Thresholds

April 2025

Counselling with spirit

‘To discover that you can still cope when life becomes dystopic is certainly an immense piece of learning about the extent of your own adaptability, flexibility and resilience’

– *Page 8*

‘WORKING WITH SOUL’ ISSUE

Confrontation with death
Existentialism and post-traumatic growth

Extraordinary awakenings
Transcendental transformations

Healing generational trauma
The power of connection

Contents

When the normal ego breaks down, this higher self emerges and establishes itself as the person's new identity. As mentioned earlier, many people who undergo extraordinary awakenings describe feeling as if they are different people inhabiting the same body, and in a sense this is literally true

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Thresholds is the quarterly journal for members of BACP Spirituality. It provides insight into and discussion of key issues facing those involved or interested in spirituality, belief and pastoral care in counselling and psychotherapy.

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Meaning-making and the soul

When it comes to human distress, or whatever we might like to call it, I've always welcomed the idea of replacing 'What is wrong with you?' with 'What has happened to you?' – something I first came across in concrete form some years ago in *Therapy Today*, reading about the Power Threat Meaning Framework (an approach to assessment that avoids psychiatric diagnosis).[1] This may be an over-simplification but, as counsellors and psychotherapists, we do spend our days sitting alongside people as they make sense of the things that happened to them. And that is special.

The articles in this issue were written by the speakers at BACP Spirituality division's 'Working with Soul' event that so many of you attended in December. The theme was 'Life through death: exploring the relationship between post-traumatic growth and spirituality'. Each contribution goes right to the heart of how the human soul makes sense of itself. I use the word 'soul' with care but intention.

Entering into relationship with what is, however dark and difficult that may be, has the power to transform and perhaps even transcend. In *Confrontation with death*, Emmy van Deurzen states that there is 'much that can be learned from people's confrontations with limit situations and especially with death'. She explores the 'existential resoluteness, resilience and inner strength' that can be found in so doing.

On p13, Steve Taylor tells us about people who have lived through unspeakable trauma, and then spontaneously experienced a shift, in which they are touched by the sublime and experience an awakening.

In her piece on generational trauma in the Māori context, Nikki Kiyimba explores how external events, meaning-making, and spiritual or faith practices might cross over the course of a lifetime. Nikki also highlights the importance of our connectedness with others on this journey.

In her first column, Stella Duffy shares her own journey with mortality. She, too, emphasises our intersubjectivity as human beings, and the importance of honouring that and addressing inequities.

Entering into relationship with what is, however dark and difficult that may be, has the power to transform and perhaps even transcend

I received a letter following the January issue. It rather pleased me. Firstly, because I never get letters (and, yes, readers, that was a hint!) and secondly, because it also talked about the importance of remembering that we all exist in the context of community and relationship. Read Ruth Layzell's letter on p29. If you feel called to, please write in and keep the conversation going, whether on this topic or another that moves you. Until next time. ●

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Inner me

Maria Kefalogianni, psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer, talks about the things that inspire her

Tell us a little more about what you do

'I must go abroad to meet myself' were the words I wrote, aged 21 in 2007, just before applying for an MSc in counselling psychology. The acceptance letter arrived and I left home three days later. I have been a counsellor since 2009 and a supervisor since 2013, as well as a trainer in the field since 2013. For the past five years, I've also trained supervisors.

I would describe myself as a weaver, above all, intertwining paths of spirituality, creativity, poetry and psychotherapy. I am a presence-centred psychotherapist, which is a new model that I am currently writing about and offering.

I am also a sound healer using the voice, a mystic poet, and aspirant writer in the studies of consciousness, integrating psychotherapy and non-duality. My mission is to support people in the reclamation of their dharmic path and authentic inner divine self.

Left
The dress Maria found

Is there a spiritual aspect to your work?

Absolutely. Life/work separation has largely dissolved. Grace brought me on to a path of self-inquiry in 2008. I never followed a particular school, but rather my heart and gut. Life is my teacher. Since 2019, a profound awakening/shift in consciousness occurred which brought a clean-up process of deepest shadow material, both at a personal and ancestral/collective level. All I offer is underpinned by an embodied lens of unity consciousness with my clients/supervisees. I seek to illuminate the beauty in vulnerability, the grace in surrender, and the deepest golden wisdom found in the scars of our humanness. Above all, I am a student of life, and I am well aware that I can only offer clients what I embody. We are sent what we need.

What moves you in life?

What moves me deeply is the authentic connection found within all creation, nature and humans. I am deeply humbled by my clients' stories and witnessing myself within them. I notice how we both move to weave meaning from life.

Nature stirs my soul. The more I learn to trust, the more her rhythm is one with my body. Creative expression of the divine is my playground. I am hooked on mystic poetry that arises effortlessly from my soul, as the expression of the divine. It is a sacred ritual to me. Ultimately, the deepest joy is trusting this dance of life and loving our innocent human quests for understanding. Watching this inner knowing embed within my body cells is like witnessing this movement, weaving me deeper still into this magical and mysterious world.

Are there any wellbeing practices or rituals that sustain you?

Interestingly, prior to the deep shift in my identity (awakening), there was little discipline in my life. Through the journey of descent of spirit within my body, I am oriented towards developing practices that contain me. This path of awakening is not for the faint of heart. My aspiration for daily ritual and prayer takes place at my altar. I also love ecstatic meditative dance, my self-inquiry practice and being part of *sangha* groups. This is where people gather in circle and community. Such groups support members to anchor in wholesome embodied stillness to safely explore their spiritual journeys. Here, I feel deeply held by people navigating deep spiritual transformations.

More recently, I have enjoyed the freedom that comes through singing with my *shruti* box. Above all, sitting in stillness and silence replenishes me deeply. This can be quite difficult with three children and life generally.

> It is the sacred pulse running through the fabric of existence, an invisible golden thread that connects everything in this intricate tapestry of life

Tell us about a mystical or memorable moment in your life

So many to choose from. The most recent is an experience that is more in the realm of mysticism. It comes in the shape of a most wonderful dress from my ancestors/spirit that I found in the middle of the road while driving.

Moments later, a deep bodily knowing emerged to which I surrendered. The words 'I am ready to meet you' came out of my mouth and I heard 'OK' in reply.

Seconds later, I heard a clear voice in my head say, 'Stop. That's a gift for you.' Collecting the dress has been the start of a new unfolding in my journey. It revealed that my next step would be to undertake ancestral healing training.

Who has inspired you?

So many people have, but my biggest teacher and inspiration has been my own life and nature, and as I am coming to discover more deeply, the voice of the divine feminine within me. My current spiritual teacher inspires me hugely, as does learning about the feminine wisdom of Mary Magdalene, and hearing stories about archetypes of the Dark Goddess that patriarchy has taught us to fear. Other influences at the start of my path included Mooji and Thich Nhat Hanh. Adyashanti and Gangaji are more recent ones. In the psychotherapy world, it would be Irvin Yalom and, more recently, John Prendergast. There are too many poets to choose from, but Fred Lamotte is my current favourite. Our world is fused with inspiration.

Do you have a favourite spiritual book?

This is the toughest question for me as I can devour books. I have read so much since the awakening experience to try and understand it. *Listening from the Heart of Silence* by John Prendergast is a wonderful book that deeply resonates with my way of working with people. I also loved *Belonging* by Toko-pa Turner.

A favourite quote?

'We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time' – T.S. Eliot. I would add 'with our very ancient-new eyes' to the end of this.

A favourite piece of music?

I can't say 'no' to the music that plays me daily, and the soul sounds that emerge from within my body. I feel I am being stroked by a divine presence. I call these moments my 'inner massage' therapy. I love mantra chanting and singing, it's a great portal to presence for me. Otherwise, I can't keep still to the sound of music from the 1980s!

What does the word 'divine' mean to you?

I love this word. It is the sacred pulse running through the fabric of existence, an invisible golden thread that connects everything in this intricate tapestry of life. It is my reminder of the beauty in joy AND sorrow (especially then), in dark and light. It is a land filled with paradox where the mystical dance reveals the authentic version of ourselves – beyond limited identity. It is like making love to life, daily, moment to moment. It is the eternal limitless grace found in my deepest vulnerability, in the wisdom whispered into my ancient ears and the garden of my heart, harvested with my hands. It is the very fuel that weaves these words together. ●

Biography

Maria Kefalogianni is a presence-centred psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer in the field. She is also a writer in studies of consciousness and a mystic poet. She holds *sangha* circles abiding in deep presence, and a free community for psychotherapists who weave this deep orientation in their work, found through her website: **https://tinyurl.com/2safmtrc**

Above:
Maria's altar
Maria's *shruti* box

Be featured here

If you would like to be included in a future *Inner me*, please contact **thresholds@bacp.co.uk**

Confrontation with death

Emmy van Deurzen offers an existential perspective on trauma and post-traumatic growth

One of the few certain things about human existence is that we are all born into this world, and will inexorably each leave this life behind by dying at some point. In his magnum opus *Being and Time*, 20th century existential philosopher Martin Heidegger said: 'as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die'.[1] This focuses the attention on the reality of death, rather than putting the idea of death somewhere at the back of our minds or exiling it into a distant future. Heidegger spoke of death as the possibility of the absolute impossibility of being.[1,2] This brings out an aspect of death that human beings don't like to think about very much – that death will be the end of their known existence. Whatever your religious or spiritual worldview, the fact of death is undeniably the end of your earthly trajectory. Whether there is something beyond death remains debatable, but we know that we cannot take anything from our brief visit on planet Earth with us into death. We will have to leave behind our physical body, our identity, our connections and loved ones, our possessions and everything we have created while we were in the world.

This is a challenging thing to think about and when Ernest Becker published his book *The Denial of Death,*[3] it was a shocking revelation to many people to hear him broach this taboo subject in such a direct manner. Becker showed how death was dealt with in various cultures, and gave evidence that most cultures shared a terror of death and a desire to avoid this fear. Terror management theory was largely derived from his work.[4,5,6]

In *Denial of Death*, Becker said: 'The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.'[3] This means that we always pay a huge price for denying death. Becker agreed with Heidegger that it is only in facing death early on that we can learn to live to the full. Becker wrote about the ways in which human beings seek to escape from the idea of death by creating heroes, and by defiantly creating various kinds of meaning in the face of death. He also spoke about the management of death anxiety through immortality projects, or by focusing on trivial matters and distracting yourself.

The management of death anxiety

This was a theme directly taken from Heidegger's work. He wrote in detail in his book *Being and Time* about the many ways in which human beings seek to cheat ideas of death and the anxiety it triggers.[1] We have ingenious ways of distracting ourselves. Heidegger showed that human beings are always homeless (*unheimlich*) and insecure at the core, as we are inevitably part of a process of change and transformation. We live in time, between birth and death, and are always no longer who we were, and not yet who we are becoming. We can ward off the anxiety that this generates in many ways, for instance, by letting ourselves get absorbed in the world of things, or by falling in with other people. We can also do it by protective sheltering and tranquillising, in many different forms or shapes. Most of us have observed ourselves and our clients doing this by living in a small bubble, using various substances, foods, games and movies to obliviate fears. We learn to forget about the things that raise our anxiety and become opaque to ourselves, and to the reality of our finitude. We distract ourselves and become alienated from the truth of existence, and live inauthentic lives.

