

IMAGINATION AND THE LIFE FORCE: TOWARD A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUALITY AND COMMUNICATION

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Combination of theory and practice in research is an essential step on the way to development of spirituality and communication as an area of cognition. I suggest as a basis for this theory to examine both perception and expression of "life-breath" which fills with energy all living creatures and surrounding world.

ABSTRACT

The articulation of a theoretical framework for research and practice is the vital next step for the development of spirituality and communication as a field. I propose to ground such theory in both the perception and expression of the "Life Force" flowing through and between all living things. Among humans, the essence of spirituality is most profoundly realized in efforts to construct meaning. If communication is conceptualized as the sharing of meaning, then communication media are the means through which meaning is both perceived and expressed. These media will be explored in six realms--*pneumologic, morphologic, empalagic, monologic, dialogic and polylogic*—that connect spirituality and communication within, without and between us all.

"(T)he validity of spiritual knowledge is grounded on its emancipatory and transformative power of self and world, and that this validity is relative to the spiritual culture that generates the knowledge."

– John Heron

"What gets left out of our theories of communication is what lives in-between those empirical manifestations (of consciousness) and their localized interpretations, or the 'music' between the notes, the work of the insight on lectures and discussions producing education. Put simply, what is missing is imagination which...is also to miss the spiritual basis for communication, relationships and communities."

-- H.L. Goodall, Jr.

“I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds
To open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the human imagination.”
--William Blake (From “Jerusalem: The Emanation of the
giant Albion”)

Among the greatest scientific discoveries of the 20th century was that the entire known universe consists of energy and matter, and the void in between. Neither energy nor matter can be created nor destroyed; they may only be transformed.

All living things are but gatherings of matter without the animating energy of what variously has been called *shakti*, *Ein Sof*, *bios*, *aether*, *Qi*, *Prana*, *Élan Vital* or the *Life Force*. Since this energy can be neither created nor destroyed, it pre-exists physical being, animates during life, and continues on after death. If our bodies are, indeed, mere ashes and dust,¹ then it is this Qi that animates what we know as “life.”

Since it is that energy which neither be created nor destroyed that constitutes life, then the energizing spirit of the human being is the same as the energizing spirit of the sun, the tree or the bird. It can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be transformed within and between living things.

The most notable manifestation of this energy for us is in our physical beings. To see an elderly person shift in abilities due to dementia or Alzheimer’s disease is to recognize that the life energy is slowly leaving the body. Who this person had been is leaving as well, while the physical body remains. To bury a loved one is to recognize that, while the body may be what we inter in the grave, it is not the complete person we knew whom we bury. What is missing from the body at death is the life force, which is what constituted who the person truly had been beyond the ashes and the dust.

Thus, we can perceive this *bios* from the outside looking at others. But, we can also perceive the Life Force within ourselves through prayer, meditation, deep contemplation, ritual dance, etc. Our

awareness of it often becomes heightened in times of high crisis when the normally constructed façades of our experience become cracked open to reveal a deeper reality within. It is both outside of us and inside of us.

It is also among us. We sense its presence through love, through compassion, through humility, through sacrifice. The sensing of that energy, the perception of that life force as being real, the feeling that there is something greater, deeper, more profound out there among us *and* in here within, the nagging sense of trying to find your way back to some place imagined as “home”² is what we call *spirituality*. It is an awakening comprehension of the interconnectedness of all manifestations of life energy that animates the potential for a growing spiritual development within each and all us. It is the recognition that this energy exists, that it is real, and that we can know it even if we cannot find the words to describe it adequately. It is not only within each of us, but also between and among all of us that the universality of the spirit may be comprehended.

Humankind is a meaning making species. Throughout our existence, we have used our imaginations to both perceive that life is finite, and we have sought to comprehend the infinite in order to ascertain:

Why are we here?

Who or what brought us here? Why?

Where did we come from? Why?

Where are we going? Why?

What is to become of me after I die? Why?

How do we live together? Why?

How do we discover Truth? Justice? Love? What do these mean?

We use our personal and collective imaginations in seeking answers to these questions as means to satisfy (in the words of Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan, 1973) our Desires to Live, to Know, to attain Power, to gain Happiness and to live in Peace.

As we imagine how to ask these questions, to whom or to what we direct them, and what we accept as answers, we also build our abilities to exist within the world we both experience and create. Or, by emptying our minds through meditation, by shutting out the constructed

Ego, we seek to allow the *prana* to illuminate our consciousness. We may evolve in our spiritual comprehension, or we may stagnate (See Fowler, 1995). Or, we may have been taught to believe that we have no right to ask such questions.³ But we live in accordance with the imagined meanings we both perceive and express.

