

From Body/Mind to Soul/Spirit: A Different Paradigm

Paper & Presentation

LOROS, Conference, 2013: Spirituality and End of Life Care

Larry Culliford, a psychiatrist from the Royal College, who calls for the inclusion of spirituality into current psychology, defines:

“Spirituality links the deeply personal with the universal....the psychology of spirituality in its purest essence involves recapturing an appreciation of wholeness, of indivisibility, and concerns reconciling this with the apparent disjunctions of material reality, of time and space” (1)

It is this reconciliation of the spiritual, which is based on an energetic, interconnected, timeless view of the world, with our current materialistic, disconnected, time-space view of the world, which provides us with the challenges we face in the research as well as practical applications of the ‘spiritual’. My talk will focus on those two differing views of the world and the human being within it.

When I began to research for my book, I looked into mental health statistics and general well-being data to find out if there is a connection between mental/emotional well-being and spirituality, or the lack of it. I was rather astonished by the amount of psychological professionals who asked themselves the same question I did: is it the loss of ‘the spiritual’, the loss of connection to the soul, as well as the loss of the idea, that we are part of, and embedded into, something bigger than ourselves that could, at least in part, explain our increasingly low, anxious and helpless states, which show in an unprecedented increase in mental health problems and seem to be in stark contrast to our relative material wealth and security? (2) I was also astonished how insecure the majority of healthcare professionals seems to feel when it comes to including the spiritual into their work.

Nowhere does this insecurity become more obvious than when we are confronted with existential crisis in form of life threatening illnesses, and in our general relationship with, and attitude towards, death. When I, in preparation for this talk, read briefly through the 2011 report, commissioned by the government and compiled by four professors from the University of Hull: ‘Spiritual Care at the End of Life: a systematic review of the literature’, I wasn’t at all surprised that they state:

“A number of assessment and intervention tools intended for end of life and palliative care were identified. However, we did not find one example of a validated tool or evaluated model (developed specifically for palliative and end of life care), which is in common use in clinical or other practice settings. Yet clinicians and practitioners from all professions in studies across the review identified confusion, ambiguities and uncertainties in addressing spiritual need and offering spiritual care or support, which might be assisted by a framework to guide and facilitate their individual engagement with spiritual issues as well as making optimal use of the resources of the multidisciplinary team” (3)

The contemporary materialistic view of the world

As I said, that we struggle to include the spiritus, is not surprising. Modern science, including increasingly contemporary psychology and certainly modern medicine, has rejected the idea that the human being consists of more than a mind and a body. We have, especially since the age of enlightenment and the advancement of science, reduced the human being more and more to a body/mind, in accordance with the bio-chemical evolutionary model and scientific requirements, whilst rejecting earlier concepts, which define the human consisting of mind/body/soul and spirit.

Whilst, for example, pioneers in the field of psychology, such as James, Jung, Maslow and many others of humanistic and transpersonal inclinations attempted to understand the human psyche in the original meaning of the word 'soul' within the realm of the transpersonal, modern psychology concentrated increasingly on exploring conscious mind and behaviours within a limited framework of 'mind'.

The same applies to modern medicine. Despite all its great advances, which brought enormous benefits to our overall physical health and increased our life expectancy, it moved away from the original concept of health and the word healing 'hal', which means whole, towards a reduced concept of diagnosing and alleviating physical symptoms (example: watching para-olympic athletes one understands that people with physical disabilities can be more 'whole' than able-bodied people).

To underpin that, let me give you the accepted definitions of psychology and medicine, the two disciplines, on which most of the physical and mental/emotional care we offer is based.

According to the BPS, Psychology is generally defined as the scientific study of the human mind and behaviour, how we think, feel, act and interact individually and in groups. (4) It addresses the mind within the social structure of this material world of duality, utilising 'science' as a means of exploration and description. Medicine, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is the study of the body, the science of diagnosing, treating, or preventing disease and other damage to the body or mind.

