

Interview with Dr. Larry Culliford

By Kathy Noren

Kathy Noren is a BA. (Hons) student of Health & Community Development at Bournemouth University. She is preparing a dissertation on: 'An exploration of the relationship between spirituality and mental health'.

Larry Culliford is a consultant psychiatrist who writes self-improvement books under the pen name Patrick Whiteside.

KN: Could you define what you mean by spirituality?

LC: It is difficult to define, because the whole question of defining means putting limits around something, and spirituality doesn't have any limits. But it is also necessary to try and define it in terms of everyday use, particularly if you are going to introduce the idea of spirituality into health care, and if you are going to do anything do to with researching spirituality. So here is a useful definition from a nursing textbook by Murray and Zentner¹.

'In every human being there seems to be a spiritual dimension, a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in God. The spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite, and comes into focus when the person faces emotional stress, physical [and mental] illness, loss, or death' (p.259).

My own thinking, that spirituality is connected with 'dimensions of human experience', is a valuable one if you think about the other dimensions. I use a kind of a system or hierarchy of dimensions of human experience, starting with the *physical* or particular (as in atoms and molecules). The next level of organisation or complexity is the *biological* level, and then the next level is the *psychological* level, which I divide into *intra*-personal, that's a person's own mind before they start to relate to other people, so the next level is *inter*-personal, and that includes family and society and culture. Some people would want to add a separate cultural dimension, a *psychosocial* dimension. And then the *spiritual* dimension comes in one sense at the top, but also in another sense at the bottom, at the beginning.

This is because it is more essentially non-material, not consisting of matter. It is a dimension that we do not access directly through our physical senses. This dimension connects with the idea that 'out of the nothingness comes form and substance' - interchangeable matter and energy. Similarly, 'out of the void comes creation'. So this is a way of linking all these dimensions together.

One of the things that I am very keen to reflect on and establish is the distinction between religion and spirituality. Obviously religions are about spirituality, but they also have a cultural function and a cultural dimension. Spirituality is something that seems to be embedded in all world faiths, and indeed also in some atheistic pursuits like humanism and so on. This is another area that needs thinking through very clearly so that you don't automatically relate spirituality and religion. For instance, in surveys of health care professionals quite a lot of people do that. They just automatically presume that spirituality and religion are the same thing, and of course there is an important distinction. So, the relevance of spirituality in health and health care is to do with it's

healing powers if you like, or it's relevance towards healing; and healing can be distinguished from cure in a way that perhaps I can mention in answering some of your questions later on.

KN: Some would say that spirituality does not exist because you can't measure it. What do you think about this? Can you measure it, and how?

LC: It is sometimes helpful to think in terms of spiritual beliefs and practices, and this does link up with religious beliefs and practices, and although you cannot easily define the content you can measure the effects. For instance, the Royal Free Interview for Spiritual and Religious Beliefs ²³ does prove that there is something measurable in this area. Perhaps I should add that there has been a great deal of research material published on this topic, and much of it shows that religious or spiritual belief and practices are conducive to better physical and mental health. The Handbook of Religion and Health by Koenig, McCullough and Larson ⁴ is full of this research.

KN: What are your thoughts about what Freud and Jung have to say about religion?

LC: Freud was a bit negative about religion and I can't say that I have read much of what he has written about it. Jung on the other hand explored more what I would call spirituality than religion as such.

KN: What are your thoughts about Frankl's logotherapy ⁵ and the following critique that he made of Jung?

'The 'unconscious God' must not be mistaken as an impersonal force operant in man. This misunderstanding was the greatest mistake to which C. G. Jung fell prey. Jung must be credited with having discovered distinctly religious elements within the unconscious. Yet he misplaced this unconscious religiousness of man, failing to locate the unconscious God in the personal and existential region. Instead he allotted it to the region of drives and instincts, where unconscious religiousness no longer remained a matter of choice and decision. According to Jung, something within me is religious, but it is not I who then is religious; something within me drives me to God, but it is not I who makes that choice and takes the responsibility.

For Jung, unconscious religiousness was bound up with religious archetypes belonging to the collective unconscious. For him, unconscious religiousness has scarcely anything to do with a personal decision, but becomes an essentially impersonal, collective, 'typical' (i.e., archetypal) process occurring in man. However, it is our contention that religiousness could emerge least of all from a collective unconscious, precisely because religion involves the most personal decisions man makes, even if only on an unconscious level. But there is no possibility of leaving such decisions to some processes merely taking place in me" (Frankl 1997, pp70 – 71).

LC: It is quite a long time since I read Frankl and other existential psychologists, including Rollo May. Frankl seems to be criticising Jung on the question of how personal or impersonal, or how much choice or intention, the individual has in terms of expressing their archetypal spiritual/religious nature.

