



The “Holy Grail” Experience or Heightened Awareness?

by Kathryn M. Gow

Abstract

Can moments of spiritual atonement (the Holy Grail Experience) be explained away as heightened awareness and other more mundane worldly phenomena? The author posits that part of the puzzle can be accounted for by the following factors: hypnotic phenomena such as time distortion, time orientation, fantasy proneness, absorption and a movement from dissociation to association. Knowledge about sensory modalities, internal dialogues and peripheral sensing, and about meditation and awareness, may also help to verbalise this magical moment of “grace”. Writings on conversion experiences and mysticism may also assist us in investigating this phenomenon, when time stands still, and when for brief moments in life we become absorbed in the wonderment of life at its zenith - a taste of eternity. Contextual elements of prior social isolation and sensory deprivation are investigated as possible contributions to this unique phenomenon. In this conceptual article, the author explores the Holy Grail experience from both spiritual and secular viewpoints.

Introduction

What is the Holy Grail experience? Robert Johnson (1990) in his book *Ecstasy* refers to the Holy Grail experience as being a once-in-a-lifetime experience that people seek out for the rest of their lives, hoping for another glimpse. Johnson (1991, p. 116) reiterates this singularity of the experience: “If we have a powerful mandorla experience (and what a joy it is) we can be sure it will be brief. We must return to the world of dualities, of time and space, to continue our ordinary life.”

There is no doubt that this experience can be categorised as a mystical experience, although it is different from those normally reported by saints and legendary figures.

She picked up her pencil and was bending over her sketch when suddenly she was

struck by the extraordinary clarity of the light surrounding her. It was the same clarity of the moonlight the night before, and she put down her pencil and looked around the room at objects she barely noticed anymore unless she needed them. Now each was unique: seemingly polished to a brilliant sheen, the tiniest details standing out, perfect in their precision. The clear light washed over her, as well, and ... Jessica looked with wondering eyes ... it was as if her studio was newly created, or she had walked into it on this day for the first time. I have never felt like this before, she thought (Michael, 1997, p. 215)

Just a hyperaesthesia-like awareness? This occurs when “a person goes from a relatively unfeeling state to one of acute awareness of sensations” (Edgette &

Edgette, 1995, p. 236). In this passage of the novel, Jessica has had a major accident and has kept herself away from people because of the damage to her body. But at this point in time some years later, she comes alive again.

Depak Chopra (1990) refers to the spiritual heightened awareness state as the fourth state which some people (*Rishi*) have learned to access. "This ability is not 'thinking' as we use the term - the whole phenomenon is an immediate experience, like recognising the fragrance of lilacs or the sound of a friend's voice. It is immediate, nonverbal and unlike a flower's fragrance, totally transforming" (Chopra, 1990, p. 180). These Holy Grail experiences are found across cultures; take for instance this dedication poem:

You are the risen sun, and the early rays
of dawn,
Will I ever find your like, you who have
been shown to me only once?
(Traditional Somali poem, Waris Dirie,
1998)

They persist across time and place. Laski (1980, p. 117) quotes from Carl Jung's 1938 essay *On a Higher State of Consciousness*:

Standing on a little hill in the East African plains, I saw herds of thousands of wild beasts, grazing in soundless peace, beneath the breath of the primeval world, as they had done for unimaginable ages of time, and I had the feeling of being the first man, the first being to know that all this is. The whole world around me was still in the primitive silence and knew not that it was. In this very moment in which I knew it the world came into existence, and without this moment it would never have been.

The fact that nature seems to be connected to mystical experience was expounded by Pan-Chui Lai (1999) when pointing to Paul Tillich's romantic attitude toward nature that he interprets as being related to a type of nature mysticism. The author speaks here of her own personal experience which involved nature:

While living in Surrey, England, in 1971, I was walking along Broomleaf Road in Farnham when suddenly I became fully aware of everything around me. Every sense seemed to be heightened and I was so struck by what was happening that

time stood still. In this regard, paranormal researchers (Blackmore [1993] on near-death experiences) point out that experiencers find it difficult to express what such experiences are like, but the green hedge that I was walking past became greener; it was almost as if it had a very definite presence and it seemed that I was being spoken to by the Creator of Life itself.

These experiences are different from deathbed visions in that the person is awake and apparently healthy and well at the time of the experience. "Medically inexplicable mood states rise to states of exhilaration, joy, and serenity, all occurring shortly before death" (Currie, 1995, p. 151). While deathbed visions describe things that happen along the way from this life to the next and into the next, these Holy Grail experiences are present time orientation. There is no hint about future events, nor is there necessarily any movement; in fact, quite the opposite is the case. The time orientation is now. However they both share the sense of the joy that follows.

