

THIS IS NOT THE TRUTH

'It would be absurd to suggest to someone to enter a room that they were already in'

St Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle,, trans Mirabai Starr (Riverhead Books: 2004, 38)....slide

Slide.....Yet many religious traditions have focussed on how best to get close to God, usually by telling us that the room we are in is not worthy enough, replete as it is with the pull of the ego and its earthly attachments. Therefore we must transcend our current reality, especially the ego in order to be acceptable to God. The irony is hard to miss as the desire to transcend the ego is in fact a major act of ego. We call this spiritual bypassing and it always led to trouble. 'Spiritual bypassing', a term used first by John Welwood, 'is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds and developmental needs.'

Here in Ireland we know all too well what this means. So it's rather comforting and radical for St Teresa to remind us that when we simply to show up our experience, whatever it may be, God shows up too.

The particular religious, cultural and societal imprint which until relatively recently purported to lead us to God –most notably through a comprehensive range of moral imperatives and religious observances - no longer holds currency for many. Although religious ritual and sacramental support will always be sacred and meaningful for many, our engagement with people's spiritual experience at all stages of modern life now requires a more complex skill set – one that respects and works with the inextricable connectedness between our psychology and our spirituality.

Slide.....Anatole Broyard was a writer for the New York Times who died in 1990 from prostate cancer. In his short book, 'Intoxicated by my illness' he wrote the following:

"I wouldn't demand a lot of my doctor's (clinician's) time. I just wish that he would brood on my situation for perhaps 5 minutes, be bonded with me for a brief space, survey my soul as well as my flesh – to get at my illness – for each man is ill in his own way"...

He goes on:

"I'd like my doctor (clinician) to scan me, to grope for my spirit as well as my prostate....how can a doctor presume to cure a patient if he knows nothing about his soul, his personality, his character disorders?"

Note the seamless weaving together of the terms 'soul', 'personality' and 'character disorders' – his experience hints at the sacred dance that takes place between our psychology and our spirituality, our Ego and our Essential self.

Both the Christian contemplative tradition and modern transpersonal psychology recognise the truth of this connectedness. Roberto Assagioli was the founder of Psychosynthesis which sometimes uses the image of the 'orchestra' to illustrate this point...**slide**

Slide....The ego has fixed ideas about who we are in the world and even stronger ones about who we feel we should be! We are driven by our self-images and we want to be seen as measuring up to these images - the good parent, the ideal wife, the competent one at work, the popular one, the good friend, the spiritual one....our ideas about ourselves go on and on. Richard Rohr writes that 'we have to find a way to get beyond our self-images and our ideas about who we are. We have to discover the face we already had before we were born'.

Rohr is saying here that we have to rediscover our Essential Self, the Self we were before the scaffolding of the ego took us over (mention the present-moment-ness of the baby, albeit unconscious, no rigid patterns of behaviour, no imprints from family, society, culture or religion). Our ego self, sometimes called our false self is who we take ourselves to be. It is a social and mental construct to get us started on life's journey. It is a set of agreements between you and your parents, your family, your schoolmates, your partner/spouse, your culture and your religion. It is a launching pad – with the focus on your appearance, your education, your job, your money, your success and so on. These are the trappings of the ego that get us through each day. Psychologist, Bill Plotkin, describes the ego/false self as our 'survival dance' but not our 'sacred dance'.

Thomas Merton writes that all 'sin' starts from the assumption that my ego/false self is the fundamental reality of life. 'And so', he says, 'I set up my life in the pursuit of pleasure, the thirst for power, knowledge, honour, love - to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something real.' Eventually, he writes, 'that which is too awful to think about finally happens. Death reveals to us that eventually tomorrow is today and we have run out of time. We discover that there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow and my structure of pleasure and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified by them.....and when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness...to tell me that I am my own mistake'

But I don't want to demonise the ego self – which is often what religion has done. Our ego self or false self is not bad or inherently deceitful. It is actually quite good and necessary as far as it goes. In fact we need an ego in order to be in the world and to engage with it. The problem is that it just does not go far enough, and it often poses as the real thing, it's the

part pretending to be the whole. That is the only problem and the reason we call it 'false'. The false self is more bogus than bad, it pretends to be more than it is. We need it to get started but it becomes problematic when we stop there and spend the rest of our lives promoting and protecting it. When we're living solely from the place of our ego self, we get a felt-sense of that. There is a sense of being fake in some sense – living from the surface of ourselves rather than from our depth. And from this place of fakeness, the ego self desperately seeks support or mirroring – it wants support from 'out there' – to be seen and validated by others for my looks, my achievements, my possessions, my house, my bank balance, my style...we can't bask in our own light, so we work hard to bask in the light of others' approval.....and when we don't get this validation/mirroring we feel shaky, unstable, lacking in support inside – there can be a feeling of 'I don't know how to be me'.

