

## Situating Myself: Stepping back

William West

My ongoing way of dealing with the world has been about making sense of the experiences that I have of existence. Over the years I have drawn on a number of theories and groups that have seemingly helped me understand life. This has included both religious and therapeutic theories and groups. I find that I stay with such groups and theories probably longer than totally useful or necessary – maybe out of a possibly misplaced sense of loyalty and perhaps a fear of moving on.

However, I am left with some creative and often empowering residual elements from this journeying which contribute profoundly to my sense of well-being. For example, since my early 20s I fairly regularly have had what I regard as spiritual experiences. Feeling energies at sacred sites and/or in religious buildings; feeling one with all of creation when I am outdoors in nature; feeling interconnected with other people. These experiences are, for me, like they were for William Wordsworth – good and having a moral purpose, they act as my teacher, and put me in touch with who I really am.

I wrote about one such experience nearly 20 years ago:

Recently I was in York for a meeting with counselling colleagues and having a few minutes to spare I decided to visit the Minster. As I entered the Cathedral I immediately felt a sense of being in a spiritual space, if you like I was awestruck. I made for the small chapel that I knew was set aside for silent prayer. Inside the chapel I was overwhelmed by the feel of the spiritual energy present and I was moved to weep. I felt such a sense of gratitude at being able to feel this energy and also had a sense of being enabled to return to my true nature or spiritual self. This was immediately followed by a sense of regret at not living enough from that true sense of mine.... I left the

Minster feeling uplifted and cleansed and somewhat washed out. (West, 2004, pp. 2–3)

I was eventually led to see myself as a mystic. This usefully explains a lot to me. Mystics are notorious for not fitting into groups since we follow our inner light – however misguided this can be – and this often rubs up against what can seem like unnecessary rules. We cannot do or be different. I am aware that saying I am a mystic might seem egotistic. I am certainly not claiming I am better or more spiritually evolved than other people; I might even prefer not to be on a mystical path; but I do not seem to have any real choice in the matter. It is a pain at times trying to build a theology on (my) mystical experiences. Life could be easier(!).

I remember a time in the 1980s attending a Church of England Communion service, as I was wont to do from time to time, and when it came to reciting the Creed, I thought – ‘I don’t believe this today, so I can’t take Communion’. Another time in the 1980s on a retreat, as part of the Communion service we were asked to confess our sins silently to ourselves. Well apart from slough I was convinced that I had not sinned that day, so again Communion was out. And the trouble with mysticism is that you, well I, cannot rely on the experiences to happen. Indeed, Christian mystics are aware of the Dark Night of the Soul, that period of spiritual development that feels at first as if everything is lost; that there is no firm ground, that one feels abandoned.

I had a phase in my life in which I actively practised spiritual healing, during the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s; I saw and felt auras around people, and my intuitive capacities deepened. I still regularly pray for those around me in need, which could be seen as distance spiritual healing. I have attended various yoga classes over the years and have intermittently done

individual yoga practice. In the late 1990s I was especially affected by the spiritual quality of the yoga classes run by the Hindu group Ananda Marga, round the corner from where I lived, though I never actually joined the group as such. These classes focused on our energy system or chakras rather than merely the physical. In most yoga postures we would hold the posture having breathed out and not immediately breathing in. In between postures we would usually lie down on the floor stretched out in what they referred to as ‘the corpse posture’. At the end of the class we would lie in this corpse posture for a seemingly timeless few minutes, and it was very often a special and spiritual moment for me. I used to leave those early-evening yoga classes feeling lit up inside.

Currently my spiritual life also involves regular solo cycle rides for two hours at a time, several days a week, early in the morning out on a canal tow path and in the wider countryside. This clears my mind and resolves issues in my life, and is also a time of personal prayer. Sometimes I find myself drafting poems and other writings on these bike rides.

In 1991 by accident I stumbled across the Quakers. Curiously it was at the start of the first Gulf War, and at the end of the Quaker Meeting for Worship they read out a statement about the Gulf War which reflected my own unease about it. With Quakers I loved not having to sign up to a creed: in their silence the energies and the auras were present to me; and from time to time I was moved to speak, even though I did not really want to. It was so strange, feeling compelled to stand up and voice the words on my mind. Quakers were a good home for my spiritual experiences, and I also valued their ethical and religious viewpoint. When I first started attending Quaker Meetings I could feel the impact of it on my energy system for several days afterwards, and for a while I attended twice a week to keep my energy system optimal.

