

**MAKING SPACE  
SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

**The Mary Hemingway Rees  
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**Julie Leibrich**

Contact:  
Dr Julie Leibrich  
PO Box 2015,  
Raumati Beach,  
New Zealand.  
Phone: +64 4 902 2382  
email: [seacoast@paradise.net.nz](mailto:seacoast@paradise.net.nz)

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## 1: AT LAST WE MEET

### OH: Photograph1. Kapiti Island, 2000.

#### **We all have a capacity to hurt and be hurt, to heal and be healed.**

I imagined you many times as I sat at my desk in Raumati, early in the morning, looking out to Kapiti Island, thinking about this talk. I tried to see your faces. Look in your eyes. I wanted to know who I'd be talking to. I wanted to know what spirituality meant to *you*.

Sometimes, I spirited you over. My imaginary audience. I brought you onto the beach where I live and together we looked at Kapiti for inspiration. So if any of you got a strange tingle of being somewhere else recently...

Sometimes, as I worked on the talk I felt I got to know you, even though we hadn't met. I thought about how some of you would be coming from a long way away, like me. Some of you would be here alone, maybe not knowing many people. Others would be meeting up with old friends the moment you arrived.

I thought who *are* we, these people going to Vancouver? Why are we getting together? A group of survivors, family and friends, psychiatrists, nurses, researchers. Every one of us here has the capacity to hurt and be hurt, to heal and be healed. Would we be able to acknowledge that? Would we be able to communicate with each other meaningfully at this conference?

I so hoped we would share more than just information and knowledge. I hoped we would take the risk of relating our experiences to each other - our uncertainties and fears, our discoveries and dreams, our deepest insights about mental health. Because then, we would *really* connect with each other - on an individual and international level. That way, we would enter the realm of healing for ourselves, each other and the mental health system itself.

## 2: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGNS

**OH: Photograph. Rooftop at Assisi, 1987.**

**We look for a sense of connection, with ourselves, others, and the universe.**

I will take a risk right now and tell you that I felt I was called to give this talk, and I don't mean by Professor Roy phoning New Zealand from Canada!

We don't use words like vocation much any more. Smacks of missionary zeal.

Not cool. To say one is called to do something seems grandiose, pretentious. Ideas of reference, perhaps? Yet many of us look for signs. Especially when we are lost. Or we just notice them, when we make the space to do so. Seeing signs can give us a sense of *personal* significance, *personal* meaning in life. They spell out our sense of connection with the universe.

There were so *many* coincidences surrounding my invitation. Things far beyond my control and far beyond my imagination. Jung and Koestler would have been in their element<sup>2</sup>! From my point of view, it could not have been clearer that I was being called to give this talk, than if a golden dove had landed on the roof of my house with a signed invitation in its beak.

But I had been very ill and wasn't sure if I would be able to prepare a lecture, or even travel to Vancouver. Also, the set topic was vast. Although, my friend Ian said "*Spirituality and mental health? Well that'll be a short talk! Stand up, say 'Hope and Acceptance' and sit down again.*"

I knew I was no expert and also could only talk from my limited Western perspective. I said to my friend Robert "I don't know of any culture that *doesn't* have the concept of spirituality". He grinned. "*You should come on down to the Otago Medical School!*"

I really didn't know if I could do this, but I felt I was *supposed* to. I said to myself "I'll find the words". What I meant, of course, was "*They'll find me.*"

### 3: THE MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY

OH: Painting. *Gathering of Yogis. Govardhan, 1620.*

**Spirituality is a subjective experience, unique to each person.**

The first question – and the one I paused on for longest – was what do we mean by spirituality. I began to re-read familiar writers – C S Lewis<sup>3</sup>, Jung<sup>4</sup>, John Donne<sup>5</sup>, to remind myself what *they* said, but somehow I needed to move on from my loved and familiar world of literature. I starting asking friends and acquaintances “What does spirituality mean to you?”

Manda was succinct. “*Knowing you’re connected to everything.*” Jim was even briefer. “*Nothing.*”

Dorothy, said “*God! I don’t know. It’s nothing to do with churches. It’s more to do with sunsets, the sea, things like that. The open air and natural beauty. Water. And birds. Definitely something to do with birds.*”

Robert, said “I think it comes down to three questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? And why are we here?” Eric said “*A connectedness to some place. In my younger days – a religion. Like knowing a place. Knowing people.*” Margaret said “*One of those glimmers in time, when you have a feeling of how life really is, and the wholeness of it.*” David told me that his son was a very spiritual person. “*He’s an atheist, mind you. But a very spiritual atheist.*”

Then a young woman at the hairdressers pulled me up short. She turned the question on me. “*Are you a spiritual person?*” she asked. “*Can you read my fortune?*”

Everyone – I asked about thirty people - said something different. I finally asked myself. What does it mean to me?

I had been avoiding the question. It seemed too difficult, and anyway, it’s always easier to get *other* people to talk about the really hard topics in life, isn’t it?

