

## RESEARCHING 'SPIRITUALITY': SOME OF THE PITFALLS AND PLEASURES OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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*Abstract: Following the publication of her book 'Recognising Spiritual Needs in People Who Are Dying' the author reflects on the experience of researching spirituality. The article gives an open and honest insight into the unpredictable challenges, difficulties and humbling experiences that clearly have a profound personal impact that has led to a journey of personal discovery and change.*

*The Editors*

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When I was asked to reflect on my experience of researching 'spirituality' I hadn't realised how dis-comforting it would be to remember some of the difficulties this involved, or how pleasurable I would find recalling precious moments of insight. Doubtless most readers will be unfamiliar with my work so it may be helpful to set the scene. Earlier this year (2004) the Oxford University Press published, 'Recognising Spiritual Needs in People Who are Dying', the product of three years' qualitative research conducted by myself at St. Christopher's Hospice in South London as part of a PhD in Pastoral Theology (Heythrop College, University of London). The book explores how terminally ill people express their spiritual concerns when they do not use religious language. My brief here, however, is not to argue for a language of spirit or to suggest ways of relieving spiritual pain but to expose something of my motivation, experiences and rationale as a neophyte 'theological anthropologist'. Nevertheless, some initial clarification is required. By 'spirituality' I mean the interpretative story and ensuing values of an experience that is regarded as both human and ultimate. It is not necessarily anchored in a religion but is shared by analogies of experience across cultural and religious backgrounds, certainly not by identifying any 'lowest common denominator'.

I applied to St. Christopher's partly because my work as a nurse, and later as a manager with a national disability charity had convinced me that human experience often carries depths of significance that escape general recognition. I wanted to draw attention to these overlooked aspects of daily life

where, as the psalmist writes, 'deep calls unto deep'; where events become experiences and language may operate under a law of diminishing returns. Theology searches for what Tillich has called the 'meaning that gives meaning to all meanings'. I wanted to provide a group of vulnerable people with an opportunity to tell their story and to see whether I could detect an horizon of meaning that lies beyond yet incorporates all other interpretations – be they psychological, sociological or even philosophical. This theological perspective, however, is increasingly marginalized and this is risky. It means we are artificially foreclosing the range of our existential explorations. Unless theologians conduct methodologically sound research, others will do it for us and ultimate concerns may be excessively 'psychologised' or reduced only to social issues. These factors may, of course, come into play but it is important they do not have the final word.

Motivations for conducting research also stem from less conscious sources. Viewed retrospectively, I now realise that personal reasons drew me to 'spirituality'. Perhaps it was a relief to clad these in a 'respectable' academic guise. 'Committed impartiality', however, is neither novel or methodologically unacceptable; paediatricians are often parents and it is advantageous if researchers of black and ethnic minority people belong to such groups. For any research project, the view from nowhere does not exist. What matters crucially in an area such as spirituality is the investigator's honest and continually developing self-awareness. When personal and professional issues do elide, however, it is important to arrange wise, caring and competent supervision. I

was extremely fortunate in this regard with both my line manager and my academic supervisor.

Researching 'spirituality' is akin to researching 'communication' – too broad a concept to be meaningful. Until my focus emerged (i.e. the non-religious expression of spirituality through metaphor and symbol) I experienced discomfiting feelings of chaos and aimlessness, particularly when my more clinically minded colleagues exposed their own assumptions by enquiring whether I had developed a 'tool to measure spiritual pain' yet. Only by committing myself to the experiences of patients was I able to develop sufficient confidence to follow modes of enquiry, analysis and interpretation governed more by criteria of artistic integrity than by any quantitative approach. In the hope of giving heart to others, confusion and its accompanying dismay are often a necessary prelude to valuable and creative enquiry. Such feelings do not necessarily signify personal incompetence. Nevertheless, spirituality will always resist total seizure. The horizon retreats no matter how far one travels in its direction and with spirituality one has to learn how to handle the unavoidable limitations of language. Eventually, like most poets, I had to show what I could not say about the symbols that mediated ultimate meaning for the patients I met.

Listening deeply to another's story has a contemplative dimension that I sometimes found hard to sustain. This was due less to external factors than to my own compulsion to 'justify' my presence when everyone else in the hospice seemed to be so busy. Sometimes it requires courage to adopt the stillness that is demanded of deep receptivity. Patients were always more forthcoming if I managed to simply sit quietly for ten minutes or so before our 'interviews'. Feelings of isolation are an almost inevitable part of research and for anyone who is not a chaplain yet investigating spirituality, these feelings may be compounded by not belonging to any distinct and immediately identifiable professional group. I was based in the hospice chaplaincy department and my colleagues were extremely supportive but my role was unique. Furthermore, my position was funded by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust and thus supernumerary. When one is researching in relative isolation a subject as hard to grasp as spirituality it is really important to recruit supportive companions in the early days. Interestingly, my supernumerary status was a bonus when I collected data as patients clearly

