



Regression in the Service of Transcendence **Reading Michael Washburn**

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Abstract: Michael Washburn's idea (1995) of using regression as a process that may actually serve spiritual development is attractive for many reasons. First, it transmutes a more pathological orientation toward manifestations of psychological suffering into one that has the ability to hold greater value for the life purpose of an individual. Instead of viewing people as clusters of symptoms needing to be treated, or as less spiritually evolved when suffering is present, Washburn offers a model that places suffering within a larger paradigm of spiritual unfolding. This approach may be quite helpful to those in the spiritual and psychotherapeutic communities, as clients or practitioners, because it allows a frame from which to view what may seem like a mere snapshot metamorphose into a full motion picture by allowing presenting symptoms to have a larger meaning. However, it is also important not to reify theoretical concepts by creating a kind of orthodox dogma with potential to do more harm than good. Fortunately, Washburn himself is not a Washburn fundamentalist and does address issues surrounding instances of severe pathology. Though he does not provide treatment options or any clinical solutions, he does provide an overarching framework within which regressive experience and suffering can have meaning. He constructs a place where the prism of experience is never severed from the dynamic ground of which it and all things emerge.

Michael Washburn, in the second edition of his seminal work, *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground: A Transpersonal Theory of Development* (1995), provides a rich discussion of a pivotal feature of his dynamic-dialectical model of development. His concept of regression in the service of transcendence is a twist of the phrase, regression in the service of the ego. The Freudian application of using regressive techniques to help restructure the personality is trans-

formed almost a century later to address themes and debates within the field of transpersonal development. Washburn employs the concept to illustrate a stage in spiritual development where there is a crisis or dark night of the soul preceding a spiritual awakening. What was lost or repressed in the psyche through the primal repression of the ego is retrieved once again through regression (p. 171).

Regression is mediated by a renewed

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relationship with what Washburn calls the Dynamic Ground. Washburn is interested in explicating the essential features of this relationship between the ego and the Dynamic Ground. In his schema, the ego differentiates itself from the ground into a body ego, this later becomes a repressively dualistic dissociation called the mental ego, until finally the ego is able to reintegrate with the ground (Washburn, 1995, p. x). Central to his stage theory orientation is Washburn's transcendent notion of Dynamic Ground. Here, Dynamic Ground serves as the psychic energy that powers all. It is undifferentiated potential and the site inhabited by spirit. It is also conceived as the state of consciousness that one is born into at the pre-egoic stage of development. Kundalini rising, Reich's psychic energy within the sexual system (1942), Grof's nonspecific amplifier (1975), Otto's notion of the numinous (1917), are all included as manifestations of the Dynamic Ground according to Washburn. Regression in the service of transcendence, then, is the primal repression of the ego giving way to the experience of the ground directly within consciousness (p.126). It is the first part of a much larger psychic reorganization (p. 201).

Washburn views regression in the service of transcendence as a two-fold process. The first stage is marked by a withdrawal from the world. The mental ego loses its *raison d'être* and there is a type of existential suffering experienced. The chains of primal repression are loosened and the Dynamic Ground grabs a foothold. The second stage is where the person encounters the prepersonal unconscious. This level follows the opening of the Dynamic Ground. The person may exhibit psychotic features and produce somatic symptoms. On the other hand, people can experience rapture, great intuitive insight, and a plethora of psychic abilities all subsumed within this emergent experience (pp. 172-174).

The idea of using regression as a pro-

cess that may actually serve spiritual development is attractive for many reasons. First, it transmutes a more pathological orientation toward manifestations of psychological suffering into one that has the ability to hold greater value for the life purpose of an individual. Instead of viewing people as clusters of symptoms needing to be treated, or as less spiritually evolved when suffering is present, Washburn offers a model that places suffering within a larger paradigm of spiritual unfolding. This approach may be quite helpful to those in the spiritual and psychotherapeutic communities, as clients or practitioners, because it allows a frame from which to view what may seem like a mere snapshot metamorphose into a full motion picture by allowing presenting symptoms to have a larger meaning.