#### 4: SPIRITUALITY IS SPACE

**OH: Photograph. Ullapool Harbour, detail, 1993.**

**Spirituality is a space where I find meaning and peace.**

I *experience* spirituality as space.

I call it the space within my heart. It is my most precious self. My spirit. My soul. My essence. My *being*. It is the breath of life<sup>6</sup>. The innermost part of me.

It's the place where I meet myself. It's where I belong. It is where I find a sense of connection - with my self, and with something beyond my self - a spirit greater than myself. And sometime, very occasionally, with another person, who is standing in *their* space.

It is the space I go into when I need to find meaning in my life, when I need to come to terms with life or death, or when I need to accept that nothing stays the same. It's where I go when I need to cope with the knowledge that I walk alone in this world, or experience the comfort of infinite love.

It is the space between reason and imagination. Space where time is in different perspective, where things happen which I could not have predicted. Space where I feel loved, where I feel at peace, where I discover things.

It is a kind of coming home. For me, the meaning of spirituality is meaning itself.

## 5: RELIGION IS INTERPRETATION

OH: Illumination. *The Evangelical Symbols. Book of Kells, 8<sup>th</sup> Century.*

**Spirituality is an experience whereas religion is an interpretation.**

Spirituality is an experience, not a religion. Spirituality is beyond doctrine, beyond cultural difference. It is something deep within our core.

Religion is an *interpretation* of the experience of spirituality. A means of expressing it. A means of honouring it. Religion shapes our spiritual experiences because it is linked to culture, upbringing, a sense of history, but it is not the experience itself.

Religion is also one of the ways we try to share our experiences of spirituality, but this can be dangerous. It can actually create a barrier to sharing spirituality.

Doctrine can be a divider. An excuse for wars. Spirituality is a connector. A reason for peace.

Religious beliefs can be so easily misunderstood. Even the simplest phrases we use to talk about our beliefs can be alien. Let me tell you a cautionary tale:

A few years ago. I was writing a book on why people give up crime<sup>7</sup> and was interviewing a young woman about major changes in her life. I was very aware that her boyfriend, a heavy-duty gang member, had come out of jail the day before the interview and was staying with her.

He wasn't in the room but I felt ill at ease. I figured he was having a rest - in fact, once or twice she talked about the man upstairs. How she only ever did what he wanted. I realised he was asleep and, to be honest, I was glad not to meet him because he sounded a pretty bossy kind of character. She seemed to worship him.

A week later, listening again to the tape, and *really* listening to the woman, rather than worrying about myself, I realised she had been talking about God. She called him "The man upstairs."

I also believe in the man upstairs, by the way. I believe that when I talk, he listens and much more importantly, I believe that when I listen, he talks. But *that* is a doctrine. My *interpretation*. The *meaning* I place on my spiritual experiences. To say more now, might create a barrier.

## 6: MENTAL HEALTH IS FREEDOM

**OH: Painting. *I Dreamt I was in Marseille*. Matija Skurjeni, 1898.**

**Mental health is the freedom of knowing and accepting one's self.**

Defining mental health is almost as tricky as defining spirituality. It is another elusive concept and like spirituality, an utterly subjective experience. For me, it means knowing who I am and accepting that.

Mental health is the state of freedom which comes from accepting one's self and taking responsibility for one's actions. It is many other things as well of course - acceptance of others as they are, acceptance of life as it is, knowing when and how to change and when and how to let go.

My definition of mental health has a lot in common with the way I define spirituality. Both concepts are concerned with the experience of *self*. One reaching into dimensions of space to discover self, the other realising the freedom that comes from accepting self. That is why spiritual experiences and their interpretation can have such a profound influence on mental health.



## 7: PERSONAL STORIES ARE PRECIOUS

**OH: Cover. *A Gift of Stories*. Gathered by Leibrich, Otago University Press, 1999.**

**Relating our experiences with others makes it possible for them to relate to us.**

In my last year as Mental Health Commissioner, I put together a book called *A Gift of Stories*<sup>8</sup>. This is a collection of personal accounts of dealing with mental illness.

Many of us in the book talked about spirituality but I won't try to sum up what we said. Actually, I don't *want* to. Stories about people with mental illness have been summed up for too long, by other people, in things called case histories, notes, files. Personal stories are not data to be analysed. They are worth much more than that.

When I first imagined *A Gift of Stories* I saw something that would be precious. That is because personal stories are precious. Stories are the most wonderful way to talk about experience. A story is not just a plot or a theme. It is inextricably linked with character and place and voice. A personal story often reveals insight and has the power to evoke insight within others.

I wanted us to relate *our* experiences because I wanted to make it possible for other people to make a connection with *their* experiences *through* reading about ours. Through us. To them.

Producing the book - the telling and the gathering - was an act of love. A gift. It taught me that illness can also be a gift.

## 8: ILLNESS CAN BE A GIFT

OH: Photograph. Ullapool Harbour, 1987.

