How do adult twins experience and view their identity? An intuitive inquiry

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Adult identity formation and individuation have been well documented in psychological and world spiritual literature. Identity and individuation differ for twins because of their physiological and psychological connection. Although the literature has to some extent explored twin identity at prepersonal and personal stages of ego development, little research literature exists which looks to unravel transpersonal phases of twins' individuation. With a focus on transpersonal development, this research used intuitive inquiry to investigate "How adult twins experience and view their identity." Individual twins derived from a single ovum (monozygotic) and from two separate ova (dizygotic), were interviewed to understand their personal experience of their identity development. The researcher's own experience of twin identity was reported through embodied writing and poetry. Results allowed for the formation of an emerging model of Twin Identity Development, which outlined a possible trajectory for twin identity development, introducing the transpersonal as a connecting thread between the prepersonal and personal twin identity. Participant perspectives on identity development indicated the possibility for twins to embrace both an individual and a joint identity and in some cases, transcend both. Embracing all aspects of both identities created a sense of wholeness for twins. Further investigation into different twin identities and parenting of twins could validate the research.

Keywords: twins, twin estrangement, twin identity, awakening, transpersonal, model of Twin Identity Development, spiritual awakening, co-dependency

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I am an identical twin and “nothing in my life goes unaffected by this fact” (Martinez, 2017, p. 1). Understanding the twin relationship has been a lifelong process for me. From earliest memories, there was a felt experience of complete unity. I did not consider myself a separate individual. Me and my sister were one unit. There was one collective ego. We looked alike, had similar voices, and were dressed identically. There was not a sense of mine or yours, just simply ‘ours’.

We were often told we were the same and, to some extent, expected to be the same. According to Klein (2017), this is not uncommon for twins. Our parents frequently called us by one name. We also acted as surrogate parents, providing each other with support. We rarely had serious fights. This was primarily because we could understand and empathise with the other’s point of view. I felt unconditional trust, love, safety, and wholeness. On the level of form, there seemed to be no duality. Once we turned eighteen, we decided to separate, even though unable to express why. Within months of the initial separation, it felt as though my world had been turned upside-down. The following verse from the Bible rang true:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying: ‘Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die’ (Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 1990, Genesis 2: 15-17).

Much like Adam and Eve, who were living in a non-dual world in the garden of Eden in a state of undifferentiated bliss, I had also been living blissfully in an overall state of non-duality. At the age of eighteen, it seemed to me that similar to Adam and Eve, I had taken a bite of the proverbial apple and was being hurled from unconditional love and unity into an uncertain world, full of duality, confusion, fear, and loneliness. Like the archetypal first humans in the verse, I felt a part of me was dying, and I longed for the safety and closeness of the first eighteen years. Lassers and Nordan (1978) refer to the grief experienced by twins as they mature and separate: “During this belated separation, the loss of the symbiotic twin is mourned, often with much pain and suffering, before adequate growth toward individuation can take place” (p. 28).

As our individual egos developed, so did the distance between us, changing the dynamics of the relationship from one of unity and peace before the separation, into a rollercoaster of ups and downs afterwards. Over time, the sense of non-duality evolved into a seemingly complete duality with a fortified notion of self for us both. Wilber (1992) describes the dualistic world we live in as the fallen world and the original sin (eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge) as the self-contraction in each of us. He maintains that this contraction usually occurs in an individual as they become identified with their individual body and mind. The self-contracted self does not recognise its true identity with the ‘All’ and thus feels an “acute sense of lack, of deprivation and of fragmentation” (Wilber, 1992, p. 85). This description aligned closely with my

experience of moving from a joint twin identity, towards an individual identity, after the separation from my twin.

I desired to understand the complex lived identity experiences of other twins at the prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal level in comparison to my own experiences. This could help me to understand how being a twin may have influenced my identity development. According to Lewis (2005), the prepersonal identity occurs before the formation of an individual well-functioning ego. It is the stage at which an individual has not yet emerged out of attachment to their primary caregiver. There is no awareness of a separate self. In the personal stage, others are seen as different and there is quite a well-functioning individual ego. The transpersonal involves transcending the self to identify with a larger context.

