



The Self-Transcendence Spiral of Growth: Exploring the Many Faces, Places and Times of Self-transcendence

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Abstract. This chapter explores the many definitions of self-transcendence and proposes they can helpfully be seen in a single diagram, a spiral of self-transcendence. Seen in this way it supports us in understanding the varied nature of self-transcendence and how it may occur in different time frames of our day and lives. Also, that the different experiences of self-transcendence may link or be systemic, e.g. experiences ‘in the day’ may, in turn, feed a wider experience or understanding in the perspective of our lives.

Keywords. Self-transcendence, Spiral of growth, lifespan development

1 Introduction

At its core, self-transcendence (ST) involves moving beyond the boundaries of the self—whether through self-forgetfulness, connection with others, engagement with higher values, or relationship with the wider world. It can be understood both as a process (the expansion of personal boundaries and consciousness) and as a content (the experiences and states that embody this expansion) (Worth & Smith, 2021).

ST means to move or go beyond ourselves, a self-forgetfulness, to connect with something larger than ourselves or more meaningful, to make connections and interconnections with others, and potentially the wider world. In this we may get absorbed, fascinated, concentrated on something outside one's own psyche and situation essentially transcending ourselves, and in doing so we may forget ourselves.

As we will see, ST has been explored and discussed by a wide range of theorists and researchers, and the sheer diversity of definitions offered over the years is telling. Maslow, for example, offered 35 separate formulations, highlighting both process and content dimensions (Maslow, 1971 / 1993). Worth and Smith's (2021) attempt to clarify such diverse perspectives on ST reveals a continued fascination around this topic, reflected in it being ranked in the top 2% of most viewed articles across all Frontiers journals.

Here, we take a step further and build on that work by focusing on seven different representations of ST, suggesting that these may be arranged metaphorically on a ‘spiral’. We argue that organising ST experiences in this way illustrates how they can be understood in relation to one another, reflecting different levels of complexity, depth and breadth of human development.

2 Why a Spiral?

We propose that ST grows in complexity across a range of experiences that may be typically interconnected and revisited. Individuals may encounter multiple dimensions of transcendence at once or move fluidly between them over time and these experiences are typically linked to their own growth and development. From this perspective, we suggest that a spiral motif provides a helpful template in which to illustrate and understand the relationships between ST experiences. That said, we do not argue that there is necessarily a sequence or progression of the experiences of self-transcendence.

As the literature on self-transcendence is vast, spanning psychology, philosophy, spirituality, and existential thought, we also believe that the use of a spiral allows us to situate a range of perspectives on a single conceptual map, rather than privileging one author or tradition over another.

As ST may occur (illustrated in the writing of this chapter) in many contexts: in a moment of daily reflection, during experiences of flow, in peak or plateau states, through self-actualization, or across the lifespan, these experiences may overlap, interweave, or appear simultaneously. Thus, the spiral symbolizes the proximity, continuity and expansion of transcendence across time and perspective, and allows us to see both the diversity and potential interconnectedness of ST experiences. We may encounter, as we explain below, transcendence in daily reflection, in the search for meaning, in experiences of flow, or in moments of awe. We may experience it as gradual personal growth, or as dramatic transformation. The spiral suggests that these are not isolated events, but interconnected pathways that continually invite us to expand beyond ourselves.

Human beings often assume they are “fixed” in the present. Yet growth occurs continually, both within and beyond our awareness. Transcendence can be small or large, immediate or cumulative, personal or cosmic. It is the thread that links becoming ourselves, giving to others, and discovering unity with the whole.

The diagram immediately illustrates that a spiral may have many points to it, points where an aspect of self-transcendental could show.

In our exploration below, the order in which we discuss the different ST experiences takes us from the ‘base’ of the spiral to the top. There is overlap in the spaces of the spiral that suggests we might move up and down within it as part of the dynamic of these experiences. So, there might be a smaller perspective or a wider perspective.

We also suggest that in the variety of ways in which self-transcendence can be presented, we might be on more than one level of a spiral simultaneously – using the transcendence of existing boundaries in more than one way.

