

Gini Stanley interviews Linda Edwards, Holotropic Breathworker and Psychologist

Linda Edwards conducts a private practice in Melbourne. She is also completing a PhD on how healing happens. In this interview she talks about her spiritual emergence, how she works with clients, and the results of her research.

Linda, could you tell me about your spiritual awakening?

Well, in a conscious sense, it first started 20 years ago when I had a spiritual emergency but didn't know that it was a spiritual emergency. It began with me being very stressed out at the time that I had a two-year-old baby. I was so stressed it felt like I was an egg that was about to be cracked open if I didn't do something about it.

I was a Lifeline telephone counsellor at the time and also a computer professional. After doing a Lifeline workshop (ongoing training) I decided to try massage and meditation as ways to relieve stress. Massage was like cigarettes: it relieved the symptoms but didn't cure, although harmless. Then I tried meditation and, of course, I got more than I bargained for – far more than stress release.

I was suddenly able to bounce up at six o'clock in the morning for the baby, not needing the ten hours sleep at night that I had needed all my life. That was fantastic but I got a lot more than that because I went into a full-blown spiritual awakening that was like Saul on the road to Damascus. It was spectacular stuff! I had like a Niagara Falls of orgasms pouring through my body, energy like I have never felt before, and visions which I didn't believe in. When I experienced the visions I was totally aware that I was in a normal world and at the same time experiencing something else. I just marvelled at this, thinking: "What on earth is going on here?" It wasn't hurting me in any way. Luckily I'd been meditating in an Eastern meditation tradition where it was explained that strange things could happen as a result of meditation.

What sort of meditation were you doing?

It was Siddha Yoga at the time. One of the good things about Siddha Yoga was that it gave people a conceptual framework so they weren't scared when such things happened. And so, when these beautiful energies poured through my body, I decided to enjoy it. I experienced heaven and hell, my own perfect self, flying through the universe at the speed of light and all sorts of things.

At the same time I was physically quite ill and unable to eat food. I had hypoglycaemia, candida, food-allergies, etc. A quite severe case I was. The large amount of energy threw me into a pretty dysfunctional space for a while. That's why I would call it a spiritual emergency. I now look back and see that the whole of this physical illness together with the visions and energy experiences was a spiritual emergency brought on by doing meditation for a year.

I had a number of spontaneous healings. One was where a meditation master from India appeared in a vision pointing a laser beam of light into my thyroid. This was excruciatingly painful, but then it burst with blissful energy throughout my body. Two weeks later the lump in my thyroid was gone. The doctors had been trying to get rid of it for six months without success (they had been draining it with hypodermic syringes but it grew back again). But on this occasion it was cured. It never came back.

I remember reading a book by Bartholomew that said: "It takes an instance to know the self." I had heard these words spoken a hundred times before. I knew the words intellectually but on this particular occasion, that knowing of the self happened – for an instant.

And there was a healing on all four levels. Mentally, I knew that I no longer rejected the parts of me that my husband didn't like. Emotionally, I felt a shift in my feelings to acceptance of myself. And I knew that I was physically healed: my diarrhea and all the symptoms of the food allergy I had at the time just dried up. I had no symptoms from that moment onwards. I had a number of these instantaneous healings at different stages. What I learned from this is that when you connect with who you truly are, healing can be miraculously fast.

After that first awakening I had a period of about two months where I was in, what I call, a state of unconditional love. For me this was an experience of a totally different way to live and to be motivated. Prior to this experience, I was motivated only by fear or terror. I was a person always scared of bad things happening. I thought that was normal.

After that initial two months of being in a wonderful state motivated by 'Divine love', rather than by fear or terror, I knew there was a different way to be and I wanted that permanently. So when I lost it, it was the greatest loss I've ever had. When I eventually acknowledged this loss, I became a seeker – a spiritual seeker.

Were you dysfunctional because of the physical stuff?

Yes. I have to point out here that other people may be dysfunctional because they feel they are having a nervous breakdown. As a matter of fact, the night before I had the experiences of visions, I felt like I was going mad. It felt like I was at the end of my tether. It was not a psychotic experience but an experience of losing it. All night I was hysterically crying, not

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knowing what to do. The next night I had the spiritual opening I've just described.

So spiritual emergency can happen in a predominantly emotional way, in a predominantly mental way, in a predominantly physical way or in a predominantly transpersonal way. And it is the transpersonal one that the SEN brochure seems to be focussed on.

When people experience the transpersonal aspects they tend to be labelled "psychotic". In my work I've met a number of "psychotic" people but I haven't yet met one who was psychotic in a way that I couldn't see wasn't part of the growth experience. I'm not saying they don't exist, I am only talking from my own experience.

