**Voices, visions and the spiritual journey [Chapter head]**

By Isabel Clarke, LH and Adam J. Powell

What is the meaning of life? The question has almost become a joke, perhaps because our logical minds can get nowhere with it, but still it persists. Surely, the journey of life is about more than just ‘getting by’? That experience of a deeper connection, of meaning behind the vagaries of everyday life, that sense of the spiritual, hard to pin down but fervently defended, must tell us something, surely?

The journey becomes spiritual when it spills out beyond the mundane confines of the everyday. Gateway events – the birth of a baby; falling in love; death – all these will reliably draw back the thin veil, to use a common metaphor, between the ordinary world and something other; something deeper, with the potential to be either more wonderful or more terrible. This is the place that is accessed when that everyday world hits an impasse and there is no good way forward. It is accessed when the props, the containment, that maintain our sense of self fall away; our roles and relationships that tell us who we are and where we fit in. This happens at times of transition and crisis.

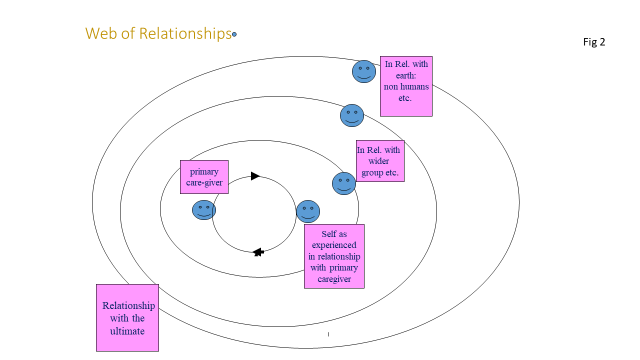
At such times we can find ourselves reaching out beyond the confines of our individual self-perceptions. This experience can be creative, leading to growth and transformation; an opening to new horizons - provided we make it back to solid ground. For those who do not find their way back so easily, this journey can prove testing. For those who get lost, it signals breakdown; madness. Yet even here, the breakdown can be a prelude to break through, to fuller life. The secret is to be able to get back. The right support is helpful here, hence my commitment to the Spiritual Crisis Network – to be explained below.

To summarise; all human beings have the potential to engage with the world in two distinct ways. Normally, we weave in and out of the two without noticing it. We concentrate on a difficult text or some calculation, then let the mind drift as we turn to enjoying music or taking a walk in nature. Our logical faculty is engaged by the text or calculation. For the other, we switch to feeling and experience. At some point, it can become possible to cross a threshold between these two ways of knowing. We then find ourselves in the realm of extreme experience, whether mystical or mad, or both. These two ways of being and knowing arise from the way our brain functions, see Box 16.1 for more detail here.

|  |
| --- |
| **Box 16.1: TITLE?**  How our brains give us two distinct ways of experiencing.  Cognitive research has tracked which pathways in our brains are connected and which are not. The Interacting Cognitive Subsystem model of cognitive architecture reveals two central meaning making systems. See Figure 16.1.  ---------------------------------------------------------  -------------------------------------------------------------  The Emotion Mind, which connects our senses and bodies, looks out for the self. The other, Reasonable Mind, connects the more recently evolved verbal systems, and holds precise knowledge. Mostly they work together and give us ordinary consciousness. At high and low arousal they start to separate. When they become really disjointed, this gives us that other way of knowing. Their memories are similarly separate. Reasonable Mind memory knows about time and place, whereas Emotion Mind memory is interested in threat to and value of the self. When they separate, past bad memories get mixed up with current ones, as knowledge about time is lost. |

Box 16.1 explains how time becomes collapsed when we leave our everyday functioning, hence the re-accessing of trauma memories, just when things are most challenging in the present; a process that can hasten breakdown.

This double nature means that, while we feel as if we are a coherent, self-conscious unity, we in fact exist within a web of relationship.



**Figure 16.2: TITLE?**

For each one of us, there are important relationships, such as those with our early care-giver, that define us, but these are contained within others. The relationship that is furthest and deepest is a relationship honoured by peoples throughout the ages. In our precise, everyday way of being we want things pinned down, so assign names – God, Goddess, Spirit etc. – but in this relational mode of being, we know through experience, through feeling. We can feel more than we can precisely know.

This chapter concerns what happens when life’s journey strays far into that other way of being, perhaps too far. Once the individual has left behind the safety of their individuality, the familiar boundaries are lost; things merge; the interior world is experienced as if outside – in the form of voices, visions and other strange happenings. This is a place of extreme and of paradox. It might feel deeply meaningful and directed; abounding in synchronicities, or it might feel dead, meaningless and void.