Slide....Movie: 'Catch me if you can' Frank Abagnale Jnr (1960s) – posed as a pilot, a paediatrician and an attorney.....all arising from his sense of deficiency in early life.....that sense of deficiency is something that seems to be a common human experience – a sense that we are not good enough, not lovable enough, not acceptable enough...and our ego sets about trying to prove that this is not true...like a hamster at the wheel, it promises to prove again and again that we are indeed lovable, worthwhile and good enough.....

We are engaged in spiritual work when we accept the invitation to move beyond our ego self – and when we do this at the right time and in the right way – it will feel as if we have lost nothing. Of course, if all we know is the false self and we don't know that there is anything beyond it, the transition will probably feel like dying. Realising that we have been living from the surface of ourselves rather than from our depth can bring shame. We can feel 'shell-like' – hollow and brittle. If that is all we have known, we may experience a kind

of terror in letting it go – if we don't have that, what will we have? Therefore we need lots of compassion and support when doing this work. It's not for the faint-hearted! There will be the voice in your head urging you to stick with what you know! Only after you have fallen into your True or Essential Self will you be able to say with the mystic Rumi 'what have I ever lost by dying?' You have then discovered true freedom and liberation. When you are connected to the Whole, you no longer need to protect or defend the part. You are now connected to something inexhaustible....the mystics might use the image of the wave and the ocean....**slide**

If we do not let go of our false self as the ultimate truth of whom we are, we remain stuck, trapped and addicted. Unfortunately, many people reach old age still entrenched in their egoic operating system. Richard Rohr writes that 'all great spirituality teaches about letting go of what you don't need and who you are not'.

Francis Bennett, spiritual guide, speaks of 'awakening' and then 'awakening from our awakening'. He describes the first awakening as the realisation that we are more than our false selves – that there is Essential Presence underlying our conscious awareness and that the realisation of this eternity within us is hugely liberating. But then he describes the awakening from this awakening is the acknowledgement that this inner divinity can only get expressed through this particular body through this particular personality structure. We still need to pay the bills, show up to work on time and obey the law! Telling a parking officer that we are pure presence isn't going to make the fine go away.

But the incarnation of our spiritual nature that Francis Bennet and many others talk about must give us pause for thought. On one hand, he is suggesting that we are in some way plugged into Infinite Being. Yet my expression of Being is through this particular personality

this body and through the layers of my psychological history. If this is so, our interest and curiosity must be two-fold. It must be in our connection with the Numinous/the Transcendent, but also in the particulars of my unique personality structure with its history, its traumas, its patterns of behaviour and bodily expression. AH Almaas , founder of the Ridhwan School, otherwise known as the Diamond Approach to Spirituality, calls this our 'pearl' – the unique expression of the divine in the way that I and only I can incarnate it. This isn't new – just forgotten by many! John Duns Scotus (1266)- 1308) asserted that God only created particulars and individuals, a quality he named "thisness" (*haecceity*).....**slide** 'Thisness' grounds the principle of incarnation in the concrete and the specific. You can't really love universals. It's hard to love concepts, forces, or ideas. Ideology is just the ego wrapping itself around such abstractions. What is *haecceity*? It's you. It's the unique identity inherent in each being. Each one of us has been given our gift, and that's our little "*haec*." It's what makes me, me, and not somebody else. *Haec* cannot be cloned. It's the part of me that is not to be replicated.

So it would seem that an authentic spirituality requires us to inhabit our Essential Self as it gets expressed moment by moment through the structure of the personality, and working through the inevitable distortions that arise from the layers of our psychological history.

