



The Journey to Consciousness: *Depth Psychotherapy Plus Dinkum Spirituality*

A paper by Noel Giblett. Published in *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol.6 No. 4, August 2000.

Abstract

*It is said that the best preparation for a therapist is self-work. In this account of his personal journey, **Noel Giblett** reflects on significant personal and professional paradigm shifts. This paper was originally presented at the 'A Chorus of Voices' conference in July 1999.*

The Personal Story

At 24 I experienced my first taste of therapy. It was with James Oldham, the Melbourne based Gestalt Therapist, at one of his earliest workshops for the Gestalt Institute of Perth in 1981 and it blew my mind. I can still remember some of the scenes from that workshop, painful personal work directed by James with a remarkable lightness and grace. He was, as a friend of mine put it, The Smiling Therapist, and he loved people into life.

Due in no small part to that introductory taster, I decided to enter therapy with a local Gestalt therapist and then in the next year commenced training in Gestalt Therapy in parallel with studying Social Work. My conviction was not only that I wanted a piece of this 'therapy', but also that I wanted to do it – to work with that kind of potency and grace for the healing of others.

What followed was five very intense years, part therapy-training part therapy, part crash-course in group dynamics. I witnessed a wide variety of overseas and interstate Gestalt therapists. I bared my soul to total strangers, as did others, and experienced a wide variety of what passed for therapy - some of it more like a street fight or open heart surgery, *sans anaesthetic*, most of it more gently enabling and enobling. I am fond of saying that I wonder what would have become of me if I had not met and opened myself to the best of these, the likes of James, Daniel Rosenblatt, Hunter Beaumont and Claudia Rosenbach.

I am also fond of saying that, like Sunday School, I came to an unmistakable point when it was time to leave the Gestalt enclave. I can remember the moment of parting just as vividly as the moment of induction. I guess it was an 'aha!'

We were deep into the final year of the Gestalt Therapy Training programme, at the end of which, we were advised, some would be invited to sit certificate exams and some would not. (I remember thinking at the time that there is a thin linguistic line between 'certificated' and 'certified'. The most sensible thing I'd heard in five years of training was that it takes ten to fifteen years to make a good Gestalt therapist.)

We had just begun the first day of the final workshop. The visiting trainer was one of my least favourite therapists (a particularly harsh man). The air was heavy with group power plays and posturing, and some therapy.

For some reason I became very aware of the sunshine and the birds outside and I was filled with a longing to be sitting under a tree reading a book. Being a good student of Gestalt, I stayed with my awareness until I could stand it no more. Just prior to the afternoon tea break I announced that I would be leaving the workshop - that I had realised I would rather be reading a book in the sun - and I bid my farewells. To his credit, the trainer did not pass one ounce of judgement or gratuitous diagnosis, although the same could not be said for the course convenor who protested, 'I don't know if that's okay by me.' Sadly he'd missed the point and he wasn't alone. Several fellow trainees chimed in to the effect that I was running away from something, not prepared to take my psychic medicine or letting the side down. Little did I realise that I was breaking an inviolable tribal code - I thought I was just following my awareness and exercising my options, good Gestalt principles.

No one that I could remember, in five years of training and workshops, had ever *said* that they'd rather be doing something else. Some had disappeared at tea breaks or not returned the next day, others had 'gone to the toilet' never to be seen again! But to say to the group that one would rather be doing something else was new for them and proved to be something that many in the training group had difficulty accepting.

Not surprisingly, I strode out of that room feeling six foot tall (perhaps for the first time in my life). I got in my car, headed down the highway for home and let out a joyous whoop that would have done Thelma and Louise proud. Whatever had happened in there, whatever benefits I had gained from five years of therapy and therapy training, I was living in a moment of crystal clarity that it was now time to leave. Like Sunday School, Gestalt training and Gestalt therapy had served a purpose, but there were things I wanted to know and taste, and a journey I wanted to take, that Gestalt (at least as I had experienced it) seemed unable to help me with.

I was seeking my own path. I knew that in essence it was a spiritual path and would not be found in enclaves of any kind - least of all this one. Paradoxically, perhaps in that clarity I had come home to my own gestalt.

Another chapter unfolded over several years, sampling various approaches to therapy, always ostensibly to make me a better therapist but of course in truth driven by needs within me. Eventually in systems theory I found something that made sense, something beyond *me*, *my* needs, *my* desires, *my* neuroses. I commenced work as a couples' therapist late in this chapter and made the very difficult transition (at least for me) from thinking intrapsychically to thinking systemically. Slowly but surely I also admitted to myself why I was doing this, that it was to make sense of my own marriage and my parents' marriage.