**Illness can make people discover a deeper, stronger sense of self.**

In a *Gift of Stories*, I began by using the word **recovery** to describe how people dealt successfully with mental illness. I wanted to challenge the stereotype that people who experience mental illness never get better. But as I worked with the people in the book, and we talked about this word, it began to seem too *limited* a concept.

Recovery is commonly used to mean “Hey! Here I am! Completely better!” Yet this, as a goal, would deny the experience of many people with ongoing experience of illness, for whom getting well means learning how to *manage* the illness – whether it comes in episodes or is ever-present.

Recovery can also imply that the goal is merely to return to some prior state – to get back what you have lost, or, worse, to cover yourself up again, or both. To make things the same as they were before. But this denies the *power* of illness, which often leads to new things.

Eventually I used the word **discovery** rather than recovery. Our stories were full of discovery – not just *about* dealing with mental illness but *through* dealing with it. I described dealing with mental illness as “making our way along an ever-widening spiral of discovery in which we uncover problems, discover the best ways to deal with them, recover ground that has been lost, discover new things about ourselves, then uncover deeper problems, discover the best ways... and so in an intricate process of growth.”<sup>9</sup>

I made a comment in the text about being fearful of committing myself to the permanence of publication. I was right to be cautious.

A year later, I thought the word transformation might have been better. When someone experiences severe illness, it *changes* them. They are *never* the same again. People who have had to deal with mental illness say that it gives them strength of character, a greater capacity for compassion, a deeper, stronger sense of self.

Two years later, after my own experiences of the last year, I wondered about the word **transcendence**. It means that although we are ill, we are not imprisoned by that experience but go beyond it. We transcend the illness and claim its power. Illness teaches us about being well. Vulnerability teaches us about being strong. Loss teaches us about finding.

Several people in our book called their mental illness a gift. Sometimes I even do so myself.

## 9: RELATING SPIRITUALITY TO MENTAL HEALTH

OH: Photograph. *Isle of Tiree, 1987.*

**Mental illness can be a spiritual journey which leads to greater health.**

Every time I have had an episode of illness in my life, I have been on some kind of spiritual journey by the time it is over. In the long term, through these experiences, I see myself becoming more and more whole. In fact, I see myself as a mentally *healthy* person, who is sometimes ill.

When I experience severe depression, I seem to lose my sense of self. I feel like I am disintegrating. Depression is a potential killer. It puts everything into shadow. Colours fade, voices and music become harsh. It whispers in my ear that life has no value. Sometimes, it is as if I have died, and the depression then becomes a state of mourning for the dead me.

When everything seems so pointless and full of pain, I have to find some kind of comfort if I am to survive. Although I need to accept the illness, I also need hope.

Sometimes I have a kind of miraculous experience, a kind of turning point which involves spiritual insight. I know, deep within, that at these times, I am healing. That is why I have to reach the space within my heart<sup>10</sup> to get well. There are many ways into that space for me<sup>11</sup> - through reflecting with gratitude on the things I have, through focusing on the smallest point of here and now, through letting go of all the things I am trying to control. Almost always, though, the way in is through silence and solitude.

Sometimes, it is too hard and I am lost or locked out from myself. Then maybe someone else can show me the way home through my connecting with them and *their* spiritual self. Maybe they are able to say "*I know what you're going through. I've been there too*". Or maybe all they can say is "*I don't know what it's like for you, but I care and I'll be there with you*". Maybe they just take my hand and sit a while. I call such people soul mates.

Sometimes it is impossible to reach out so I am not able to connect with another person. Sometimes I do not *want* to reach out, I need to reach *in*. Then, I am on a different kind of journey, one that I *have* to take alone. I can't always tell the difference until the journey is over.

Sometimes the best I can do is wait and hold on to the belief that "*this too will pass*".

I have had various treatments for depression, including drugs, but I am ambivalent about medication. Once or twice they have saved my life, but they also numb me and make it harder for me to connect with my spirit. So in the long run, they make it harder to heal. I haven't worked this out yet.

I also experience times of intense joy and creativity. They are a kind of kaleidoscopic switch-back where ideas travel at the speed of light. This is when I know that everything is connected to everything else in the universe. I look at a tree and *see* how every leaf on that tree is connected with every other

leaf on every other tree. I have amazing dreams, sometimes waking dreams, maybe mystical moments.

These are also often my source of inspiration as a poet. Creativity is the greatest spiritual experience I have. Creativity is the act of giving breath to life, expressing the spiritual world in the physical world.

Sometimes my highs are frightening - when I get close to the edge of what I call a spin. If I cannot "manage them", hold the clay in shape, if you like, as it spins on the potter's wheel, then I am in trouble. I can become so exhausted by the speed and intensity that I get physically ill.

So far in my life, I have never allowed the joy to be viewed and treated as a mental illness and no external force has insisted that it should be. I know that I have been fortunate and often reflect that it might have been otherwise.

