

In dialogue with Gabe Phillips on Psychology and Spirituality

NOEL HAARBURGER

Like a shadow, I am and I am not. Rumi

Noel: Gabe, let's start with what inspired you to explore the relationship between spirituality and psychology?

Gabe: It seemed an obvious, and even necessary, inquiry for me because my personal and professional journey across my lifespan reflects a dynamic relationship between psychology and spirituality. This phenomenon appears to be quite common for others as well and this interested me. As a young man I joined a religious community so my early adulthood was deeply absorbed in spiritual practice, community life and the teaching mission of the Christian Brothers. Then at 26 I left and started studying psychology full-time for the next decade before starting work. Around 40 I was introduced to the Diamond Approach, which brought together these two major strands of my life; the spiritual practice of my early adulthood and my subsequent psychological training. But it is particularly my involvement with the Diamond Approach over the last 15 years that has really focused and refined my interest. In this approach I found a psychologically grounded spirituality and a spiritually informed psychology and this unique perspective has really captured my attention.

Another factor inspiring my interest has emerged from my clinical work. I began to notice that even though psychotherapy is a wonderful vehicle to help people explore the psychological aspects of their experience, particularly their ego development, in some developmental stages and on some issues a psychological perspective alone seemed to run out of steam. This appeared to happen when clients needed less help to strengthen their ego and more help to dissolve their ego. So incorporating some spiritual teachings into my psychological understanding and psychotherapy practice helped me better understand human experience and increase the effectiveness of my clinical practice.

Noel: So when you talk about a psychologically grounded spirituality and a spiritually informed psychology what do you mean?

Gabe: Fundamentally I mean that each perspective provides an opportunity to realise the potential of the other. But maybe we can take a

step back and create some context first. If we look to the ages it becomes clear from history and culture that a connection between psychology and spirituality exists. Let me make two observations ... first the psychological adventure of knowing ourselves has historically been inextricably linked to the spiritual adventure of knowing the divine and secondly, psychology and spirituality are both culturally embedded. This means spiritual understanding and its related practices emerge in a cultural context, part of which are the predominant psychological theories of the time just as psychological understanding and its related interventions are influenced by the spiritual ideas and practices of the time. History and culture reveal the intertwined, inseparable connection between these two aspects of reality. One example is how depth psychology, especially object relations theory, is integral to the contemporary spiritual teaching of the Diamond Approach.

I will try and make the connection even more explicit by referring to the apparent pathway our human development follows. We are by nature inclined to be very connected to our psychological issues, but these issues are not all of who we are even though these issues often grab our attention and are the focus of our energy. It makes sense to start our spiritual journey following the thread we have most access to.....

Noel: The psychological aspects of our life?

Gabe: Yes. It is a significant observation of Hameed Ali, the creator and co-founder of the Diamond Approach, that if we begin the path where our curiosity naturally focuses, but don't stop there, then our spiritual nature begins to open up to us.

Noel: And this happens by following the psychological threads of our experience?

Gabe: That's right. Conversely, when our spiritual understanding stalls, returning to explore unresolved psychological issues can help move us along on our spiritual path. In this way each is a portal to the other and if their inseparability is held in mind it becomes much clearer that each also realises the potential of the other.

Noel: As you say that you're reminding me of the notion of spiritual bypassing - when spirituality doesn't have any psychological grounding to it, it can tend to bypass our shadow experience, prematurely transcending events in our life and limiting integration. You're talking about a spirituality that grounds us in knowing our psychological experience. That does sound fundamentally important.

Gabe: Yes it is, because we don't want to be spiritual in a way that doesn't enable us to function in the world. We are in the world and we

want to contribute to society and be able to live effectively in the world as spiritual beings. Conversely we don't want to be only psychological beings with a self-limiting view of reality.

Noel: Can you give me a current example of a spiritual practice that has influenced contemporary psychological practice?

