

A Service User's Perspective

Hilary Pegg

The psychiatrist thrust a piece of paper into my hand. In disbelief I read 'Bipolar Affective disorder: a guide for patients and families'. I looked at the psychiatrist in horror. 'You have had grandiose delusions' she said calmly. 'You were very ill'. I knew she was wrong. What I had experienced two years before was neither grandiose, nor a delusion. I knew I had had spirit guides speaking through me. They even told me their names. One, called Alalal, lived in the Institute of Joseph of Arimathea and normally communicated through numerology. He had answered my prayer for healing for my sister who was dying of cancer. He spoke through my mouth, moving my tongue and jaws. My arms had become hot as my husband drove me to lay hands on my sister. The missionary I had visited had told me I was possessed by a spirit. She had laid hands on me and I found myself praising God ecstatically, the words just pouring out of me. But all I could do was mumble to the psychiatrist 'do you know anything about Christianity?' Her eyes took on the glazed look I have come to know from psychiatrists and doctors. 'We'll leave it there, read the leaflet, see if you think you've got it and I'll see you in six weeks.'

Somehow, I had to defend myself! It had all been real, so real. I went home and spent several sleepless nights writing a defence of my spiritual experiences, which had included receiving what is known as the 'The Baptism of the Holy Spirit' at a charismatic service 'Living Water' just before my voices started. I made meticulous notes of dates, times and places. In the day I scoured the Internet for references to religious experience and its relation to psychosis. Then one morning I woke up early to voices in my ears telling me it was the end of the world but there was nothing to worry about as long as I played my part. My spirits were back.

I was to relax and let them manipulate my body as they had done the last time. I found my limbs being moved, my head being rotated. I felt wonderful and cared for. I heard other voices, doubting voices...could this woman be given the responsibility for the end of the world? Yes, said the spirits, we have trained her; she will play her part exactly as we have taught her. Well, the world didn't end; they later said they were just testing me to see if I obeyed them and I was soon back in hospital again. I continued getting messages until God Himself spoke to me. He came back to earth periodically to view the world through human eyes. I was to be the second coming of Jesus. He told me I was now a perfect human being and though I would be tarnished by life's experiences, a tape would be made of my life. Then I realised that there was no actual tape; the tape was my life.

Soon I was sitting at a ward round, this time in front of the consultant psychiatrist. He told me three times I had manic depression. 'What I say three times is true' said the Bellman in Lewis Carol's Hunting of the Snark. But it couldn't be true. The psychiatrist's eyes still glazed over when I tried to explain about my spirits. Finally I gave in. After all, the spirits had told me some strange things. My sister wasn't healed and died of cancer at the end of the year. Perhaps the truth was that religion is just what manic-depressives tell us. All that about the love of God and the existence of a spirit world, yes, the atheist psychiatrists were right. It was probably all hereditary, neurotransmitters and GABA and not coping with life's stresses and strains. Just keep taking the pills.

Author's note.

I have written the above to recreate my memory of how I initially felt on leaving hospital without any spiritual input. I am a Methodist local preacher and felt my faith was being put on the line. I am shifting from this black and white view that

my experience was either spirits or chemicals through my contact with the Psychiatry and Spirituality Special Interest Group. I am very grateful that the website is in the public domain and would like to thank Dr Powell and Dr Sanderson for responding personally to me. Dr Powell wrote in his newsletter article 'Mental Health and Spirituality' (Newsletter 10 Dec1992), 'the key to working...is extraordinarily simple. It only requires that the psychiatrist shows a genuine interest in and respect for whatever the patient ventures to confide.' I am sure this is true and has been the case for me.

As an 'involved service user' I am hoping to support any initiatives in my own area of Norfolk to bring spirituality onto the agenda.

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