

Personal Essay.

A short history.

Since I can remember I wanted to be a physician. I saw myself in an academic setting. The medical profession seemed the perfect place to put my bright mind and warm heart to good use. Helping others to feel better; to heal people seemed the noblest of goals.

Well, my parents did not agree; they lived through the war and its aftermath and wanted their children, especially their daughters, to be economically independent.

So I studied Business.

I did well, had a good time and even won a national prize with my thesis “Marketing in Hospitals”. First I started working in the pharmaceutical industry where I was still in touch with the medical world. Eventually I got married and moved with my husband to Tunisia where we managed my father’s business. We reorganized and bought the factory, worked really hard and made “it”. Both men loved it; I enjoyed it but wanted out.

When we finally moved back to Europe I started looking for other ways to make myself useful. I considered entering Medical school, but with a company to run and two children I could not bring myself to take that option. We had our two younger sons and I discovered my creative side by renovating a huge house. The associated social life my husband adored however did not suit me. I felt trapped in an alien lifestyle and it became very clear to me I had to change my course and find something more inspiring to do with my life.

Gestalttherapy and Clinical Hypnotherapy

First I did some psychosynthesis workshops to figure out what that could be. Something with psychology, that was clear; again helping people to feel better. And it had to be something sufficiently “intelligent”, because I felt I needed the mental challenge.

I decided to start with a Gestalttherapy training in Belgium. Shortly after, an accelerated Hypnotherapy training program in the USA presented itself so synchronistically that I joined it during holidays in the following years. I loved both.

I immediately related to the Gestalt philosophy deeply. It definitely resonated as “my thing” and for the first time I felt truly inspired. The philosophy was only one aspect of the training however and my affinity with it did not mean I automatically “did well” in the rest of the training. Most of my fellow students were already working as therapists but I had to conquer new territory, learn a foreign language and different ways of expressing myself. Coming from a business background – my family, my education and my experience - this was all very new to me. I learned and “worked” hard through four years of private sessions and group-processes. The Gestalt way, I might add, which was quite an accomplishment. Although my ego got bruised and literally knocked-out on several occasions, I loved this new world that seemed so much more real to me.

Hypnotherapy was altogether different than Gestalt. Maybe it’s opposite. Hypnosis always was magical to me. The philosophy seemed hard to explain and less graspable, but the work itself proved to be so caring and loving (vs. all the confronting I was learning in Gestalttherapy) that it touched me from the start. The people giving the courses were deeply inspiring. They created a place where flying fish¹ from all over the world could meet and share their experiences. It was always wonderful. I learned so much about the other side of psychotherapy. I experienced the more human, I – Thou, contact between people. I explored the worlds beyond our conscious mind, the passageways we have between inner and outer experiences. I discovered bridges between the realities under and above the surface of our consciousness.

Gestalttherapy taught me about awareness, hypnotherapy about true connecting. Both gave me insights into the transpersonal that inspired me to look for more...

Shelley Takei’s metaphor: flying fish are the fish that are jumping out of the water because they know in their hearts that there is a bigger world out there. Flying fish love it when they meet other flying fish because it is difficult for them to talk to “ordinary” fish about what they experience (d). I love the image of the flying fish (above the water level) greeting each other "You too?" and “Hi there!"

A place flying fish meet is a place to recognize you are not alone (and not crazy) and above all a place to confirm you intuitions and visions.

Transpersonal Studies

I entered the program at Atlantic while I was in my last years of the Gestalt training. By that time I was still working for our company, running the financial and administrative side of our business and involved in the overall management. I was also starting with my own psychotherapy practice. I felt I needed a more theoretical background in psychology, both trainings left me with a hunger for more wisdom, for a broader perspective. I searched for academic programs in Holland and Belgium, in Europe even, but found what I was looking for in America. The program at Atlantic University seemed perfect. I had a BA (due to my American style business school, which was unique in Holland); my English was okay so I was accepted as a distance student in 1999.

What I found out during the six years it took me to complete the AU program is that most important to me in the courses was to find a confirmation of my own intuition, knowing and feeling. This probably sounds arrogant, but I don't mean it like that. I don't suggest that I already knew everything that was offered, but I definitely had the feeling that I seemed to recognize the essential parts of the material. It was as if the theories and texts somehow resonated with something already in me. Probably you recognize the thrill I felt while reading and exploring this new, but also not entirely new territory. I still have this fascination, and I hope I will always have it, when I "meet" with knowledge that deeply touches who I am. That is the sense I get, how else would I "recognize" it, or feel it resonates with something essential in me?

