

# The Transcendent Function, Cultural Complexes and Change in Society

by **Thomas Singer, M.D.**

**F**or some time, I have been thinking about how insights of analytical psychology can be applied more usefully in understanding social, political, and cultural aspects of our lives in which the collective psyche is the currency of exchange and change. In this paper, I want to consider how the conflicts generated by cultural complexes are occasionally transformed in a way that suggests the activity of what Jung called “the transcendent function.”

But first we need working definitions of what we mean by “the transcendent function” and “cultural complexes” in order to understand the terms of this equation. Indeed, Jung’s term, “the transcendent function,” sounds like some abstract formula from higher mathematics. Jung introduced the notion to describe how an individual, caught internally between two conflicting and opposite points of view each laden with strong beliefs, emotions and behaviours, sometimes unexpectedly finds a resolution emerging from the unconscious that threads its way between the opposites and finds a

new position that allows the intense conflict to resolve. What I am proposing here is that the “transcendent function” may also appear in the collective psyche of groups in conflict with one another as well as in individuals.

The notion of a “cultural complex” is a relatively new idea that takes Jung’s original complex theory, which was primarily applied to the psychology of individuals, and uses its insights to think about the inner and outer life of groups, and individuals who live in those groups. The basic premise of this notion is that a second level of complexes, different from personal complexes, exists within the psyche of the group and within the individual at the group level of their psyches. Like personal complexes, these cultural complexes can be defined as emotionally charged aggregates of ideas and images that tend to cluster around an archetypal core. Identifying cultural complexes can help understand the psychopathology and emotional entanglements of groups, tribes and nations. Some of the cultural complexes that we are currently exploring have caused uninterrupted foul

mood in cultures for centuries. They have possessed the psyches and somas of individuals and groups, causing them to think and feel in ways that might be quite different from what they think they should feel or think. Cultural complexes are not always “politically correct,” although being “politically correct” might itself be a cultural complex. This paper will discuss briefly the relationship between the transcendent function and two of the cultural complexes that we are currently studying, racial conflict between blacks and whites in America and homophobia.

It is challenging enough to describe and understand how cultural complexes express themselves in group and individual behavior, much less to have any real insight as to what might be palliative for their more destructive effects. But, over time, I have started to get an inkling of how to go about thinking about a healing process that occasionally seems to occur spontaneously in what otherwise appears to be horrendous strife based on the cultural complexes of race, ethnicity, religion, tribe and gender. Here is how I first started to imagine the relationship between the transcendent function, cultural complexes, and social change in a paper I wrote in 2006:

*Describing deeply entrenched cultural complexes is a bit like trying to diagnose an illness of the collective psyche. And, it seems as though describing the illness leads to an automatic question – what is the cure? The standard Jungian answer to the cure for a complex is that one has to drink it to its dregs; one has to suffer it repeatedly until finally its toxic effects are digested and transformed in some alchemy of the psyche. If that is the case, Muslims, Jews and Christians have been at this digestive process for a long time, with little evidence of a “cure”. Blacks and whites have been at it for some three hundred and fifty years in the United States; there has been some progress, but no real cure.*

*Still, one should try to imagine ways in which heated up cultural complexes might get resolved. Sometimes, it seems as though relief from a cultural complex occurs by the possession simply running its course like a fever – like McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade in America in the 1950’s. In such a case, the cure – or at least a respite – is simply a matter of time, of waiting for the activated archetypal defenses of the group spirit to fall back into the cultural unconscious as they lose psychic energy. On other rare occasions, however, a charismatic leader emerges on the scene and in his or her personhood carries the transcendent function for the collective psyche that points to a real healing or cure. It is as if there is a perfect fit between the experiences of a “chosen” individual which resonates with the experiences*

*and needs of a group or even conflicting groups, pointing to a previously unimagined way to transcend roadblocks to resolution – the cure. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu come to mind as being the kinds of leaders who have embodied a transcendent spirit for the collective psyche that leads to the vision of a real cure of cultural conflicts. Perhaps Barack Obama has the potential to embody in his being a transcendent function that might point to real reconciliation and healing of the entrenched cultural complexes that divide black and white communities in America....*

*Some gifted individuals may have the ability to experience consciously the cultural complexes that divide groups into warring factions. They have the capacity to hold these cultural complexes in their psyche in such a way that an authentic experience of the transcendent comes alive in them, pointing to a resolution of otherwise intractable, emotional group conflicts. They actually carry the transcendent function for the group, with its potential for healing at the level of the collective psyche. In the meantime, most of us muddle along with the reality that many of these cultural conflicts are well beyond our individual efforts as individuals to find our way to healing at the collective level of these profound wounds.*

*[The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal, 2006, Vol. 25, no. 4, pp 26-27].*

That’s how I imagined it in 2006. Here are two questions that are raised by those initial formulations? What do we mean when we use the term “transcendent function” in the context of the collective psyche? Can we appropriately use the term “transcendent function” in the context of group psychology at all? How can we recognize the appearance of the transcendent function” in a person or a group movement in society and differentiate it from what I have come to think of as the “descendent function” that masquerades as a transcendent function – as in the obvious case of Hitler?

