



## Student pages

Karen Bateson and Clare Whitworth

Earlier this summer, at the 7th MA Psychotherapy and Counselling Student Conference held at the University of Leeds in June, we took the opportunity to ask the attendees two questions that are linked to the work of the philosopher, writer and speaker Alan Watts, via a short questionnaire. The questions were focused on spirituality and alienation from nature:

- Do you think your personal spirituality has shaped/will shape your practice? How?
- Do you feel there's a connection between alienation from nature and ill will to others?

The conference was attended by 35 people, including a range of students, at both Masters and PhD level, as well as current and past tutors, and external speakers. The questionnaire was given to 34 of these attendees (7 male, 27 female) and was also emailed to our peers who did not attend from the second year of the MA Psychotherapy and Counselling Course (1 male, 9 female). This brought our total to 43 (8 male, 35 female). We received four responses (4 female, 0 male). Here, we think further about the responses we have received, which we have broken down into the following sections: Impossible questions, Empathy, and Meetings.

### Impossible questions

*Karen:* The first thing I considered about the responses when I sat and reviewed them was the fact that our questions may have been better delivered entirely through email, to give people more time to think. For example, respondent 2 was clear that she needed more time to 'ponder' what she considered was a 'leading question' about a possible connection between alienation from nature and ill will to others.

*Clare:* Yes, I think you're right. More responses were received outside of the day, when people had time to consider their answers, and the questions were quite thought-provoking.

*Karen:* I also wondered about our question relating to spirituality. It is a question that I would potentially find difficult to answer. Respondent 1's comment, 'can't say', made me consider if the word 'spirituality' is a barrier because it may have become closely linked to mainstream religious practices (Swinton, 2001).

*Clare:* When writing the questions, my thought was that we were asking about a wider sense of personal meaning, as opposed to religion. Perhaps this is because for me there

is a sense of spirituality in my personal ethos that has nothing to do with faith, but instead how I wish to treat the world and those around me; a kind of oneness with nature. I find it interesting that this question may have been read differently by others as for me the two questions we asked were closely linked.

*Karen:* I find it easier to think in terms of personal meaning, too, because I find this in my physical reaction to the external world, through objects that I feel a connection to, or the visual stimuli that I encounter, such as a shadow of leaves flickering on a wall or coloured light reflected in a room. Claxton (2013) states:

Spirituality and religion start not from a system of belief that offers comfort and meaning, but from a first-hand glimpse of a different way of relating to the vicissitudes of life. And this shows up not as a thought, a wish or an interpretation, but as a direct experience. It is seen and felt, not construed or imagined. It is embodied.

Respondent 3 is clear that her work with clients operates at this embodied level. She says: 'Resonating with the client on a nonverbal level is like tuning into the client's energy, and tuning into the shared space.'

## Empathy

*Karen:* Respondent 1's thoughts about alienation from nature and ill will to others focused on 'alienation from the self'. She sees the self as the source of disconnection from nature, and as a barrier to empathy for 'the self + therefore others'. Here the focus is social via the relational connection with others, and arguably biological because of the perceived link between the brain and empathic capacity (Iacoboni, 2009). Gordon argues that Watts' views on self-experience were embodied and that the self is an 'organism-environment matrix' (Gordon, 2015, p. 316). Watts (2009, p. 105) wrote:

In the act of putting everything at a distance so as to describe and control it, we have orphaned ourselves both from the surrounding world and from our own bodies leaving 'I' as a discontented and alienated spook, anxious, guilty, unrelated, and alone.

*Clare:* I think, here, I agree with Watts' view. In clients, I have seen that an alienation from the self does have an impact beyond the individual. Steps in repairing that alienation can often be finding a sense of empathy, first with their own person, managing anxiety and guilt, and finding a reconnection with nature and a relatedness with others.

## Meetings

*Karen:* I was struck by respondent 3's comment about the relationship of her practice of Kundalini Yoga with her client work because they link the use of the therapist's body with the idea of being open in terms of emotion. She states: 'This helps me tune into my own energy and physical feelings and to become more emotionally available to my clients'. Respondent 2 also sees a clear link with spirituality and her counselling/psychotherapeutic work that stems from her religious practice as a Quaker, where equality is a central factor. She states: 'For me, this translates into my intention to meet the client at a place that transcends the ordinary – similar to Benjamin's (1990) notion of "mutual recognition"'. She also refers to openness in terms of change, saying: 'This also leads me to be open to being changed by the client'.

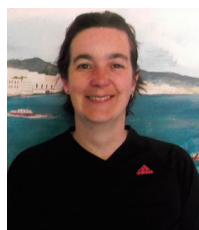
*Clare*: Respondent 4 also felt something similar about being open to new or unexplained moments, and the link they felt between yoga/meditation and connecting with the self. She says: 'I think this may be ever changing alongside the process of growth'.

It has been a thought-provoking exercise producing this critical review of the responses we have received. Across the answers, we have a range of religious and spiritual backgrounds, as well as differences in the way we connect with the wider world, yet what unites them is a sense of connection with our bodies, with our clients. Submissions for the forthcoming student page in *Self & Society* are very welcome. The next issue will focus on Rudolf Steiner and several issues next year will be unthemed. Please send your contributions, on any theme, to Karen Bateson (hc15keb@leeds.ac.uk) or Clare Whitworth (eng5c2w@leeds.ac.uk).

### Notes on contributors



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### References

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