

Postmodern Mystical Healing

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In this talk, I'm going to give you an example of a form of mysticism that belongs to the 21st Century, not the Middle Ages; a mysticism of people who could well live next door, instead of in the cells and monasteries of monks or the ashrams of yogis; a mysticism that is neither overtly religious nor even vaguely traditional. I'm going to do this by giving you a brief glimpse into the teachings, practices, and experiences of the students and teachers of two contemporary schools of spiritual healing: the IM School of Healing Arts, located in New York City, and the Full Spectrum School of Healing Arts, located near Erie, Pennsylvania.

I'll confess: attempting to capture in twenty minutes the richness of the dense, nuanced, complex reality of these two schools is a challenge. I'm presently writing a book on this subject, and even then, it's a real struggle to convey, with any degree of subtlety, the textures, tastes, sights, sounds, and smells of these healing worlds, to say nothing about the multitude of rather arcane exercises, intricate teachings, and extremely subtle, yet visceral experiences that come together to make up the lifeworld of these schools of spiritual healing.

And yet, at the same time, I look forward to the opportunity to share with you what I've observed during my decade long immersion in these two schools. I'm in a somewhat unusual position – I am what has come to be known, at least in certain circles, as a scholar/practitioner. In the same way that Karen McCarthy Brown produced her insightful work on voodoo by fusing the roles of anthropologist and voodoo initiate, and just as there are wonderful scholars of Zen who themselves have sat zazen for years, I have attempted during the last nine years, for better or for worse, to straddle the two worlds of insider and outsider, participant and observer.

I started off attending the IM School as a student in 1995. Then, five years later, I was asked to be a teacher in the school. In addition, my wife, Sandra, also a graduate of the IM School, started her own school 10 years ago – the Full Spectrum School of Healing Arts. Until about a year

ago, I shuttled back and forth between NY and PA for long weekends of work as a teacher in both of these two schools, while still doing my quote-unquote “day job” of teaching full time at Southern Methodist University during the week.

While I can clearly make no pretense of detached neutrality or pristine objectivity regarding these schools, I’ve worked hard, as someone trained in the academic study of religion, to look deeply into my experiences in these schools, to hone my introspective skills, and to be self-reflexive about my dual role as scholar and practitioner. And since a key feature of these two schools is the ability to engender within its participants powerful mystical/visionary states of consciousness, I’m at least one step ahead of the game, in that I have had numerous direct, transformative, spiritually charged experiences myself from within that context.

As a scholar/practitioner, I’ve become extremely aware of the value of studying living mystics. I’m convinced that this type of investigation can be a fruitful complement to the typical way in which we, as academics, have tended to study mysticism. I think no one in this room would argue that the overwhelming majority of scholarly articles and books on mysticism focus on the lives and teachings and practices of mystics who are far removed from our own experience, mystics who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago, mystics with cultural backgrounds very different from our own. Understandably, the study of these mystic “others” is almost exclusively textual. As Steven Katz puts it, “the main legacy we have of the great mystics is their *writings* and related *linguistic* creations.”¹ While Katz’s point is obviously important, if we become *overly* dependent upon texts to provide *all* of our data about mystical experiences and overlook, or more seriously, censor the information that is available to us through personal introspective work or careful, in-depth examinations of the lifeworld of living mystics, then it is perhaps inevitable that we will be tempted to reify mystical experiences -- that is, we might well imagine that retrospective, textual accounts of mystical experiences written by mystics who lived in centuries and cultures that are far removed from our own are actually fully accurate and complete depictions of what happened within

the interior state of these mystics. I know that when I read the mystical accounts of others, I can easily get swept up into the specificity of the narrative to such an extent that I frequently forget that what I am reading is not actually the experience itself; I can become so lost in the words that it is as if those words and the meanings that they carry somehow communicate an unimpeded and unproblematic portrayal of what actually occurred within the consciousness of the mystic.