Could it be that, in our efforts to be taken seriously and adhere to scientific requirements, and move away from religious dogma, we threw out the baby with the bathwater and neglected an innate, even vital part, of human existence, namely the soul? It is certain that questions such as whether there is an innate part in human beings that is spiritual, whether there is a human need for meaning, connection, purpose and wholeness, whether there is a soul, which needs to be catered for if we want to be emotionally healthy, and especially questions about the purpose of life, as well as death and dying, cannot be explored when we are busy working within a materialistic, scientific view of the world, defining the human being as consisting of a mind and body, and within a clinical framework.

I would like to outline a different concept for you and hope that this contributes to an overall understanding.

A holistic view of the world

On the whole, our assumptions about how the world works, based on our learnings, personal experiences, social norms and general beliefs of the society we live in will determine our world view. In secular societies, based on a materialistic view of the world, we are not encouraged to experience the underlying energetic nature of ourselves, let alone of the universe.

We do know though, from teachers all over the world, that ongoing spiritual practices lead us to experience the world, and ourselves, more in energetic form, changes what we perceive to be real, expands the worlds / fields we seem to access, puts us into a wider context and, for most people, affirms that it is the body that dies, but not our essence. Or, in other words, with experiences stemming from ongoing spiritual practice we seem to begin to define the human as consisting of mind, body, soul and spirit.

When we begin to attempt defining the human within a wider field, consisting of body, mind, soul and spirit, rather than seeing them within a bio-evolutionary model consisting of a body/mind, we move into the quantum realm, the underlying energetic realm of the 'unseen'. We move in a direction that leads us to the edge of our current materialistic and scientific paradigm and many components resist our current way of thinking, our current research designs and our descriptive language. The following is compiled from different sources, all of them based on nature-based, indigenous traditions from around the world, with some contemporary adaptations.

An interconnected web

One of the fundamental connections between most spiritual systems is the assumption that there is a kind of field that underlies manifested creation. This field is seen as a power, energy, essence or consciousness that initiates, energises and sustains all of creation, the universe in its many manifested forms and appearances. This basic energetic building block of existence is viewed as being shared by all of life, with the various manifested life forms emerging from it, vibrating on different levels.

Shamans all over the world describe the universe in similar terms, namely as a living, interconnected web, energetic/vibrational in essence and evolving. This view seems to be increasingly confirmed by science, especially by quantum physics, higher mathematics, field theories in biology etc. Where shamanic descriptions differ from contemporary science is that they define 'spirit' as being at the core of all living things, with consciousness underlying all of creation. They also differ from modern science in the sense that it is through their direct experience that they access those realms, employing various techniques to shift and alter their states of awareness profoundly, to open the gates to, connect with and utilise all accessible realms of consciousness, rather than trying to understand the world through scientific methods.

Everything is made of vibrations/energy fields and is connected: Because shamans explore and experience reality from different planes of consciousness, or states of perception (simplified: trance states), they perceive the universe in the form of vibrations and energy fields, and they come to the only possible conclusion: namely that the world is a living, vibrating being and therefore everything within it is interconnected. Vibrations are repetitive, wave-like patterns, probability patterns, in contemporary language, in physical systems in the atomic and subatomic realm. As

far as we know from quantum physics, the universe is a field where everything has an inherent wave-like pattern. These patterns are called quantum waves, or probability waves, as the patterns are relatively stable. That relative stability determines how probable events are on an atomic level and, of course, on the level at which we, as human beings, experience as the physical world.

All things contain 'spirit' as a life force: Connected to the perception that everything vibrates and is energetically interlinked and interdependent is the notion that all things are alive, containing a life force, defined as Spirit. All things means literally all things - humans, animals, rocks, plants, rivers, lakes, oceans, all elements and the solar system. Some suggest that the word essence or soul might better describe this life force. In shamanic terms, the word spirit – or consciousness - is appropriate, as spirit stands for a basic force that can manifest itself in different ways and forms. Spirit is the specific essence that makes a being what it is, a human a human and a tree a tree, but it also transcends this because it is a basic life force that exists throughout the universe, manifesting itself in different forms.

