

Spirituality and Mental Health **Launchpad Lecture 13th June 2006**

Spirituality is a very broad term; sometimes it is associated with particular religions, but usually it is seen as not necessarily religious, i.e. not committed to particular doctrines or ceremonies. Many who are agnostic about God, or even clear that there can be no such being, can approve of some kind of spirituality.

I am a Roman Catholic priest and a Dominican Friar, so would myself have a spirituality linked to particular beliefs; but I often find a kind of kinship with people of other beliefs who nonetheless seem to be saying the same kind of things as I would want to say: for instance that human beings are not helped by people or institutions which try to keep them in the condition of infants.

There is some evidence that religious beliefs or icons – using the term very broadly – can have a negative effect on people's mental health. For instance:

- A woman came to the door late one night, handed me a bunch of daffodils and told me they were for the Virgin's altar. I asked her why she had come so late, and she said "God told me to." I am glad to say that I did not give her a lecture in theology, saying it's pretty abnormal for God to speak directly to people, and they should use their common sense. I actually took the flowers meekly, went into the freezing cold church in my pyjamas, found a vase and put the flowers on what we call the Lady altar. It seems to me to have been a pretty harmless incident, and quite good for my humility, but of course there can be much more serious incidents of people believing that God is telling them things, like: "You are rubbish." "You must punish yourself by starving." "You must save that poor baby from this wicked world." Whether the belief includes hearing an actual voice or not is another matter, and I am not qualified to address that specific issue.
- Guilt is often associated with religion: certainly, fairly liberated Catholics often talk about the famous Catholic guilt – to which I respond that they should try Evangelical guilt, which I was brought up on. I obviously can't tell you what people actually say in confession, but in my pastoral encounters I come across people (only very occasionally, I have to say) who blame themselves for a disaster which happened on Tuesday in India because on Monday they used Brylcreem on their hair. Those aren't religious icons even in the broadest sense, but the guilt is part of a whole religious

world-view. Which is not to say that people without a religious world view can't have quite destructive and seemingly irrational guilt.

- Many people with a belief in God see that God as a punishing deity, someone before whom we are guilty until proved innocent (and indeed that would fit in with a certain style of Christian theology); but this punishing God has an amazingly detailed and personal knowledge of my particular faults, and is not going to let me get away with them.
- Another thing which torments quite a few people is having bad thoughts about what is particularly holy. People who express their torment about this usually spare me the details, but they may use terms such as “sexual thoughts about the virgin Mary” or “disgusting thoughts about the crucifix”.

I am not suggesting that religion as such is to be held responsible for unhealthy use of its imagery. But we may wonder whether the sufferers would have had this sense of being hostilely watched over if they hadn't been told about an all-seeing God, perhaps by a very controlling person who had been let loose on the Sunday School. It is probably the case, though, that a majority of those who hold the same religious beliefs which torment the tormented, find in those beliefs meaning, hope and integration.

We remind ourselves that the title of this lecture is “Spirituality and Mental Health” – not ill-health; “mental health” nearly always connotes “mental ill health”, but I want to concentrate on mental health; in other words I am not speaking about the place of chaplaincy in the mental health services, or the ways in which nurses, clinicians, managers etc. might include a spirituality component in the care plan of service users. These are important issues, but I think my task is to show why they might be important.

Let me attempt a working definition of spirituality:

- it is imagination in a quest for meaning beyond the humdrum;
- it is the search for connectedness within the many parts of individual life, connectedness between individuals, between communities and between the human community and the earth which we inhabit;
- it is hospitable hope which welcomes the woundedness within us and among us, and hears in that woundedness the narrative of our healing.

You spell that lot out by telling stories and sharing experiences:

- Imagination in search of meaning beyond the humdrum. I'm not talking about escaping from the chore-filled reality of every day, but the possibility of discovering beauty and meaning in the very realities of that every day. Van Gogh can make a chair an object of celebration. A meal together with friends is more than 6 people simultaneously feeding their faces. I had an American friend with whom I was studying theology at a college in London: we sometimes travelled back to our digs together, by bus or on bikes. When he got back he would regale the others with stories of what we had seen and heard on the journey, and have us in fits of laughter; usually I hadn't seen anything particularly remarkable. Maybe his "extra vision" came from not being a native of England, but he helped us all see something of the comedy of ordinary urban interactions. He was a kind of poet, and it seems to me that poetry is a hugely important source for mental health – both reading or preferably hearing the poetry of others, but also writing or speaking one's own reflections on experience. It is not easy or even necessarily desirable to do that on one's own, although one hears of lonely artists who produce great work; and of course I need to remind myself that van Gogh ended his life very unhappily. But creative, imaginative work is ideally done in a community context where you are heard or seen by others, and where the notion of celebration, festival or just plain fun is present. And I haven't even mentioned music....

The lonely artist is certainly not in danger of deadening conformity; the notion of the celebrating community may entail some danger of the artist trying to please others; but I believe imagination flourishes best in a community situation where the community allows many and varied voices and visions to express themselves. The opposite is mere fashion. I was in the drinks department of a supermarket recently (I know, I know, I should have been in Oddbins or the Cumberland Arms, but that's where I was...); I heard someone saying "It's the in drink these days." I don't know what the drink was, but a culture which actually encourages people to choose their drink because it's trendy is in dire need of the spirituality which is imagination seeking meaning beyond the humdrum. There is a pathology in that kind of conformity, and I would ask practitioners in the field of mental health whether our services are seeking to offer to those who are deemed mentally ill an opportunity to explore their own imaginative response to the world around them. (I know that at least some of the time the answer is yes).