This raises the question of whether it makes sense to consider the spiral as being bi-directional in nature. We believe so. That is, we argue that we may find ourselves moving ‘up’ or ‘down’ within the spiral as we initiate or engage with different characteristics of ST.

If we do that, to us, it changes the tendency for us to need to feel fixed in moments of time.

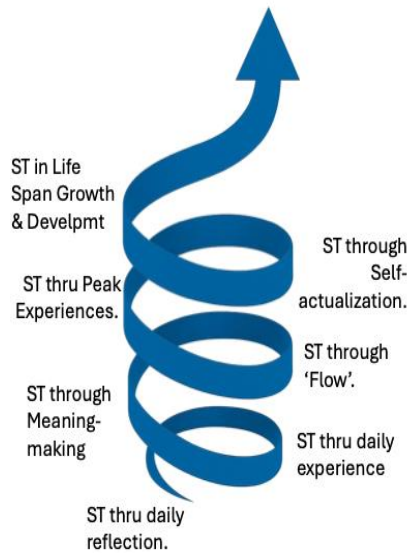


Figure 1. The Self-Transcendence Spiral of Growth

2.1 Daily Self-Transcendence

We are starting from what may be the smallest point - the occurrence of self-transcendence in the day, using the work of Rollo May, (1960, 1983). May was an existential psychologist as well as a psychotherapist and a hugely prolific author on a range of subjects influencing our lives.

He argued that transcendence is a natural part of our humanity, and he emphasised it can occur usefully in every single day. He described it as an emergent quality through a self-awareness and a reflectiveness where we can stand outside a situation, the experiences of the day, and in doing so learn from it - we can perceive, transcend, and go beyond our immediate circumstances. What May is saying is when we pause and then explore the experiences of the day, we transcend ourselves in order to make more sense of our experiences. Seen like this our coming into 'being' via a reflective transcendence is a constant daily process.

Viktor Frankl (1959/1966) extended this perspective, famously suggesting that "life questions us." For him, transcendence is bound up with the human drive to seek meaning. Paul Wong (2010, 2016, 2017) further elaborates on this, describing levels of meaning – situational, vocational, and ultimate meaning. ST emerges as we move beyond personal concerns to connect with values, purpose, and the transcendent.

These authors and psychologists approach self-transcendence from a wider perspective still, daily potentially, where we must make sense of our existence, our cognition, our attention and focus will go beyond ourselves.

As such we're driven by our attention. What Frankl says particularly, and Wong, is we are pulled towards meaning, finding meaning. There is a beautiful expression of Victor Frankl where he says, 'life questions us'.

Now, if you think what that expression might mean, it's saying we are in relationship with the life around us. The words have an implication that we are unavoidably connected to the life around us and as such that relationship puts us in a situation where life may raise questions for us.

A self-transcendent quality enters in as we process and find meaning in an experience, we take responsibility for our lives and have the potential to transform our own understanding and attitudes.

What we are noticing here is that self-transcendence can be a step-by-step approach in which exploring an experience can give us wider insight into it and beyond.

Frankl and Wong seem to infer that life is also challenging us to look for meaning within the experience and then decide what the implications are for that, and in our life beyond it.

3 Self-Transcendence as Meaning-Making

If we take another step forward and turn to the later writings of Paul Wong (2010, 2016, 2016a, 2017), we find his suggestion that self-transcendence can give rise to three forms of meaning: situational meaning, the discovery of calling, and ultimately, the realisation of ultimate meaning. But what might this look like in practice — in the process of making sense of an experience?

In the first instance, situational meaning invites us to look beyond our immediate personal or circumstantial concerns, towards the values or spiritual understandings that a moment might hold. This perspective reminds us that we are not alone in the event itself; rather, we are always stepping beyond it — towards broader insights, deeper values, and meanings that connect our present our lives.

In turning to our calling, Wong proposes that we begin to seek, pursue, and engage with a higher purpose — a vocation that transcends the situation at hand. Our focus, what it serves: a contribution to something greater, an act of service.