Sometimes, I am not so sure that I would have chosen *this life, my life*, if I'd been there on the edge of time and had a say about it. I think I'd have asked for something a bit easier from the man upstairs. "Scuse me Guv. Do you think you could take out a bit of the mood swing stuff and give me a bit more tranquillity." But I think Guv would have turned round and said, "Look Jules, this is all that's on offer today. Take life while you can and accept it for what it is and sometimes you'll know the meaning of miracles."

## 10: HEALTH MEANS BEING WHOLE

**OH: Photograph. *Taj Mahal, detail, 1998.***

**When we are well, we see ourselves as whole.  
When we are ill we can see ourselves as disintegrated.**

We are parts, and we are whole.

When we are well, we experience ourselves as whole. Health, literally means *being whole*<sup>12</sup>. Healing means *making whole*. It is a natural power - a power of nature. At my best, at my most spontaneous and natural, there is no incongruity between being parts and whole. I am simply one.

When we are ill, it is less easy to see ourselves as whole. One of the most devastating experiences of mental illness is that very *sense* of not being whole - the disintegration of self. We say we are "falling apart", "coming apart at the seams", "breaking down". Sometimes I forget my wholeness - especially when I am ill - and I see my body as separate from my mind. And sometimes I forget my body or my mind. Other times I see my spirit as so removed from my mind and body that it doesn't belong to them at all.

Any therapy which treats a person in a disintegrated way is not just ineffective, it is actually harmful because it can reinforce the disintegration of illness and erode a person's innate power to heal themselves.

## 11: WISDOM REQUIRES INSIGHT

OH: Photograph. *Sunset at Stigliano, 1998.*

**Spirituality and mental health are understood through insight, not information.**

In the Middle Ages there were three kinds of proof: Reason, Authority, and Experience<sup>13</sup>. By the end of the nineteenth century we had narrowed it down to one: scientific evidence. But *whose* evidence are we talking about?

At present, the dominant model of health care in the western world – the one which gets the funding – is based on biological determinism which sees illness primarily, if not totally, as having physical causes. This model, by *definition*, sees people in parts, rather than as whole. Even models which *call* themselves “holistic” or “integrated” often act *as if* people were in parts.

Clinical trials are one of modern medicine’s greatest strengths, and greatest weaknesses. They derive from the scientific method which was associated *solely* with the physical sciences and was not designed or equipped to assess non-physical events. People may sense, may believe, that their deeper beliefs and hope play an important role in health, but modern scientific methods, which rely on clinical trials, cannot possibly prove it.

Clinical trials require that a set of rules be followed in order to demonstrate cause and effect, if present.<sup>14</sup> The *problem* is that some of these rules are not only impossible to follow when testing some non-physical therapies, they actually prevent the practice of some crucial therapeutic principles. They demand, if you like, that the very factors which should be tested are removed – for instance a highly individualised treatment plan, a focus on the therapeutic relationship itself, a reliance on subjective measures of wellness, and so on.

If we are limited to scientific principles in developing health care, then we will inevitably exclude a whole range of healing experiences from trial. And of course, if therapies are not proved to be successful, they won’t be funded.

Controlling the range of treatment, by controlling what is acceptable evidence is a way of controlling people. This is the politics of health. Worldwide, for example, there is a 7 billion dollar market for anti-depressants<sup>15</sup>. Imagine what could be achieved if even the smallest *fraction* of this were spent on supporting people to heal themselves.

The *real* issues of spirituality and mental health do not lie in standardized categories and definitions. They do not lie in the area of information and proof, but in the area of wisdom and belief. And *that*, in the garden of evidence-based medicine, is the biggest thorn of all.

Experience is the greatest teacher of all and the teacher comes when we are ready to learn.

## Exhibit D<sup>16</sup>

Here is my brain  
in a pickling jar.

Note the tired synapses.  
Observe the threadbare nerves.

Then tell me, if you will  
where is my love of rain

my craving for colour  
my vanishing dream?

## 12: HEALING IS CONNECTION, NOT CONTROL

**OH: Photograph. *Rooftop Dragons, Assisi, 1998.***

**Healing is about connection, not control.  
A relationship based on power is control, not connection.**

Healing is about connection, not control. Relationships built on power are not about connection, they are about control. Whenever one person says I am the healer and strong and you are the patient and weak, then a healing relationship cannot occur. If people treating others cannot admit their own vulnerability then they cannot help them heal.

Why has so much of mental health “care” actually involved taking away people’s freedom? I think it is because someone who is strong enough to say they are weak is very threatening indeed.

On the other hand, when we are willing to accept our own and other people’s vulnerabilities, we are human beings, being human, at our very best. We are really relating to each other. We are wanting to connect rather than control.

How then, do people who set out to heal others develop this ability? I think there are two aspect to this. To really see ourselves clearly and to make it possible for us to see the other person clearly.

To see ourselves we need insight. This is one of the most wonderful things we have, as human beings. It takes us beyond information and knowledge. Insight is the key to wisdom. *Information* is about facts. *Knowledge* comes from integrating facts. But *wisdom* comes through *understanding* - standing *under* knowledge and letting the insight we gain from our own experiences illuminate knowledge.

