

Observing the Rites of Autonomy, Distancing the Prospects for 'The Spiritual'

Mark Furlong

We are acculturated to believe each healthy person is a firmly bordered republic, a kind of self-sufficient island. With its associated values entitlement and self-determination, this assumption has become an internalised schema within which individuals – and many therapists – evaluate personal competence and adjustment. Whilst acknowledging that an expectation of autonomy might encourage ambition and empowerment, the injunction 'be autonomous' may also bring with it a number of unintended consequences. These include the promotion of experiences of isolation and incompleteness, experiences that many find uncomfortable and which may come to be associated with an emerging desire for what might be called 'the spiritual'. A question then arises: might an expectation of personal autonomy on the one hand prompt a yearning for spiritual experience yet, on the other, diminish the prospects of such an experience by marginalising the possibilities of personal and interpersonal connectedness? After developing this argument, I offer preliminary ideas to assist practitioners to envisage how the 'secularly spiritual' might be imagined and invoked within everyday therapeutic practice.

You will not find my name if you examine the A–Z of the authors who have studied the spiritual. At one bookend of this expansive library one can find *Adams, Neil* (1995; 1996), whose groundbreaking work in the *ANZJFT* focused on the important, albeit under-theorized, relationship between spirituality and family therapy. At the other bookend is *Zaehner, Robert* (1957), who offers a classic, more general text that diligently catalogues the many ways spirituality might relate to mysticism. Given my non-presence in the long list of texts between these bookends, I have no basis for claiming any particular expertise in spirituality. What I believe am able to do is to link spirituality to a key feature of our modern world that I have been studying: how the self is theorised and practised in western and non-western cultures (Furlong, 1999; 2001b; 2003).

I will argue that the 'first world' premise that each person is autonomous and rational, unitary and free-choosing, establishes a powerful stipulation that bears directly upon the possibilities of the spiritual. How does this argument run? In brief, the assumption of an independent self

has a number of particular effects. Firstly, this assumption specifies key attributes in relation to which we experience our selves; secondly, these attributes come to constitute crucial norms that characterise individual behavior in the (so called) developed nations, for example the expectation of individual self sufficiency and the pathologising of dependence. In so far as the self is experienced within these terms — as separate; as inevitably and quite properly isolated — it is likely that anomie and dissatisfaction will result. And, if people came to feel isolated and empty, it would not be surprising to find an emerging interest in the spiritual.

This paper will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I shall offer an account of the assumption that the healthy self is autonomous, and that humans should expect to be, and aspire to operate as, free-standing islands; secondly, I shall consider the effects that this dominant assumption has upon the possibilities for spiritual experience; thirdly, I shall offer several preliminary comments on how the secularly spiritual might be facilitated in our therapeutic work.

The Dream of the Autonomous Self

Western culture is premised on the assumption that each person is a 'sovereign' entity as if this is our natural state of being (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 1997). And, whether we look to our artistic, business or Olympic heroes, it has never been clearer that the modern role model is a self-sufficient, free-choosing character, who acts decisively upon her/his environment. Popular culture may sentimentalise the selflessness of mothers, and other marginalised and dispensable martyrs — yet this window dressing is not the real



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show: the ascendant role models of to-day are pragmatic and phlegmatic achievers. Our winners are mobile, independent and intelligent units, lone-wolves if you like, who are as self-ruling as they are effective, as successful as they are inviolate. As any year twelve psychology student in Victoria and Tasmania will tell you, the goal, the end point, of the human developmental process is 'autonomy', it is the realisation of one's latent independence and that is what we are meant to be. Not only do all students come to 'know' this as a matter of their general acculturation towards the attainment of common sense, young citizens literally learn

“...the construction of autonomy as inviolate disqualifies the importance of relationships and context...”

this 'specification for the self' as an objective fact from their studies in that supposedly technical subject 'psychology'.

Yet our current valuing of independence is anthropologically unique, is historically anomalous and is far from logically axiomatic (Heelas & Lock, 1981). We citizens of the so-called advanced nations have been so intensely acculturated that the premise that the 'individual is an island' does not seem like a variable at all: it is so familiar as to be invisible. As stated by the anthropologist Louis Dumont: 'Western ideology grants real existence only to individuals and not to relations, to elements and not to sets of elements' (1986: 9). This conclusion is consistent with the conflation of the intimate with the familial found in the 'developed west', where there tends to be a limited vocabulary for delineating types of relationships (Furlong, 2003).

