

# PATHOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

## The Story of False Spiritual Adult and Bad Child

Steve King

Pathological spirituality is a phenomenon that exists on both the individual and the collective levels and it is on the increase. This doesn't surprise me as we are passing through a time that I think of as the autumn of the patriarchy. As many of the old economic, political, religious and philosophical structures crumble or become ineffective, a similar dissolution is taking place with the individual structures that these larger ones inculcate and support. Two currents flow strongly. One is the impulse to create new structures as the old ones collapse and the other is the impulse that seeks to hold those old structures together at any cost—fundamentalism and extreme conservatism. It is also not surprising that there is such a variety of spiritual and psycho-spiritual paths for seekers to choose from.

People started coming to me with spiritual problems almost as soon as I began practice as a psychotherapist sixteen years ago. They puzzled and disturbed me because I thought they had been cheated. They were caring, thoughtful, intelligent people who had spent ten or fifteen years sometimes following a path in order to make a positive change in themselves and in the world. And what had it got them? Stuckness and suffering.

Again and again I heard comments like the following:

*-If I could only get rid of my ego...*

*-No matter how hard I try, I can't forgive...*

*-I know that I am the one who is creating this reality, so it can't be okay for me to blame someone else.*

*-I have to drop this anger and move on.*

*-My meditation used to help me detach and rise above these feelings but it isn't working any more.*

*-I know I shouldn't be angry with my father because he was doing the best that he could...*

*-I chose this incarnation because it had something to teach me, so why can't I just surrender to it and learn the lesson?*

The people who said these things were deeply divided by an idea of who they

ought to be that was wildly at odds with who they really were. At first I was angry with their teachers. Who were the people who taught this stuff, I wondered? Then I started to understand the role of the inner critic and how it will make use of anything to empower itself. I don't mean I decided that there was no bad teaching around. I think that there is a lot of it. But I saw that even when the teaching was valid, sometimes the inner critic turned it into something else. Bad spiritual teaching would probably not take root in an adult if there weren't already an inner critic there ready to receive it. Bad spiritual teaching helps to support and maintain a strong inner critic and produces a very split person. On one side is a part that presents itself as spiritually advanced, a part I called False Spiritual Adult. On the other side is the troubled, hurt, or split-off side that I called Bad Child because that is the way False Spiritual Adult portrayed it. The first thing I noticed about False Spiritual Adult was that although it had a benign attitude to the environment and to others, when it came to the Bad Child part of itself, it was harsh, critical, non-accepting and judgmental. For me, this is what distinguished it from genuine spiritual development.

In the beginning I tried to work with the only one side of the process, Bad Child.

'If you're angry, hit the bag with the stick and then you'll feel better,' I'd say. I got 'spiritual' answers like, 'Letting bad feelings out into the universe is a kind of psychic pollution.' Or, 'Giving attention to negative feelings makes them grow bigger.' After a while I began to understand that the inner critic always relates to an earlier time in the person's developmental story. This meant that it wasn't only Bad Child

who was young; False Spiritual Adult often had the intellectual capacity of that developmental stage, even though it was talking about very grown-up stuff. Whereas genuine spiritual adulthood can have a childlike quality, False Spiritual Adult is childish.

Sometimes in dialogue with False Spiritual Adult I would ask, 'How old are you?' And my client would pause, then smile and say, 'Four.'

This was an enormous discovery. I could say, 'Well, you're doing really well for a four year old but there are some things you don't know yet about being grown-up.'

It was like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Toto pulls the curtain back and Dorothy sees that the all-powerful wizard is only a frightened little person hiding behind a big scary mask. Ever since I was a little boy, stories have been important to me as ways of making sense of the world. Now I use them to help me work with my clients better. Here is my first story about False Spiritual Adult:

In the beginning there was a time when the person experienced rejection, shaming, threats or punishment when he or she expressed a feeling. The person's response was to hide the feeling. Sometimes this hiding was so good that the person even forgot about the feeling. But it was still there, really, so the person felt empty, haunted, confused and split. The earlier in the person's life this happened, the more the rejection felt like a threat to survival (and sometimes was), and the more completely the feeling was hidden or split off. Later on the person encountered an idea of spiritual growth, of happiness, wholeness and a sense of being at home in the universe. The

part of the person that was hurt and lonely and split off longed for this growth. But the part that was already pretending jumped on the new idea and used it to pretend even more. This part became False Spiritual Adult and said to the other part, 'If it weren't for you, I could be completely happy (or enlightened or free or whole, etc., etc.). You are Bad Child.'