To see others, we need to be able to negate ourselves for a while and look at the world through their eyes. In a literary context, Keats called this “negative capability”. The ability to experience something outside of oneself as if it were one’s self. I think that this is how we open the doors of our perception and find the heart of relationship.<sup>17</sup>

People who want to help others heal have to abandon the need for power and control utterly. Yet control lies at the heart of society.



### 13: THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

OH: Woodcut. *Pillory in Market Place*. Anon. c 1600.

#### **Societies based on hierarchies of power control people.**

Society is founded on the politics of difference - the power struggle to be "better" than someone else. People are classified and controlled (by exclusion) on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, appearance, education, money, sexual orientation, and all manner of abilities.

It is much harder, of course, to classify and control a person's inner world. It is intangible, unseeable. Maybe even inviolate, invincible? It cannot be imprisoned - except perhaps by drugs. This means, to people who need to control others, that a person's inner world may be the most threatening part of them. That is why it is much easier to reclassify spiritual experiences as a sickness. And why it is much easier to treat it in physical ways.

People fear what they don't know and don't want to know what they fear. Since what we fear must, by definition, be dangerous, people who experience mental illness are called unpredictable, frightening, without conscience, dangerous, demon-possessed. So the uneasy dance between madness<sup>18</sup> and mysticism<sup>19</sup> continues, and the societal need to contain people with mental illness is met. Society stigmatises, shames, silences, sidelines, segregates, separates, scares and scapegoats them.

## 14: THE UNEASY DANCE OF MADNESS AND MYSTICISM

OH: Engraving. *Frontispiece, Songs of Experience*. William Blake, 1794

**Defining mysticism as madness is a way to control people.**

A spiritual journey is the sanest voyage we can make. Yet the major hallmarks of spiritual journeys are so easily interpreted as symptoms of mental illness.

As far back as we can see, it has been a matter of political definition, (that is, the exercise of power by someone else) whether seers and sages, mystics and magicians, poets and painters, witches and witch doctors, shamans and saints, were deemed to have:

- wisdom or *illusions*
- visions or *delusions*
- dreams or *hallucinations*
- insight or *insanity*

How easily we defile by re-definition!

“Oh, hello, come on in. It’s Mr Blake. Mr William Blake, isn’t it?  
Well, come along in and have a seat. I’m Doctor Jones. Can I call you Bill?

Just a moment now while I look at this note from your GP.

Mnnnnn. So you’ve been seeing angels again. And in a tree!  
Ahhhhhhhh.

Tell me, Bill, just to get things going here, exactly how *many* angels were in the tree?

Mnnnnnnnn

How many wings did they have?

Hmmmmmmn

And were they outstretched or covering their faces?

Who, in their right mind would lead their people into the wilderness for forty years, who would go off into a desert without food and water for forty days and nights? Who would leave a family and comfortable life in search of extreme austerity? Who would rule a vast country yet live in utter poverty? Moving right along from Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed...

Yes, of *course* I sometimes ask myself am I having a mystical experience or going nuts? Am I walking towards the light or into the dark. But it is *my* question. Not someone else’s. And it’s *my* answer.

Does that matter? Of course it does, because if someone else is defining your personal experience, your status can change overnight from valid to invalid (in-valid). That is very dangerous, because then, the very *ways* in which you heal might be interpreted as sick too. And no longer available to you.

- A need to be solitary becomes *unhealthy withdrawal*. In fact seclusion has been given an entirely new meaning.
- A need for silence becomes *hypersensitivity*.
- A need for rest becomes *hypersomnia*.
- A meditative trance becomes *losing touch with reality*
- Deep thought become *disassociation*

“Diagnosis is usually determined by someone else, standing outside the person - someone else tells you what’s ‘wrong’ with you. And diagnosis usually comes along with a prognosis attached to it - someone else tells you what the outcome is likely to be. But if all you have is someone else’s diagnosis and prognosis, then your recovery might also be prescribed by that. That is to say, someone else will tell you when you are ‘right’.”<sup>20</sup>

## 15: THE AGE OF BLAME

OH: Painting. *Shelter Scene, Sleepers*. Henry Moore, 1941.

**Blaming people for their mental illness is another way to control them.**

The next twist in the uneasy dance is when mental illness is seen as a divine punishment or moral failing.

The word illness, comes from Old Norse (illr). It is interesting that for many years it was mistakenly recorded as coming from the Old English *yfel*, evil and many texts were mistranslated accordingly.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that spiritual ease helps people deal with illness does not necessarily imply that illness is a manifestation of spiritual disease. That step of reverse implication is a very dangerous trap. Imagine being told you have a “soul sickness”.

One of the greatest fears I have about talking about spirituality and mental health is that not only might we reactivate old bigotries, we might create new ones, because we live in societies which foster blame and guilt.

“Oh, hello, come on in. It’s Mr Newton. Mr Isaac Newton, isn’t it? Well, come along in and have a seat. I’m Doctor Blake. Can I call you Zac?

