**Myths of power. The Relationship between Life Defining Meaning and Science.**

There is a paper that I need to write arising out of two issues facing the Spiritual Crisis Network, the UK organisation set up to support those struggling with anomalous experiences, and to promote a spiritual understanding of these ([www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk](http://www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk)) One is the topic of evolving consciousness. This is rooted in Grof’s founding ideas and beloved by many in the field (energetically espoused by SMN). So far so good. It provides a basis for optimism around anomalous experiencing. However, where it is claimed as scientific fact based on spurious quantum theory (eg. Goswami 2012), caution is needed.

On the other hand, there is a scientific body of research demonstrating the advantage in terms of health outcome of non pathologizing ways of conceptualising anomalous experiencing (Brett et al 2013, Heriot-Maitland, Knight & Peters 2012)

The issue of scientific respectability versus the utility of non-pathologizing conceptualisations came up over whether it was permissible to put something about astrology on the website. This is one of the popular ways to make sense of anomalous experiencing, which, in contrast to medical diagnosis, do not demolish the individual’s sense of identity. On the contrary, these conceptualisations give non-pathologizing meaning and hope through the idea that exploration in the territory of non-ordinary experience is a way out of a stuck place, and has potential for growth and transformation. Grof’s ideas of spiritual emergence and emergency which are behind the foundation of the spiritual crisis network are a case in point here. A scientific case can be made for the healing power of these conceptualisations, even if some of the meaning systems on which they are based cannot be verified by science. I am calling these myths.

The fudge comes when people are determined to claim scientific authentication for these myths. It is here that I want to step in with the concept of Ways of Knowing, and the validity of myths – both for navigating states of consciousness ‘beyond the threshold’ and for humanity to adapt effectively to our current crises of environment and health. These are of course linked.

**Ways of Knowing**

Chris and I argued this point (Clarke 2005). Because of the way our brains are constructed we have two stabs at reality, but no means of knowing the whole of it. We have been endowed with two, irreducibly incompatible ways of knowing, and a cognitive apparatus that papers over cracks and comes up with a plausible, unitary, story.

One way of knowing is analytical reasoning. This can produce great precision and predictability within a limited context, and by filtering out a proportion of the raw data. This faculty has been stunningly successful in mastering the environment to suit human beings, but is coming up against ecological limits. We need the other, experiential, way of knowing to take over where the analytical lets us down. We need the wisdom of the spirit, of relatedness, of love, to wake up to our real situation within creation – a part of it, not lording over it. Where we enslave nature, we find ourselves in turn enslaved, at the mercy of forces we have no hope of mastering. It is the very contrast between cold, analytical thought and the warmth of relatedness that we need to remain true to here.

However, those like Goswami and Chopra who argue that this other way of knowing will only be taken seriously if harnessed to science, are, I would argue, engaging in a dangerous and unnecessary fudge. Dangerous, because the actual arguments about the need for these qualities at this juncture are indisputable, but basing the argument on shaky foundations merely gets it side-lined. Unnecessary because we can engage the power of myth without reducing it to pseudo-science.

From the Ways of Knowing perspective, I contend that it is the task of our analytical reasoning, informed by the corpus of soundly verified scientific data, to determine the limitations and edges of where this reasoning can get us; be as clear as possible about this; and then hand over to myths – not myths denigrated as inferior, but respected as the only means capable of penetrating beyond this boundary, of engaging usefully with mystery.

The problem with this argument is that the dominance of scientism means that the word ‘myth’ has become debased; it carries the connotations of something that is not ‘true’. Ways of Knowing contends that Truth has more than one sense. In experimental type science, this sense is straightforward – something either is or isn’t. The other way of knowing is governed by a logic of ‘both/and’; truth can be both absolute and multiple at the same time. Myths can penetrate deeply into the relational way of knowing and grasp truths that are beyond logic. But to insist that only one myth is valid, is I contend, to misunderstand this way of knowing.

**Multiplicity of Myths.**

To return to SCN’s dilemma. Myths are a life-line for those who explore the treacherous territory beyond the threshold of ordinary consciousness, beyond groundedness in individual self-consciousness, (that I like to call, following Claridge, the Transliminal). Myths such as astrology, awakening and evolution of consciousness, or the Hero’s Journey, can provide meaning to experiences that might otherwise wreck the traveller’s grasp on their identity and plunge them into dangerously exposed states when the boundaries between inner and outer, the boundaries between minds and beings, dissolve.

Which myth to run with, and different sorts of myths is a fascinating topic that I intend to explore in the paper referred to above. Here I simply lay down the hypothesis that, when we have used the power of our analytical minds to determine where the range of convenience for contextually bound science reaches its limit, we need to embrace myth to take us further – while accepting the relative and multiple nature of myth. This is what I mean by myths of power.

Brett, C., Heriot-Maitland, C., McGuire, P., Peters, E. (2013) Predictors of distress associated with psychotic-like anomalous experiences in clinical and non-clinical populations. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology,* 11.213-227

Clarke, C, Ed.(2005) *Ways of Knowing: science and mysticism today*.  Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Goswami, A. (2012). A Post-Materialist Human Science and its Implications for Spiritual Activism. In L.J.Miller Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*. NY:OUP.

Heriot-Maitland, C., Knight, M. and Peters, E. (2012)**.** A qualitative comparison of psychotic-like phenomena in clinical and non-clinical populations*. British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 51, 37-53. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8260.2011.02011.x

**Theme for the paper - Discerning different sorts of myths.**

Directional myths (Teilhard de Chardin, Awakening, Jung)

Hierarchical myths (Wilber)

Participatory myths (Ferrer).

Archetypal. (Hero’s Journey).

Impact of myth on ego bolstering – eg. hierarchical myths tend to do this as place their proponent at the head of the hierarchy.