

## **‘Causing a death’**

### **Two books reviewed by Professor Andrew Sims**

**Hiram Johnson** (2006) *Tragic Redemption: Healing the Guilt and Shame*, Austin, Texas: Langmarc Publishing.

**Kelly Connor** (2004) *To Cause a Death: the Aftermath of an Accidental Killing*, Forest Row: Clairview Books.

The Spirituality and Psychiatry SIG functions at its very best when it is either considering a psychiatric subject from a spiritual perspective or a topic of spiritual significance from a psychiatric standpoint. One such topic that recurs in our thinking is guilt and forgiveness; a spiritual approach to psychiatry is especially likely to make a positive contribution in this vexed and complicated area. How to forgive? How to be forgiven? How to forgive yourself?

The journeys that culminated in the writing of these two very different books both started when, as a teenage driver, each author caused the unwitting but in their own opinion, reckless death of another person. Although that was their start, they diverged in their actions and thinking thereafter. How can one be forgiven and how can one live oneself knowing that one has killed another person? For a mere psychiatrist with a consuming interest in each individual and his or her story, one of these accounts is a bit short and the other a bit tall on story. Both are polemical, going to great lengths to demonstrate that their prescription is ‘right’.

Kelly Connor moved as a child with her family from drabbest Manchester to sunny Australia. Whilst still in Britain she developed deep antagonism for organised religion, especially Christianity. The family moved from Sydney on the East Coast to Perth, finally settling there for Kelly’s teenage years. There, soon after passing her driving test, she accidentally ran over and killed an elderly woman. This changed the course of the rest of her life. Her nomadic childhood had set the pattern for her wanderings, geographical, ideological and in her relationships in adult life. She was ‘destabilised’ and socially isolated, and treated in psychiatric hospitals, which included fringe therapies such as Primal Scream. Eventually, she found some peace of mind and her story turns into ardent rhetoric on behalf of the teachings of Rudolf Steiner.

Hiram Johnson could hardly be more different as a person. He describes an equally troubled childhood with an alcohol-abusing father. However, when faced with his causing the death of another, the biggest challenge to selfhood, he reacts by holding on to certainties and remaining in the same place, more or less, geographically. He goes through depression and self-loathing but comes out with an established faith that results in little self-examination but considerable peace of mind. We end up by not knowing him as a person very well but we do know how he was able to come to terms and live with himself.

These accounts make a fascinating contrast in the resolution of a broadly similar spiritual problem. All credit should go to the Editor of the Newsletter in choosing to have them compared! Having spent much of my life carrying out psychiatric follow-up studies I would love to know what happened afterwards in both cases.