Humans and Soul: This view therefore suggests that, like everything else, humans are essentially spirit in manifested form, with the manifested form being our body/mind. Closely connected to spirit is the concept of soul. Spirit and soul are at times used interchangeably because their subtle shades of meaning vary from culture to culture. Both terms reference an invisible force, but the term soul often refers to something, immaterial and independent of the body, that is specifically within human beings (and sometimes animals), whilst spirit is, as explained above, a force more generalized, inhabiting all of nature. For example, Carl Gustav Jung, who has studied indigenous cultures, defines the soul as 'the living thing in Man, that which lives of itself and causes life' (Jung 1959, p.26).

In such definitions Soul is often seen as the specific essence, which contains the information of this life force energy (spirit) as well as all the imprints we carry in form of individual and collective experiences or karma. Spirit, as an essence, contains all the life force possibilities, whilst it is our soul that is individually ours and drives us towards becoming all we can become, and can be altered, positively and negatively, by our individual and collective experiences during every lifetime. Used in this sense, soul is an active, individualised force, with the function to to guide the mind/body consciousness, that which we humans call 'I' towards - and on - the path which is most aligned with the desire and wish of 'Spirit' to express itself through us in its purest or highest form. Or, in other words, it is originally Spirit that seeks to manifest itself through us, and it is our specific life essence, our specific soul, which impels and drives us towards growth, towards change, towards becoming all that we can be.

Everything is evolving and sacred: Closely connected to the above is the notion that the cosmos is alive, a changing, evolving and conscious entity. The shaman will therefore treat the entire universe and everything in it as sacred, infused by the same spirit, expressing itself in different ways. The expression 'all life is sacred', as well as the expression 'nothing should be done to harm the children', are just two examples of how this view of the world creates the desire to strive for 'living a life that honours the sacredness as well as continuity' of creation.

Everything is treated as being reality: From a shamanic perspective, everything is reality, whether it exists in form of matter or in form of energy, whether we can see it or experience it with our senses in ordinary waking consciousness, or not. Shamans,

also indigenous contemporary ones, are masters of 'the ecstatic experience' and on the whole, as far as I can see, not too concerned with questions of 'what is real and what is not real and what can be proven or not in a scientific sense'. In this the shaman is, in my experience, quite pragmatic. She will utilise whatever works and is very conscious that everything is influenced by our perception. So, for the shaman, parallel universes, layers of reality, infinite possibilities and various states are not puzzling; as long as they can be experienced on some level of consciousness or another, they are real and, as they don't see consciousness as being confined to the brain, but able to expand and travel, it can access and interact with 'all there is' and 'all there is' is certainly real. For the shaman, there is no sense of a 'natural' versus a 'supernatural' world; there is only that which we can 'see' and that which is 'hidden', the visible and the invisible being equally real.

How do we access the fields and how to describe them

According to more earth based, spiritual traditions, we never lose the connection to those underlying fields completely, but we get attached to, and lost in, our manifested and created world, the world of the physical body, of our thoughts, beliefs and emotions, the world that we, as a species, create around us - our work, our families, our societies, our laws and rules and so on - because we can only experience this manifested world with the senses we normally use

We need to assume that we have, for a better word, two minds. The first one is the one we all know. It is our thinking, feeling, survival mind, which functions based on what we can experience with our senses in the normal waking state of consciousness. It processes information and reacts to it. From the moment we are born, it gets trained to function in accordance with the requirements, knowledge and demands of our society. Within a secular society we are kept fairly firmly on the level of 'this reality'.

