



# **The Participatory Turn**

*Review of Jorge N. Ferrer,  
Revisoning Transpersonal Theory:  
A Participatory Vision of  
Human Spirituality*

**Karen Jaenke**

**F**errer's book (Albany: SUNY, 2002) signals a watershed moment in the evolution of transpersonal theory. As Richard Tarnas persuasively argues in the foreword, this book conceptually furthers the paradigm shift initiated thirty-plus years ago by Maslow and Grof's groundbreaking research into peak and psychedelic experiences, which gave birth to transpersonal psychology. Paradigm shifts, Tarnas suggests, although initiated by revolutionary breaks in theoretical frames, are rarely, if ever, completed at once. They often require subsequent conceptual breakthroughs that confront lingering assumptions that have been unconsciously carried over from the old paradigm. Although the birth of transpersonal psychology reclaimed the spiritual dimension of human experience as a valid scientific enterprise, thus initiating the healing of modernity's long-standing schism between religion and science, other unexamined holdovers from the positivistic mindset have continued to plague transpersonal studies.

Ferrer's achievement formally bridges transpersonal theory and the participatory paradigm, a multidisciplinary paradigm shift being birthed in our times (Barfield 1965; Tarnas 1991; Heron and Reason 1997; Kremer 1992a, 1992b; Skolimowski 1994; Reason 1993; Lincoln and Guba 2000). Thus, the book will be of particular interest not only to transpersonalists but to those in other fields who are wrestling with the deeper meanings of a participatory mode of thinking and being, as well as to those who seek insight into the most profound currents of our zeitgeist. Ferrer's book is one voice in a growing chorus that celebrates participatory ways of knowing and being. Indeed, in

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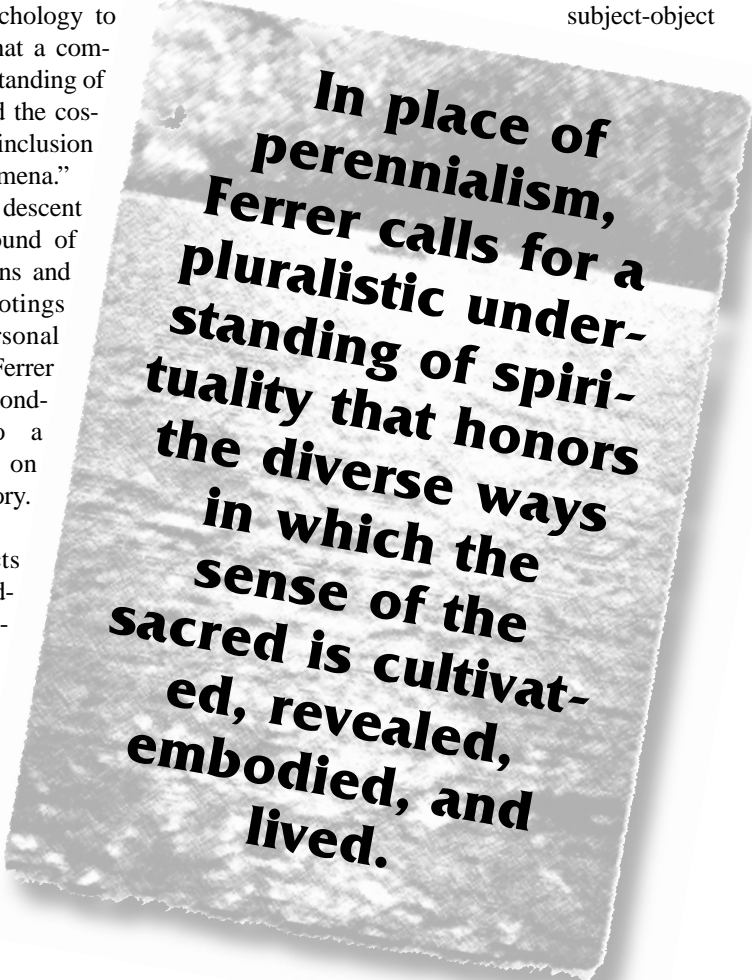
time he may come to be heard as one of the leading voices of the chorus.

