

Interview with Puran Oerton, Psyche Nurse and Sufi Sheikh (Teacher)

Interview by Gini Stanley



Puran Oerton is a psychiatric nurse, currently working as a drug and alcohol counsellor. He is also a Sufi sheikh (equivalent of a minister), who conducts the Universal Worship service, giving spiritual guidance to his mureeds (students/disciples) and teaches Sufi practices. Sufism, an esoteric branch of Islam, was brought to the West by Hazrat Inayat Khan in the early twentieth century. He made it into a Universalist doctrine, whereby excerpts from the sacred texts of the major religions are read at worship services.

Puran, How do you conceptualise Spiritual Emergency? Do you agree with the term?

There are certainly other ways of looking at personal crisis than the traditional medical model. If you look at the medical model nowadays, it talks about biopsychosocial factors being present in what is called psychosis. That is you've got to have a biological predisposition, the right sort of psychological make-up and the appropriate stressors and no mention there of a spiritual aspect to it.

Certainly I've read a lot of yoga texts from the Satyananda path around Kundalini-type experiences and my other main source has been Lee Sannella: *Kundalini: Transcendence or Psychosis?*

With regards to Kundalini-type experiences, I certainly have had lots of episodes in my work as a psych. nurse, that I feel somewhat ashamed about now, because of the way people were medicated for what was clearly, to my mind now, an experience which was at least deserving of looking more deeply than: "This is a psychotic episode, let's tranquilise".

I believe that individuals can experience crisis from a variety of reasons, some of those are external and some internal. And, yes I think Spiritual Emergency is a useful term sometimes. Not everybody who has a psychotic experience is having a Spiritual Emergency. To my understanding it is useful to have a frame of reference and a context. Where somebody is actively engaged in a spiritual practice and/or has been around somebody who is a 'potent' teacher, then the issue of Kundalini and Spiritual Emergency is perfectly valid.

But somebody who has had multiple admissions or with none of the hallmarks of what Sannella called Spiritual Emergency then, I think using the term there is not necessarily useful.

Do you agree with the idea of mental illness as disease, such as with schizophrenia?

I've heard so many differing theories. Do I agree with the term schizophrenia? I think schizophrenia is too broad a label applied to too many different things and in that biopsychosocial model there seem to be some people who have a very biological aspect to their symptoms. For some people there is clearly a pattern that seems to run through some families and whether that is because they have this illness called schizophrenia or whether that is because their brains are wired differently to that of most people, I don't know. You know, if you want to call that being more open to a spiritual experience, I think that's as valid as saying that they have schizophrenia. I think there are some circumstances where it is a valid and useful term.

Are you familiar with the work of John Weir Perry?

No.

He is a psychiatrist and his research was conducted with young adults diagnosed as schizophrenic. He came to see the process at least in certain cases as spiritual renewal. He initially called it Psychological Renewal of the Central Archetype, the Central Archetype being the Self. He says that the psyche has been triggered by a crisis and that the psyche is going

through a process so intense that it precludes being able to function in everyday life. But he found that when the person and their process was validated and listened to they recovered. They didn't just recover their former functioning, they exhibited greater emotional maturity at the end of it. Have you seen this?

I agree that that is true for some people but it is also not true for some other people. The literature is full of well-intentioned, well-skilled therapists who work outside the medical model, who've worked long-term with people who've been psychotic and really not had that good an outcome.

If you came across someone that you thought was having a Kundalini experience what would you do with them?

What I'm looking for initially is safety for the person and for other people around: so, ideally, a safe, protective, nurturing environment. It depends on what sorts of experiences a person is having. If there is lots of fear, lots of projected anger, lots of divine or bizarre experiences that the person doesn't have language to describe I look at what they need in that moment.

I'm also looking at some basic biological needs. Some people who aren't functioning 'normally' forget to do things like eat. In Yoga systems that I have looked at, where awakening kundalini is part of the expected process it's usually a very structured environment: lots of structure around sleeping and diet and all that sort of stuff. That regular rhythm is very, very important.

As is availability of someone who is non-judgemental and non-punitive who is essentially there with the person. Ideally that would be somebody who is there no matter what is happening. It is important for the [helping] person to be earthed, able to keep their feet on the ground, and able to keep them there no matter what's happening.

Also, ideally, from my perspective, is the idea of presence. It's not enough to be physically there but not focused. It's the grounded self that is going to be the most useful. And one who is able to be aware enough of their own feelings in the interaction with the other person so that they can stay grounded no matter what they're dealing with.

Small amounts of medication may be useful sometimes if lack of sleep is a problem and everybody concerned just needs some space. If somebody is acutely psychotic and the experience is clearly not going to be useful for them, then slowing them down with anti-psychotic medication may be what is needed.

How do you know whether the experience will be useful?

Essentially, the combination of the resources available, the effectiveness of the environment for containing what's happening and how long it's going on for. If it goes on and on and on then my suspicion is it becomes damaging for the person.

Do you know of anyone doing Sufi practices that has had a Spiritual Emergency?

No, but I've seen a couple of individuals who were very ungrounded after doing Zikr [Sufi meditation]. And I've seen a couple of people who felt quite panicked after doing some of the breathing practices. I have to say that those people were fairly ungrounded to start with.

What did you tell them to do?

The usual things that I talk to people about are: bodily awareness, like focus on physical sensations such as feet on the floor; being with grounded people; looking at dietary things; avoiding alcohol. Sometimes it's simply a matter of being with that person and talking for a while. After a group one night, a woman was feeling quite agitated and panicked and we talked for an hour and she felt much, much better.

