>
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<td>(Julie paces, cries, and prays)</td>
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<td>surrender</td>
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<td>(she prays her life's most heartfelt prayer)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>confusion</td>
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<td>(next morning; phone call from boyfriend)</td>
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<td>synchronicity</td>
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<td>(the bird appears in Julie's apartment)**</td>
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<td>transformation of self and self-in-the-world</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Julie sees herself as part of an interdependent universe; begins to work for the benefit of the whole; becomes more aware of symbolic experiences in her life)</td>
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<td>greater happiness with self and life-circumstances</td>
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<td>(became clean and sober; creative again; employed in fields of interest)</td>
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* Peak experience/Peak performance  
** Peak experience

**Figure 1.** A conceptual map of Julie's experience.
This was apparent from the fact that she stated it as such during the interview. Julie had also, on two occasions, made choices that helped her avoid easy access to alcohol and drugs. She once chose to spend time on a fire-watchtower with a friend who didn't abuse, and she had also turned down a high paying job in a resort area.

Julie stated that even before the experience she had thought often about superstitions and luck, and we can see from her story that she related easily with the symbolic. This forth background element, an openness to a symbolic dimension in experience, also relates back to what was discussed in the literature review. The authors quoted there felt that openness to the extraordinary in experience played a part in the occurrence of extraordinary experiences.

In two literature reviews of process and outcome research with psychotherapy (Orlinsky, Grave & Parks, 1994; Orlinsky & Howard, 1986), client openness (vs. defensiveness) was related to a positive outcome for therapy in over 80 percent of the studies reviewed, and "was the most consistently positive correlate of therapeutic outcome that [was] surveyed" (Orlinsky & Howard, 1986, p. 366).

Having a spiritual nature, the fifth element, is obviously a significant part of Julie's experience. Julie said that she used to pray to God on occasion for herself and others to test if prayers "worked." She said that sometimes they seemed to, but for the most part her faith was confused
because her Catholic upbringing had "left a bad taste in my mouth."

Having a spiritual nature can mean different things depending on one's spiritual beliefs. It may mean that one allows for the possibility of divine guidance or intervention, or that one believes that the divine aspect of the whole can manifest in one's life. It may also simply mean that one is more open to different possibilities in experience. While a complete discussion of spirituality is beyond the scope of this paper, it is a significant element in this experience.

The sixth element, the awareness of one's own mortality (para. 7), is something that often leads an individual to be reflective about themselves and their life (Yalom, 1980). Self-reflection can set the stage for personal change, and perhaps that was part of what happened for Julie. An awareness of mortality is stressed as essential to 'authentic being' in the existential orientation to counselling (May, 1983; van Deurzen-Smith, 1988; Yalom, 1980). It also plays a significant role in helping students of Buddhism with the process of taming the mind in order to perceive its true nature (Patrul Rinpoche, 1994).

The last element, level of distress, was included because of my felt sense that it played a part in the occurrence of this experience. Julie's level of distress seemed to have a role in overcoming barriers to the experience. It seemed to facilitate the surrender that took place, perhaps by wearing
out resistance to surrender (see Transcending an egocentric view: The prayer).

Some writers feel that distress plays an important role in motivating a person towards change (Janis & Mann, 1982; Miller & Rollnick, 1991). There are also trends in the process and outcome research literature to find that distress precedes positive change, although these findings are not conclusive (Orlinsky & Howard, 1986). With these background elements in place, I will turn now to the experience itself.

From Julie’s story it is apparent that she felt her life and her self ‘closing in’ (para. 5-6). Just as her options and freedom were disappearing from her ‘external’ life, so too were her creativity and self-esteem disappearing from her ‘inner’ life. This was a situation especially conducive to self and life examination. Given Julie’s state at the time, the marriage proposal was like having the door slammed shut on a cage. This was followed by her boyfriend’s symbolic statement which shocked her, and provided her with a representation of herself that resonated (para. 7).

Shock is recognizable as an event that can stop us in our tracks and cut through the workings of our conscious mind. It can also precede personal transitions or growth, perhaps by allowing space for input from the unconscious, or perhaps by opening us up to different possibilities in some other way. Here, we also see Julie relating to the symbolic nature of the statement. As was mentioned in the literature review, Frick
(1990) felt that the recognition of a symbolic element in experience can lead to sudden personal growth.

What followed were altered sensations and perceptions characteristic of a peak experience (see Symbolic statement: "You’re just like a bird in the house."), a sense that she was not herself (and yet was the truest self of all), and a peak performance of 'automatic' songwriting. Here though, Julie was protecting herself from the experience (see Symbolic statement: "You’re just like a bird in the house."). In part this may have been that she did not feel completely at ease opening to the experience in her boyfriend’s house. It also may have been due to her being overwhelmed by the experience’s intensity. This part of her experience seemed to loosen up her concept of self and reality, to open up the possibility of new paths in her life, and to pave the way for what was to follow.

This new way of being/perceiving faded and Julie mourned its loss (in her story this occurs between paragraphs 8 and 9; it is described in Transcending an egocentric view: The prayer.). Despair over herself, her situation, and her inability to change soon followed. Her distress level rose markedly, and over the course of the evening she became emotionally/existentially exhausted. Face down on the carpet she surrendered (para. 9) and prayed her life’s most wholehearted prayer.

Surrender and prayer are of course time-honoured methods
of precipitating an experience of the Divine. Jung (1969) also states that an admission that a problem is beyond one's own resources to solve musters the "helpful powers" (p. 21) of the unconscious. The research literature on prayer is sketchy and somewhat conflicting, but there seems to be a trend towards finding that having prayer experiences (mystical-type experiences during prayer) and engaging in meditative or contemplative prayer are related to higher scores on measures of well-being and purpose in life (Carroll, 1993; Finney & Malony, 1985; Poloma & Pendleton, 1991; Richards, 1991).

Through this time of prayer and surrender, Julie somehow transcended an egocentric view and understanding of herself and her relation with the world. Transcending an egocentric view is crucial to an experience of the divine in a Catholic spiritual path (McBrien, 1981), and crucial to experiencing the true nature of reality in a Tibetan Buddhist spiritual path (Dalai Lama, 1992). What followed this were a sense of peace, a felt knowledge, and a feeling of interconnection with the beauty and order of all things (see Transcending an egocentric view: The prayer.). These are all characteristic of a spiritual or peak experience.

Julie experienced an interdependence of phenomena, and this is a basic tenet of many religions and spiritual paths. Recent discoveries in a variety of scientific fields (e.g., physics, chemistry, and genetics) also leads some scientists to theorize that "the universe must be fundamentally
indivisible...in which the observer cannot be essentially separated out from the observed" (Briggs & Peat, 1989, p. 29).

Some psychological theorists share a similar viewpoint. For example George Kelly (1955a) viewed the universe as 'integral' and said that, "By that we mean it functions as a single unit with all its imaginable parts having an exact relationship to each other" (p. 6). Jung (1960e) hypothesized that mind and matter may be of the same ultimate nature, different aspects of one phenomenon. Sprinkle (1985) speculated the mind may function as a hologram, with each individual mind able to reflect the whole.

Julie's new awareness faded over the next few hours (para. 9-10; Transcending an egocentric view). She was left with the memory of a wonderful experience and a song to prove it had happened. However, at this point she was still unable to envision a life without drinking (para. 9-10). Again it seems that these events loosened and expanded her idea of self and reality, but were not sufficient for the growth of a new self and life.

An occurrence of synchronicity is what finally sets her new awareness firmly (see Synchronicity: The bird in the house). Her internal state represented symbolically as a 'bird in the house' manifests in front of her as a bird in the house. Another peak (or spiritual) experience follows, this one characterized by aesthetic shock, altered sensations and perceptions, interdependence with all things, joy, and a felt
knowledge. Julie said that she knew her life would be different from then on.

During the course of her experience Julie underwent several changes in her perceptions of herself and the external world. The changes in perception were accompanied by changes in her actions and in her orientation towards herself and living. These have gradually translated into changes in her circumstances.

These changes in Julie's view of herself and her relations with her environment are similar to a counselling process of having clients explore their constructions of themselves and the world, helping them alter maladaptive constructions, and finally encouraging the development of new ways of interacting with their world based on the new constructions. The effectiveness of this process has been documented in the research literature (Kelly, 1955; Martin, 1992; Rice, 1992; Toukmanian, 1992). For a list of the significant elements of the experience please see Table 1.
Table 1

**Significant Elements in Julie’s Experience**

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<td>mortality.</td>
<td>16. Peak experience.</td>
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<td>moderate to severe.</td>
<td>18. Change in view of self</td>
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<td>8. Sense of life closing</td>
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<td>in.</td>
<td>and self-in-the-world.</td>
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<td>9. Symbolic statement by</td>
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<td>another.</td>
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John’s Experience

1 John was a retired 64 year-old man in excellent health who engaged in volunteer work to improve the lives of others. He was born in Jamaica and grew up as a member of a poor family. John had a brother and two sisters and lived with his grandmother "and a whole bunch of other children" in a small village until he was ten. His father was in the military and his mother lived and worked in Kingston (at a factory). John had infrequent contact with his mother until he moved in with her (in Kingston) when he was 11, and almost no contact with his father until he was 18. He worked as a police officer for four years in Jamaica, then emigrated to the United States when he was 22.

2 During his adult life in the United States he became successful in business. John said that although married at the time he was addicted to "intoxicant sex" and saw nothing wrong with having mistresses, as he felt that it was just something that men did. He said that as a child and as a young man he saw the women around him taken for granted and viewed as objects of pleasure by the older men, so he too took on that conceptualization of women. Looking back at that time he stated that although he was financially successful, he was "dead spiritually."