Limit situations

Karl Jaspers, a contemporary of Heidegger, and a German philosopher who was also a psychiatrist and psychologist, contributed enormously to existential thought. Jaspers spoke of the limit situations that human beings try to deny. He said: 'I must die, I must suffer, I must struggle, I am subject to chance, I involve myself inexorably in guilt. We call these fundamental situations of our existence, "ultimate situations"'.[7]

Jaspers especially focused on the four limit situations of:

Struggle (*Kampf*): we have to fight for survival each day and suffer in that process

Death (*Tod*): we all die eventually, though we deny it and it terrifies us

Chance (*Zufall*): we are all subject to uncertainty and coincidence

Guilt (*Schuld):* we all make mistakes, and owe a debt to others and to life.[7]

> When you have been close to death, you tend to see everything from a perspective of the possibility of catastrophe, and this makes you feel the relativity and unreliable nature of life much more acutely

According to Jaspers, it is possible to face these limits and go beyond them, especially by turning towards what he called 'a comprehensive view of all that exists'.[7,8] He saw limits as really being boundaries that take us to the frontiers of human existence. This gives rise to the idea that when we dare to go to these borders, we may see across them to change our narrow perspective. Thus, we discover the possibility of being transformed. For we find that these are not end points, but liminal spaces, in which we have a view across the border. It is a theme taken up more recently by French contemporary philosopher Jean Luc Nancy, in his book *The Fragile Skin of the World,* where he illustrates the work to be done in those liminal spaces.[9] It also connects with the recent interest in panpsychism and the work of people such as Godehard Brüntrup, who has done interesting research on near-death experiences,[10,11] also reverberated by Goff's book *Why?*.[12]

A clearer sense of identity

Irvin Yalom's work, which is generally well known among psychotherapists, was in many ways an extension of Becker's work, summarising what can be learnt from existential philosophers, and applying it to psychotherapeutic work. In his book *Existential Psychotherapy*,[13] he showed the importance of tackling death anxiety, which he also argued was the most fundamental source of human fear. His book about his own confrontation with death anxiety *Staring at the Sun*[14] made it into a more deeply felt personal argument, and the book he co-authored with his late wife Marilyn Yalom, as she was dying, brought it even closer to home, showing the impact on both the person saying goodbye and the one remaining alive.[15]

Yalom provided illustrations of the way in which confrontations with death can lead to a clearer sense of identity and a renewed appetite for life. I have myself written many times about my work with those who had confronted death,[16] and latterly about my work with an Iranian refugee who had to confront death in a very direct manner, and who struggled enormously with the impact of this on his life.[17,18,19] In my book *Rising from Existential Crisis,*[20] I have also described some of my experiences in relation to a serious traffic accident at the age of 10, which resulted in a life-threatening head injury, leaving me in a coma for three hours and in hospital for many weeks. I had to lie flat on my back in the dark and stay immobile to allow the multiple hairline fractures in my skull to mend, and for my subdural hematoma to be absorbed, hearing medical staff whisper about the gravity of my situation. It had a huge impact on my life and especially on my sense of self, which became very different during those weeks of isolation in intensive care. It really was like venturing into a different universe, going across the frontier of life. It led to me thinking differently about my family, friends and my future life as well.

In *Rising from Existential Crisis*, I also included some of the results of my doctoral students' work around confrontations with limit situations.[20] This demonstrated how those who become political refugees after confrontations with death, suffer many wide ranging and inexorable losses, though they are not necessarily traumatised by this if they have a clear project to believe in and work towards.[21] Even so, we know that refugees, in general, are at far greater risk of emotional problems than the general population.[20] This is also true for those who see active combat. Another doctoral piece of research showed that those who have been confronted with death during active service suffer greatly in their intimate relationships as a result. They no longer feel that other people can understand what they have seen, or that they can resonate with what they now know to be the case about the world.[22] People are profoundly altered by such experiences of first-hand exposure to violent deaths and danger, and this can lead to isolation, as they sense they are different to others and are out of sync with the normal social world around them. This often leads to fractured relationships, addictions and depression. When you have been close to death, you tend to see everything from a perspective of the possibility of catastrophe, and this makes you feel the relativity and unreliable nature of life much more acutely.

> We live in time, between birth and death, and are always no longer who we were, and not yet who we are becoming

An aftermath of healing

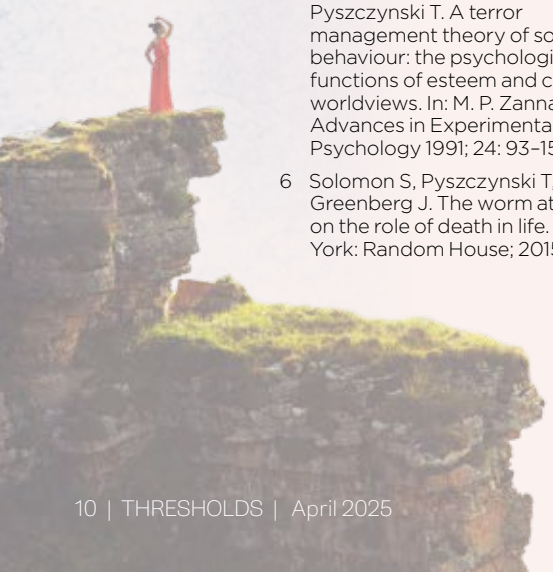
Understanding these things better leads to a different approach to traumatic experiences and post-traumatic growth,[23,24,25] because it becomes obvious that going through adversity and tragedy can give rise to an aftermath of healing and making sense, if new purpose can be found or created. This requires building existential resoluteness, resilience and inner strength. When this succeeds, it can feel to people as if they have met the challenge of their mortality, and are hence forward able to be more confident about being a match for any future difficulties.

Viktor Frankl's work is a well-known illustration of this point.[26,27] He overcame his Holocaust experiences in Auschwitz, which had also confronted him with the death of his parents and wife, who were exterminated in the camps.[28] As a psychotherapist who created his own school of meaning therapy, known as 'logotherapy', he demonstrated that his understanding of other people's misery was greatly enhanced by having found a way to survive these excruciating horrors. By carefully observing how he and others dealt with these extreme and inhumane conditions, he had concluded that human beings

need to find meaning by taking value from the things around them wherever possible. They also need to create new meaning whenever possible by adding something of value to the world. Finally, he learnt that when there is no hope left, you can still determine your own attitude towards your suffering.[28] He discovered that those who gave up hope and purpose would die very soon. His confrontations with death taught him to find meaning, even in loss and grief. He said that 'having been is also a kind of being and maybe the surest kind.'[27]

To discover that you can still cope when life becomes dystopic is certainly an immense piece of learning about the extent of your own adaptability, flexibility and resilience. Frankl's findings have been echoed by other accounts of the Holocaust, such as those of Edith Eger[29] and Hannah Pick-Goslar,[30] and also in the touching account of Etty Hillesum's life by Patrick Woodhouse.[31]

There is much to learn from people's confrontations with limit situations and especially with death. For the qualities that enable them to survive and the insights that allow them to thrive afterwards are of importance to all of us who are facing dark times. ●



Biography

Emmy van Deurzen is a philosopher, psychologist and existential therapist who is the author of 20 books, translated into 25 languages. She is an international speaker, and has founded and co-founded numerous training and professional organisations. She is president of the worldwide Existential Movement, and a visiting professor at Middlesex University.

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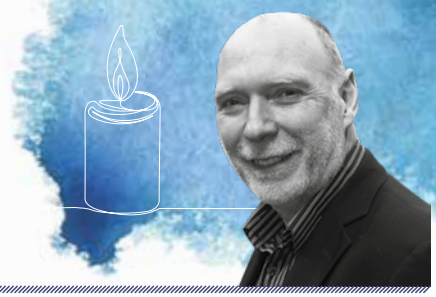
Wildfires



Alistair Ross draws upon a biblical verse to explore the power of words

The impulse to write this came from the worrying news of uncontrollable fires that devasted many parts of Los Angeles in January 2025. It all seemed so far away, an image on a screen, as if on another planet. That was until I received an e-mail from an American psychoanalytic colleague asking for prayer. He and his family were in a part of Los Angeles that I thought was safe and hadn't seen on the news. He said that they had been relocated from their family home, and they were now being relocated again away from this second temporary home, as this also was no longer safe. He did not have any news about his original home. Can you imagine what that must be like? In one word, 'devastating'.

As I write this, I am sitting comfortably in my small study in which I have over 1,000 books crammed floor to ceiling. In fact, to get to the top shelf, I have to stand on my desk, so don't tell health and safety. I have read them all, and each has a story to tell, a memory to recall. They exist as a way of stimulating my mind, offering ideas that challenged me and shape me. I have built this collection up over decades and have an equal number of books in my study in Oxford. They are made of paper so, being nicely flammable, would add further fuel to any conflagration. Such a fire is unlikely, but so thought my colleague in Los Angeles. The potential loss stirs deep and uncomfortable feelings, so I don't really want to dwell on this any further.

This took my thinking to a verse from the Book of James in the New Testament. In a modern translation, chapter three, verse six reads: 'The human tongue is physically small, but what tremendous effects it can boast of! A whole forest can be set ablaze by a tiny spark of fire, and the tongue is as dangerous as any fire, with vast potentialities for evil. It can poison the whole body, it can make the whole of life a blazing hell.'[1] As therapists, we hope our words offer balm, emotional healing, and an acknowledgment of another's trauma and pain. Oftentimes, it is the very words spoken by another that caused deep wounds in the first place. They fester and, like a wildfire, never seem to end until everything has been destroyed. Literally an emotional hell. Clients tell of hateful words repeatedly spoken by parents, seemingly intent on destroying the life of another. Such clients still hold on to a child-like longing to hear the words 'I love you', but they never come. Therapy is one place they process this loss, while there are other much more destructive patterns of coping with the pain such as drugs or alcohol. Through our words, clients feel believed and no longer alone. And also through our willingness not to use words and to sit, waiting in silence, until the right moment.

> The temptation to gossip is powerful and has an intense appeal

Yet, when we are not in our counselling or consulting room, how easy is it to start fires by unkind, unwise, or just plain hurtful words. The temptation to gossip is powerful and has an intense appeal. Knowing information that we are tempted to pass on is almost an antidote, especially when, in our professional context, we adhere strictly to confidentiality. For all of Freud's brilliant achievements and original ideas, his letters reveal him to be a little indiscreet at times, if not gossipy.[2] So no-one is perfect, not even our heroes. The wisdom from the Book of James really made me think and re-examine myself. I would be hypocritical to say I have never gossiped, so it is helpful to have a reminder of the harm that can be done, even unwittingly. Wildfires will come and wildfires will go, but we live on through finding hope and healing for others.

P.S. I have since heard from my friend that he and his family are safe! ●

Biography

Alistair Ross is Associate Professor of Psychotherapy at Oxford University and Director of Psychodynamic Studies. His recent books include *Introducing Psychodynamic Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Open University, 2019) and *Sigmund Freud: a reference guide to his life and work* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). Alistair's research focus is on spirituality and psychoanalysis.

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Fearless speech

Rob Hill writes about telling the truth as a therapist

The journey that I have in mind is one that started with clients – or rather an experience of myself as I sat with clients. I had become increasingly aware of the accumulation of secrets that I was keeping from some of my clients. These 'unshared truths' were my personal reactions to the client, which I was keeping hidden because they felt too difficult to share. They might be my irritation, fear, boredom, or sense of failure in the work. Although they felt too difficult to share, they also felt too important to just ignore. They were part and parcel of what it was like to be with that person, and often I could hear from the sessions that other people in the client's life were probably feeling similar things.

These were examples of, in therapy speak, 'inauthenticity' and 'incongruence' on my part, but in everyday language, we could simply call them examples of 'not telling the truth'. Why wasn't I telling the truth? Particularly, when I was suggesting to my clients that it would help in the work if *they* were authentic and congruent, if *they* 'told the truth'!

These questions led to many conversations with other therapists over several years, a lot of reading and, eventually, to writing a book of my own about the therapeutic dilemmas of telling the truth.

One of the early stops on my journey of research was the Ancient Greek idea of *parrhesia*, a word typically translated as 'fearless speech'. I learnt about *parrhesia* through a long series of lectures that Michel Foucault gave in the last few years of his life on the theme of truth telling, and its importance to what the Greeks would have thought of as the healthy development of the soul (which in modern therapy language, we tend to call the 'Self').[1] But in writing the book, in addition to immersing myself in *parrhesia*, I ended up newly engaging with topics which sit adjacent to the topic of truth telling (such as power, shame and narcissism); topics for which truth telling gave me a new and interesting angle of entry.

