VENTURING INTO THE ABYSS:
EXPLORING VICTIM IDENTITY THROUGH NUMINOUS EXPERIENCE

by

ELIZABETH CASSANOS

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

PSYCHOLOGY

MERIDIAN UNIVERSITY

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The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

Mary Oliver
THIRST

Thirty spokes Share one hub.
Make the nothing therein appropriate, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Make the nothing therein appropriate, and you will have the use of the clay vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Make the nothing therein appropriate, and you will have use of the room. Thus we gain by making it Something, but we have the use by making it Nothing.

Lao-Tzu
Tao Te Ching
ABSTRACT

VENTURING INTO THE ABYSS:
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The Numinous breaks through consciousness as direct experience of that which is wholly other to normative reality. Evoking deeply affective experience of the “Other” in relation to trauma, this study explored the intersection of numinous experience and victim identity. The Research Problem asked: How does numinous experience affect one’s sense of personal power in relation to victim identity? The hypothesis anticipated that by engaging the dark numinous in a ritualized container, there might be enough experience of separation from personal victim identity to increase awareness of multiplicity, thereby opening a gateway to previously untapped consciousness capacities. It departed from contemporary research by intentionally evoking the shadow dimension of archetypal experience within an altered-state of consciousness.

The literature review explores understandings of the numinous, parallel concepts, and their psychological application. It investigates the shadow and imagination, as the dimension and means through which this study accessed numinous experience. The final section examines trauma and victim identity, an aspect of trauma underlying individual suffering and social paralysis.
The study employed Imaginal Inquiry, a distinct research approach developed by Aftab Omer, situated in the participatory paradigm. Participants imagined into the archetypal dimension of trauma using guided visualization and shamanic journeying. Expression was written, verbal, artistic and dramatic. Interpretation was heuristic and integrative. Through its focus on the shadow side of the numinous in relation to trauma, this study explored methods to experientially work with victim identity.

The cumulative learning of this study claims that intentionally evoking and expressing numinous experience provides an expanded experience of self, at least temporarily, that can augment personal power and decrease identification with victimization. This study produced six learnings which addressed: preconditions for evoking numinous experience; creating symbolic distance from victim identity; identifying the victim-bind as an expression of the good-evil split; the effectiveness of numinous experience to break through established defenses; the integrative role of courage and compassion; and how, through experience of the numen, core splits that form the basis of projection can be transcended. This study suggests that evoking numinous experience to work with complex issues, such as victim identity, is an area ripe for exploration.
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