My understanding of Jung is different, in that he defines a kind of sequence. Jung's idea of the ego is one that matures by integrating the shadow, becoming a grander or more mature self, which is then itself in contact with the collective unconscious. He does very definitely describe a process of personal development and

growth, in which a therapist has a part like a midwife, rather than someone who provides an external treatment of some kind. It is someone who helps a natural process unfold. So I am not sure that I entirely agree with what you have read to me of Frankl. I think they were both approaching something which, when they were writing, had been almost declared taboo by Freud who was very influential. He was so convinced that religious beliefs and practices were unhelpful, and was hostile to Jung, personally in fact, and their relationship fell apart because of Jung's insistence on this spiritual element of human psychological make-up.

KN: A statement on the Royal College of Psychiatrists website (www.rcpsych.ac.uk) is; *'Both pathological and normal human experiences are considered in order to understand better the overlap and difference between the two'*. How can you differentiate between the two experiences?

LC: This is a hard question, and it is hard because we actually define for ourselves what is normal and what is pathological. This means our own belief systems come into play here, although we are not good at acknowledging that, because of our scientist adherence to the so-called objective approach. And I think this is where psychiatry is set to move forward, to develop.

Some of the pioneers are people like R. D. Laing whose books, 'The Politics of Experience' and 'The Divided Self' point towards a healthy component of severe illness states - as if people can grow through psychosis in a way that those individuals cannot in any other way. That is not to say that every episode of psychosis, or everybody who suffers from psychosis, is on a spiritual path that is about to be helpful for them, but I think we do have to look much more closely as a profession at people who are having necessary, essentially unavoidable but creative episodes of what appears to be an illness state.

What is difficult again is that people are often describing their experiences in terms of one or another religion, so it may not be helpful to be too ready to define anything as normal or pathological until it has been very thoroughly explored, and the model that we now use is the bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model. The model that we traditionally used was more simply the bio-psycho-social, but we are adding a spiritual component to help professionals, or to remind professionals, that there may be a spiritual component and that it may be even a healthy and useful, positive one, that there may be a healing component that has a spiritual basis.

The question of how to differentiate can be answered at an individual or personal level, in the sense that 'how can I differentiate as a practising psychiatrist' might be a different answer from 'how can we as a profession differentiate'. In other words, I advocate the development of what you might call spiritual skills for practitioners and some will in the first place naturally, and in the second place by effort and training, be more adept than others at picking out what you might call a spiritual crisis from mental illness. But the important thing for all is to know that there are other so-called experts around, and expertise should be available through chaplaincy and pastoral care departments. It isn't always, but it should be, and it should be something that we are working towards.

KN: An existential question on your website (www.happinessite.com) is *'To what extent do we, both as individuals and together, have choices about our own psychological development?'* What is your view?

LC: Psychological development has a nature and nurture component, I would say. That is to say there is a hereditary component. Already infants at an early age are showing different temperaments, and there is some quite good research on that. So each kind of baby is an individual, psychologically speaking.

In terms of nurture - the environmental contribution - psychological development has been written about by researchers like Piaget. The one that I like, because he follows it throughout the life cycle, is Erik Erikson, who developed some of Freud's earlier ideas. You know there is an enormous amount of literature on human psychological development. The question of choice, however, is not often addressed, at least I am not aware of it in the formal literature, but it is one that is very worthwhile introducing.

I have a sense that a person has a choice as soon as he or she recognises that there is a choice. So there are a couple of stages really. The first is to realise you have a choice, and then you exercise it – and if you want to develop yourself psychologically, your choices include going on some kind of programme, reading certain books and so on. There is a sense in which we all are developing psychologically, but my view is that we each have a choice about how much time and effort we put into it. For example, people who find themselves angry a lot can go to anger management classes. Where this links with spirituality is that a lot of spiritual development has a beneficial effect on psychological development. For example, learning how to meditate. Good questions to ask yourself include, 'Who am I?' and, 'Who am I becoming?' It is much easier to ask and answer questions like these at a personal level than to try and ask similar questions at a collective level.

KN: How far do you think people can be happy without having a sense of meaning and purpose in life?

LC: I think it helps to have a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Most people have, although not everybody has thought it through and knows what it is. Not so many people have asked themselves, 'What gives my life meaning and purpose?' Again, I think this is a question that each person would benefit by reflecting on.

A concept that comes into mind to help focus on this, and several of the other questions, is the idea of *maturity*. People go from relative immaturity to maturity in their psychological development throughout life, and I think a sense of meaning and purpose goes with maturity, as does happiness and other attributes. Maturity involves virtue and wisdom, a greater awareness of what each person shares with every other person, and to what extent we are inter-dependent and dependent too on the nature of life itself, the plants, and on the cosmos, etc. It involves an awareness of a kind of universality.