Ferrer's newly invented term "the participatory turn" is central to his thesis and destined to secure the seminal place of the book. Playing on various "turns" in the evolution of Western philosophy, such as "the turn to the subject" in the nineteenth century and, more recent, interpretive, linguistic, conversational, narrative, and pragmatic "turns," "the participatory turn" signals a monumental conceptual shift, a major turning point in Western intellectual history, with relevance far beyond transpersonal studies. Writing as one who has assimilated vast amounts of transpersonal scholarship and is familiar with the wider Western thought streams from which transpersonal studies emerged, Ferrer is aware of the evocative power of his term and of the turn to which it refers. His broad vantage point enables him to transcend the dualisms that have plagued Western philosophy, religion, and science, and to offer stunningly succinct syntheses—for instance, distilling the essence of transpersonal psychology to the "conviction that a comprehensive understanding of human beings and the cosmos requires the inclusion of spiritual phenomena."

A painstaking descent into the underground of hidden assumptions and unquestioned footings within transpersonal studies enables Ferrer to make a corresponding ascent into a meta-perspective on transpersonal theory. Simultaneously, Ferrer connects transpersonal studies to other contemporary thought streams, including fields as diverse as feminist theory, cross-cultural philosophy of religion, comparative mysticism, inter-

religious dialogue, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, and post-Kuhnian philosophy of science. The shift into the participatory paradigm that Ferrer achieves for transpersonal studies will be of value to scholars seeking to make the same shift in their own disciplines.

Ferrer's core concern is that transpersonal theory lacks an adequate epistemology, with calamitous consequences. At the crux of transpersonal epistemology is the character of knowledge to which transpersonal phenomena provide access during an expansion of individual consciousness. What these nonordinary states of consciousness reveal foremost are the fallacious limitations of perceiving the world through a subject-object lens—the characteristic stance of "the Cartesian ego." Thus, because the prime data of transpersonal psychology—transpersonal phenomena—disclose nondualistic, unitive modes of perception, the conception of transpersonal phenomena must follow suit. It must faithfully capture and convey this essential nondualistic knowing—or participatory knowing—in which the subject-object



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dichotomy is transcended and resolved. And it is this central task—the reconception of transpersonal phenomena according to the participatory perception they awaken—that Ferrer undertakes. Or, as he states in the book’s first line, “This book is a revision of transpersonal theory from a participatory perspective of knowledge and reality.”

With these introductory comments, let me trace the main argument presented in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. Both the organization of the book and Ferrer’s argument divide into two parts, named “Deconstruction” and “Reconstruction,” reflecting his affinities with postmodern thought.

### *Deconstruction: The Transpersonal Trinity*

The deconstruction entails a critical appraisal of three prevalent (though not ubiquitous) assumptions found in transpersonal studies thus far. The first, experientialism, refers to the ontological assumption that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena are fundamentally individual inner experiences. The second, inner empiricism, refers to the methodological assumption that transpersonal inquiry needs to be empirically (that is, experientially) grounded. Third, perennialism, refers to the metaphysical assumption that there is a common core within the diversity of spiritual traditions—a “single spiritual ultimate” that has a universal structure and hence is universally accessible. Ferrer argues that although those three assumptions have served transpersonal studies in important and laudable ways, they reflect an early stage in transpersonal inquiry and today are limiting and problematic.

In place of experientialism, Ferrer proposes an ontological shift that would view transpersonal and spiritual phenomena not as inner or intrasubjective experiences but as participatory events that can emerge in a variety of loci—an individual, a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place. The experiential element of transpersonal phenomena is not denied, but it becomes reconceived as the participation of individual consciousness in a multilocal transpersonal event. Thus the individual partakes of a participatory event, which offers a multidimensional

knowing that cuts across the knowing dimensions of mind, body, heart, and soul.

Ferrer’s next target is inner empiricism, which refers to the adoption of the language, methods, and standards of empirical science in the study of transpersonal phenomena. This includes the importation of positivist and postpositivist validity standards of replication and intersubjective verification or falsification. Ferrer argues that spiritual inquiry must instead establish its own standards of validity, which, he proposes, relate to the emancipatory power of spiritual phenomena, especially the capacity to free individuals of egocentric world views and ways of life.

Finally, Ferrer takes on perennialism, the metaphysical assumption of a single ultimate spiritual reality that is both pre-given and universal. This metaphysical view is captured by the transpersonal analogy “all rivers lead to one ocean,” or in other words, the various spiritual traditions lead to a single spiritual essence. In place of perennialism, Ferrer calls for a pluralistic understanding of spirituality that honors the diverse ways in which the sense of the sacred is cultivated, revealed, embodied, and lived. Instead of a “single spiritual ultimate” (which operates as unexamined baggage from positivism’s postulate of a single objective reality), Ferrer posits a “dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power.”