Gabe: Mindfulness is the standout example of our time. It's the tag line for many contemporary psychological approaches, including mindfulness based CBT and various approaches to the treatment of trauma. The spiritual practice of mindful meditation and the practice of being non-judgementally present to immediate experience have morphed into the psychological intervention of mindfulness, or mindful awareness. I think this borrowing process is the nature of how we make use of what is useful from the world of ideas to support our human development.

However, in my view, it is important to keep in mind the spiritual origins of mindfulness while applying the practice psychologically. You see from this example how easy it is to make the separation between psychology and spirituality, as if mindfulness is only a psychological phenomenon.

Noel: Just an intervention.

Gabe: Yes an intervention that is dissociated or disconnected from its rich spiritual tradition. This separation can be limiting if our personal development, understanding and the application of the practice isn't established on a personal level in the practitioner. It can become a hollow intervention, not grounded in the richness of its originating tradition.

Noel: I know you have spent a lot of time thinking about the soul, the self and the mind. What is your understanding of these core psychological and spiritual concepts and how does your understanding of them support your view of the interconnection between psychology and spirituality?

Gabe: That's a big question. I'm not going to try and define each concept here because it's too big a venture for this interview. However, I think it's really useful to tell you about my process of investigation into these concepts and how, in my view, what I discovered supports the view that psychology and spirituality are two aspects of one reality. It occurred to me that the soul, the self and the mind are really three central concepts of spirituality and psychology, so I set about defining these three concepts, looking for the points of differentiation and convergence.

It is important to give some information about the sources of my definitions. My description of the soul is based on the spiritual teachings of Hameed Ali (A.H. Almaas) from the perspective of the Diamond Approach. My view of the self is based on the psychotherapeutic writings of Perls,

Hefferline and Goodman from the perspective of psychology and Gestalt. And my definition of the mind is based on the work of Dan Siegel from the perspective of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). So I based my work on a spiritual perspective of the soul, a psychological perspective of the self and contemporary scientific view of the mind.

The critical point I want to make, without going into the detail, is that I found a remarkable degree of convergence. What I discovered through cross-referencing these three areas of study was that the soul, the self and the mind were commonly described as embodied, relational, immediate, experiential processes that registered, reflected and regulated experience. I think this scientific, spiritual and psychological convergence is fascinating and warrants further investigation into a soul-self-mind view of human experience, development, health and well-being. I am currently writing more about this but it's too large a topic to go into here now.

Noel: It sounds very interesting Gabe. I want to ask you for another example of a spiritual teaching that you use that could be applied to the practice of psychotherapy?

Gabe: I referred earlier to ego development and ego dissolution. I would like to comment on the spiritual idea of self-realisation of the soul which elaborates the ideas associated with ego development and ego dissolution and their psychotherapeutic relevance. Imagine three related circles, one representing the soul, the other the self, the other the mind. The area of overlap, particularly between the self and the mind, could be described as our ego identity which is significantly shaped by the five dynamically interrelated influences of genetics, temperament, attachment, personality and environment. Through these influences we develop a more or less integrated ego with boundaries, self-identities, fixations and a history of associations.

The core task of psychotherapy could be described as the psychological integration of the ego for health and wellbeing. Dan Siegel observed that psychotherapy helps us to be more comfortable in our own skin, not to lose our skin. From this perspective our ego and our particular personality don't disappear in psychotherapy but rather move to a more flexible and adaptive flow.

My interest is going beyond this conventional understanding. So harking back to Dan Siegel's comment that the goal of psychotherapy is to help clients feel more comfortable in their skin, I want to explore what happens if we lose our skin? More specifically, what happens if we dissolve our ego identity? This intention points in the direction of self-realisation of the soul.

At this point I think it is useful for me to define self-realisation so we have some understanding of it. From the perspective of the Diamond Approach, self-realisation relates to the full maturation of our humanness, where all the constructs of the mind and the self are rendered transparent. In other words, self-realisation is the experience of ourselves in which we know ourselves by directly being ourselves rather than having our experience mediated through the constructs about ourselves that we have in our mind.