### ***The Experience of the Transcendent Function in the Collective Psyche***

I imagine the collective psyche as being like the air we breathe or the water we swim in or even like the radioactive background that saturates the earth. The collective psyche permeates for better or worse almost every aspect of our waking and sleeping lives. Even so-called individuated Jungians breathe, swim in and are saturated by the collective psyche. What happens when the transcendent function appears in the collective psyche?

The excitement generated by the hope for the transcendent function to appear can literally be equated to the “yearning for the second coming” and

any realization of such hope results in the sensation that a vast dark cloud that has subliminally suffused all life has suddenly lifted and one can actually believe in the potential to realize the *summum bonum* or “the greatest good” – as Thomas Aquinas called it – for much of the human community. In short, a collective experience of the transcendent function can rekindle one’s faith in humanity.

Think of the following quote from Jung, not in terms of the individual psyche about which he was writing, but in terms of how we might imagine the transcendent function operating at level of the collective psyche:

*If we can successfully develop the function which I have called transcendent, the disharmony ceases and we can then enjoy the favorable side of the unconscious. The unconscious then gives us all the encouragement and help that a bountiful nature can shower upon man. It holds possibilities which are locked away for the conscious mind, for it has at its disposal all subliminal psychic contents, all those things which have been forgotten or overlooked, as well as the wisdom and experience of uncounted centuries which are laid down in its archetypal organs.*

[Jung: Vol. 7 Collected Works, 216 ].

I would like to suggest that one way to imagine how the transcendent function works in the collective psyche is to think of it as bringing to life from the collective unconscious “all the encouragement and help that a bountiful nature can shower upon man”. And this “bountiful nature” includes the possibility that any number of the cultural complexes that divide groups and nations from one another around issues of race, gender, ethnicity, the environment, international armaments, and multiple other issues can be resolved or at least mitigated in their negative impact.

I want to briefly give two examples of this phenomenon. I want to suggest that the transcendent function can appear in the collective psyche at a very specific *moment* in time and also that this breakthrough moment in history may become a *process* over time revealing the ongoing activity of the transcendent function. The transcendent function, then, occurs both as a moment in time and as a process over time. It can be carried for the collective by an exceptional individual or it can emerge spontaneously in a group of otherwise ordinary citizens – or both. I do not believe that the “transcendent function” alone causes cultural complexes to resolve, like some magical, divine intervention that reverses the course of history. Its appearance is ushered in only by the

hard work, enormous sacrifice, and deep suffering of many individuals and groups who have fallen victim to cultural complexes and raised their voices and beings in protest against its injustices. Such “witnessing” by individuals and groups can bring into being the transcendent function which can, in turn, signal a shift in the course of potent cultural complexes with multi-generational histories. We can “feel” the activity of the “transcendent function” by our waking up to the fact that a deep shift has occurred in the collective psyche that is as real as it is unexpected.

### EXAMPLE 1. *Barack Obama and Race in America*

Barack Obama’s 2008 speech in Philadelphia on the cultural complex of race in America was one of those rare occasions in which one can actually point to the activity of the “transcendent function.” The speech began with Obama’s willingness to go straight to the painful emotional reality that activated cultural complexes have potent, negative affects and stereotypical thinking/imagery embedded in them. These activated complexes stimulate very old (sometimes centuries if not millennia) memories, fears, hatreds, and traumas. Here is how Obama put it in Philadelphia:

*[A] legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations [of blacks] - those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future... For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years... In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race... They are anxious about their futures and feel their dreams slipping away. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice they themselves never committed; when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.*

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th\\_n\\_92077.htm](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.htm)

Most politicians pander to the tensions inherent in cultural complexes by playing to one side of the opposites or the other – whether it be around abortion, race, global warming, gay marriage, or most other divisive issues. One can see in Obama’s description of how blacks and whites perceive one

another that he is the rare politician who seems able to identify the opposites, make them conscious in a clear, direct language and allows one to identify with the powerful feelings on *both* sides of the conflict. By Obama's clearly empathizing with, even embracing, the opposites without fully identifying with one side or the other, he opens up the possibility of imagining a new way in which to resolve the entrenched, seemingly intractable cultural complexes. This is the only antidote to the toxic influence of "us vs them" dynamics that I can see actually working in social and political life. This opening up to a third way that brings the opposites together with a new, symbolic attitude is what we Jungians mean by the transcendent function. Listen to Obama's words from Philadelphia with the idea of the transcendent function in mind:

*The Declaration of Independence was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations... I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together - unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.*

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th\\_n\\_92077.htm](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.htm)

To summarize this example: The symbolic attitude that we Jungians call the "transcendent function" was most explicitly expressed in Obama's March 18, 2008 Philadelphia speech on race in which he was able to probe both black and white fears and resentments in a non-polarizing way that pointed to reconciliation rather than fuelling "us vs them" reactions. That speech is an excellent example of how the splitting dynamics of cultural complexes can be transcended through bringing the opposites of black and white into dialogue rather than manipulating them to further divide people against one another.