- Connectedness: a very important idea in many kinds of spirituality. In part it is about affirming our bodiliness. Dominicans were invented, in

part, as a reaction to a type of spirituality which St Dominic found in his day, a spirituality which seemed to deny the goodness of the body. So it was an amusing irony for me the other day to bump into a long-lost friend who – standing beside her man-friend – kind of caressed me and said “We all need 14 intimate touches a day; people in your walk of life don’t get enough of it.” (How do they know it’s 14? Why not 12, or 16?) Well, I’m open to as many strokes, caresses, hugs or whatever as I can get, and I often stroke, caress and hug people too. But there are many people, and not only celibates, who are either afraid of bodily contact or somehow don’t get it from others.

But it’s not just connectedness with our body that we need. We need to connect with and appreciate the whole of our bodiliness, including – and you’ll see in a moment why I use the term – the shit.

Arthur (the name is fictitious) lived in the Byker Wall; he also died in the Byker Wall, and when the police rang to tell me, because they’d found my name in his flat, I thought, oh dear, he’s done it after all; but he hadn’t: it had been a seizure. Anyway, one day Arthur asked me to go round to his flat and bless it. It soon became clear that there was more to this than just Catholic piety. He suggested at first that I might just like to bless some pious objects on his windowsill – a statue of St Francis and such-like. But I suggested it would be better to bless the whole flat, and it soon became clear that there was something lurking in one of the rooms which was the real subject of his concern. He often expressed concern to me that certain encounters with the rest of his family would cause “the shit to hit the fan”. He had enacted this concern by relieving himself into a jerry and putting jerry and contents into a cupboard. Now, what in his flat should be blessed? He took a bit of persuasion to accept my view that either we blessed the whole flat or none of it. And the whole flat included the room with the cupboard in it, and the cupboard with the jerry in it, and the jerry with the shit in it. If you’ll pardon the pun he seemed mightily relieved when we had done it, and agreed that now the jerry could be emptied into the WC in an act which I think I described to him as a form of baptism. The next day he came to a study group at St Dominic’s and the group found him more light-hearted than he had been for a long time.

But Arthur was short on human contact, and seemed like many an urban citizen not to be very connected to the earth around him, to what a friend of mine calls sacred Gaia. What is unhelpful in such contexts is a spirituality which separates spirit from earth, God from neighbour. Connected spirituality offers a vision of people valuing their bodiliness,

welcoming the other, owning their earthliness; but it is politicians and town planners who need to catch this kind of vision. People who are damaged by isolation are often in need of therapeutic, compensatory intervention, and I would hope that those who offer the intervention would be people who have such a vision. But as I say, I am not in a position to detail how clinicians and others in the mental health services can give practical expression to the vision.

The third component of spirituality which I suggested above is that of hospitable hope which welcomes the woundedness within us and among us, and hears in that woundedness the narrative of our healing.

I think what humankind is most in need of is hope, because there's a lot to feel hopeless about. I'm sure no-one here would mistake hope for optimism or simply whistling in the dark. Or for denial of the awful reality which is the condition of many people. At a study-day recently I did a handout of what I was saying, and included two pictures: one was of the entrance to Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay, where three men had just committed suicide; and one was of Nelson Mandela at some gathering, beaming broadly and wearing a t-shirt with his prison number – 46664 incidentally – printed on it. The official American reaction to the Guantanamo suicides was very revealing: first the military: Rear Admiral Harris said he did not believe the men had killed themselves out of despair. "They are smart. They are creative, they are committed," he said. "They have no regard for life, either ours or their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us." And then the Government version: Colleen Graffy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, described the suicides as "a good PR move to draw attention". The deaths were part of a strategy and "a tactic to further the jihadi cause," but taking their own lives was unnecessary. The lengths to which the officials went to deny the truth about what had happened is staggering, and the opposite of the hospitable hope of which I am speaking; whereas Mandela can confront the woundedness of his history, wear his prison number with pride, and use it as a symbol of his triumph over the negatives which the apartheid regime had lived – and died – by. The extra picture I have offered on the handout is from a slum in Panama. The little girl may well not know that she is in a slum in Panama, but she clearly knows how to celebrate life, and lives beyond the definitions with which we might unwittingly and compassionately try to restrict her being.

I believe that if we are to be agents of healing in a badly broken world, we need to confront and acknowledge and in a sense welcome our own

woundedness. The idea of the wounded healer is a very important one: the vision of suffering people being necessary for the wholeness of our world is hugely challenging. It must not be misunderstood: we seek healing for individuals, and don't tell them, as Catholics used to do, to offer up their sufferings. (Well, I could spend a long time explaining how that idea can be understood in a healthy sense, but we've all got buses to catch...) But we need to acknowledge that the world is richer for all its inhabitants; thinking for the moment just of the human inhabitants, that means that it is precisely in our imperfection that we are valuable. Any ideology which posits ideal people to whose perfection we should aspire is totally destructive of everybody; spirituality is surely about accepting the people we actually are, and recognizing the contribution which each person makes to the whole. I can see how this might present a dilemma to those involved in therapeutic intervention on behalf of individuals: if I say to this person that they are valued as they are, but as they are they are suffering from a bad disorder of some kind then do I make healing a false goal? I think what I want to say about that is that the answer must be a both-and. For a start those who are the healers need to recognise their own woundedness and sense their solidarity with those they seek to heal. Then they need both to value the present of the suffering person and to work humbly towards a goal of greater freedom for that person – which will include a greater capacity in that person to value themselves as they are.

My final word is that I believe spirituality amounts to the capacity both to see the possibility of fuller life for ourselves and others – through imagination, through connectedness and through hope: but it also offers the capacity to see an apparent failure in our efforts as not a total disaster, but a staging-post on a journey which has not yet ended.