

‘Mental Health, Wellbeing and Spirituality’
Westpark Conference Centre, Dundee
12-14th August 2004

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Who says it doesn't pay to complain? This three-day conference, two years in the planning, had arisen from a service user's complaint that his spiritual concerns were not being addressed by Tayside Mental Health Care Trust. It proved to be groundbreaking, involving speakers from America and New Zealand and Britain, well known names in their fields in the areas of Spirituality and Mental Health.

There were no less than seven keynote speakers at the conference and three choices of three workshops a day for all three days. One could not possibly take it all in. This did not include entertainment in the evenings with Scottish Music, a Ceilidh and a trip to a concert at Glamis Castle! I can only give a taste of what was available.

The American speakers were Professor David Lukoff and Professor James Griffiths. The former was involved in getting a category called 'Spiritual Emergency' into the American DSM IV diagnostic manual, the latter has just written a book called 'Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy: How to Talk to People about their Spiritual Lives'. They had been brought over using funds normally earmarked for lecturing to psychiatrists but delegates at the conference were a complete mixture: nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, chaplains and service users. Several ethnic groups were present and several religious backgrounds, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sikhs. As service users we had bursaries to enable us to attend.

Of particular interest to me was Professor David Fontana who was responsible for bringing transpersonal psychology into the British Psychological Society. He has studied and written widely on the psychology of spirituality, meditation and personal growth (23 books translated into 26 languages!) Another was Professor John Swinton, who wrote 'Spirituality in Mental Health Care: Discovering a Forgotten Dimension' He challenged my racist and ageist prejudices about professors by being a young Afro-Caribbean with a Glaswegian accent! Another interesting person to meet was Moira Sills, a white British Buddhist who has developed a method called Core Process Psychotherapy. She talked particularly about the relationship between the client and the therapist. All these people have written and spoken about the importance of paying attention to the client's spiritual concerns.

This for me was the message I took from the conference. Whatever religion or spirituality the client has, it must be honoured. For us service users who have been ignored in the past for the spiritual content of our psychoses, this was enormously helpful. Not only were the speakers talking about this, those attending the conference were keen to listen to our experiences and share theirs. The beauty of a residential conference is that the conversations that take place in the breaks and at meal times are as inspiring as the talks and workshops. We met many people we would like to keep in touch with.

The speakers were available to talk to throughout the conference and were very friendly and approachable.

I would pick out one moment to take away from the conference that took place over breakfast on the last day. We were sitting with Isobel Clarke, a clinical psychologist who has written 'Psychosis and Spirituality: exploring the new Frontier'. She has also started a Yahoo Internet chat group (psychosisspirituality) of which I am a member and which was the source of my knowledge about the conference. This is an international group, but I met several British members at the conference. Isabel suggested that as service users highly inspired by the conference, we should consider what we were going to do now. She said humans were like frogs, that they were amphibious. The two worlds they had to live in were the spiritual and the everyday. In the spiritual they swam gracefully like the frog but on dry land, the day-to-day life of supermarkets and, dare we say, biomedically-biased psychiatrists, we had to find the equivalent of the hopping of the frog.

We had spent three days being recognised, honoured and appreciated for the spiritual experiences we had had in our 'madness'. Then we had to go back and walk on land. For me this was expressed rather graphically by the fact that I fell over on a moving escalator at London Bridge Tube Station after flying back from Dundee above the clouds. What happened to the service user who had complained in the first place? He had got himself a job in Spain and did not come back for the conference. Let's hope along the way someone was taking his spirituality as seriously as ours was taken at this conference.

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