Now let’s see what it says here....Mnnn. So you’ve been seeing apples falling again.

How many apples were there exactly? Were they green apples or red? And were they ripe when they fell?

Now are you sure you didn’t shake the tree?

Come on now, Zac, think back. Are you sure you didn’t pull them off deliberately?

In the Age of Blame it is easy to move from correlation to cause to condemnation. Time and again, social statistics become misinterpreted through social politics, and social fashion starts to dictate health economics.

We are in danger of changing our health model from the ridiculous biological determinism to the appalling economic determinism. Just look at recent messages in preventive medicine. It is a short step from saying:

1) Illness is inextricably linked to not being fit, being stressed, exposing oneself to various kinds of poison.  
to saying

2) Illness is a person's own fault  
to deciding that

3) Support will be withheld.

What is so flawed about such arguments, apart from genetics of course, is that it ignores the fact that many of us live in sick societies which put a premium on perfection. I believe that societies which expect people to be perfect, and so create impossible goals, actually cause sickness.

## 16: THE SPEED-NOISE SOCIETY

OH: Painting. *The Scream*. Edvard Munch, 1893.

**We live in an impossible “got to be perfect” society.**

We are the quick-fix society, the pill pop generation, who, in the flick of a wrist can cheer up, grow hair, lose weight, stop smoking, have great sex. Possibly, all at the same time.

We live in a “got to be perfect” society, with mind and body police on every corner. Health itself has become a market commodity, where health service systems are run on absurd business models, so far removed from welfare that is difficult for any one to fare well at all.

We are overloaded with information. We have hundreds of ways to communicate but no time to talk to each other. We live in a jargon world. A world of reversed metaphors where the technical now explains the human. We used to say the computer is like a brain. Now we say the brain is like a computer.

Things which take time, people want NOW. Things they have now, they don't want AT ALL. We are always being urged to be *somewhere* else and *someone* else.

Privacy is not tolerated. Boundaries are ridiculed. Silence is rare.

People rush around so frenetically and noisily, maybe they are *scared* to stand still. Scared of silence. Scared of space. Scared of their inner world – what they might find there. Scared maybe, that it will be full of empty echoes.

If we go fast enough, space disappears. If we make enough noise, we don't need to listen.

## 17: A TIME OF SPIRITUAL CHAOS

**OH: Painting. The Tree of Paradise. Seraphine Louis, 1929.**

**We live in a time of chaos where “spirituality” is sold in the market place.**

There is agonising emptiness within our society which I think reflects a desperate need for meaning, relevance, something deeper in life.

Some people say there is a spiritual renaissance. Maybe there is a *readiness* for it, but I don't think it has really begun yet. I think that we live in a time of spiritual chaos. Old orders are in disarray. Familiar rituals are disappearing. New doctrines, new-age cults, supermarket spirituality, all jostle for attention.

Many of us seem to be scrambling for fashionable symbols and icons rather than deep inner vision. We even have a global religion, with an altar on every desk where we can connect with divine intervention. All we have to do is press the “save” button.

In the mean-time, in the current climate of materialism, spirituality *itself* becomes another market commodity. Or perhaps commercialism is a new religion.

Many of the old religions are making their pitch up-market. A church near me actually has a strategic plan which it hands out on Sundays along with the hymn list. It even has a vision and mission statement, which, I suppose, is appropriate.

I discovered, while singing “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”, the strategic goals include:

- worshippers must be restructured around congregation committees called core groups
- 75% of worshippers must be involved in groups.

And even more revolutionary:

- prayer must be a priority output.

Some churches seem to be trying to jump the isolation gap by compliance bonding, where strangers are forced to greet each other in freeze-frame intimacy. And at the church door, you can find a stand with your name tag in a slot. You must wear your label to pray. Who's here? Who's not? Who's late? Who are you? Like my Grandad clocking in at the mill - presumably if you lose your faith, you get given your cards.

On bookshelves and on the web we are offered vast libraries to lead us into new-age self discovery, glittering with words full of food for the soul.

One internet site even offers a spirituality assessment with a multiple choice questionnaire. Trying to make the mysterious, the mystical,

measurable. For the more scientifically inclined, it explains “while the scoring is numeric and generated by an algorithm, the interpretation is purely heuristic -- it takes place in your mind and heart as you contemplate what your score might mean.”



## 18: WORDLESS CONCEPTS

### **OH: Painting. Painter: To the Moon. Marc Chagall, 1917**

As a student at Edinburgh University, I studied logic and metaphysics. One day, as my mind and body were being metaphorically sliced in two by a lecturer, I looked out of the window and saw the afternoon light through some autumn trees in George Square. I couldn't tell what *part* of me experienced them - my eyes, thoughts, feelings, or spirit. I simply experienced it.

I still find *intellectual* arguments about dualism frustrating. In fact I can't see the point of an *intellectual argument* about wholeness. We might as well have a *feeling session* about intellect!