The premise that the self is one's own, that 'I am the boss of me', decisively, if opaquely, shapes how normality and well-being, pathology and dysfunction, have come to be constructed: within the canons of bourgeois psychology, the well adjusted are expected to be 'differentiated' (Bowen, 1978), or 'individuated' (Mahler, 1968); 'autonomous' (Erikson, 1980); the poorly adjusted will be 'undifferentiated', 'fused' and self-doubting. Apart from defining health and pathology, the construction of autonomy as inviolate disqualifies the importance of relationships and context in the construction, maintenance and evolution of identity. The Western premise of the unitary self is enacted as an organising principle within professional disciplines and in particular health and welfare settings; it follows that practitioners, who as citizens and as cultural producers tend to re-cycle the accepted practices, will therefore tend to perform this premise in their work. For example, they tend

to privilege the client's 'rights' over those of the client's significant others'.

The premise that the self is autonomous helps to establish, and then regulates, many of the norms, laws and ideologies that are now characteristic of (so called) developed nations, for example the expectation of self reliance and individual responsibility. Downstream of this assumption are a set of 'commonsensical' consequences that construct specific professional codes, e.g. the value that is given to 'self-actualisation'. Yet, if one reflects on these dogmas, are they really self-evident? For example, how did Maslow (1954) 'discover' that the historical and culturally anomalous abstraction he called 'self-actualization' constituted the highest need in his hierarchy of human requirements? Isn't there something irreducibly culture-bound about his claim? Intellectual practices arising from the above have come to govern important, apparently 'natural', aspects of our understandings of mental health and maladjustment: our negative attitude to those with 'ego' or 'boundary problems', to those who are not 'in control' of their lives, etc.

What does this leave us with? I think it leaves us hopping from one foot to another, as in a contradictory and conflicted spot, that is as both weightless and burdened:

- *weightless*: if I am the 'boss of me now' I am in a precarious position as I have no access to security and legitimation, to existing values or received codes of ethics and behavior. If it is only *my* conscience that guides me, how can I be sure?
- *burdened*: from managing your superannuation to 'owning' your sexuality, it is down to you. As an eighteen year-old daughter of a old friend, who visited us recently from her home in California, told me with the utmost seriousness: 'Everything, even how I feel, is just a personal decision'. By way of such 'facts' being accepted, every choice, every risk, has downloaded onto the lowest entity-level unit — the individual — where once forms of traditional and collective responsibility tended to prevail.

I don't know about you, but I often feel both vertiginous and weighed down by all this. And, I suspect it is probably even more difficult for many young people (McDonald, 1999). So, how does this hyper-modern experience of being *spoilt for choice* and the assumption that each of us is meant to be an island, relate to the prospects for spiritual experience?

'The Spiritual' and the Assumption of Autonomy

Before looking further, what is 'the spiritual'? Of course, the spiritual is, by definition, a realm that is, at best, problematic to define. Nonetheless, the term is inclusive of the sacred, the transcendental and the mystical. More subjectively, this realm is associated with the awareness, if not direct experience, of:

- higher, even divine, meaning and purpose; the immanence of a deeper or higher order
- elevated levels of consciousness

- the appropriateness of awe
- the importance of detachment and surrender, of being 'at rest'; an enlightened 'letting go', a delighted submission, and
- the coherence and unity of existence.

For the present purpose I wish to focus on this latter aspect: at its most simple an inherent dimension of the spiritual concerns the phenomenon whereby the subject's perceived horizon of immediate attention dissolves the boundaries of the skin. In this state, the boundary between self and other, between the self and its environment, ceases to exist. In this state, the experience of identity and immediate awareness is experienced in a manner that is fused with that which is larger than the self.¹ In a secular sense this occurs in romantic love and sexual communion. It also occurs in those everyday moments where, to use a phrase of the filmmaker Frederic Fellini, we experience those 'family kinds of feelings', that is those pure moments of non-contingent union, of one-ness and contentment. These moments resemble, I suspect, that feeling of 'I'm part of something bigger' we can experience if we are involved in, and directly identify with, collective engagements with the team, the regiment, the gang and so forth. The 'secularly spiritual' is, for me, about these moments of one-ness, a non-denominational experience of 'you-am-I'.