Of course I was disappointed that after a running start – I did the first 6 course in 18 months - my priorities shifted so much that I found it extremely hard to continue. You have no idea how distant a distance student can feel from her studies. Well, in retrospect it becomes clear to me that, as I experienced my "external" life as it evolved during those years, I always found the accompanying "material" to study and mature.

As some might know in 2001 my husband and I split up and divorced after almost 20 years of marriage. I made a conscious choice to let go of my whole life as I knew it in order to create a new one (for me and my four children) that suited me better. In the same year my father got sick and I accompanied my parents during the long process of his passing and my mom's surviving.

My AU courses however were always in the background. It seemed that the courses I did before gave me the necessary ground in “transpersonal” knowing to face my life with an inner wisdom that I was not aware of before. When my father told us about what he saw on the other side, I could be there for him. Later, I could be there for my mom too.

It is hard to explain, but I think a background in consciousness, inner life, Jung and religious experience is very helpful. Not only in situations of death, grief and trauma.

The elected courses I did in the past few years were more or less directed towards transpersonal psychology. It was important to me to find out where I wanted to go with my studying. Most of my AU mentors (thank you Shelley, thank you Frank!) gave me the possibility to adapt my programs to my needs and I loved that. I believe an adult student should be able to earn that opportunity. In this way I could follow up on my intuition and find my own specific path.

In retrospect I can say that the learning modules that seemed less relevant sometimes turned out to be the most interesting. Some fit me like a glove (TC 510: Self-in-relation) and most were unexpectedly appropriate (TS 561 for instance about Myths and symbols). I remember I was not very enthusiastic when I read the description of the TS508. I enrolled in “Inner Life” at the same time because I thought I would get “bored” with the reading. Well, TS508 turned out to be my favorite course. Way too extensive (it is split in two now I believe) but I learned so much, thanks Tom! And of course, especially those courses on transpersonal psychology helped me to be a better therapist; I have no doubt about that. I could work with what I learned right away. A big advantage of studies about human consciousness – you can use yourself and your life to put what you learn to practice.

Every course has its share of personal work (even the thesis!). I feel great respect and gratitude for the integrity all my mentors showed. Acceptance par excellence indeed! They invited me to write what was on my mind and heart (thanks Greg), the only way to tackle your inner life I guess. After all the processing in my trainings, I sometimes resisted the never ending journaling assignments. I remember telling Amy that after her “creating a meaningful life” I was quite fed up with my personal stuff, but of course especially that course had perfect timing!

Personal experience and expression.

Before I entered the Transpersonal Studies program I never had the tools or the language to express much about transpersonal issues to others. I felt there was more to Being - more connection, more compassion and more wisdom - but I never found a way to live it, not consciously anyway.

The most important thing I found at Atlantic University was my awareness of inspiration². Sometimes you need somebody else to make you aware of something you already know. Then you *consciously* know and you become able to use what you know. This is what I often felt when I studied for the AU courses. I recognized what I already knew but “forgot”. I discovered my own experiences in words and concepts. I read that other people were thinking what I was thinking, that others were having similar visions and felt similar compassion. This was, and still is confirming. It gives me my ground in being as an individual, but also as a human being. Now I am able to consciously express my re-found knowledge and compassion in the way I live and connect to others.

When I talk in this thesis about the human need to grow, the innate urge many of us seem to share to become more conscious, I *feel* that need. When I read about how important human relating is and how true contact between people resonates within our innermost being, I *experience* that connection. I *know* how important it is to be confirmed by another human being in order to feel my individual entity and our common ground in humanity. This is why I can write about it, and this is probably why you can understand what I am talking about when you read it.

When the subject somebody writes about touches you, when the words resonate with something within you, it awakens parts of you. It makes aspects of your unconscious conscious and thus you can grow. When it confirms you in something you are you mature. When you discover elements of knowledge that are somehow already part of your consciousness, you become more whole.

²the theme of my thesis

I learned so much in this way from the words and writings of others.
Now that I finally have the language to express what I have always known (but am now more consciously aware of), I am inspired to talk and write about it. Now that I have the tools to share what I learned about the transpersonal, I want to use my ability to translate theoretical issues into personal applications, to “awaken” others.
I love to inspire people and intend to do so on a larger scale.

Paula, April 2006