Here are some of the spiritual and psycho-spiritual ideas that I encountered in my work with False Spiritual Adults. Sometimes these were what had been taught and sometimes they were what the False Spiritual Adult converted the teaching into. I'm just going to present them as they arrived. They concerned attitudes towards five subjects: the ego, forgiveness, responsibility, feelings, surrender.

## The Ego: Ego Killers

This idea comes in through eastern schools, notably Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, but some of my clients had also been students of various gurus, some of which were Western. Ego killers hold that the ego is a bad thing that has to be destroyed in order that a more spiritual structure can flower in its place.

Saying, 'Kill off your ego in order to be more spiritual,' is like telling someone to kill off their adolescence to be adult. One grows out of the other the way that flowers develop from buds. Jung warned against the simple appropriation of eastern ideas into the West for just this reason. These ideas are particularly dangerous when they are taken up by someone who hasn't yet developed an adult ego. As many people have pointed out, they are like someone who is trying to get to a later

stage of development by skipping over the current one. Sometimes I encountered people who had were on the receiving end of a lot of invasive behaviour in their childhoods and who hadn't developed healthy ego boundaries. They thought that they had achieved enlightenment because they felt at one with the universe, when in fact it was because they just hadn't gone through any individuation yet. In some cases their teachers encouraged this thinking. The healthy adult ego precedes the larger, spiritual self.

## Forgiveness: The Merchants

They peddle the idea that it is healthy to forgive people who have hurt you, which is true. But they don't understand that forgiveness is not a single willed act but part of a process. It is almost a by-product of self-understanding and acceptance. I suspect that people who teach this stuff have never themselves forgiven anybody nor experienced being genuinely forgiven. The False Spiritual Adult makes use of this idea to beat up Bad Child.

'If you'd just forgive and forget we could move on out of this stuck place, but you won't do it because you are ignorant, selfish and bad.' And Bad Child just mumbles, 'But they hurt me and it wasn't okay.' The feelings of Bad Child have to be allowed. This doesn't mean that murderous rage is acted out in murder but that it has to be felt, explored, and understood. It is False Spiritual Adult who is 'sticking' by refusing to acknowledge and accept the feelings of Bad Child.

Any process of forgiveness that does not take full account of the hurt that was done is bogus and only increases the original splitting.

## Responsibility: The Guilt-trippers

Are you responsible for everything in your life? Telling Bad Child, 'You created this reality yourself,' is worse than useless. For Bad Child relates to a time in a person's development when they felt that things 'just happened' to them. They did not feel responsible for what was going on and telling them that they were increases Bad Child's sense that it is bad or deficient. This idea is extremely damaging when it is aimed at a part of the person who is about three

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years old and wonders what it was about her that made her parents beat and abuse her. It stops her from understanding that her feelings were a natural and healthy reaction to the treatment she got, and it encourages her to try to reinvent herself as the all-powerful being who created the whole situation. This keeps her from experiencing (in the present) the feelings of powerlessness, blame, sorrow and rage that might have overpowered her had she felt them at the time. It also stops her from integrating the left-behind parts into herself and moving on.

It is not just gurus and spiritual teachers who do this to clients. Many counsellors and therapists do it unintentionally, believing that they are helping to empower the client. The client says, 'I can't do that.' (Something like telling her mother that she hadn't been perfect.) The therapist says, 'Say *'won't.'* Say, 'I *won't* do it.'" How many of us have done that without checking to see whether the part of the client we were addressing was the very young part that genuinely *couldn't*? What about the part of the client that actually feels powerless?

## Feelings: The Amputators

I call the next group the feeling amputators because of their belief that 'destructive' feelings can just be dropped. They can't do it, but they believe that it is because they are faulty rather than because it can't be done. I had clients with this orientation who had worked in various traditions—New Age, Native American, Buddhist, Yoga and some types of meditation. They were particularly difficult to work with because they often came in with a lot of self-awareness, an enormous amount of rage and the belief that working on it would make it grow. What was happening was a desire to be rid of bad feelings without ever 'having' them. This is an extension of the original decision not to have the feeling in order to be good or to survive. But after the encounter with spiritual ideas it sounded much more grown-up. 'Giving attention to destructive feelings only makes them grow more powerful.' This is a confusion of detachment and repression (or dissociation) and it doesn't work. Feelings can't be amputated. They must be 'had'. Then they can change.

For me these 'bad' feelings are as important or holy as any part of a person's life.

## Surrender: The Quitters

Some of the people I worked with had worked previously with therapists and teachers with a Buddhist, Taoist or Jungian background and no understanding of developmental processes. From their perspective it was unspiritual to protest or fight against the circumstances of your life. For them, acceptance was the key. But many of my clients came from abusive childhoods where what had been missing was a responsible adult who would have done whatever was necessary to stop the abuse. And in the present, healing involved bringing in that role. There is confusion between surrendering in the sense of recognising that something really did happen, and surrendering in the sense of pretending that it was okay when, in fact, it was horrible. The first is part of any healing, but the second perpetuates and amplifies the damage.