The relationship between integration and self-realisation produces a psycho-spiritual view of human experience, development and reality. From this perspective the primary focus is to expand the work of ego development by engaging in an inquiry process that supports ego dissolution. Making transparent that which is opaque! If we return to the image of the circles at the intersection of the soul, the self and the mind and focus on the distinct and unique boundary shaped by our history and associated identities, psychotherapeutic work shifts from strengthening this boundary to dissolving it. This is the process of self-realisation of the soul.

Noel: It's dissolving those ego structures rather than building them up?

Gabe: Yes.

Noel: It reminds me of the metaphor Ram Dass used when he referred to psychological work as akin to rearranging the furniture in a prison cell while self-realisation work is breaking out of the prison altogether.

Gabe: Yes, that's exactly it.

Noel: Say a little bit more about the relationship between integration and self-realisation.

Gabe: I think this is another example where the inseparability of psychology and spirituality is illustrated. I really like the definition of integration from interpersonal neurobiology by Dan Siegel. He emphasises the linkage of the differentiated elements of a complex system into a self-regulating functional whole, observing that this is the mechanism for health and wellbeing.

In the work of interpersonal neurobiology nine domains of integration are referred to, including bilateral integration, vertical integration, memory integration, narrative integration, state integration to name some. Interestingly, the ninth domain of integration that Dan Siegel refers to is what he calls transpiration or integration of integration. Now the interesting thing about transpiration is that in this domain there is an awareness of an expanded sense of self, or as I would like to say, an expanded sense of the soul that is inclusive of the self and the mind.

So transpiration is like a bridge that creates a pathway to something larger. I also think transpiration links psychological integration with spiritual self-realisation and in so doing helps us to understand how to lose our skin and what happens if we do. It seems that this expanded sense of self begins to move and operate differently in the world of our experience. Psychological integration brings us to the edge of an expanded awareness that we belong to a larger whole, and in so doing our boundaries and our sense of separateness that keep us from experiencing this expanded sense of consciousness begin to dissolve. It is at this point that self-realisation as a dynamic experience that reflects continual unfoldment toward optimisation comes into focus.

Noel: It's like an endless process of transcending and including, transcending and moving beyond, but including and integrating where you've come from.

Gabe: Yes. These two perspectives of development, integration and self-realisation complement each other, and demonstrate the observation I'm making that psychology and spirituality really have so much to contribute to each other.

Noel: When I hear you talk about this I feel excited because including integration and self-realisation together creates a more expansive perspective. It feels there's a lot more human potential that can get explored in this possibility. How do you use the idea of self-realisation in a psychotherapy session?

Gabe: One simple example of using this self-realisation perspective in psychotherapy involves a process that I call seeing and seeing through. This process, in the first instance, involves seeing self-identities (i.e. who I take myself to be) or structures of the mind (e.g. my super ego or child) in order to facilitate integration. When we know ourselves and can see our functioning, see our mind operating in the world.....

Noel: And our patterns that are included in that?

Gabe: Yes including our patterns. When we can see all of these aspects of our experience then we have a way of supporting our ego development.

Noel: It reminds me of the notion in Gestalt of simple self-awareness, becoming aware of patterns and self-images and our feelings.

Gabe: Yes all you mention is encompassed in this notion of seeing. But what can happen is that we can become very identified, fixated or obsessed by these identities and lose our capacity to see them simply as ideas and processes.

Noel: You mean we take them to be who we are.

Gabe: Yes, exactly. Often the work that we do with people is to help them to see themselves more clearly and realistically within a more coherent story. But we can become so identified with the various aspects of ourselves that we get stuck. For example, you hear people say, I'm the sort of person who is like this or does that, and you can sense the thick and impermeable shell of an inflexible identity. This can be quite difficult to work with. So the second part of what I'm suggesting is that the seeing needs to be accompanied by a process of seeing through. Seeing through is related to the transparency that I talked about earlier in relation to self-realisation.

When you see an aspect of yourself there's actually someone doing the seeing. Once you recognise that there's an aspect of yourself doing the seeing then you're not so identified with what is actually being seen. Seeing through is a process of disidentification. What it does is render that which is opaque, or bounded, or tightly defined more transparent.

