

# Sitting in the Stillness

## Freedom from the Personal Story

Martin Wells

Mantra Books, Winchester, 2019

The impact of the many Spirituality SIG conferences over the last 20 years is impossible to fully appreciate. People have been touched in many varied ways, sometimes by a one or more speaker, sometimes by connections made with like-minded colleagues.

The seeds of this inspiring book were sown at a Spirituality SIG conference on the subject of mindfulness in 2008 which was attended by the author Martin Wells. In his introduction, Martin explains: "After many years' commitment to this path [of self-improvement], which included workshops retreats and conferences, I was starting to become increasingly jaded – and was going through the motions. My work as a therapist and meditation teacher was starting to feel formulaic and lifeless. But one day everything changed! The words I heard at a conference in London [2008 SIG conference] arrived like a clap of thunder, waking me up from my trance. They led me to question what I had taken to be 'me' and to loosen my identification with my story." The words were spoken by one of the speakers, Jean-Marc Mantel, a French psychiatrist. The words which particularly shook Martin were: "You are not your story.....It is fiction!.....Enquire into who or what you really are."

As a psychotherapist, Martin has been offering mindfulness practice in his NHS work for nearly 30 years. His experience at the 2008 SIG meeting led to a radical reappraisal of his understanding of mindfulness and of his personal and professional practice. This book is the fruit of this journey.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is a collection of stories about Martin's work with individual patients or colleagues. These stories are true, although heavily disguised to protect people's privacy. The second part has a similar format but the stories are based on his work with couples, families and groups.

Running through these stories are two broad themes. The first is that, although we often come to professional help seeking a better life and relief from some form of illness or disease, the reality is that we already are who we seek to become. From this perspective, behind the mask of our persona (persona = "sound through") there is a deeper level of being which is whole. As a psychotherapist, one accompanies someone in the "stripping away of false notions of self." So in describing his work with one particularly challenging patient, Martin writes "If I've helped him it has been by not trying to help or fix him but more by staying curious about the man behind the mask. There never was anything to fix! In fact, in trying to help or fix I assume the role of therapist and invite him into the role of patient. If I can sit still enough, by that I mean, be present without roles and expectations, there is a different kind of invitation. From this place we invite the patient into their own stillness, which quite naturally reveals itself as who they are."

From this perspective, a breakdown in our functioning, may represent the collapse of our constructed image of self, which in turn offers an opportunity for the being behind the mask to reveal itself. This notion of breaking down to break through is not new, but Martin brings a refreshing approach to this that challenges the culture of “striving to be better”.

The second theme running through the book is that of the underlying interconnectedness of all life. This is particularly evident in Martin’s descriptions of his work with couples, families, and small and large groups. He gives good examples of the way a collection of people can function as a self-regulating whole organism. From this perspective, a couple, family or therapeutic group “offers the opportunity to experience both separation and isolation as illusions of the mind and ultimately to experience the common thread that connects us all.”

The final chapter is devoted to some frequently asked questions about mindfulness and responses to these. Martin notes that for all the welcome growth of interest in mindfulness, there is a risk of it being seen as a technique or treatment which “implies a form of doing that takes us from one state to another so that we feel better. But the essence of mindfulness embodies the opposite, reminding us that there is nothing wrong and nothing to be fixed.”

Overall this is a wise and enlightening book. The writing is open and sincere and carries an inner authority born of Martin’s personal and professional experience. He explores profound issues about who we are with a light touch and writes in an accessible and non-technical style. The text is liberally sprinkled with inspiring quotes from poets and mystics through the ages. Many people could enjoy and be inspired by this book – not just those interested in mindfulness, but anyone who is curious about their story and what lies beyond.

Andrew Clark