I would like to suggest that studying contemporary, living mystics, and examining carefully our own mystical experiences, might well help to overcome the problems that can arise if we restrict our methodology to textual analysis (even if these ethnographic and introspective forms of methodology may have problems of their own). When I attempt to examine and articulate my own mystical experiences and when I probe into the mystical experiences of the students and teachers in these two healing schools, it is impossible to convince myself that the words that I use to convey these experiences, no matter how clear or inspired they may be, in any way adequately reflect the inner dynamics of those experiential realities. While I certainly attempt to accurately and faithfully portray what takes place in these healing schools, I am always painfully aware of the gap that exists between the outer shell of my words, even at their most elegant, and the subtle shifts of inner perception that are, arguably, the beating heart of these healing schools.

Having underscored a few of the philosophical and methodological issues that I continually struggle with in my research, what I would like to do is to just plunge right into a description of two fairly representative practices that frequently take place in these two schools.

To begin with, I'd like you to picture yourself in a large, open room with high ceilings and stark wood floors. Thirty-six people of various ages are attending, for the first time, an introductory weekend-long workshop at the IM School of Healing Arts, located in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. Most of the participants have signed up for the weekend primarily as a first-hand way to decide for themselves whether they wish to enroll in the first year of a four year program in the

¹Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

IM School. Most have no intention of becoming healers themselves. Instead, feeling perhaps an inner emptiness or a spiritual hunger, or suffering from a chronic, inexplicable illness, or having seen the changes in loved ones who had previously attended the school, they are willing to take the risk to spend the weekend with complete strangers in order to get an experiential "taste" of this mode of spiritual transformation.

Eighteen of these courageous souls now stand in a line about 30 feet away from their partners. Their partners are also in a line, but are seated on cushions with their backs against the wall. The room is hushed, filled with a sense of reverent stillness mingled with a tinge of anxious expectation. The two lines of people are quiet, focusing their attention on their partners at the other side of the room. Then, the clear notes of a Bach cello concerto, coming from the large speakers at either end of the room, begin to echo off the spartan walls. Slowly, at their own pace, step by step, with many pauses, the people who are standing make their way closer and closer to their seated partners. Their instructions, given to them beforehand by the director of the school, Levent Bolukbasi, a Turkish man in his early 50's, are to center themselves, to focus on their hearts, and to approach their partners reverently, seeing the divine within the partners seated before them. About 10 feet from the seated partners, the standing partners kneel and continue on their knees their slow progress forward, until they are seated directly in front of their partners. Taking hands, or putting their hands on their partners' knees, the pairs sit silently together, looking into each other's eyes. Several minutes pass, as the room fills with a tangible sense of presence, a subtle, but viscerally powerful sense of unseen energies filling the space. As the moments go on, some of the participants cannot contain their nervous laughter, while some reach out and embrace their partners, sobbing, while yet other pairs lovingly and reverently stroke each other's face.

In the sharing session that follows, many of the 36 participants who previously had kept other workshop members at an edgy arm's length, are now intertwined together on the floor, lounging in each other's arms (and legs), a tangled puppy-pile of mingled bodies. While some of the students continue to struggle with self judgments and remain somewhat contracted and quiet,

others are effusively ebullient. One man speaks in a voice cracking with emotion of the joy that arose within him after he released his anxiety and of how he let himself genuinely, deeply be seen and cherished by his partner. A woman shares how much awe and exaltation she felt when she looked deeply into the eyes of her partner and then suddenly experienced herself looking into the face of God. She comments that “it must be something like this after we die – to be held up by this sense of sacredness and loving presence.” Another woman speaks of seeing scintillating fields of white energy surrounding the body of her partner, noting that “I kept seeing this brilliant aura surrounding her. It kept pulsating, coming in and out, in and out. It was so surreal, everyone was surrounded by this pulsating green glow.” An elderly man describes how pleasurable sensations of energy coursed through him when he first took his partner’s hands, and then how he felt his heart explode, uncovering depths of love that he never before knew existed within him. He also mentions that, as he was slowly backing away from his partner at the end of the exercise, “it felt like there was this huge magnet, or a large rubber band, of energy and love connecting us.”

The IM School director, Levent Bolukbasi calls this exercise “Wholeness Healing.” Both schools frequently use Wholeness Healing, as well as other similar guided interactions, as a potent way for students to experience the flow of love that can happen when they fully open themselves up to their own wholeness, their own divine essential nature, while in the presence of another person who is attempting to do the same.

