

Book Review by Dr. Larry Culliford

Spirituality, Values and Mental Health: Jewels for the Journey

Edited by Mary Ellen Coyte, Peter Gilbert and Vicky Nicholls

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This is a marvellous patchwork quilt of a book. It will suit perfectly those given to sincere reflection on their work. Always informative, it is often surprisingly enjoyable and at times deeply moving.

The final brief chapter is worth reading first. Written by the three editors, their 'Concluding Thoughts' serve as a useful introduction. Admitting to problems summarizing the material, 'contributed by such a wide variety of people in many styles of discourse and written for a diverse audience', the editors point out that 'because of the complex nature of spirituality and mental health, any writing on the subject is unlikely to be a step-by-step manual'. What they do offer comprises 'pointers and suggestions which (they) hope will demystify, endorse and improve existing practice, or provide new ideas and support for individuals and organizations'. I think they succeed.

In a lucid and readable Foreword, modern prophet John Swinton calls this volume of essays, 'An important contribution', describing it as, 'drawing on empirical research, personal narrative... while retaining a continuous focus on the empowerment of service users'. He emphasizes the collaborative and creative nature of research and reflection, undertaken both *with* and *by* people with personal experience of mental health problems. This aspect is the book's real strength.

It helps that the text is well organized. There are twenty-four chapters, most also followed by short sections of poetry or personal reflection. The whole is arranged in five sections: Context, Diverse Perspectives, Good Practice, Education and Training, and Research. Unfortunately, I found the first section a little awkward (though others may like it.) Peter Gilbert, for example, aims at too many targets in an idiosyncratic, 'scattergun' first chapter on context. Quoting from economists, poets, philosophers, fiction, film and television, almost at random, he tries to say too much, from an admirable but misplaced enthusiasm. Asking, in his final section 'well, reader, are we still in touch?' seems particularly risky. 'Only just', I was thinking, and others – the very audience this book wants to capture – might already have put the book down. Let me urge all so affected to persevere.

The second section was the most affecting for me, and in a strange way perhaps also the most informative. Vicky Nicholls and Barbara Pointon in successive chapters, for example, write movingly and persuasively about the spiritual dimension from the perspective of 'survivor' and 'carer' respectively. They write with respect for those trying to help, with neither rancour nor self-pity, both demonstrating the maturity that weathering adversity can bring. Nicholls (p103) quotes Sally Clay: 'We who have experienced mental illness have all learned the same thing... We know that we have reached the bare bones of spirit and of what it means to be human'. This is a vital part life's true purpose. We may not exactly envy such a person, but we can all learn from her.

The idea that there is value in mental ill-health, in ministering to it in so many ways as well as surviving it, is an emergent theme of the book worthy of considerable emphasis. It is an idea useful in combating stigma and ignorance, also in restoring both personal and professional esteem. Life may best be considered and experienced as a continuing journey of spiritual development. It is obvious that we need to help each other along. We also need the humility and confidence to seek, acknowledge, make use of and value the help of others when it is available. In spiritual matters, I have often found it wise to think of patients as among the most precious of guides. This book has helped me understand better why this should be so.

There are many jewels for this journey here. Some chapters are focused on spiritual practices (Ch. 10 & 15), some on particular religious or spiritual viewpoints, such as one on Islam (Ch. 6) and one on 'Working with Qi (Chi)' (Ch. 14). Others address organizational and workplace issues (Ch. 16, 17 & 19). I was particularly impressed with the clarity of the two chapters (22 & 23) in the section on research. The first, again by John Swinton, helpfully explains, compares and contrasts the *structural-behavioural* and *value guidance* approaches. The other, by John Foskett and Anne Roberts, describes the influential 'Somerset Spirituality Project' during which the topic was explored from four perspectives: those of service users/survivors, carers, mental health professionals, and religious and spiritual leaders. The editors seem, once again, to have saved the best until near the end.

A degree of unevenness is to be expected in a patchwork quilt with so many contributors. While the fabric may seem slightly thin here and there, with flimsier research backing, the emotional colour is usually vivid. On the other hand, whereas some parts seem paler – a less exciting read – the text is thicker, with more supportive substance. Overall, in my view, the result here, both highly attractive and extremely useful, will serve to keep everyone warm, fuelled and jewelled on their journey. All involved are to be congratulated. This beautiful book deserves to be read by many. Among those wishing to improve themselves and their practice, none will be disappointed.