

# The Radiance of Being<sup>1</sup>

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Allan Combs, a Professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina, Asheville and Saybrook Institute is the author of over fifty articles, chapters and books on consciousness and the brain and is the co-founder of The Society for Chaos Theory in Psychology. In *The Radiance of Being: Complexity, Chaos and the Evolution of Consciousness* (winner of the 1995 Best Book of the Year of the Scientific and Medical Network of the U.K.), he adroitly presents the grand possibility that systems/complexity theory, cognitive neuro-science and the great mystical traditions can work together to illuminate that most ordinary yet mysterious power we all possess which Combs prefers to call “subjective presence” or more plainly, “consciousness.”

For the long evolutionary history and destinal future which Combs explores in this book is of nothing other than this most immediate yet also most amazing “*awakeness*” to the flow of experience from now to now to now to now, etc., such as you and I are having—right now. What is the evolutionary history and potential of *that*? What was *that* like for our Neanderthal ancestors and for our enlightened brothers and sisters? What “structures” or “states,” if any, can be discerned in *that*? How might *that* relate to the brain? I don’t know about you, but when I *read* about consciousness, I seem to need constant buzzers to stay awake to *that* and, specifically, to the *amazement* of *that*.

As we launch into Combs’ wonderfully wide-ranging answers to the above questions, allow me one more buzzer from Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*. I hope it helps: “Ask yourself ‘For how long am I struck by a thing?— For how long do I find it *new*?’ ” L. Wittgenstein (1968, p.210)

In other words, imagine being so consciously awake to the Heraclitean flow as to find everything and every moment strikingly new, thus fleetingly impermanent and endlessly re-arising. (Think of this when you read the Combs’ quote below, from his p. 264.)

Such poignancy of impermanence was in fact the original stimulus in Buddha’s legendary search for enlightenment. As a boy, Siddhartha sees an old man hobbling down a narrow, winding street (the complexity of life) and is struck with compassion. Years later, his search ends. He comes to rest in the endless impermanence of being. Curiously, a contemporary version of this sight moves Combs 2500 years later in his opening pages: “I notice a feeling of fondness for this man all out of proportion... triggering a whole set of feelings, reflections, thoughts and memories.”

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[1] Review of **Allan Combs**, *The Radiance of Being: Complexity, Chaos and the Evolution of Consciousness*

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And so begins Combs' sharing of his search for meaning and connection with us. Before the final pages, he will cover chaos theory, autopoietic systems and strange attractors, Gebser's ever-present origin, Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields, Laszlo's psi-fields, the psychospiritual teachings of Vedanta, Buddhism, kundalini yoga, Aurobindo, Plotinus and Nicolas of Cusa. He will explicate and compare the grand evolutionary theories of Vico, Hegel, Teilhard de Chardin, Bergson, William James, Jung, Stan Grof, and Ken Wilber. He will share his well-researched belief that progress toward ever-higher orders of complexity is the guiding telos of the evolution of consciousness, from prehomonids to contemporary homo sapiens and beyond to the advanced stages whose exemplars are the shamans, saints and enlightened ones of all times.

Reviewing Gebser's and Wilber's million year evolutionary conjectures, Combs maps out these grand stages: (1) the "archaic/archaic-oroboric" or the oneness with nature, animallike stage; (2) the "magical/magical-typhonic" or the childlike, bodily based magical thinking stage; (3) the "mythic/mythic-membership" or the agriculture/clan and early language stage; (4) the "mental/mental-egoic" or the (alienated) individualizing, thinking-remembering stage; (5) the "existential-centaur" or the integrated thinking/feeling stage; (6) the "psychic" or consciousness-manipulating stage of the shaman; (7) the "subtle" or beyond the body, ego-transcending stage of the saint; (8) the "causal" or enlightened stage of a Christ, a Buddha, or a Lao tzu; (9) the "ultimate/integral" or a seemingly highly elevated version of the first stage of oneness with the All.