3 John said that two years prior to his experience his best friend died. This was the catalyst for an examination of how he was living. At that time he was having "alcohol trouble"
and experiencing numerous health problems, such as high blood pressure, rashes, aches and pains, loose teeth, kidney trouble, and poor bladder control. He thought that he honestly might not live another year. He did not however change his behaviour.

4 What did enable John to change was his wife "telling me the truth about myself." One night she said to John that she was leaving him, and told him that, "I won't watch you kill that child within you." John reported that the statement triggered something, and that from that moment everything was different. "I felt like I had died, something in me ceased to exist." John described that something as an egoistic, self-centred viewpoint, what he called "sinful thinking."

5 He said, "I felt like a car that is going towards a wall at 120 miles per hour, [which] knows that it is going to crash but there is nothing it can do about it, [then] crashes and gets put back together again. In a split-second I was a brand new person." John also stated that in that moment he for the first time had truly felt another person's pain, and that pain had killed his "sinful nature."

6 After this experience, John said that he cried for three months. "I prayed night and day...I watched my whole life, and my life was all lies. I said to myself I can't live like this any more. I went through tremendous self-examination. I had to learn, to love, to live. And that sweet little boy came to life to be a brother for humanity and accumulating
John's interview was not tape-recorded thus all the information comes from notes taken during the interview. His experience centres around the statement by his wife and what follows it. Therefore, I will examine the effects of this statement in more detail, followed by (a) the most essential part of the experience, (b) short-term changes, (c) long-term changes, and (d) a discussion.

**Symbolic statement:** "I won't watch you kill that child."

In the moments after his wife's statement, John describes a rapid transformation. He states that his self-centred view of the world 'died' within him, and in essence a lot of who he was as a person also died at that time. He said that in the moment after his wife's statement he "truly felt the pain of another [his wife]." From then on he was open to others and the pain of others. He said that "the next morning the setting was familiar [By this he meant the same house, furnishings etc.], but everything seemed strange. I was vulnerable, I felt like a little child." John stated that everything looked different, and felt differently (i.e., the emotional tone and intuitive felt sense of his surroundings were different).

**Most essential part of the experience.** John stated that it was his wife telling him the truth about himself.

**Short-term changes.** The three-month period of intense
self-examination (para. 6).

**Long-term changes.** As was written above, right after his wife's statement John lost his egocentric focus and orientation towards living. Therefore, with the exception of the three-month period of self-examination, all the changes were long-term changes. He became able to put his new orientation into words as follows; "What can I do to improve myself, and in the process improve all things?" He said he learned that our mind creates our experience, and as such we reap what we sow. "Sinful" thought [i.e., thought oriented towards self and self-gain or protection] creates misery for the self and misery in the world, while "clean and pure" thought [i.e., thought oriented towards improving the self and creating happiness for others] leads to happiness for all creatures. It had been over ten years since his experience at the time of the interview and John was obviously still working hard to ensure his thoughts were clean and pure.

John felt that life is never static. He said that we are moving towards death or life every moment, not in the sense of a progression of time, but as a progression of consciousness. John stated that he no longer feared death. He said, "Death isn't the box, it is in our consciousness." However, he did lament the fact that so many of us are essentially "walking corpses" with dead consciousnesses, that is, consciousnesses which have a self-centred focus.

There were four other long-term changes. One was the
improvement of his health. John said that as he stopped worrying about "worldly things" [he also started living in a healthy way], his body regained its health completely. A second long-term change was that other people's attitudes towards him changed. John stated that as he became more open to people, people became more friendly. A third change was that, "I couldn't lie any more, I just couldn't do it."

Finally, John stated that since his experience he has witnessed many miracles in his life, the first of which was a reconciliation with his wife. He also told me about an event that had occurred during a fairly recent working visit to Jamaica. He and his wife were driving over a river on a narrow wooden bridge with no rails. A truck coming the opposite direction took the corner onto the bridge too quickly and ended up on their side. A collision seemed imminent. At that moment John felt the steering of the car "ripped out" of his control. Their car ended up on the opposite side of the bridge and they passed the truck safely. John stated that he had come to realize that there exists a divine guidance that you can access through your "thought process." By this he meant that miraculous events can manifest in one's life, and that guidance is available when one is trying to choose a course of action.

Discussion. The background elements in John's experience were (a) a significant problem, (b) recognition of the problem, (c) distress about the problem, (d) a spiritual
background, and (e) an awareness of his own mortality. For an outline of the experience see Figure 2.

**Background elements**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>significant problem</th>
<th>spiritual background</th>
<th>distress about problem</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>recognition of problem</td>
<td>awareness of mortality</td>
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**Experience**

beginning of an examination of life and self (at the death of his friend)

symbolic statement by John's wife; shock; transformation of self (feeling his wife's pain; altered perceptions of self and environment)

examination of self and life; integration of experience (the three month cry)

continued development of new self (new orientation to 'clean and pure' thoughts)

**Figure 2.** A conceptual map of John's experience.

After his friend's death, John stated that he became aware of his alcohol and health problems (elements a & b). He also became aware of his own mortality at that time (element e). Although these things were emotionally distressing for him (element c), he did not make attempts to change the way he was living (para. 3). Element (d), a spiritual background,
springs from his upbringing and childhood in Jamaica.

John’s experience and the elements therein defy ready classification. It does resemble a SGE in that he interpreted his wife’s statement symbolically (that the statement was symbolic for John can be seen in his use of the little boy image in paragraph 6 of his story).

What is undeniable is that John’s experience was transformational. The death of his friend led John to a heightened awareness of some of the problems in his life. He became especially aware of his health problems, and of his own mortality. These are elements which seem to have set the stage for his experience. The statement by his wife shocked John and brought about an instantaneous change in his view of himself and his view of his relation to the world. He came to believe in the interdependence of all things (as evidenced by his new orientation towards living; see Long-term changes).

What followed was an intense three month self-examination. John realized that his life had been "lies." This was because his actions had been based on an inaccurate and harmful egocentric view of himself and the world. His new understanding was that he was a part of the world and a part of humanity. Therefore he wanted to act in a way that would be of benefit to the whole. This three month period of emotional distress and prayer seems to have been a ‘sorting out’ period where he processed his emotional reactions and integrated what he had realized.
His belief in the value of this new 'path' was cemented for him by his improvement in health. He stated that it was evidence of the power of "clean and pure thought." It demonstrated the interdependence of thought and external events, and mirrored John's inner transformation.

Before the experience, John stated that he felt like he was "stumbling from crisis to crisis." He said that, "at that time everything I touched was dying." When I asked him how he thought the change had come about, he said that he was not sure. He did feel that, "It was nothing I did. The only thing I did was to give up the thought I was in control" [an act of surrender]. It was only the thought of being in control that he gave up because he felt that in actuality "I never was [in control]." He said that, "If it wants to happen it doesn't take any effort. The rest is just my ego maybe." Table 2 shows a list of the significant elements of John's experience.
Table 2

**Significant Elements of John's Experience**

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Spiritual background.</td>
<td>10. Surrender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Shock.</td>
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Mark was a 44 year-old man in good health who was working as a lawyer. His parents immigrated to Canada from eastern Europe after World War II, and English was the second language in his house while he was growing up. When asked about his spiritual beliefs Mark said that yes, he had them, but that they were personal.

Mark’s experience occurred halfway through his first year of law school. Prior to returning to university he had been working as a therapist specializing in Eriksonian hypnotherapy. Mark had been out of school for 10 years when he started law school, and he found the first term very difficult and stressful. He was aware that the program would continue to be difficult, and felt daunted by the work he had left to do. After his Christmas exams Mark felt himself caught in a powerful internal struggle. What he termed his "rational side" told him that he would be able to finish the program, and advised him to continue. His "emotional side" however told him that the demands of law school were too much, and that he already had a career so the suffering he was experiencing was unnecessary. This was a level of internal tension that Mark had not experienced in his life. He felt like he was being "pulled apart" inside, and was unable to return to school for "one long week."

At one point during this week Mark went to consult a therapist "with no result." He realized that his problem was
to find a way to integrate "my mind and my feelings." He said that finally, "I asked for an integrating dream, a dream of direction, and relied on the subconscious to provide an answer." Mark said that as a result of his training in Eriksonian hypnotherapy, "I knew the resources of the subconscious."

That night Mark dreamt that he was in the dean's office tending his resignation. The dean told him, "I never accept these things after Christmas exams in January. I get lots of people every January stressed out and thinking they should quit." He then said that Mark was "doing fine" and should "hang in there," and that he would not accept the letter. In the dream the scene then shifted and Mark found himself standing on a "beautiful low stone bridge" over a creek. He looked down at the water and saw a "beautiful multicolored butterfly." Mark jumped into the water and chased the butterfly, swimming after it. He stated that this dream gave him "the impression that I should go [on with school]." Mark did return to law school, and was glad that he had made this choice.

Analysis

Mark's experience was obviously very potent for him. The major element, the dream, contained both direct guidance and a number of symbolic elements. Due to the fact that the interview was fairly brief and by telephone, there was not enough information about the dream to write an expanded
analysis. Therefore I will begin this section with (a) what Mark felt to be the most essential element of his experience, (b) short-term effects, (c) long-term effects, and (d) a discussion.