**LH’s story [A-head]**

I am grateful to the assistance of LH In order to illustrate how the spiritual journey can take someone to strange, frankly psychotic, places, and still come through safely to new and broader perspectives. First, a word about the Spiritual Crisis Network (SCN), where I am volunteer secretary and which was where I met LH. Having worked in acute mental health services, I am only too aware that the messages we give people about their experiences can make all the difference between the sort of despair that does not motivate people to undertake the work of re-joining consensus reality, and the type of positive outcome I have been suggesting is possible. There is a robust strand of research showing that people making sense of their experiences in ways that offer hope do much better. Seeing it as part of the spiritual journey is an example of this type of interpretation. The Spiritual Crisis Network spreads awareness of this perspective, provides peer support groups (now over Zoom) and responds to emails from those in crisis.

LH first contacted SCN in crisis after leaving psychiatric hospital. He received support and validation, joined a peer support group and later became a volunteer, responding to crisis emails and helping to train other volunteers. However, his journey to these roles involved involuntary hospital admission, locked ward and a long period when his life was in ruins.

The first question is, why did LH’s life journey take him to such extreme places? There are two strands to this in LH’s background. Psychic gifts ran in his family, with bards and freemasons among his ancestors, as did vulnerability. His brother had had a breakdown in early adulthood resulting in a life-long diagnosis of schizophrenia. Openness to this type of experience has physical foundations in levels of arousability, action of neurotransmitters etc. However, that vulnerability does not need necessarily to lead to a life of disability, as we will see.

Another factor that often facilitates this openness is trauma, and I asked LH about this. He said that as a boy he was severely bullied; he was gay, and always felt an outsider. At home, too, his father could be aggressive, so that fear was a constant. Even when he came into his stride socially in his later teens, he felt an outsider. His interests were different; esoteric and philosophical. In his 20s and 30s, his job involved travel and he took the opportunity to explore sacred places and practices, being particularly drawn to ancient Egypt and the Valley of the Kings. Psychic experiences broke into his normal life every now and then. He says that, looking back, the way he viewed those things now seems limited and arrogant to him.

**Transition: awakening and underworld [B-head]**

Times of transition have been identified as the occasion for opening to the other way of experiencing. At the age of 40, after various spiritual experiences, LH travelled to India to study Aruveydic healing and massage and was embarking on Reiki training when the awakening happened. He was learning to work with energy, and suddenly energy took over his whole self, shaking his body, and connecting him with others in uncanny ways. He now views this as a shamanic awakening. His life became full of coincidences, and initially it felt liberating, and as though his eyes were opened and he could see through and beyond the conventional world.

Straying beyond the ordinary, world view, which is limited and made predictable by the two parts of our processing working together, is often experienced like this – a spiritual revelation. The boundaries and divisions that delineate our normal thinking fall away. Everything can feel connected and meaningful in a cosmic sense. However, this is not a safe place to remain in. Without those boundaries, the sense of self becomes fluid and permeable, and we need to be able to get back and ground ourselves in the shared world if we are to safely explore the other. In LH’s case, he plunged in too deeply and got seriously lost, beyond the bounds of consensus reality.

In the middle of his work as a massage therapist in London, shortly after his Reiki initiation, he experienced feelings of blissfulness connectedness and love. This lasted for about three days, culminating in a profound experience when he found himself proclaiming: ‘LH is dead! You must listen to me; this is the voice of God’. The following day he felt compelled to go to St. Paul’s and proclaimed himself to be Christ, asking to preach on the Apocalypse. Everywhere, uncanny coincidences appeared to confirm this identification. Being apprehended by police with dogs and bundled off to hospital did nothing to resolve his internal turmoil. Still battling with supernatural powers and far from consensual reality, he accidentally injured a nurse, leading to forcible sedation and seclusion.

This ushered in LH’s period in ‘the underworld’. External and internal worlds merged and collapsed. He lost his job and was embroiled in a court case. Once out of hospital, he lived like a hermit, plagued by obsessions and synchronicities and strange experiences. It was a synchronous encounter with a chakra worker that LH feels helped him to turn the corner. After taking essences sent by this man, he started to evolve in a positive direction.The resolution of the court case, which reduced stress levels, will also have helped. It was at this juncture that he contacted SCN. Attending his first meeting of the London group, he was encouraged to hear the facilitator share that he had believed himself to be Jesus too at the height of his crisis, now some years distant.

