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Mystical Poetry and Imagination: Inspiring Transpersonal Awareness of Spiritual Freedom

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The author describes the philosophical and empirical aspects of an intuitive inquiry that explored 24 individuals' (ages 30-80) mental images and creative expression in response to selected mystical poetry through a three-step procedure named Imaginal Resonance. Participants' imaginal encounters with the poems inspired transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom—a participatory, co-creative experience of self-awareness beyond personal concerns. Intuitive examination of the data and a hermeneutic analysis uncovered participants' symbolic expressions of qualities such as awakening, personal development, introversion, expansion, connection, and liberation. Imaginal resonance facilitated a temporary glimpse of spiritual freedom, which was soon hindered by reasoning, questioning, commentary, comparison, anticipation, and judgment of the imagery and the experience as a whole. While the memory of the creative imagery lingered, the immediate experience of spiritual freedom diminished considerably with the return to discursive thought.

Keywords: *imagination, resonance, transpersonal, creative expression, mystical poetry, spiritual freedom*

Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.
How do they learn it?
They fall, and falling,
They're given wings.

(Rumi, Trans. 2004, p. 243)

In a recent interview (Howe & Tippet, 2014), Marie Howe, poet laureate of NY, said about poetry that it “holds the mystery of being alive. It holds a kind of basket of words that feels inevitable . . . It has the quality of a spell . . . its roots can never wholly be pulled out from sacred ground” (para. 13-14). The sacred ground of poetry, as this study explored, is that of the imaginal realm. The inevitability Howe spoke of, I believe, is inherent to the phenomenological nature of imagery; “Poems don’t mean; they are” (Hillman, 1979, p. 139). They do not require paraphrasing into metaphors, but rather direct understanding of their imagery, as similarly identified by Kuiken et al. (2012): experiential reading of poetry “begins locally, in response to foregrounding, with a felt sense of a passage that embodies something “more” than can be readily expressed” (p. 1).

Mystical poetry of an occult nature has this quality of a spell.

It will use to the utmost the resources of beauty and of passion, will bring with it hints of mystery and wonder, bewitch with dreamy periods the mind to which it is addressed. Its appeal will not be to the clever brain, but to the desirous heart, the intuitive sense. (Underhill, 1910/1993, p. 126)

Occult poetry does not attempt to describe the supernatural. Instead, it speaks to the reader in terms of lived experiences and offers condensed expression that is neither decorative, nor effortful—it builds upon common earth of common humanity through the use of familiar, natural imagery (Aurobindo, 1939).

In this article I describe an intuitive inquiry (Netzer, 2008) in which participants responded to poetry recitation with mental images, visual art expression, and *embodied writing* (Anderson, 2001). I began this inquiry with my own experience, in which I retained the occult nature of poems by responding to them in their own imaginal language. At the same time, I was tapping into the poetry’s revelatory intention by becoming one with

its spiritual symbols, discovering something new about myself and, over time, developing increased transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom. The wisdom found in mystical poetry has been described as the transcendence of the ordinary self—a “grasp from beyond the ego and usual conscious forces by a power, process, or insight that drives and demands to be expressed” (Slusser, 1989a, p. 105). In that sense, poetic imagery may become a meaning-making medium, which deepens events into experiences (Hillman, 1989). The following poem by Aboulker-Muscat (1995, p. 108) expresses this notion:

How to Live

I live in time
and out of time,
by inner experience.
For all of us,
at every instant
it is possible to do so,
if, only, quiet and calm,
we live with the moment.
Then the garden
is here and now,
and, here and now is the Kingdom.
By suppressing the will,
detaching and surrendering
we approach.
But the key
is in living fully.
Bringing every instant
to its eternity.

Imagination and Mysticism

The creative imagination, according to psychoanalytically oriented depth psychology, is a dynamic potential—a nonegoic, psychic source of sensations, energies, feelings, and images to which the ego might, subsequently, apply its organizing functions (Washburn, 2003). This appreciation of the essential role of the imagination in the human psyche is in contrast to early positivistic views of human imagination as epiphenomenal (Block, 1982), and perhaps more aligned with neuroscientists’ assertion that conscious and unconscious thoughts, sensations, and actions (including reflexes and involuntary nervous system functions) are shaped by prior imagining—the perception of possibilities as actualities through multisensory visceral and felt images (e.g., Damasio, 1999). Furthermore, according to recent neuroimaging research, it has been confirmed that the capacities to mentally

recall the past and imagine the future appear as two distinct patterns in the hippocampus, therefore clearly distinguishing memory from imagination (Kirwan, Ashby, & Nash, 2014), and thus reopening the scientific discussion regarding the unique role of the imagination.

Given that mental imaging is not the mere recollection of past perception, it is not necessarily conditioned by personal history or future expectations. Images may present in the mind as pre-reflective, pre-subjective, creative connections or revelation of new awareness—as philosophically conceived by Sartre (1940/2004): the restoration of a lost, original intuition or pure knowledge. Moreover, the metaphysical laws of the imaginal-spatial dimension are non-causal (events are not linked in a determined, sequential fashion), which implies a wholeness of perception, juxtaposed with the dissection and categorization of conceptual thought (Epstein, 1986, 2004). Thus awareness of intentions, emotions, and desired actions can be self-regulated by the imagination, as it has the capacity to stimulate external reality as well as create vivid, internal representations influential of one’s personal and social function, linking perception and action (Decety & Grezes, 2006; Thomas, 1999).

