

**‘Crossing the River:
The contribution of Spirituality to humanity and its future’.**

Edited by Arthur Hawes and Ben Bano.
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Book review by Dr Alison J Gray

Crossing the river was written in honour of Peter Gilbert, a senior social worker and tireless advocate for spirituality in mental health. He developed motor neurone disease in late 2012 and died Christmas 2013. The book title ‘Crossing the River’ was the phrase he used to refer to the transition from life into eternity.

The book covers the four main areas in which Peter thought, taught and led: Spirituality and Mental Health; Spirituality and Social work; Inter-faith relations and Leadership.

Certain images and metaphors recur: that of spirituality as breathing, the importance to Peter of his running club, the fact that Peter had experienced his own bout of illness and was a service user, the need for wholeness and integrity in leadership, and the depth of Peter’s compassion. The image of death as crossing the river is frequently alluded to. Many of the chapters have an honest, lively, personal and narrative approach, rather than a technical or academic one, which reflects my experience of Peter’s personal approach to life over the ten years I knew him.

The first section, Spirituality and Mental Health has five chapters, starting with an emphasis on the service user as the centre of a whole person approach. Arthur Hawes makes an interesting link between the principles that underlying the Mental Health Act code of practice and the principles which underlie (Christian) spirituality.

Qaisra Khan emphasises the importance of nature in experiencing the divine (going running was a significant part of Peter’s spirituality). In the following chapter John Swinton continues the link with running and focuses on spirit, meaning breath, in so many languages. Anthony Sheehan, formerly of the National Institute for Mental Health Excellence, gives his thoughts on the link between spirituality and the established church, looked at from the US faith based health sector. Stephan Ball offers a basic introduction to spirituality in mental health from a Quaker viewpoint, highlighting three basic existential needs; the sense of identity, the need to belong and the need for meaning and purpose; needs that are met for so many people through faith based communities.

Spirituality and Social work is the theme of chapters six to nine. Margaret Holloway returns to the importance of spirituality as breath and the need to live and breathe our spirituality in our work. Spirituality is seen as sustaining the social worker, particularly in difficult relationships with clients who have lost their sense of meaning.

The importance of place and the strength in being open as a wounded healer come through strongly. Bernard Moss gives a clear and concise update on the state of social work training and the recent establishment of the College of Social Work. Margaret McGettrick majors on spirituality, the healing entailed in listening properly to the service user's story, and compassion as a form of spiritual practice. The best services recognize the need for the carer to have time to re-energise and reflect. I found Margaret's comments on compassionate care leading to 'joy and a sense of fulfillment in their work' very affirming.

Hari Sewell's chapter could have easily sat in the 'leadership' area since it is to do with the Social Care Strategic Network annual residential break. Hari's description of these short breaks at Worth Abbey highlights the planned 'down-time'; not packed full of information but enabled those attending to reflect and recharge in whatever way was natural to them. That those of many faiths and none cherished and valued these weekends says a lot about Peter's open spirituality, grounded in Benedictine Catholicism, and about the opening and welcoming nature of the team at Worth Abbey.

Chapters ten to twelve reflect on Peter's multi-faith work, giving a clear and concise introduction to spirituality from Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist perspectives. The chapter from Martin Aaron is much more personal than the others and covers the development of the National Spirituality and Mental Health Forum. Chetna Kang considers the Hindu approach to death and rebirth and the need to nourish our spiritual nature so that the divine side comes through. Sarajane Aris gives a concise introduction to Buddhism, mindfulness and the Buddhist concept of death. The only Gilbert mentioned here is Prof Paul Gilbert, whose papers are not clearly differentiated from Peter's, both being listed as 'P Gilbert' – a point of detail that is worth amending if the book goes to reprint.

The final section is on spirituality and leadership. The first chapter provides a bridge from the previous section, being on the Sikh conception of leadership. Here the metaphor is flowing water rather than breath. Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh describes the work of the Sikh community in Birmingham in altruistically serving others, and again emphasizes the need for the leader to be an integrated whole person. 'Social cohesion depends on finding cohesion within ourselves, when we recognize and build on the interdependence of body, spirit and mind' (p. 135).

Peter Sedgwick writes of Peter Gilbert's support in the process of change at an Anglican Theological college and again commends the Benedictine rule to modern leaders, highlighting the importance of integrity in leadership. Peter Bates reflects on Peter Gilbert's help with the leadership of Learning disability services, particularly the need for distributed leadership, thereby supporting people to lead whenever and in whatever areas they are able. (Here I was challenged by Peter Bates' approach to the current economic climate; the changes and cutbacks forced on the National Development Team for Inclusion by austerity have to be faced).

Ben Bano closes with a summary of Peter's teaching as the need to focus on our inner selves - our souls, the importance of compassion and love to motivate our actions, and the value of the rule of St Benedict for leaders.

Peter's final gifts to us were editing the excellent 'Spirituality and End of Life Care'¹ while facing his own mortality unflinchingly, and giving all of us who knew him the example of a good death. As Martin Aaron writes: 'He was a compassionate man, whose vocation in life was in the service of others' (p. 111).

'Crossing the River' will be a useful introduction to spirituality in mental health, particularly for any who knew Peter Gilbert's work. The writing is uniformly of a high standard. As is common with multi-author texts the book is occasionally repetitive, but the fact that it was assembled in just a few months does not show through. Currently unavailable via Amazon, the book can be ordered at the Pavilion publishing site www.pavpub.com; all royalties go to the Motor Neurone Foundation.

¹ Gilbert P. (ed) 'Spirituality and End of Life Care'. (Hove: Pavilion Publishing, 2013)