We are deeply grateful for Terhune and Jamieson’s interest in our work (1, 2).

We take seriously their concern that the observed relationships between absorption and spiritual presence events could be inflated by two items referring to sensed presences in the absorption scale (“I can often somehow sense the presence of another person before I actually see or hear her/him”; “At times I somehow feel the presence of someone who is not physically there”). We reran our key analyses (study 1: ref. 2, SI Appendix, tables S20 and S21; study 3: ref. 2, SI Appendix, tables S32–S35; study 4: ref. 2, SI Appendix, tables S40–S43), omitting these two items, and found identical patterns of significance and very similar estimates of effect size for the effect of absorption on spiritual presence events in all cases. This lends us confidence that our observations are not an artifact of these two items but instead reflect a deeper relationship between the general construct measured by the absorption scale and the experience of spiritual presence events.

Terhune and Jamieson (1) raise two important questions: What exactly is the absorption scale (3) measuring, and which aspect(s) of “absorption” facilitate experiences of communication with spiritual presences? In terms of the factor structure of the absorption scale, our datasets do provide some converging evidence for the Modified Tellegen Absorption Scale (4) factors highlighted in the letter: Exploratory factor analyses pooling data from all field sites consistently revealed a factor that could be called “synesthesia,” one or two factors similar to “altered states of consciousness” (although the particular items that characterized these factors varied across studies). In study 3, we also observed a factor reminiscent of “aesthetic involvement in nature” and, in study 4, a factor indexing “sensed presence.” We reran the key analyses using absorption “subscales” based on these factor analyses and did not find robust differential relationships between spiritual presence events and any particular absorption subscale. Moreover, factor structure varied substantially across field sites—further reinforcing that no one factor facilitates spiritual presence events across cultural settings.

In other words, our data suggest that, while there may be important distinctions among different aspects of absorption within a cultural setting, such distinctions are culturally variable, and all items are related to the same underlying construct. This is also reflected in the high observed reliability of the absorption scale across studies and sites; all α ≥ 0.78 (2). Instead of a privileged relationship with one particular aspect of absorption, there is a general relationship between spiritual presence events and the broad construct of an “immersive orientation toward experience” that, we argue, underlies all of the items in the absorption scale.

The deeper question here, familiar to Terhune and Jamieson (1), is the relationship between absorption, dissociation, hypnosis, and psychosis (5–8). Our intuition is that these are separate constructs often entangled in individual lives and in spiritual experience—and that the field cries out for more research.