Ferrer adapts and extends the perennialist metaphor that “spiritual traditions are like rivers leading to the same ocean” in two important ways. First, the “ocean” shared by most spiritual traditions does not refer ontologically to a single spiritual ultimate, but more transformatively and humanly to the overcoming of self-centeredness, which he identifies as the common element in most religions. This “Ocean of Emancipation” offers a radical shift in perspective away from the seeking of metaphysical absolutes and toward the very human and painstaking emancipatory process of deconstructing the Cartesian ego and eradicating self-imposed suffering, which will ultimately result in the emergence of selfless perception, cognition, and action. Second, Ferrer reminds us that this ocean has many shores,

referring to the multiplicity of transpersonal disclosures of reality.

This metaphysical revisioning has axiological implications for value judgments concerning the relative merit of various spiritual revelations, insights, and practices. Ferrer points out that hierarchical rankings of spiritual insights depend on assumptions of a pre-given spiritual ultimate, relative to which such judgments can be made. Instead, qualitative distinctions among religious traditions must be assessed not through appeal to a priori metaphysical schemata (and pronounced in a doctrinaire manner), but rather through a collective and dialogical process that undergoes the rigors of spiritual inquiry and inter-religious dialogue, with a discerning eye toward their emancipatory impact.

The trinity of experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism has been essential to the birth and youth of transpersonal psychology (given its parentage in a materialistic and secular culture that denied the value and validity of spiritual phenomena). Ferrer believes that these frameworks, heretofore somewhat sacrosanct within transpersonal circles, today severely inhibit the creative possibilities and contributions of transpersonal psychology.

### *Reconstruction: The Participatory Turn*

Once Ferrer has dislodged transpersonal psychology from its Cartesian moorings in experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism, which are intimately connected to the subject-object dualisms at the epistemological foundations of modernity, he embarks on his reconstructive effort. The reconstructive goal of Ferrer’s project concerns the development of a distinctly transpersonal epistemology, based in transpersonal data. Transpersonal knowledge refers to “the knowledge claimed to be accessed during transpersonal experiences.” Although conventional discussions of knowledge claims occur in modes of discourse characteristic of the Cartesian ego and rooted in a subject-object dichotomy, transpersonal phenomena reveal the fallacious limitations of a subject-object understanding of perception. Hence, the knowledge claims surrounding transpersonal phe-

nomena must honor the mode of perception revealed in transpersonal states.

In one of my favorite parts of the book, Ferrer uses transpersonal data to demonstrate the falsity of the subject-object dichotomy in favor of a subjective-objective fluidity. In transpersonal states, the subjective can become objective when the self disidentifies from subjective structures with which it was previously identified, and elements previously submerged in human subjectivity emerge as objects of conscious awareness, as with the emergence of witness consciousness. The opposite transition, from objective to subjective, also occurs in transpersonal states when the self identifies with objects of the external world, thereby coming into an inner knowing or fusion with elements of the cosmos, which in turn results in an expansion of self-identity to encompass other aspects of life and the cosmos. Ferrer cites Puhakka (2000), who points out that distinctions between subject and object or knower and known are obliterated in such moments of fusion. At this moment, an ontological shift occurs: it is no longer the subject viewing the object but the subject being the object. This transforms the subject's being.

Ferrer achieves the participatory turn through a remarkably simple adjustment (albeit one with far-reaching implications): transpersonal phenomena are not individual inner experiences but epistemic events. In this reframe, transpersonal experiences do not lead to transpersonal knowledge; rather, transpersonal participatory events elicit in the individual transpersonal experiences. Human participation in transpersonal phenomena is a multidimensional event that transverses the distinct knowing dimensions of mind, heart, body, and soul. Furthermore, spiritual energies are not confined to our inner world (which would be an anthropocentric distortion, appropriating all spiritual energies and powers to the human); they also flow in relationships, communities, and places. The participatory vision overthrows intrasubjective reductionism, because all experience is part of the surrounding context in which it occurs. Spiritual phenomena arise from human participation in spheres of being and awareness that transcend the merely

human, hence the term "trans-personal." This participatory understanding is, moreover, consistent with the view of spiritual knowing embraced by most contemplative traditions.