Viktor Frankl offers a complementary insight through his evocative expression, "life questions us." Frankl suggests that meaning is not simply made but also discovered — that we are drawn forward by a natural, even innate, compulsion to respond to life's calling.

Growth may also emerge through those we look to as role models and mentors. In the mirror of relationship, we are shaped and reshaped — invited to see ourselves anew. Through such connections, our sense of self expands, reflecting the dynamic interplay between self and other that lies at the heart of transcendence.

4 Pamela Reed's Model of Self-Transcendence

From a different disciplinary vantage point, Pamela Reed (2008) developed one of the clearest and most accessible definitions of self-transcendence within the field of

nursing. Hartman and Zimberoff (2015) highlight the elegance of Reed's model, which portrays self-transcendence as an expansion of personal boundaries along four dimensions.

First, we transcend intra-personally — by turning inward, reflecting on our inner states, values, and aspirations.

Second, we transcend inter-personally — through our relationships with others and the environments we inhabit, cultivating meaning in the space between self and other.

Third, we transcend temporally — by perceiving our lives across time, integrating past, present, and future in a way that deepens meaning in the now.

Finally, we transcend trans-personally — through connection with dimensions of existence that lie beyond the personal, whether spiritual, existential, or cosmic.

Reed's perspective is especially resonant across the lifespan, as it offers a way of understanding how transcendence may unfold in daily life and ordinary contexts. It reminds us that growth often occurs not in isolation, but through the interplay of reflection, relationship, and connection — with self, others, and the world (Worth & Machon, 2022).

5 Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) concept of flow offers a distinct but complementary view of self-transcendence. Flow refers to a state of deep absorption in a challenging and meaningful task — one that stretches our skills and demands our full attention. In such moments, the boundaries of the self temporarily dissolve; time recedes, and we become fully present to the activity itself.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that self-transcendence arises here through engagement. When a task aligns with — and slightly exceeds — our abilities, it draws us outward, beyond self-preoccupation. The more fully we attend, the less we are caught within the self. Over repeated experiences of flow, we evolve incrementally: differentiating new capacities, integrating insights, and consolidating a deeper sense of identity. Growth here is subtle but cumulative — a process of becoming through doing.

6 Maslow and the Transcendent States

Abraham Maslow (1964, 1970, 1971) articulated several further expressions of self-transcendence through his research on peak experiences, plateau experiences, and self-actualisation. Each offers a distinctive window into how transcendence may appear within the arc of human development.

6.1 Peak Experiences

Peak experiences are moments of intensity — emotionally, sensorially, and existentially. They often arrive suddenly, accompanied by awe, ecstasy, or profound unity. In such experiences, the boundaries between self and world dissolve, and time itself seems to fall away. Maslow described these as states of total perception — free

of judgement, wholly accepting, and deeply integrative. They provide, as some have suggested, a peek into a higher order of reality, offering glimpses of the sacred or the whole. In these moments, we let go of self-consciousness and are, briefly, one with the experience itself, (Maslow 1964, 1968, 1971 / 1993; Kaufman 2020).

6.2 Self-Actualisation

For Maslow, self-actualisation represented the ongoing process of realising one's fullest potential — of becoming most fully oneself. Far from a static endpoint, it was a dynamic unfolding, a continual growth towards authenticity, meaning, and contribution. As individuals actualise their capacities, they not only integrate their inner world but often turn outward — investing in the growth of others and the service of causes beyond themselves. Maslow saw in this movement a form of self-transcendence: the giving away of the self in support of life beyond the self. In transcending polarities and dichotomies, we become more whole, (Maslow 1964, 1968, 1971 / 1993).