Life as an individual (intrapsychic) therapist had been relatively manageable - even working with Vietnam Veterans and the darkness of PTSD - but nothing prepared me for the personal and professional sense of exposure that goes with couples' work. It was excruciating, humbling and draining - personally and professionally. And it was the next necessary step for me. No pain, no gain. I used to refer to this time as a second professional apprenticeship, but it took me a while to admit that it was the personal apprenticeship that was really knocking me for six. I found it hard to admit that despite years of therapy and good intentions, I was part of the marital system that I was unhappy about. Systems thinking left me nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, no-one to blame.

After several years of counselling couples and several years of addressing issues in my own marriage, I once again felt the need to move on to something else. The focus on relationships has its own shadow side, the search for the complete relationship. I was grateful for the apprenticeship in systems thinking and practice, but something in me said that even *this* was not the last word on me, or my marriage. Something broader, deeper, wider was calling me.

Looking back I can see a pattern. I had gone into Gestalt therapy (and Gestalt training) to 'find myself' and had come to a point where I had to put aside how others said I *should* be in order *to* be. In the same way, I had gone into couples therapy training (and on occasions couples therapy) in order to 'sort out my marriage'. Now it was time to go beyond even this focus.

I read recently that it is important, particularly for men, that we not confuse our primary relationship with our mission in life. While I do not want to take this idea too far or minimise the importance of relationships, I think there may be some truth in this - at least for me.

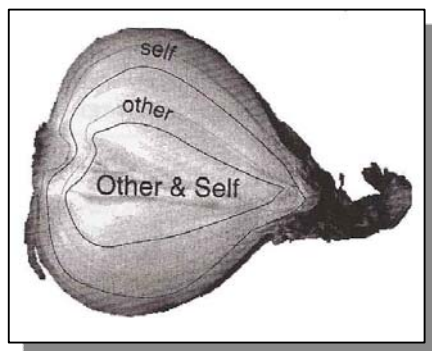
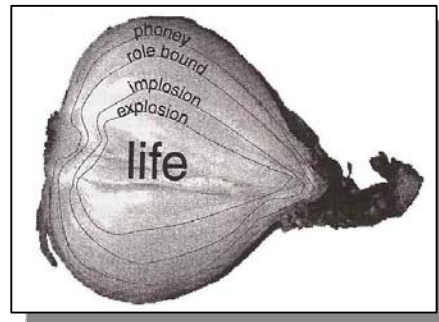
Yet another conviction was taking hold and yet another wider lens was catching my eye. I needed to claim that for me there is life after couples' therapy and 'life after marriage,' although we are still married. The spiritual lens was presenting itself, not for the first time in my life but in a new way that demanded my full attention.

I like the saying, 'All problems are psychological; all solutions are spiritual.' In other words, we experience at a psychological level any distress or difficulty, but perhaps the solution or way forward lies deeper and broader. Or to put it another way, our commitment to therapy shows us reaching for something, but perhaps that reaching cannot be satisfied by human endeavour and human understanding alone. I was in and out of therapy at various times for about ten years, some of it very helpful. However, none of it has been as transforming in a lasting way, or has yielded as deep a peace, as the spiritual gifts I have been given along the way and the spiritual 'lenses' which have changed the way I see things.

Some of my favourite spiritual gifts and 'lenses' are listed in point form in the tables below. Suffice to say, the journey from a purely therapeutic modality to one that embraces spirituality has been for me like moving from simply having the pieces of a jigsaw to also having the box-lid that gives me the overall picture.

So now I find myself in this third chapter of my personal and professional pilgrimage. I am pleased to be working alongside (and frequently meeting) other pilgrims who share a similar psychological-spiritual vision and vocation - 'wounded healers' as Henri Nouwen would have called us, but also dinkum meditators and pray-ers, and self-confessed children of God.

My picture of these three chapters of my journey (individual, couple and the transcendent) is quite simple really, an adaptation of Fritz Perls' 'peeling the onion' metaphor. If I remember rightly, Fritz had us moving in from the phoney (outer) layer of the self to a genuine but role-bound layer, then to implosion, then explosion, then Life.



My adaptation of the onion metaphor is that we are called to move from *self*, to *other* to *Other* (capital O), and that it is in that divine (capital O) *Other* that we discover our true (capital S) *Self*. To put it another way, I need to *have* a self in order to go *beyond* that self to an authentic relationship with another human being, but if I stop there I only have half the story.

