

Book Review by Dr Andrew Clark

Ways of the Soul. A Psychiatrist Reflects: Essays on Life, Death and Beyond

Dr Andrew Powell

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This book is a collection of 15 papers written by Andrew Powell either for journals or conference presentations between 1997 and 2005. A further volume of papers is due to be published later this year. Andrew is Founding Chair of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and in the preface, he writes about the evolution of this group, which will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its founding next year. Over those years it has provided a deeply valued forum for those psychiatrists with an interest in spirituality.

All the papers draw on Andrew's experience of working clinically as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, his understanding of psychoanalytic and Jungian psychology, as well as quantum physics and comparative religion. These influences are all brought together with Andrew's characteristic clarity of thought and personal warmth.

Each paper stands alone and has been thoughtfully tailored to the specific audience being addressed. The writing is refreshingly jargon-free and accessible to non-clinical and clinical audiences alike. Rather than summarise each chapter, which Andrew does in his preface, I will highlight the main themes which thread through the pages.

The first theme is the centrality of Love, both in the world of the human psyche and in the world of the cosmos. This is what all human beings long for, either consciously or unconsciously and, whether we know it or not, this is what we are all born to embody. The struggle to experience love, both within ourselves and in relation to others, is a major source of mental suffering as well as a potential spur for growth. Andrew helpfully explores the varieties of love, including the distinction between love that is ego-driven, which can be manipulative, and love that emanates from the soul which is only capable of good. Drawing on his long psychotherapeutic experience, he also describes the many different ways in which the ego creates obstacles to love through protective psychological defence mechanisms. This allows him to take a compassionate look at the human struggle with hatred and with evil. His key clinical point is that regardless of any other therapeutic intervention, people suffering with mental health problems, and indeed all of us, are in need of love.

The second theme is the search for wholeness. More than once we are reminded that our words 'wholeness' and 'healing' share the same etymological root. True healing usually involves a journey to a greater sense of wholeness. In this regard, healing

(wholeness) - is helpfully distinguished from the notion of 'cure' (absence of disease) which continues to have such a powerful hold over medical professionals and patients alike. Several of the papers refer to Carl Jung's concept of 'individuation' in which the human journey is viewed as one towards ever greater integration of the different aspects of our selves. Andrew emphasises the relational aspect of this search for wholeness. As social beings, human beings are born to connect and the yearning 'to belong to more than ourselves' is given as a succinct description of the spiritual impulse in us all. In the face of the ever increasing destructive potential of human beings, the reader is reminded of the importance of this process of integration for the future well-being of the human race and of the world we inhabit.

The third theme is the need to question the assumptions we hold about the nature of reality. We all see the world through our own particular lens which is shaped by powerful personal and cultural influences. Andrew makes frequent reference to the hold that the mechanistic view of the natural world has had over Western Science in particular and hence over Western culture. Andrew has had a longstanding interest in quantum physics and gently introduces us to some of the headline findings and implications, in particular for how we view consciousness and the mind. A recurring theme is the non-locality of consciousness in which, rather than being seen as secondary to the activity of the brain, consciousness is viewed as primary so that the brain 'picks up' consciousness rather like a radio might pick up a particular frequency. This allows a whole new perspective on phenomena familiar to many clinicians such as thought possession, projective identification, and group processes, as well as other phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, mediumship, near-death experiences and reincarnation.

In the final, and most personal, paper entitled 'Spirituality and Later life - a Personal Perspective', Andrew writes about the profound existential challenge of facing our own death and reflecting on the life one has led, sometimes with painful clarity. He is sustained by a view of the universe that 'extends beyond time and space, where all flows together in a vast ocean of consciousness and [from which] our souls venture forth...so that we can learn and grow through experience.' Andrew ends with an acknowledgement of his indebtedness to his patients. 'Our patients hold up a mirror to us and if we choose to look into it, we are aware that we are far more alike than different. In my efforts to try to help them, it turns out my patients have been helping me!'

I found these papers a joy to read. They are accessible and well referenced. They offer a fresh perspective on some familiar and some less familiar territory. Despite the breadth of the metaphorical canvas on which Andrew paints, the clinical consulting room is never far away and he offers some wise thoughts on clinical practice. I have no hesitation in strongly recommending this book to any mental health professional with an interest in spirituality, whether or not this is linked to a religious faith.