Along with Kampis, Goertzel and others, Combs sees the essence of the evolving complexity of consciousness as various concatenations of thoughts, feelings, images and memories interacting in such a way as to give rise to "new" second order thoughts, feelings, etc. The second order ones then interact with the previous order and with each other, giving rise to further novel ideas, feelings, images, etc. Interacting "orders" are viewed as "systems" whose dominant "patterns" can be viewed as "states of consciousness" or "basins" each with its own set-point "attractor" and subject to the catastrophic alterations of interloping "strange attractors." As Combs asserts in his own intricately pulsing prose,

I believe that the events which structure our experience at all levels are....self-organizing, auto-poietic processes, precisely analogous to the intricate events that create and sustain living cells, where complex metabolic reactions feed back on to them selves and on to each other in rich auto-catalytic and cross-catalytic interactions which create an intricate and self-sustaining fabric of the whole....Every part, every reaction, every process is dependent on all others in a single flow of continual self-creation....[yet] these systems are often poised on the edge of chaos, moving back and forth between fixed and predictable cyclical patterns of activity, and chaotic patterns that assure flexibility in adjusting to the demands of a changing world. (p. 264)

Combs further suggests that a credible "periodic table of consciousness, representing a large but finite array of potential states" (p. 190) could be construed, just as matter can be sequentially charted as discrete elements. States of consciousness correspond to actual physical and metaphysical planes of being and thus the inner and the outer worlds are depicted as nested versions of one another. Yet, Combs' definition of spiritual evolution requests more of us than the mere

realization of successively more subtle planes. “[Spiritual] growth means to advance toward increasingly creative, dynamic, and expansive ways of living in and experiencing the world.” (p. 193)

In stating his preference for spiritual paths which lead to “a rich and *realized* life *in the world* [my emphasis],” Combs and many others construe the path of “solitude and retreat” as being a stereotypical escapism. My opinion, from decades of clinical experience with people in the throes of kundalini awakening is that the matter of “retreating” is far more complex.

For there seem to be degrees of awakening which produce retreat by literally taking over numerous hours of every day for the rest of one’s life in meditation, song, and spontaneous devotional movements known in yoga as *kriyas*. My colleague, Lee Sannella, author of *Kundalini, Transcendence or Psychosis?* maintains that many of these people get inappropriately hospitalized in the West only because our culture lacks supportive settings and understanding of the spiritual legitimacy (non-escapist, nonpathological) of their status. Some reorienting strange attractors are that strong.

In any case, Combs notes that an evolving consciousness will become especially discerning of the limitations of linguistic abstraction whereby magical-thinking, mythical reifications, and egoic opinionatedness can still wield their convincing confusions. Combs asserts that evolved states of consciousness are therefore to be assessed by how far they reach “beyond mental abstractions toward an experience of the *immediate present*” [my emphasis] (p. 257). Clearly, his ultimate criterion is temporal.

Thus, sentience must go more deeply into embodied temporality, perhaps related more to the endocrine side of the neuroendocrine system, with all its hormonal-emotional cycles and chemo-regulating rhythms. It must outgrow the skittish misapprehension of the nearly chaotic Heraclitean flow known in psychiatry as “anxiety” (ironically, a term Kierkegaard originally used to denote the enlightening first contact with the holy flow by the alienated egoic mind and that Heidegger took further to include the shocking realization of one’s own mortality—all together comprising Wilber’s “existential-centaur” stage of evolution.) Duration itself emerges as a kind of perceptible fourth dimension as “time becomes a concrete aspect of the world” (p. 112, after Gebser).

Yet, time, as duration, as “*happen*” (say the word over and over until this special verb bursts forth its fleeting-creation sense) is not just another object of consciousness. (“Happen” or “duration” are just more words like “The sound of one hand clapping” is just one more sentence.)

If we fully grasp our own phenomenal identity in Combs’ “immediate present” as “happen, happen, happen,” the beauty, terror, or awe of *being ourselves* this very self-sustaining near-chaos of constantly recurring novelty provokes its own rapt concentration. Each moment, we *are* our own strange attractor, yet without us going bananas. For the complex and chaotic “sea” which fascinates the mystic and drowns the psychotic (as Stan Grof puts it) is the deep sea of self-world as infinite novelty in the eternal impermanence. Thus the endlessly scintillating, complex

surface and undercurrents of the great waters comprise an apt metaphor for Combs' bedazzling topic: us-as-consciousness.

And even if our grasp of the immediate present should fade, won't its scent call us forth again and again? For this is in fact the everpresent scent of the endless mystery of "what's next," of what always awaits after, as Combs notes from Vedanta, "not this, not this, not this..." And this sense of the endless-eternal is the depth of the author's "immediate present." As the illumined Protestant chaplain Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote in 1799 regarding the scent of the eternal: "It is the problem in the solution of which we are for ever to be engaged."