Assagioli (1965/2000) viewed the imagination as a multilevel function, located in the super-conscious (inclusive of aesthetics, intuition, and mystical experiences), which integrates sensations, feelings, thinking, and intuition. As such, the imagination is outside the province of reason, and may be developed as a channel, linking self and self-transcendence through the ingathering, storing, and transformation of unconscious material to conscious, psycho-spiritually transformative experience (Jung, 1959/1970).

In various mystical traditions, it is suggested that one need not seek to control events, but rather yield to the mystery of the universe throughout joyful as well as painful circumstances. Through inspired receptivity, the mystic aims to align with the realm of divine intelligence. In the language of the Sufi Ibn’ Arabi, the mystic calls upon *autonomous imagination*, where dreams, fleeting images, and spontaneous visions arise, awakening the heart—the intuition that expresses itself in symbolic language (Halligan, 2001).

William James’ view of the varieties of mystical experiences suggested a link between mysticism and the imaginal in that the mystic’s subjective feeling is a form of revelatory, illuminative (also known as *noetic*) insight and deep knowledge (James, 1902/1972). The

mystical experience, whether momentary or the outcome of a lifelong practice, is uniquely perceived through contemplation, feelings, the senses, and a variety of states of consciousness. It is not achieved through systematic, rational propositions, but can be linked to a single word, light, odors, and musical sound. Similar to the imagination, the mystical experience cannot be defended by logic. It is a passionate affirmation of the mystic's desire and faith in the reality beyond physical reality: "through the images within the heart, the locus of the imagination, the divine, whose pure essence is incompatible with all forms, is nevertheless manifest in a form belonging to the "imaginative presence" . . . allowing for the imaging of the imageless God" (Wolfson, 1994, p. 8).

To Corbin (1969/1998), the imaginal is objective and actual. It consists of idea-images, archetypal figures, and *immaterial matter* (more subtle substances by comparison to external sensations). Corbin noted that the effect of the act of imagining is so powerful that it forms and transforms the visionary into the shape that he or she has imagined. He wrote:

Between the world of pure spiritual Lights . . . and the sensory universe, at the boundary of the ninth sphere . . . there opens a *mundus imaginalis* which is a concrete spiritual world of archetype-figures, apparitional Forms, Angels of species and of individuals; by philosophical dialectics its necessity is deduced and its plan situated; vision of it in actuality is vouchsafed to the visionary apperception of the Active Imagination. (p. 42)

However, in active or receptive imaging there is still a distinction between the observer and the observed. The mystical, ineffable experience must, therefore, not be confused with the mystic's description of it (Vaughan, 1995). This recognition is expressed in a mystical poem attributed to Rabi'a, a woman of Sufism who lived in the 8th Century.

In love, nothing exists between breast and Breast.
Speech is born out of longing,
true description from the real taste.
The one who tastes, knows;
the one who explains, lies.
How can you describe the true form of Something
in whose Presence you are blotted out?
And in whose Being you still exist?
And Who lives as a sign for your journey?

(C. A. Helminski, Trans., 2003, p. xxvi)

Mystical Poetry and Symbolic Expression

Imagery is not literal or logical, but rather symbolic and analogical in nature. "We can amplify an image from within itself, simply by attending to it more sensitively [sensing rather than analyzing]" (Hillman, 1979, p. 139). A truly living-symbol compels *unconscious participation* and has a life-giving and life-enhancing effect (Jung in Slusser, 1989b). Symbolic imagery invites a participatory and co-creative stance (Ferrer, 2002), which entails an integration of all human dimensions: the body and senses; feelings and intuition; rational cognition; and spiritual connection to a larger dimension—a working relationship between the seen and unseen, known and unknown, the embodied and the mystical.

Responding to mystical poetry via the imagination is akin to stepping into the liminal, where the poems hold a liminal space as a symbolic intersection between the poet's and the reader's lived experiences—on the threshold between known and unknown (Turner, 1974).

Symbolic language may be uniquely perceived or commonly shared in that the symbols become archetypal or mythical. The following poem by Aboulker-Mouscat serves as an example:

Round Mirror

Perfect, polished, round mirror
Where the soul of my heart
Is clearly reflected
Sunny orb, flowing fountain
Outpouring the starry sand
of creation.
In a grain of sand all the Heavens.
In a drop of light
All the Universe.
I am round.
A flying round bird
Soaring from star to star
And singing.

Aboulker-Mouscat (1995, p. 31)

Experiential Knowing

As is true with other potentially transformative experiences, to encounter the mystical in poetry more directly, rather than as an outside spectator, requires "laying aside all the characteristics of our most prideful rationality, our words, our analysis, our ability to dissect, to classify, to define, to be logical" (Maslow,

1966/1998, p. 84). When we resonate with poetry via the imagination we engage in what Maslow called *experiential knowing*, which begins with immersion, free from self-consciousness. It is an experience, which is not bound to time and place, and therefore the origin of the poem need not match our own time-place circumstances; our resonance with the poem may not always be explicable.

My own imaginal exploration of mystical poetry underlined one of my assumptions, known in intuitive inquiry as *preliminary lenses* (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2011). It was my experience that when we begin an experiential exploration with not knowing, we approach it with a form of innocence, without expectations or concerns for external standards of appropriateness (as would be demanded of us if asked to interpret the meaning intended by a poet). A non-judgmental acceptance of our subjective experience is more readily experienced when we engage our imagination with curiosity and playfulness. At the heart of experiential knowing is *fusion knowing*, a kind of melting together with the world (Maslow, 1966/1998). I began this study with an acknowledged bias that an imaginative response to mystical poetry tends to yield a form of fusion knowing: a high degree of resonance, perhaps harmony or consonance, an integration of the poem's wisdom as palpable, timely, as well as personally relevant. Strong dissonance with a poem's imagery might be worthwhile exploring as well in terms of underlying unconscious material that might trigger the strong, unfavorable reaction.