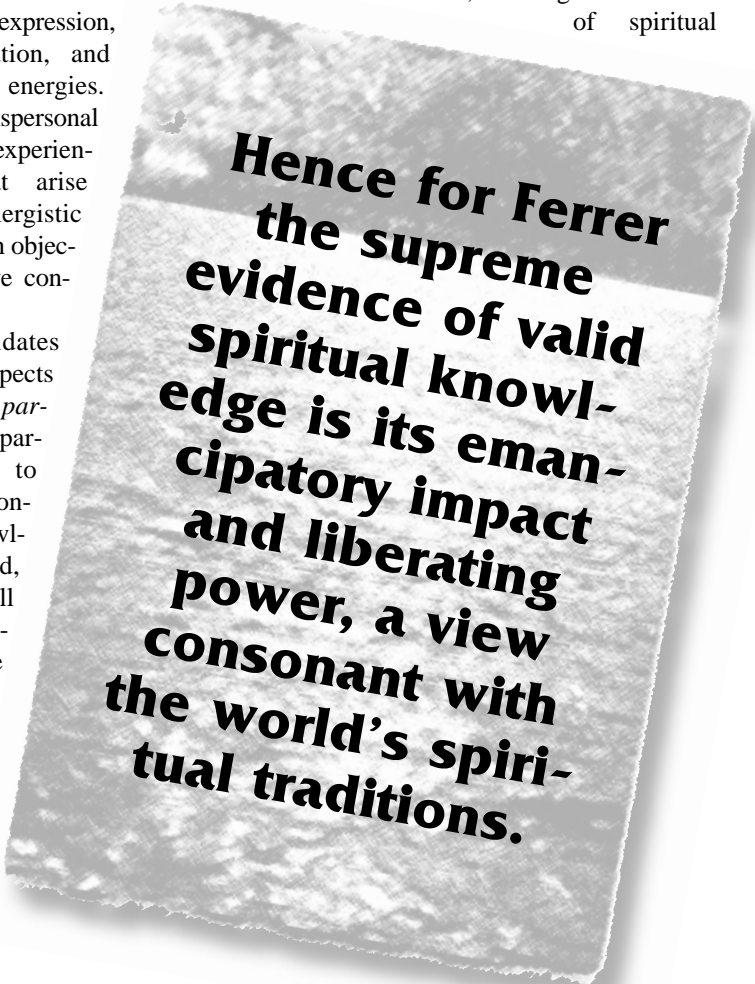
Thus, three important components to the participatory vision may be elucidated. Transpersonal phenomena are (1) based on events, in contrast to intrasubjective experiences; (2) multilocal, in that they can arise in different loci, such as an individual, a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place; and (3) participatory, in that they invite the generative power and dynamism of all dimensions of human nature to interact with a spiritual power cocreatively.

In illuminating the meaning of an event, Ferrer offers the delightful analogy of a party, which as a participatory celebration of life and the other is not any one individual's property and cannot be possessed. For a party only occurs when a certain combination of elements come together. The most we can do is facilitate those conditions through dress, decoration, delectable food and drink, and activities or rituals that promote self-expression, mutual participation, and openness to life energies. Like a party, transpersonal phenomena are experiential events that arise through the synergistic presence of certain objective and subjective conditions.

Ferrer elucidates several distinct aspects of the meaning of *participatory*. First, participatory refers to the multidimensional nature of knowledge conveyed, which traverses all knowing dimensions of the human being. Not merely cognitive, it involves an opening of the mind, body, heart, and soul. Second, participatory

refers to an I-thou relationship of cocreative communion in sharp contrast to relations of appropriation, possession, or passive reception of knowledge. Third, participatory refers to human beings' ongoing ontological immersion in spiritual realities. Humans are always participating, consciously or unconsciously, in the self-disclosure of spirit by virtue of the immanent presence of spiritual energies. Fourth, participatory knowing, by virtue of this encounter with presence, is enactive, in the sense of bringing forth a world, and thus transformative for self and world.

This participatory understanding helps correct at least four dangers along the spiritual path, the first two conceptual and the latter two practical: (1) intrasubjective reductionism, in which spirituality is reduced to a primarily private and individual affair; (2) subtle Cartesianism, which imposes a subject-object model of knowledge and cognition onto transpersonal phenomena (that is, a subject's knowing or having experiences of transpersonal objects); (3) spiritual narcissism, referring to the misuse of spiritual



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practices, energies, or experiences to reinforce self-centered ways of being, which can manifest as ego-inflation, self-absorption, and spiritual materialism; (4) integrative arrestment or the failure to integrate the spiritual realizations arising from transpersonal phenomena into everyday life in service of transformation of self, relationships, and world. As Ferrer points out, the assimilation of transpersonal states into enduring traits is the hallmark of genuine transpersonal development. The goal of the spiritual quest is not to have spiritual experiences, in the way that a consumer possesses a product, but to expand and stabilize spiritual consciousness, lead a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly. When spiritual openings remain divorced from wider ethical and social contexts, their sacred and transformative quality substantially diminishes.