In 2015, just prior to my ‘retirement’ from being a full-time academic, I spent a life-changing 13 days in hospital with a broken leg from a cycling accident. I kept a note book beside me

in the 13 days I was in hospital and I recorded how I was; and at one point I wrote poetically:

She wheels me to the chapel  
For a moment of rest  
And reflection  
Bathed in the colours of the stained glass  
And I’m weeping  
Glad to be alive  
And out of my head on morphine.

(West, 2015)

Whilst in hospital, among other life changes I found a need to move on from Quakers and eventually, by ‘accident’, I stumbled across Unitarians where, again, my spiritual experiences made sense, and where my intellectual curiosity and love of diversity were welcomed. And again, no creed to sign up to. I say by ‘accident’ as I had attended over six different churches near where I live over an 18-month period, and none of them felt just right. I gave up my search and then someone mentioned Unitarians in a different context, and I thought, ‘Why not try them?’. One morning on the way to the Unitarian Chapel where I am now a member, I thought of the words of Julian of Norwich, mentioned below – and the minister quoted these words in his sermon!

Therapeutically I began by reading R.D. Laing, David Cooper and Wilhelm Reich in the early 1970s, and learning and practising co-counselling, attending various encounter groups, and I became increasingly gripped by the work of Reich. He spoke to me politically, therapeutically and, eventually, spiritually. From Reich I learnt to be embodied and also to experience myself as an energy system; and for the mystic in me, and for the final years of Reich, this energy was universal. Therapeutically Reich’s bodywork was very effective for those of us out of touch with our feelings.

Reich also appealed to the radical anarchic young political figure that I was in my early twenties, and he helped me make sense of racism and fascism (Reich, 1997). I naively thought that if people knew the truth then they

would act to create a better society. I found they mostly *did* know the truth, but mostly did not act. Reich and Fromm (2001) helped me make sense of this. I remember reading Reich saying that it was when the hungry did not break the law to feed themselves – this was when he was surprised. I realised that people needed to change, to heal themselves, before they would build a better society. This truth remains. However, good therapy does not necessarily lead people to societal change. Curiously, spiritual experiences do tend to make people more altruistic (Elkins et al., 1988).

I am aware that using this word ‘truth’ could be a bit loaded, or even overloaded. Truth is usually expressed in words and hence culturally situated, if not constructed. My current supervisor/mentor keeps reminding me of how phenomenological I am, which still takes me by surprise. I struggled to read some of the basic phenomenological texts, but I have picked up on it through my long-term exposure to person-centred therapy and its worldview. I was also gripped in the mid to late 1990s by Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic approach to research, which does have a strong phenomenological element in it.

In 1978 on a Reichian therapy weekend I felt a rush of energy from my heart centre, or chakra, down my arms and into the palms of my hands, and I knew, for the first time, that I wanted to be a therapist. For a decade I worked as a Post-Reichian therapist (which was profiled in a 1994 edition of *Self and Society* – in articles by Totton and Edmondson, West (1994a), and Cumming) which also seemingly triggered the development of me as a spiritual healer.

I then had a ‘mid-life crisis’ in 1990 when I realised that I did not want to spend the rest of life as a therapist immersed in my clients’ pain and suffering. So, whilst some of my colleagues at the time were studying Arnold Mindell and Process-Orientated Psychotherapy, I went the other way and did a Masters’ degree in Counselling Studies at Keele University. Immediately afterwards I took the unusual decision to do a Ph.D. with a focus on how

therapists understand spiritual healing when it happens in their work. The curious thing was that this came to me whilst I was having an academic supervision session on my Masters’ dissertation (on clients’ experience of bodywork psychotherapy; West, 1994b). I found myself blurting out that I wanted to do a Ph.D., half expecting my supervisor to turn me down. He did not. It made no sense to do a Ph.D., and it reduced my limited income at the time; but I felt called to do it.

Doing the Ph.D. and consequently bits of lecturing and academic supervising, I found that I wanted to be an academic, and subsequently spent the next 20 or so years doing that full-time. I fairly quickly became involved in supervising a group of five or six Ph.D. students at a time, and many of them shared some of my interests in spirituality, bodywork, culture and how we make sense of our experiences. This was a special time for me. I still do a bit of this work, but it is now coming to an end, I feel.

Transpersonal ideas have been part of this mix for me. I think it is the innate acceptance of the spiritual realm that makes this so. One of the key moments in my moving towards spiritual healing was taking part in a transpersonal group in which we had some guided imagery. Whilst listening to the words in my mind I found myself in a church, a Cathedral, which gradually rotated around me. I felt a sense of the energies present, including some amethyst inner light that swirled around me; and when I opened my eyes someone on the group said, ‘What’s that lilac colour around your head?’. So not just my subjective experience but something that was visible to someone else present in the room! This scared me even more. I had a number of psychic experiences in those days which I did find disturbing, as I knew that seeing auras could be viewed as crazy.