**Most essential element of the experience.** Mark stated that the part of his dream in which he jumped in the water after the butterfly was the most essential part of his experience. He commented that "I needed to do it [swim after]." He said that the butterfly was a symbol of transformation for him, and also that by swimming after it he had felt cleansed of his troubles.

Before the dream Mark had felt "terrible tension and pressure, a battle between mind and feelings." If he listened to one aspect of himself the other aspect would "rebel." He felt that he had needed integration, "which the dream provided." He stated that asking for help from the subconscious had "resolved the tug of war and provided direction. The conflict dissolved after that and I successfully finished [law school] and it's working out."

**Short-term effects.** In the morning after the dream Mark felt "clear," and thought that the dream had "really told me I had to go to law school." As was written above he had missed about a week of school, but made a list of the things that he needed to do and "just got to it and rolled up my sleeves." He said that having that "clear direction" was what he had needed.
Long-term effects. Mark stated that he has learned that conflicts between "mind and feelings" can be resolved by a "sign from inner wisdom," and that this usually happens through dreams. He said that he has come to rely more on "clear" or "lucid" dreams for these signs.

Mark also felt that his experience "taught me about myself and relying on more than mind and feelings. It taught me about commitment...how to stretch, how to grow." The experience "brought up parts of myself I needed. I was facing the wall and was forced to bring up out of myself resources. It encouraged me to go on and finish, practising law and making a contribution. I really grew from the experience of law school...had to reach down deep for the strength and resources to finish."

Discussion. The background elements in Mark's experience were (a) a significant problem, (b) recognition of the problem, (c) distress about the problem, (d) an attempt to resolve the dilemma, (e) spirituality, (f) an openness to 'other' dimensions of experience (i.e., the subconscious), and (g) an orientation to living which was relatively non-egocentric. For an outline of the experience see Figure 3.

The first six elements (a-f) are apparent in Mark's story (para. 1-3). Element (g), a relatively non-egocentric orientation to living, comes from his statement to me that he enjoys and feels it important to work for the benefit of others. This was reflected in his life 'pre-experience' by
him donating time and energy to various causes.

**Background elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>significant problem</th>
<th>recognition of problem</th>
<th>distress about problem</th>
<th>spirituality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>open to other dimensions in experience</td>
<td>relatively non-egocentric</td>
<td>attempt to resolve problem</td>
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</table>

**Experience**

- internal tug of war between "rational" and "emotional" side (to finish law school or to quit)
- emotional turmoil and attempts at resolving dilemma (examined rational side, emotional side; sought help from therapist)
- unable to resolve dilemma, stuck in turmoil
- surrender of problem-solving process to "subconscious" (asked for a dream which would provide integration and direction)
- dream containing direct guidance and symbolic elements (active participation w/in dream; symbolic elements most essential)
- resolution of internal conflict (return to law school)
- personal transformation (bringing forth unused inner resources)

**Figure 3.** A conceptual map of Mark's experience.

Mark's experience seems to have been precipitated by an internal conflict which generated severe emotional distress.
within him (para. 2). He tried to work through his dilemma cognitively and by listening to his emotions, however these two aspects of himself were directly opposed (para. 2; Most essential element of the experience). Mark also consulted a professional without success (para. 3).

Mark then asked for help from his own unconscious resources, and in essence surrendered conscious control of the conflict. What followed was a dream which resolved his dilemma. Dreams have provided valuable information to individuals and societies since ancient times and across cultures. Dreams can contain advice for waking life, clues to sources of physical illness, information about the future, and material for therapy (Gupta, 1971; Piotrowski & Biele, 1986). Mark’s dream contained both plain guidance (i.e., the information was not symbolic) and symbolic elements, but he identified key symbolic dream elements as the most essential part of his experience. The information provided by the dean in his dream was certainly to the point, but Mark stated that the symbolic part of the dream led to the integration of his rational and emotional aspects. This allowed him to move forward with clarity (see Most essential element of the experience).

Mark identified the butterfly as a symbol of transformation (see Most essential element of the experience) and this element of the dream is prescient of his personal transformation during law school (see Long-term changes).
Mark was an active participant during the symbolic portion of his dream. Instead of standing and watching from the stone bridge, he jumps in the water and swims after the butterfly. It is through this act that he feels "cleansed" of his troubles (see Most essential element). Jung (1966c) stated that active participation with the manifestations of the unconscious is necessary in order to take away their power.

Mark's internal dilemma generated emotional turmoil that seemed to be resolved through surrendering control of the problem-solving process to his unconscious. The symbolic aspect of the 'message' from his unconscious (his dream) was what he identified as most essential to this resolution. Mark's dream prompted him to return and finish law school, and he underwent a personal transformation in the process. He seemed truly grateful for the parts of himself that were "brought up" as a result of the experience. Table 3 shows a list of the significant elements of his experience.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Significant Elements of Mark's Experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Significant problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Recognition of problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Distress about the problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Attempt to resolve dilemma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Spirituality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Openness to 'other' dimensions of experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Relatively non-egocentric.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Surrender.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Petition for help.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dream.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Symbolic and non-symbolic message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Integration of rational and emotional aspects of self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Change in view of self and self-in-the-world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paul's experience

1 Paul was a 55 year-old mental health professional who was in good physical health. He was born and raised in the United States, and had one older sister. His mother was a homemaker, and his father an aviation architect. Paul came to Canada as a young man to pursue an educational opportunity. He stayed when he was offered work, and eventually became a naturalized Canadian citizen. Paul was married to the woman whose experience follows, had two children, and was a practising Buddhist.

2 Paul's experience "wasn't a single point, it was a series of events." He stated that what resolved the problems he had been experiencing was a series of decisions he made in relation to the events in his life at the time, and the results of those decisions.

3 Paul's problem had both "emotional" and "spiritual" aspects to it. He stated that his relationship with his wife at the time "had become more and more difficult over the years. Parallel to that there was a need that I had to be active spiritually [Paul felt compelled to practice semi-secretly because his wife did not approve.]. Paul said that he had been "working long hours in a stressful position with a non-profit society." He had taken on the job of making the society financially stable within a years time, and was tense and preoccupied at home as a result. He stated that his relationship with his wife deteriorated during this time.
Paul said, "What brought everything to a crisis for me was the fact that my wife left." Paul stated this was a "surprise to me" and the "last straw in a series of stressful events." He said, "I found myself not able to function anymore."

The spiritual practice Paul had been doing was a Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice of Red Tara, "a female...deity practice. This particular embodiment of energy is a compassionate embodiment of energy." He was "practising regularly and had also applied to do a Dzogchen retreat [a more advanced type of practice] that winter." Paul stated that he had been accepted even though he had not completed the preliminaries that are usually required. He said that this "kind of sets the stage because I was under a lot of stress, I was missing my wife...the society was still not breaking even, and I was practising hard in my spiritual practice."

Paul said that he devised a plan to have the board of governors of the society lay him off. This would allow him to do the retreat and then "come back and do whatever. All I needed to bring the budget up to par...was basically the equivalent of my salary." He made a proposal outlining how the organization would be able to function without a director, and citing personal problems, asked to be laid off to be able to collect unemployment insurance. The board agreed to this.

Paul stated that at "this point the first of some events happens. I was in the parking lot to the condo apartment
where I was living, and there were these guys next door who were also in the parking lot in their car, and I didn’t really know them hardly at all. We’d kept different schedules, but they were construction guys and they were kinda rowdy and very friendly and we just happened to be parking our cars at the same time. They were saying ‘well how would you like to go to the bar?’ I thought well why not, I’ll go to the bar. So we all went to the bar together in their car. Well, it turned out this was a stripper bar. I got in there and we were having some drinks, and this black stripper came on and for some reason she looked to me as if she were Tara. So all of a sudden it was, I was sitting in this bar getting drunk and here was Tara dancing away, and I didn’t really know what to make of this.

Somehow that experience in that bar transfigured some stuff for me that then got worked out over the next several months. Rather than focussing on going down to that Dzogchen retreat, which as it turns out I probably...was very much not ready to go to, I instead struck up a relationship with the person who was the secretary of the society...who was filling in part-time for our regular person." Paul said that the relationship started getting "intense just about the time I was supposed to head down for this Dzogchen retreat," and he decided not to go. This relationship "lasted six or eight months."

After this Paul stated that he moved into a group
boarding house because he was now on unemployment insurance. There he had time to think, and it was a supportive atmosphere. He felt like he was starting to heal. Then, another "movie I had to go see" takes place, and Paul became involved in another relationship. This one was also short-term. He said that in both relationships there had been a "kind of fantasy vocabulary and fantasy set of values." In both cases, "I worked hard to fool myself that this was a good thing that was happening."

After this second relationship ended Paul agreed to look after an acquaintance's son at her home on one of the Gulf Islands in British Columbia, while she tried to start a business in Vancouver. He was there for about six months. He said that there were few demands on him, and a great deal of time to "sort out my spiritual stuff...my relationship stuff." He began two meditation practices, one "physically demanding" and the other "gentle" and "affirming." Paul said, "That combination seemed to clear me out real good." Paul stated that through these practices he realized that he was still "holding on" to his relationship with the secretary in some way. Then, "there came a day when I was really clear...that I was done with it, I was letting it go, and that was that. "Within a couple of days of having had that experience...I got a phone call from a buddy lining me up with a blind date."

The person he met on this date became his present wife.

Paul said that since meeting his wife, his "relationship
problems and spiritual problems have all basically been taken
care of." He stated that the emotional problem was one of
"not feeling connected with anybody. Meeting [his present
wife], all that disappeared...that problem [and the spiritual
problem] disappeared suddenly."