Hence for Ferrer the supreme evidence of valid spiritual knowledge is its emancipatory impact and liberating power, a view consonant with the world's spiritual traditions. Akin to Christ's teaching "By their fruits ye

shall know them," Ferrer's test for the validity of spiritual knowledge rests in the quality of selfless awareness and action it spawns. Thus, judgments about how accurately spiritual claims correspond to "ultimate reality" are virtually senseless. The goal of contemplative traditions is not to describe and represent, but to enact, embody, and transform. The emancipatory power of spiritual truths refers to their capacity to liberate individuals, communities, and cultures from overt and subtle forms of narcissism, egocentrism, and self-centeredness, which are limiting ways of being. To know is to be liberated and to contribute to liberation.

One of the entrenched Western dualisms Ferrer addresses is that of the Myth of the Given, upheld by perennialists, and the Myth of the Framework, upheld by contextualists. According to the Myth of the Given, the world has pre-given features independent of any cognitive or interpretive activity (ontological thesis), and human knowledge

is valid when its claims correspond to this pre-given world (epistemological thesis). The Myth of the Given is undermined by the interpretive turn in philosophy that recognizes the interpretive nature of all human knowledge; the world's disclosure is not fixed but partially fluid, depending on the perceptual and interpretive lenses of the knower. The creative role of human cognition is arguably more fundamental in subtle spiritual knowing than in empirical knowing. Conversely, in the Myth of the Framework, the knower becomes a prisoner of these conceptual frameworks, because knowledge is always con-

structed and screened through interpretive filters.

Ferrer, however, points out the flawed logic of both positions, which are equally embedded in the dualistic divide between framework and reality, although each accentuates a different side of the polarity: "This splitting of reality into two halves is not only epistemologically suspect but also existentially and spiritually alienating" (144). This flawed epistemic dualism contributes to the profound existential estrangement of the modern self from the cosmos, because of the alienating gulf between subject and object, knower and known. In its place, an epistemic model is needed that preserves the merits and partial truths of each position, freed from Cartesian-Kantian dualisms.

Transpersonal data point the way to overcoming this dualism. During transpersonal events, the alienating barriers that prevent us from direct, intimate contact with the world dissolve. In nonordinary states, "the natural world can be drastically transformed and unfold with an exalted quality of depth, pregnant meaning, profound numinosity, luscious life and sacred Mystery" (118). Transpersonal phenomena transform the Kantian problem of mediation into intimate communion with the cosmos.

Giving up the dualism of framework and reality, of subjectivism and objectivism, in favor of recognizing the simultaneously interpretive and immediate nature of human knowledge lands one within the embrace of a participatory vision of knowledge and reality. To transcend this dualism is to redeem our participatory, connected, and unmediated relationship with reality and the source of our being. This entails a radical interpenetration of cognizing self and cognized world.

Once the notion of a pre-given ultimate reality is dispensed with, the participatory vision makes room for a radical plurality of spiritual paths, truths, and epiphanies. In place of a single, pre-given, ultimate reality, Ferrer postulates a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power that invites us into cocreative participation. In his vision, spiritual reality is not singular and universal but plural and multiple, and this creative and inex-

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haustible spiritual power gives rise to an unlimited possibility of revelations, the varying insights of which may be overlapping or incompatible.

Put simply, different spiritual traditions prescribe different spiritual practices leading to different spiritual realizations. Like trails in a dense forest, spiritual pathways traveled by others can be more easily followed, but this does not mean that new trails cannot be opened, leading to new wonders and pitfalls in the always inexhaustible mystery of being. The infinite elaboration of mystery is captured in an ancient Islamic proverb, "God never reveals himself in the same way twice" (157). When spiritual reality is understood as malleable, indeterminate, and ever open to a multiplicity of disclosures contingent on human creative participation, divergent spiritual revelations and truth-claims can be cause not for conflict and competition, but for celebration.