The journey of researching and writing the book has been fascinating, but also exposing. To be truthful with clients is an exposing, risky-feeling thing to do – which mirrors, of course, the process of self-exposure that the client experiences in psychotherapy. With self-exposure comes the potential for shame, and it is always tempting to avoid shame.

I am not someone who identifies especially as a spiritually-oriented therapist. So, the 'mini-journey' of writing this piece for *Thresholds* has led me to think, in a way that I hadn't

> I think of this as a move towards being a craftsperson rather than a production line worker, which is itself a move towards the spiritual

in writing the book, about the links between truth telling and spirituality. At least three come to mind.

First, although the spiritual is sometimes framed as something *within us*, for me, the spiritual is more about connecting with something *outside us*, something beyond us. As John McKenzie, the psychologist and congregational minister, wrote many years ago: 'We grow within but not *from* within; we grow from *without*.'[2] Being offered a truth from outside ourselves is a crucial part of growing 'from without'. It allows us to newly engage with the truths that we brought to therapy – truths that we often felt were self-evident – the only truths possible.

Secondly, and connectedly, spirituality for me is very much an experience of interpersonal connection. As Martin Buber wrote: 'When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.'[3] The word 'God', here, may put some people off, to some extent myself included, but if we substituted the word with 'spirituality' or even 'truth', I think that Buber's sentiment, and the awe in his sentiment, still stands.

Thirdly, developing a more truthful, authentic way of practising has, for me, involved challenging some of the received wisdom which I absorbed in my training and acculturation as a therapist. In exploring the limits of the truths that can be therapeutically shared with clients, my way of working has had to shift away from some of the mechanical, rationalised 'rules' around what 'should' be said in therapy, and towards attuning and resonating with what 'can' be said. I think of this as a move towards being a craftsperson rather than a production line worker, which is itself a move towards the spiritual.

These are three links that come to my mind, but I'm wondering about the others which I haven't thought of. ●

Biography

Rob Hill is a relational psychotherapist with a private practice in London, in which he works with individuals, couples and families, as well as offering supervision. His psychotherapy and supervision training was at Metanoia Institute, London. His book *Telling the Truth: the therapist's dilemma* is out now.

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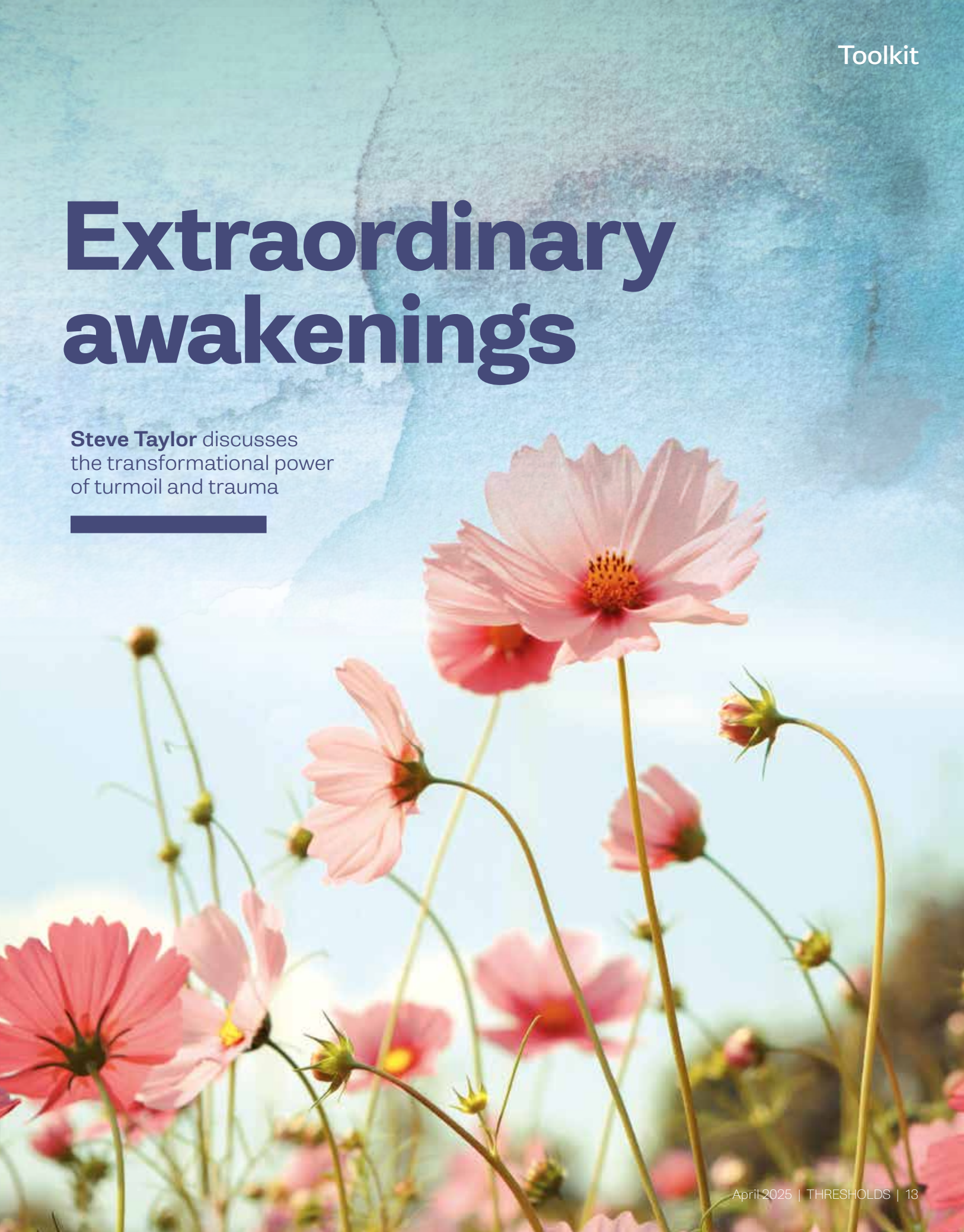
Extraordinary awakenings

Steve Taylor discusses the transformational power of turmoil and trauma



As a young man, I suffered from depression. I felt like I didn't know who I was or who I was meant to be. All I knew was that I didn't like the person I seemed to be. I felt uneasy in other people's company, found it difficult to speak to anyone, and felt that I couldn't function in the world. At university, I rarely went to lectures and sometimes went days without seeing anyone. I would stay up until four or five o'clock in the morning, reading or writing or listening to music, and get up in the early afternoon. I saw no hope of finding a place in the world, or of being happy. I often thought about taking my own life and believed it was inevitable that I would do so at some point, if not now.

However, every so often, my depression dissolved for no apparent reason, and I was filled with euphoric harmony. These experiences usually occurred in natural surroundings, when I was walking through the park or in the countryside around my university. Everything around me came to life. The trees, fields and clouds above me took on an extra dimension, to the point where they seemed sentient. At night, I would look up at the sky, moon and stars, and feel that the whole of space was filled with radiance and harmony. Everything seemed connected, as if all things were manifestations of something deeper than themselves. I felt lifted out of myself, into oneness, above all my problems.

Self-understanding

For a long time, I didn't understand these experiences. In fact, I thought they provided further evidence that there was something wrong with me. However, at about the age of 21, I read a book called *New Pathways in Psychology* by Colin Wilson.[1] Published in the early-1970s, it was mainly about Abraham Maslow and discussed his concept of 'peak experiences'. I felt the relief of recognition, realising that this described the type of ecstatic experiences I was familiar with.

I felt I was picking up clues, edging closer to solving a mystery. A year or two later, I found a book called *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* by the English scholar of mysticism, F.C. Happold.[2] It is mainly a selection of passages from mystical texts, such as the *Upanishads*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, along with non-religious nature mystics such as Richard Jeffries. Again, I recognised my own experiences.

> Another intriguing aspect of my research was that some of the people who reported awakening experiences caused by turmoil didn't return to a normal state of awareness

Even more importantly, the book opened me to the world of spirituality. I read many of the books that Happold discussed, attended talks on spiritual topics, and visited a local Buddhist centre where I learned to meditate. I finally had a framework to understand and accept myself. 'I'm not crazy after all!' I thought. 'Or, at least all of these other people are crazy too, so I'm not alone in my craziness.'

Awakening through turmoil

One of the reasons I became a transpersonal psychologist was to study spiritual and mystical experiences (or awakening experiences, as I prefer to call them). I wanted to understand why they occur, and whether they are connected to certain activities and situations or certain psychological states. As a non-religious person, I also wanted to study the experiences outside the context of religion. I sensed that they are natural human occurrences for the religious and non-religious alike.

I define an awakening experience as an expansion and intensification of awareness across four different areas. Awareness intensifies:

- *perceptually,* as the phenomenal world becomes more vivid and alive
- *subjectively*, as we become aware of an increased depth and richness to our own subjective experience
- *intersubjectively*, as we become increasingly empathic and compassionate towards other people, other living beings, and the whole natural world
- *conceptually*, as we develop a more global or universal perspective, moving beyond egocentric to world-centric concerns.

In 2017, I conducted a study of 91 reports of awakening experiences with my co-researcher Kristina Egeto-Szabo. We found that the experiences had four main triggers: 37 were linked to psychological turmoil (such as stress, depression, loss, bereavement, combat), 26 were linked to nature, 21 to spiritual practice (such as meditation or prayer), and 15 were linked to reading spiritual literature or listening to spiritual talks. Some experiences had more than one trigger.[3]

These findings made me reflect on my own awakening experiences as a young man. Perhaps they were brought on by my depression and frustration. Perhaps, every so often, the inner pressure and turmoil became so intense that my normal ego-self disappeared, and I experienced a state of liberation.

Another intriguing aspect of my research was that some of the people who reported awakening experiences caused by turmoil didn't return to a normal state of awareness. They were permanently transformed. Some people reported feeling that they had taken on a completely new identity, as if they were different people living in the same body, with a new perspective on life, and new values and attitudes. The world seemed more real and beautiful, and they felt more connected to other people, and to nature.

Transformation through turmoil

I coined the term 'transformation through turmoil' (TTT) to describe this permanent shift. TTT can be seen as an intense form of post-traumatic growth. It features essentially the same characteristics as post-traumatic growth (such as enhanced appreciation, a new sense of purpose and meaning, and more authentic relationships) but at a heightened intensity. Whereas post-traumatic growth normally occurs gradually over a number of years, TTT is often dramatic and involves a sudden moment of transformation.

At the same time, TTT can be viewed as a state of permanent spiritual wakefulness. It features the same expansive and intensified awareness as an awakening experience but is established as an ongoing state.

I summarise many dramatic cases of TTT in my book *Extraordinary Awakenings*.[4] For example, at the age of 42, Irene Murray was diagnosed with breast cancer and told that she might only have a few months left to live. Irene's transformation began as soon as she left the doctor's consulting room. As she described it, 'It was the first time I'd seen death as a reality and realised that life is just temporary. I thought,

> In some people, there seems to be a latent higher self, fully established as a structure, waiting to be born

"I'm just so lucky to be alive, the fact that I'm still here." The air was so clean and fresh, and everything I looked at seemed so vibrant and vivid. The trees were so green and everything was so alive. I became aware of this energy radiating from the trees. I had a tremendous feeling of connectedness.'

Irene expected the feeling to fade away, but it didn't: 'It was really intense for the first few weeks, and its remained ever since. It just blew me away, it really did. I used to just sit and think, "This is amazing, that things could just fall into place so quickly."'[5]

Fortunately, Irene's cancer went into remission, but her sense of appreciation and wellbeing remained. She felt like a different person and gave up her IT career to retrain as a counsellor and therapist. More than anything, she felt a new sense of connection to other people and nature, and a new enjoyment of solitude and doing nothing in particular.