In time I changed my own ideas about False Spiritual Adult. Instead of viewing it as a pathological condition I began to see it as a point in a developmental process. This in turn led me to a second and more inclusive developmental story:

It is the nature of humans (and all things) to develop. One of the ways that we do this is by flinging one part of ourselves forward ahead of the rest of us. This seems to work okay for a while and then, as the distance between the two parts grows, tension arises. (This happens at the place where what I call False Spiritual Adult usually starts getting noticed.) Either

the place we moved forward to isn't quite the right one for us, or the parts we left behind aren't ready to go there yet, or (usually) a combination of both. This tension calls attention to the situation so that something can be done about it. No matter what we are doing, there is nearly always some element of this fling-ahead/leave-behind process involved. The work I do with False Spiritual Adult can be grouped under four general headings: reflection, adding to the menu, even-handed support, and the four realms of body, feelings, mind and spirit.

## Simple Reflection

Saying what I see honestly and in a neutral way requires a lot of self-knowledge. It is hard not to automatically support some clients' belief systems, particularly so when it involves an element of something I wish I believed or knew about at first hand. For example, when clients talk about reincarnation it reminds me that I wish I could remember previous lives. But the truth is, I don't. So, for me, reincarnation is a theory. It offers an explanation that is attractive to me, but it is only a theory. If I'm not careful, I'll find myself saying something like:

'Yes, there's no way to avoid things—if we don't face them in this life, we'll have to face them the next time around.'

And if I say that, I help to create and support False Spiritual Adult. My only congruent response is:

'I like the idea of reincarnation because it seems to explain things that I can't otherwise understand. But, honestly, I don't have any memories of previous lives.'

I work on my affect (being angry with my client's teacher, for example) with my own therapist. Then I am more able to reflect. When I find the balanced place from which to comment, my observations are more likely to be useful. When I am critical or incongruent they probably won't be.

## Adding to the Menu

When someone is split there is often some element that is missing from the field. It is often the responsible or compassionate adult or the kind and loving form of a god. It helps to talk about what is missing.

'I'm not god, but I think that a loving god would understand why you might be feeling murderous rage. And it's worth noticing that you haven't actually murdered anybody.'

## Even-handed Support

This involves working with both sides of the process. It is like a wise parent who can hear what both children are saying and love and value them both. It is possible to explore with my client the ways in which each side of the splitting relates to an overall developmental process. The basic thrust of it is forward—where is the positive momentum on each side?

This involves deciding how much genuine spiritual adult is present and how much of it is false. Since this is always a subjective evaluation, I make it clear to my clients how I am thinking. I use several criteria, but the main one is inclusiveness. I think that genuine spirituality involves the recognition that there is nothing that is 'beyond the pale.' Other characteristics are patience,

understanding, centredness and the willingness to learn something new.

## Body, Feelings, Mind, Spirit

I look for the figures on both sides of the split in all four realms. Which realm is most accessible? When a change begins in one realm it will percolate out into the others if it thrives. I water it with continued attention. I notice that the process moves at different speeds in the

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different realms and point this out to my client. The emotions are not deficient because they move more slowly than the thoughts. They are not superior to the body because they change more quickly.

Pathological spirituality is a growing phenomenon that is likely to be on the increase for some time. As counsellors and therapists we can work more effectively with it if we recognise the relationship between the developmental story of the client, which produced an inner critic and a splitting, and the genuine desire for



spiritual growth that is also present. Only by working with both sides of the process can we help to bring about the needed healing and integration.

As trainers, supervisors and group leaders we can be more aware of the way the inner critic makes use of spiritual and psycho-spiritual ideas. It is also necessary to challenge bad teaching and therapy. This will help to reduce the role they currently play in the creation and maintenance of False Spiritual Adult.

When we think about these things we are at the place in the story where the situation attracts the needed attention to itself in order to change. The ending of my story is this:

After a lot of difficult work, False Spiritual Adult saw that Bad Child wasn't bad, that Bad Child's feelings were a normal response to the circumstances of Bad Child's life. Moreover False Spiritual Adult realised that without Bad Child's feelings it was impossible to be truly adult. So False Spiritual Adult accepted Bad Child as a part of itself, feelings and all, and there was great rejoicing and celebration.

For a while there was peace and harmony, and then with the next season's growth, came a sense that something wasn't quite in balance any more ...

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