Prepersonal

Current prepersonal research points towards the establishment of a shared twin identity. Jensen and Parker (2012) show a physiological connectedness between sets of identical twins, through exposing one twin to five random mild shocks and recording simultaneous electrodermal activity in the second (isolated) twin. Karavasilis et al. (2018) develop this research by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) MRI studies to investigate a potential connectedness between monozygotic twins. Their findings validate this connectedness by showing simultaneous significant brain activity in the twin outside the fMRI scanner. While more research is needed to further establish this hypothesis, it stands to reason that this connectedness and shared physiological experience could lead to an identity connectedness or shared sense of identity.

Klein (2017) highlights boundary issues and problems with decision-making as some of the typical struggles faced by adult twins. She demonstrates how twin identity is “based on the shared attachment, experiences and memories of childhood” (p. 162). Friedman (2018) validates this view, warning parents of twin-enmeshment and co-dependency and highlights the importance of individuating twins.

Personal

Current research focuses mainly on twins developing an individual (personal) sense of identity. It indicates that twin issues, such as attachment, boundary issues, and lack of individuation, are a result of a shared (prepersonal) identity and can be resolved through transitioning towards a personal identity. According to Klein (2017), the stage of formation of an individual identity can become hindered where a twin replaces parental attachment with twin attachment, rather than emerging out of attachment to develop an individual sense of self. A study by Olney (2019) points out that twins who were close as children have a more difficult time establishing their own identity and maintaining boundaries as adults. Bacon (2019) reports similar findings and advocates the importance of developmental individuation in the twin relationship (or twinship). Stewart (2000) contends these views and asserts that this focus is based on the “Western ideal of the

Unitary, discrete self” (p. 1) and influenced by the norms and values of Western societies that overlook values such as human interdependency which may also be beneficial.

Transpersonal

According to Cook-Greuter (2000), transpersonal experiences can occur where there is awareness of a transcendent realm, and the ego is mature enough to consciously “deconstruct the earlier illusion of the separateness of the Knower and the Known” (p. 239). In the prepersonal and personal research referred to above, there is no mention of a possible transpersonal approach to twin identity issues. Nevertheless, transpersonal psychology is open to the use of worldly wisdom and spiritual literature in bringing understanding to a contemporary research problem (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Of particular relevance for the topic of twin identity are Jungian archetypes pertaining to twins. In Jungian psychology, archetypes are developed elements of a collective unconscious and their existence is usually inferred indirectly from myths, religion, stories, and artwork or dreams (Jung, 1991).

Jungian archetypes

Whilst not all Jungian archetypes directly relate to twins, the Orphan, Companion, and Syzygy archetypes (Jung, 1991) allude to common twin identity themes. The Jungian Orphan archetype represents one who has experienced the act of abandonment or separation. The Companion archetype explores the symbolism of companionship and symmetry. It represents a person who is always by your side but can easily switch from ally to enemy. The Syzygy archetype represents sacred duos or the divine inner marriage. Typical Syzygy stages are separation, loss, despair, and violence, often followed by connection with the internal divine (The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, 2020).

The main gap in the reviewed research literature is that it appears to be confined to the prepersonal and personal. The transpersonal sources of Jungian archetypes, although not research-based, provide a starting point for new twin identity research which integrates the transpersonal into the prepersonal and personal and closes some of the current research gaps.

The research question was: How do adult twins experience and view their identity?

Method

For this study, I employed a method of Intuitive Inquiry. This is a hermeneutic research approach developed by Anderson (2004), that joins “intuitive and compassionate ways of knowing to the intellectual rigor of human science research” (Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 16) and follows five iterative cycles of interpretation.

Cycle 1 calls for clarification of the research topic via a creative process, and a precise statement of the research topic. I engaged daily with the initial quote from the Bible. Data and reflections were journaled based both on inner perceptions as well as on data that could be confirmed externally.

In Cycle 2, personal understanding of the topic is reflected upon in relation to specific texts extant to the literature review. A set of preliminary lenses was subsequently created.