One great contribution *The Radiance of Being* provides is to so conscientiously work to map out the psychic lattices of patterns, states, structures, and basins through which consciousness looks out through a glass darkly. For Combs agrees with "recent evolutionary views of consciousness, as well as [with] systems theory in general, as seen in the grand evolutionary synthesis, [which] tend to view earlier evolutionary stages not as lost, but as continuing to express themselves at lower levels of constantly complexifying systems." (p. 77)

Drawing from Sheldrake's research on "morphogenetic fields," Combs also explores how species' wide evolution might be catalyzed as the gains of one individual ripple through such psychic fields to ease the way for all others. Here the findings of Pavlov, William McDougall (Harvard) and Gary Schwartz (Yale) on baffling examples of "inherited learning" are given a subtle energy-mind basis that is further bolstered by the idea of quantum potential as developed by de Broglie and Bohm. Here, powers of non-local causation are thought to operate via forceless, information-bearing "guide-waves." Laszlo's psi fields merely give further definition to these ideas by envisioning highly complex, nested wave functions capable of influencing neurological functions, and thereby, potentially, the species-wide evolution of consciousness.

Although Combs sorts through some pretty hypothetical ideas to complete his map of consciousness, he does so without resorting to the Freudian phantasm of an "unconscious mind." He debunks this confusing psychoanalytic black box concoction with a lucid argument for a unitary consciousness, as did Wittgenstein who said using the term "unconscious mind" is about as helpful as using the term "Mr. Nobody" to name the dark space of any empty room. Is there anything in that dark room? No, Mr. Nobody is in there. Ah, Mr. Nobody, of course!

Combs also states, "Freud made the mistake of treating consciousness as if it were a thing rather than an event, of making it a noun instead of a verb." Such a grammatical shift away from static-noun toward process-verb situates consciousness more explicitly in the Heraclitean flow where a next moment is always about to happen. Subjectively, we face not merely a chaos of possibilities, but the phenomenal essence of mystery itself: that which allures by what remains yet to be revealed in the rest of time.

Thus, the phenomenology of mystery—awe, sheer uncertainty, the allure of the "just-beginning-to-happen"—deserves our further attention in the study of consciousness, chaos, and complexity. Yet, there will be no "demystification"

after this study. Greater awe, not a calming understanding, denotes more learning about this unique matter.

Talk about ultimate mysteries and endless flow!—Combs' work draws upon the profoundly mysterious possibility that consciousness survives bodily death through reincarnation. When the lightbulb burns out, the energy that was in the filament goes somewhere else, comes back, and so on, for a long time, perhaps forever. Alive or in the after-life, Combs describes the capacity of the mind to "approach absolute point attractors in which consciousness settles into luminous [near?] immobility. As the first Western "psychologist of religion," Ludwig Feuerbach proffered regarding such absolute settlings of mind into mind as its own, without a second, object:

Consciousness, in the strict or proper sense, is identical with consciousness of the infinite; a limited consciousness is no consciousness; consciousness is essentially infinite in its nature. The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the in fi nite, the con scious sub ject has for his object the in fin ity of his own na ture. (1957 [1841], pp. 2-3)

In considering Jungian archetypes, Combs speculates most tentatively that they may "be formed by wave-functions of the quantum potential type, built up into complex nested structures of a non-local nature...[which] might evolve semi-autonomous self-organizing dynamics of their own...existing perhaps in a symbiotic relationship to the physical brain." (p. 211) And here is a good example, too, of one of the author's many explicitly guarded, cogently presented musings which emerge at the edge of chaos, and at the horizon of the credible (Comb's himself notes the "strangeness" of his preceding speculation.) This is the kind of book where one cannot help but wonder if what you are reading about now as being highly speculative might become consensual reality in some not-so-distant future.

Thus, almost surreptitiously, page by page, Combs centers his reader in a consciousness that beholds the entire living museum and artifice of mental structures while also describing the most evolved, if distant-sounding stages in the evolution of consciousness. If while reading *The Radiance of Being* you become a bit giddy, perhaps it will be be-cause Combs' words and incisive quotes have guided you into, then out of the laby-rinth of the mind and onto that "farther shore" where only the One Shines, ever-new.

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