Analysis

Paul's experience contained several events that can be
explored further. These are (a) the coincidental meeting and
subsequent decision to go to the bar with his neighbours, (b)
perceiving one of the women in the bar as a deity, (c) self-
exploration through relationships, (d) overcoming an emotional
problem through relationship, and (e) overcoming a spiritual
problem through validation.

Because the time frame of this experience was longer than
the experiences reported above, short-term and long-term
changes were inapplicable. Therefore, after an elaboration of
the above events, the analysis will conclude with the most
essential element of Paul's experience and a discussion.

Open to the unusual: A trip to the bar. Paul said that
it was "coincidental [I used this word in the question that
preceded this statement, Paul's use of it may have been
influenced by this.] that these guys were parking their cars
at the same time I was...I had never met them before. I had
been living next door to them for a year and I'd never seen
them." Going to a bar was an unusual activity for Paul. When
I asked why he had decided to go, Paul said that he had felt
that he had no choice in the matter of going, "they wouldn't take no for an answer."

**Shift in perception: Meeting Tara.** Paul stated, "When this one stripper came on I remember getting stopped in my tracks. That whole pattern [i.e., drinking, joking, watching strippers] got put on hold, and I was just watching with a quality of openness I would say." In response to a question Paul stated, "I don't know how the identification took place...when I saw her, when she came out, she seemed to be, she seemed to look like Tara. I watched her kind of, I was sort of in awe somehow.

Were it not for that trip to the bar I would not have got involved in that relationship [with the secretary]...because I was headed for a Dzogchen retreat. But the stripper in the bar kind of said, 'well you've got relationship needs'...and that sort of got me thinking a little differently. I wasn't aware of that intellectually. I was scarcely aware of that feeling-wise. There might have been ten different strippers in the evening when we went, and nine of them were just strippers doing their thing, but this one person seemed to me to be some sort of goddess.

Something in me changed that I was receptive to it then...so I could find myself being attracted to this secretary. At the time I didn't have a clue [Paul meant that this awareness had come from looking back at events, it was not awareness he had at the time.]. I was perceiving
differently, my needs had shifted, my priorities had shifted
(from a retreat to a relationship). I wasn't especially aware
of that shift at all, but I was acting out of it. Looking
back on it its like...there was a part I had to go play in a
play. I wasn't ready for a Dzogchen retreat until I did
that."

Self-exploration through relationships. According to
Paul there were "some things that I needed to try." He stated
that it was necessary to have an experience to unlearn things
"I had learned at a really basic level." Paul talked about
having "sold to myself" as a young man societal conventions
and other ideas about what is important in a relationship
(i.e., the way your partner looks or behaves). What he was
unlearning was "fantasies about myself" having these kinds of
relationships.

Paul said that before and during the relationships he had
a personal "investment in a way of seeing that was in part
dishonest. I had wanted those trips to work and the wanting
was blinding. The impulse to kinda get clean and clear about
it was at some level recognizing that I had been dishonest."
It involved a recognition that "I want to know what's going on
with myself, with myself in relation to the world. I want to
see it for what it is." Again, he stated that this was not a
conscious understanding, it was "a hint of wanting to get
clear. It was like honesty itself started to get some
momentum with me and honesty was asking for more honesty." In
response to a question Paul agreed that, "it was wanting to be something that I was not" that had caused the problems. He also said that his wanting to get clear was a desire to find out who he in fact was.

In this context, Paul also talked about the North American attitude that "if you try hard enough you win." He said that what we do not learn is that, "if it ain't working, screw it." He felt the latter superseded the former. Paul said that getting "caught up" in events causes us problems, and that his two relationships helped him to break the pattern of thinking he had to succeed by trying harder. He felt that it was alright to let things go when they were not working out.

Overcoming an emotional problem through relationship. Paul said that his present wife and he are "coming from a joint place and not perceiving separateness particularly." I asked if the sense was that he had transcended an egocentric view of himself, and he said that was not it. They were just "being there together." It was "simple," and there was a "quality of real deep acceptance involved in that." It felt "quite organic." Since meeting his present wife, the "instant solution [to the emotional problem] continued to grow and be what it is."

Overcoming a spiritual problem through validation. Paul said that the spiritual problem "in a different way was solved from the beginning...in that before I met [his present wife] I
was feeling like I was working in a vacuum with unsure results." He stated that they both felt their spiritual needs were "completely understood" and "validated" by each other. From this sprang a "feeling of real confidence" that things would work out, "and that’s how it’s turned out." Paul stated that "even though a spiritual path is a long thing and you just keep taking steps on it, it has continued to feel that way...confidence was a key ingredient for us."

**Most essential element of the experience.** Paul said it was, "The motivation to travel a spiritual path. I think that’s what basically is getting worked out in all of this" [e.g., the experience in the bar, the two relationships, and experiences since]. Paul further defined this motivation as a "sincere desire to do something spiritually, sincere desire to connect with people who are spiritual teachers and participate in that energy. As I look at those events, those were off the wall events, and I feel like I was getting a lot of help even though I didn’t know it at the time. It seems to me that somebody with the ability to see the big picture was helping out quite a bit."

I asked who that might have been. Paul answered, "I had made a connection already with several teachers. I had connected with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, with His Holiness Karmapa." I next asked how that help would manifest. Paul replied, "It manifested in a series of events which were, each event had the same character in the sense that it presented a
break in my routine that was also an opportunity to make a decision to do something different. So it’s like saying here I was the rat headed for the Skinner bar on the 5,000,000th trial you know. And something comes along you know, somebody’s hand reaches in and smashes the rat as he’s headed for the Skinner bar, and throws him into the side wall you know. And at this point the rat has an opportunity to choose to do something other than press that Skinner bar. So then you go and you do something completely different and that evolves into something, and you process one of your trips. And you know the big hand comes down and whaps you into the wall again and then you can say, ‘oh, I don’t have to be on this trip, I could do something completely different,’ and so you go into another one of your trips right? It’s like that."

Paul felt these events were guidance interventions from his teachers. "You don’t necessarily know who your teachers are, but that’s why I was saying that a person’s motivation is the most important thing, because that’s what connects you with whatever teachers you may have whether you’ve met them or not. If we’re fortunate enough to have at some level a motive that is real basic or real true or real helpful to other people, then that motive connects up with how things are and we experience events that help us. Our motive interacts with the world around us and gets reflected in our environment. In this whole process things can be really quite hopeful because it doesn’t matter how often you [mess] up you keep getting
Discussion. The background elements in Paul’s experience were (a) a significant problem, (b) recognition of a problem, (c) distress about the problem, (d) spirituality, and (e) shock over his ex-wife leaving. These elements are all apparent from Paul’s story (para. 3). For an outline of the experience see Figure 4.

The first significant event within Paul’s experience was the coincidental meeting with his neighbours, and the subsequent decision to go to the bar with them (para. 6; Open to the unusual: A trip to the bar). Being open to ‘unusual’ aspects of experience was discussed in the analysis of Julie’s story. Coincidence, that is, coincidence which is not synchronicity, has not yet been discussed. This element appeared twice in Paul’s story. The first time was of course his meeting his neighbours. The second time was when he was asked to participate in the blind date (para. 9).

Albert Bandura (1986) wrote, "there is a fortuitous element in some of the events [people] may encounter in their daily lives...it is such fortuitous encounters that often play a prominent role in shaping the course of lives" (p. 30). We can all perhaps recognize the role of coincidence in our own lives, especially in how some of our significant relationships or interests came about. The coincidences in Paul’s experience occur as if he and his environment were interdependent. These kinds of coincidences have throughout
history led people to wonder about the existence of God or a power greater than themselves. They have also been seen as evidence that reality is non-dualistic and interdependent.

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**Background elements**

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<th>significant problem</th>
<th>recognition of problem</th>
<th>spirituality</th>
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<tr>
<td>distress about problem</td>
<td>shock</td>
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**Experience**

- coincidental meeting; engaging in an unusual activity (meeting and going to bar with neighbours)
- visionary experience; internal shift in values and perceptions (seeing Tara, starts making different choices)
- moving through old conditioning (brief relationships)
- cutting through old conditioning; emergence of 'honest' way of being (meditation; letting go of old relationship)
- coincidence; manifestation of solution to problem (blind date)
- resolution of problem (experience of new relationship)

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Figure 4. A conceptual map of Paul's experience.

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Another parallel to coincidence is found in Harold Kelman's writing on the Greek concept of 'Kairos.' According to Kelman (1960) the ancient Greeks had two concepts of time.
One is the linear concept that we are familiar with. The other, Kairos, is a 'window' that appears in time, in which "something unique can happen or be accomplished" (p. 233). Kelman wrote that Kairos is a concept equally applicable to current times. He stated that it "refers to a spiritual event in the life history of an illness be it physical, psychological, moral, or involve confronting a whole way of having lived" (p. 267). Paul's meeting with his neighbours could be seen as the fortuitous encounter Bandura describes or as Kairos.

At the bar, a woman appeared to Paul to be Tara, a Buddhist deity (para. 6; Shift in perception: Meeting Tara). One could ascribe this occurrence to a visionary experience, a projection of the anima (Jung, 1960e), or the effects of alcohol. However, irregardless of to what one ascribes it, the event had a tremendous impact. Paul described something being "transfigured" within him (para. 7; Shift in perception: Meeting Tara). His priorities and way of perceiving the world shifted in a way he was not conscious of at the time, and resulted in a significant shift in the type of choices he was making (e.g., choosing a relationship over going to a retreat).

