

‘Healing from Within and Beyond: the therapeutic power of altered states’

A joint meeting between the Section of Hypnosis and Psychosomatic
Medicine of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Spirituality and Psychiatry
Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists
held at the RSM on 9th May 2005

Report by Dr. Julian Candy

The London house of the Royal Society of Medicine has recently been extensively remodelled. Nearly seventy delegates enjoyed a late afternoon into early evening meeting in an unusually comfortable lecture hall equipped with the very latest technology.

The content of the three lectures matched the excellence of the surroundings. Dr Nicola Crowley spoke about the work of Stanislav Grof, a psychiatrist and psychotherapist who initially worked in Prague with LSD. Subsequently in America he developed the technique he has named Holotropic Breathwork. In essence, this involves overbreathing to music, but in a carefully controlled and fully monitored fashion. The altered states of consciousness that result has allowed him to expand the scope of his psychotherapy into the postnatal, natal and even prenatal eras. He has found certain constant patterns of experience which he has labelled the three perinatal matrices, and within them certain recognisable pathological constellations, which are a little similar to Jung’s complexes. The implications of this important and under-recognised work go beyond the treatment of individual patients, touching as they do on the reality and content of the transpersonal and spiritual realms. Nicki illustrated her theme with pictures and music that not only demonstrated the technique but also drew our attention to some of these wider implications. The lively questions that followed enabled Nicki to clarify some of the issues about safety and about the spiritual basis of consciousness which her talk had provoked.

Next Professor Peter Conradi, who is a teacher of English Literature, a renowned biographer and a Buddhist spoke to us about the ‘Ox-herding pictures’. This famous Oriental series of ten cartoons tell the story of the boy who has lost his ox. His search for the animal and his need to master it parallel aspects of psychological and spiritual development. In the end the ox disappears again, in the way that the ego when fully integrated can be transcended, when calm-abiding prevails. Professor Conradi showed us some of the pictures and pointed out the manifold lessons they illustrate. It was good to hear a non-medical person dealing so confidently and perceptively with personal development in a way that found no need make a distinction between the psychological and the spiritual. Would that more psychiatrists followed his example!

Finally Professor David Aldridge spoke about music therapy and the dying. He comes from a strikingly broad base spanning the creative arts and medicine, both orthodox and complimentary. Some remarkable videos illustrated how music and in particular song can induce an altered state of consciousness that benefits both patient and family. He emphasised the significance of 'performance' in our interactions with others, and indicated how this can be used for therapeutic benefit.

A responsive audience appreciated three contrasting speakers. Drs. David Jenkins and Andrew Powell, the respective chairs, ably kept order while interpolating their own characteristic comments.

This well attended joint meeting suggests that the organisers chose the right format for a topic of this sort: just three speakers within four hours, and not encroaching too much on the working day. It is to be hoped that its success will be followed by further meetings of this type and at this venue.

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