Holy Grail experiences are different yet again from Near-Death experiences (Grosso, 1983), although the concept of the archetype is still present, with Christians more likely to detail an encounter with Christ than non-Christians (Grosso, 1983). Holy Grail experiences tend not to be out of body experiences, and when light is present, there is no hint of going through tunnels of darkness to light, such as the following near-death experience:

Ahead the light became brighter and brighter until it overtook the darkness and left me standing in a paradise of brilliant light. This was the brightest light I had ever seen, but in spite of that, it didn't hurt my eyes in the least. Unlike the pain one might feel when walking into sunlight from a dark room, this light was soothing to my eyes. (Brinkley, 1994, p. 9)

There is no speed or acceleration as reported by Greyson (1998). Hyperalertness and mystical consciousness however are shared. In opposition to a feeling of detachment, there is an emotional tone with the Holy Grail experiences. They share feelings of peace or bliss. Unlike the Near-Death individuals, these Holy Grail individuals did not report significant life changes (Groth-Marnat & Summers, 1997), but nevertheless gained strength for their life journeys.

These experiences are regarded as profound and powerful and cannot be forgotten. Such moments form a memory which cannot be reincarnated nor evoked again, regardless of however much men and women of prayer might wish for that in times of trial and tribulation. This is why Johnston says that it is unique. They cannot produce this hallucination again if that is what it is, nor it seems do they wish to do so. Such caution is inherent in their religious guidelines which (contrary to the New Age movement followers who believe that they can “turn God on just like a tap” and happily channel messages to “all and sundry” from spiritual beings [see Gow, 1997]), warn against pursuing the gifts of God rather than God himself. Rinpoche (1994) in his book *The Tibetan Book of the Living and the Dying* also warns about the distraction of the luminous bardo of dharmata at the moment of death.

Scott Peck, within the context of therapy and psychological health, warns that people with mental health problems so believe in the myth of the Garden of Eden that their recovery is often held up because of their desire to return to the Garden, rather than accepting that they can never go back to that stage of innocence, nor will life ever be the same again. New Age followers, especially those who have been lured into the search by paranormal experiences, continue to seek for the “highs” but feel betrayed when God does not show them the way (see Gow, 1997) and are unprepared for the *via negativa* because they lack wise spiritual guides.

Oftentimes the saints emerge from the dark night of the soul and encounter a mystical experience; or perhaps it could be that the mystical experience brings them out of the void. In the dark night of the soul, it is as if God’s presence is mysteriously and inexplicably withdrawn (Beaston, 1999). And the soul may know that this is part of the *via negativa*, for it is as if the “Param-Atman” (God) takes pity on them and sends them this message of support and love in a rare but unforgettable mystical experience where all senses are heightened and where they are spoken to from the core of their being. Anthony Bloom writes thus:

When I found myself confronted by perfect happiness, a quite unexpected thing happened. I suddenly discovered that if happiness is aimless, it’s unbearable, I could not accept aimless happiness. Hardships and suffering had to be overcome, there was always something beyond them. But because it had no further meaning and because I believed in

nothing, happiness seemed to be stale. So I decided I would give myself a year to see whether life had any meaning. If in the course of that year I could not find any meaning, I decided I would not live, I would commit suicide ... I did not believe in God ... I counted the chapters of the four gospels to be sure I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. I started to read St. Mark’s gospel.

When I was reading the beginning of St. Mark’s Gospel, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. (Bloom, 1970, p. xii)

Bill Barlow recounts a similar experience of encountering “the Other” although it follows a different set of life events. Barlow is in the army and has been a leader of men; a survivor of an attack on his tank in the Middle East that leaves only him alive. He takes the route of monasticism and near poverty and turns to a life of prayer, long hours of prayer every day and night. However, his experience of the Holy Grail occurred in the army barracks before he left the Guards. He speaks thus of the event:

Then there was the other stranger who appeared one evening in my bunk just as I was getting into my bed. I suddenly became aware that someone was standing in the corner of the room by the fireplace. I could see nothing. But I had a strong and definite impression that someone was there. I wondered who it could be. As though in answer, the person came across the room towards me. I still could see nothing. He continued moving until there was no longer any distance between us. But instead of stopping, he mysteriously united himself to me.

