

Release the potential within spiritual crisis

Honouring the Journey and Creating a Sharing, Caring, Containing Community.

Account of a meeting organized by the Spiritual Crisis Network in Stroud on 8th October 2016.

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Stroud was a natural place for the Spiritual Crisis Network to gather. The friendly home of alternative, community focused living, fitted perfectly with SCN's mission to offer a new and hopeful message to those struggling with the sort of strange experiences that more often land the unwary deep in the psychiatric system. Moreover, it could be seen as something of a homecoming. The organisation, founded in 2005, arose out of the second of three conferences, organised by Catherine G. Lucas, titled 'Revisioning Mental Health', and held at Hawkwood, Stroud. Catherine Lucas has since gone on to publish important books on this theme (Lucas 2011, 2015).

But SCN gathering in a nightclub? A prominent purple building with scarlet doors? It might have seemed an unlikely venue, but Stroud's Consciousness Healing Centre, situated in the Twisted Fix nightclub, offered us a warm welcome for a public event and a place to hold our AGM. The generosity of Daisy Abraham and the venue team meant that we were able to offer an interesting programme to the public very affordably, and hold our own meeting in a space big enough to welcome in newcomers interested in getting involved.

The Spiritual Crisis Network is all about experience, making sense of experience, and supporting people through challenging but

potentially transformative experiences. The flyer about the event of 8th October described the aims of the organisation and of the workshop as follows:

Where someone's journey takes them to places of unusual, unshared experience, our society tends to label this as illness and shut it down as quickly as possible.

People having these experiences, which can be called spiritual crisis or emergency, do need a supportive, understanding, sympathetic community – to hold them through this process, keep them safe, and enable them to return to the shared world with renewed gifts and vision.

This event will present new, hopeful, ways of understanding this whole area of experience.

With this new vision, we will invite you, the participants;

- To share your experiences if you wish
- To think about how this containing community can be taken forward

Behind this agenda there is a conflict. A conflict between this benign and hopeful conceptualisation of unusual experiencing, and society's pathologizing of these same experiences. The testimony of individuals and the research give the same message. Where someone's journeying into the territory of anomalous experience is received with sympathetic support; where the experience

is seen as on a continuum with normality rather than something abnormal, and above all, where their self image and hopes for the future are not destroyed through a stigmatizing diagnosis, the outcome is far better than that produced by the routine psychiatric response. I am referring here to the 'need for caseness' strand of research which matches the experiences of people who have come under the mental health services with others who have found different ways of making sense of what they are going through, such as spiritual crisis. Brett et al. (2014), Heriot-Maitland, Knight & Peters (2012), and Lovatt et al (2010), for example, give an idea of an extensive and revealing research enterprise. Similar conclusions have robustly emerged from epidemiological research which shows that traditional societies consistently produce better outcomes for individuals experiencing psychotic episodes compared with those treated in the West (see Warner 2004, 2007). The Spiritual Crisis Network opens the door to one hopeful and non pathologizing way of making sense of what can be quite disorienting and disturbing experiences.

This hopeful, normalizing message is there to be found in the literature. Psychosynthesis and Transpersonal Psychologies offer a narrative of transformative crisis. The Grofs, Stanislav and Christina, came up with the idea of 'spiritual emergence' shading into 'spiritual emergency' where things got difficult. The Grofs were very clear in their account of the potentially transformative nature of entering non ordinary states of consciousness (Grof & Grof, 1991, Grof, 1990). Research by Mike Jackson (1997, 2010) both demonstrated the overlap between such states experienced benignly and psychosis, and offered a helpful model for understanding what might be going on here in his 'problem solving' or 'paradigm shifting' hypotheses. Where ordinary life was no longer working, or had reached a crisis point, human beings, particularly those high on the schizotypy spectrum, had the facility to shift into another dimension. This could be a creative experience, drawing wisdom from the wider perspective, but there was also abundant

opportunity to become trapped in vicious circles set up by isolation and stigma, leading to the reduced functioning attracting the label of 'illness' and 'psychosis'.

