



'It's God's job to do the ripples'

David Waite explores his approach to the spiritual elements of his counselling practice

In writing this article, I wanted to describe what I do in my practice and why I do it, but the 'why' bit has caught me out. I tried to answer that sort of logical question for my own life some years ago and the result was a 250,000 word book – which was never published. I learnt a lot then, but I only have 2,500 words here, so a different tack is required. While I feel I know what I am doing in my practice, and indeed seem to be able to convey that to my clients, explaining it in writing



It is by accepting that the good outcomes are not really ours to claim, that we can also live with the not-so-good outcomes, because they are not of our making either



to the panoply of readers I feel *Thresholds* appeals to, rather than face to face with an individual, is a greater challenge.

So I thought I would start with some words of wisdom from the rather remarkable prison chaplain I support on a voluntary basis. Rev Shawn is utterly dedicated to helping inmates transform themselves, and believes this is effectively done through an acceptance of the spiritual presence of Jesus in their lives. I have to agree with his approach, because I see it working. However, my role as counsellor, and indeed my seemingly eternal quest for a truth which can make universal sense, persuade me to look beyond the Christian domain for a model which works for everyone. Not everyone in the UK professes a Christian faith. Of those who do, I suspect many don't have what I would describe as a relationship with the person of Jesus, whoever and whatever they might think that is. And there were lots of people around before Jesus lived, so what could have worked for them?

Big questions already. So I will use Shawn's phrase to get me started. In referring to his chaplaincy work, he says, 'It's my job to throw the stone in the water. It's God's job to do the ripples.'

The God question

Like a lot of Shawn's sayings, this one keeps coming back to me with ever greater depth. But first, it begs an important theological question. Who or what is this God? There are plenty of people around who seem to know who and what God is, and they will be sure to tell me. An eminent Christian leader I know would frequently inform his followers that God had told him something. That seemed to rally them to his current cause. While for the most part, his missions were well intended, I had to disagree with some of his beliefs, and so wondered if we were communicating with the same God.

My own view is that we are all affected from time to time by impulses which drive us to actions which go beyond the obvious. And if those impulses are deep enough, they can even be life changing. I am sure we would all like to think they were good and wholesome, so God can then

be on our side. However, we also need to entertain the idea that they may not always be. One of the more graphic illustrations of this desire to be right to the point of self conviction was related to me by a torture victim whose tormentors insisted to him that their actions were God's will. And I have no doubt that those extremists who are committing atrocities at this time also believe that their god is guiding their actions. Something mighty powerful is, that's for sure, but I think most would agree that that driving power is not a good one. Some of us might attribute the word 'evil' to it.

Evil at work

Which brings me to another saying I have picked up: 'If you don't see evil coming towards you, you are probably travelling with it'. In other words, if we don't accept the existence of evil, we will be caught out by it, or even collude with it. That is more obvious inside a prison. It can be a little harder to detect outside. And that's how we have let our leading bankers create havoc with international finance and people's livelihoods all over the world. It's how we let some who call themselves 'carers' damage children's lives. We didn't see the evil. We didn't want to see the evil. In fact, we don't even want to think evil exists. Perhaps it is only when we sense a conscious connection to the 'good spirit', that we can face the evil one. It is only when we know we have a defence, that we can have the courage to look the enemy in the eye.

So I propose the existence of powers beyond our normal understanding and control which operate through us, producing both good and bad (evil) results. I like to use the word 'spiritual' to describe those powers. They seem to emanate from beyond our conscious realm and we don't seem to have a better word to describe their nature. And I see 'spiritual' as being a neutral concept, whereby both benevolent and malevolent spiritual powers exist.

A working model

At this point, it is good for me, particularly with my scientific background, to recognise that my conclusions here are simply best-fit models to make some sense of my personal experiences and my observations of others'

experiences. They provide me with the tools I need to conduct my own life, as well as my working life. I invite others to challenge my models, but while this one makes more sense to me than the others I have considered, I will use it to frame my understanding of my world and consequently my decision making, for now at least. I need to be careful, too, not to extrapolate my models into automatically absorbing similar or related ideas from other sources, be they religious, philosophical or even psychological.

Detailed analysis can explain some of the features of our brain processing, our motivations and our actions. However, modern neuroscience and indeed psychology still come nowhere near to providing models which are simple enough and practical enough for us counsellors to practise effectively on a daily basis, and indeed, for me to apply to my own life. I prefer the black box process. I observe what goes in and what comes out. I don't need to understand what is happening inside. When I see what works, I go with it.

So to return to Shawn's saying. He inherently accepts the existence of a power beyond the human, which he calls God, and it is implicit in his stance that this particular power is a good one. I can accept his God because the

results support his premise. In this model, he sees himself as an agent for this benevolent power, or can we say in the context of the word spiritual, a benevolent spirit?

This aligns with my person-centred counselling training of allowing 'the process' to work. I am not there to fix my client, not least because I do not possess that ability. I am not even fixing myself that well, so I can be no expert on a client who has just walked through the door. What I can do is to help create the conditions under which some benevolent power can heal his or her damage. I am throwing my stone into their waters, just as Thorne sees Rogers enabling many 'to discover that at the deepest centre... is the human spirit... open to the transcendent'.¹

I find a parallel in the world of physical healing. If I cut myself in an accident, the mechanism of healing is the body. If a nurse applies a bandage, she would be prepared to admit that she is not healing the damage; she is just creating the conditions for the body to apply its own healing. And that is a process of remarkable complexity, much of which is still beyond our understanding. In the same way, as a counsellor, I am helping create the conditions in which my client's psyche can apply its own healing. And that is every bit as powerful and amazing as the bodily healing.