This human *other* is not my ultimate purpose in life, nor was s/he ever meant to be – we see in our society the consequences of loading up humans with divine expectations. Beyond (or better within) the *self* and the *other* lies the divine *Other*, the Centre and Ground of our Being.

Therapy or Spirituality?

Perhaps therapy and spirituality are best regarded as inseparable. While some very able therapists get by with scant regard for spirituality, the best therapists seem to me to be those who are comfortable with spiritual things. And similarly, I never met a good spiritual director who was not also quite self-aware and psychologically well informed. It seems to me that the best therapists and spiritual directors know the place of both the psychological and the spiritual, and have committed themselves to a journey of self-examination and transformation which renders all of their work *therapeutic* in the true sense of the word (*therapeuo* – I heal).

We should also remember that the very words ‘therapy’ and ‘spirituality’ are just our attempt to name aspects of our experience. The words themselves are not definitions as such but are simply a form of corporate shorthand.

Having said that, for the purposes of this discussion I want to separate therapy and spirituality and summarise some of the connections and distinctions as I see them. Of course models and schemas have their limitations but perhaps they also serve a useful purpose in catching the essence of something worth considering.

In Table 1 (see below), I am suggesting that there are three levels of ‘work’ in life - *self*, *other* and *Other* (or me, you and the Divine) - and that at each of these levels good therapy can offer something and good spirituality can offer something. My interest is in what each modality offers and how these offerings are similar but different. (I see *therapy* and *spirituality* as probably polarities on a continuum, not separate entities, hence the dotted line down the middle.)

To summarise, I am suggesting that beyond a concern with the relative merits of one model of therapy over another, lies a deeper spiritual appreciation of the questions of identity, relationships and meaning-making. This appreciation *seeks* not so much to solve problems as to enter mysteries. This appreciation *sees* not so much a world of black or white, but a world of black *and* white, and grey, and all the other colours of the spectrum. The dinkum spiritual sensibility is a place of profound wonder, mystery and grace, where light and dark both have their place.

Perhaps this is about old paradigms versus new ones, old models versus new ones. Old ways of seeing versus new ways of seeing. This does not mean to say that all the old models are bad and all the new ones are good. I am simply advocating that we loosen our grip on our favoured psychotherapeutic lenses and reflect on how we are seeing things.

Table 1: Levels of Work – self, other and Other

Focus	Therapeutic challenges	Spiritual challenges
<p>“self”</p> <p>Individual work Into the self <i>The “reflective” self</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claiming one’s own voice • Dealing with shame • Coming to awareness • Exercising choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeper Identity (Psalm 139) • Dealing with being loved unconditionally by the Divine • Owning and learning how to love one’s own shadow. • Strong sense of one’s own ‘agency’, for good and/or ill.
<p>“other”</p> <p>Couples’ work Beyond the self <i>The “relating” self</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going beyond blame. Recognition of being part of the relationship system • Managing one’s own anxiety & learning to self-soothe • Balancing the drive for change with acceptance of the limits of what’s possible • Appreciation of the seasons of the relationship and the family life cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grace and graciousness, not just begrudging acknowledgement or withholding of judgement. • ‘I’m okay’ – deeper and deeper self-acceptance. • Deep appreciation of our mutual divinity <u>and</u> our mutual humanity/contingency. • Profound sense of mutual mortality & createdness - ‘We will both pass away one day.’
<p>“Other”</p> <p>Divine Other eg spiritual direction or Archetypal Therapies Deeper into <i>and</i> beyond self <i>The “created and divinely loved” Self</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am not the master of the universe • There is more to life than me, you and the material world • There is something even more important than focussing on (perfecting) the self and relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perhaps someone else is – the Divine? • What else is there? - Living with life’s question/s, unknowns and uncertainties. • What could be more important? - To love &/or a mission in life. - From self to Self – a bigger self-in-God <i>cf. settling for less.</i> - ‘Finding your life by losing it.’

Old Models vs New Models

James Hillman wrote the book, 'We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World is Getting Worse.' At the 1999 *Psychotherapy in Australia* Conference, Ernesto Spinelli gave a thoughtful and challenging keynote, 'If There Are So Many Different Psychotherapies, How Come They Keep Making the Same Mistakes?' What follows is something of a personal answer to these kinds of concerns.

As I have indicated, I have been both an earnest client and practitioner of therapy, individual and systems based. I am indebted to those therapists who set me along the path of doing my own work, individually and in relationships. However, for me the path of therapy eventually began to look like only half of what I needed, and this is my response to Hillman and Spinelli.