Another powerful, paradigmatic practice found in both healing schools is energy healing “table work” sessions. This time, picture yourself in a large, high-ceiling, windowless, blue carpeted ballroom, in a small college town in northwestern Pennsylvania. The overhead lights are soft, and the room is humming with quiet, intimate, conversation, as twenty four second year students of the Full Spectrum Healing Arts School, and an equal number of third and fourth year assistants, have paired off, positioning themselves, two by two, around each of the 24 massage tables that fill the room in three orderly rows.

After the twenty four “receptive” partners have lain down on their backs on the massage tables and the “active” partners (or “healers”) have made them comfortable with blankets or pillows, the lights are dimmed even further. The healers then stand silently at the foot of their massage tables, looking at their partners. As second year students, they all know the main outlines of what comes next – this table session is one of the highlights of each of the weekend workshops. During the next 45 minutes, the room is filled with the soothing sounds of a vibraphone CD emanating from the large speakers at one end of the hall. Sandra Barnard, a short, auburn haired woman in her early fifties, who is the director of the school, stands near the speakers, and step by step, with gentle clear instructions, guides each of the standing partners as they place their hands lightly, and lovingly, on various parts of the receptive partner’s bodies. (For instance, the bottoms of the feet, the sides of the hips, the solar plexus, the heart, underneath the head, and so on.) Sandra’s job is not simply to assist the participants in the mechanics of the table session. She also periodically reminds the healers to center and ground themselves, to remember their breath, to feel their connection to their partners, to open up to inner guidance, to recall that they are not sending or giving energy to their partners, but rather, are simply present and open, holding the deepest and highest healing intent for their partners, while connecting to their own divine essence and serving as loving witnesses to their partner’s healing process.

During the table session, a deep, resonant, rich peace fills the room, almost as if the vibratory “note” of the shared group consciousness has been raised, saturating everyone’s consciousness with a thick, soft, loving stillness. Time begins to feel very elastic and dreamlike. There’s a sense of hyper-reality in the room, almost a transfiguration. The room feels full, crowded with loving presences; as one student later said, “it was as if angels were witnessing what was going on, as if their angelic state of consciousness was flooding into the room.” (Several other students commented that they could see the shimmering, luminous outlines of angelic beings in the room.)

During the table session, some of the receptive partners begin to breathe deeply, or stir, or make quiet sounds, but most of the transformative work is taking place hidden from view. It is not until the session ends, when the tables are folded and put away and the group gathers at one end of the room, arms and legs intertwined, leaning back into each other, their faces soft and glowing, that it is possible to hear what has taken place, as one by one, they share their experiences.

An older woman shares what happened to her while she was on the table. Her voice quivers with emotion as she says, “I felt balls of fire at my hips that were bright iridescent red. It was so freeing, so clearing, so incredible. It was as if something that was bottled up there was completely taken away. I’m so excited that I can barely talk. I feel like something tremendously important happened today.” A middle-aged, balding man, tears pouring down his face, also shares his experience, commenting that “when I was touched, this reverence surged up and poured through me. Then the tears started. It was as if they were pouring from every pore of my body. I felt like all of the tears that I’ve held inside of me for so long were released by this experience.” A petite blonde woman in her fifties, shaking her head in wonder, shares that she “could feel the love and light streaming out of [her healer’s] hands and heart. The fibers of light were just streaming out and interweaving.” She went on to add, “When I was on the table, it felt so beautiful to be touched in this way. And when [my healer] lifted his hands and moved to the next spot, I could still feel them touching me. And then, at some point, I felt like there was this fire igniting within me. Afterwards, I felt very porous and luscious, almost like pudding.” Her healer, a dance teacher in his fifties, gives his own impressions of what happened during the session, noting that, “At one point, I saw this figure 8 of energy, standing end to end, revolving, rotating around its axis. And at her solar plexus, she started breathing quickly, and then all of the sudden she just let go and opened up. Then, around her head there was this shower of golden sparks, like a desert storm. Oh, and around her legs, there was this sense of ruby colored oil spreading over everything. Then everything got very still and peaceful.”