Paul next related that two relationships started a process which enabled him to break through some old patterns (para. 7-8; Self-exploration through relationships). These patterns involved old constructions of what a desirable
relationship was, and fantasies about himself in this kind of relationship. The final breakthrough was achieved during a period of intensive reflection and meditation in an environment with few distractions (para. 9).

Meditation is a new element, and is an activity that many people participate in worldwide for a variety of reasons that range from stress reduction to spiritual awakening. However, it is first and foremost a method for practitioners to deepen their understanding of their spiritual path (Sasaki, 1992). Research into the effects of meditation has found that it has positive effects on psychological well-being (Collins, 1989; Sakairi, 1992; Sasaki, 1992). These effects include (a) reduction of anxiety and neuroticism (b) increased self-acceptance and personal agency, (c) increased emotional stability, and (d) increased attention span and clearer thinking (Sakairi, 1992; Sasaki, 1992). Sakairi and Sasaki emphasize that clinical research on meditation is sparse, therefore any findings should be taken as preliminary.

Once Paul was able to break through these old patterns and let go of his emotional ties to his old relationship, another remarkable event occurred almost immediately (para. 9). As was written above, Paul's environment responded as if he and it were interdependent, and he was invited by a friend to participate in a blind date. Paul recounts that through this date he met his present wife, and both the emotional and spiritual aspects to his problem were solved (para. 9-10;
Overcoming an emotional problem through relationship; Overcoming a spiritual problem through validation).

The spiritual aspect of Paul's problem was overcome at least in part by validation. This is a new element, and it also was a part of his self-affirming meditation (para. 9). Through mutual validation of their spiritual needs, a "real confidence" dawns in Paul and his wife that things will work out for them spiritually. He states that this confidence has been a "key ingredient" for them. F. Ishu Ishiyama has done extensive work on the concept of validation. He has also researched the effects of loss or lack of validation of different aspects of self (e.g., physical self, transpersonal self) on the lives of individuals. Ishiyama's model of self-validation "provides a conceptual framework for understanding and helping individuals who are going through personal transitions" (in press, p. 3). The model has been shown to be beneficial in a variety of contexts (Ishiyama, in press, 1994, 1989; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992).

The emotional aspect to Paul's problem was overcome through relationship. What Paul was experiencing before he met his present wife (para. 10) resembles what Irving Yalom called existential isolation. Yalom (1980) defined this as, "a fundamental isolation...a separation between the individual and the world" (p. 355). Yalom and other existential writers that he quotes felt existential isolation to be an aspect of the way things are in reality, and something that one must
learn to live in spite of. Through the relationship with his wife, however, Paul overcomes this isolation.

By undoing the 'conditioning' of the values and ideas he had 'sold himself' as a young man, Paul was able to understand himself in a more genuine way. He then became able to relate with himself and the world in a way that was "honest," and finally, to connect with another person in a way that ended his experience of isolation (see Self-exploration through relationships; Overcoming an emotional problem through relationship). Yalom (1980) referred to the type of relationship Paul experienced with his wife as fusion, and felt it to be a negative thing. He stated, "Fusion with another individual, with group or cause, with nature or with the universe always involves a loss of self: it is a pact with Satan and eventuates in existential guilt - that guilt grief which laments the unlived life in each of us" (p. 381).

Undoubtedly 'fusion' can be a way of avoiding fear or insecurity by taking on the beliefs and values of another individual or group. Paul's relationship however, differed from this. He described it as a "simple", "organic" relationship with "a quality of real deep acceptance." Through this relationship Paul's sense of isolation "disappeared."

Therefore, it strikes me that Yalom has seen only half the truth here. Perhaps relatively speaking we are isolated individuals, but Yalom dismisses the possibility of there
being a truth greater than individual truth. Mystics, including Christian mystics, write of a oneness with ultimate reality (which may be referred to as God or suchness or something else), not an authentic self who contemplates or contacts a being separate from themselves (Laski, 1961). Yalom, by implication, also dismisses the validity of cultures that emphasize the group over the individual, or cultures that believe in the interdependence of all things. Finally, Yalom's view seems to run counter to the experiences of the co-researchers in this paper, and they in no way appear to be lamenting unlived lives. Table 4 gives a list of the significant elements in Paul's experience.
Table 4

**Significant Elements of Paul’s Experience**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Recognition of problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Distress about problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Shock.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Coincidence.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Open to an unusual activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Visionary experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Shift in priorities, perceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Gaining knowledge of self through relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Meditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Interdependence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Validation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Theresa’s experience

1 Theresa was a 44 year-old woman in good health who worked as an accountant. She was born and raised in Canada, and had one older brother. Her mother had been a homemaker, and her father had been a partner in an oil exploration company, and a college professor (teaching electronics). She had two children and was a practising Buddhist.

2 Theresa’s story began at a point in her life when she was married to her first husband. She stated that from the time her husband started graduate school, they "didn’t have much of a relationship." He first became engrossed in his studies, then in his career. Theresa said that, "we had a hard time for a long time. We tried really hard, but it just couldn’t happen. I wanted a real relationship and I wanted a family and a real home life." She found life in the "academic scene" chaotic, unfulfilling and shallow. "I felt like I’d been locked in a black closet for years...it was devoid of honest human connecting. I believed in something more than all these human constructs, I guess partly because I almost died when I was 17 and I knew damn well that there was a hell of a lot more out there than what everybody’s willing to talk about because I experienced it. Like a consciousness that is so much more than what we experience in our ordinary day to day stuff. That whole period of my life [her first marriage] I was completely alone in the spiritual end of things."

3 Finally, Theresa’s husband told her that he wanted to
travel alone on a holiday they had planned to take together. He also stated that he wanted to have a trial separation. Theresa said that, "I couldn’t believe it...that same night I decided to move west. I was in shock, I went to stay with a friend who didn’t know my ex-husband and I chain smoked cigarettes and I figured out, it just came to me like that. On the one hand this was about the shittiest thing I could imagine happening, but on the other hand it could be a start of a new life.

The thing that settled on me after the decision to move west was this incredible state of grace. I don’t know how, any other way to explain or describe it except that. And every time I got really down what I focussed on was the blessings that I had rather than what was not there." Theresa said that members of her family were living in western Canada, and "it had always been really healing to be near the ocean and the mountains."

She continued, "It was really quite incredible, I went to my boss and I said, 'I want a transfer.' They hadn’t had anything [for a few years] because of the recession out west...[but] it turned out just that week there was an opening...so they arranged that." Theresa said that while her ex-husband was away on holiday, "I put the house up for sale and sold it, and packed up and moved out west. The focus really shifted in my life. I was really, really tired of all that empty crap. I started to have a spiritual growth that
was really significant, like and it was almost like you have
to have your whole life blown to shit before everything is
open enough for all that to happen. You know like there was
no number left [Theresa emphasised the no heavily]. You know
in order to be protected from other people you construct a
persona? That was all gone...and I didn’t want to resurrect
it either because all it resulted in was these dumb, there was
no real connecting, so I didn’t really want any of that any
more.

6 I was real careful about not isolating myself...but I was
really careful about who I spent time with like outside of
work. My cousins were all really supportive...and I was
workin’ on being real happy just by myself. That longing for
family was still very much there and like my mom, my aunt, and
my aunt I. were all praying really hard for like a really
wonderful thing to happen in my life, and boy I tell you if
you ever want anything done you get those ladies workin’ for
ya. I was really actually at a point in my life where I was
feeling really okay about stuff, like I really felt pretty
solid on my own.

7 I guess I was doing some kind of meditation. I would
walk a lot, I moved to a place where I could be in nature very
easily. So I spent almost all of my spare time hiking up in
the mountains. So I’d hike and I’d find a really nice spot
and I’d sit. What I was trying to do was almost fuse myself
with everything...and that was really healing. So I was
feeling like I was going to be okay being on my own the rest of my life, and that all of that desire to have kids and all of that was, I let it go. I thought what I would do instead was work on helping other people, and that would be how I would...have that nurturing connection." Theresa began volunteer work, "and that’s when the blind-date thing happened. After that all my wishes came true."

Analysis

Theresa’s experience had an element that can be explored in more detail, the state of grace. For her experience as well, short and long-term changes were inapplicable so the exploration of this element will be followed by the most essential element of the experience and a discussion.

Reconnecting: A state of grace. Theresa said, "That same night that my husband laid the bombshell on me, like my life was completely blown apart. For the last five years of my marriage...I’d really been exploring following one’s heart so I was really trying to open up to what my heart was saying. And like that night, since everything else was blown apart it was like that allowed that to become very clear for me. So I was sitting there completely numb...in shock, when all of a sudden this very clear thing came through that was a knowing. And what it was was 'go west.' And not only was it go west but this was the start of something completely new...this was a rebirth. So my feeling is like I’ve had two lives in one lifetime. That understanding [to go west and that it was a
new beginning] was there at that moment. I felt not alone, like I was really not alone in a really profound way. When I almost died when I was 17 I was in a colourless place, colourless and formless but I felt completely comforted... completely at comfort and a part of something much greater than myself. So I knew that there was this vast...existence beyond our ordinary existence. I knew that, and it was actually harder for me to come back from that and live here, like I wanted to go. But that consciousness said to me 'you’re not finished there you have stuff you have to do so you have to go back.' After you’ve felt that connected, the feeling of aloneness when you come back is almost unbearable. I was working on that for years, trying to find...a way to be here and be okay and really helpful at the same time.