Spiritual Freedom and Imaginal Resonance

The experience of spiritual freedom was addressed in this study as a human potential, a transpersonal state of being in which one's perception of reality is not restricted to personal concerns and thus opens, if only momentarily, to a universal mystery within and beyond the material. Through this lens, experiencing spiritual freedom is *not* a permanent overcoming of self-centeredness, ultimate attainment of enlightenment, or knowledge of an absolute, religious Truth, which in and of itself seems contradictory of freedom (Ferrer, 2002). Another essential aspect of this view of spiritual freedom is its participatory nature. In this vein, the potential to become aware of one's inherent transpersonal nature necessitates a co-creative enactment, commonly facilitated through transpersonal practices as introduced by various spiritual traditions. Last, but not least, a

participatory vision of spiritual freedom rests on the premise of interpersonal and ecological interconnection and interdependence. As such, it reveals that one's freedom is inextricable from the freedom of others and the wellbeing of the world at large (Ferrer, 2002).

Resonance (Sheldrake, 1987, 1994) denotes an attraction, identification, or sympathetic relationship in response to stimuli that matches an already existing or intrinsic quality. Resonance is a vehicle of information through which behavioral habits are amplified, reinforced, and inherited through repetition, subsequent to a creative change. It involves attraction toward shared consciousness, and gradually (but with increasing likelihood) is influenced through correspondence with already existing qualities in others—"the developing organism tunes in to the morphic fields of its species and thus draws upon a pooled or collective memory" (Sheldrake, 1994, p. 112). Imaginal fields of resonance (Hill, 1996) are the organizing principles of the psychological world, expressed in sensations, emotions, concepts, fantasies, dreams, visions, stories, and supernatural phenomena.

Imaginal resonance (Netzer, 2006, 2008, 2013b) is a process of imaginative response to internal, tacit knowing and/or external stimuli. The process includes temporarily putting aside the intermediary interference of discursive thought or logic, and intentionally activating the imagination, paying attention to inwardly felt sensations, and expressing self-awareness in creative ways (e.g., poetry, visual art, expressive sound, music, and creative movement). I employ imaginal resonance in my work as a psychotherapist in order to activate multiple ways of knowing and to help form new habitual patterns that complement and transcend discursive thought. In my own experience, the practice of imaginal resonance has cultivated trust in the validity of intuition and has confirmed the analogical nature of the imagination as a source of insight and spiritual transformation.

In essence, imaginal resonance as a vehicle for transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom suggests that one can become aware of an expanded reality, noticing that even though one's experiences are bound to circumstances, they may be filtered through a creative interiority that can transport the self beyond circumstances, for example through finding the sacred or the divine in everyday life. The following poem by Colette Aboulker-Muscat encapsulates this experience:

Finding the Divine
 in all that is
 and exists;
 Living the State of Grace
 behind the appearances.
 By sensorial return
 and sensuous sharing,
 knowing how to reach
 the core.
 And to accept this exact place
 in the world;
 that everything and everyone
 have by birth.
 Then, feeling in your soul,
 a spark of the World Soul—
 Only when this is done,
 your eyes are becoming
 the windows of your soul.

Aboulker-Muscat (1995, p. 44)

Research Design

Intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2011), a transpersonal research method, was selected to guide the design of this study due to its paradigmatic as well as epistemological principles. This method honors multiple ways of knowing in participants' subjective experiences and the researcher's subjective perception and interpretation of the data. The method's balance of multiple ways of knowing encouraged this researcher to honor her voice, to be fully attuned to felt senses in response to the data, and to be informed by reverie, attention to intuition, dreams, embodied writing, and creative expression (for a discussion of intuitive inquiry in the context of this research see Netzer, 2008, 2009, 2013a).

The study included 20 women and 4 men, ages 30 to 80, conveniently divided into five groups. To facilitate sacred space and intimate connection within each group, sessions began with an opening ritual and the creation of the group mandala (Netzer, 2008, pp. 116-121). A different poem was selected for each group (commonly inclusive of nature-inspired imagery). The rationale for my application of mystical poems as prompts or stimuli for the imaginal resonance process, rather than constructing my own mental imaging exercise, was that these poems received the endorsement of experts in the study of mysticism through continued translation and publication in both popular and scholarly venues and, thereby, I believe, are

a trustworthy source of pluralistic spiritual inspiration. I selected, by and large, current publications of older texts because I felt those sources have stood the test of time. I perceived the mystical poetry as a vehicle to transport the participants into an imaginal realm depicted by the mystical poet, in which qualities of spiritual freedom were symbolically expressed.

The participants listened to my recitation of the poem selected for their session only once, with their eyes closed, instructed to "see, sense, and feel" the poem's imagery. Instructions included emphasis on a long exhalation after each image within the poem, as a way to highlight the images and link them to one another. In the conclusion of the brief recitation, the participants provided, each in turn, an oral report of their image (without any explanation). Subsequent to sharing the mental images, participants wrote down the image description, which took place up to 10 minutes following the initial recitation and imaging. Creative expression, embodied writing, and a reflection on their experience as a whole completed the experiential set of data. An open studio approach (Allen, 1995) availed participants a variety of two- and three-dimensional media, such as colored pencils, watercolors, paints, clay, and so forth. This allowed participants to intuitively choose the medium that most closely corresponded with their immediate, felt response to the poem recitation and their co-occurring mental image.