6.3 Plateau Experiences

Late in life, following a near-fatal heart attack, Maslow began to describe what he called plateau experiences (Krippner, 1972; Cleary & Shapiro, 1995; Cleary 1996; Gruel 2015; Hoffman 1999). Distinct from the sudden intensity of peak experiences, these were quieter, sustained states of reverence for the ordinary — moments of deep presence and wonder in everyday life. In the plateau experience, dualities dissolve not through ecstasy but through calm — a gentle merging of the sacred and mundane. Maslow saw this as a stable state of being, rather than becoming, marked by a continuous awareness of the miraculous within the present moment. It reflected, perhaps, a final integration — an enduring openness to life as inherently sacred (Maslow 1971 – Chapter 21).

7 Lifespan Development and Growth

Self-transcendence is also evident in the gradual unfolding of human development across the lifespan. As we grow, we continually transcend former versions of ourselves, integrating experience and reorienting our sense of meaning. Developmental theorists such as Erikson (1959), Erikson and Erikson (1997), Erikson, et al (1986), Vaillant (1977, 2002, 2012), Tornstam (2005), and Kivnick & Wells (2013) have each illuminated how maturity involves shifts in perspective — from self-concern to wider connectedness, from immediacy to reflection.

Lars Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence offers a particularly powerful example. Drawing on extensive qualitative research, Tornstam observed that as individuals age, many undergo perceptual shifts — toward cosmic awareness, deeper calm, and selective engagement in relationships. Approximately one-fifth of participants in his studies described such transcendent experiences: perceiving the world as more unified, valuing simplicity, and embracing a quieter form of wisdom. In this, aging itself becomes a process of transcendence — an expansion of consciousness through reflection and time (Tornstam 1997, 1999, 2005, 2011).

8 Jung and the Transcendent Function

Carl Jung's (1993; see Stein, 1998/2015, 2006/2018) concept of the transcendent function predates much of the later literature yet remains foundational. For Jung, transcendence emerges when conscious and unconscious elements are brought into dialogue — when opposites reconcile to form a third, integrative perspective. In this process, polarities are not eliminated but held in creative tension, producing a new synthesis that expands awareness. Transcendence, then, is not escape from contradiction, but its transformation — a movement toward wholeness born from the union of opposites (Worth & Machon, 2022).

9 Making Sense of Self-Transcendence in Practice

This chapter has outlined multiple representations of self-transcendence — from momentary states to lifelong processes. But how might we make sense of these ideas in our own lives, or in our work with others?

We propose the following reflections:

- We often believe we are fixed as we are now, (Quoidbach et al, 2013) — yet growth is inevitable.
- Transformation unfolds both within and beyond our awareness.
- Growth occurs across varying sized scales — in life's major transitions and its smallest moments.
- Periods of stability alternate with periods of change.
- We are driven to expand, to look beyond ourselves, and to give of ourselves.
- In doing so, we discover our uniqueness — and our unity with others.
- Transcendence weaves through all experience, from the everyday to the extraordinary.

The spiral metaphor introduced earlier allows us to situate these diverse experiences within a single, dynamic pattern. It reminds us that we may enter the spiral at different points — through daily reflection, meaning-making, flow, peak experience, or developmental growth. The path is not linear but recursive; we move fluidly between perspectives, expanding and contracting, integrating and differentiating, as we grow.

In working with others, we often encounter the belief, "I am as I am now", (Quoidbach et al, 2013). Yet the reality of self-transcendence invites a gentler truth: we are always becoming. Whether through learning, giving, or connecting, we continually stretch beyond our present form.

Joseph Campbell (1949) described the culmination of the hero's journey as the discovery of one's uniqueness — a realisation that each of us is singular, yet part of a shared whole. "There has never been someone like you before," he wrote, "nor will there be again." In embracing both our individuality and our interconnection, we touch the essence of self-transcendence (Worth 2016).

In this light, Reed's (2008) four-part model once again offers a helpful compass for reflection:

- Intra-personally: Where am I now in relation to my values, aspirations, and inner life?

- Inter-personally: How do my relationships and environments invite me to grow beyond myself?
- Temporally: How do past and future shape my understanding of the present moment?
- Trans-personally: How might connection with dimensions beyond the personal deepen my sense of meaning?

Through such inquiries, we may find ourselves — again and again — spiralling outward, beyond the self, into greater wholeness.

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