At any rate, that night when all of that other stuff was gone it was like all the things that had diverted my attention from that were all gone too, so it was possible for me to be completely open to that again, and I felt really connected up again, and that I was being looked after, and I was [spoken emphasis], I was completely and totally looked after from that moment. Like the kindness of the people who dealt with me, like all that did was reinforce to me that that kindness was reaching me from everything around me, and it had always been that way, but I couldn’t see it until that time. But the expression of the ultimate consciousness is all around us all the time, communicating to us if we perceive it that way. So
that's why if I got caught up in how hurt I was, how I pulled myself out of that was being, remembering all the kindness around me all the time, and that's what I mean by remembering all the blessings that are there all the time. So that for me was the state of grace...being really looked after. So it might feel bad, but it was preparing me for something really good. It was change, and change is painful, but it was for the better."

Theresa said that after reconnecting with the state of grace she felt "calm," "determined," and "knew where I was going." Before this she had been "struggling, confused and hurt all the time." She said she had not been experiencing the state of grace because she had been caught up in day to day things, especially career. At present, career for her is not "an all consuming thing, it's just something you do." When I asked her how long the state of Grace was with her she said that it "has been with me ever since that day, and it's only getting better. If you ask for spiritual help you're going to get it. If you ask for material things maybe you won't, but if you ask for help on your spiritual path it'll be there.

It's whatever you really [spoken emphasis] need is what you get. It's that faith that you're getting what you really need that helps to see you through. Like so maybe you're not getting that job opportunity or whatever because what you really need is what you're getting. And it must be that that
job opportunity wasn’t what you really needed. Whatever you really need for developing your spiritual path is what you get. From my point of view that’s all there is to do, that’s the only reason I’m here."

**Most essential element of the experience.** Theresa said, "To some extent if I didn’t have that experience of almost dying when I was 17, because after that point I was really focussed in many ways on my spiritual life. It was that experience of being really, almost dying. That does shake you up, that does make you wonder what it’s all about, why am I here?" She continued, "[I was] living with an understanding of impermanence...because I knew that I wouldn’t be here, but the other thing I knew was that dying wasn’t bad either. That understanding about life is pretty fundamental."

**Discussion.** The background elements in Theresa’s experience are (a) a significant problem, (b) a recognition of the problem, (c) distress about the problem, (d) attempts to resolve the problem, (e) a near-death experience, (f) spirituality, and (g) openness. For an outline of the experience see Figure 5.

Elements (a), (b), (c), (e), and (f) are obvious from her story (para. 2; Reconnecting: A state of grace). Element (d), attempts to resolve the problem, came from Theresa’s statement during the interview that she and her ex-husband had attended marriage counselling during the last few years of their marriage. Element (g), openness, came from Theresa’s
statement that she had been "exploring following

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**Background elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>significant problem</th>
<th>recognition of problem</th>
<th>distress about problem</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attempts to resolve problem</td>
<td>near-death experience</td>
<td>spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>openness</td>
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**Experience**

- shock; collapse of persona  
  (statement from ex-husband)
  ↓
- state of grace; felt knowledge; transformation of emotional state  
  (experience at friend's house later)
  ↓
- open to new direction; coincidence  
  (move west; job opening)
  ↓
- integration and continued growth  
  (healing activities)
  ↓
- surrender; resolution of problem  
  (letting go of having kids; feeling "pretty solid")
  ↓
- new direction  
  (blind-date)

---

**Figure 5.** A conceptual map of Theresa's experience.

"one's heart" (see Reconnecting: A state of grace). This meant that she was trying to be open to information from her 'heart' and open to taking new directions in her life.

Of these background elements, Near-death experience (NDE) is the only element that has not already been discussed.
Although there is some confusion about the exact definition of a NDE, Theresa’s experience would clearly be considered one (para. 2; Reconnecting: A state of grace; Most essential element of the experience). This is because she was close to physical death (from a kidney disease), and experienced herself functioning out of body (Rogo, 1989). NDE’s have been recorded in western civilization from at least the time of Plato (Rogo, 1989). The NDE’s of different individuals show both common elements and elements unique to the culture of the individual. D. Scott Rogo states that some researchers dismiss the NDE as a hallucination or some other psychological phenomenon. Rogo (1989) however, after reviewing several studies of NDE’s, concluded that the "research primarily demonstrates that the NDE is an important and (at least) subjectively real experience" (pp. 98-99).

Whatever the reality of the NDE, Theresa’s near-death experience changed her orientation to living. She became "focussed in many ways on my spiritual life." Therefore, Theresa felt this to be the essential element in her problem-solving experience.

The "bombshell" from Theresa’s ex-husband delivered quite a shock (para. 3; Reconnecting: A state of grace). This shock seemed to cut through the workings of her conscious mind, and resulted in her reconnecting with a greater consciousness. Theresa had experienced this state of consciousness before, during her near-death experience (see Reconnecting: A state of
grace). Through this came a 'knowing' of a new direction she should take, and a knowledge that she was "being looked after" (para. 3; Reconnecting: A state of grace). Through reconnecting with the state of grace Theresa also experienced: (a) a collapsing of her "persona;" (b) a transformation of her emotional state (she was now "calm," "determined," and had a sense of direction); and (c) significant "spiritual growth" (para. 5; Reconnecting: A state of grace). Theresa now believes that "the expression of the ultimate consciousness is all around us all the time, communicating to us if we perceive it that way" (see Reconnecting: A state of grace).

Felt knowledge and connection with something greater are common elements of a peak experience, as was discussed in the literature review. The collapse of the persona is a new element, and is also perhaps partly what John was referring to when he said that he "couldn't lie anymore" (see Long-term changes in John’s experience), and what Paul meant by "honesty" (see Self-exploration through relationships in Paul’s experience).

In Jung’s words the "persona is a certain complicated system of behaviour which is partially dictated by society and partially dictated by the expectations or the wishes one nurses oneself" (Evans, 1981, p. 79). The persona is like a face one puts forward to others and sometimes to oneself for various reasons. Two simple examples would be (a) a counsellor acting differently at work to meet with societal...
expectations of professional behaviour, and (b) putting 'one's best face forward' to avoid facing some private pain. Theresa stated that she was tired of the shallow relationships that result from using a persona. She was grateful for its collapse as that opened up the possibility of connecting with others in a genuine way (para. 2, 5).

The resulting move to western Canada was aided by a coincidence when a transfer opportunity became available. This was contrary to previous trends in Theresa's company (para. 5). After moving, Theresa continued her healing and personal growth, and integrated the results of her new direction. Through supportive social contact, hiking, spending time in nature, and meditation, she reached a place where she was at peace with herself and her future. She surrendered her desire for marriage and children, and decided to engage in volunteer work to fulfil her desire for a "nurturing connection" (para. 6-7).

The benefits of meditation have been discussed. However, the elements social support, exercise, and being in nature are new. Social support is important to individual and collective well-being. Also, counsellors are urged consider their client's social support network when making interventions. A lack of social support can hamper an individual's attempts to make positive change in their lives, and an unsupportive social network can sabotage efforts at change (Gottlieb, 1988).
Research on the effects of exercise shows that it tends to be related to: (a) increased well-being; (b) improvements in mood; and (c) improvements in self-concept, self-esteem, and self-assurance (Leith & Taylor, 1990; Plante & Rodin, 1990). However, Leith and Taylor (1990), as well as Plante and Rodin (1990) warn that some of the past research on exercise was methodologically unsound, therefore the findings from this research may be inflated. They stress the need for further study to confirm the results found to date.

The benefits of being in nature are something most of us seem to seek out instinctively, and I think we can all recognize the healing effects of natural surroundings. In Theresa's case she specifically tried to "fuse" herself with the natural surroundings as a healing meditation (para. 7).

Theresa had accepted and was comfortable with her new direction in life. It was at this time however, that she was invited to participate in the blind date. The result of the date was another shift of direction that has led to even greater happiness for her. Table 5 contains the significant elements in Theresa's experience.
### Table 5

**Significant Elements of Theresa's Experience**

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<tr>
<td>4. Attempts to resolve problem.</td>
<td>15. Social support.</td>
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<td>10. Interdependence.</td>
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</table>
Chapter 5: Discussion

This section will begin by listing the elements that the stories held in common. This will be followed by (a) the theoretical implications of these elements, (b) their counselling implications, (c) speculation about the nature of problem-solving experiences, (d) the limitations of this study, (e) recommendations for future research, and (f) the summary.

Common Elements Between Stories

As was stated in the introduction, because of the variability of the experiences collected here, constructing a paradigmatic model was not possible. There were however elements which appeared in most, or all of the experiences. Therefore it was possible to 'colour in' the phenomenon 'problem-solving experiences.' Table 6 contains a list of elements common to three or more experiences.

Appearing in all the stories were the elements (a) significant problem, (b) recognition of problem, (c) distress about problem, (d) spirituality, and (e) change in view of self and self-in-the-world. The first four of these elements formed part of the background of each experience, while element (e) was involved in the experiences themselves.

The elements that appeared in four of the five experiences were (a) openness, (b) shock, (c) surrender, (d) prayer/petition for help, and (e) interdependence. Element (a), openness, appeared as both a background and experience
element. The rest were experience elements.

The elements that appeared in three of the five experiences were (a) awareness of mortality, (b) loss of/relative lack of an egocentric view, (c) symbolic statement/message, and (d) coincidence/synchronicity. Element (a) and relative lack of an egocentric view were background elements, the others were experience elements.

Table 6
Common Elements Between Experiences

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<th>5 of 5</th>
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*Pre-experience background elements. **Background and experience elements.

