

Steve Taylor, *Extraordinary Awakenings: From Trauma to Transformation*. Novato, New World Library, 2021. 254pp. ISBN 978-1-60868-767-1 (paperback).ⁱ

Dr. Steve Taylor is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Leeds Beckett University, and former Chair of the Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society. He has written a number of books on his ideas and research including: *Waking from Sleep*, *Out of the Darkness*, *The Leap*, and *Spiritual Science*. He is also a published poet and has the accolade of appearing in the *Watkins Review* of the 100 Most Spiritually Influential Living People.

Taylor's latest book, *Extraordinary Awakenings: From Trauma to Transformation*, focuses on experiences of what he calls Transformation Through Turmoil (TTT). These are intense and permanent experiences of spiritual awakening triggered by trauma or distress. The types of turmoil covered include: war and cases of resulting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), imprisonment, bereavement, facing death through both Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) and "Intense Mortality Encounters" (IMEs), depression and suicide, and addiction. Taylor refers to the people who go through these transformations as "shifters", as one of their main defining characteristics is a shift in their sense of personal identity and values, "...a shift into a more intense and expansive state of awareness." Not everyone who experiences trauma will become a shifter, but for some, psychological or emotional turmoil can result in profound personal transformation.

In using the terminology of "spiritual awakening", Taylor draws attention to the idea that such transformations, can be understood as part of a process of individual and cultural psychospiritual evolution. Unfortunately, sometimes the disruptive effects of this process can be mistaken for psychosis. However, Taylor explains that not all examples of spiritual awakening are brought about through turmoil. Many people experience a more gradual awakening process by following a spiritual path over many years. Occasionally people can also experience transient awakening experiences that do not result in permanent transformation. Trauma or turmoil can result in either permanent or temporary awakened states, which Taylor describes as, "...a higher functioning psychological state – a state of enhanced well-being and freedom from psychological discord, in which people live more authentically and creatively." Taylor summarises the characteristics of spiritual awakening as expansions of: perceptual awareness, insight into one's own being, connections with others and the natural world, and of our concepts of ourselves and society in a global sense. In this respect, although Taylor only briefly mentions the similarity, the concepts and individual cases he describes overlap to a large degree with Stanislav and Christina Groff's concept of "spiritual emergency."

Although Taylor's aim is not to provide advice on how to navigate one's way through experiences of TTT, he does suggest various factors that seem to make the journey easier. If one can accept the experience with an attitude of surrender to it, remaining open to what is

happening, and find a framework of understanding that makes sense to each individual experiencer, then the path may be easier to tread. Whilst obviously not advocating that people seek out traumatic experiences as part of their spiritual practice, Taylor suggests that those of us who have not experienced TTT can nevertheless learn from those who have by embracing challenges when they arise in our lives, consciously detaching from our attachments, and by contemplating our own mortality.

Taylor draws on various religious and spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Christianity, and Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, to offer a model of TTT whereby our old self or identity is dissolved, either by a sudden shock or by a breakdown of attachments, that results in the revelation of a new or Higher Self. This new identity, suggests Taylor, is latent within the individual, "When intense deprivation and suffering... strip us of our desires, our attachments, and our identity, an extraordinary awakening can occur." Such shocks or breakdowns can occur when we are reminded about our own mortality, by our helpless inability to free ourselves from patterns of habitual behaviour, or when we experience social isolation. Perhaps, the latter is particularly relevant considering the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. We may wonder what the final psychospiritual impact of lockdown will prove to be when Taylor states, "To be cut off from ordinary society and all its distractions, and to be obliged to turn our attention to our own being, can therefore prove to be a powerful experience."

In summary, Taylor's book contributes to the ongoing study of religious and spiritual experiences in the tradition of William James and Sir Alister Hardy, as well as to the philosophical and theological debates about the meaning of suffering, and the literature on spiritual emergency begun by Stanislav and Christina Groff. However, perhaps the most important contribution that Taylor's book makes is to offer a sense of hope and optimism to all of those who are currently isolated and alone, facing the fact of their own or a loved one's mortality, or who feel out-of-control and at the mercy of their own inner processes or the apparent chaos of the world around them. For in the dark night of our souls we may find the opportunity to see a guiding light; an opportunity not to break down but to "shift" up.

Mike Rush

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