Conversations with the Soul

A Psychiatrist Reflects: Essays on Life, Death and Beyond

Andrew Powell

Muswell Hill Press, London, 2018

Andrew Powell was the founding chair of the Spirituality in Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which is celebrating the 20th anniversary of its founding this year. Over those years it has provided a deeply valued forum for those psychiatrists with an interest in spirituality. This book is a collection of 17 papers and talks given by Andrew between 2006 and 2017, several of them given at conferences organised by the Spirituality in Psychiatry group. It is a welcome sequel to “Ways of the Soul” which included papers from the previous decade. Both collections draw richly on Andrew’s experience of working clinically as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, as well as his understanding of psychoanalytic and Jungian psychology, quantum physics, anthropology and comparative religion.

Each paper is complete in itself and although many of them were originally addressed to clinical audiences, they are refreshingly jargon-free and so are accessible to anyone interested in the subject matter.

The overall focus of the book is the question of what it means to be human and the challenges we all face both on a personal and collective level. Indeed one of the chapters is the transcript of a dialogue addressing this very question. Andrew brings a broad bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective to his reflections on being human. He sees our bodies as providing a vehicle and opportunity for an evolving partnership between the ego and the soul. The ego helps individuals to grow and survive in the physical world. The soul co-habits with the ego for the purpose of gaining experience and so must share in the ego’s experience of pain. The soul is seen as the particular manifestation of the all-encompassing Spirit (which may be called “God” or “Supreme Consciousness”) in an individual form. Both ego and soul need each other and when working in partnership can become the perfect instrument for creating heaven on earth. However, the ego’s innate tendency to separate and divide and see the world through its own lens, means that it is often unaware of and disconnected from the soul.

At an individual level, Andrew sees the disconnection between ego and soul as a key factor in mental health problems. At a collective level this disconnection has led to a profound sense of alienation and has led to untold destruction of our fellow human beings and Nature. Helping individuals and groups to re-establish a healthy connection between ego and soul has been Andrew’s life work.

The more clinically orientated chapters describe ways of helping others listen to and converse with their soul. With the help of remarkable anecdotes and case stories, Andrew provides glimpses both of his own journey and those of the patients he has supported. He offers examples of ways in which a clinician can invite the patient to go deeper, such as using a question like: “What would your heart say if it could speak?” He also devotes significant passages to the importance of forgiveness, which is ultimately seen as a quality of the soul which balances the ego’s tendency to retaliation. From this perspective, forgiveness does not need to be forced or pushed. Helping someone connect with their soul brings forth the quality of forgiveness naturally.

The chapters examining our collective human situation give a particular emphasis on how, over the last 300 years, especially in so-called Western culture, humanity has become increasingly enthralled by scientism. This is an ideology which particularly appeals to the ego with its explanatory and technological power. Whilst science has brought extraordinary benefits to humanity, scientism has led to a narrow materialistic worldview with little room or respect for spiritual perspectives. Consequently, many in today’s world have a deep prejudice towards matters of the soul. Inevitably, modern mental health care has been shaped by a similar prejudice. Andrew draws on some of the findings of quantum physics and transpersonal psychology to address this narrow worldview and to show that it is no longer in step with modern scientific and psychological research. Fittingly, the final chapter of the book is entitled: “Prejudice – can we live without it?” The chapter and book ends with Andrew’s answer to his own question which is “yes, we must, if there is to be a future for humanity.”

My overall response to this book is one of warmth and hope. Having worked in the same field, I was struck by the courage in Andrew’s professional work which comes through in these papers. He was exploring ways to help people connect with their soul which would have been frowned upon by some colleagues. He was exploring a pathway to healing that not many psychiatrists had trodden. It is worth remembering that the origin of the word “courage” is from the French word for heart “coeur” and this book does indeed have plenty of heart. This heart-centredness is blended with clarity of thought which many readers will value, whether or not they are clinicians.

The book is also a timely exposition of the centrality of love and its importance in any situation in which one is in a position to help another human being. Andrew reminds us that in the face of inevitable suffering we always have at our disposal “the best medicine known to humankind – the healing power of love”.

Andrew Clark