

This is a very abbreviated version of the longer article below. I wrote them before coming across John Welwood's book. To read the full article see below.

## Abbreviated version of - Psycho-Spiritual approach to personal development - Spring 2016

### **Introduction**

Psychotherapy is the work of healing ourselves. But are we all in need of healing? Are we all damaged or holding some sort of trauma? By trauma I mean a wound to the self that was too much to bear, so that some part of it had to be repressed and therefore remains un-digested, un-healed. Well, due to the complexity and length of our developmental journey from infancy to adulthood, it seems that none of us emerge totally unscathed, especially in this 'unnatural' modern world of ours. This article is my attempt to show how the processes at the heart of the work of healing ourselves are the same as the work that is necessary for our spiritual development, especially to begin with. The aims are somewhat different, but the means, i.e. self-observation in the service of self-knowledge, are the same.

### **Our Psychology - What needs healing**

'Ego' is a difficult word, it means different things to different people, in different contexts. I'm using it in line with Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (PHG) (1951) where the ego is seen as the part of the self that engages and contacts our environment to get our needs met, from a crying baby needing to be fed, to someone wanting to rule the world. But no matter how dominant the ego appears, it is also clear that it is by no means the whole of the self, it is just the visible tip of the self above the water. Our growth and development are dependent on our ego, it is our inevitable separateness, it is our identification with our own needs and wishes which has its lawful and healthy aspects, as well as its compulsive and compensatory ones that emerge from our adjustments to trauma. The more the self gets wounded and traumatised the deeper and more fixed our compensatory structures are. We create defensive patterns of being, or "ego structures", to manage the situation where a part of us has to be kept buried, out of awareness, and avoided. This is about the self making emergency adaptations in order to survive as is obvious in children who face very difficult situations.

As PHG argued, in an ideal situation the ego is simply a functional aspect of the self that emerges and recedes in the process of getting our needs met through the cycles of "contact and withdrawal" that characterise the daily rhythm of our lives. It is when the ego is stuck (fixed) because the self is having to defend and contain repressed trauma, that we develop problems in relating to ourselves and the world. Obviously there is no ideal, we are all on the scale somewhere (as above).

Our insecurity is our fear of being re-traumatised, once we have faced and healed our trauma we are no longer insecure. All our negative behaviour is this. No one was ever born evil, and this is the basic humanistic standpoint, that people are fundamentally good and that our negativity comes from trauma of some sort.

### **Choice and self-responsibility**

Surrendering our self-responsibility is the enemy of psychological health, whether it is through the panic of anxiety, the defeatedness of depression, or the slow self-deceptive giving into the negative, avoidant, destructive tendencies within us (leading to addictions, compulsion, etc.). This is not about blame in any way, we do the best we can, when we can. But there is a profound reality about our lives that we come to at this point, which is that as humans we have choice. It may be only a tiny, tiny amount, but there is always something there. Otherwise we would not be 'human' we would be automatons. There has to be choice to make sense of it all. If this is so, then logically and intuitively there has to be some 'Absolute' meaning towards which we are headed.

The fact that we do have choice means that development is possible, that our destiny is freedom and that there is Truth, that we are part of the teleological force of evolution and the unfolding of Consciousness. Logically and intuitively there has to be some 'Absolute' meaning towards which we are headed. This is also why taking responsibility for ourselves is such an enormous life-long task, which at the point of its completion is the same place as 'enlightenment', a place where self-responsibility is redundant because we have eventually accepted and embodied that we are simply a part of, and an expression of, the Consciousness, Love and Energy that makes up the universe.

### **The spiritual dimension of life**

As I see it spirituality is about our connection to the transpersonal, to the Absolute, to God, or whatever words you choose for that which is un-definable. It seems that we perceive this absolute through the "three faces" of the head or cognitive awareness, the heart or emotional awareness, and the body or energy awareness. Most spiritual traditions have a similar trinity at their core.

I like the quantum physicist Amit Goswami's (2008) definition of spirituality as "cosmic" or "quantum consciousness", he argues that "consciousness is the ground of being", that it is Consciousness that creates the world with the collapsing of the quantum wave into a particle through observation. Potential into actuality. He argues that there is form in 'un'-consciousness (the un-manifest cosmic consciousness), which is revealed by the laws of nature, laws of growth and development, stages of consciousness, states of being that we can 'tune into', creativity itself. Everything in the process of manifesting has to obey these laws and processes.

This is something that Gestalt Therapy with its recognition of the huge innate wisdom within the self, confirms for me.

### **The here and now is the gateway to the spiritual**

Choice is the ultimate here and now quantum phenomena, the collapsing of potential into actuality. Experientially I know that life is vital and alive when we are in touch with the here and now, when we are more present to this very moment. Creativity emerges in the empty space milliseconds before choice. Being present to ourselves is to touch consciousness itself, touching what is beyond time and space.

The work of connecting up our head, heart, body is essential if we are to develop this capacity which at heart is “separating ourselves from ourselves” (Gurdjieff 1973), or as Robert Kegan (1995) put it “making what we are subject to into an object “. It is this skill of self-observation that it is essential to learn for therapy to be effective, as well as for any spiritual ‘work’.

This movement to becoming present to ourselves is always a profound shift. It is the movement from being lost in reaction, identified with something or lost in daydreams, to becoming aware that I am alive and participating in this moment of life. Gurdjieff called it “self-remembering”, we remember that we are alive and have a body, that we are feeling things (and feeling are always meaningful) and that we are able to think and find meaning.

### **How we can start healing**

The great question is how to ‘wake up’? This starts, as with any scientific undertaking, with an honest phenomenological exploration of what is. This brings new ‘data’ which enables the deep inner meaning making wisdom within us to re-start. Importantly we can start to see underneath the surface of our habitual self narrative to what is driving us to be the way we are, our motivations for being stuck in reacting to life in the way we do. As PHG (1951) made so clear, awareness itself is the most powerful agent of change, it allows sense making and healing and opens the door to choice.

This is the work of therapy, to support this process of breaking the ‘spell’ of our victim illusion again and again and again.

### **The movement from working psychologically to working spiritually**

This ability to live closer to the ‘quantum’ edge of our here and now being, enables us to live closer to choice and responsibility which only exist in this present moment, where there is a more coherent sense of ‘I’ able to take responsibility for maintaining a more consistent of self-awareness.

The work towards the “third” stage (Harvey, Wilber) of consciousness has to come from our deep wish for ‘being’, it cannot be ego-generated and has to emerge organically from some deep connectedness. It is the work of moving into the emptiness of the here and now, letting go of the ego and moving towards some ultimate reconciliation.

To me our life is not a random event in a random universe, it is, as many have said, about God wanting to express and see itself by become conscious of itself. Ultimately, in this tiny corner of this unimaginably vast universe, this is through us human beings fully realising and embodying Consciousness, Love and the Energy of Life. It seems that we have the amazingly possibility of consciously letting go of our ego and embodying Being in the fullness and emptiness of Cosmic Consciousness which must have existed before the "Big Bang".

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