Introduction to the Inaugural Volume of *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology*

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Alef Trust

It gives us enormous pleasure, as the Directors of Alef Trust, to write an editorial for this inaugural volume of our journal, *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology*. It is eight years since the social enterprise that became *Alef Trust* was founded, and it is intensely satisfying to witness the many ways in which our founding vision is being realised. We started with a dozen students on one MSc programme; today we have some two hundred students across a range of studies including Open Learning, Certificate, Master's, and Doctoral programmes – all exploring leading-edge knowledge in the topic areas of concern to the Alef Trust, and engaging in innovative whole-person and transformative pedagogic approaches. The coherence, strength, and dynamism of the Alef Trust community is perhaps our greatest achievement. A team of dedicated individuals – scholars, practitioners, and facilitators – have become an extended family of co-creators, nourishing a heart-felt, forward-looking, and proactive community of learners and change agents sharing in vision and values. Our shared vision speaks to nurturing individual and collective transformation through whole-person education, practice and research. We value multiple ways of knowing, embracing somatic, spiritual and indigenous pathways and practices alongside intellectual inquiry. We acknowledge the important role that our indigenous and wisdom traditions must play in the betterment of our human ways, recognising and honouring our embeddedness in nature and cosmos. By reconciling a diversity of voices and epistemologies, we hope to foster a thriving *ecology of knowledges* (de Sousa Santos, 2018) that balances reason and rationality with embodied presence and

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communitas (Turner, 2012), and that goes some way towards addressing the societal and systemic inequalities and injustices that continue to haunt us to this day.

In writing this editorial it is the importance of research that takes centre stage. Founding AlefTrust was in part based on our perception that a significant gap was opening between a general thirst for spiritual and transpersonal approaches, especially in Western societies, and the poor status of transpersonal studies in the academy. Not only is it regrettable that important areas deserving scholarly attention have been neglected, but also the disconnect between popular movements and academic initiatives has led to increasing extremism in some forms of new-age spirituality. Too often those with a genuine fire to explore mystical and spiritual paths end up afflicted with a pseudo-spiritual myopia, lacking discernment and fostering gullibility. Conversely, earnest desires of practitioners and scholars to research “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971) have been squashed by the constraints of an academy beholden to well-worn tracks and bound by much bureaucratisation and commodification.

One of the founding aims of the Alef Trust is to address this impasse, by building a community of learners and researchers who endeavour to bridge the gaps, honouring the mystery at the heart of our being whilst valuing reflexive appraisal through a multitude of lenses. As such, Alef Trust is committed to generating high quality scholarly and research work in broadly transpersonal areas; but without effective dissemination, even the greatest endeavours along such lines will never seed change. Moreover, within academia much interesting research carried out in final dissertation projects ends up in institutional archives, virtually inaccessible to interested lay persons and other researchers, thereby impeding the evolution of our shared knowledge base. In recent years we have witnessed a surge in the open access movement aiming to make research freely available to the public, and we are pleased to align with this ethos. These are the fundamental reasons why we regard this initiative by our colleague, Tadas Stumbrys, to establish a journal through which the best examples of our students’ research can find a wider audience, as so important. Of course, the research and scholarly output from many in our Alef Trust community has already been presented in conference settings and in other publications. And we will continue to encourage publication in other journals where relevant. Nevertheless, this new journal represents a very significant step in showcasing the high-quality research that has been generated by students on our postgraduate programmes, and that we expect to continue as Alef Trust grows further.

Our assertion that the standing of transpersonal psychology will be enhanced by increasing research output, must of course be tempered by consideration of quality issues. More research of dubious quality will no doubt be detrimental. However, there is more to *quality* in research than a range of established scientific markers, important as those are. As psychologists we must understand the cultural and social backdrop to research questions. As some may put it in more colloquial fashion—*what is it that is wanting to emerge right now?* We believe that the cross-disciplinary and

international background of our students places them in an ideal position to begin forging answers to this question. Accordingly, the range of research topics represented in *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology* shines a distinctive light on the issues that are currently unfolding at the intersections between culture and our spiritual aspirations.

Discussions concerning research approaches that are appropriate to transpersonal psychology have emphasised the transformative role of research, not only in terms of its impact for readers, but also for researchers and participants (Anderson & Braud, 2011). For Anderson (2015), it is “the inquirers’ encounter with the Sacred” (p. 212) that underpins the transformation experienced. This accords with our experience with students in the Alef Trust community: Their testimony frequently includes reference to the life-changing impact of their research, and for many, their research quests have focused on challenges in the way the sacred is perceived and embodied. This is not to argue that the degree of transformation experienced is a universal indicator of quality; without a doubt, transpersonal methods in research raise questions over reliance on subjective measures, demand characteristics subtly imposed by the researcher, and dangers associated with circularity in argument. But the transformative impact of the research on those directly involved in that research connotes a distinctive feature of transpersonal research, namely the way in which researcher and participants become central players in a journey often having a sacred quality.

This is not to deny that the more traditional paradigm in science is of great value in quantifying and validating transpersonal constructs (e.g. Friedman, 2015). But we hold that this paradigm can be constructively complemented with insights gained through transformative research approaches that honour multiple ways of knowing and incorporate practices that bring first-person connection with transpersonal domains. Such research breathes life into an academy starved of embodiment and imagination, and lacking reverence for the human soul and its embeddedness in nature. We seek a *balance in methodological approaches*, a pluralism of voices and perspectives that can place transpersonal psychology as something of an exemplar for the paradigm so desperately needed in our contemporary fragmented world (Ferrer, 2014).

It is our hope that *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology* will become a beacon for this pluralistic and integrative paradigm, and in so doing will advance the role that psychology can play in enriching spiritual, holistic, and ecological endeavours.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the huge effort required to get this project off the ground. Our heartfelt thanks go to Tadas Stumbrys, the Editor, for his vision in proposing the journal and the many hours he has devoted to ensuring that it meets the light of day. Thanks also to Francesca Hector, the Production Assistant, who has worked alongside Tadas to ensure that the journal exemplifies the professional quality to which the Alef Trust community aspires.

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