Theoretical implications

The first implication of these experiences is that counselling theories should be open to spiritual interpretations of reality. This is how four of the five co-
researchers interpreted events, and spirituality was a background element in all five experiences. To not be open to a spiritual view limits the scope of our theories, and renders them unable to account for all of human experience.

The beliefs held by many spiritual traditions could explain the events related by these co-researchers. For example, a Catholic framework would probably hold that these experiences are examples of divine intervention in the lives of individuals, or examples of individuals becoming open to God’s guidance (McBrien, 1981; Merton, 1976). The three co-researchers who interpreted events in a way that does not accord with Catholic doctrine would be perceived as mistaken about the source of the guidance or help they received.

Another example is a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. From this point of view the events would possibly be explained as (a) examples of interdependence, (b) manifestations of karma, and (c) individuals progressing along the path to realization (Dalai Lama, 1992; Das, 1992).

A complete exploration of spiritual teachings which could account for the events related by the co-researchers is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it seems that examining spiritual explanations of events would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

From a mundane perspective, the way events occurred in the experiences fits with a variety of theoretical positions in psychology. Perhaps the most complete fit is found in
Jung’s conception of the workings of the psyche. Briefly, Jung (1960d) wrote that the psyche included the persona and the ego in the conscious mind, and the personal unconscious and collective unconscious in the unconscious mind. The persona was introduced above, and is essentially a social self that we present to the world in response to societal expectations and our own desires.

Jung described the ego as the central reference point of consciousness and our sense of an I, while the self was the sum total of conscious and unconscious. The personal unconscious was seen as being derived from personal experience, but was material not currently conscious. "The personal unconscious consists firstly of all those contents that became unconscious either because they lost their intensity and were forgotten or because consciousness was withdrawn from them (repression), and secondly of contents, some of them sense-impressions, which never had sufficient intensity to reach consciousness but have somehow entered the psyche" (1960d, p. 151-152). Some childhood experiences for example, may not be immediately accessible to the conscious mind, but can be recalled with effort or in certain contexts.

The collective unconscious is "identical in all [people] and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us" (1969, p. 4). Jung speculated that the deepest 'levels' of the unconscious would comprise "a psychic activity which goes
on independently of the conscious mind and is not dependent even on the upper layers of the unconscious [that part of the unconscious more readily accessible to consciousness], untouched — and perhaps untouchable — by personal experience" (1960c, p. 148). Jung (1960c, 1967, 1969) stated that the unconscious communicated to the conscious mind through symbols.

Jung’s writings are vast, however many of his essays dovetail with the way events occurred in these experiences. For example Jung’s (1969) writings on the anima fit with Paul’s experience, and his (1960a) writings on synchronicity fit with Julie’s. Consider also the following quote from Jung (1969):

In the end one has to admit that there are problems which one simply cannot solve on one’s own resources. Such an admission has the advantage of being honest, truthful, and in accord with reality, and this prepares the ground for a compensatory reaction from the collective unconscious: you are now more inclined to give heed to a helpful idea or intuition, or to notice thoughts which had not been allowed to voice themselves before. Perhaps you will pay attentions to the dreams that visit you at such moments, or will reflect on certain inner and outer occurrences that take place just at this time. If you have a attitude of this kind, then the helpful powers slumbering in the deeper
strata of [our] nature can come awake and intervene (p. 21).

Jung (1969) describes this experience as non-dualistic, infinite, and a "true experience of the world" (p. 21). Reading this passage one can see many of the significant elements that have appeared in the experiences above. Jung's writing can not be explored here in its entirety. However, the data from this study supported his conceptualizations of the workings of the human psyche.

Another theorist whose work was supported by the findings is George Kelly. As was mentioned above, Kelly believed the universe functioned in an interdependent fashion. His psychological theory was based on the idea that we essentially 'construct' our own reality by the way we interpret events.

Kelly (1955) wrote that, "[One] looks at [one's] world through transparent patterns or templets which [one] creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always very good" (pp. 8-9). Kelly called these templets constructs. When there is a poor 'fit' between our constructs and reality, we experience problems. Kelly also wrote that we can have difficulties when our personal investment in a "larger [superordinate construct] system, or [our] personal dependence upon it, is so great that [we] will forego the adoption of a more precise construct in the substructure. It may take a major act of psychotherapy or experience to get [us] to adjust [our] construction system to
the point where the new and more precise construct can be incorporated" (p. 9).

As was evident from their stories, the co-researchers adopted new constructs via their experiences. I would argue that these new constructs were also more precise constructions of reality. This can be seen from the outcome of their use. It is difficult to imagine the use of a less precise construct having long-term beneficial effects. There could however, be potential short-term benefits from using less precise constructs. For example, in order to prevent oneself from being overwhelmed by emotionally charged memories, one might use a defense mechanism like repression. This would be a less precise way of construing events that could have short-term benefits. However, the use of less precise constructs becomes counter-productive in the long-term. The new constructs used by the co-researchers had long-term positive effects on their lives and well-being. This was evidence that an experience can, as Kelly wrote, make it possible for us to adopt more precise constructions of reality.

Finally, Frick's (1990) concept of the SGE was also supported by this study. Julie, John and Mark's experiences were examples of people resolving problems through relating to symbolic elements of what they were experiencing. This led to sudden personal growth in two of these three cases. It also led to the resolution of internal conflicts in two of the three cases. Frick (1990) wrote that sudden personal growth
and the resolution of internal conflicts were both characteristics of a SGE.

**Counselling implications**

This study focussed on a natural process of personal problem resolution. Therefore, the results have implications for counselling, which is also a process of personal problem resolution. All five co-researchers were aware and distressed about a personal problem before their experience (elements 1-3 in Table 6; Elements will be followed by their Table 6 reference number in brackets as they are introduced.). This supports the idea that counsellors should take time to ensure that their clients have a good grasp of what their concern is, and what is at stake if the situation remains the same (Egan, 1994; Janis & Mann, 1982; Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Clients who are not experiencing some level of distress about their problem, or who are unable to connect with their distress, may have difficulty making progress (Janis & Mann, 1982; Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

The elements spirituality (4) and prayer (9) suggest that counsellors should be open to spiritual explanations of reality. We should also be open to discussing spirituality and the client’s spiritual beliefs in session. Certainly it would be wise to refer a client elsewhere if they present a spiritual problem that is beyond one’s expertise. However, there may be instances when a helper who is not taking the perspective of a particular spiritual tradition is the one who
is best able to help.

The element change in view of self and self-in-the-world (5) is indicative of the counselling endeavour as a whole. Whether a therapist employs reflection, narrative, reframing, or artwork, the aim is to help the client view themselves and their world in ways that are more adaptive.

Element number (6), openness, implies that it is important that clients are able to be open to the counselling process. They would also benefit from being open to events in their lives, and open to new experiences in general. Therefore interventions which promote client openness become important. These include (a) orienting new clients to what goes on in counselling, (b) using immediacy to explore any obstacles to openness that do arise, and (c) encouraging clients to experiment with new behaviours in-session and as homework.

Next are the elements interdependence (10), and coincidence/synchronicity (14). The implications of these elements are extensive. Western thought is based primarily on a dualistic conceptualization of reality, therefore adopting the concept of interdependence would entail a fundamental restructuring of our own constructs. For example, if the universe is composed of interdependent parts collected within an indivisible whole, then working for the benefit of others and the world around us would be as, or more important than, focussing on ourselves. This is not to say that working on
self-growth or improving one's own life would not be a meaningful thing to do, simply that to work solely for one’s own benefit would actually be estranging oneself from reality. Also, to act in a self-centred way, or engage in actions that harm others or the environment would ironically not be in our own best interests. If reality is interdependent, the results of our actions influence the entire system we are a part of and eventually come back full circle upon us.

The counselling implications of interdependence are difficult to imagine precisely. However, it is clear that a fundamental shift in the way we view counselling would be necessary. For example, the therapeutic relationship has been found to be a highly significant element in positive outcomes for counselling (Orlinsky et al., 1994; Orlinsky & Howard, 1986; Whiston & Sexton, 1993). Exactly why it is important is unknown. Perhaps the reason is that if one is able to connect in a genuine way with a therapist, then one is better able to make genuine connections in general, which better reflects the way things are in reality.

At the very least these two elements (10 & 14) suggest that we be open to counselling approaches that incorporate them. Examples of these approaches include the work of Kelly (1955) and Jung (1960a, 1960e, 1966c, 1969). Another example is Morita therapy, which was developed in Japan primarily for working with people suffering from neurosis (Fujita, 1986; Ishiyama, 1986). Finally, certain spiritual traditions could
also be included, as they have a therapeutic function as well. Buddhism for example, is viewed as a science of the mind as well as a religion (Dalai Lama, Benson, Thurman, Gardner, & Goleman, 1991). Elements (10) and (14) also imply that clients should be aware that meaningful or helpful events may happen outside of the therapy session.

The above therapeutic systems also incorporate the elements surrender (8) and loss/lack of egocentric view (12). Morita therapy for example, encourages 'going with the way things are' and not fighting against 'inconvenient' emotions. Morita therapists encourage clients not to focus tightly on themselves and their anxiety, but instead to focus on being involved in their activities. Emotions are viewed as a natural part of the whole person. They are not seen as something to control, but something to accept and act in spite of (Ishiyama, 1986).

Jung’s thoughts concerning these two elements (8 & 12) are clear from the passage quoted above (Jung, 1969, p. 21). He felt that they were necessary components of a 'true experience of the world.' In Kelly’s theory they fit in with having to give up constructions that are not in accord with reality. If a person has a large investment in their constructions, making progress in counselling is much more difficult.