A warm tingling sensation, not unlike pins and needles, entered into my body and spread, with enlivening effect. The sensation expanded vastly and caused the fulcrum of self-awareness, usually in the mind, to shift and disperse itself, giving my entire body an acute alertness and intelligence

I remember extending my arms before me in the dark to look at them, as though by

doing so I would know what was happening to me. Everything was centred on the body, on my flesh ... It was then I recognised the stranger in the room with me. It was Christ

This experience gave way to a dominating impression of having been lifted up and above myself, so that I seemed to be looking down on the entire created order

In speaking with Barlow, he does not mention any details about heightened awareness, but talks about the sudden experience of a presence - whether or not you wish to describe this as a positive hallucination or a projection outwards of his deepest desires or not, is up to you. He feels as if he is being spoken to. There is a feeling of love that flows from this presence and Barlow is healed. (I will return later in this paper to the concept of mystical healing.)

Rinpoche (1994) refers to the “spontaneous presence” of the “primordial purity” in the Ground Luminosity at the moment of death (a display of sound, light and colour). Rinpoche points out that, within the framework of Quantum Physics, matter, when revealed, is revealed as an ocean of energy and light. While both Barlow and Bloom refer to the joining of the presence with themselves, Rinpoche warns that “once we mistake the appearances as separate from us, as ‘external visions’, we respond with fear or hope, which leads us into delusion” (p. 280). There is, however, nothing psychopathological about the events reported herein, although they may be labelled as paranormal or as altered states of consciousness.

Hypnotic Phenomena

Generally, prayer is free ranging and verbal (external or an internal dialogue) and induces a semi-trance state, or it involves prolonged concentration on a prayer or mantra and is generally not spoken aloud as this breaks the concentrations, but if it does become like a hypnotic chant whether spoken aloud or in mind only - either way the effects can be hypnotic. The religious literature is replete with visions and channelled messages to people who stood in cataleptic states for hours on end.

It is not only prayer but meditation and contemplation that can lead to the experience of hypnotic phenomena. Heide, Wadlington and Lundy (1980) concluded that practice in mediation might lead to increases in hypnotic responsivity because similar attentional capacities are involved in both. According

to Erika Fromm (1977), meditation can lead to rapture because there is turning away from reality-orientation towards inner space in the manner of a spiritual yogi. Here is the idea of ecstasy that is found, but not meant to be sought for its own sake, in the spiritual journey.

Time Distortion

The descriptions of the various experiences that could be called Holy Grail experiences all contain mention of time standing still; as if the person were already in Eternity where there is no time. Alterations in one’s sense of time are a hypnotic phenomenon even under conditions of light trance (Erickson, 1980). Time expansion is reported by everyone who has had a Holy Grail experience. Often an experience can be reported within meditation or prayer when the person has brought his or her attention to the present time and no longer thinks of the future or the past.

Patrik (1994) found that in meditation the heightened awareness experience is a sustained perceptual experience characterised by a greater richness of perceptual data, which finding brings us to the move from dissociation to association.

Dissociation and Association

In Braun’s (1988) BASK model of dissociation, he lists mystical experiences as a dissociate episode, along with fear, repression and highway hypnosis. Hypnosis, or automatism, is nevertheless listed as normal. However, Braun does not specify how he defines a mystical experience.

Irwins’s (in Greyson, 1998) definition of dissociation as “an unconscious defence mechanism through which emotions are separated and detached from ideas or situations so that experiencing some emotional impact can be deferred or delayed” is noted here. There is a more popular way of describing the person who exhibits dissociation as a habitual way of living - this is the “Thinker” in the Myers Briggs personality typology (Briggs Myers, 1980). This instrument contains four continuums, one of which is the Thinker - Feeler continuum that is readily taken as a measure of what could be termed dissociation (a high score on the Thinker) and association (a high score on Feeler). Previous work by the author utilizing this measure together with fantasy proneness and paranormal belief (Gow et al., 1997; Robertson & Gow, 1999) has led her to the conjecture that the scores on the continuums of the Myers Briggs offer insight into how people can label their paranormal experiences as “real as real” and remain convinced

for the rest of the lives that what happened was a fact and not a fantasy.

Whether the person is classified as a Thinker or Feeler is not the point here; the movement of a dissociated person into the associated state can be so rare that he or she finds this unusual, and is flooded with the sensory information that others (Feelers) are more open to every day. The argument here is similar to that of the sensory deprivation model, except that the mechanism is totally different. Thus, the concept of sensory deprivation really does not hold to any great extent, but the concept of a move from a dissociated way of being to an associated state of being does.