**Re-entry and new direction [B-head]**

During the dark period, LH had been exploring every avenue to make sense of the wealth of symbolic material bombarding him. Part of that exploration involved taking up photography, capturing the mythic and symbolic in the everyday; the shapes of the clouds and the architecture of the South Bank in London where he lived. At the same time, he was taking neuroleptic medication, and he tried to get himself re-admitted to hospital in desperation on a number of occasions. Once he had turned the corner, when taking the essences and the desperation had left him, he was able to gradually come off the medication that was dulling his faculties, and the researches he had been undertaking started to come together in a more coherent and communicable fashion.

The alchemical journey of transformation, or the Hero’s Journey (see Joseph Cambell’s 1993 book on the subject), of descent into the underworld and rebirth, leading to re-entry bearing gifts, can be seen as a framework. The revelation of rebirth came to LH when he recognised symbols from Egyptian and other ancient mysteries in the paintings of the Renaissance Gallery of the National Gallery and archetypal figures at the British Museum. The gifts bestowed were a new confidence and fearlessness, an ability to use imagination and discern symbolic meaning, which were to enable the new direction that his life took at this point.

Taking up acting was a central part of this new direction. He has portrayed the High Priest in Boris Godunov at the Royal Opera House and played Oedipus Rex in Sophocles’ Greek tragedy, Oedipus Tyranus, something he says his shyness would never have permitted him to accept previously. He was able to contribute his deeper knowledge of the mythic depths of the piece to the production. Also, his photographical representation of the unseen world led to three pieces of work being exhibited at the Tate Modern. When Covid caused that work to dry up, his fearlessness showed in his taking a job in a care home at the height of the pandemic.

Where previously contact with the transliminal had thrown LH’s life into turmoil, now that he was finding his ability to engage with this dimension of reality at the same time as keeping his feet on the ground and operating effectively in the shared world, he found that it was giving direction to his life in a sound way. Where he accessed that archetypal, mythic dimension, he reported that it was as if that direction came from outside of himself. It further helped him to use and redefine imagination to motivate himself to attempt things he would otherwise have avoided, and to communicate effectively with the people around him, who had previously rejected his new enthusiasms as craziness.

LH concluded by saying that the journey is ongoing, and he has no idea where it will lead, but with his newfound trust in direction from the level of symbols, coupled with the power of imagination to create reality, he has confidence in it.

To conclude, LH’s inherited openness to crossing the threshold to the other way of experiencing launched him on this journey. It started slowly with his esoteric interests earlier in life; it took over and submerged him when he was undergoing a sensitive, transition period. With some external validation and support, and a lot of investigation on his own part, he has come through to fuller expression of the creativity and spirituality this openness brings with it, and his life in the shared world is on course. He now views these profound experiences as a gift.

**Everyday voices and spiritual speech [A-head]**

We are now going to turn attention to the particular case of ‘hearing voices’. Indeed, whether experienced as excessive self-scrutiny in which the ‘I’ turns an alienating gaze inward, or as a form of transcendence in which something perceptually ‘other’ interrupts (however briefly) the unity of self, extraordinary quasi-sensory events break many of our taken-for-granted experiential rules. Although striking, these episodes may be relatively common and, for some, rather mundane. For example, hearing voices in the absence of any physical speaker seems to occur on a sort of continuum, ranging from the mental conversations we have with ourselves on a daily basis to the emotionally distressing auditory voices accompanying various forms of psychosis.

Between those two poles exist a whole range of voice-hearing phenomena. It is estimated, for instance, that the majority of people will hear voices if deprived of sleep or sensory input for multiple days. Drugs – synthetic and organic – may induce voice-hearing, and nearly one third of people grieving the death of a loved one will hear the deceased’s voice in the weeks and months after their death. Many children hear and converse with imaginary friends, while approximately 1% of the general public hears voices every month without requiring psychological or psychiatric care.

Voices may elicit positive, neutral or negative thoughts and feelings. They may seem to originate from within the mind or outside of the head. Some voices are perceived as thought-like, while others are reportedly heard aurally through the ears. The voices may be understood as belonging to an unknown agent or an easily recognisable intimate. The Hearing Voices Network, an international user-led linkage of voice-hearers, clinicians and advocates, has also raised awareness of how important it can be to acknowledge the words spoken by voices in addition to their perceived agency. The messages conveyed may reflect individual histories (including personal traumas) and cultural inheritances, even if they sometimes remain entirely ambiguous to the hearer. That said, in some instances initially meaningless voices acquire transformative meanings or interpretations over time – having first seemed benign or even ordinary.