Returning to the initial point, how does the explicitly 'male-stream' (Smith, Osman & Goding, 1990) expectation that the self is, and should be, an island affect the prospects for the experience of oneness and unity? Put round the other way, how does the assumption that it is 'unhealthy' and 'dysfunctional' to be 'undifferentiated' from others or 'fused' with one's environment affect our access to the oneness and unity that are such an important part of spiritual experience?

It would seem to follow that the extent to which the experience of connectedness and oneness has been pathologised will determine access to the secularly spiritual. That is, in so far as we live within, and accept, the language of interpersonal separateness, the experience of connectedness will be de-legitimated, denigrated or disowned. And, in so far as independence has been prized, the consequence will be that the prospects for an experience of togetherness, for the safe receipt of an experience that 'you-am-I', will be marginalised.

This is interesting, as a sense of identity might be firmed-up, rather than white-anted, by strong inter-dependencies. The more an individual human 'system' develops its complexity, the more its autonomy is developed within the context of multiple co-dependencies (Mathews, 1990). So, rather than attenuating the sense of identity, it is possible that the experience of oneness — with the group, the tribe; with the land, the universe — might strengthen a sense of self by diversifying the individual's portfolio of symbolic-emotional investments and identifications. This theme has been approached from other, non-systems perspectives. For example, working within the broad rubric of 'attachment'

and 'social capital' (Maris, 1998; Putnam, 2000), it is now being argued that social linkages underwrite quality of life and the attainment and maintenance of health.

That noted, I believe that the importance of being an up-front group member tends to be constrained by the ascendant position autonomy has been given. As the TV theme song goes 'I am the boss of me now'. Rather than being encouraged to be explicitly in-and-of-a-union, it seems that a disowned sense of belonging can only be pursued indirectly, that is by way of slavish devotion to fashion brands, to having the designated 'good' lifestyle, and so forth. Under the misapprehension that this is my freely chosen individual choice, by selecting the right badges and brands I, the conscripted consumer, in fact sign up to be one of a herd. Here, everyone can equally experience anomie, isolation, and the sense of precariousness and emptiness that the current resurgence of interest in the spiritual, in part, speaks to. Troublingly, as argued earlier, this condition makes 'the spiritual' marginal even as it is the more 'needed'.²

You am I: Implications for Practice

What, if anything, has this got to do with the work of family therapists? I reckon in so far as we want to be ecologically oriented therapists, and if we do not wish simply to propagate male-stream prejudices about the nature and operations of the self, then we should act in ways that oppose self absorption, anomie and isolation.³ We can inadvertently reinforce the 'individuals are an island' premise, or we can act to contest this notion. Perhaps an example might help.

A middle-aged man comes to see a therapist and states that he is dissatisfied with his work, his relationships and, in a general way, his life. He does not appear to be either particularly depressed or distressed and reports feelings and thoughts consistent with a picture of listlessness and anhedonia. In the absence of any distinct pathology, one school of thought might frame the problem in terms of the client 'not being in touch with his own feelings' or 'feminine side', another in terms of his 'not being assertive enough', a third that he is not 'sufficiently self valuing', another that he lacks 'self management skills'. As therapeutic work progresses, it follows that the client will, again depending on the practice ideology of the therapist, be more or less explicitly coached towards becoming more emotionally self exploring and expressive, less shy and more assertive, more self-caring and self-entitled, or more practised and vigorous in the techniques of self-control. And so forth.

However sensible these approaches can be in particular circumstances, the possibility is that they are variations on the same theme: teaching a dog to chase its tail. If there is an absence of affiliation, if there is a quality of unbalanced or even exploitative relatedness, it will be counter-productive for the therapist to prescribe greater self absorption, the expectation he should get more of what he wants, or that he should more effectively 'mine' his environment.

Let's not encourage people to think in terms of 'me', to propagate 'me-ism'.

Contesting the Lie-of-the-Land

The vegetable 'individualism' has an ubiquitous position in our diet: it is the krill at the base of our food-chain, the grass we cows and sheep endlessly chew, as it is also the honored offering at the head of the menu. If we are what we eat, and all of us are life-long consumers of popular cuisine, we've been on a long-term saturation diet of this crudest of root crops.