I know spirituality through touch, or a kind of sixth sense. When I am in that space I am whole. I do not experience myself in parts or even dimensions or aspects or levels. I am simply whole. To describe it in words, in detail, means I inevitably present self as something fragmented.

As Mental Health Commissioner, I came across the *word* spirituality all the time. But hardly anyone ever said what they really meant by it. Sometimes I felt people were just trying to be "spiritually correct". "Oh, yes. Remember the *spiritual dimension*" they'd say, eagerly ticking off their quality control matrix, hoping to get high ratings on the performance indicators.

We pay lip service to things we can't or don't want to talk about. And, anyway, these days people only want to talk about what they can measure.

We don't seem to have the words to talk about spirituality any more. Maybe we have lost the words. Maybe it is because the concept has become so remote. Or maybe it is embarrassing for us to talk about something so ephemeral in our materialistic world.

Maybe the words we *did* have are archaic or ambiguous. So we hold our tongues. And the distance between people gets greater, and possibility of relating, more remote. Or perhaps we are really dealing with something that is a *wordless* concept. Something *beyond* words. We just don't have words to describe our wholeness, our oneness, our spiritual self.

Imagine walking backwards, away from words. Let go of your verbal skills. Let go of your word pictures. Walk away from them. Lose everything but awareness of your self. Then stand still, be silent. Do you experience yourself as whole?

## Before Words<sup>22</sup>

In his cave, he had no nouns  
this man-pre-man. Imagine  
the absence of thought.  
It makes no sense.  
So sense was all.

Picture following the voice  
of gods and demons  
in everything.  
But then there were  
no names.

No givens, to distinguish  
right from wrong  
from reason.  
Only two rooms  
and locked out of one.

Without words, what  
becomes of connection?  
With them, what  
does connection  
become?

## 19: MAKING SPACE

OH: Photograph: *Birds in Sky*, 1998.

**To look within ourselves, we need to make space. To share what we find, we need to take a risk.**

One of the greatest difficulties for me in writing this talk was that I was constantly trying to find words for wordless concepts. And probably one of the greatest difficulties for you listening to me has been trying to find the wordless concepts amongst my words!

So let me now summarise the main points I tried to make:

Firstly, I ask you to think deeply about something I said right at the beginning: We are *all* weak. We are *all* strong. We are *all* wounded. We are *all* healers.

I believe we are at this conference because we want to heal the mental health system. That means we need to recognize our innate abilities and through that *connect* - with ourselves and each other - because healing is *about* connection.

It is very difficult, in a world which values being perfect and *invulnerable*, to acknowledge vulnerability, but we must transcend those difficulties. When we can connect with our *own* experiences of vulnerability and accept other people's vulnerability without judgement, then we can connect with each other, rather than control each other.

As members of The World Assembly on Mental Health, we have certain responsibilities. One of them is to question the *politics* of health. It is our job to challenge any medical control of mental illness which limits people to physical treatments. We must also challenge the economics of blame which actually withholds treatment.

It is also our job to confront social control of difference and expose ridiculous notions of perfection. We must declare and demonstrate that experiencing mental illness, in whatever form, is not something to be ashamed of. Indeed, that dealing with mental illness is something to be proud of, because it gives people a gift of insight. It can give people greater strength of character, capacity for compassion, a stronger sense of self.

We should also be clear that being imperfect is one of the hallmarks of being human and lead the way by saying that illness teaches us about being well, vulnerability teaches us about being strong, loss teaches us about finding.

When we let go of our prejudices and mind-sets, we begin to understand the worlds of other people. Negate ourselves for a while, as Keats would have said, in order to see the universe through other people's eyes. Then, even if we do not recognize our *own* spirituality, we may see that, for others, spirituality is intimately linked to health. That spirituality is a deeply personal experience which can be crucial to understanding and healing mental illness.

When we are dealing with the mysteries of life, we need to put aside the search for facts. Then, we will discover that insight is the teacher. This takes patience. It takes time and space. It means tolerating ambiguity, and instead of going out to get knowledge, waiting for wisdom to find us.

Let's try to speak and listen to each other in different ways. See as if we were blind. Speak as if we were mute. Listen as if we were deaf. Trust our instinct more.

If we are willing to make more space to listen, and let time do its job, then, I believe, that just like the man upstairs, we will hear.

So let's make space for ourselves and each other throughout this conference. If we make connection our goal, rather than control, we may see miracles!

## 20: RETURNING TO SIGNS

**OH: Photograph. Vancouver. World Congress Website, 2001.**

**Make space, let time do its job, and see what happens next.**

Some months ago, before I was invited to Vancouver, I came across a name I hadn't met before, and I came across it in a very strange way.

I happened to hear about a childhood friend of mine whom I hadn't heard of in forty years. It came to my attention that this friend had translated some work by a French, Jewish, neuropsychiatrist called Henri Baruk<sup>23</sup>.

I was curious and followed this up. The work was to do with spirituality and mental health. I was even more curious and went to some lengths to get a copy of one of his books.