I can be open to all possibilities because it is beyond my control. There is no limit to what may happen





The stone-throwing is easy and comprehensible. The ripples are far more complex than my human understanding. They can travel further and wider than my imagination



This concept of being an agent of change helps me as a counsellor. While we are all affected by how our clients are progressing, the belief that the healing is not 'in my own gift', enables me to dissociate myself from the responsibility of the outcome. That's not a cop out. It just reflects reality. All I can actually do is the best that I am able. Another counsellor may be able to help this client more, but for better or worse, it's me they have, and I will do what I can. I am always willing to learn, and that process will never end, but it helps no-one if I carry guilt for the failure to achieve an outcome which a third party might desire or expect.

This approach avoids those destructive emotions which can damage us and, consequently, our work with future clients. The converse is also true: we are not responsible for our clients' successes either. We can rejoice in them, and I do, but that is the working of this spiritual power too. All I did was help set the scene. It is by accepting that the good outcomes are not really ours to claim, that we can also live with the not-so-good outcomes, because they are not of our making either.

A spiritual power

And when I accept that I am allowing a spiritual power to do the work, I can then think about getting out of the way. That does not necessarily imply a passive classical person-centred style, but it does mean I am conscious of the existence of this benevolent spirit and am ready to respond to its impulse, which may be quite subtle. That can often mean remembering to keep silent for a while. Something may be happening.

While there are occasions when the depth of my emotion surprises me, I am not usually explicitly conscious of the presence of another power in the room. Some of my master's course colleagues also felt that way. But even at this lesser depth, I suspect my clients get some sense of presence too. They may attribute their feelings in the room to my abilities. One client did not. She was a

Christian. She said that she felt the presence of Jesus in the session. Interestingly, religion had not been part of our discourse. I was quick to ensure we did not have an identity issue. We did not. But this reminded me emphatically that my role was one of an agent of a spiritual power rather than a practitioner making the changes. And it is that power which gives me the confidence to not only stay with my client in their tough moments, but to be optimistic about the outcome of the therapy, whatever shape that may take. I am not the architect. Something much smarter than me is at work.

I introduce these concepts very simply to my clients by saying at the outset that I am not there to fix them, but to help them find their own healing from within – their self-actualisation. If they can sense some positive presence, whether they think it is from me or not, then that will give them the confidence to know that they are not relying on just their own thoughts any more – nor even mine. The possibility that this new power will start to resolve their issues gives them new hope and great comfort. Clients have commented on that confidence and how it makes them feel optimistic, maybe for the first time in a long time. Hope, I suggest, is an essential ingredient of any therapy.

My acquiescence to a spiritual power means that I can be witness to changes beyond my dreams – and often beyond the client's too. Instead of framing an outcome of finite dimensions, I can be open to all possibilities because it is beyond my control. There is no limit to what may happen. And I don't have to understand how it works either. I just rejoice in what I see and help the client consolidate their new condition. The stone-throwing is easy and comprehensible. The ripples are far more complex than my human understanding. They can travel further and wider than my imagination.

It is such a delight for me when a client suddenly announces something significant. I am simply the witness to another little miracle. The fact that I can take the credit

for at least allowing conducive conditions is secondary to the joy of being party to major changes. My reward is to be the vehicle of this life-giving and love-giving power and quite a lot washes off on me in the process. That is what keeps me doing it.

And there is even more to this acceptance of spiritual power. While I am allowing it in my work, I feel protected from the emotional impacts the more extreme revelations might have if I were on my own. Some of my clients have spent time homeless and addicted, and their stories are truly horrific. I seem to be able to be with them through their stories and remain undisturbed afterwards. And if they have to retell them, that's OK too. I have never felt the need to offload session emotion onto anyone. If there is one thing which Carl Rogers has taught me, it's the transformative power of listening – and really being with the story. My spiritual friend empowers me to do this, time and time again.

Thus, the model reflected in Shawn's saying implies:

- The existence and active presence of a benevolent spiritual power.
- The existence and active presence of a malevolent spiritual power. That is why we counsellors have work to do.
- The means of change is beyond my power. I am only an instrument for a powerful spiritual entity. My job is to facilitate the conditions for its functioning.
- The above realisation enables me to be confident about progress.
- My confidence in this progress gives my client hope too – an essential therapeutic ingredient.
- My acceptance of this power enables me to work with my client on his or her issues without any human hierarchy.
- I need to allow change to happen and not get in the way too much.

- I accept successes and failures alike because all I am empowered to do is my best. The outcome is not mine to claim.
- I don't seem to be affected by clients' emotional unloading, probably because it's not me who is taking it.
- I feel I am the vehicle of a much greater power than myself. This is a greatly rewarding experience, but also one of great responsibility. Accordingly, this power is also my internal supervisor.

This is a model which works well for me, at least until I find a better one.

Biography

David Waite retired from his profession of engineering and felt called to work with people rather than projects. He has a master's degree in counselling psychology in which his chosen dissertation topic was spirituality in counselling practice. He has pursued spirituality as a means of self-development both in and out of mainstream religion. He teaches meditation.



Reference

1. Thorne B. Person centred counselling and Christian spirituality. London: Whurr Publishers; 1998.