Noel: With transparency the doorway to further self-realisation is opened and spaciousness is experienced, especially when the self is not defined and constricted by a self-concept.

Gabe: That's right.

Noel: You have previously mentioned the view of totality as another spiritual teaching that you believe has relevance to Gestalt therapy. Could you describe the view of totality?

Gabe: This is a spiritual idea that really interests me. It derives from the current edgy work of Hameed Ali and the Diamond Approach - it's written about beautifully in his new book, *Runaway Realization* (A.H. Almaas - 2014). Gestalt was very synthetic in its formulation so in this tradition I am borrowing this idea of reality. It is my particular interest and project to apply spiritual ideas to psychotherapeutic practice. I think the view of totality has something wonderfully useful to contribute to Gestalt and to psychotherapy.

The view of totality is described as an open-ended perspective that includes all possible real ways of experiencing and intimately knowing reality. So it's an unconditional openness to hold any view or many views at once. Hameed says the view of totality recognises the truth of all views.

Noel: And what else?

Gabe: It is anaperspectival understanding of reality where we don't have to adhere to any one particular view while at the same time having the freedom to take any one view at any particular time. So there's no ultimate view in this perspective. Consequently we're further liberated from our subtle judgements, preferences, fixations and idealisations.

Noel: There is potential value in every view - is that what you're saying?

Gabe: No, I am saying that each view is simply a view of reality. We're always tempted, like you've just done, to give some weighting to different views. The attribution of value can move us away from this open and open-ended perspective, because we want to create a hierarchy. We want to create an ultimate view. Paradoxically this hierarchical view is also part of the view of totality as it is just another view of reality!

Noel: What are your thoughts about why we do that? Why do we hold on to a view and make it superior to other views?

Gabe: The ego loves certainty. The ego loves predictability. The ego loves to diminish complexity. It's part of our egoic self and reflects our human nature to assert ourselves in the world and ensure our survival.

Noel: That makes total sense to me. So it's risky to have a view of totality. It sounds like it requires learning how to live with less certainty. Would you agree with that?

Gabe: Yes Noel, everything comes with both advantage and risk. Something important that is true about this view of totality is that it isn't just an idea that we can incorporate into our practice, it is actually a way of being that is established in us through a great deal of psycho-spiritual inquiry and development.

Noel: If you were to apply the view of totality to Gestalt in particular, or psychotherapy in general, what contribution do you think it could make?

Gabe: If we really grasp this notion of an open-ended perspective then it helps Gestalt practitioners to resolve a particular debate in the Gestalt world associated with the tension between the individualist perspective and the relational perspective and the associated relationship between duality and non-duality. We tend to like new, shiny objects, so the relational perspective has in some significant way been talked about as supplanting the individualist perspective. There is a real paradox in this argument as the relational view, which is based on a non-dual view, often argues for pre-eminence in relation to the individualist view. In so doing it ensnares itself in the dual perspective by defining itself in relation to something else.

Noel: Exactly.

Gabe: So this inherent contradiction is resolved from the perspective of the view of totality. From the view of totality the individualist and relational perspective are just two ways in which reality manifests. The value of this perspective is revealed when you consider that ego development requires a self and other or duality, while ego dissolution requires experiencing the unity of all things, oneness, boundlessness or non-duality. So each

perspective then becomes an expression of reality manifesting in a particular way.

If you bring in the view of totality, which I like to think of as a third turning of the wheel in the development – or more accurately in the potential development of Gestalt - you begin to resolve one difficult theoretical practice debate within the Gestalt and wider psychotherapy world.

Noel: That is very interesting.

Gabe: I can give another example of a contribution that I think this spiritual idea offers the Gestalt approach. The view of totality points to Gestalt's foundational principle of holism, which is ever present in our theory and practice but which has been increasingly sidelined. But by incorporating the view of totality holism has the potential to be mainstreamed and radicalised. Another way to put this is that the view of totality turbocharges holism and brings it to fruition as unbounded inclusiveness.

Noel: I like that term, unbounded inclusiveness.