When I started my Ph.D., a Post-Reichian colleague of mine had recommended reading Ken Wilber’s work. His early writings (e.g. Wilber, 1979) offered a useful map of human spiritual development which made sense to me, and John Rowan’s (1993) take on this really

helped. I could see that spiritual experiences could be regressive and unhelpful; also that the therapists or helpers needed to be the appropriate facilitator, in terms of their own development, in order to be truly helpful to the client.

I never did transpersonal training – the proposed course I wanted to attend in the North of England in the late 1990s did not recruit enough participants, and the moment passed for me. When I became an academic I realised that I was moving away from being a practitioner as such. When my sister died in 2001 I temporarily stopped seeing clients. I then found, later on, that I did not want to resume seeing clients. From time to time I asked myself about this, but my inner voice kept saying ‘No!’. I then thought, ‘Well when I do retire, I can do some voluntary counselling work’. However, the inner voice still keeps saying ‘No!’ to this notion, despite the guilt that I feel in not putting these talents of mine to use in this way.

It does occur to me that my desire to move away from being immersed in my clients’ pain and suffering (mentioned above) reflects, even if on an unconscious level, some measure of stress and burnout. Hence the wise inner voice advising me not to practise with individual clients. It feels like my sensitivity around others and what they voice or keep unspoken is a blessing and a curse – a double-edged sword, if you like. It has taken me years, and it still is incomplete to truly look after myself. I remember Arnold Mindell saying that our key task as therapists was to look after ourselves. There is a streak within Christian culture that praises the sacrifices we can make to help others, with Jesus as the role model. The danger with this is that if we do not truly know who we are, how can we stay out of harm’s way as we do the work we are called to? This self care does not have to be costly or complicated, but it needs to be fit for who we are now.

Currently in (semi) ‘retirement’ I am about to attend a course in pastoral supervision – in the North of England (!) – to support my group work with people of faith. I recently did some

reflective practice work with a group of Church of England vicars, which really changed how I viewed religious leaders (West, 2020). Also, I was impressed by the role they also play in filling in some of the current gaps in our welfare state – food banks; free meals and housing asylum-seekers.

It has been a struggle to be who I really think I am. Or rather to first ‘discover’ who I really am, and then to figure out how to be that person, as per my experience in York Minster, mentioned above. What I have learnt is that my work is at its best when I am most engaged, and most honest and open with it. It is easy to hide away, but something gets lost when we do so. Our presence is crucial. We do not have to shout it from the roof tops; indeed, actions or inactions can speak louder than words.

A few years ago, I realised that in all the work relationships that I was in at the time – tutor, lecturer, academic supervisor, therapist, therapist supervisor – I was increasingly being the same person in each relationship. I was aiming to create a space in which the other person could open up within, and then I would see what response was invoked in me and decide whether to, and how to, proceed. It felt like I was offering love – agape, if you like.

I am not saying that I am this perfect spiritually evolved person. I am still learning. Now that I have more time to reflect on my past life, there are moments when I wince at memories of me working as a therapist and what I said or did not say, or what I did or did not do. Beyond that, the same sort of responses are there in how I lived my private life and related to family and close friends. I took some comfort from dwelling in Julian of Norwich’s work – ‘Sin is behoven but all will be well’.

We are meant to live our lives, and in so doing we are bound to mess up. This can be viewed in a non-Christian but perhaps still spiritual way by considering Jung’s notion of the shadow; that we all have an aspect to us that can be destructive of ourselves and others. And that we have to face up to this, rather than hide away

from it, and reclaim our energies that can be lost and trapped in this shadow side of us. It is a sobering prospect as we learn how imperfect we are, but I prefer the notion of our lack of perfection – if we truly were angels, we would no longer be humans.

I am currently weeping very often as I last did in the early 1980s. Back then it seemed to be about deepening my sensitivity and intuitive nature. I am not sure currently what this weeping signifies. It is a response to watching the Paralympics, to the suffering of family and friends, to my reflections on my close friendships, to meeting with my new twin grandsons, and sometimes it has no clear focus. However, this is probably not the end of the story, and maybe this is part of retiring. Interesting word, that – retiring – maybe a notion of stepping back! And then, what next?

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## About the contributor



**William West** is currently a visiting professor at the University of Chester where he supervises a handful of Ph.D./Doctorate research students. He also does a bit of academic external examining. He remains fascinated by how faith, spirituality and therapy co-exist. He loves cycling, bread baking, creative writing, singing in two choirs and hanging out in cafés alone or with friends.

## SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

**Rachel Carson (1907–1964)**