Imbedded within these questions are the means by which we seek to find, and to give, meaning to our lives. Each of us does this in two fundamentally distinct, yet intertwined, ways: perception and expression. I comprehend the world that is through my senses as refracted by my ability to comprehend, my imagination, my culture, my experience in order to derive meaning; I express what I imagine the world to be refracted by my ability to comprehend, my imagination, my culture, my experience in order to create meaning. We do this not only by ourselves, but also with others in our participation within, and the creation of, family, community and society.

Thus, the Ein Sof that sparked the imagination of Moses is the same energy burning the bush through which he beheld the presence of Hashem. The *shakti* that animated Michelangelo's, David Unaipon's, Hannah Höch's or John Coltrane's creative imaginations is the same that animates yours, or mine. The *Qi* through which Gautama Buddha found enlightenment, or through which Hildegard von Bingen, John of the Cross or Bahá'u'lla envisioned God, is all of the same life force. The dedication to truth and to justice that animated Dorothy Day, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., or that has animated Aung San Suu Kyi, Vacláv Havel or Nelson Mandela emanates from the same spiritual *prana*. That *Élan Vital* animates each of us as well, all the time, since it can neither be created nor destroyed. It is as real today as it has been for every living creature that came before us, for all who currently exist and for all those who will be living in generations yet to come. What separates us from the more enlightened masters is that our abilities to comprehend the life force, and to derive meaning and inner strength from our perceptions, is not as finely attuned as theirs. But, the *Élan Vital* is there nevertheless.

The process of creating and sharing meaning⁴ through an ongoing interplay between perception and expression is what we call

“communication.” We construct meaning of the impressions we have of the world through our minds. We also make meaning from and through the inner voice (i.e., our perception of the Life Force) that speaks through our hearts. Communication is not only a rational process, one of the mind, but it is also a process of filtering what we sense through our emotions, which is the realm of the human heart. Both mind and heart are always interacting as we engage the world, a vital mixture of both “up from the body” and “down from the spirit” experiences (T. Armstrong, 2007). It is in the spaces between these, “the interpretive in-between those empirical manifestations (of consciousness) and their localized interpretations” (Goodall, 1996: 20-21) where the Life Force can be comprehended.

In the active creation of meaning, perception, both within and without, precedes expression. From our time in the womb throughout our lives and on into death, we attempt to comprehend life’s problems and challenges, to question them, to share our experiences with one another. Communication is grounded in this quest to ascertain and to share meaning, within our selves, with and among each other.

Communication media, then, are the means through which we can perceive, express and share meaning. These media can be anything: radio, television, computer, people, objects, symbols, signs, our perceptions of our pasts, our telling of stories who were are, where we come from, why we are here, where we are going.

However, such media are imperfect lenses through which meaning can be made. As lenses, they do not allow for complete perception or expression of all that may be derived. Our eyes, our ears, our facilities with language, our languages themselves, are all imperfect. Our cultures impose strictures on the ranges of meanings permissible, rendering them incomplete. We cannot see or say all that we may comprehend. The meaning we derive from looking and listening, from speaking and acting, is also incomplete. Yet, although our words rarely match the full extent of our ideas, they are the best that we have to work with.

Thus, the processes of creating and sharing meaning, i.e., communication, are always incomplete, partial and provisional. They are used by imperfect beings utilizing imperfect lenses in order to

produce incomplete and provisional meanings. Our lenses are framed by developmental (T. Armstrong, 2007; Fowler, 1995, Wilber, 2006) and/or experiential (Denton, 1998; Heron, 2003; Peck, 1997; Remen, 2006) factors. Our senses of completion, the desire to attain wholeness that seems forever hidden (Palmer, 2004) resonates through the spaces between what is said and what is heard, the spaces where the life force can best be comprehended, i.e., in our imaginations.

Through the ages, people have attempted to identify and define this Force, and to determine what it means in the conduct of our lives. Yet, our efforts to do so have always been incomplete because our perceptions of it are grounded in the historical, cultural, societal, biological and/or developmental contexts within which meaning is incompletely, imperfectly and provisionally constructed (K. Armstrong, 1993, 2000, 2006; Eisler, 1988; James, 1929; Smith, 1958). All the spiritual traditions in the world, as well as all who have been seeking ways in which to comprehend this force and to share their comprehensions among others, have tried to describe and explain the presence of the Life Force while also having to contend with the incompleteness of their visions, and with the incompleteness of the means with which to share their visions. Further, since women, typically, comprehend this energy differently than men do (Plaskow and Christ, 1989; Heron, 1998), no one can offer a complete guide to the Spirit in and of itself. In our searches for wholeness, we must use incomplete means.