Gabe: I borrowed the phrase from Hameed, to give credit where it's due. So this open-ended openness invites us personally and professionally to better understand our excluding practices and to develop including practices. Clinically this is very interesting, especially when the client and therapist begin to think together about the various personal, relational and collective processes that constrain and support access to the totality of our experience. For example, the effect of super-ego attacks is a significant way in which particular aspects of personal experience become imbued with shame and deleted from interpersonal contact and in some instances even removed from awareness. So the view of totality potentially offers something very significant to our understanding of holism in Gestalt theory, practice and personal development.

Noel: It certainly sounds like it has many great implications for Gestalt. One last question, do you see the possibility of a wider application for these ideas?

Gabe: Yes definitely. If we establish in our being and practice the view of totality I think it supports a more precise understanding of the nature of reality. In particular it mitigates the harmful effects of comparison, categorisation, exclusion and judgement. While this open-ended openness is a helpful way of being with ourselves personally if you begin to apply this way of being on a larger scale and cease to assert that any perspective is an ultimate view we also cease the process diminishing other people and other views. This means other views are just that, another view, and

not a lesser view.

It occurs to me that if our curriculums for learning, not just in Gestalt or in psychotherapy training but in the entire education process, were infused with the view of totality so that this view became established in our being and resulting life practice then one result would be that humanity would be more in touch with its humaneness. We would no longer need to remove from consciousness that which we do not wish to experience and we would no longer need to remove from view those that we do not wish to see.

Let me give you an example of an application of this perspective in the wider context. A perspective that is open, accepting, allowing and including has the potential to mainstream a human rights agenda by challenging society's excluding practices, such as its current preoccupation with pathologising experience and criminalising behaviour. You see the consequences of this behaviour everywhere.

This is a very big project but it's a project that really interests me. I think some of the ideas that we have talked briefly about today point towards a way to begin to achieve this larger vision, in part by initially grasping how psychology and spirituality realise the potential of each other.

Noel: I can see the real benefit of this vision on a global scale as well as an everyday scale. If everyone started to do what you are suggesting it would make a huge difference to the world. Thanks Gabe.

Gabe: You're welcome.

Biographies

Gabe Phillips DipTeach, BEd, BA, GradDipAppliedPsych, MPsyCh, PhD, FMGANZ, MAPS, MCCLP.

Gabe works full time in his clinical psychology and psychotherapy practice, Lifespace Consulting. His work and world view are informed by Gestalt, Interpersonal Neurobiology, mindfulness, psychodynamic and Diamond Approach ideas and practices. Gabe has a particular interest in working with same-sex attracted people to develop happy intimate relationships, accepting (and accepted) positive identities, and better mental health (and human rights) outcomes. Gabe is a co-founder and former Managing Director of Gestalt Therapy Australia (GTA). He is on the Editorial Board of the British Gestalt Journal and is an elected Fellow Member of Gestalt Australia and New Zealand (GANZ). Gabe is an ongoing student of the Diamond Approach to Self-Realisation (A.H. Almaas) and is

actively engaged in the project of integrating psychological and spiritual perspectives of reality into his understanding of human experience and psychotherapeutic practice.

Noel Haarburger BBSc, BEd (Counselling), AdvDip Gestalt Therapy, ClinMGANZ, MAPS.

Noel is a psychologist and faculty member at Gestalt Therapy Australia (GTA). Currently Noel works in his private practice with individuals and couples, as well as providing supervision to allied and mental health professionals. Previously he was the senior psychologist at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre for 4 years. Noel has worked in diverse settings in various fields of psychological practice including family, drug and alcohol, problematic gambling, sexual assault, domestic violence and psychiatric disability. Noel has a special interest in working with trauma and in integrating embodiment, mindfulness and Buddhist psychology perspectives into his practice. He has been a student of the Diamond Approach since 2003, and is about to complete his advanced training in somatic experiencing, a highly effective body focussed approach to working with trauma. Noel also practices and trains students in equine assisted psychotherapy with his wife at Equine Psychotherapy Australia, in central Victoria.