Participants as well as the researcher employed embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) as a body-centered approach to recording felt sensations. This approach to personal reflection invited presence and inward tuning to the subtle ways in which the body communicates, as well as an opportunity to be verbally expressive in a way that is not divorced from the original experience. As Anderson (2001) emphasized, embodied writing is not concerned with grammar and syntax. As such, it was the researcher's attempt to minimize participants' distancing from the imaginal experience, which is perceived at once and as a whole. As part of the preparatory phase of the study, I introduced creative expression and embodied writing, and tried to demystify concerns about artistic and writing abilities. This preparation was largely successful and resulted in the relief of some participants' apprehension about their creative expression skills and overall free expression in both visual and verbal modalities by most participants. The procedures for data gathering in each group session included the following six steps:

1. Mental imaging in response to the recitation of a mystical poem
2. Verbal descriptive report of the mental image in the present tense
3. Recording of the mental image recollection in writing, as a report free of commentary
4. Creative expression in art media (free of guidelines, in an open studio setting)
5. Embodied writing, depicting their experience of imaginal resonance as a whole
6. Brief written reports of awareness of changes in mood, bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings during the session

Intentionally, I did not ask the participants for their intellectual understanding of the poems, the recitation of which they heard only once (when 1 month passed, I sent them a print copy of the poem). I also did not discuss my prior experience with imaginal response to mystical poetry. Similarly, the questionnaires, at 1 week and 1 month following the experiential session, focused on the participants' experiences through brief, written reports pertaining to their awareness of analogical relationships between the imaginal resonance process and subsequent everyday experiences as well as shifts in habitual patterns: 1. What is your current experience of the images you created in response to the poem you listened to? 2. Are you aware of relationships or analogies between your imaginal resonance experience and your daily life experience? 3. Do you experience any shifts in habitual patterns and in your relationships with others that you might relate to the experience you participated in? 4. Now that you have read the poem, do you have any further comments to share?

Data Analysis

Data analysis of participants' experiences and images unfolded in this intuitive inquiry over three stages. In the first stage, participants' resonance with the poems, perceived through mental imaging and expressed in embodied writing and creative expression, was compared to their verbal discussion and commentary on their experiences in the follow up questionnaires. At first, as I immersed myself in the transcribed reports of the mental imaging, participants written descriptions, embodied writing, and finally their response to the follow up questionnaires, I intuitively noticed indicators for how glimpses of *immediate knowing* and a sense of *wholeness* have gradually diminished with their return

to discursive thought and daily activities. This initial phase, which began with the search of indicators for qualities associated with spiritual freedom, resulted in the emergence of six behavioral patterns I identified as *hindrances* of spiritual freedom by virtue of negating immediate knowing and a sense of wholeness. These qualities, discussed below are: reasoning, questioning, commentary, comparison, anticipation, and judgment.

In the second stage, I engaged in a thematic content analysis of the same verbal reports of the mental images and the imaginal resonance experience as a whole and uncovered symbolic images associated with transpersonal experiences (Assagioli, 1969), which I have aligned with the phenomenological structure of imagery as constituting and necessitating (a) intention, (b) direction, and (c) action (Sartre, 1940/2004). In the third stage of data analysis, described elsewhere (Netzer, 2013b), I focused on my imaginal response to the data, by engaging in the imaginal resonance procedures myself in response to the poems and participants' images and artwork. Given the scope of this article only excerpts from the approach to the first two stages of data analysis are presented.

Discussion of Findings

Six predominant qualities (at least one in each participant's reflections) appeared to have colored participants' experience after completion of the imaginal resonance sequence of mental imaging, creative expression, and embodied writing: *reasoning, questioning, commentary, comparison, anticipation, and judgment*. Examples below are of various participants from groups 1-3 (for complete stage 1, see Netzer, 2008, pp. 197-209).

1. *Reasoning*: "For me, the exercise was a reflection of the nature of mortal death, so any introspection on this topic, for me, usually leads to having a more 'aware' life in the present." (3-02)
2. *Questioning*: "Unsure of whether I would be able to complete the task because of my very practical nature." (1-04)
3. *Commentary*: "I need to listen to my soul, my inner child." (3-04)
4. *Comparison*: "I feel I was thinking differently from what I normally would, given a certain task." (3-06)
5. *Anticipation*: "Hopefully, in the end, you find your beauty." (2-04)
6. *Judgment*: "Wishing to try to express my vision better. Stop trying hard to control." (1-02)

Through this initial thematic content analysis, I gleaned the diminishment of wholeness, with the return to discursive thought, and thereby the diminishment of transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom, which was present during the imaginal resonance process.

Immediate Knowing and Wholeness

By comparison, participants' initial resonance with the poems' imagery was characterized by a sense of *immediate knowing* and *wholeness*. Immediate knowing (e.g., Fries & Nelson as cited in Ross, 1987) is the ontological term I chose to distinguish the phenomenological qualities of wholeness, directness, doubtlessness, and, at times, although not always, intuitive understanding expressed in the participants' initial verbal and written reports of their resonant mental images. Such experience, even momentarily, is unmediated by reason, nor masked or distorted by added qualifications, commentary, comparison to past, anticipation of the future, and judgment. The experience of wholeness (Dieneske, 1985) is an experience of presence to the unity of all beings—a sense of timelessness, connection with a larger whole, healing, and joy. These qualities were noticeably expressed in the participants' initial resonance with the poems' imagery (e.g., peace, comfort, fearlessness, warmth, pleasure, connection, emptiness filled with life, expansiveness, oneness, clarity, presence of self and universe, stillness, and happiness) and were reflective of a transpersonal awareness (or a glimpse) of spiritual freedom.