Theories of the spiritual bases for communication, therefore, must be built upon efforts to understand human efforts in closing the gaps between perceptions of incompleteness in the search for wholeness. They must be grounded in people's and communities' personal, social and cultural perceptions and expressions given what lies "in-between," i.e., the "life force" flowing through, between and among each of us as we construct, and manifest, meaning. To extend our analyses to mediated communication, such theories must also identify and define the various ways through which we can ascertain, and express, the *logos* in our efforts to perceive and to express (or to derive and to share) meaning within ourselves, between and among each other.

Given this as a foundation for spiritual communication, we can identify six types of media, each reflecting the range of meaning possible through them. Those media through which we perceive and express meaning within are *pneumologic*, *morphologic* and *empalagic*; those through which we perceive and express meaning outside of ourselves are *monologic*, *dialogic*, and *polylogic* media.

Pneumologic media are predicated on our abilities to comprehend manifestations of the Life Force within ourselves; it has been likened to our varying abilities to *listen* to the voice residing *within*. This voice emanates from the depths of the human heart.⁵ The inner listening is much like breathing: I perceive within and I express within and without. It is a back and forth, in and out, experience. Perceiving *within* means creating the space to listen to the still small voice while seeking connection to the spiritual center. This is irrational engagement with the world inside as perceived from our connection within through the Life Force. In the words of Denise Riley, “Conversation with oneself, while admittedly vulnerable to error, is also crowned as the site of our best proximity to truth” (2004, p. 66).

The path to human understanding leads ever more deeply into the limitless pool of the Life Force. The more we allow ourselves to do so, the more profoundly we can comprehend “the pearl of great price.” The more I can comprehend the presence of the Life Force, the more I find it manifest throughout all my being. This includes not only my conscious or subconscious awareness, but also the meaning I create and express through the body, since “Our bodies influence our abilities to really listen to others” (Rowe, 2003, p. 157).

This is the realm of *morphologic* media, i.e., the making of meaning of the world and of life through the body. This includes the five physical senses—hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, smelling—but there is more. The perception of hunger or sexual desire can overwhelm the rational, cognitive senses. The perception of heat may mean the environment is too warm, or it can mean that there is a perceived danger, or perhaps that one’s temperature is rising due to menopause or illness. It is the perception of what these may be and what causes them that factors into the meaning the individual makes of the situation; what, if anything, to do in response broadens the meaning further.

Morphologic media are also where several faith traditions locate seven major energy centers called Chakras. Ascending from the bottom, they are oriented with self-preservation, self-gratification, self-definition, self-acceptance, self-expression, self-reflection and self-knowledge (SacredCenters.com/chakras). In the realm of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), *Ein Sof* is thought to animate ten *sefirot*: Nothing, Wisdom, Understanding, Love, Power, Beauty, Eternity, Splendor, Foundation and Kingdom (Matt, 1995). Among all of these, there is a connection between what is comprehended within with what is comprehended without. Morphologic media are those through which meaning is perceived and expressed physically and spiritually. The deeper one goes, the more profound the depths of meanings become.

As my efforts at making meaning deepen, the better I am able to listen to the inner voice to find out who I truly am, and forgive myself for being so. Since meaning-making is twined simultaneously within and without, pneumological meaning-making draws consciously upon the Life Force within while listening, seeing and speaking without.⁶ This is the basis of what Marshall Rosenberg (2005) calls, *Nonviolent Communication*, the practice of which can lead to inner harmony, peace, and reconciliation, both within, between and among people.

Such an approach to communication can best be built upon both inner and the outer foundations simultaneously. By bringing these strands together we have a heightened possibility to weave more harmonic spiritual chords and more resilient social cords the better to connect people to each other and to themselves. Here is the realm of *empalagic* media, i.e., the interposition of the “wounded healer” as a means to facilitate healing through communication with the source of the inner voice. “Spiritual communication becomes the foundation of for the healer’s capacity for empathy...Spiritual work is based on the emergence of an intersubjective space where individual differences are melded into one field of feeling and experience shared by healer and sufferer” (Koss-Chioino, 2006, p. 50). The engagement of the healer and the sufferer is a medium as well, interposing experience with deep listening, both within and without. It accesses the “Deeper power of being heard” without judgment ((Truxaw, 2003).