Cycle 3 begins the return arc of the cycle. For this study, data was gathered from interviews with six individual twins. The interviews followed an informal semi-structured format as per Creswell and Poth (2018) with open-ended questions. The interviews were one-on-one and were carried out virtually via Skype over a period of two weeks. A participant overview is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant information

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Monozygotic (MZ)/ Dizygotic (DZ)
Abigail	46	Female	MZ
Ben (twin of Chris)	31	Male	MZ
Chris (twin of Ben)	31	Male	MZ
Doris	54	Female	DZ
Elena (twin of Frieda)	34	Female	MZ
Frieda (twin of Elena)	34	Female	MZ

The data was analysed and presented as personal and meta-narratives, as required by Cycle 4. In light of the data gathered, a summary of final interpretive lenses was produced.

Cycle 5 integrates the research findings into the literature, looking at problems and what remains unresolved or problematic. Through stepping back and gaining a birds-eye view of the whole research project thus far, it was possible to look at what had been left unsaid, thus completing the return arc of the cycle.

Results

The main themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: Attachment, Identity, Unique Bond, Bliss, Compassion, Separation, Boundaries, and Loneliness.

All six participants expressed how they shared an *attachment* and *unique bond* with their twin. It was a bond that was subtle and not always visible or sensed by others. As Chris explained, “If I’m feeling something, if he’s there (Ben), he’ll be experiencing the same feeling and we can agree on it.” Doris also mentioned that “there is a bigger attachment there than to the rest of the family.”

Elena talked about a shared *identity* that played itself out as a need to wear matching clothes and referring to one other as sister: “We demanded that our clothes had to match... I didn’t call her by her name, not until we were adults, like in our late teens.”

Throughout the course of the research, I meditated upon both my individual and my twin identity, repeatedly asking myself the question “Who am I?” I had the feeling that aspects of my identity were beginning to disappear and were being replaced with space that left a feeling of gentle bliss. This was a *bliss* that I seemed to recognise. I recalled a poem I had written in Cycle 1.

I recognise this place; full of peace, striking beauty
Only last time there was something missing, unmistakably me
(Excerpt from “The Journey”).

Was this the same bliss that I had experienced as a child or simply a reductionist pre/trans fallacy? (Wilber, 1982). My heart felt that it was the same bliss. I was never disconnected from this field of consciousness. There was no journey. The bigger ‘I’ was simply absent for a while. My mind says I underwent a journey through time, from the prepersonal through the personal and into the transpersonal. The experience of bliss simply appeared to be the same but could not possibly have been the same without the awareness that is there today. Elena also reflected upon the “blissful times” she shared with her sister as a child.

Compassion was also a common theme amongst the twins. From Abigail’s personal experience, she believed that “twins have more compassion for other people.” Not only could the twins share in each other’s joy, but also took on each other’s suffering. Frieda described how her twin’s hurt felt worse than her own: “it almost seemed like it was worse if it was happening to her than if it would have happened to me...I feel her hurt is my hurt and her world is my world.”

All of the twins recognised the need to move from the prepersonal to the personal stage of development and *separate* from their twin at some point. Four had already separated physically, with two participants on the verge of separation. This desire for separation amongst the participants often began with a longing for something seemingly inconsequential. As Doris explained, “we just wanted our own space.” There was also a longing to be seen as an individual. As Ben described, “I try to be individual. I’m more conscious of just trying to make sure people think of us as separate.” Chris

described his uncertainty about their inevitable individuation: “There’s an unknown where I am curious about what will happen when, because we will eventually have to separate... and I don’t know what the attachment will be.”

All participants agreed that they had experienced *loneliness*, both within and outside of the twinship. As Frieda explains, “People assume you’re never alone... but actually we were insecure and both lacked confidence and things. It almost felt like we were alone even if we were together.” This view was mirrored by Ben who explained how, “Chris is perpetually my closest friend... the close friends I have do not think of me as their closest friend because I have Chris... so there’s a loneliness in terms of friendship that I think I feel.” Elena described her intense loneliness when her twin got her first boyfriend: “It was a big aspect because it was so unfamiliar not to have that connection anymore. I definitely felt loss and loneliness.”