Symbolic Imagery

As described earlier, in the second stage of engagement with data, I was searching for patterns that might indicate the presence of symbolic imagery (Assagioli, 1969) that can be associated with the qualities of intention, direction, and action. These qualities, according to Sartre (1940/2004), are inherent in the phenomenological nature of the image. If that was, indeed, the case, it suggested that the participants' imaginal resonance imagery might encapsulate specific knowledge, beyond their initial inspiration of the poem, by way of informing and providing personal guidance for a continued transpersonal practice. The symbolic images depicted (a) intentions for awakening, illumination, development, intensification; (b) directions such as introversion, deepening/descent, elevation/ascent, broadening/expansion; and (c) actions, or experiences of love/connection, transmutation/sublimation, rebirth/regeneration, and liberation. Similar qualities existed in the poems, but the participants' resonant images were unique to them. Thus the participants' images were not

identical to the images in the poem. The former expanded on the latter and placed it in a context, which contained the seed for the analogical relationship between the resonant image and the participant's daily life. Following are three examples to illustrate this analysis (for complete stage 2, see Netzer, 2008, pp. 209-221).

1. Participants' images included themes of *illumination* as the initial revelation of spiritually perceived light, immanent in humans and other aspects of creation. Their intuitive awareness, integrated with and transcended the intellectual, logical, or rational faculties. For example: "the plants are brown, but I see colorful flowers popping through" (1-01); "I am calm, reflecting the brightness of the sun" (2-02); "all the while [as the bird is flying against the wind] there is a bright sun shining in the sky" (2-04); "I see points of light coming off different points, all over the planet" (3-06).
2. The direction of *Broadening/Expansion*: Exploring the vastness of consciousness without losing oneself in its vastness. The inclusion of other beings in oneself, and the realization of ever widening cycles of existence beyond one isolated timeframe, toward an extra-temporal, transpersonal dimension. For example: "there are huge flowers . . . fantastic colors and textures . . . vast emptiness, but full of life" (1-02); "I am watching the sky, the water, the wind, anything that is moving. I hear the birds, the water, and I am warmed by the sun" (2-02); "my body begins to spread out like a great, clear jelly fish (3-02); I am zooming out, going farther away . . . the Earth is becoming more distant (3-06).
3. The action/experience of *Love/Connection*: Transcendence of the limits of separate existence. Communion with other beings and, ultimately, with higher beings. For example: "being thankful for the gift of being" (2-02); "[the maternal figure is] very gracious and loving, welcoming all the forest creatures to her" (2-03); "I begin to feel the energy of all the other animals and plants in the ocean . . . it is warm and comforting . . . I feel no fear . . . I don't feel alone" (3-02); I see a connection . . . between myself and everyone that is present in this room and everything that has been created in the entire world . . . like a

cord, but not an attachment . . . pleasant, alive, Oneness” (3-03).

By engaging participants’ multiple ways of knowing, including their intuition, creative expression, and embodied writing prior to requesting their intellectual reflections on their experience as a whole, the differences between imaginal insight and the return to discursive thought became clear. Following is the discussion of three examples of poems and three corresponding exemplary participants’ imaginal resonance. The poems recited in groups 1-3, as cited below, were by Rumi (2004), Merton (1967), and Aboulker-Muscat (1995) respectively (note that the poems’ authors were intentionally not disclosed to participants to minimize preconceived ideas about the poems’ origin).

Group 1 Poem and Exemplary Imaginal Resonance

Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Regulate your breathing, long exhalations through the mouth and normal inhalation through the nose. Breathe out three times. See, sense, and feel . . .

A rider goes by, but his dust
Of passing hangs in the air.
Look down this road through the particles into
infinity.

*Breathe out once.
Know that . . .*

Flowers open every night
Across the sky, a breathing peace
and sudden flame catching.

Breathe out once and open your eyes. (Netzer, 2008, pp. 126-127)

35-year-old woman. The following is an exemplary report of a participant’s mental image of the above poem by Rumi (trans., 2004).

I am on the porch steps of a Western/Midwestern saloon. Nothing but this dirt road in front of me. Someone rides by on a motorcycle. I am in the dust. I am not really looking down the road, but I am looking into the infinity of the dust, not noticing the road. Through that, it becomes nighttime and I see shooting stars and lilies budding and opening. I think about how I always wondered why they never bloomed during the day and I try to pry one open—to no avail. I let it go.



Figure 1. Expressive art image created by participant 1-04.
Oil pastels on paper (11 x 15 in.)

In her embodied writing she noted: “[I] Feel very present. Aware of my thoughts. There is a bit of tension in my feet. I feel integrated, mind and body. I am peaceful and safe. I am aware of somewhat shallow breathing.” Regarding her experience as a whole she said:

At first I felt a bit of anxiety when I entered the room. It eased up when we did the practice session. . . . Through the mental imaging, I was aware of some feelings that correlate with my current issues. The art expression was my favorite, because it helped to further meditate on the subject matter of the mystical poem. I felt it brought clarity to my own thoughts, and allowed me an expressiveness in another dimension. (Netzer, 2008, pp. 143-144)

The imaginal resonance of this Group 1 exemplary participant seemed consonant with the poem to which she responded. My hermeneutic analysis of Rumi’s poem “A rider goes by” elicited within me a sense of awakening to the possibility of broadening the worldly experience of our actions (the dust we create in our passing): “look down this road through the particles into infinity”—an expansion into possibilities of embodying peace, which are not necessarily open to us in our ordinary wakeful state: “flowers open every night. Across the sky, a breathing peace, and sudden flame catching.”