#### *Deepening the Participatory Turn*

Turning to my own appraisal of Ferrer's work, let me first confess my deep sympathies with Ferrer's embrace of a participatory vision of reality as the most encompassing revisioning task of our times. Even for those of us who philosophically resonate with the participatory turn, such as myself, the subject-object dichotomy so deeply entrenched in our structures of culture and consciousness does not fall away easily. Stan Grof once said to a class that the most difficult challenge nonordinary states of consciousness present is not the perceptual one but the conceptual one. Thus, I heartily applaud Ferrer's very cogent presentation, particularly his attention to how an actual shift from a subject-object mode of cognition into participatory consciousness occurs. From my own exploration and research into dream states, which on a nightly basis deconstruct subject-object modes in favor of profound states of participatory knowing and being, I find Ferrer's elucidation of the various aspects of participatory knowing both illuminating and highly applicable.

My primary critique of Ferrer's work concerns a still more radical move that I see as essential to completing the shift into the participatory paradigm. This

more radical move, going to the very root, would address the oldest, deepest, and most troubling dualism in Western thought, the spirit-matter dichotomy. Although Ferrer's participatory revisioning paves the way for redressing this dualism, he does not tackle it *per se*. The door is opened, however, by various moves that claim body, place, and immanent spiritual sources within the embrace of participatory events—specifically, by recovering bodily based knowing as intrinsic to the multidimensional nature of participatory knowing, and by recognizing that spirit can manifest multilocally in contexts beyond the human world, including physical places. Also important is Ferrer's critique of the dissociation of most past and present spiritual traditions, with their distorting overemphasis on mental and transcendent spiritualities to the neglect of a grounded connection with immanent spiritual sources. However, Ferrer falls short of completing the full participatory revisioning, the one that would heal this most deep-seated of Western dualisms—a reclaiming of the spirit-infused presence in all matter.

The alive quality of nature is something frequently revealed in transpersonal states, when the objective becomes subjective and one is afforded sacred entrance into the interiority of nature. This profound insight into the living spirit of nature, inclusive of the densest forms of matter on earth, the lapis or stone, has been known to the alchemists and to indigenous peoples around the globe (Jaenke and Johnson 1998). The sacred perception into the spirit present in matter, as revealed in transpersonal events, needs to inform not only our cognitive constructions of the nature of our world, but also our actions on the world. Consider, for example, the profound participatory spirit and respect in one of Colorado's (1994) nine coordinates of indigenous science: "All of nature is considered to be intelligent and alive, thus an active research partner" (1994, 1–2).

The inclusion of all matter as a locus of spiritual energies and as a living research partner would additionally mean that the Ocean of Emancipation would lose any leftover anthropocentric moorings on human docks. The test of the emancipatory impact of any knowledge claim, spiritual or material, would

at last be extended beyond the human world to include all of nature and matter. This would come close to one native test for true knowledge rooted in right action, namely, that its consequences be considered to the seventh generation. The principle of cocreative communion would then be extended to include a most profound respect for the material and natural world. Indeed, the Ocean of Emancipation would become no mere metaphor; it would include the literal emancipation of our oceans, and indeed the rest of our planet, from the ecologically suspect subject-object encroachments and experiments of the human world.

To fuse matter and spirit would be the ultimate healing gesture of any revisioning project in the West. We can look forward to the day when the natural, human, and spiritual sciences establish their validity claims in a feedback loop that includes consideration of how nature is affected by all human endeavors. Systems theory, one of the most tangible scientific expressions of the emerging participatory paradigm, recognizes not only the supraordinate role of the whole system in which any individual part participates, but also the vital role of feedback loops in regulating equilibrium and restoring balance. Human cooperation with the feedback loop set up in nature would require a capacity to listen to the language of spirit as it speaks through nature. Entrance into transpersonal states is actually a way of deep listening. Transpersonal events are moments of communication with spirit in nature.

Only as our natural, human, and spiritual sciences incorporate as a validity standard the feedback loop—the deep listening that includes not merely short-term human benefits but also short- and long-term, systems-wide consequences—will we fully enter into participatory consciousness. That is, only as our sciences become ecological sciences, using as their validity test long-term sustainability, can our physical and spiritual science be truly trustworthy, a valid epistemological endeavor. This move would additionally restore us as full participants in the creative unfolding dance of the cosmos.

The long shadow cast by the Western separation of science and religion, matter and spirit, has become painfully visible in the form of our increasingly denuded planet. Our spiritual traditions largely have stood by while the desacralization of nature has occurred; their hands are tied because they too are caught in the deep dualistic divide between matter and spirit. Transpersonal psychology stands at a vital and healing intersection between science and religion, but it needs to take one further step to embrace the participatory knowing that all matter is infused with spirit. Spiritual science can make a contribution as vital as that of the physical sciences in this final revisioning task of

recognizing all matter as sacred and worthy of our deepest respect and cocreative participation.

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