In another case, a man called Adrian underwent spiritual awakening while in prison in Africa. He was locked up in a tiny cell 23 hours a day, with no idea when he might be released. During the endless hours of incarceration, he began to reflect on his life, and to let go of the past and any sense of failure or disappointment. In the cell, he had a small statuette of the Buddha, which he had picked up on his travels around Asia. He developed a spontaneous meditation practice, focusing his attention on the statuette for long periods. Over the next few weeks, Adrian began to feel more at peace, until he experienced a sudden shift: 'It was like the flick of a switch… a complete feeling of release and acceptance, of everything and anything that was going to happen. It was a release of blame, anxiety, anger and ego…For three days, I was in a state of what can best be described as grace. After that, the feeling eased, but it remained inside me.'

When Adrian was released and returned to the UK, he felt that he was looking at the world with new eyes. As he told me, 'There was a huge sense of wellbeing…I was in a hotel in London, and the city seemed magical…Walking in nature was amazing. I was hypnotised by flowers, trees, leaves. They looked beautiful and surreal, and filled me with warm love.'[4]

Without a background in spirituality, Adrian wasn't sure what had happened to him. His new sense of wellbeing was overlaid with confusion. He even wondered if he had gone mad and read through psychiatry books trying to diagnose his condition. But several months after his transformation, he read a book about spirituality and recognised that he had undergone a spiritual awakening.

Why does TTT occur?

TTT may seem mysterious, even miraculous. Nevertheless, I believe that it can be explained, at least to a degree. It arises from ego dissolution. This can occur suddenly, during a period of intense stress or suffering. In other

cases, there may be a long process of dissolution, over many years, during which the psychological attachments that support our normal sense of identity break down. By psychological attachments, I mean roles, ambitions, hopes, beliefs, achievements, status, possessions, and even other people. These attachments are the building blocks of the ego. When enough of them are stripped, our identity collapses, like a house would if bricks were removed.

This is usually a devastating experience, but it can also be liberating. In some people, there seems to be a latent higher self, fully established as a structure, waiting to be born. When the normal ego breaks down, this higher self emerges and establishes itself as the person's new identity. As mentioned earlier, many people who undergo extraordinary awakenings describe feeling as if they are different people inhabiting the same body, and in a sense this is literally true. This is why some addicts become free of their addictions, and also why 'shifters' (as I call people who experience TTT) sometimes become free of trauma and psychosomatic conditions. The identity which carried the addiction, the trauma or the illnesses simply no longer exists.

I found that acceptance was an extremely important aspect of TTT. Many people undergo transformation at the precise moment that they shift into a mode of acceptance. Rather than struggling against their predicament (or refusing to acknowledge it), they let go, or surrender. This attitude of acceptance is the trigger that allows a latent higher self to emerge and take over their identity.

Perhaps this partly explains why TTT is uncommon. Understandably, many people may not be prepared to acknowledge and accept their predicament. Personality types may be another factor. People with soft ego boundaries, who are more open to anomalous experiences, are more likely to experience TTT. Finally, in many people, a latent higher self may simply not be ready to emerge, in the same way that a chick may not be ready to be born. It has yet to establish itself as a fully formed, integrated structure.

Challenging aspects of TTT

As Adrian's story illustrates, TTT can sometimes be challenging, particularly when the person doesn't have a background in spirituality. Shifters may struggle to make sense of their transformation without a conceptual framework. In a society that tends to pathologise any non-ordinary states of consciousness, they may suspect (like Adrian) that they are suffering from a psychological disorder.

In addition, sudden transformation can have an explosive effect, disrupting a person's normal psychological processes. Shifters may experience difficulties with concentration, memory and social interaction. There may even be some physical issues, such as sleeping problems, unexplained pain and uncontrollable energies. These issues may continue for a long time (sometimes several years) but almost always settle down eventually, leading to integration. They can also be managed to a large degree, through the support of others, and through lifestyle guidelines such as a simple diet, stress avoidance, contact with nature and meditative exercises.

However, there is a real risk that, without proper awareness, these issues may be confused with psychosis. The potential confusion between psychosis and disruptive spiritual awakening is an important issue for therapists, but unfortunately too complex to go into here. I discuss the topic in detail in my book *The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening.*[6]

I would suggest three areas where counsellors and therapists can support TTT. First, they can help by facilitating the process of acknowledgement and acceptance that allows TTT to unfold. Second, when a person is undergoing TTT, counsellors and therapists can help to establish a conceptual framework that allows shifters to understand their transformation, making them (and their peers) aware that they are not suffering from psychosis, but undergoing a powerful positive shift. Finally, they can help shifters to deal with the confusion and imbalance that TTT can bring.

I hope that, eventually, TTT will become normalised rather than pathologised. Then, rather than undergoing a difficult transition, shifters will quickly adjust to their new identity, and to their new expansive awareness of reality. ●

Biography

Dr. Steve Taylor is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, and past chair of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. His books include *Extraordinary Awakenings; Time Expansion Experiences; The Adventure: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Awakening;* and, *Spiritual Science.* He regularly presents *BBC Radio 4*'s Prayer for the Day. www.stevenmtaylor.com

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An experiment in uncertainty

Our new columnist, **Stella Duffy** introduces herself and her outlook on life, therapy and equality

Next week will be 25 years since my first cancer diagnosis and 11 years since the second. It is also 18 months since a ruptured brain aneurysm assured me that while I am my life, I am also my death. I am grateful for my survival and I live with the costs of survival – chronic pain, not least, among them. One gain of survival is truly knowing my mortality. At 61, and coming from a family who don't live long, even if I never have cancer again and the metal fixing in my brain continues to hold, I have maybe 20 years left, gifting me a passion to live more, be more, do more. Sometimes, more means more rest, more quiet. Often, more is about unlearning, re-acknowledging that I cannot know anything for sure, that it (life, work, words on a page) is all an experiment. This column is an experiment – for me and hopefully for any of you who come along for the read.

As I write, I am beginning the fourth year of my private practice, still new in the work, and preparing to teach two courses that were part of my doctorate in existential psychotherapy. I taught in my previous career as a writer and theatremaker, and when working for community and culture equalities. I'm aware that our teaching can make a massive difference to trainees' work with their clients, and feel a strong sense of wanting to bring possibility. The possibility that there may be no perfect answers, that we are not meant to know everything – our work is to be alongside, to discover with, not for. 'Therapist-ing' feels easily as creative to me as writing or directing, supporting clients to tell their stories and make their choices.

I am also keen to keep learning. My supervision training last year took a deep dive into cultural competency – not just as part of the training, but as central to the course – and this has given me more fluidity in addressing my whiteness in the therapy room. This is work that was long part of my creative practice, but featured less strongly in my own therapy training. Like many of us, my training included 'diversity' in siloed-off modules, rather than threaded throughout the work. While this is a standard way of teaching privilege and othering in therapy trainings, I feel we need to do better as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century.

Existentially, it is impossible to perceive any of us as purely individual, experiencing only intrapersonally – we are always already intersubjective, interconnected. Even the ascetic monk's choice to be alone is made in relation to others. Philosopher Mariana Ortega updates Heidegger's 20th century *being-in-the-world*[1] to *beings-in-worlds*, including those of us with multiplicitous, intersecting identities; noting that while we all feel unease sometimes, the already-marginalised experience an ongoing continuously felt sense of unease.[2] It seems to me that a psychotherapy fit for the 21st century must attend to how we live in the world and the inequalities inherent in our society. To do this, I'll need to name my whiteness in the training room, just as I name it with all of my clients, not only those who are racialised or minoritised.

> It seems to me that a psychotherapy fit for the 21st century must attend to how we live in the world and the inequalities inherent in our society

In therapy training, we consider the power imbalance in the room, the client's generosity in opening themselves to us. I believe that other imbalances need addressing too.

It was useful for me as a queer woman, childless not by choice, affected by serious illness and living with chronic pain, when my therapists named their heteronormative or pronatal or able-bodied privilege. It meant I didn't feel they were asking me to educate them about the inequalities I live. I turn up to work white, cisgender, wearing a wedding ring. These all silently declare my privilege, but when I actually say the words, naming my whiteness, I also name what whiteness might bring into the room, and that it might be relevant to any of us raised in our institutionally racist culture. I won't always get it right, but I'm committed to trying to notice the imbalances. Both my Buddhist and existential practices call us to address social inequity. Given the current geopolitical situation, this is needed on an hourly, daily basis.

I don't know how best to do any of this, but I do know I want to try, and a way of doing so is to encourage enquiry in myself, my clients and my students, greeting the unknown and moving into it anyway. Welcome to the unknown. ●

Biography

Stella Duffy is an existential psychotherapist in private practice. Her doctoral research was in the embodied experience of postmenopause. An award-winning writer of 17 novels, over 70 short stories and 15 plays, she is also a theatre maker and facilitator, with a particular interest in the creative possibilities of existential psychotherapy.

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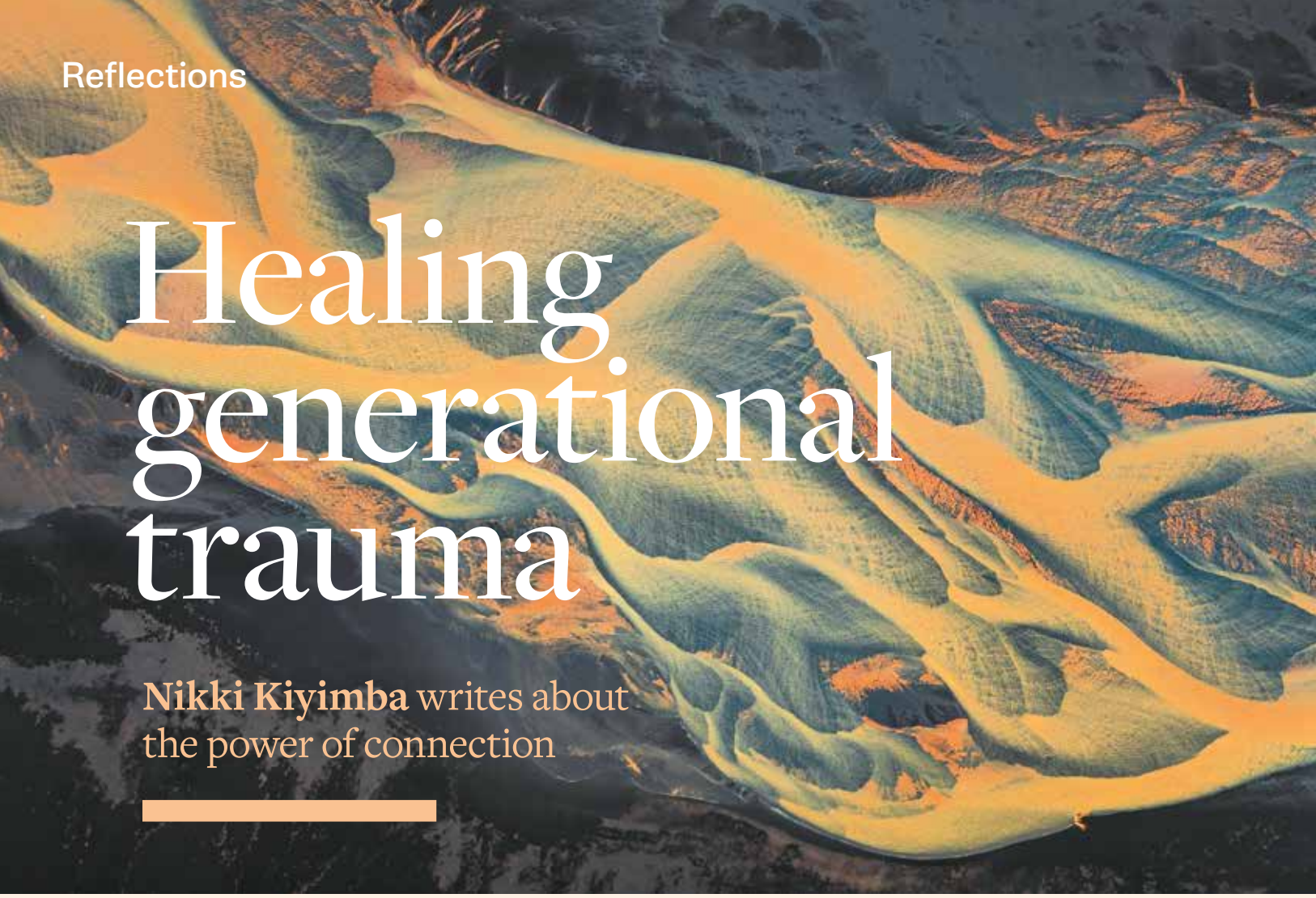

Healing generational trauma

Nikki Kiyimba writes about the power of connection

This article celebrates spirituality and science as complementary ways of explaining human experience.[1] Quantum science has thrown open the doors of classical physics to shine a light on the relationship between consciousness and existence.[2] Concepts once firmly in the scope of spirituality have now been embraced by mainstream science.[3] Apart from the challenging finding that human consciousness is integral to the collapsing of wave frequencies into particles of matter, quantum science demonstrates how matter can be 'entangled' across significant distances.[1] The reason I start with this statement is that it challenges Western notions of individuality, and provides space for us to consider whether the knowledge of the interconnectedness of human and natural life, long held by indigenous and collectivist cultures, is a more accurate understanding. Thus, in our work with clients, I propose the division between 'us' and 'them' is a social construct that will no longer be useful for us in moving forward. Instead, I suggest we embrace an understanding of this interconnectedness, or oneness, of all things.[4]

Practically, this article offers three threads that can be applied to our work. The first is to allow clients to talk about the spiritual aspects of their trauma as they navigate grief and hope. Then, I offer the metaphor of the spiritual journey as a river to support conversations about spirituality. Finally, I propose that as we embrace connection and oneness as a universal reality, we do so by taking responsibility for personal embodiment.

