

EDITORIAL

CONFERENCE REPORT

'MENTAL HEALTH, WELLBEING AND SPIRITUALITY'

Dundee. 12 –14 August 2004

I drove up to Dundee through intermittent rain, and under a louring sky which spoke of yet more to come. At intervals, signs flashed a warning that the A9 was closed north of Perth, and as I came within sight of that city I looked down on a river Tay engorged with flood water. I turned east, and my thoughts took me to the approaching conference. It promised much; an international gathering, an array of distinguished keynote speakers, and a diverse choice of workshops.

Mental Health, Wellbeing and Spirituality. In combination, they reflect so much that is currently creating a buzz in the world of healthcare. This conference, hosted by NHS Tayside and supported by the Scottish Executive, had about it from the outset a palpable air of excitement, the sense of an opportunity to explore movements and ideas whose time had come. It had attracted, among others, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers; counsellors and nurses; those involved in advocacy work; academics and practitioners in various fields; chaplains and faith group representatives – and, most significantly, service users themselves, whose distinctive voice gave the gathering its particular intensity of focus.

It was no holiday. Meditation at 7.15am (absent: G Nelson); breakfast, and a bus at 9am sharp to take us to each morning's two keynote lectures. Back to West Park Conference centre for coffee, then straight into workshops till lunch, and again till dinner. Boot camp, but worth it. I have seldom spent a more invigorating, challenging and at times just plain bewildering two and a half days.

In the space of this editorial I can only provide a brief overview of what was on offer. Keynote speakers included Professor David Lukoff, whose central

theme was the relationship between spiritual experience and psychotic illness; professor James Griffith, who spoke about encountering the sacred in professional practice, and Professor David Fontana, who considered the growing body of evidence which warrants that spiritual and mystical experience be taken seriously. Dr. David Reilly offered a multi media presentation on 'Integrative Care: Creative Emergence', while proceedings were brought to a close by Professor John Swinton's thoughts on 'Remembering the Person. Thinking beyond illness to the possibility of a mental *health* care Service'. As for the workshops-they offered everything from 'meditation with children' to 'ageing and the spiritual journey'; from 'designing hospitals' to 'psycho-spiritual supervision'; from 'talking with people about their spiritual lives' to 'the art of living'.

Most thought provoking for me were the sessions led by psychologist David Lukoff, who explored the phenomenon which he called 'spiritual emergency'. He describes a spiritual emergency as a crisis related to a sudden spiritual awakening or breakthrough, an experience sometimes of seismic intensity. Such an event could be precipitated perhaps by over exposure to some ill-understood spiritual practice such as certain forms of yoga or meditation, and at its height could exhibit many of the symptoms normally associated with psychotic illness. His thesis is that mental health professionals need an awareness of the potential importance of the spiritual dimension in the lives of patients, and the discernment to distinguish between a psychotic episode and a spiritual emergency. Such discernment, he argues, might mean the difference between being treated with anti psychotic medication, or being listened to carefully, contained within a safe environment, and assisted to integrate the experience and use it to begin to construct a 'creative personal mythology'. Drawing on

both personal and professional experience, Dr Lukoff advocates a hopeful prognosis; spiritual emergency, supported and not merely medicalized and suppressed, can lead to spiritual *emergence*, and on towards a life deepened and enriched by the whole episode. This is in contrast to the somewhat pessimistic stance adopted towards that which is deemed to be psychotic illness, with its expectation that the patient will be on medication for the rest of his days. He speaks of recovery in terms of a spiritual journey, often towards greater integration of the person and an enhanced sense of connectedness to others, or to Another.

And so, Dr Lukoff advocates a re-visioning on the part of those of us who are steeped in western cultural attitudes and trained to employ a bio-medical model of understanding; that we should make room for other possibilities; that we should be less swift to dismiss the actual content of a patient's story, in favour of the form of a psychotic illness. To that end, Dr Lukoff and colleagues proposed a new diagnostic category to be included in the American edition of DSM-1V (1995). It deals with 'religious and spiritual problems' as the focus of clinical attention.

I hope that the above summary illustrates to some extent the fascination and challenge of the conference as a whole. At one level, something fairly obvious is being promoted; that patients should be treated as human beings, their experience listened to with respect. At another level, the challenge is profound to those trained to regard as pathological any spiritual or mystical elements in a patient's presentation. Challenging also to the whole mental healthcare establishment – that the care of those undergoing mental/spiritual turmoil should be truly therapeutic, and underpinned by hopefulness of a person's future potential. The challenge extends also to faith groups, that we should neither accept uncritically, nor dismiss out of hand as mental illness, the stories of those whose spiritual journeyings have the power to unsettle us so deeply.

I drove away from Dundee into unexpected glorious sunshine, with much food for thought and many shades of feeling. My mood arose in part from the elusive quality of this word 'spirituality' about which so many other words have been recently spun. John Swinton posed the question as to whether we need in fact to move on from using this word, with

which so many meanings and so much vagueness are associated. (His own perceptive comment that spirituality is about living in the world of love, stories and experiences speaks eloquently to some of us, but may run the risk of mystifying others. So it always seems to be when any attempt is made to capture the essence of what spirituality is.) I had heard many experiences described with sincerity, some involving the kind of free-wheeling, unfettered, extravagant imagery which is apt to unsettle a Presbyterian soul. So many 'spiritualities'- how to discriminate amongst them? Amid all the talk of auras and chakras, of alien encounters and out of body experiences, where does truth, or reality, lie? I found myself at times giving thanks for the rigour, the discrimination, the spiritual moderation of a mainstream religion, and for the quieter manifestations of the spiritual life, nurtured within a community, nourished through struggle and prayer and the disciplines of daily living, and often issuing in lives of great compassion and self-forgetfulness. Yet, then again, I think of King David, embarrassing his wife by dancing and capering before the Lord. I remember the eccentricities of an Ezekiel; I think of those scriptural hearers of heavenly voices; of Paul, speaking enigmatically of the man caught up into the third heaven; of Luther, even, chucking an inkwell at the Devil. And I think, hmmm...

I am grateful to Lynne MacMurchie for her summary of John Swinton's closing remarks.

David Lukoff is Professor of psychology at Saybrook Graduate School in San Francisco

James Griffith is Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the George Washington University Medical Center in Washington DC

David Fontana is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Cardiff University and Visiting Professor of Transpersonal Psychology at Liverpool John Moore's University

David Reilly is, among many other things, Consultant Physician at The Centre for Integrative Care, Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital

John Swinton is Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care in the School of Divinity, Religious Studies and Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 4th ed.(1995) American Psychiatric Association. Washington DC