Henri Baruk was a revolutionary, who argued that psychiatry was a "moral discipline", deeply related to spirituality. He lamented that "*the evolution of psychiatry has caused the moral aspect to be neglected in favour of purely technical solutions*", which, he said "*I consider to be a great error*". He told his own story, how as a psychiatrist, with such ideas, he continually had to fight to be heard. I found his story, like all stories, precious. I only wished I could have met Baruk, but he died two years ago.

Several weeks after this discovery, I was asked to give the Mary Hemingway Rees Memorial lecture in Vancouver. I tried to find something out about Mary Hemingway, and who else had given this lecture. I came across only one name. The person who gave the Second Rees Memorial Lecture. It was at Edinburgh University. Forty years ago. His name was Henri Baruk.

I imagine that my message today has been similar, in spirit, shall we say, to his. Maybe that's not such good news. Has nothing changed in forty years? Well yes, of course it has.

There have been many improvements in mental health care in recent years, in many parts of the world. One of the most crucial developments has been the survivor movement which has broken through walls of silence and insisted that people who experience mental illness have something to say, which is worth listening to.

I doubt that at that World Congress, forty years ago, there would have been so many survivors, or so many people prepared to talk about their own vulnerability. And this year, I believe for the first time, a survivor has given this lecture.

The past year has been one of tidal changes in my own life. Changes in state and status at every level. Solitude and silence have been paramount. Trying to fathom the depths of my spirituality has been the one thing which has kept me anchored when I was totally at sea. In fact, it ensured my mental health. And I learnt once again, that we never know whether we are at the end of one journey or at the beginning of another.

By the time I had written this talk, I knew that was the reason I was called to give it. So I would be *able* to come to Vancouver and tell you that.

Maybe you came because you needed to hear it?

Thank you

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<sup>1</sup> All photographs, excepting the last one, are by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Both Jung and Keostler were fascinated by ideas of signs and synchronicity. See for instance, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. C G Jung. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 172 (1<sup>st</sup> published 1955). and *The Roots of Coincidence*, Arthur Koestler, Picador, 1974. (2<sup>nd</sup> published 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Discarded Image*, C S Lewis, Cambridge University Press, 1964 and other books by him for wonderful discussions of spirituality in the context of medieval thought and later developments.

<sup>4</sup> See *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, C G Jung. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976 (1<sup>st</sup> published 1933) for one of Jung's best discussions of what he called "the spiritual problem".

<sup>5</sup> See any collection of John Donne's songs and sonnets for a gorgeous illustration of how matters of body, mind and soul were dealt with in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was a major theme of the metaphysical poets.

<sup>6</sup> Spirit - *spiritus* (Latin) meaning *breath*. Inspire - *inspirare* (Latin) - *to take breath in*.

<sup>7</sup> *Straight To The Point: Angles On Giving Up Crime*. J Leibrich. Otago University Press: Dunedin, 1993

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- <sup>8</sup> *A Gift Of Stories: Discovering How To Deal With Mental Illness*. Gathered by J Leibrich for the Mental Health Commission. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> *A Gift Of Stories*. See above.
- <sup>10</sup> See *The Space Within The Heart*. A Menen. 1970. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- <sup>11</sup> The Healer Within. J Leibrich. In *Folding Back the Shadows: A Perspective on Women's Mental Health*. Edited by S Romans. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 1998.
- <sup>12</sup> Health - *heale* (Old English) meaning *whole*.
- <sup>13</sup> See discussion in *The Discarded Image: An Introduction To Mediaeval And Renaissance Literature*. C S Lewis, Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- <sup>14</sup> The Measurement Of Efficacy: A Case For Holistic Research. J Leibrich. In *Complementary Medical Research*, 4(1):21-25, 1990.
- <sup>15</sup> See The Economist, December 19<sup>th</sup> 1998. "Spirit of the Age".
- <sup>16</sup> From a poem sequence "In the Anatomy Museum" by J Leibrich. Published in *Poetry New Zealand*, Winter 2001.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Doors of Perception*. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists - College Academic Address, 1996, J Leibrich. Published in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. Vol 31(1), 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> madness. from *gemaede* (Old English) meaning foolish
- <sup>19</sup> mystery, mystical. from *mystikos* (Greek) meaning an initiate
- <sup>20</sup> *A Gift Of Stories*. See above.
- <sup>21</sup> Chambers Dictionary, 1966 edition.
- <sup>22</sup> From forthcoming collection *Before Words* by J Leibrich to be published in 2002.
- <sup>23</sup> See *Moral Psychiatry: Justice In The Modern World, In Hebraic Civilization And In Psychiatric Practice*. H Baruk. Translated by B Lent. In *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, Part 1 in Vol 1(2), 153-164, 1998, Part 2 in Vol 2(1), 47-59, 1999, Part 3 in Vol 2(2), 135-144, 1999, Part 4 in Vol 3(1), 47-56, 2000. See also *Patients And People Like Us, The Experiences Of Half A Century In Neuropsychiatry*. H Baruk. Willam Morrow and Company, New York 1978.