When considering post-traumatic growth from generational trauma, we need to consider first whether it is culturally universal.[5] Post-traumatic growth refers to 'positive' changes in awareness of personal strength, new possibilities and relationships, appreciation of life and spiritual change.[6] It is the process of using experiences as opportunities for individual development.[7] The universality of post-traumatic growth has been criticised as uniquely Western,[8] with culturally specific assumptions about 'the individual'.[9] Collectivist cultures are more likely to conceptualise growth in terms of greater connection and social integration.[10] Thus, in our multicultural contexts, we need to be careful not to perpetuate hegemonic presuppositions that 'growth' is an individual, internal, psychological experience. For example, when indigenous Māori

people are approached from an individualistic worldview, it not only invalidates what is culturally important, but these interventions make 'no sense'.[11]

> … in our multicultural contexts, we need to be careful not to perpetuate hegemonic presuppositions that 'growth' is an individual, internal, psychological experience

I am a British citizen living in Aotearoa New Zealand. So, although this article considers generational trauma from the perspective of colonised indigenous peoples, in the multicultural context of the UK, these principles are just as applicable. In traditional Māori culture, the Tohunga was a person with natural spiritual abilities who worked holistically with the body, plant medicine, land and spirit to support a return to wholeness. However, during the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Tohunga Suppression Act, a law passed in 1907, made it illegal for indigenous Māori healers to practise their *rongoā* (medicine) skills. This suppression of freedom to engage in cultural spiritual practices is arguably a form of religious trauma, defined as 'pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs and experiences'.[12] Although the Tohunga Suppression Act was repealed in 1962, there remain significant health disparities between Māori and Pakeha (non-Māori). Thus, most Māori have experienced generational trauma, the passing down of trauma narratives, epigenetic imprints, and spiritual damage from one generation to the next.

To understand the impact of generational trauma on post-traumatic growth, I refer to the indigenous health model *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (four sides of the house),[13] where all four sides need to be intact to maintain *hauora* (health and wellbeing). They are *hinengaro* (mind and emotions), *wairua* (spirit), *whānau* (family and community), and *tinana* (body). In addition, the fifth element of *whenua* (land) acknowledges the importance of connection to a place of belonging, and the consciousness of *Papatūānuku* (Mother Earth).

Mind and emotions: Narratives of grief and loss are passed down from one generation to the next. Counselling may support examination of cognitions, focusing on evidence which confirms core beliefs, and how these narratives are perpetuated by repetition. Emotionally, along with the anger and fear within generational trauma, shame and blame are often prevalent. Without invalidating the trauma, harmful emotions can be examined to assist clients to find pathways to resolution and peace.

Spirituality: Our challenge is to support clients to find reconnection with their own ways of understanding spirituality. This may be from an indigenous point of view, or another culturally congruent perspective. Our own comfort with allowing conversations about spirituality into the counselling space enables clients to feel safe to do so. Spiritual beliefs and practices can often be a large part of a client's sense-making system, which in turn will play a significant role in recovery from trauma.

When life is mapped onto the course of a river, we can explore the relationship between external events and internal meaning-making systems, and possible belief changes, or changes to rituals and spiritual practices

Social connections: Current experiences of racism continue to feed into clients' belief systems, and provide evidence of ongoing marginalisation and discrimination. Apart from working within an ethical framework of culturally competent professionalism, we may support clients to navigate ongoing experiences, and make meaningful connections with extended family and communities.

Body: Epigenetics means 'on top of' genetics and refers to environmental influences. 'Epigenetic changes are modifications of DNA, which occur without any alteration to the underlying DNA sequence and can control whether a gene is turned "on" or "off".'[14] Because this happens at the level of gene *expression*, counselling can assist with reversing this process, due to how changes in behaviour, affect and cognitions correlate with gene modification and expression.[15,16]

Land: Loss of connection to land can have an impact on identity. Supporting clients who are separated from their homeland through reconnection with language, culture and physicality can be beneficial.

Having spiritual conversations

When clients are working with grief and losses in their life, an emerging theme is separation, whether that is through the death of a loved one, the breakdown of a partnership, or being torn away from their home country. Health is based on connection, and when clients are healing from separation, hope appears where there is possibility for reconnection, a different kind of ongoing connection, or for forming new connections. As clients navigate grief and loss, they may draw on spiritual narratives to make sense of what has happened, and to draw courage to face what might lie ahead. Alternatively, we may support curious enquiry about how to make conscious connections with themselves, others and the natural environment. This could be an alternative way to talk about spirituality and may feel more familiar for some people.

The river metaphor

Some people feel anxious about allowing clients to bring their spirituality into the room for fear of not being able to relate, or having a very different perspective. Our social constructs regarding religion and spirituality are imbued with notions of correctness, or comparisons related to being further along a path to awakening than others. A way to avoid this is to use the metaphor of a river.[17]

Imagine the course of a river is our journey through life. A time of quite prescribed or rigid religious experience might be a period when the river passes through a narrow canyon. A time of turbulence and difficulty in life can be imagined as the rapids, perhaps when a person's faith is questioned or abandoned. Wider parts of slower flowing water relate to times of expansiveness and integration of new ideas, and waterfalls might represent change or shock. When life is mapped onto the course of a river, we can explore the relationship between external events and internal meaning-making systems, and possible belief changes, or changes to rituals and spiritual practices. This approach involves holding space for a client to reflect on the relationship between traumatic events and spiritual beliefs, and expressions in order to move forward.

Practising personal embodiment

The development of a practice of personal embodiment is a tangible way to demonstrate acceptance of oneness as a universal reality. The infinity symbol (∞) can represent the symbiotic movement of energy between two people. However, in professional counselling, we may forget how much both our light and shadow is part of that exchange. I am not suggesting we can expect to be perfect, but that we take responsibility to do our own 'shadow work'. In the field of intergenerational trauma, restoring ourselves as a pathway to the generations before and after is known as 'ancestral healing'. I believe that self-healing not only energetically affects our own blood lines, but others' also.[18] I am inspired by the work of Dr Ihaleakala Hew Len, a psychiatrist in Hawaii who took this principle seriously. He used a simple prayer called *Ho'oponopono*, comprised of four statements: 'I'm sorry', 'Please forgive me', 'I love you', 'Thank you'.[19] When Dr Hew Len experienced a 'shadow' emotion in himself from reading his patients' notes, he said this prayer and, in healing and forgiving himself, he saw healing occur in his patients. Fierke and Mackay describe this as a process of 'seeing', stating that in 'the process of "seeing" and acknowledging this suffering, the entanglement is broken and something in the world itself changes, which is consistent with the quantum principle that observation changes the object of measurement'.[20]

Entanglement

This article has drawn on the colonial trauma of Māori people in Aotearoa New Zealand in an example of both generational trauma, and a collectivist culture that challenges our Western ideas of post-traumatic growth as an internal individual experience. As confronting as it is to shift our worldview from separation to connectedness, this is what scientific evidence in quantum physics points to. Entanglement happens with two particles that have interacted and then separated; when changes happen to one, they are immediately replicated in the other.[21] If humans are also entangled, what might this mean for how we practise? ●

Footnote

I use the definition of 'holistic health' as: 'feelings of wellbeing, attitudes, a sense of purpose and spirituality'[22] which includes spirituality as an inextricable component. The definition of 'trauma' I use is: 'a sudden harmful disruption impacting all of the spirit, body, mind and heart that requires healing'.[23]

Biography

Dr Nikki Kiyimba is a clinical psychologist specialising in complex trauma. She has published over 50 peer-reviewed articles and books, and developed Responding to Trauma, the first postgraduate programme accredited by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Nikki is at the forefront of international professional training for health and social care professionals.

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Contemplating contemplation

Matthew Geary
considers the impact his Buddhist practice has on therapeutic reflection

In Buddhism, *prajna* refers to the cultivation of intuitive understanding, wisdom, insight (*vipassana*) or discernment. The three *prajna* tools that enable the embodiment of *dharma* (a Sanskrit word which has many complex meanings but in this context refers to Buddha's teachings) are listening, contemplation and meditation.[1] While deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, I have found these *prajna* tools to have practical applications in counselling. Indeed, they provide a unique framework and procedural logic for working with, understanding, and addressing the complexities of the human mind and emotions.

My previous article for *Thresholds* discussed Buddha's teachings on effective listening to the *dharma*, and it explored how these instructions might apply and benefit counselling practice, and the counsellor-client relationship.[1] Through writing that article, I discovered that hearing and listening are inextricably related but different things: the former refers to the sensory, physiological act and reception of sound, and the latter refers to the more voluntary, psychological act. It infers a more active, thoughtful and interpretive participation that attempts to ascertain and understand the truth of the communication. In other words, contemplation is a constituent of listening and is an ongoing cultivation of the sense perception. For instance, we hear the birds chirping, but when we listen to them, we attend to their calls' music, message, meaning and nuance. Similarly, in a counselling session, we might witness and hear our client's varying expressions of anger. Still, we heed the multiple implications of that communication when we genuinely listen, and may hear the underlying, 'I feel helpless and invisible', 'No one listens to me', 'I am frustrated', or 'My needs are never met'. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that 'to hear' is 'to understand the sense', but 'to listen' is 'to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.'[3] This distinction is crucial in counselling, where active listening is a key tool for understanding and empathising with the client's experience.

Buddhism and contemplation

In Tibetan Buddhism, contemplation is the bridge stage between listening and meditation – a stage of thorough, healthy questioning, creative doubt, and a refinement of our comprehension and understanding. Wisdom through reflection means 'not only listening to what the teacher has taught and understanding it, but subsequently reviewing it in your mind and establishing the meaning through reflection, examination and analysis, and asking questions about what you do not understand'.[1]

The Buddhist practice of contemplation is a powerful means of using logic and reason to develop positive qualities and eradicate errors. It is vital, and we must not take it lightly or overlook its significance because, as Andrew Holecek states, contemplation 'breaks down the teachings into truth and works it into an embodied understanding'.[4]

The Buddhist emphasis on contemplation (*sam*), then, combined with its teaching on being fully receptive, can inform and enrich counselling and therapeutic practice. As in Buddhism – while acknowledging that Buddhist contemplation is a practice with a different focus, significance, utility and teleology – a contemplation of the importance of contemplation in counselling and therapy intimates that it, too, is a necessary phase from listening that informs a new, deeper and more accurate level of understanding of the client, their history and issues, ourselves, and what is happening in the counselling sessions. Through this understanding, the counsellor facilitates transformative change in the client's life.