Could it have been that both Bloom and Barlow (as with Jessica) had been traumatised without registering this? One was contemplating suicide (possibly through the influence of nihilism) and the other had survived a major death threat during a war.

[Note: The extensive work on trauma and PTSD has given us more insight into the dynamics of association and dissociation with use of the terms denial/dissociation and over-coupling/overwhelming (Phillips & Friederick, 1995; Spiegel & Cardena, 1990). The person who is in denial as a protection for the ego, or for some reason (perhaps personality and others, see Kingsbury, 1988) is more readily liable to dissociate in everyday life and because of the influence of the trauma experience is cut off from some of the main sensory experiences that other people access. Part of the healing process and generally the recommended treatment plan is to bring these patients back into contact with their emotions and somatic experiences (Phillips, 2000). Such therapy, when conducted strategically and with care, helps to heal the person to the extent that he or she is able to experience sensory information that has been disconnected from his or her conscious experience, not just in relation to the traumatic event but in relation to other aspects of living.]

People who pursue a religious life pray and meditate frequently. They also tend to forestall immediate gratification and practice denial in many forms - either for their own benefit or for the good of everyone (both alive and dead). Anthony Bloom's experience followed a period of great deprivation of sleep and, no doubt, adequate food.

However, even if we account for this Holy Grail experience as one that followed deprivation and added into the scientific equation the concept of a sudden move from a state of dissociation to

association, it does not explain why it happened at that precise moment Bloom encounters "The Other" whom in this case he identifies as Christ. Now, this is no ordinary moment. The man, who is so full of happiness thinks of suicide. The Other sends him love.

Let us return to the concept of trauma and post-traumatic growth. All of these Holy Grail experiencers report that their lives have taken on new meaning and are richer. Such positive outcomes for clients could perhaps be due to the cognitive reconstruing of the event. So, the reconstruing and making meaning of the event is as true of the Holy Grail experiencers as it is of recovering trauma victims. It is about sense making - we have this moment when all our senses are heightened and we label it as God (spiritual) or the Holy Grail (more secular).

Hallucinations

Are these Holy Grail experiences vivid hallucinations? Nadon, Laurence and Perry (1987) say that hypnotic perceptual hallucinations are experienced by few highly hypnotisable individuals. Yet, do these Holy Grail experiencers have a talent for dissociation that they are unaware of, on which the earlier argument about dissociation to association movement was based? In all the reported cases in this article, both positive and negative hallucinations could be argued to be present. Notice how the body of Christ disappeared into Barlow's body.

Negative hallucinations are "alternations in the subject's experience of sensory stimuli Negative hallucinations refer to the person's *not* perceiving a stimulus that actually does exist in the immediate environment" (Edgette & Edgette, 1995, p. 15). Here is another event which happened to me:

In the middle of a church service in a country church in Guildford, I stood with fellow worshippers for the last time and as I stood there (Eastern Orthodox practices require parishioners to stand not kneel), I became transfixed: the walls of the church were no longer there and there was no barrier between this life and the new life awaiting me back home. The light was very bright and I could hear the sounds outside the church magnified - the sound of birds came alive. No, I did not faint and this altered awareness lasted some time - how long I do not know.

That it could be termed a negative hallucination (the church wall disappeared) never occurred to me until I started to write this article; it is a memory not as strong as the one along Broomleaf Road and was different. I did not set out with any intention to “disappear” the walls of the church, and I did not analyse the experience at the time. I do know now that I must have used my peripheral vision somehow to access this vision, as it was more peripheral than concentrated.

Edgette and Edgette (1995) considered such hallucinations to be pseudo-real experiences that could serve as a cue or trigger for other emotional reactions. There I was about to leave my friends and a lifestyle that I had come to love, which experience now represented more about me than anything that I had ever encountered while living in Australia. But the walls of the church came down and then there were no longer any barriers. I knew that the walls had not come down, so trance logic was evident here. I and the universe were one - there was no longer any separation.

The basic oneness of the universe is not only a central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics (Capra as cited in Schick & Vaughn, 1995). Schick and Vaughn say that people who have had mystical experiences have usually led lives of extreme self-denial and self-discipline. Often they have renounced worldly foods, repressed physical drives like sex and rejected normal human companionship. They say that a routine life of prayer, devotions and rituals induces sensory deprivation which leads to altered states of consciousness. However, if this were the case, then we would expect these people to have many such experiences, but they don't - they are rare. Nor can they be explained by nitrous oxide use in those cases.