So it is not just having a sense of meaning and purpose. If your sense of meaning is based on the results of your favourite team, how they did last weekend in the match, then your happiness level is going to go up and down according to the results of the team. So it is what gives you a sense of meaning and purpose really that defines to a degree, not just happiness, but contentment, inner peace, freedom from guilt, shame, doubt, anger and things like that. It is a big question and indeed it is very much what I have been writing about in my books.⁶ I suppose a starting point is that however happy a person is, there are ways in which they can develop towards being more happy, either more frequently happy, more intensely happy, or happy for longer, and also develop a greater sense of self-worth and contentment in life. So, yes, I do think the question of a sense of meaning and purpose is critically important.

KN: Is suffering necessary for spiritual growth?

LC: Well, I think the Buddhist four noble truths give a good answer. The Buddha said right at the beginning of his teaching that there is suffering. It is unavoidable.

If you have a physical body, then you will know what suffering is in terms of physical suffering and physical pain. Because we have minds, we also know about emotional suffering. What I have been writing is to some extent aimed at clarifying different types of suffering. But, also interesting is what the Buddha goes on to say about the causes of suffering. He describes attachment as a primary cause of suffering. In other words, if you want something, or you have an aversion – either wanting something or wanting to avoid something – these are both causes of suffering. Spiritual growth in those terms has to do with letting go of this seeking, this grasping, this egotism, this self-serving attitude, and I would say that the Greek philosophers, Aristotle and so on, also understood this to some extent. And Christian philosophers too – although this is a big topic to get into, the religious and other interpretations of what is suffering.

One meaning of 'to suffer' is quite simply to experience something, and another meaning of it is to allow something, as in the Biblical quote 'suffer little children to come unto me'. This means to permit them to do so. So the question 'What is suffering?' is worth exploring, particularly individually. It can help for a person to ask 'what is suffering?' 'what makes me suffer?' and 'how do I experience suffering?' This questioning starts you on the process of letting go of suffering and avoiding it.

So, is it necessary? Well it is probably unavoidable. I think there is quite a good teaching that says that fools are people who do not learn from their mistakes. Ordinary people do learn from their mistakes, and wise people learn from other people's mistakes. In other words, there are ways to get through life without suffering if you learn the lessons, either through having made the mistakes or having watched others make them. And, of course, you can read texts, for example scriptural texts, wisdom texts, which teach you how to avoid suffering. And you can learn spiritual skills to avoid suffering too, or better, to transform sufferings into blessings. These are the skills of meditation and so on. This is again a big topic.

KN: West ⁷ poses the question; Are spiritual questions existential questions? What is your view?

LC: I don't think you can map them exactly onto each other, but they do overlap a good deal don't they? I think so. If a person addresses the existential questions of their own life honestly and with courage, then they will find themselves exploring the spiritual dimension. I think probably this is more to do with language and how you describe experience than that there is a very real or significant distinction between spiritual and existential matters.

KN: West also questions whether spirituality in a therapy setting could make you lose your objectivity and impose your values on the client. What is your view?

LC: This question implies a value. It implies that you value objectivity. In therapy some objectivity is necessary, in the form of what you might call detachment, but some subjectivity is also necessary because of the process of empathy. Empathy is that kind of process by which a person experiences, within themselves, something that's going on in the other person. This particularly occurs at the emotional level, and a therapist needs to be able to subjectively experience their empathic response to the person they are treating. Where spirituality comes in, I think, has to do with something called compassion, which is a bit like empathy in a sense, but it is more generally directed

towards all one's brothers and sisters of human kind (and possibly towards the animal kingdom as well) rather than just the individual you happen to be working with in therapy.

I don't think so much spirituality imposes values, although one can speak about spiritual values. I think it helps you discover them really, and not so much adopt them as be adopted by them. People who follow a spiritual path in an active way through prayer, meditation, reading scripture, engaging in religious practices, liturgy and ritual, by going on pilgrimages, doing good works and all the rest of it, they do embody spiritual values. It is a kind of repetitive or snowball type process. Obviously, the more you engage in spiritual practice, the more these values will be demonstrated spontaneously in your life. For instance, some examples of spiritual values are: kindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance, patience, honesty, creativity, joy, humility, wisdom and courage. It is hard to think that anyone might not want those values to be an integral part of the therapeutic process. Certainly a therapist who has their own agenda doesn't usually get very far, and of course a great part of training to be a psychotherapist has to do with becoming aware of your own agenda, which might be unconscious initially, making it conscious and then somehow letting go of it.

KN: Yalom said that logotherapy is fundamentally religious; do you agree?

LC: I can't say that I am sufficiently familiar, sufficiently recently, with logotherapy to say much about that, but I would again point out that there is a distinction between religion, religiousness, and spirituality. So again I go back to what I said earlier about Frankl and the existentialists, that there is an overlap here. But logotherapy is not a religion. It does not properly have churches or priesthood or anything like that. But I suspect Yalom was saying something about it pointing towards the spiritual dimension, and I think in a helpful way.

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