So, what exactly is contemplation in counselling? How is it related to finding meaning and truth? How does it help the counsellor and client? When and where does it take place?

Contemplation in counselling

In the Western classical tradition, the word 'contemplation' comes from the Latin *contemplātiō*, which means 'the action of looking at, consideration, study, taking into consideration'.[5] The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides further definitions of the word: first, it is a 'religious or spiritual meditation; (sometimes) a meditative practice in which a person seeks to pass beyond

intellectual reasoning or reflection to a direct experience of the divine or infinite'; second, it can be simply 'the action or process of thinking deeply or carefully about a person or thing; serious consideration; thoughtful reflection'.

Contemplation in counselling is not a process that begins when the client is first seated in front of us. It starts before we even meet the client, as we read their assessment or consider the nature and content of a telephone or e-mail communication. At this point, we deeply and carefully consider whether we can effectively work with the client. We might intuit their nature, history or difficulty from their use of language and preliminary exchanges. They are already in our minds.

Once the counselling has commenced, we listen intently to the client, reflect on their words, and check our understanding to indicate that we are listening to what they are communicating. We might stop and allow silence, and space for deeper absorption and reflection. Further, we are mindful: contemplating what is happening and being communicated in the present moment, and thinking about the past that brought this moment to bear, and the future we will look toward together. We might consider, what is conveyed precisely by a specific word, phrase or gesture? What are the many semantic implications of a client's communication? What are the subtexts of their narrative? Whose words are these even?

Importantly, our contemplativeness makes us more open and present with the client. It checks ego assumptions, opinions and certainties. It seeks to go beyond the limitations of our discursive thinking and psychological mechanisms. Contemplation is a pause, a relinquishment of knowing and authority, and a clearing for silence and deep attentiveness. It is acceptance, compassion, an allowing of the other to be, and a demonstration of respect for their uniqueness, integrity and irreducibility. It confirms what we know and do not know (and might never know). We can embody and model contemplation for the client as a caring, non-imperialist, ethical way of being and participating with the other, which they might assume and take into the broader social world.

Furthermore, the therapist thoughtfully and carefully challenges the client, and encourages them to contemplate actions, events, thought processes, beliefs, patterns of behaviour, words, and the impact of familial, environmental and social conditions, among other things. Contemplation occurs within and between sessions, and after counselling has closed. Indeed, we can sometimes receive a message or card from a client some months or even years after counselling has closed, declaring an understanding or insight into themselves, their relationships, history, or situation, which they did not perceive during counselling. Hence, contemplation can move the client from a stuck, long-held position and shift seemingly rigid perspectives, not only during counselling but also long after. Contemplation can gradually liberate clients from entrenched feelings of guilt, disgust, shame, helplessness and responsibility. Alternatively, it may encourage clients to acknowledge their role in a life situation: responsibility, actions, mistakes and values. Client contemplation promotes right action, self-care and positive change. As the Buddhist teachings avow, contemplation leads us to live healthier, happier, more balanced, productive and spiritual lives.

After the counselling session – whether on the drive home that evening or weeks, months, or years later – counsellors continue to contemplate and think critically. We read and reread our notes or repeatedly listen to the counselling sessions – if they are recorded – to detect defences, hints, patterns, avoidance, connections, absences, and things that we might have misunderstood or missed. We consider and reconsider our reactions, interpretations and approaches. We journal and review our meetings with the client, and our initial thoughts and impressions. What is here? What is missing? We even have dreams about our clients and what they bring to the sessions. In other words, once we begin the work, there is a continual processing of our experience of the client and their communications that never stops in our attempt to refine the information and ascertain the truth of their experience. These contemplations and wrestling with understanding (sometimes requiring that we surrender our wish to understand), often change how we view the client, their difficulties and our responses.

One of the most clinically beneficial forms of contemplation in counselling takes place during supervision. Here, the counsellor and supervisor engage in discussions and challenges about impressions, confusion, desires, preconceptions, resistances, fears and qualms. The supervisor, as the more experienced practitioner, may contemplate the exchange from another perspective. They alert us to gaps in our knowledge, leaps of judgment, or alternative ways of looking at things. They prompt us to consider what is occurring in the transference and countertransference. They ask us to think again. Sometimes, they even urge us to relinquish the will to know or interpret. Supervisors remind us of our counsellor role, limitations, and moral and ethical responsibilities. Moreover, they remind us to consider the multiple dimensions at play when working with a client, and the various levels of meaning inherent in a verbal or non-verbal transaction.

The importance of clarification

For instance, we might have a client who says that they feel incredibly attached to us. In our understanding, 'attached' means feeling close to someone and having great affection for them, much like a grandparent or a pet. However, imagine that later, you come to understand that the client was using the word 'attached' to infer what Sigmund Freud called an 'erotic transference'.[6] In other words, the client has developed intense feelings of love and longing for you, and boldly expressed those feelings. Realising the complex implications of the client's communication could prove extremely useful for the therapy, indicating the client's early erotic attachment to one or more family members, a vital identification, the awakening or displacement of a long-suppressed desire, the realisation of a different, more intimate kind of relationship, or an attempt to equalise power relations in the therapy. Indeed, as David Mann attests,[7] as long as the erotic transference does not radically escalate and culminate in fraternisation or even a relationship (which is unethical, damaging and counterproductive to the therapy), it can be ethically and safely acknowledged, worked with and through, leading the client to understanding and making positive transformation possible (see also Pearson[8]). Nevertheless, if the counsellor misses, consciously or unconsciously shuts down, or radically misinterprets the client's words and meaning, they risk provoking anger, embarrassment, shame, a transgression of boundaries, and a breakdown in the counselling relationship.

In this case, the counsellor's thorough contemplation and clarification of the client's exact use of the word 'attached' and what they mean, as well as a conference with their supervisor and research into erotic transference, can help avoid misunderstanding, miscommunication and mistakes in the counselling. Indeed, contemplation, discussion with the client, research and supervision provide opportunities to think about, clarify and explore what might be happening with the disclosure. Is it out of proportion with what has been happening in the sessions? Does the client always become attached to unobtainable people? Do all their close relationships become somehow sexualised or confused with love? If so, does the transference indicate a formative absence (say, of the father), sexual abuse, misuse or sexualisation? Also, what is the counsellor's experience of the countertransference? Are they denying, repressing or splitting their feelings? Are they able to talk about the transference with the client? Do they need to refer the client? Contemplation, here, is crucial so that the counsellor makes the correct clinical, professional, moral, and ethical decisions for the client's therapy and the betterment of their wellbeing.

In Buddhism, the second *prajna* of contemplation not only reflects upon and questions whether something is true or attempts to clarify the meaning of something but, on a deeper level, also enables inquiry into how things are beyond dualistic thinking, and our ego beliefs, perceptions and projections. Often, Buddhist teachers describe contemplation as sharpening the sword of *prajna*. Likewise, but in a less profound way, contemplation in counselling and therapy refers to thinking diligently. Contemplation in counselling encourages acceptance, deep attentiveness, compassion, due proportion, fortitude, generosity, patience, evaluation and re-evaluation. For both the client and counsellor, it helps reduce hindrances to transcending the conditioned, impulsive, or prejudicial mindset that impedes true insight and understanding. In counselling, contemplation provides the vital foundation, certitude and strength necessary for genuine, therapeutic understanding, healing and change. ●

Biography

Matthew Geary is a qualified integrative psychotherapeutic counsellor. He works at The Listening Post (a professional voluntary counselling service) and in private practice. Matthew has a PhD in English literature and psychoanalysis. He is also a published author and independent scholar in art, literature, psychoanalysis, feminist philosophy and maternal studies.

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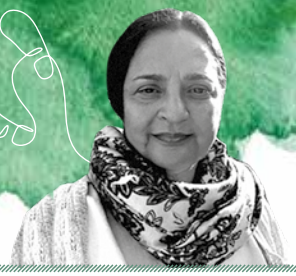
A pathway to transformation



Sabnum Dharamsi

I promised last time that I'd share why I chose *Walking lightly* as the title for my column. It comes from the Qur'anic verse – 'For, [true] servants of the Most Gracious are [only] they who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the foolish address them, reply with [words of] peace' (Qur'an 25:63). The words communicate an inner practice of humility that is also embodied outwardly in the way we move in the world, the words we speak, as well as our relationship with the planet and its people.

Humility

I chose this title because these themes – of inner and outer congruence, and humility at an individual but also planetary level – are critical to our therapeutic training and practice. 'Walking lightly' resounds in my mind and heart when I train students. I want us to hold humility when working with the unknowable and the vulnerable.[1] For example, novice students' go-to response with difficulty in client work is often a triumphant cry of 'Take it to supervision!', but I notice that their engagement with the client's distress is sometimes superficial. And, although supervision is essential, for it to be useful, there must first be the willingness to be open, even when it feels uncomfortable or is *emotionally* demanding – times when we ourselves are perhaps depleted or overwhelmed.

It is difficult to be open. Clients' trauma, anger, pain and destructive patterns may unleash our own unhealed trauma. Students *and* experienced practitioners can hide behind walls of expertise, distanced from the rawness of the clients' or our own process. 'Walking lightly' is an invitation to tread gently on planet earth but also on our earthly constitutions, the clay parts of ourselves that hurt, and to foster a gentler relationship to self and others.

A gentle openess

'Walking lightly' invites a more gracious acceptance of our shadow sides and of the work that needs to be done, but it can also be transformational. Perhaps with this gentle openness, we may be able to hear more subtle messages from the soul, the divine light within. When we look at shadow aspects, we are also connecting to the developmental process that comes from them: places of survival, defensiveness and transactional relationships. Perhaps we can then listen within for concepts such as love, compassion, forgiveness, hope and justice, and discover the truth of them in our own lives. And, by doing this, we also begin to internalise and reflect these qualities in the way we engage relationally. As Hubl notes in his visionary book *Attuned: Practicing Interdependence to Heal Our Trauma – and Our World*: 'When we bring consciousness to bear on this process (witness), we discover still higher evolutionary capacities that aid repair. In particular, we awaken the soul's ability to help heal others.'[2]

This process becomes part of wisdom because we discovered and worked with what was blocking us. We've experienced an embodied healing process and perhaps even engaged with the more beautiful qualities of existence. In Islam, these qualities, in their absolute limitlessness, are some of the many names of God: Compassion (*Ar Rahman*), Forgiveness (*Al Afuw*), Justice (*Al Adl*) – configurations of the divine essence. Sufi poetry, in particular, speaks of how human beings long to be captivated by these loves of the soul, if we can but be true to our best selves.

The courage to be accountable

'Walking lightly', though it communicates gentleness, does not mean avoidance or a lack of courage in the personal, relational, social or political. It also invites a modest approach in what we take from the world. I echo the sentiments of the Cameroonian writer Achille Mbembe, who writes about developing a planetary consciousness; a recognition that we are all united in the air that we breathe, and that our future depends on not devouring mineral resources and exploiting people for the sake of a few individuals.[3] Life is precious and sacred. To me, holding that in our hearts – deeply, dearly, humbly, courageously – is the work of a therapist, and a signifier of someone who can be trusted. To 'walk lightly' is not to bypass spiritually or to seclude ourselves in the intimacy of the therapy room, thereby forgetting our responsibilities to other human beings who have systemically been denied access to the privilege of therapeutic healing. It is to remember that the therapy room is also in the planet we share with flora and fauna, with its ancient rock formations and ocean tides. I guess if I was to say one prayer here and now, it would be a call for humility, which includes the courage to be accountable. For people to see that having a role, be it that of therapist, doesn't excuse us from fulfilling our role as a citizen of the earth, and to speak out about injustices, especially ones that impact marginalised groups, or extract and destroy planetary resources that only serve the interests of powerful corporate giants. ●

The beginning of April marked the end of Ramadhan and the beginning of Eid – best wishes to all readers!

