

What Inspires the Psychiatrist? Personal Beliefs, Attitudes and Values.

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In order to understand what guided me into Psychiatry, and hence my personal beliefs, I have to go back to my early days.

I was born and brought up in a small town in Pretoria, South Africa, into a Shia Muslim family. At the age of 15 I was initiated into meditation by my Imam. One of the conditions of the practice was that we meditated strictly between 4 and 5am and that we had to take the practice seriously. So we meditated, got experiences and the Elders gave talks on the meaning of life, Soul and Spirituality etc. My uncle, when we met, talked to me about metaphysics, yoga and his astral experiences. We young ones talked about football, snooker and girls! This is just a glimpse of life as I knew it.

After matriculating I applied for entry to Medical College in Dublin, and was accepted after doing the entrance exam. After some difficulties in adapting, I settled down in a pleasant leafy suburb of Dublin and got down to serious study. Around the corner just happened to be the Theosophical Society, which I joined. I spent time there when I could, in the library and attended talks. Being there connected me to the time I had at home. One of the books I came across at the time was the New Testament. The teachings of Christ had a profound effect on me, one of the verses sticking indelibly on my mind 'Seek ye First that Kingdom within...' I was entranced, mesmerised. It was a teaching that reverberated in my mind for a long time.

After graduating and doing my house jobs, I applied for a psychiatric post at the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries, Scotland and was accepted. The reason for going there is because it is near the Tibetan Centre in Eskdalemuir, Samye Ling. It is in a remote, bleak part of the countryside, run by Monks who escaped the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. I was curious about Buddhism and wished to learn more about it. I stayed in Dumfries for four years. During this time I would travel to the Centre over the weekends, attend their talks and join in their meditation sessions, which are held between 4 and 5 in the morning.

For me what was central in the teachings of Buddha was the importance of the mind. Buddha attained enlightenment after six years of intense meditation, contemplation and living an austere life. He emphasised that the mind had the most important function. It could be classified into three sections, the gross mind, which is the mind that we are ordinarily aware of, the subtle mind that manifests in dreams, and the subtlest mind, which is in deepest sleep and at the point of death. It is this level of the mind which, when purified, becomes enlightened, or reaches Buddha hood. Apart from the practice of meditation, there are also doctrinal formulas that assist the student during his practice. The teachings of Buddhism are replete with the importance of the mind, which is not possible to go into detail here.

During my stay in Dumfries, Transcendental Meditation came to town. We attended an introductory talk, liked what we heard and enrolled for the course. We were initiated into the practice and completed the course, which I found very impressive. The teacher, Gita Bellin, became our close friend, our house became the local centre where all the introductory talks were held and

the courses were taught. Gita would talk to us about her travels to India, about the mind and states of consciousness. She persuaded me to look into doing the teacher training course and after much thought and discussion with my wife Maggie, we decided to go for it. This meant giving up psychiatry and being way from the family for six months, a difficult decision.

The course was held high up in the hills, in Switzerland, in an incredibly beautiful setting. This was one of the Academies set up by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of TM. The course was intensive, learning about the dynamics and philosophy of meditation, states of consciousness and how this would relate to practical life. We learned about Vedic Philosophy and parallels with modern Science. Maharishi would invite scientists, artists, etc. and in discussions they would draw parallels between their subjects and meditation, which was very exciting.

After six months I returned home. We then moved to London where I got a job in North London. The next big influence for me was doing a course in Psychosynthesis, which I did for a year. Psychosynthesis was developed by the psychoanalyst Dr. Roberto Assagioli, a contemporary and close friend of Jung. Apart from his medical training, he also studied the world's major religions, especially the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian traditions. He introduced psychoanalysis to his professors in Florence but later criticised and abandoned it.

Psychosynthesis is a psychotherapeutic approach that synthesises both Western therapies and Eastern psychology, emphasising not only the importance of the mind but its transpersonal dimension.

Assagioli based this approach on the following philosophy:

- The purpose of psychological healing is to contact a deeper centre of identity, the Self and to nurture its unfoldment while removing obstacles to its actualisation
- The aim is to create an optimistic vision of human nature in spite of the dominance of the pathologically orientated psychology of the time
- To recognize the need for meaning and purpose as being fundamental to human existence and well being
- To perceive life as an evolutionary journey of development and differentiation, and to see problems as opportunities which aid this unfoldment
- Human beings are both individual with unique qualities, and universal, intimately connected both with others and with the environment
- The active evocation of potential is necessary for the treatment of neurosis and pathology
- People not only repress their unacceptable aspects of themselves but also their higher impulses such as intuition, altruism, creative inspiration, love and joy

Thirty years later, Assagioli's ideas were seen to be in agreement with the work of Abraham Maslow, who maintained that one could not draw universal conclusions or theories about human nature by extrapolating from the pathology of human beings or studying the sick psyche, but that one

should study human kind in its greatest, most beautiful manifestation, 'the psychology of Becoming'.

The therapeutic approach to Psychosynthesis is not only for those seeking therapy but also an educational tool for self-development.

Another workshop that influenced me greatly was EST, or Erhard Seminar Training. This was developed by a successful businessman called Werner Erhard who, like Assagioli, studied all the major religions, especially Buddhism. He was, apart from his business interests, a trainer for mind development and also Silva mind Control. It is said that after he received what he would term an enlightenment experience he changed dramatically. His weight dropped, he stopped smoking and generally his appearance changed. It was also then that he decided to give up his business interests and developed the EST workshop. About 1000 people came to the first workshop. He then began to train trainers, and slowly EST spread all over the world, especially in India. It was his intention that EST would have a limited lifespan.

It is difficult to describe the workshop experience. Erhard himself says that the purpose of the workshop is transformational. The purpose of the training, he would say, is to transform the experience of living, so that things that you have been putting up with, or trying to change, clear up just in the course of life itself!

The workshop was over two intensive weekends, starting at 9am and stopping at 2 or 3am the next morning, only to start again in the morning at 10am.

I was asked to be a Wellness Consultant, my role being to screen out people who we thought may not be strong enough to last the course, which could be very challenging. I had the great opportunity of doing this for eight years. This would entail discussions with the trainers during the breaks. The trainers were the best that I had ever seen and had the pleasure to work with.

Apart from my involvement with the above schools of meditation, therapies and the EST workshop, my wife and I ran weekly meditation classes for six years.

To summarise, my early life gave me an understanding of the spiritual dimension of life through traditional teachings and the practice of meditation. This I consider a purely personal affair, of helping one through one's personal evolution in life.

It is personal because it is based in a traditional belief, not necessarily shared by others, in which case it may be diluted or dismissed when challenged vigorously in an atmosphere of scepticism. Yet this is understandable when those belief systems are not consistent with one's own intuitional and intellectual appraisal. One has to be adaptable; for not being so gives rise to a fanatical attachment to one's beliefs, arising from fear and insecurity.

In the field of psychiatry, I believe the study of spirituality is of paramount importance. The study of the mind must include not only its expression in behaviour but also that which is the essence of it, call it what you will - Spirit, Being, Transpersonal Self. We learn only half the truth in our conventional training and, as Oscar Wilde said, 'half a truth can be worse than a lie'.

Assagioli pointed out that mental problems are caused not only by repression of the ego, but also by repression of the sublime. Our great prophets taught us just that. Christ said, 'seek ye *first* that Kingdom within...' Krishna said, '*first* establish yourself in Being, and then perform action...' The Greek philosophers exhorted, 'know thyself'. This message has an urgency about it.

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