I've never had anyone become psychotic as a result of the practices that we do. We [Sufis] share with lots of traditions an attraction for people that may not be that balanced to start with. It's probably a fairly crude way of putting it, but people operate on the edge of society for a variety of reasons, some of them are healthy, and some not. Wanting to explore oneself is not the cultural norm, unfortunately. We also, from time to time, attract people who clearly have lots of problems in their life and are looking for belonging and healing. I think that's quite valid and those people are welcomed.

I want to change tack now. When people are in a state of mania, for example, they become very

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spiritually oriented. They often speak a lot more about God and other spiritual things. Would you say that has any relationship to a spiritual state?

It may or it may not. In this context, I've had a lot of T.A. (Transactional Analysis) training about different ego states. For some people, the experience of mania is like that internalised parent taking over, if you like, or taking the place of the adult. I look at my son growing up, he is eight now. Two or three years ago he was saying things like: "I'm more powerful than God", "I'm stronger than superman", etc. That's a normal part of growing up. Life, in my view, is such that it reminds us that those things are not necessarily true.

Do you see bipolar disorder [manic-depressive illness] as a genetic illness?

Not necessarily. It's almost like an over-compensation for the depression and low self-esteem, etc. Wouldn't it be great if that was true! It is an overly simplistic way of putting it.

Could you see depression as the soul crying out for something?

The Dark Night of the Soul is a phrase that comes to mind. I think depression is a response to one's experiences, either of external or internal life, where what is being valued or what is considered important is taken away or there's cause to consider those things.

That's different to cyclic depression, isn't it?

Yes. It's like in the process of metamorphosis people do change through spiritual experience. They physically change. They become lighter and brighter. They manifest light. Their faculties become sharper: they hear more, see more, and think more clearly. They can access more of their brain. That is the result of an awakening Kundalini. That's the fruit, if you like.

Somebody having a psychotic episode as part of that process, as a part of that evolutionary metamorphosis, that makes sense to me. Where you have somebody that is in a stable environment

who is given structure and a way of making sense of their experiences and given support to grow, when that person keeps having psychotic episodes, then I wonder if it's more about how the brain is wired.

It's like the Kundalini experience is an overload. Ideally people aren't overloaded, they progress slowly enough that their system is able to expand around the increased energy.

Some people have a spontaneous Kundalini experience, not coming from spiritual practice.

That's right. That can be either because it just happens more now or because there is more awareness and more reporting of it.

I remember reading a paper about young men in Bali. It would be not uncommon for a young man to have a psychotic episode when in his late teens and the community would see this as a sign from God that he was chosen to be a witch doctor, a medicine man. He'd been taken away from the community and looked after by the medicine men.

Then, when he was no longer psychotic he would be incorporated back into that community by the medicine men. He would then have a social role. His work would be different from the others. He would be expected to intervene in illness and give advice about marriage and that sort of stuff. It was extremely rare for anyone to have a second psychotic episode.

I guess, using some of the rationale about Kundalini experience or Spiritual Emergency, that would be an ideal outcome. Somebody having a Kundalini awakening is recognised as having one and dealt with appropriately and then has an appropriate role in life to support them in their altered state.

What then happened is that Western medicine came to town and recognised these young men as being psychotic and started treating them with the drugs that Western medicine used. They relapsed, they were ostracised by their community and there was no role for them and, lo and behold, you have a community of chronic schizophrenics. I carried that paper around for about five years.

Yes, that says a lot. John Weir Perry found that people admitted to his facility recovered in about six weeks and then didn't have a relapse.

How do you conceptualise the hearing of voices?

Well, in dreams people hear voices. Some people think aloud. Some people read aloud. Our heads are full of voices, our own or others'. I think that either through alteration in brain function, or through drug use, or whatever, the normal boundaries can blur. I don't feel panicky if someone tells me they hear a voice. I ask, "Does this concern you? Is it something new?" I'm interested in the context and what it means for that person.

Have you had any experiences of people hearing voices where you think that these are the voices of astral entities rather than internal voices?

No, but I have certainly been around people who claim to channel. If you talk about the process of Mohammed being given the Koran, or the relationship between Moses and God, or Jesus and God, etc. it would be easy to call them psychotic.

Most of the people that I have heard talking about their voices don't have that type of voice. What they hear is not useful stuff, things like: "You're no good." or "It won't work."

I've read about two kinds of voices. The first kind of voices come from a higher realm. But then there are lower entities that can attach to people's minds and say destructive things. They may be entities needing to go to the Light, sort of preying on people who are more vulnerable than the average person. I am wondering if you've noticed that with people you've worked with.

What I have seen more of is like an internalisation of the sorts of things they have thought about or that other people have taught them while they were growing up.

So it's as though their inner critic is experienced as a voice?

Yes. Or it could be the more grandiose sort that we were talking about with mania. You know it's difficult in a way because what I think about somebody else's experience is less important than what they think unless I have much more power than they do.

In that sense, what I am more interested in is finding out what this experience means for that individual and trying to reflect that and to support them in their processing of their experiences, rather than trying to make it fit into one box or another box. I am not going to tell somebody they're having a spiritual experience unless that is a useful thing to do, unless that makes sense of their understanding of the world.

Similarly I would never tell somebody they were schizophrenic. I am not qualified to make such statements and it's not useful.

So you just deal with whatever they are presenting with?

Yes. It's what's happening in your life that you want to do something about now. If it's beyond that and the person is clearly having distortions of reality or internal experiences that are very uncomfortable, I ask how much of this can they tolerate. I would give them some help to slow down the process whatever it is, if that's what they want to do.

Thank you Puran.



The winged heart is the Sufi emblem.