In relation to *boundaries*, Doris explained how they were never explicitly stated between her and her twin: “I am unsure as to whether this was because we never had any or because we had an implicit understanding of where to draw the line. Either way, they were never actually verbally communicated.” Chris confirmed this when he described how, “I think there’s rough ones [boundaries] in my mind...it’s like if there were boundaries, we’re navigating around them on our own already so we don’t have to talk about them.”

Unchanged Lens from the preliminary set of lenses created in Cycle 2:

Lens 1: Attachment is a core issue for many twins and often lies at the core of twin problems.

Seed Lenses highlight new understandings that developed and germinated throughout the course of the research:

Lens 2: The depth of twin closeness and companionship can manifest in interactions with others as high levels of compassion and empathy.

Lens 3: Some twins do follow an identity development path similar to individuals that are not born as twins (i.e., singletons). These twins are less likely to feel such a strong need to assert their individual identity.

Lens 4: The trajectory of twin identity can take a cyclical nature. The twin enters the transpersonal through reclaiming the prepersonal oneness they experienced during their childhood as a twin, but this time with the personal clarity and discernment of a mature adult.

Lens 5: The synchronous, subtle connectedness between twins goes beyond the mind and has ineffable qualities to it of a transpersonal nature.

Changed Lenses highlight new developments and meaningful progression of change from the initial lenses:

Lens 6: Even though twins may never truly drop the shared identity and may not be aware of a distinct personal identity, at some point, steps towards developing an individuated sense of personal identity may happen. This move seems to be inevitable and almost inherently desired. It can happen consciously or organically.

Lens 7: It is the pattern of twinship identity, defined by Klein (2017), as 'interdependent-identity', 'split-identity' or 'individual identity' (p.10), that lays the foundation for ego-development, rather than whether the twins are monozygotic (MZ) or dizygotic (DZ). Interdependent-identity twins display high levels of dependency on one another, split-identity less, and individual-identity twins no more than singleton siblings.

Lens 8: The loneliness felt by twins is not only brought on by separation. It is also sometimes felt when together.

New Lenses highlight new and unexpected breakthroughs in understanding through the research:

Lens 9: Twin attachment depends more on the patterns of twinship identity explained in Lens 7 above, rather than whether the twins are MZ or DZ.

Lens 10: Comparison of twins can enhance their need to be seen as an individual in their own right and may in extreme cases be a contributing factor towards specific health disorders.

Lens 11: Identifying, witnessing, and embracing all aspects of the twinship no matter how confused, splintered or contradictory they may seem, seems to be the key to a sense of wholeness for twins, and the key to allowing the twin to move beyond the prepersonal and personal into the transpersonal.

Discussion

Model of Twin Identity Development (TID)

Reflecting upon the narratives, my own journey, and the transformed lenses, a trajectory of twin identity development became evident within the process of identity development for all the participants. This led to the development of an emerging Model of Twin Identity Development (TID) (Figure 1). This model proposes a generic identity trajectory for twins.

Figure 1
Model of Twin Identity Development (TID)

Prepersonal Identity

The Prepersonal Tier of the TID model, shows how twins begin their lives undifferentiated and symbiotically merged with their initial caregiver and twin in a ‘We-space’. Cook-Greuter (2013) refers to such a stage of undifferentiated merger as the ‘symbiotic stage’. As illustrated in the TID model, research data from all six twins pointed to twins detaching early on from the parental caregiver, but remaining undifferentiated and physiologically and psychologically attached to their twin. At this stage, the twins often assumed the caregiving role for each other, providing support and compassion. As Abigail explained, “I always had the part that I should protect her.”

The research data suggests that at this stage, the twins did not have a concept of a separate self. As Frieda explained, “her world is my world.” This stage is represented by the ‘twin-identity tier’ of the TID model. From the research data, the twins continued in this shared ‘we-space,’ seeing themselves and their twin as one unit. Furthermore, the data pointed to a maintained fusion and the development of a joint ego which may have resulted in an interconnected worldview. For two of the participants, their connectedness led to them developing their own idioglossia.

In my case, the maintained fusion generated *bliss* experiences or *flow* states during the prepersonal stage of the TID model, where there was a momentary merging with my twin and a personal self-sense disappeared (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). These bliss or flow experiences were experienced in the moment, but occurred without awareness, as this would have required a clear, separate self which I did not have. As this stage of maintained fusion lasted into adulthood, memories of this bliss remain.