If we want to access the realities behind and beyond, we need to alter our states and perceive within such altered states of perception. We then realise that 'consciousness' is not local and will travel way beyond the boundaries we normally experience (see for example near death descriptions, dis-memberments and other extreme altered state experiences), accessing fields, which we then translate into images, stories, myths and so on. Or, in other words, if we want to experience the energetic levels of creation, and ultimately the consciousness of Oneness, we need to alter our mental states, become the observer, realise that 'beyond the mind activities' there are fields that we can access through our minds, but not with our minds, and, ultimately we will 'know the source' (for most of us, just for very brief periods of time; getting glimpses of this state).

There are many ways which are practiced in different spiritual systems to facilitate altered states of perception: meditation, mindfulness, yoga, trance dance, vibrations and rhythms, shamanic journeys, mind altering plants, fasting, ceremonies and ritual, prayer, chants, mantras, being in, observing and listening to nature, dreams, visions and more. They are all used to still the mind, bring us into the moment and to become aware of, communicate with and work within such energy realms.

The language we need to describe such realms is relatively unfamiliar to us. It is the language of myths, spiritual teaching stories, metaphors and fairy tales, of

painings and crafts, of sacred sounds and celestial music, of forms that describe spirits, in form of demons and angels, guides and power animals.

No matter which spiritual practices we utilise, and no matter how inadequately we describe our experiences, spirituality helps us to directly experience and perceive something greater, some force or forces outside ourselves into which we are nevertheless embedded, of which we are a part, from which we arise, to which we return after the body dies, and by which we are influenced. Spirituality helps us to access that greater reality and the information held within this underlying field. With continuous spiritual practice we internalise and absorb, for want of a better word, those experiences and information within our being, a process that will alter us.

Discussion: End of life from an indigenous, shamanic view

When it comes to dying, we can observe that people do change their states. They see 'relatives' which are already dead, they see angels (and sometimes demons) and other beings, they worry about unfinished business and more. The realities become hazy and 'mixed up'. In shamanic terms, we slip into the 'worlds between' in our perception towards the end of our lives.

Within the above view of the world and the human being, only the body/mind in its current manifested form dies. The essence, in form of our base spirit energy and our soul imprints will leave the body. Overall, in indigenous traditions, from a more shamanic point of view, death is just another form of reality. In simplified terms, seeing the world energetically, the spirit essence, the soul, leaves the body at the time of death. It is still alive, just in another dimension. Death is therefore a transition stage between lives.

Quite a few indigenous cultures in South America (Quechua especially), talk about two souls. A Celestial Soul and an Ancestral Soul. The Ancestral Soul goes back into the Underworld, after death, the Celestial Soul reaches for the Upper World. The task during a lifetime is to 'bring the 'ancestral soul' and the 'celestial soul' together as much as possible.

There is also the idea of re-incarnation, coming mainly from the East, but it is also for example believed in indigenous cultures of the Americas and in parts of Africa. And within those systems, there are teachings, which see our task as 'discovering and living our Buddha nature', to come off the wheel of Maya as the ultimate goal of human existence as this will lead us out of the reincarnation cycle.

The shaman is on the whole concerned with the underlying energies. He/she can be seen as the intermediaries between the world of spirit and the manifested world. Their main task is to work towards balance on every level, the level of the individual and spirit, the individual and the tribe, and the tribe and the world of spirit in the widest sense (which includes nature, the upper and underworld, the ancestral world and more). The shaman will have gone through many 'death experiences', will have altered his state profoundly, will know about energy fields underlying the manifestation of a human, will have contact with the ancestor spirits, will know about the energies within the 'spirit world', will have spirit helpers and power tools, will know the ceremonies, rituals and journeys which need to be undertaken and more.

One of his/her tasks is to help the dying person to bring the soul back into harmony and balance, to energetically finish unfinished business, to help the soul through the different thresholds when it leaves the body and more.

Importantly, all he/she will care about is that part of the human that will leave the body, which will live on, will leave the body in a state of harmony, able to get through the layers, without getting stuck. They will use drumming, ceremony, cleansing the energy body through smoke, call in helping spirits, bring back split-off parts to restore harmony, bring in ancestor spirits to gather around, will chant, rattle and more and assist with unfinished business as much as possible.

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