Finally, spiritual paths also frequently emphasize elements of surrender, and loss of ego (Dalai Lama, 1992;
McBrien, 1981). In Buddhism for example, surrendering one's clinging to the concept of an inherently existing self is viewed as essential in order to experience the true nature of one's mind, which is the same as the true nature of reality (Dalai Lama, 1992).

The results of this study also supported working with symbol (13) in counselling. Jung (1960c), as was stated above, felt that the unconscious communicated to the conscious mind through symbols. Since the "integration of unconscious contents...is the main endeavour of analytical psychology" (1960e, p. 217), being able to work with symbols is essential for counsellors who employ his methods. See Jung 1966b and 1966c for examples of how he worked with symbolic manifestations in sessions.

Another way of working with symbol in counselling is through metaphor. "Metaphors, because they allow clients to perceive a different reality around their problems while still remaining in touch with their problems, also enable clients to 'see' different solutions and/or 'see' different ways of viewing their problems" (Atwood & Levine, 1991, p. 202).

Dolan (1986) wrote, "The metaphor elicits an unconscious search for an appropriate and adaptive solution to the problem. The precise meaning that a client attaches to a metaphor is derived from the client's own inner resources... [t]herefore, the resulting application fits the client's needs exactly " (pp. 1-2).
However, as Briggs and Peat (1989) caution it is important not to use a dead metaphor (i.e., one that has lost the tension between its terms). They write that "for metaphor to elicit nuance it must be fresh, not dead; it must shock the mind into wonder by opening up a gap between its terms and then bridge the gap with an electricity of nuance. Overuse closes up the gap between the terms of a metaphor because we come to think we "know" what the metaphor means" (p. 197). Comparing life to a sea voyage is an example they give of a dead metaphor.

Also of note is that symbols may be a powerful way to help individuals overcome substance-abuse problems. Symbolic statements were involved in the problem-solving experiences of the two co-researchers who had problems with alcohol. By chance, I also found a third example of this in a newspaper article while I was working on this thesis. The following passage from that article describes the experience of an addict.

He ran away from an abusive home at thirteen and ended up on the streets "sticking a needle into his arm every day." He committed armed robbery to support his habit, and spent 12 years in B. C. prisons. But one day he spotted a man he used to know standing in the 'food line' and his life turned around. "When I was a kid I really looked up to this guy, even though he wasn't a positive role model. He was my idol so to speak and there he
was - 20 years later, a broken-down, lonely old man living off the food line, and I said, 'Wow, this is going to be me.' " [After this experience he] got counselling, returned to school, volunteered in treatment centres, and started the society [for drug and alcohol treatment] (Gold, 1995).

It would be worth researching symbolic 'interventions' to determine if they can effect change in counselling settings as well as natural settings.

The last common elements, awareness of mortality (11), and shock (9) were elaborated on in the discussion section of Julie's experience. As was mentioned there, awareness of one's mortality facilitates reflection about oneself and one's life. Despite our aversion to thinking about death in North American culture, it seems that this could be a valuable activity to engage in with some of our clients.

It is difficult to recommend using shock in-session. However, interventions such as confrontation, paradoxical intention, and certain types of reflection can provide a shock, and are beneficial when used appropriately.

Speculation about problem-solving experiences

Based on the findings of this study, there appear to be some pre-conditions that are necessary for problem-solving experiences to occur (see the first five elements of Table 6). These experiences seem to require an awareness that there is a problem, and at least a moderate level of distress about the
problem. Also, being open to viewing events in spiritual way seems to play a key role.

The experience itself can take a variety of forms, and although a number of elements commonly appear (elements 6-14 in Table 6), these elements do not seem to be universal. However, the result of the experience does seem to be universal in that it involves a shift in perceptions. There is a change in how one views oneself, and a change in how one views oneself in relation to one's world. The result of the experience often went beyond solving the problem that the co-researcher was initially aware of. For Julie, John and Theresa, the experience seemed to include a spiritual awakening.

In the theoretical implications section above, several possible explanations of how the experience might 'work' were given. These included (a) spiritual explanations, (b) Jung's theory of help manifesting from the unconscious, and (c) Kelly's construct theory. Another possible explanation can be drawn from statements made by two of the co-researchers.

In reference to seeing connections and "coincidences" in her environment, Julie said that, "If I was less attached to day to day concerns, I could see these things more." Theresa stated that the reason she had not been experiencing the "state of grace" was that she had been caught up in day to day concerns. Perhaps being caught up in the everyday world and a more mundane way of viewing events, precludes our experiencing
another aspect of reality. Several of the authors quoted in the literature review expressed this sentiment (Frick, 1990; Jung, 1967; Maslow, 1970).

Julie said, "If you're not going to twig to the miraculous, you're not going to get it." She also stated that she can sometimes see these coincidences happening for other people, "but they don't get it even when I point it out." Julie wondered if it had something to do with timing, or about people not being ready to see them. She also wondered what she missed before she "got it."

Based on these statements and the results of the study, it is possible to hypothesize that we are interdependent parts of a greater whole, and further, that what keeps us from perceiving this is being caught up in mundane concerns, and close-minded or self-centred thinking. The problem-solving experience may help us to break through our habitual way of perceiving, and help us to open up to the way things actually are. In the case of someone who is already fairly open to 'reality,' the experience could manifest in the form of dreams or experiences that can be recognized as help.

It may be part of our potential as human beings to experience life in a way similar to that described in the above stories. The benefits for the co-researchers included: (a) increased well-being and happiness; (b) finding guidance naturally available in times of confusion; (c) feeling that they were more 'authentic,' and capable of connecting with
others in a genuine way; and (d) the possibility of spiritual realization. Living in a self-centred way, preoccupied with day to day concerns could well run counter to this experience. If this is true, we should consider changing our priorities, and our outlook on living.

Finally, it should be noted that although the experiences were depicted in Figures 1-5 in a linear fashion, they were not conceptualized as a linear progression of events and elements. The Figures were only intended to be a reference aid, as the experiences obviously occurred in a more holistic way.

Limitations

As three of the co-researchers were acquaintances (Mark, Paul & Theresa) this study may contain a sampling bias. A further limitation was the lack of an independent corroboration of the data analysis.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study suggest several avenues for future research. First, it is necessary to continue research into problem-solving experiences. This study was an initial exploration of the phenomenon, and the results require confirmation. Other possibilities include: (a) research into the efficacy of the therapeutic methods of Jung and Kelly, (b) research on the Symbolic Growth Experience (Frick, 1990), (c) research on the therapeutic function of spiritual traditions, and (d) research on symbolic interventions with substance
abusers.

Summary

This study explored the nature of personal problem-solving experiences. Each of the experiences presented here was unique enough to preclude constructing a paradigmatic model. However, common elements between the experiences did emerge, and these were listed in Table 6 above. There seemed to be several pre-conditions necessary for the occurrence of a personal problem-solving experience. These were (a) a significant problem, (b) awareness of the problem, (c) distress about the problem, and (d) spirituality. The experiences also universally resulted in a change in the way the co-researchers viewed themselves, and a change in the way they viewed themselves in relation to the world.

The study provided support for spiritual interpretations of reality, as well as the theoretical conceptualizations of Carl Jung and George Kelly. Willard Frick's work on the Symbolic Growth Experience was also supported. The counselling implications of the research included (a) the need to ensure that clients have a sufficient degree of problem awareness, (b) the importance of helping clients to be open to the counselling process and life-events in general, (c) support for working with symbol in-session, and (d) the possibility that our conceptualization of counselling may need to change in order to accommodate the interdependence of phenomena.
Finally, the study included speculation about how a problem-solving experience might 'work' that was based on the overall results of the study, and statements from two of the co-researchers. In brief, it was hypothesized that the experience helps the individual cut through their habitual way of perceiving themselves and events, and helps them to open up to a more accurate experience of reality.
References


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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Format
1. Description of the event.

2. Relevant thoughts, feelings, actions, and experiences prior to the event.

3. Short-term and long-term differences after the event.

4. Most essential element of the experience.

5. How did the experience work? Co-researcher's ideas and a check of literature generated hypotheses.
Appendix B

Newspaper Advertisement
UBC Masters student researching experiences that transformed people's lives. If your life had a turning point, please call Steve at 261-6059.
Appendix C

Consent Form
Participant’s Information and Consent Form

Personal Problem-solving Experiences: An exploratory study  
(Project Supervisor: Dr. Ishu Ishiyama - 822-5329)

My name is Steve Ayers. As part of my Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology I’m doing a research project on critical moments or events which solved problems in people’s lives.

To help me in this research I will be interviewing people who have had this kind of experience. The first interview will probably take about an hour and a half, the second about half an hour, and they will be audiotaped. Parts of the tapes will be transcribed to use in my thesis. When the research is finished it would be helpful to be able to contact you to discuss the results.

The information you provide will be kept confidential, and I will not be using names or other identifying information in the thesis. After my thesis has been accepted the tapes will be erased.

There are no financial benefits from participating in this study, and you are free to withdraw any time you wish. If you have any questions about the research, or remember additional details that you feel are important, you can contact me at 261-6059. I hope the opportunity to talk about your experience will be a rewarding and enriching one.

I, ______________________, of legal age (19 yrs or over) have read the above carefully, and give my consent to participate in the above study. I also acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form.

Please contact me / do not contact me to discuss the results of this study.

Signature __________________________ Date ______________