James Hollis, a well-known Jungian analyst and writer says that there are certain markers that identify a mature and authentic spirituality.....**slide**

- The first is the principle of resonance – our belief system has most likely been imposed on us by our 'tribe' - in Ireland, we have the Christian/Catholic imprint – the true test of a spiritual path is whether or not it resonates with you – if it feels true

for you. If the resonance isn't there, it's not for you. We often only know what resonates with us in the second half of life. This is the time when the beliefs of our tribe come into question. The black and white codes of conduct and values that we unconsciously signed up to no longer offer us sustenance. Richard Rohr writes eloquently about this. He says that the transition to the second half of life moves you from 'either/or' thinking to 'both/and' thinking – it enables us to increasingly live with paradox and mystery. Before we can experience this shift in consciousness, Rohr says that we usually have to experience something that forces our 'either/or' thinking to fall apart.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes this journey in the second half of life beautifully

"I have learned to prize holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty and to seek companions who have arrived at the same place. We are a motley crew, distinguished not only by our inability to explain ourselves to those who are more certain of their beliefs than we are but in many cases by our distance from the centers of our faith communities as well. Like campers who have bonded over cook fires far from home, we remain grateful for the provisions that we have brought with us from those cupboards, but we also find them more delicious when we share them with one another under the stars.

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperOne: 2012), 224.

- The second marker of an authentic spirituality has to do with our encounter with the Numinous – the moments in life when our ‘small’ encounters the ‘large’. This can’t be manufactured (Job’s encounter with God). We cannot make grace happen. We can arrange the furniture – set up the conditions in our life that enables grace to be received. Richard Rohr uses the image of a tuning fork. All we can really do in the spiritual life, he says, is resonate to the true pitch. We must begin with the knowledge that the Sender is always present and broadcasting, the only change is with the receiver station – you and me. The important thing to remember is that grace has nothing to do with worthiness or the group you belong to, but only inner resonance and a capacity for mutuality.
- Thirdly, Hollis suggests that to be spiritually authentic we need to grow up psychologically and that this involves learning to tolerate anxiety, ambiguity and ambivalence. It also means being willing to become intimate with our psychological landscape – to do the work on ourselves, bringing understanding and compassion to our history, our wounds, our reactivity, our relationships. One of the best maps I know of to enable us to understand our psychological landscape and its connection to our spiritual nature is the Enneagram. The Enneagram provides a great road map to the psycho-spiritual landscape that we uniquely inhabit.
- Finally, Hollis says that we need to look at the type of spiritual practice we are engaged with and ask whether or not it lead me to a more deepened engagement with the Mystery, the Mystery of all that is. The poet Rilke says that ‘our task is to be

defeated by ever larger things', meaning that as we deepen our encounter with Mystery, we take on ever bigger questions, ones that invite us to embrace the anxiety, ambiguity and ambivalence referred to earlier.

There is no bigger encounter with Mystery than when we are diagnosed with an illness that will end our life. So when we are assessing the spiritual landscape of patients with a palliative illness we need to have some clarity about what it is we are assessing. Given the approach to spirituality that I have outlined in this talk, I'd like to suggest that assessing RESILIENCE is solid basis on which to begin spiritual assessment. It's a concept that can put a framework on the social, psychological & spiritual aspects of our coping. Some very interesting research on resilience has been done on this by Linda Machin in the context of bereavement. She developed **Range of Response to Loss** model (2009) based on the concepts of resilience and vulnerability. Machin outlines the interplay of one's core reactions to loss, identified as 'overwhelmed' and 'controlled' with one's coping responses, identified as 'vulnerable' and 'resilient'. This gave rise to her now well-known assessment tool, the **Adult Attitude to Grief Scale (AAG)**. The tool offers direction and focus for support/ therapeutic intervention and repeat use provides a measure of the change taking place in a bereaved person's grief perspective (Machin and Spall 2004; Machin 2007).

More recently, Linda has used this research to develop the **Attitude to Health Change (AHC)**. The Attitude to Health Change scales (one for patients and one for their carers) provides tools to explore the feeling and thinking perspectives which indicate how vulnerable or how resilient patients and carers are in facing circumstances of changing health.

The AHC has two significant functions:

- The quantitative appraisal of vulnerability through the scoring system.
- The generation of a conversation through the encouragement of qualitative response to the items in the scale. This second function provides practitioners with a framework within which to explore the impact of serious changes in health and the patient's/carer's coping capacity. The wider conversations about care and treatment choices may potentially flow from this person-centred engagement with patients and carers. It may also highlight differences in the patient and carer perspectives which will be an important guide to the way in which support is offered.

Repeat use of the scale during the illness trajectory will help reappraise variations and fluctuations in response to health changes.

Although not designed specifically as a spiritual assessment tool Linda agrees that almost all the questions on the AHC open up the door to spiritual perspectives, particularly Questions 7 & 9.