It is my implicit trust that their psyche knows better than I do, that enables them to heal. The wounding that happens to the person who is labelled psychotic is basically that they are given the message that they cannot trust their own psyche. Then they are boxed in with no way out. When these people come to me and I say that I do trust their psyche and that their psyche knows better than I do, they suddenly start to trust their psyche and they can start to heal themselves. It can happen quite rapidly within the right environment.

When you say rapidly, what do you mean?

Look, I've done ten sessions with somebody who had been ritually sexually abused by umpteen men in the first few years of life and raped every second year of her life up to the age of fifty. She had been in mental hospitals, straight-jacketed, labelled psychotic and had been on psychiatric drugs for decades – a pretty severe case.

She came along to me to work on sexual abuse. After we'd had a few sessions where she had revealed progressively more information, it became obvious to me she was behaving in ways which my colleagues would regard as psychotic. She was flipping me into a scene back when she was four years old and she was bringing angels in. But when I looked at what she was doing she was more or less running her own sessions. As a hypnotherapist I often put angels or the therapist or whoever with the client in order to provide them with the safety that they need to go through a process. I noticed how all these aberrations, which would be labelled psychotic, were creating safety for her to confront what I was directing her to confront. And so I had nothing but admiration for this, so-called, 'psychotic' mind.

After the third or fourth session, she phoned me up and said: "Linda, tell me the truth, do you think I am crazy?" I said to her: "No, actually no more than the rest of us. Your craziness is a bit closer to the surface than some people's. I have seen the craziness in my own psyche and I've got just as much craziness as you have. Mine was just far better defended so it enabled me to appear more functional." I think she quite liked that!

Anyway, we continued (our sessions) and the amazing thing was that, although some extraordinary stuff was coming out, and I had no idea where I was going (and if my colleagues were flies on the wall they would probably not approve of what I was doing), it all paid off in the end. Everything that came out was coherently attached to everything that had come out before, which is not what you'd expect from a psychotic. It was bizarre stuff but it all dovetailed in, producing a totally coherent picture in the end. The last bits of stuff that we dealt with actually came to the crux of the rejection and abandonment that was causing her paranoia.

What kind of work were you actually doing with her?

It was something that I have evolved from Stan Grof's work. I am a certified holotropic breathwork practitioner. I did the two-year training that he held in Queensland. What most influenced me out of this training was the bodywork. What I found was that for myself the breathwork sessions had not been powerful enough. Eventually I uncovered a way of working with a mixture of hypnosis and Stan's bodywork. It seems to work very well and, in my opinion, is more suited to private sessions than holotropic breathwork.

What I do with people is, if they come with an emotion, I go straight into bodywork. If they are not in their emotions, then I use the hypnotic procedure called "revivification". Basically it involves engaging all their physical senses in the memory of the event. When you engage all the physical senses, the mind doesn't know the difference between what is vividly imagined and what is physical reality. It triggers the old emotions. When much of the emotional is triggered you go into the bodywork.

What I do with the bodywork is basically what Stan does, which is to accentuate it. So I get them, by various means, to accentuate the body sensations. First, I ask them to take a few deep, connected breaths to energise themselves and to get the energy moving. Then, depending from an NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) point of view, how they access their minds (by visual, auditory or kinaesthetic means) I get them to make the sensation as bad as possible. If they are kinaesthetic people I get them to contract their muscles and push themselves hard with their knuckles wherever the pain or sensation is. If they are visual people, I get them to imagine the sensation getting more intense and also spreading to more parts of the body, even to fill the whole universe with it. So, one way or another, you either move the emotions around the body or out into the universe.

When the trapped energy is given the freedom to expand and move whatever way it wants it is eventually freed from the body and no longer bothers them. That can be a sudden thing. They can be going into some really intense feeling, like they're going to die, and then it suddenly explodes into a rebirth or sometimes a mystical state. Or it can just be something that gets bigger and bigger until they are 'swimming in it'. Usually I ask them to surrender,

to let go. If they believe in God "Thy will be done" is a good one. Either way you diffuse this bound-up emotion from past trauma and suddenly they are free of it.

There are other people who are not in touch with their feelings. They come in with a problem in their head, it may even be a problem with their child. I find that by just getting them to tense up and relax their body I can teach them, within a session, to get in touch with the difference between being fully relaxed, being numb and being anxious. Even if I can just get them to distinguish these three things, because a lot of abuse and trauma has numbness associated with it.

The premise of the way I work is that emotions are physical sensations with a mental interpretation. Psychological research has established that physiologically you cannot tell the difference between intense positive and negative emotions. The context is needed.