Washburn, in this way, is faithful to his long-time interest in depth psychology. Depth and regression are seen as part of the hero's journey. The journey to the underworld takes courage not because it glorifies the condition of suffering but because it somatically and symbolically enacts the integration of dualisms. The light may shine the brightest in the dark. Alternatively, the maxim "our vulnerability can become our greatest strength" helps to illustrate this redemptive process of transformation. One may, through the experience of regression, gain new tools and insights to furnish a more attenuated roadmap to guide their own emotional growth and spiritual development (p. 201).

Using the concept of regression in the service of transcendence may also help those who have a tendency toward spiritual bypass. For those who find refuge in spiritual practice and discipline, it may be tempting to repress the vestiges of old wounds as they resurface. It also gives a permission slip to those who are advanced spiritual practitioners to frankly admit to and work with those parts of themselves that are not fully healed or that incur discord in their lives. Might the world be

served better if regression was not a shameful experience to be avoided or concealed at all costs but instead another opportunity for growth?

There are already many practical applications at work using the concept of regression in the service of transcendence. Many therapists in the field of transpersonal psychology employ a host of specialized techniques that allow signs and symptoms of spiritual emergence to be shared and managed without pathologizing their clients. There are also cultures and communities that allow for a wider spectrum of expression where suffering is a natural part of spiritual development. Seeking integration and wholeness through the transcendent potential of Washburn's conception of regression may be promoted as a larger philosophy of holistic human development with applications to global conflicts or one person's life journey. If all can be honored for having value toward something greater rather than experiences to be feared or judged, there might be more possibility for peaceful resolutions to conflict.

The problem with the adoption of any orientation, however redemptive its potential, is that it is never a one-size-fits-all solution. Invariably, situations or groupings of experiences arise which simply cannot be accounted for by a particular model. This might be especially true for developmental models. There is always new research and data that either support or detract from the theoretical construct, and usually do both.

That is why it is so important not to reify theoretical concepts by creating a kind of orthodox dogma with potential to do more harm than good. In this case, the potential would be to consider any manifestation of suffering a regression in the service of transcendence. For example, a transpersonal psychotherapist or spiritual guide does not assess for risk of suicide when there is clear indication but instead is swept up by the transpersonal dimension of a person's story. They mistakenly use Wash-

burn's model as a sort of stencil to which all data is applied so that the client's account is made to fit the "right" stage, ego opening to dynamic ground but also the potential suicide of the patient.

The particularly dogmatic might throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater and not at all employ useful mental health solutions. It is similar to those who will not use any form of allopathic treatment because they have found a countervailing model. One does not have to look far to see the applications of supposedly ameliorating theories used in the most grievous of ways. Marxism under China's Cultural Revolution and Stalinist Russia are prime examples of how a stage theory of development designed to liberate becomes employed to oppress.

From a less sinister but still critical standpoint, it is possible that regression for some people will not have any special affinity with transcendent potential. Where does the ego meet the dynamic ground for trauma patients or the developmentally delayed? For those who have severe dissociative or severe personality disorders, ego development may not be congruent with Washburn's model of spiritual development. Those who have a borderline personality disorder, for example, may not have the ego stability to safely integrate experiences emerging from the realm of the dynamic ground. Some may never experience the promise of regeneration of spirit.

A Washburn fundamentalist, if there were such a thing, might intervene in ways that could be contraindicated for those suffering from acute psychosis and not fully acknowledge the devastating depths of suffering. This could be a case of wearing-the-rosy-transpersonal-glasses syndrome. Lastly, there is no specific clinical data that Washburn refers to in order to support the claim that regression may indeed be used in the service of transcendence. To be fair, he is neither a clinician nor a scientific researcher. It might not interest

Washburn to scientifically prove that his model is correct. Instead he may desire his model to be understood as heuristic in purpose.

Fortunately, Washburn himself is not a Washburn fundamentalist and does address issues surrounding instances of severe pathology. Though he does not provide treatment options or any clinical solutions, he does provide an overarching framework within which regressive experience and suffering can have meaning. He constructs a place where the prism of experience is never severed from the dynamic ground of which it and all things emerge.

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