According to Cook-Greuter (2013), individuals usually remain in the symbiotic stage from birth to the beginning of language capacity. Due to the relatively short length of time spent by most singletons in this phase, this preconscious phase usually only “resides as memories in the subconscious” (p. 8). This would support the notion that any bliss experiences of singletons at this stage may only be carried subconsciously.

The TID model presented above contains a second tier that represents a stage described as “maintained fusion.” This is where the twin comes out of a sense of undifferentiated self, which I refer to as a ‘demerger’ from the parent but is still merged with the twin. The data suggests that this tier, if it arises, continues from the prepersonal into the personal stage where the twin begins both a demerger from their twin identity and simultaneous construction of an individual identity.

Ben and Chris primarily described interdependent-identity twinship patterns, such as turning to each other for companionship, support, and reassurance (Klein, 2017). They still live together and remain closely connected and dependent as per the prepersonal stage of the TID model. Elena and Frieda also primarily displayed the interdependent-identity pattern within the twinship and remained highly dependent on one another into early adulthood. The TID model recognises that twins can establish adulthood whilst still maintaining dependency on their twin.

The research data suggests that split-identity twins, who are “accepted as twins but not as individuals in their own right” (Klein, 2017, p. 10), and individual identity twins, whom Klein (2017) describes as being treated as distinct from one another, tend to move out of the prepersonal stage earlier than interdependent-identity twins. Abigail mainly described patterns of split-identity within her twinship, where she and her sister fluctuated between periods of dependency on one another and independence from one another. She described a strong sense of independence by the age of thirteen. Doris and her sister primarily displayed independent-identity twinship patterns, having attended different schools throughout life and having individual friends and interests. Doris began her journey into the ‘personal’ tier at the onset of primary school.

The maintained fusion in the prepersonal stage and the demerger from the joint identity in the personal stage differentiates the TID model from other Identity Development models based on singletons, such as the EDT (Ego Development Theory) model by Cook-Greuter (2013), where an individual moves directly from parental symbiosis, towards the construction of an individual identity.

Personal Identity

The process of separation is represented in the TID model as a ‘demerging’ from the joint identity with a simultaneous construction of new elements of an individual identity. Consciously or unconsciously, the twins participating in the study realised either a twin-imposed or societal/institutional need to become independent as individuals in

their own right. They felt compelled to begin the process of separation from their twin. Ben explains the twin-imposed need: “Yeah, I want more time just to further just worry about myself by myself.” This differed from Doris where the decision to split her from her sister was taken by the school. We were “just put in two different classes.”

To contrast this with singletons, Cook-Greuter, (2000) explains how most adults have usually demerged from their primary caregiver in infancy. She describes how the earliest tier of differentiation from the primary care-giver “is rarely encountered in professional adults, as these ways of seeing the world are usually traversed in childhood” (p.8). Cook-Greuter (2013) also notes cases of ‘arrested development’ as exceptions where development has stopped prematurely and individuals may not have demerged from the parental or primary caregiver by adulthood. In some cases, singletons need to go through a phase of demerger from a sibling where there has been parental neglect, leaving one child to care for another (Denby & Ayala, 2013).

According to Cook-Greuter (2000), adulthood is seen to be achieved when people “see themselves as independent, responsible, goal-oriented agents of their own life” (p. 229). The TID model differs in that there is the recognition that twins can establish adulthood whilst still maintaining dependency on their twin. It identifies the later formation of individual identity, due to the joint identity in the early stages of life.

The research data highlights the fact that a demerger can prove difficult for twins due to limited past singleton conditionings or lack of individualised patterns which they can draw on. As Elena explains, “it wasn’t easy to be very honest.” The demerger from the twin and conditioned twinship, and simultaneous construction of an individual identity proved to be harrowing, causing a sense of loneliness and disconnection. On the other hand, the research data showed how demerging from the twin also felt liberating. As Abigail describes, she “absolutely didn’t miss anything.”