During a vision “time becomes synchronic” (Bonney, 1993) while “whiteness, brightness, cleanliness, shiningness, up-ness are qualities associated with normal ecstasy” (Laski, 1980, p. 93). Laski refers to the desolation triggers and ecstasy triggers. Sunlight flickering on water or on leaves, she says, is an effective trigger, and this is to do with flashing lights. While there is evidence of desolation triggers in several of the Holy Grail experiences reported here, there is no record of flashing or flickering light.

The Holy Grail experience as depicted in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is, according to William Bonney (1993), the result of repressed sensuality. This concept of repressed sensuality makes sense when we

understand the aesthetic life that the characters have chosen to lead. Thus the variable of repressed sensuality may be a correlate, but that in no way indicates that it is a cause of the experience.

Metaphors of Healing

The focus on healing is of prime interest to those who practice hypnosis. Joseph Campbell (cited in Matthews, 1994) says that:

It is one of the prime mistakes of many interpreters of mythological symbols to read them as references, not to mysteries of the human spirit, but to earthly or unearthly scenes, and to actual or imaginable historical events ... whereas it is one of the glories of the tradition that in its handling of religious themes, it retranslates them from the language of imagined facts into a mythological idiom; so that they may be experienced, not as time-conditioned, but as timeless; telling not of miracles long past, but of miracles potential within ourselves, here, now, and forever.

According to Matthews, the story of the Holy Grail could be a metaphor of healing and one which we as hypnotherapists could well make use of as we assist souls along their life paths:

The King - call him Arthur or Christ or the World Soul - is wounded by as well as for us. His wounds impinge upon everyone, and when he is healed, so shall we all be. It is the same story, an utterly simple one: the Grail serves us; we serve the Grail; it will heal us when we use it to heal the wounds of creation. (Matthews, 1994, p. 35)

This explanation is so close to the narratives of Barlow and Bloom and Johnson that perhaps all three men found the Holy Grail just that once in a moment of immense healing and as a proof of love divine.

Walker (1992, 1994) had no problem in suggesting that we should use the transcendent function more in hypnotic metaphors. “Within this place become conscious of the transcendent dimensions of your life. Begin to relate to the transient in your own way, a way that is comfortable and unique to you. Remain in the presence of the transcended relating to it in your own way” (Walker, 1992).

There has been some talk of mystical experience in the hypnosis literature, and in the late 1970s even a script to lead clients into such an experience was utilised by well-known hypnotherapists. Sacerdote (1977, p. 322) reports on the success of this metaphor with a pain patient. The patient had a mystical experience in which “the expansion of time and space also became identified with an expansion of the vital capacity of my lungs”. However, Fromm (1977) did not have the same outcome and concluded that experimenter expectation was the cause of the mystical experience. This induced experience is not the same as the spontaneous altered states as described in this paper.

Milton Erickson’s script about going to the top of the mountain has been emulated by more modern gurus like Tad James (of Hawaiian *Huna* fame and co-author of *Time Line Therapy* [Woodsmall & James, 1988]). Promoters of Time Line Therapy believe that there is a strategy for joy we can instil in ourselves and our clients.

Rossi’s (1994) belief that faith healing works to activate special messenger molecules to heal the person, together with his other major conceptual contributions to mind-body healing (Rossi, 1993; Rossi & Cheek, 1988; Rossi & Ryan, 1992), along with Gow’s (1996) concept of belief harnessing chi (*Qi*), suggest that there are at least two possibilities in this type of healing process. Either the Holy Grail event results in new cognitions and emotions that lead to the release of powerful neuro-transmitters that heal the body and mind or, alternatively, neuro-

physiological changes occur first (because of some trigger) and then the Holy Grail Experience occurs which leads to new meaning and a new will to live. A number of possible sequences may occur resulting in the same outcome: powerful healing. Who knows what we may come up with if we actually work with, and analyse, the spiritual tradition of grace as the activating healing element.

Conclusion

While we cannot force a Holy Grail experience which appears to result in healing for an individual, we can focus more on mystical concepts in our practices as therapists for those clients who lead spiritual lives. It may be that we find, in so doing, that the client is not the only one who is healed as we explore those aspects of life which are generally kept out of our cognitions and emotions. The warnings about being balanced and grounded would hold as well for us as therapists and physicians as they do for the spiritual practitioners.

To see the divine light, with bodily sight, as the disciples saw it transformed on Mount Tabor, we must participate in and be transformed by it, according to our capacity. Mystical experience implies this change in our nature, its transformation by grace. (Lossky, 1968, p. 224)

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