Each level of our food pyramid now consists of processed fodder from this same stock, albeit sometimes cunningly disguised. For example, at the top of the pyramid we find 'self-actualisation', the highest level of human need. One mightn't need much of this essential trace element, but you must get some. Just below this level is the sophisticated food group 'being differentiated', clearly a precious and key quality in one's diet. Also not required all the time are those richer and more sophisticated platters such as planning *your* career and looking after *your* rights and interests, which are items that should never be neglected although, in themselves, these are not a primary subsistence grouping. A mid-level grouping is concerned with looking after your everyday functions, particularly your regularity, a sub-system that requires the ingestion of lots of 'I'm special', 'I'm worth it' fibre. Then we come to those items we need multiple portions of each day, such as 'maintaining your focus' and 'making the most of your time': you have to keep up an even supply of these staples, so nibble on them as often as you can between meals. Lastly, always on the table should be the never-out-of-flavor item 'manage your everyday consumer choices'. Clearly, there is no limit to how much of that you need: just help yourself!

Being self-centered and self-absorbed, living timelessly on this diet in our 'I-aeon' (the 'me-decade' has mutated into some kind of boundaryless 'I-aeon'), our diet of self-centredness is enough to make you sick: every mouthful you consume makes you hungrier and less satisfied in the same way as undertaking amoral paid work further impoverishes us with every dollar we earn. In this neo-liberal context, it is not surprising that we see the emergence of anomie and its antithesis, the pursuit of connection and meaning. I have argued that the high value we place on autonomy, together with the acceptance of the associated 'downstream' values of confidentiality and self-determination, has helped create the conditions within which hunger and anomie flourish. And, without compromising our role, to a significant degree practitioners can contest the expectation that 'autonomy rules' if we so wish. This can be furthered by asking our clients (and ourselves) questions that bring into the spotlight the public and the relational – the shadow side of independence. We may invoke the realm of people-as-interdependent-entities, our history as creatures that are sustained by group memberships: 'What kind of reputation or legacy would you want to leave?' 'What

role should other-oriented feelings, like shame and humiliation, play in your life?'

Around these and other themes that explicitly stimulate the social-self, one can develop innovative, provocative practices that enliven the prospects for inclusiveness and accountability, practical examples of which have been developed in family group conferencing and narrative work with men who are abusive. How might we enhance the prospects for the secularly spiritual, how can we catalyse the you-am-I experience? In the first instance this can be facilitated by being able to see, and to encourage others to see, the stars through the rigging. More specifically, as Tom Paterson (1996) suggests, we can work towards a balance between our relational and the autonomous selves which opens the way to enhancing the prospects for the secularly spiritual if not the institutionally religious.

As a kind of epilogue/afterthought, I would like to conclude with a paragraph written after this paper was delivered at the Hobart conference in 2002. After considerable discussion with a number of those present, it would seem that the re-raising of the question of spirituality was experienced by some colleagues as positive, perhaps even as important and acknowledging. Yet, for others, it was apparently disquieting, even embarrassing. It seems to me that this latter response may, in part, be due to an unwelcome convergence between therapy and ministry. One does not need to be Erasmus to locate conjunctions, as well as disjunctions, between the work of secular therapists and religious ministers with respect to traditions, conventions and formats, guiding metaphors and broader linguistic practices. It is not the place here to examine this matter further (see, for example, Ehrenwald, 1991) other than to observe that in our current neo-liberal political environment the priest is not properly the enemy of the therapist. I, for one, may not enjoy my memories as an 'ex right footer', as a young church-going Catholic, of groups that I experienced as brimming with self-congratulation and disowned aggression, my experiences of holy church smugness and 'icky and cloying' assemblages. That said, I am happy to say that I am now less likely to feel embarrassed at the many points at which spiritual and therapeutic practices connect: both have tended to be, but are not necessarily, associated with political quietism; both can be pursued with, or without, a belief that identity and well-being are necessarily social affairs.

Endnotes


- 1 More accurately, the 'all-is-one' aspect might be regarded as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the spiritual. Although this is arguable, in so far as one wishes to distinguish the sacred and the profane, the everyday feelings of union form the experience of awe (and fear?), that more refined understandings of the spiritual expect.
- 2 Clearly, there are multiple additional forces at play that bear on the prospects for the spiritual. In the 'developed world' it is the materialistic that increasingly tends to be valued and, given we also tend to make a radical distinction between 'fact' and 'value',

this leads to privileging that which is empirical. I would argue that these practices act cumulatively with the canonisation of the sovereign self and that together these conjoint practices devalue that which is deemed to be of the 'non-objective' realm, such as the spiritual.

- Taylor's (1989) magisterial philosophical study of the origins of the modern self uses the theme of morality as a counterpoint to what he sees as the 'disengaged instrumental' tendency in the construction of the modern self.

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