Further integration of the research findings showed that during the Personal Tier of the TID model, the twins developed a stronger sense of individuated self. They were able to stand outside of the twinship and view it from an external individualised perspective. Klein (2017) explains how during the process of individuation, twins may crave clear boundaries. For the research participants, this desire for boundaries went hand in hand with periods of togetherness and separateness and, in extreme cases, estrangement which came about as a result of the twins’ inexperience at balancing individual and joint needs to create adequate boundaries. Frieda explained how at this stage, people crossed her boundaries left, right and centre: “I had to learn that the hard way.” This supports the importance of developing a separate personal twin identity emphasised by Friedman (2018).

Transpersonal Identity

The TID model describes a Transpersonal Tier beginning with twin integration of the big and small self. I refer to this as ‘twintegration’. This trajectory is reflected in Elena’s

journey. She entered into a self-actualising stage of spiritual development where both the bigger joint twin identity and the smaller individual and disconnected self-identity become fully transparent. From this witnessing perspective, she was able to embrace and integrate ('twintegrate') both the individual identity and the twin identity into her interconnected worldview.

Elena was propelled into this stage through intense emotional turmoil brought on by a demerger from her twin identity. This connects back to the Jungian archetype of Companion where any attempt to sever the companionship dependency means death (Jung, 1991). From the transpersonal perspective, this could be perceived as the death of the twin identity rather than a physical death. For Frieda, movement into this stage happened organically, as awareness of identities and their associated patterns and conditionings became transparent and a process of dis-identification began. On a personal level, a craving to experience the bliss and flow states of the prepersonal stage, still clear in my memory, acted as the driving force for my journey into the transpersonal.

The transpersonal trajectory continues in the TID model as transparency of the twin and individual identity, followed by dis-identification with conditioned identity patterns and a re-connection with the transpersonal. For Elena, the process or practice of observation and dis-identification with past conditionings and patterns led to the experience of a direct mode of beingness where flow states were experienced. As Elena explained: "When I finally stepped into the deeper kind of introspection of my suffering, the intensity of the emotional turmoil catalysed a life-transforming spiritual awakening."

The symbolism of the Jungian archetypes of Orphan, Companion, and Syzygy (Jung, 1991) was mirrored in the participant data, with narratives alluding to the transpersonal aspects of separation, companionship, and sacred duos where the connection to a bigger 'I' or wholeness was represented by the deep connection to the twin. For Abigail, Elena and Frieda, the transpersonal thread connected the prepersonal and personal identity, helping the twins to 'twintegrate' and move beyond both identities. This thread also facilitated a connection to the bigger transpersonal self (Wilber, 1992) and a deeper sense of identity. These findings validate the necessity of this research and future transpersonal research on this topic.

The main limitations of the research study were that all participants were of Caucasian ethnicity and none of the participants from cultural backgrounds that offer a collective cultural perspective. There was no quantitative result verification as the research was based on subjective twin experience. Qualitative research is transferable but not generalisable. Whilst the results are encouraging towards building a model, and the trends may be applicable, the findings cannot be stated as definitive. Due to its transpersonal nature, the research may only be valuable to counselling practitioners that are working at the level of the transpersonal.

To conclude and going back to the original question of how adult twins experienced and viewed their identity, the study illustrated how twins experienced both an individual identity and a shared twin identity. The research shed light on the fact that they did not need to view the shared twin identity as mutually exclusive from their individual identity. Neither did they have to choose between the two. The research highlighted the uniqueness of the identity development process and shed light on the importance of a 'both...and' approach to twin experience, which allowed twins to maintain and embrace both their prepersonal and personal identities (as opposed to relinquishment or deconstruction of the prepersonal) in a move towards wholeness.

Experiencing the co-existence of both identities allowed the twins to integrate all aspects of themselves, without discarding any aspect of who they were. The consequences of this 'twintegration' and in some cases, transcendence of both the prepersonal and personal, helped facilitate a sense of wholeness for the twin research participants as well as a conscious spiritual connection to the transpersonal sacred within. This has helped close gaps in the research by introducing the transpersonal as a potential connecting thread between the prepersonal and personal twin identity, allowing twins to transcend both identities to discover a transpersonal 'bigger' self (Wilber, 1992). Further investigation into different twin identities, collective cultures, and parenting of twins could help validate and further develop the model of Twin Identity Development.

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About the Author

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