As I see it, the purely therapy based approaches are half-truths. At best, they tell us only half the story of human existence – the *how* but not the *why* or *what for*. In other words, they can help us realise how to lift our game, but they typically skirt issues of why we need to lift our game or what it's all for. We need to be bold enough to enter the second half of the story, the spiritual insights that speak profoundly to all levels of our personal work, and look for frameworks that help us with the whole journey to consciousness (see Table 2 below).

The 'New Models' as I am calling them (although some are as old as humankind) invite both a profound contentment *and* a profound vision for the self - 'I am enough just as I am' *and* 'I am still becoming who I am.'

One of the Psalms says, '*The Spirit goes forward with those he loves, even while they sleep.*' That's my kind of self-development!

Table 2: Old Models vs New Models

<p style="text-align: center;">The Old Models</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Therapy <i>ueber alles</i> (over all else)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The New Models</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Depth Therapy + Dinkum Spirituality</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'My therapy is better than yours' 	<p>Cross-Discipline and Cross-Paradigm: e.g. drawing from therapy/ies, theology, wisdom literature, fiction, poetry etc</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathology based 	<p>Mythology based.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dysfunction based <i>'self improvement +++'</i> 	<p>Resilience based: i.e. looking for the best in people <i>cf. worst.</i> Honouring 'good enough' parenting and partnering <i>cf. 'better/more/best'</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumption of neurosis/neuroses 	<p>Assumption of human nature: i.e. both noble and flawed.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis Paralysis? 	<p>Reflection <i>and</i> action.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Feelings +++ ' <i>(in some schools of thought)</i> 	<p>Time/s and place/s for restraint, for waiting and observing self and others.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking behaviour change – sometimes with subtle prescriptions and norms 	<p>Seeking balance between deep transformation <i>and</i> deep acceptance (of self and other).</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life as a succession of problems to be resolved 	<p>Life as mystery to be encountered.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life as suffering to be relieved 	<p>Life as suffering to be transformed: 'The problem with life is not suffering but wasted suffering,' ie suffering from which we learn nothing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making and achieving <i>(including subtly feeding the ego of the therapist/s)</i> 	<p>Meaning-making: being and doing from one's own centre, beyond ego</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapy: based on constructs derived from knowledge, theory, structuring of experience etc. 	<p>Consciousness: Closer to the raw material of our experience, utilising intuition and hopefully wisdom etc.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wilfulness – the drive to know, to set oneself apart, the quest for mastery or control 	<p>Willingness: The preparedness to surrender to the deepest processes of life itself, to surrender one's self-separateness (May, 1982)</p>

Conclusion: How to Get There From Here

As I see it, the journey to consciousness - which knows the place of both the psychological and the spiritual - requires what I call the three 'ilities': *humility*, *vulnerability* and *virility*.

Humility comes from the same root word as *humus* or vegetable mould. I am *of* the earth and will one day return *to* the earth. I am not God, I did not think up the idea of me, and I am not (speaking absolutely) the master of my own destiny. I free myself from many delusions when I can look myself in the eye and say, 'You too will pass,' and when I can think of loved ones and enemies alike in this context. It puts things in perspective.

By *vulnerability* I mean the capacity to let things touch you deeply. It is said of St Francis that he was often in tears, both of joy and of sadness. There have been times when I have been unable to watch the evening news without shedding a tear and I am not proud to say that I can now do it pretty much unmoved. The capacity to distance myself from suffering may help me get through the day sometimes, but I am not entirely convinced that it is a good thing. Also, as the Franciscan Richard Rohr says, 'Sometimes you've got to be broken before you can be blessed.'

And finally we need a new kind of *virility*, a true *eros* for life. I am grateful to Sam Keen for the book *The Passionate Life* in which he points out that for the early Greeks *eros* was the guiding energy or mission in a person's life (Keen, 1983). What does it say about our society that we have reduced *eros* to sexual erotica and a preoccupation with romantic love?

I began by recounting how at 24 I had my first taste of therapy and I witnessed something very fine. I thought the magic was in the therapy, or the person of the therapist, and perhaps there was some in both. But now, at 42, I sense that 'the magic' comes from the Source of all love and all true therapy, the well that never runs dry and One whose love mine is merely a pale reflection of.

For this reason, I believe I can do no better than drink directly from that Source and point the way for others to taste for themselves.

This article is an edited version of a paper presented at the inaugural *Psychotherapy in Australia* Conference, 'A Chorus of Voices,' in Melbourne, July 1999 by Noel Giblett. Contact Noel through his website at www.noelgiblett.com.au.

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