One example might be a childhood imaginary companion whose voice and communications are later transformed by the voice-hearer’s own encounter with new beliefs in the light of emerging psychological needs – the once blithe imagined playmate becoming a sage spiritual guide or relative visiting from beyond the grave. Indeed, evidence suggests that one of the most common forms of hallucinatory experiences, the voices and visions experienced during the transition between waking and sleeping (and vice versa), can sometimes receive profound spiritual attributions. In these transitional moments, waking life literally merges with dream consciousness, producing vivid quasi-perceptual experiences that may be difficult for the experiencer to categorise. Was that a dream, a hallucination, or something uniquely intended for me? Many turn to their social networks and cultural resources to answer that question. In doing so, some have concluded that the blurring of boundaries – between self and environment, waking and sleeping, etc. – indicates a spiritual or supernatural significance for the vision or voice.

Such spiritual voices, for example, are common among mediums and psychics, particularly those who report receiving clairaudient communications. While Spiritualists believe that spirits continue to live on beyond the death of the physical body and may attempt to communicate verbal messages to relatives or others via mediums during séances or other public events, not all reported clairaudient communications are experienced in this way. In fact, many clairaudient mediums join Spiritualist circles or churches only after having had unusual auditory experiences. For some, this may include early childhood experiences of seeing, hearing and/or speaking to a figure in their room, in the garden, or when walking along the beach. For others, the earliest relevant memory is of hearing their name called when falling asleep – one of the most common voice-hearing experiences among the general public. In all of these cases, however, the early experience is eventually interpreted within the paradigm of Spiritualism. The figure in the room or the voice calling the name is believed to be the spirit of a deceased loved one. In turn, the experiences subsequently lead to participation and to additional training in mediumship practices, transforming initially relatively mundane episodes into meaningful instances of spirit communication and proof of life after death.

Thus, the identification of voices heard with spiritual speech can bring comfort and clarity, a feature of many spiritual and religious voices that sets them apart from the distressing or aggressive voices most often reported by those with a mental health diagnosis. For instance, Protestant Christians who report experiences of hearing supernatural voices, typically the voice of God, also describe the experiences in overtly positive terms. Indeed, studies reveal that the vast majority of Christians who hear spiritual voices receive comfort or clarity concerning a dilemma or source of anxiety being faced in their lives. Just as striking are the number who cite hearing the voice of God as a moment of identity transformation. Usually described in terms of religious conversion, the individual first recalls being an atheist, sceptic, or stuck on a desultory path in life. However, as a result of hearing the divine voice, whether it spoke works of deep enlightenment or nearly meaningless banality, they claim to have emerged with fresh hope, faith and purpose. In this way, new directions are sometimes discovered by voice-hearers at the intersection of their interior lives (emotions, needs, perceptions and hauntings) and external possibilities (social contexts and spiritual/religious resources). One clinical/therapeutic aspiration is that those new transformative paths are just as much part of the journey for emotionally distressed psychosis patients as they are for non-clinical psychic mediums or Christian converts.

**Conclusion [A-head]**

There are several messages that follow from this perspective on the spiritual journey.

First, that journey can take people to strange places, involving hard to fathom experiences, such as voices that are compelling for the individual but that others do not hear; a strong sense of meaning and direction that can make sense metaphorically, but be misleading when taken literally, and a loss of the grounded sense of self accompanied by an openness to the whole that can be both exhilarating and terrifying. Though such experiences might be labelled as an illness, it is argued here that they are part of the available spectrum of human experience. Properly supported, they can lead out of a stuck period of life into new horizons, as illustrated by LH’s account. It is accessing the spiritual dimension of experience that clears the way to these possibilities.

**References [B-head]**

Clarke, I. (2008) *Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God*. Winchester:'O'Books.

Campbell, J. (1993). *The hero with a thousand faces,* Fontana, London

Websites.

https://[www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk](http://www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk)

https://[www.isabelclarke.org](http://www.isabelclarke.org)

<https://www.hearing-voices.org/>

[www.UnderstandingVoices.com](http://www.UnderstandingVoices.com)

Chapter in:

Clarke, I., Powell, J. A. & JH. (2021) Voices, visions and the spiritual journey. InS. Aris, H. Garroway & H. Gilbert (Eds.) *Mental Health, Spirituality and Wellbeing: A Handbook for Health and Social Care Professionals, Service Users and Carers.* Pavilion Publishing: Shoreham by Sea.