Empalagic media build upon Martin Buber's contention that, as we move from an 'I-It' perspective (in which we treat others as 'objects') to an 'I-Thou' series of relations (in which we treat others as 'subjects' who are as fully equal of love, pain, suffering, struggle, spiritual transcendence, and mutual respect as we are), true 'communication', i.e., the sharing of meaning between equal actors becomes more possible. This is "the highest form of love, which is intimacy that does not destroy difference" (Keller, 1985, p. 164).

Both parties try, in short, to understand (which means, literally, "to stand under") a higher sense of knowing and of meaning than they, as human beings, can ever fully comprehend. This encounter compels each of us to recognize and, ultimately to accept that we--each and all of us--can know only part of the greater meaning that is out there, somewhere, but to which we are all connected. The scientific method can only take us so far in our knowledge; the rest we can only grasp within a certain degree of uncertainty or, as the physicist Jacob Bronowski (1973) urged, a certain degree of tolerance.⁷ Whatever we look at is profoundly affected by us just in the act of looking. This implies, of course, that we are connected to the objects of our interests—both human and nonhuman things—in ways that we can never fully know.

When we consider meaning-making via electronic media, however, different dynamics come into play. The range of possibility inherent to these media no longer lies solely within the purview of the individual's experience and levels of awareness. Rather, the control over the range and variety of meanings moves to external forces via *monologic*, *dialogic* and *polylogic* media.

Monologic media are those through which a single range of meaning is expressed. This is the realm of "mass" or "mainstream" media in which a small group of trained people create messages to be broadcast to "the masses." Of these we are quite familiar. They have their roots in 18th and 19th century political and sociological philosophy. They can be traced through the earliest western communication research on the effects of propaganda campaigns during World War I. They set the foundation with the search for media "effects" (see, for example, Chaffee and Hochheimer, 1985; Park and Pooley, 2008),

persuasion research, public relations, advertising, and, more recently, diffusion and “perception management.” It is the central issue around which the debates over the political economy of the mass media revolve, in that who controls mass media, and the interests they represent, are seen to be inimical to broad, robust or equitable debate

These media are typically identified with institutionalized power. Alternative or radical media usually stand in opposition to institutionalized power, but they may also be subject to monologic structures. They may be expressing an “alternative” range of meaning to the mass audience. Replacing one ideology’s monologue with another does not, in itself, provide an alternative means through which one can people become actively engaged in meaning creation.

To that, we must turn to *dialogic* media. Through them, two or more actors engage each other as equals. All who participate probe and push the others to engage each other in the pursuit of *understanding*, i.e., the sense that, together, we stand under some greater sense of meaning that exists in the world. Dialogic media require that each side not only speaks, but listens, in a mutual sense of compassion. It is, for example, the key component of what Marshall Rosenberg defines as “non-violent communication;” communication from the heart. “We perceive relationships in a new light when we use non-violent (or compassionate) communication to hear our own deeper needs and those of others” (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 3). As Koss-Chioino (2006) argues, it is essential in the process of post-traumatic healing.

While the most obvious of dialogic media may be the telephone or cell phone, we can also see their application in:

- community development projects (Hope and Trammel, 1992; Richards, Thomas and Nain, 2001; Servaes, 2008),
- education (Freire, 1970; Kazanjian and Laurence, 2002; Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 1999; Richards, Thomas and Nain, 2001),
- theater (Boal, 1979); and
- video (Gumucio Dagron, 2001; White, 1999).

With the relatively recent introduction of the Internet, and the possibilities it provides for the convergence of audio, video, instant messaging and computerized databases, *Polylogic* (or *multilogic*) media are just now in their infancy. Polylogic refers to the ability for people to sample each others’ works to blend them into the various meanings

they are making.⁸ It is a postmodern polyglot of voices, but anyone with access can play.

This has profound implications for the conduct of research as well. Christine Borgman (2007) has demonstrated that with the digital storage of large data sets and research reports, whole new ways of conducting scientific research become possible. Using the prefix “e-“ to mean “enhanced” or “enabled,” she describes the growing applications of “e-Research” and “e-Learning” in the process of conducting “e-Science.” All of these open up the possibilities for newly generated forms of collaboration, data mining, formal and informal scholarship.