did not feel guilty for taking too much of my time! There are many other advantages in the status of 'the stranger' (i.e. not being someone with instantly recognisable responsibilities) such as the opportunity for taking a bird's eye view; for receiving disclosures that others will only make to an unknown confidante; for having a fresh perspective or even becoming the object of curiosity oneself. When I felt most lost it was my encounters with patients that sustained my commitment to the research. I knew that they were expressing spiritual concerns, even though I actually found it hard to conceptualise what this meant. It is, I found, often easier to recognise than to explain the spiritually significant and I had to learn that researching spirituality has much in common with waiting for a photograph to develop. One simply has to trust that the simultaneously and apparently chaotic emergent tones (reading, data collection, analysis and reflection – all guided by a rigorous and ethically approved protocol) will eventually form a meaningful new pattern. Spirituality is the prime exemplar of an old paradox: it isn't 'there' for us until we see it but we don't see it until it is there. Writing up findings can be an exercise in the ab-surd; trying to communicate the literally inexpressible. Nevertheless, as a pursuit that affirms the infinite value and dignity of every person researching spirituality ought not to be passed over by theologians or left to others.

Listening to people as they described their 'sense of self and sources of meaning' (the official study title) as they approached the end of their lives was often an extremely sad business. Sometimes my own emotional material and natural primitive fears of death were triggered by what I was hearing. These were potentially obstructing so I decided to meet regularly with a psychotherapist who was particularly interested in spiritual issues. This was simply a matter of recognising my own needs and limitations helped me to recognise issues of transference and counter-transference in my dealings with patients – whether I was becoming 'hooked' by their stories. Conversations with other hospice personnel reassured me that my anxieties were not uncommon. Numerous nurses reported suffering from recurrent nightmares, although this was never addressed as a potential hazard at any of the educational sessions I attended. More than once, I felt I became someone to whom staff could 'off-load' the stresses of their role. To achieve her own ends, however, a researcher must learn to recognise and tactfully out-manoeuvre any

excessive transmutations of her role. Within approved ethical standards, my primary function was to collect and analyse data. If certain patients wanted to repeatedly meet me I would gently suggest they consider talking to a chaplain or social worker. Support is an essential requirement for any research where people may be exposing something of their inner life, or otherwise private details of their personal circumstances. Being clear about my own boundaries enabled me to maintain harmonious working relationships with others, shielded me from emotional exhaustion and made it easier for me to sustain my focus. My line manager and supervisor were each committed to their own spiritual path and there were times when I relied heavily on their support and insights. I find it hard to imagine exploring the spirituality of others without also receiving sensitive mentoring or guidance from individuals wiser than myself.

Of course, not every interaction with patients was draining. There were 'graced' occasions, entirely gratuitous and mutually nourishing. Totally unanticipated, they had to happen in order to be. For instance, when a builder with hands the size of shovels gently reciprocated my hand massage and spontaneously declared, "*Giving and receiving, to me that is the heart of spirituality*"; hearing a woman describe herself as finally "*sailing on calm waters*" - despite her near total paralysis; visiting a young mother at home to see the cardboard 'statue' her children had created to 'watch over them' during her frequent respite admissions. These and many others may have been special moments but to be concerned with spirituality is not about 'extraordinary events'. Akin to the artist, spirituality is about encountering ordinary life at a level of meaning where conventional interpretations are relativised.

Clearly, researching spirituality is not like researching blood pressure or consumer preferences and a

different approach is required. Nevertheless, I sometimes found myself having to convince others that my emphasis on the spiritually disclosive potential of metaphor and symbol was not anti rationality. Rather, I was making the case for an expanded rationality. The critical issue here is not what counts as 'faith' or 'the transcendent' (which anyhow is really only a matter of asking questions), but what counts as knowledge. Whenever one is made to feel on the philosophical or methodological 'back foot' it is particularly important to be transparent in obtaining ethical approval, accurately recording data, providing an audit trail and generally complying with all the benchmarks of sound qualitative research. I found a computer programme particularly helpful for keeping track of literally pages of data. Efficiency and existential enquiry are not necessarily mutually incompatible and it will take at least these minimum standards to convince sceptics that something genuine and useful can emerge from a theological anthropology.

In conclusion, researching spirituality can be challenging, exhausting and humbling. It draws on an exciting range of disciplines and can afford truly graced insights. Although these are unpredictable, one can prepare for them in all the ways outlined above and also by remaining rooted in some contemplative, prayerful or 'awakening' practice. I do hope that others will find these brief reflections useful but feel compelled to end with a warning. After completing your investigation of spirituality the surface will barely have been scratched. Furthermore, your encounters with mystery, paradox and the symbols that mediate human and ultimate concerns will certainly have changed you -exactly how, of course, is for you to discover.

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