This participant expressed in her imagery the intention of awakening, awareness of her present way of being in the world and the possibilities of growth and change through discoveries made in the realm of darkness, where logic no longer presides and anything is possible, although nothing can be forced to bloom

prematurely. The written report of her mental image reflected details that suggested tacit awareness for the image's personal analogies. In daylight: "I am not really looking down the road, but I am looking into the infinity of the dust, *not noticing* the road [italics added]." At night: "I see shooting stars and lilies budding and opening. I try to pry one open, to no avail. I let it go." In the action of letting go, I believe, lies the promise of spiritual freedom.

In her embodied writing this participant reflected: "I feel very present, aware of my thoughts. There is a bit of tension in my feet. I feel integrated, mind and body. I am peaceful and safe." In responding to the experience as a whole she indicated her awareness of relationships between her image (see Figure 1) and issues in her daily life. This participant responded only to the first follow-up, 1 week following the experiential session. She remembered her mental image and artwork distinctly, in particular the image of the lily she tried to pry open. She indicated that she was not aware of any shifts in daily, habitual patterns even though the experience yielded insight: "I saw the flowers that I was trying to pry open to be representative of me 'forcing' things in my life that need to blossom in their own time." (Netzer, 2008, pp. 224-225)

Group 2 Poem and Exemplary Imaginal Resonance

Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Regulate your breathing, long exhalations through the mouth and normal inhalation through the nose. Breathe out three times. See, sense, and feel . . .

Wind and bird
And the afternoon sun.

*Breathe out once.
Know that . . .*

Ceasing to question the sun
I become light.

Breathe out once.

Bird and wind.
My leaves sing.
I am earth, earth.

Breathe out once.

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.

Breathe out once and open your eyes. (Netzer, 2008, pp. 128-129)

60-year-old woman. The following is an exemplary report of a participant's mental image of the above poem by Merton (1967):

I am standing in an open field overlooking a calm lake, reflecting the brightness of the sun. [I am] being comforted. I am just enjoying the mid sunny day. I am watching the sky, the water, the wind, anything that is moving. I hear the birds. I hear the water, and I am warmed by the sun. I feel alone and comfortable, being thankful for the gift of being.



Figure 2. Expressive art image created by participant 2-02.
Soft pastels on paper (9 x 12 in.)

In her embodied writing she noted:

I feel happy. Happy to be making art, to be free of cares and deadlines. I'm comfortable with the process of being quiet and of listening. It's an energizing experience, refreshing and much needed. The room atmosphere in which I am present is inviting and warm. It is free of clutter, which is welcoming. I need to be in more open fields, listening and accepting.

Regarding her experience as a whole she said:

I was a little apprehensive, not knowing what to expect. However, as the session unfolded, I became more relaxed. Creating art was a very grounding experience. However, if it had not been for the welcoming, warm and non-threatening atmosphere, which was created, my feelings and experience would have been totally opposite. (Netzer, 2008, pp. 145-146)

This participant's imagery had integral simplicity, consonant with the poem's intention, as I

saw it: an awakening to her presence in, and connection with the natural world, which invites surrendering, and which results with enlightenment, love, and connection with the universe as a whole. The poet (Merton) wrote: “ceasing to question the sun, I become light. Bird and wind. My leaves sing. I am earth, earth. All these lighted things grow from my heart.” The participant resonated immediately with this sense of connection. She described her image: “I am standing in an open field, overlooking a lake, [which is] calm, reflecting the sun, [I am] being comforted . . . I feel alone and comfortable, being thankful for the gift of being.” In a way, the poet’s cessation of questioning was directly reflected in the participant’s immersion in the poem’s imagery, accepting its completeness with gratitude and without question.

The direction of introversion in comforted solitude, was linked, for this participant, to her work as an expressive artist. She reported that the art-making aspects of the process (see Figure 2) were grounding, similar to the grounding feeling in her mental image. Her first follow-up report, too, focused on the art experience and the image within it, a large sun. She stated that this image was present in her artwork for a while prior to the session. However, the “tangible quality of the poetry reading and writing . . . gradually faded,” until 1 month after the experiential session she had only a vague recollection of what she wrote and created, except for the symbol of the circle, which “remained as a continued steadying force,” accompanying an intensification through art making and personal discovery. She wrote: “My overall experience now is one of peace, calm, inspiration, and discovery. This has significantly affected me in a positive way. I have been making more art and have a stronger desire to create, to listen, and to be still.”

This participant is an exemplar of integration of the action implicit in her resonant image. She continued to be reflective of the experience past its initial stage, and had found ways to sublimate her awareness of its meaning and message to her. She wrote:

I realized that [in prior visualization exercises] I tried to visualize the spoken word, not truly experiencing the dynamics of the moment, not letting the process take over. Realizing this is a huge change for me, one that I will keep for my own journey and I [will] recall when I am in the company of others. (2-02, first follow-up)

In the second follow-up, 1 month after the experience, although she believed she only had a vague

recollection of the image, she, in fact recalls its essence quite vividly by saying:

Sensing and feeling the need to be alone, be quiet and to reflect more deeply, I have begun to incorporate mindfulness meditation in my daily life. In relating to others, I am trying to listen more and to be less judgmental (2-02, second follow-up). (Netzer, 2008, pp. 226-229)

Group 3 Poem and Exemplary Imaginal Resonance

Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Regulate your breathing, long exhalations through the mouth and normal inhalation through the nose. Breathe out three times. See, sense, and feel that . . .

Merging into the sea,
I don’t disappear
But feel one
With the whole.

Breathe out once.

Know that . . .