We are, of course, working in merely the earliest days of such “polylogic” media. If mass media derive from conceptualizations embedded in 19th and 20th century thinking and action, and radical media are a 20th and 21st century phenomena, then polylogic media are the challenge of the 21st Century and beyond.

The Age of Globalization has provided, for the first time in the human experience, each and all of us the opportunities to expand beyond ourselves, our nationalities and our cultures to embrace the limitless sense of possibility of Otherness grounded in the realization of Unity. We now *can* know about, *could* interact with, and *must* account for people who have had entirely different sets of experiences than we have, people whose assumptions and frames of reference about life may be at great odds with our own. Due to globalization, each of us has to adapt to an expanded world in which we can know about others, they can know about us, and each of us will have to account for the others in order to live together. Of the spiritual dimensions of what these media may mean, and the ways in which the Life Force can be manifested through them, I leave to future scholars to contemplate.

Implications for Future Research

“I am now convinced that theoretical physics is actual philosophy.’

“(In this) Max Born meant that the new ideas in physics amount to a different view of reality. The world is not a fixed, solid array of objects, out there, for it cannot be fully separated from our perception of it. It shifts under our gaze, it interacts with us, and the knowledge it yields has to be interpreted by us. There is no way of exchanging

information that does not demand an act of judgment” (Bronowski, 1973, p. 364).

In the physical sciences, the study of physics provides the foundation upon which all others stand: chemistry, geology, astronomy, etc. From the study of physics, too, emerge the biological sciences: botany, physiology, medicine, etc. If at its root, theoretical physics is “actual philosophy,” then the active engagement with physical phenomena entails perception, interpretation, judgment, information exchange, i.e., the creation and expression of meaning.

So, too, in the social sciences: anthropology, communication studies, criminology, economics, geography, gerontology, history, political science, public administration, public health, psychology, and sociology. The active engagement with social phenomena also entails perception, interpretation, judgment, information exchange, i.e., the creation and expression of meaning. And since the active creation and expression of meaning is the domain of communication (albeit incompletely, imperfectly and provisionally constructed), it is the ground upon which all human engagement stands.

The contemporary study of spirituality encompasses a wide range of interests. These have come not only from the more traditional areas of religious scholarship—theology, philosophy of religion, history of religion, comparative religion, mysticism—but also from more widely dispersed scholarly fields:

- alcohol and drug rehabilitation (McGovern and Benda, 2006),
- business (Mitroff and Benton, 1999),
- counseling (West, 2005; Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006),
- ecology (Wilber, 1995; May, 2006),
- education (Kazanjian and Laurence, 2002; Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 1999);
- healing (Thompson, 2005; Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006)
- history (Sheldrake, 1991),
- management (Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion),
- medicine (Henderson and Marek, 2001; Remen, 1996; Fortin and Gergen Barnett, 2004; Sulmasy, 2006),
- nursing (Greenstreet, 1999; O’Brien, 2008),

- organizational communication (Rodriguez, 2001),
- performance studies (Rowe, 2003),
- psychiatry (Galanter, 2005)
- psychology (Speeth, 2003; World Congress On Psychology & Spirituality, 2008),
- social work (Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006; Weinstein-Moser, 2008), Richards, Thomas and Nain, 2001),
- theater (Boal, 1979).⁹

Each of these approaches is engaged in comprehending the ways in which people's perceptions and expressions of their sense of connectedness to some greater level of power and awareness, a higher level of consciousness in which the presence of the Life Force can more meaningfully be detected and accessed can assist people and communities in their journeys through life. Spiritual communication is the thread common to connect each of these areas of endeavor.

The spiritual study of communication examines the presence of the Life Force and the ways in which people perceive and express meaning via the gaps, our individual and collective imaginations. The Life Force can most easily be detected by imaging and describing "what lives in-between those empirical manifestations (of consciousness) and their localized interpretations, or the 'music' between the notes" (Goodall, 1996: 20-21), for "what happens *between* the notes is how the whole composition hangs together and makes the experiencing of it art as well as mystery" (p. 19).

If we can listen for the "in-between" with our imaginations, and if we express what we find of the Life Force within, between and among us, then a theory of spiritual communication can begin.

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Сочетание теории и практики в исследовании – весьма важный шаг на пути к развитию духовности и коммуникации как области познания. Я предлагаю в качестве основы для данной теории рассматривать как восприятие, так и выражение “Жизненной силы”, которая наполняет энергией все живые существа и окружающий мир.

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