Biography

Sabnum Dharamsi is co-founder of the first accredited (by CPCAB) Islamic counselling training in the UK. In addition to teaching, supervising and client work, she has run numerous workshops, presented at conferences both nationally and internationally, and is a published author. She is currently working on a book for Cambridge University Press.

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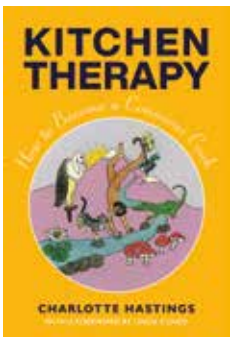
Reviews



Kitchen Therapy: how to become a conscious cook

Charlotte Hastings
Ortus Press
ISBN 978-1911383901

Kitchen Therapy is a beautifully written invitation to come into relationship with your intentions and projections around food and self. Interweaving Jungian psychology, mythology, therapeutic case studies, literary and cultural references, and ancient etymology, the book offers the reader a spiritual rite of passage in a richly unique yet vital way. We need food to survive, but this relationship can be transformed and lead to deeper connection within, often revealing surprises once confined to the unconscious.

The book is separated into three sections engaging the reader in a linear fashion, however the author encourages you to use the book as you may; to dip into the sections and chapters as needed or inspired. This recommendation dispelled the pressure of having to comply to the format. The relaxed pace of my reading was more to savour than endure – this is not a heavy read, but is wonderfully flavourful and complex.

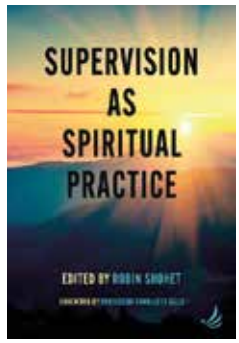
The author's suggestion to create a scrapbook of personal reflections means the reader is not separate but resonating with whatever comes in the moment, held comfortably in the knowledge and insight of the author. There is no aim greater than to be as present as you can in his process.

The author understands what it is to resist and the benefits of not being fearful of the resistance.

I wondered about how this book could be used within therapy, especially in my work with neurodivergence. The journey I embarked on in reading this book brought into focus my own issues with finding food and culinary preparation overwhelming. As I ventured further, the questions the author poses brought to consciousness that cooking has most often been a lonely occasion for me; one element of disordered eating. My memories of lack of connection, structure and consistency in childhood, reminded me of the task of caring for my own needs, and feeling the burden of having to be solely responsible for soothing any deep ache/hunger within.

The author's description of ingredients and flavours were not sentimental, but charming and soulful. This is less 'cookbook' – where you might feel a fight to bring flavours into submission or to release them safely – and is more an introduction between strangers that might once have seemed threatening or overwhelming. There is a vulnerability. The author has allowed herself to be seen and invites the reader to also see themselves as vulnerable yet expansive. I truly loved *Kitchen Therapy* and recommend it highly. I will return to it time and again within my clinical practice, and have also put it on my book club list to see it come alive within a group setting.

Karen Rawden MBACP MUKCP
Psychotherapist



Supervision as Spiritual Practice

Robin Shohet (ed)
PCCS Books Ltd
ISBN 9781915220547

As Charlotte Sills says in the foreword, 'I enjoyed this book very much'. The range of the book is wide and deep, deceptively so given the modest 150 pages. *Supervision as Spiritual Practice* is a compilation of essays, written by graduates of the training course run by Robin Shohet and Joan Wilmot. Each essay is sensitively written and profound, the variation staggering. The whole is a veritable treasure trove for working, or aspirational, supervisors.

Supervision offers the space to make a connection. The book explores the various methods and reasons for 'looking within' when we work as a supervisor. By doing this, we resist the temptation to look externally for answers and can uncover prejudices, core beliefs, fear, and the temptation to 'other'. We begin to see more clearly, and, if we act from this place, the work becomes an expression of love and understanding.

The text explores things from a range of experiences and perspectives, covering a wonderfully eclectic set of topics:

- actively introducing spirituality into the supervisory process: creating the conditions within which we can witness, with heartfelt goodwill, the miracle possibility of the other, and embracing this in the work of supervision
- exploring 'otherness': recognising how we might judge or perceive others from our own limited positions, allowing connections or offering things that might at first feel wrong, bad or not right

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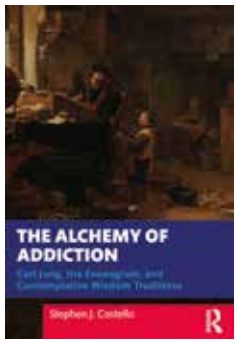
- working with a 'heart of kindness': enabling access to inner knowledge and wisdom
- working with and learning from nature. Including the non-human in human-to-human contact makes for a dynamic, vital and enlivening space. It brings solace, energy, information, vitality, mystery and wonder into supervision
- exploring the importance of both words and silence: going 'beyond the story of therapy' and embracing the oneness of all things
- taking a new look at the seven-eyed model of supervision: reviewing each lens with a fresh spiritual perspective
- being aware of our own personal narrative: reaching in to 'le point vierge' (beyond the constructs of mind, knowing, authority and narrative), allowing connection and healing to occur
- stepping through the constraints of our own inner doubts and fears: evolving into the 'good enough' supervisor
- exploring the inner revelations and discoveries needed to retain the role of supervisor after emerging from a life-threatening health episode.

Moving away from scripted stories or theories allows for far deeper, richer conversations and forges greater understanding between those in the supervisor/supervisee/client triadic relationship. Each of these essays elaborates on how this can work in the supervision process.

Robin Shohet's approach to editorial sculpting, combined with his own contributions and concluding meditations, makes this a highly worthwhile addition to any therapist's library, whether they work as a supervisor or not.

For me, one of the things that helps define or describe spirituality is numinosity. With this book, you get a 'doubly numinous' experience! First, witnessing the writers' own numinous experiences as they outline their individual journeys. Then, the personally numinous experience of slowly becoming aware of this within myself. If you choose to read this, I hope you may find this too.

Michael Sinclair MBACP (Accred)
Psychotherapeutic counsellor



The Alchemy of Addiction

Stephen J Costello
Karnac Books
ISBN 978-1032727776

This is one of the most comprehensive analyses of spirituality, its essence and methods of practice that I have ever come across. Although its main focus is addiction, the theories, concepts, philosophical discourse and methods covered are almost a handbook on spirituality, with recommendations on practical ways to develop spiritual growth.

Costello looks in detail at why addiction is such a big part of the human condition and explores ways to work with and diminish its power and impact. Western and Eastern philosophical models feature, such as the non-dual philosophy of *Advaita* (philosophy and tradition based on the primary religious scriptures of Hinduism), the Buddhist wheel of life, and the wisdom teachings of Richard Rohr, Thomas Keating and John Main. Alchemical research and the Jungian source unpinning current Western understanding of the psychology and spiritual nature of addiction are also covered in the text. All of these constructs are outlined in terms of their relationship to the psychology of addiction; and practical methods are offered as ways to reset the psyche and extract the Self from the mire of addiction.

The book is full of learning and wisdom about the scale and scope that the illness, or 'dis-ease', involves, including:

- there are many reasons for addiction, including familial, personal and societal. Factors could include suffering, boredom, trauma, and/or stress
- addiction is often a symptom of something else
- it is a disorder of attachment, not a brain disease
- it is not, however, enough to recover from addiction – you must also recover from the addictive process itself
- what we have to do with our addictions is not flee or fight them but face them fearlessly and seek to dissolve them.

Costello puts forward several methods that can be used to combat the affliction: 'We can break the addictive cycle with the help of the 12 Steps; contemplative practice (be it centring prayer, Christian meditation, or *Lectio Divina*, to name but three); the hero's journey; the Ignatian Examen and spiritual exercises; the Enneagram; Platonic philosophy; journaling, and *sanatana dharma* – transitioning from autopilot, where we are asleep at the helm/wheel, to being fully awake here and now: from stagnation to growth, from compulsion to release, from fixation to freedom, and from addicted to liberated humanity – the land of pure peace as ultimate promise.'

While it's an extensive read, the work has a humility about it that gives the softness necessary to be able to receive many of the messages within. It's a delicate art – to do so while also being adept in the knowledge and reality of the concepts that you are trying to relate. It's worth the effort if you are looking for either an explanation of, or help in working with, addiction.

Michael Sinclair MBACP (Accred)
Psychotherapeutic counsellor

The network

News and information from the world of counselling and spirituality, including updates from BACP's Spirituality division

From the Chair

The promise of spring

For me, spring always symbolises the sense of hope, encapsulated in the idea of new growth emerging, both literally and metaphorically. As we begin to stir and awaken from the hibernation of winter, there always seems the promise of potential and new beginnings. In my garden, I always look forward to the snowdrops making an appearance. They emanate an innocent quality, with their delicate white flowers nestled between the green foliage. They are closely followed by the vibrant yellow daffodils who spread their warm glow around the garden. I am always struck by the perfection of the beautifully formed trumpets as they seem to announce the change of the seasons, heralding the news that warmer weather is on its way!

It is with continuing the theme of new beginnings that I would like to welcome three new members to the Spirituality division Executive Committee: Charlotte Hastings, Claire Alison Hams and Melinda Mozes. I look forward to getting to know you and working with you over the coming months. Alongside our existing Committee members, Cemil, Jane and Sukhi, and our network facilitator Mima, we can continue to support our members, and help the division to evolve and grow.

As a Committee, we have reflected on BACP Spirituality division's 'Working with Soul' event held in December 2024. The theme was 'Life through death: exploring the relationship between post-traumatic growth and spirituality'. The three presenters, Nikki Kiyimba, Emmy van Deurzen and Steve Taylor each presented their take on post-traumatic growth and the role spirituality can play in such experiences. Nikki's presentation was called 'Trauma and the wounded spirit: a return to wholeness', Emmy's was called 'Life beyond death', and Steve's was called 'Transformation through turmoil'. The event was skilfully hosted by the Spirituality division's Deputy Chair, Cemil Egeli, who facilitated a lively discussion with the panel, prompted by questions from the audience. All three presentations provided exciting possibilities to think about the nature of spirituality, and the role it can play in our lives.

We've already been thinking about our next 'Working with Soul' event which we usually hold at the end of each year, and we hope you are able to join us. We seem to have a theme emerging for this year's event: spirituality in supervision. This has left me contemplating my usual question: 'What is spirituality?' and wrestling with how we bring it into our work with clients, without objectifying spirituality as a noun, an *it*. Sometimes, this can lead to an over-commercialisation and commodifying of spirituality with the enticement of enlightenment.

Watching a recording of Robin Shohet and Peter Hawkins in conversation about spirituality in supervision, has brought into focus some of my own thinking about spirituality.[1] For me, spirituality is, in part, about being in service: recognising we are all part of an ecosystem, and that each has a part to play in the evolution of human consciousness.

I was moved by the vulnerability that was shared during the conversations between Robin and Peter, as I experienced them both asking the existential question, 'What is it all about this thing called life?'. This is a familiar place for me, and it felt good to witness and feel part of something with others who are called to engage in such matters.

If we are to trust in the flow of life, what part do we play in such an engagement? My phenomenological attitude seems to be coming to the fore here, as I write the Chair's column. This approach often seeks to draw out many more questions than answers. But I believe that question we must, while still holding space for our heart to lead our direction and showing compassion for us all as we try to navigate the journey ahead.