SCN is committed to supporting people going through these transitions, without in any way seeking to distinguish between the psychotic and the spiritual, as such distinction merely perpetuates an unhelpfully pathologizing narrative. Though SCN has been around since 2005, we have remained small, kept alive by dedicated volunteers, but never achieving the sort of secure funding that would enable us to grow. A website (www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk) has provided our window on the world. From the time of first opening this window, people found us and contacted us through the form provided, and it quickly became apparent that sensitive and careful responses were needed for those going through often frightening and disorienting experiences. Building a team of skilled responders, providing training for new recruits and ensuring timely and high quality responses has been our central mission.

We are only too aware of the limits to what we can do. Telephone contact is often requested, and that is a plan for the future, but unrealistic given current resources. In our responses, we offer a balance between the hopeful message about the transformative potential of journeying into other realities, and prosaically sensible advice about grounding, self care, sleep, remaining in contact with other people even if they are not on a wavelength and dismissive of the experiences, and above all, keeping safe. This means advising contacting the local health services, even where the individual wants to avoid the current menu of medication and possibly, enforced detention. The alternative vision can be kept alive and pursued once the depth of the crisis is past.

This does not mean that we are complacent about current mental health services. We recognize their drawbacks and limitations and are dedicated

to working for change. Awareness-raising events like the one in Stroud are the other strand of our activity. We have held successful conferences, in Liverpool in 2011, in Sunderland in 2013, Mundesley in Norfolk in 2015 and London in 2016. Details of these can be found on our website (www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk). The Stroud event was different from these in being a workshop with an emphasis on accessibility through a minimal entrance charge and plenty of participation. There were speakers, and I will come to them in a minute, but the bulk of the time was given to the participants to discuss in groups, with each group supported by one or two members of the team. The first group session invited participants to share their experiences at times of transition in their lives, as it is at these times that the other dimension of experience, that was the focus of the event, tends to occur. People were invited to think about what helped and what hindered. The second session focused on how a caring, sharing, community to hold those going through these crises could be fostered.

Interspersed between these sessions we had speakers. I opened the session with a normalizing account of anomalous experiencing – I like to use the term ‘transliminal’ or across the threshold, to describe these states (see Clarke, 2008 and 2010 for more on my perspective), followed by some introduction to the organization and encouragement for people to volunteer to help SCN.

Midway through the programme, Leigh Hughes and Tricia Cussens, core members of the SCN team, shared their experiences, which illustrated vividly and with humour just how brutal and counter-productive the responses of the mental health system could be, as they told the stories of their own crises and encounters with it.

We were delighted to have with us Rozalia Kovacs-Napier, one of the founders of the International Spiritual Emergency Network (ISEN), to help us round off the event. She too shared her transformative journey, following the archetypal

model of the hero’s journey, into the underworld, but returning to the light, bearing gifts for the world. Joseph Campbell proposed this model in his book ‘The hero with a thousand faces’, (Campbell, 1993); see also Hartley (2010) for an engaging treatment of the same theme. Rozalia brought an encouraging message from all the centres in Europe, Australia, the US and Canada where this work is taking off. Daisy Abraham of the Stroud centre had the last word on the importance of changing the response of the Health Services and her hopes for how this might be happening.

The cohesion of the group developed throughout the afternoon as we shared experiences and aspirations and listened to the speakers. Several people in the Stroud area have come together to start a local group in Stroud, to add to the groups we already have in London, Sheffield and Brighton, and a number of new volunteers joined our meeting the next day in order to become more involved with our work. The connection between the Network and Stroud is renewed and revitalized, and with it, the important work of recognizing the importance of those transformative journeys and supporting them in ways that do not pathologize. It is the sensitive and idealistic people whose awareness is expanding who can be vulnerable in this way. Our society needs such people more than ever in current challenging times. It is in everyone’s interest to offer support for such emergence. **S**



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