Of course, not all of the students' experiences are so joyous and uplifting. A few of the students comment on the fear that they felt or reluctantly share how they were aware of the ways in which they kept their partners at a distance, or articulate the disappointment that they felt when the table session did not match the potency they had experienced during previous weekends. These students, having been in the school for over a year now, are increasingly aware of just how crucial it is to take the risk to reveal to the group these less-than-perfect aspects of themselves. They have learned, from previous workshops, just how healing it can be to be authentic, to let down their defenses long enough to let in the love and acceptance that surrounds them.

As such, they have begun to embody some of the teachings found in both the IM and Full Spectrum schools. Both schools acknowledge that in our present experiential reality we suffer deeply from isolation, fear, fragmentation, and lack of love; we are, therefore, in desperate need of transformation and healing. On the other hand, both schools also emphasize that the dynamic essence of each human being is divine and thus, in our depths, in our truth, we are already whole, and we need no transformation. What these schools attempt to do is to create a charged context in which the students can focus, in an ongoing way, on each of these interrelated dimensions of their selfhood.

In addition to drawing upon the understandings of Wilhelm Reich, an early follower of Sigmund Freud (as well as the later neo-Reichian elaborations of Alexander Lowen and John Pierrakos) and incorporating selected transcribed materials that were originally "channeled" by Eva Pierrakos from 1957 to 1979, both Levent and Sandra add their own subtle insights into how early childhood traumas create elaborate, primarily unconscious, defense structures that serve to fragment the self, to sever the bond that connects us to the dynamic dance of energy and awareness and love that is our deeper, truer nature. Both schools posit the holistic view that these defense structures manifest in our bodies as diseases and in our emotional lives as anxiety, deadness, or depression and in our spiritual lives as disconnection from our deepest essence. These defenses are enfolded and painfully felt evidence of blockages in our sexuality and life force, tangible

manifestations of our stubborn, typically unconscious, refusal to live a life that is fluid, energized, pleasurable, and responsive to the deepest promptings of our being. Through movement exercises, and explorations with sound and breath, as well as through charged, yet supportive, group interactions and intimate work with partners in their class, students gradually come into contact with these less-than-perfect dimensions of their being, and learn how to accept, integrate, and transform the terror, rage, and emptiness that are hidden within. Students are also assisted in the difficult process of learning how to live authentically – how to recognize (and release) the idealized, seemingly perfect “mask self” that every human being presents to the public.

This rigorous “personality level” work, in which students learn to become increasingly self-responsible and self-aware, is understood by both schools to be essential to the transformative process, in that genuine, profound, long-lasting connection to our wholeness is seen as not possible until the distortions, blocks, and limitations within us have, to at least a certain extent, been addressed and healed.

Nonetheless, these schools also stress the importance of learning to accept and embrace ourselves fully, as we are – perhaps the most difficult, and important, work of all. (Paradoxically, embracing our human failings with love is understood to be, in-and-of itself, an experience of ourselves at our most divine.) These schools recognize, therefore, that spiritual transformation is not always self-evident, that it can manifest itself most strongly just at those moments when we feel the most stuck, or anxious, or despairing. In many ways, even our judgment that we are fatally flawed and in need of transformation, is (again paradoxically) that which most needs transformation. Genuine healing and transformation are said to emerge from a process of letting go, from opening up, from trusting that the evolutionary impetus of life will take us where we need to go – and that all that is required is that “we” – our personality overlay – get out of the way.

Both schools teach that one of the most significant aspects of the transformational process is learning how to love – not only learning how to be gentle and patient with ourselves and others, not only learning how to open our closed hearts, but also learning how to tap into a seemingly

infinite source of love within our depths. Over time, students learn that an increased and deepened ability to give and receive love, in which the giving and the receiving of love become a unified flowing current, is itself a visceral experience of spiritual transformation. Students within these two schools are given the opportunity, in the format of a long-term, ongoing group, to soften their often prickly and defensive boundaries; to learn how to overcome their isolation and mistrust; to experience how, in moments of organic togetherness, their cherished sense of individuality is not destroyed, but actually enhanced.