Nic Hartshorne
BACP Spirituality Chair

Reference

1 Hawkins P, Shohet R. Supervision as spiritual practice. [Presentation.] Onlinevents; October 2024.

Letters

It's always good to know that articles have inspired readers to reflect, question or act, and it is a joy to receive letters from readers sharing their views. The vision for *Thresholds* is to create a sense of community and lively discussion.
If you'd like to write in about an article, please don't hesitate.
E-mail: thresholds@bacp.co.uk

Response to Abraham

I read with interest Steven Segal's article about his work supporting his client's courageous journey from self-doubt to self-affirmation (*Thresholds*, January 2025). But I found it ironic, if not rather unfortunate, that he should refer to that journey in terms of an Abrahamic commitment. The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the biblical stories that I find most difficult, in spite of being brought up to see it as an expression of remarkable faith. After a lifetime of working with and caring for those affected by abuse, I cannot read this story as an admirable example of the courage to take action but as one of potentially and narrowly averted fatal child abuse and trauma. In contrast to Abraham, who embarked on his action apparently without the knowledge, let alone consent, of the child's mother, and without a thought of the trauma he might be inflicting on his son and his wife, Steven Segal's client reflected carefully on the harm she might do if she took action and consulted with a wise other as she chose her course of action.

The irony for me in the reference to Abraham in this excellent and careful piece of work was to wonder how far Abraham was actually rather like the father from whom the client was trying to separate – the product of a patriarchal community which privileges the thoughts and actions of male adults, with little attention to the voices or experience of women and children, and whose misconceptions in relation to faith (making God in their own image) can result in spiritual harm rather than spiritual health.

I'm aware that allowances have to be made for the fact that Kierkegaard was writing in a pre-feminist, patriarchal era and context, and recognise that his Christian existentialism was groundbreaking in his time. But let's find some other biblical role models like the wise Deborah, the courageous Esther or the faithful Ruth who each took action, not in isolation like Abraham, but in the context of community and relationship.

Ruth Layzell
Director of the Institute of Pastoral Counselling and Supervision, counsellor BACP (Accred), pastoral supervisor and trainer

Response from author, Steven Segal:

I imagine that Kierkegaard may begin by acknowledging that, from the attunement of caring for children of abuse, Abraham's actions do seem obviously abusive. He would recognise the deep commitment and compassion behind this concern. However, I think he would argue that thinking and perception are context-dependent – the way people see and interpret events is shaped by the framework they inhabit. The critique of Abraham, as formulated in this case, comes from an ethical attunement, where his actions naturally appear as unjustifiable. However, he would probably point out that there is another context beyond the ethical – the religious.

With an ethical standpoint, the entire language of religion – God, belief, faith, sin – can seem irrational or meaningless. However, with religious attunement, these concepts acquire an intuitive felt sense.

Kierkegaard would argue that the transition from the ethical to the religious is deeply unsettling. It requires stepping beyond the customs and conventions that provide stability, without yet having fully internalised the new world of faith. This space of uncertainty and disorientation involves leaving the world of common sense.

Rumi's invitation to meet beyond conventions captures this idea: 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.' Taking a leap of faith means moving into this field beyond right and wrong, where common sense breaks down. As Rumi continues: 'Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.'

From a Kierkegaardian perspective, this is the space in which Abraham's actions must be understood – not within the ethical, but in the realm beyond it, where meaning is radically transformed. Different traditions recognise this space in various ways – some as ecstasy, others as wonder, existential dread or spiritual transformation. Kierkegaard presents faith as the courage to stand in this unknown.

Research participants required

Would you like to take part in a phenomenological study into how UK counsellors or psychotherapists, who have had a secular training, understand the spiritual dimension of their work, and bring spirituality into their work with clients?

If you are a qualified mainstream counsellor or psychotherapist working in the UK, with a minimum of five years' post-qualification experience, and are interested in and incorporate spirituality into your work, please contact Nic Hartshorne at **2200007@chester.ac.uk** to find out more.

The research is part of a Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf) in Counselling and Psychotherapy Studies project at the University of Chester.

New beginnings

As spring arrives, BACP Spirituality division begins a phase of new growth. Nic Hartshorne has taken up her role as Chair of the division and existing Executive Committee member, Cemil Egeli has stepped into the role of Deputy Chair. Alongside this, the Committee also welcomes three newcomers. Here's a little more about each new member.

Pictured:
Front left to right: Spirituality division Executive Chair, Nic Hartshorne and Executive members, Jane Hunt and Melinda Mozes at a recent Spirituality division Executive Committee meeting.

Back left to right: Executive member, Charlotte Hastings and BACP Divisional Committee Officer, Sonam Dave. Spirituality division Deputy Chair, Cemil Egeli, and new Executive member, Claire Alison Hams do not appear in the picture.

Melinda Mozes
Psychotherapist, supervisor and assessor

My journey into counselling has been shaped by a series of significant life experiences. I initially trained in psychology but soon realised it wasn't the right path for me, as I was drawn to working relationally and engaging deeply with the complexities of the soul. Realising this inspired me to embark on a transformative journey of self-analysis and understanding, which continues to shape my practice today.

My work is ultimately grounded in a holistic approach to healing, with a focus on cultivating self-awareness and self-compassion. I have received extensive training and gained experience in supporting clients as they confront their own mortality, and those grieving the loss of loved ones. The work often involves exploring existential questions about the meaning of life, the nature of loss, and how we make sense of our existence. It is, in many ways, a spiritual process – challenging but deeply rewarding.

In recent years, one area of my work has focused on supporting women who have experienced perinatal trauma, fertility trauma, baby loss and termination for medical reasons. I integrate body, mind and soul in my work, using somatic techniques to release trauma held within the nervous system. Additionally, I provide specialist support for church leaders facing the challenges of ministry, as well as clients preparing for or undergoing the ordination process.

To me, spirituality means seeking God in all aspects of life. It is the assurance each morning that I am not alone in my struggles, and that difficulties are part of the human condition. Spirituality acknowledges that suffering is inevitable, and while challenges will come and go, healing is possible within and through those experiences. It also means embracing life in a symbiotic way, recognising that the interplay of good and bad, joy and sorrow, is intrinsic to the human experience. Rather than viewing challenges as something to be resisted, I believe spirituality invites us to welcome them as opportunities for growth and transformation.

From my experience during training, I feel there is an opportunity for development within the curricula of training organisations. I envision a shift towards cultivating a culture within educational institutions that acknowledges the importance of understanding and learning how to work with spirituality when clients bring it into therapy. To me, this is both an ethical consideration and a matter of competency. Recognising and addressing this gap in training is crucial for equipping therapists to engage with these issues sensitively and effectively.

I see my role as an advocate, promoting the inclusion of spirituality in psychotherapy training, sharing the work of the division, and building connections with members to better understand their needs. By encouraging dialogue and raising awareness, I hope to contribute to a more holistic and respectful approach to spirituality within the field of psychotherapy.

Charlotte Hastings
Psychotherapist, supervisor, trainer, podcaster and author

I began training as a therapist in 2009, although my childhood and previous work as a teacher had been gradually preparing me for this vocation. Studying anthropology at Goldsmiths in the late-1980s, I was introduced to the work of Carl Jung who has been an ever-evolving guiding force, both personally and professionally ever since. In the same term, I began psychodynamic training. I also started teaching cooking in the community, working with people aged four to 80 from various backgrounds. Realising that cooking and therapy could be helpful partners, the concept of 'kitchen therapy' emerged. This evolved into my recently published book *Kitchen Therapy: how to become a conscious cook*, and a community interest company 'Kitchen Sessions CIC', which is bolstered by systemic family therapy ideas. Focusing on the process of creative, collaborative and intuitive cooking, we provide practical, inclusive, accessible therapeutic workshops, training and events, offering spiritual and emotional nutrition alongside and within delicious meals.

Spirituality is about love, belonging, purpose, nature, symbiosis, synergy, consciousness, presence. In post-enlightenment society, finding our spiritual framework can be mystifying. Science, like *kronos* (quantitative time), orientates towards the known, often possessed and fixed. Spirit, like *kairos* (qualitative time), is curious, open and relational. As Iain McGilchrist says, the emissary (left brain hemisphere) has mistaken itself for the master (right brain hemisphere).[1] So, for me, spirituality means finding our way home to interconnection; each ingredient in a recipe relies upon the other. In South Africa, and beyond, the concept of *ubuntu* expresses our fundamental complementarity. The symbiosis of existence helps to 'right size' our unique human experience into its universal, infinitesimal, yet unique, part of the puzzle that is life on earth (and maybe beyond).

In joining the Executive, I relish the opportunity to raise the profile of our spiritual life in all its simplicity and mundane magic. Delighted to feel a part of this division, I hope to bring my passion for community, creativity and mutuality. In kitchen therapy, I focus on the psychological sustenance that comes from the process of meal making, rather than on the physical food alone. That is, the love, learning, growth and connection that nature intended us to share. Bringing attention to the process of feeding ourselves offers a spiritual framework continually and naturally available to us all. So, I bring my personal rewilding practice of kitchen therapy to the Executive Committee, along with a desire to be a part of this vital division and the intention to place the needs of people and planet first.

Reference

1 McGilchrist I. The master and his emissary. London: Yale University Press; 2010.

Claire Alison Hams
Counsellor and supervisor

Having worked in administration for the counselling and pastoral care team at Royal Marsden Hospital for seven years, I decided to start training as a therapist in 2014. I completed a psychodynamic advanced diploma, followed by my undergraduate degree at the University of Greenwich. I am currently mid-way through PhD research at the University of Chester, supervised by Professor Lisa Oakley and Professor Peter Gubi. My research focuses on the lived experiences of attending counselling for born and raised ex-Jehovah's Witness (JW) clients. This specific research topic relates to my own lived experience, having been raised in the JW teachings, and leaving the religion in my 30s. During this life-changing epoch, I was ostracised by the JW community, and while attending traditional counselling was helpful, it was a specialised research-informed counselling model ('walking free' model), written by Dr Gillie Jenkinson of Hope Valley Counselling, that really supported a deeper understanding of my own experiences. I trained in this way of working with clients in 2022 and find it invaluable in my private practice. I work with a range of clients who are recovering from religious trauma, spiritual abuse, and high-control religions/groups or relationships. I work both in-person and online from my therapy room in Epsom, Surrey. I also work with young people who have vision impairment, as well as clients with cancer-related issues and bereavement.

For me, having deconstructed my prior belief system, spirituality means an acknowledgment of being part of a universe that we don't hold all the answers to, something far bigger and more powerful than us as humans. I also see it as that part of ourselves, unseen and deep within – the part that allows us to feel awe and wonder, like a beautiful sunset or natural environment that takes our breath away with its beauty and magnitude. I acknowledge that spirituality means something unique to each of us, and there is no one way of interpreting it.

I would like to bring my energy and passion to BACP's Spirituality division Executive Committee. I very much value connecting with others in our profession, working alongside one another to achieve progress in enhancing safeguarding and diversity of support within the counselling profession. As we come to a greater understanding, through research, of the deeply traumatic impact of both religious trauma and spiritual abuse, it is my hope and aspiration that we will be enabled to offer more insightful training for therapists who work with clients who have experienced these issues. I am looking forward to learning from my fellow Spirituality Executive colleagues who have had different experiences to me, and collaboratively moving ahead with new projects.

BACP divisional journals

BACP publishes specialist journals within six other sectors of counselling and psychotherapy practice.

Healthcare Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal

This quarterly journal from BACP Healthcare is relevant to counsellors and psychotherapists working within healthcare settings.

Coaching Today

The BACP Coaching journal is suitable for coaches from a range of backgrounds including counselling and psychotherapy, management or human resources.

BACP Children, Young People & Families

The journal of BACP Children, Young People & Families is a useful resource for therapists and other professionals interested in the mental health of young people.

Private Practice

This journal is dedicated to counsellors and psychotherapists working independently, in private practice, or for EAPs or agencies, in paid or voluntary positions.

University & College Counselling

This is the journal of BACP Universities & Colleges, and is ideal for all therapists working within higher and further education settings.

BACP Workplace

This journal is provided by BACP Workplace and is read widely by those concerned with the emotional and psychological health of people in organisations.

These journals are available as part of membership of BACP's divisions or by subscription.

To enquire about joining a BACP division, call 01455 883300. For a free of charge consultation on advertising within these journals, contact Cara Termine on 0203 771 7200, or email **cara.termine@thinkpublishing.co.uk**

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