So we are talking about mental interpretation of the context. What that means is, since the mind is very slippery, stories clients tell their therapists can go on forever. It's much easier, I've found, to deal with the primary sensations than to deal with all the mental interpretations that people put on them.

I explain this to the client: "Look I am not going to bother with the stories, that's much more difficult than dealing with the sensations. If we diffuse the sensation, the problem is not going to bother you any more." And I demonstrate you see. They might come in and say that every time they think of 'A' they get very anxious. I ask them where the anxiety is and they point to where it is in their body. Then I ask them to take a few deep breaths, to tense up wherever the pain or sensation is in the body and to make it as bad as they possibly can. And they let go and do that. And I ask them how that feels. It may feel a bit better or a bit worse. We do that a few times until it is completely gone. Then I tell them to think of 'A' again and ask if they are still feeling anxious. No. Wow! They are impressed!

So if you start off with some little thing like that, they will trust you with the big things. They are then willing to go deeper and deeper with you, quite quickly, into something that feels quite horrendous. It even works with physical problems.

What kind of physical problems?

Back pain, for instance. I had a woman, a therapist herself, who had been sexually abused. We worked through ten sessions. By the time we got to the end of ten sessions, her chronic backpain, for which she had been seeing chiropractors for decades, was gone. I never set out to do anything with her backpain as such but I did notice in the process of the bodywork that we did work on pain in her back and it just went. She reported at each session that her back was getting better and better. She had gone to her chiropractor and he was amazed at the improvement.

Linda, how long have you been practising?

I've been counselling for twenty years but I've only been officially accepted as a psychologist for four years.

How long have you been running sessions?

In one form or another the deep emotional work has been going on for about six to eight years. However, my current methods have evolved since the Grof training and my research.

Can you talk about your research?

It's a PhD in Counselling Psychology being done at Monash University in Victoria. I was given an Australian post-graduate award to do that full-time. I've just about completed it. I have been interviewing exceptional helpers around the world to find out how helping happens. I interviewed a number of people, half of them professionally qualified, half of them not; half of them were male and half were female. The qualified ones include Dr Stanislav Grof, Dr Jerry Jampolsky, Dr Jean Houston, Drs Hal and Sidra Stone of Voice Dialogue fame, medical doctors, psychologists and a family therapist. On the non-qualified side you have Advaita, "non-teachers" like Isaac Shapiro, Vartman and Gangaji [they call themselves "non-teachers" because they don't set themselves up to know anything conceptually] and Dr Cliff Sanderson whose doctorate was awarded by the University of World Peace. He's the only person who is not a medical practitioner to have been given the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Medicine. He did hands-on-healing and healed the children in Chernobyl: there was a statistically significant difference in the level of radioactivity in their urine as a result of his putting his hands on them. There was also a humour therapist who went with Patch Adams to Russia.

After interviewing the people I constructed a report from the interview data and gave these stories to practising psychologists to read and asked for them to give me feedback on the impact it had on them, both personally and professionally. All these people were impacted in a positive way.

I think the research had the biggest impact on myself, and I have documented this using my journaling to provide data. These people I interviewed actually helped me, although I didn't set out for them to help me.

And so I had my own story of how I got helped, I had the synthesis of how they said helping was going on and I also had the literature to draw upon. And there was a convergence, if you like. Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and other well-known psychologists were totally supporting the things that these exceptional helpers were saying, which was that the helping happened through some kind of contagious proximity. All of these helpers were doing different things and appealing to different people who wanted different kinds of therapy, but, my

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sense was that what they were saying was the same. Cliff Sanderson was the person who called it “contagious proximity”, and I just loved his term, so I used it.

It seemed to me that we get right back to Rogers. People have trouble proving that Rogers is all there is to it but this is because it's so hard for people to live the Rogers conditions. Basically we're talking about unconditional love, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and empathy. People think they know what those are and they try and define them and they try and teach them. But, you know, you cannot teach these as concepts. You have to evolve through your own personal and spiritual growth for it to naturally happen and this evolution seems to happen through keeping company with people who have already done it.

I was very fortunate to have experienced a dramatic shift due

to the company I kept. Just at the time I was beginning to do the data collection for my research, my marriage ended and a rather negative situation dropped away. Suddenly I was keeping company with all these people with a very, very helpful and positive attitude to life and I just noticed the incredible impact it was having on me.

We know from the research that 40% of the variance in outcome in therapy is due to what the clients do in between therapy sessions – and a lot of that is to do with the company they keep. 30% is the therapeutic relationship – the company they keep in therapy. Then you've got 15% which is factors in the therapist and 15% is the techniques they use. Research says clearly that no technique has proved superior to any other technique.

Thank you very much, Linda, for taking the time for this interview. I've learnt a lot!

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