### **EXAMPLE 2: Proposition 8 and Milk: The Cultural Complex of Homophobia in America**

If Obama's Philadelphia speech shows us how the transcendent function can make itself known in a particular historical *moment* in which we are offered a collective glimpse of how a cultural complex

might be resolved, I believe the events of the past decades surrounding the complex of entrenched homophobia shows us how the transcendent function can work in the collective psyche as a *process* over time. Note the following synchronistic occurrences in the fall of 2008 in which

1. Barack Obama's election signalled a resurgence of liberal values and raised the hopes of all progressives except the gay population which found itself excluded from the celebration and devastated by
2. the victory of Proposition 8 in California, which made civil marriage for same-sex couples not only illegal in California but also unconstitutional and which occurred almost simultaneously with
3. the premier of the film *Milk* detailing the rise and then assassination of Harvey Milk as the first elected gay official in America.

These three events combined to suggest a destructive and regressive threat to the tremendous advances in both the civil rights and real psychological acceptance of gay people. It looked like the collective psyche was retreating from its relatively rapid, transformative acceptance of homosexuality in the past several decades. In the moment, many feared that we were witnessing a "descendent function" in the collective psyche. But, it is my opinion that the activity of the transcendent function as a *process* in the collective psyche should be thought of as evolutionary and that it cannot follow a straight line, any more than the process of individuation is linear in its unfolding. I believe that the emergence of gay marriage as a socially sanctioned option for same-sex couples suggests that a transcendent function may be at work even in the most apparently dire moments of the virulent cultural complex around homosexuality. When opposites such as pro-gay/anti-gay have gone to war with each other, we can be sure that the cultural complex that informs them both is battling to find a resolution in the collective psyche the only way it knows how - through a back and forth sequence of defeats and victories in a see-saw political and social battle. For instance, on the issue of gay marriage - right on the heels of the devastating defeat of gay rights in California with the victory of Prop. 8 - American states as diverse as Iowa, Maine, and Vermont voted to approve gay marriage which suggested that a new attitude in the collective psyche as an expression of the transcendent function was unfolding rapidly, inexorably, inevitably. In this example, the reconciling symbol is gay marriage itself.

Indeed, I think that the apotheosis of same-sex marriage as a mainstream issue for the 21st century to resolve, signals the further unfolding of an increasing movement towards greater compassion in the

collective psyche. It opens us to a vision of deepening tolerance for human relationships that can free all of us from the fetters of being locked in cultural complexes that would restrict what is valid about sexual attraction and love between human beings.

### Conclusion

Few would claim to understand how the transcendent function actually works and there are those who would say that its very existence is a Jungian fantasy. Like many things that Jungians embrace, it is a mystery. But, there are those of us who would claim to have witnessed the effects of the activity of the transcendent function in both the individual psyche and in the collective psyche. We believe it makes itself known in surprising and deep shifts of collective attitudes to what at another time was deeply polarizing. Walt Whitman – we might call him “The American Bard of the Transcendent Function” – put his experience of the transcendent function this way (and one needs to remember his “I” is also a “We”):

*I celebrate my self, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

....  
*I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-  
work of the stars*

<http://www.daypoems.net/poems/1900.html>

And a more modern “bard” of the transcendent function, Van Morrison sings it this way in his recording of “Believe I’ve Transcended” on the album *Astral Weeks* (and his “I” can be heard as a “We” too). He starts with: “Going up the mountain side where the water runs crystal clear.... take my hand.” He then goes on to chant: “I have transcended.... I have transcended.... I have transcended.....”

[http://www.lyricsmania.com/lyrics/van\\_morrison\\_lyrics\\_4097/astral\\_weeks\\_live\\_at\\_the\\_hollywood\\_bowl\\_lyrics\\_92954/astral\\_weeks\\_\\_i\\_believe\\_ive\\_transcended\\_lyrics\\_900740.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/lyrics/van_morrison_lyrics_4097/astral_weeks_live_at_the_hollywood_bowl_lyrics_92954/astral_weeks__i_believe_ive_transcended_lyrics_900740.html)

### Note:

*These thoughts were first articulated in a panel discussion entitled “The Transcendent Function in Society” at The Journal of Analytical Psychology’s IXth International Conference in San Francisco in May 2009. The panellists included Betty Meador, Andrew Samuels and Tom Singer. A version of the panel discussion later appeared in the The Journal of Analytical Psychology, 2010, 55, 229-254. This paper is a modified version of that original article and includes segments from other articles and books by Thomas Singer, M.D.*



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