One and complete,
I add to the Eternal soul
Linked with all the souls,
And I live.

Breathe out once and open your eyes. (Netzer, 2008, p. 130)

49-year-old woman. The following is an exemplary report of a participant’s mental image of the above poem by Aboulker-Muscat (1995):

I see slow motion of running from the shore toward the gentle waves of the ocean. I feel no fear as I enter the warm water. All around is gray (it had been black and white), but as I enter and touch the water, the water becomes a very beautiful, bright aqua blue. My body fully enters the water and begins to spread out like a great, clear jellyfish, and I begin to feel the energy of all the other animals and plants in the ocean. The water itself becomes clear but yet still has the blue color to it. It is warm and comforting. I don’t feel alone or frightened by the water. I feel I have become the water and especially have become the fish and seaweed.

In her embodied writing she noted:

I have a certain level of discomfort following the art exercise. I feel the black and white first impression



Figure 3. Expressive art image created by participant 3-02.
Oil pastels on paper (12 x 18 in.)

which anchored me to this world, as harsh and cold and violent in nature as opposed to the comfort of this ocean, where I feel one with nature (without the violent, territorial, and competitive aspects of real nature and some parts of modern society). [I feel] cautiously optimistic that the beloved animals, known and unknown ancestors at the top of my art image will, in fact, be all united in spirit. I feel energy from their experiences of this world and any other world. The calm I felt during the initial report and reflection has given way to a more complex and troubling set of emotions, relating to the nature of the great hereafter, which is an ongoing question for me. I am happy to feel a sense of having “visited” with the ancestors whether animals or humans.

Regarding her experience as a whole she said:

I very much enjoyed the experience overall, despite the slight discomfort of the feelings the exercise brought up. Having an initial reaction to the poem, gave immediate feedback to deep human consciousness. For me, the exercise was a reflection of the nature of mortal death, so any introspection on this topic, for me, usually leads to having a more “aware” life in the present. The art expression portion of the exercise allowed for a deepening and a clarification as well as a satisfactory reflection on some of the meaning that began to emerge. This part flowed very fast and was very exciting, because as the art poured out, for me, so did the feelings, ideas, and reflections on the initial experience. The embodied writing was helpful, but, for me, the flow definitely lessened as I began to put words on the

experience. However, it was a relief to pull back and reform the experience in concrete terms. Overall, I believe the exercise accessed ideas and feelings in a way that other methods of reflection may not be able to. (Netzer, 2008, pp. 149-150)

This participant’s imagery, as I interpreted it, suggested a tacit intention of transpersonal development in the symbolic quality of running from the shore toward the ocean. There is an awakening to the universe in entering this fluid realm and a transformation of the “black and white and grays” perception of the world outside the water, as soon as she imaginally enters this less-habitual world, touches it and fully immerses herself in it. The experience is, indeed, transformative. She sees herself as becoming more integrated into the water world by becoming a great clear jellyfish, until she merges with the water and all the life it enfolds.

In her written report of the image this participant added that she is not frightened, nor does she feel alone. She continued to reflect with much awareness following the art-making process (see Figure 3)—aware of her discomfort with the message of her image and added “cautious” optimism for the possibility of unity. This awareness was present at the end of the experiential session when she wrote: “the calm I felt during the initial report and reflection has given way to a more complex and troubling set of emotions, relating to the nature of the great hereafter, which is an ongoing question for me.” She continued her reflection with appreciation of the art-making process, in which she experienced flow of images, feelings, and ideas, reflecting back to her the meaning embedded in the initial imaginal experience. She stated that the flow began to lessen as she put words to the experience, even though it was a relief to “pull back and reform the experience in concrete terms.”

Following the imaginal resonance procedure, this participant continued in-depth reflection about her experience and her image and artwork in particular. She recalled her imagery and the feeling of discomfort that accompanied them clearly and vividly. A sense of unconditional acceptance of the imagery’s message began to form:

The water was an inviting, natural environment, which welcomed me in, to be a part of nature, whether it be savage or calm . . . Water is a powerful image for me, and it evokes fear, because of the

unknown murkiness and powerful waves, as well as relaxation and calm . . . I feel happy thinking that the dark or the unknown doesn't have to be scary. It can be a letting go of sorts. (3-02, first follow-up)

A few weeks later, she reflected on her imagery, particularly in her artwork, and its message to her: "I think back to the art piece and feel a sense of strength from it, because the figure is enlightened and being taken back into the forces of nature. All is united by the light and the water." She was aware of imaginal resonance's similarity to the process of a waking dream "which brings an immediate relationship with a layer just under the conscious mind and, therefore, I think, truer and deeper." The poem, for her was a "trigger," which led to her own process of realization through the image and further consideration of her feelings about death, friendship, love, and nature.

Although the initial experience of imaginal resonance has faded by the time 1 month elapsed, her imagery remained with her as a reminder to the thoughts that surfaced following the experience. In the weeks following the experience this participant continued in the direction of broadening her awareness and carried it to the realm of action. With nature's presence in the forefront of her awareness, she made a conscious effort to take more time every day in nature: "the lingering effect has been a continued desire to be closer to nature. There was an openness to the image and poem which spoke to me and that I would like to remember going forward. . . . I take time noticing nature every day: the weather, my pets, looking around while being outside." She further expresses a link between the calmness of the image and increased calm in her daily encounters, which involve her active participation: "I was actively trying to let things that would normally upset me, roll off my back . . . generally, I feel a bit more open to strangers."

Upon reading the poem, she felt affirmed, yet appreciative of the value of the fleeting impression that carried so much with it, despite the restriction of not hearing the poem more than once. She suggested that the multifaceted imaginal resonance process had something to do with the strong effect it had upon her: "meditation, guided imaging, breathing, visual art, reading, writing, creating, and responding."

In reflection, I attribute this participant's unfolding pattern of her imaginal resonance process, primarily, to her prior experience with imaginal processes (although not necessarily art making), her active

participation in the process throughout (including the follow-up period), and dedicated self-reflective spiritual practice, which had been established long before the study began. She was able to hold on to the power of the image, while rationally integrating it into her daily life, choosing direct and immediate action, which she was able to take (Netzer, 2008).

Validity of Findings

This intuitive inquiry was transformational for me and was clearly meaningful to the participants. In intuitive inquiry two primary measures of credibility and transferability are *efficacy validity* and *resonance validity* (Anderson, 2011). Efficacy refers to the degree to which the readers relate to the study's raw data independently, and subsequently to the researcher's interpretation and insight. The degree to which the data and its interpretation facilitate personal discovery and new understanding in readers' own lives directly correlates to the rate of the study's efficacy.

Resonance validity is the capacity of the study to produce sympathetic resonance in its readers, from strong validation (consonance) to invalidation (dissonance). Resonance validity suggests that the credibility of the researcher's analysis and conclusions can be measured by the degree of resonance experienced by the reader of the study's findings. Readers of this article may tune into their own degree of resonance with the study's design and findings to assess the validity of its premise and conclusions.

Limitations and Delimitations

The expanded view of scientific, human research I adopted in this study by selecting intuitive inquiry as my methodology supported procedures in a natural, non-sterile environment, in which the researcher's status was not elevated above other participants'—acknowledging all aspects of the research as valuable data (Anderson, 1998, 2011). I encouraged freedom of imaginal expression and nonjudgmental group dynamics (for an in-depth discussion of the group influence on individuals' experiences, see (Netzer, 2008, pp. 270-274). A pleasant and peaceful environment that was (as confirmed by participants) conducive to the creative process was also an essential factor in the resulting data. These conditions must be taken into consideration in evaluating the findings of this study and the design of future studies, namely the role of an expert facilitator-researcher and research environment as inseparable of the findings.

In addition, the participants in this study were mature adults, who possessed an above-average level of education and involvement in spiritual practices. This study did not address individual, gender, and/or cultural differences in imaging ability. Thus the findings and interpretations I presented herein do not attempt to generalize about the constructs in other populations outside the delimited social and educational context of this convenient sample, especially in terms of the relationship between participants' processing of verbally presented imagery in the form of a single poem recitation and its depiction in imaginal form—a task which required concentrated attention in a short and limited span of time.

Conclusion

In this study, the experience of spiritual freedom was not explored as an ultimate crown of spiritual development (such as nonattachment or enlightenment), but rather as a human capacity to glimpse the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary if only vicariously through one's resonance with poetic mystical teachings. The purpose of the study was to examine the value of imaginal resonance—the activation of one's imagination in receptive, perceptive, and creative ways (through mental imaging, creative expression, and embodied writing)—as differentiated from contemplation and other modes of discursive thought or analytical observations of self in the world.

Intentional enactment of experiential knowing was central to this study's definition of the transpersonal—validating what transpersonal scholars have long recognized: that our connection with the spiritual in everyday life is latent and ready to emerge, given the right conditions. By reclaiming symbols and myths that open and amplify the presence of the divine in everyday life, modern civilization could bridge the loss of its connection with the transcendent (Slusser, 1989b). This study seems to affirm the role of the imagination as a *medium* for spiritual experience owing to the following characteristics: (a) being an *intermediary* realm, between the sensory and the spiritual; (b) an *intervening, symbolic link* between form and formlessness, the visible human reality and invisible spiritual experience; (c) inspiring awareness of potential *transformation*. From this perspective, the imagination is not only a distinct mental faculty, different from rational thought, but is a healing, unifying capacity—a form of consciousness that bridges cognition and affect and potentially influences internal state and action. Accordingly, the mental image is a discovery that liberates the mind from the binds of emotional and thought-based reactions and permits creative fulfillment and spiritual freedom.

Imaginal resonance has facilitated access to what Petimengin-Peugeot (1999, p. 47) called “pre-thought” knowledge. Participants were asked to reverse their attention inwardly, and responded to the poems via mental imaging, and only subsequently translated the images into words. The emphasis on the primacy of “pre-thought” knowledge is essential when one aims to gather descriptions of transpersonal experiences, while staying as close as possible to the original experience. The initial intuitive and creative responses to the poetry via imaginal processes produced an immediate knowing and a sense of wholeness in most of the participants in this study, indicative of their awareness of spiritual freedom. They were inspired by the poems and described through their images, artwork, and embodied writing, an expanded awareness and recognition for that which extends beyond personal boundaries, including oneself, others, the visible and the invisible, known and the unknown. Subsequent expression sometimes appeared contradictory of the initial depiction of the mental image, until for some, the experience practically vanished by the time 1 month elapsed. Nevertheless, as Dienske (1985) observed, the experience of wholeness, however momentary, has a lasting healing influence even when it is temporary and not fully integrated. “The healing influence is evoked in the experienced openness, intimacy, and rest; in transcending dualism; in a direct and enfolding meaningfulness; and in an inexpressible joy” (Dienske, 1985, p. 19). As a researcher, I witnessed the diversity of imaginal responses to the mystical poems, and came to a humbling recognition of how transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom is so readily accessible yet remarkably ephemeral. With that, I too experienced wholeness—a sense of timelessness, connection with a larger whole, healing, and gratitude.

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