Finally, these schools also teach that interacting with others in a group context is a potent way to learn how to sense and work with energy. Over time, students begin to recognize that human beings are more than simply physical (although working with our physicality, including our sexuality, is a key component of the program of both schools). The schools emphasize that human beings have an energetic reality, a body of light, that interpenetrates and extends beyond our physical being. It is this energetic matrix that, according to both schools, is the template for the health (or disease) of our physical and psychological selves. Therefore, many of the exercises that take place during each weekend are designed to help the students to access and to cultivate their ability to perceive (either intuitively, kinesthetically, or “visually”) the energy that is a deeper dimension of themselves. Students are taught how to work with, and transform, this energy, not only in the intimate, heartfelt, one-on-one healing sessions that are a highpoint of the weekend workshops, but also in the sometimes tumultuous and challenging give-and-take of the group process sessions that are a mainstay of the healing schools’ experience.

It has been my experience that these healing schools are not only hotbeds of profoundly transformative spiritual experiences, but are also a forum in which students are exposed to an extremely sophisticated, complex system of teachings about the nature of the self and reality. As such, I want to suggest that the students and teachers of the IM School and the Full Spectrum School are, in fact, 21st century, postmodern mystics.

Adapting a definition of mystical experience that I articulated in a book published several years ago on William James and mysticism, I would say that, *mystics are individuals whose lives center around the cultivation of, or receptivity to, numerous powerful, ongoing (and ideally deepening), immediate (and yet personally interpreted), transformative experiences of transnatural realities.* If this definition of mysticism is accurate, then it is clearly a mistake to reserve the term “mystical” only to those experiences that are unitive in nature. Unitive experiences, as powerful moments of merger into or even identity with some Ultimate Reality, are indeed some of the most profound events in a mystic’s life (moments that many of the teachers and students of both healing schools describe). Nonetheless, these unitive experiences typically only happen within the broader context of a wide range of other expanded states of consciousness, such as visionary experiences, hearing voices, sensing the presence of transnatural beings, feeling one’s self flood with unconditional love, and so on.

If we accept this broader, more encompassing, definition of mysticism, then many, if not most, of the students and teachers of these two healing schools, as individuals who have committed themselves to an arduous, time consuming, program of spiritual and psychological transformation that is rooted in the methodical cultivation of a series of powerful, ongoing, experiential contacts with the divine depths of their own being, clearly merit the title of “mystics” (even though, interestingly, most of the participants would probably not see themselves as such).

And yet, while I do think that these healing schools are deeply mystical, at the same time, it is clear that this form of mysticism is rather different than most. To begin with, this type of mysticism does not emerge from within a monastic context – the vast majority of the participants in the healing schools are not celibate renunciates, but instead, have jobs and families. The healing schools are also not churches or places of worship. Instead, they are *schools* – they have a defined, four year curriculum. People who take part in the healing schools are teachers and students, and see themselves as such. There are no hymns or prayers in the schools. Participants, if they are overtly religious (and many are not) continue to attend various religious institutions. And while the

teachings of the schools emphasize seeing the divine within each person, and within one's own being, this "divine" is never understood as a separate God-being to be worshipped and adored, but instead, is seen as the source of love found within the depths of each individual.

Finally, I would argue that the schools are not new religious movements. While it is safe to say that both Levent and Sandra are highly charismatic individuals, and as such, are often either idealized or demonized by their students, neither Levent nor Sandra hold themselves up as models of spiritual or psychological perfection. Both of them repeatedly emphasize that the schools' focus is the empowerment of students, not devotion or surrender to the teacher. As Sandra mentioned during one weekend, "I don't want to promote myself. I'm not like some people who set themselves up on a throne. I want people to come here to heal *themselves*, not to have me heal them. I want people to come here so that they can take steps in their lives."

As postmodern mystics, both Sandra and Levent see themselves, not as some divinely inspired prophet or infallible, utterly enlightened guru, but rather, as teachers. As teachers, they may well be further along the path than most of their students, and as such, can work powerfully and effectively with them. Nonetheless, they are also open to critique and challenge from their students, and are always on the lookout for distortions within themselves. Furthermore, while they both use the context of the workshops as a way to convey an enormous wealth of subtle and profound teachings, these teachings are understood to be helpful maps of reality, rather than divine revelations. Time and time again, both Sandra and Levent stress the importance of letting go of the need for certainty, and challenge their students' tendency to cling to rigid systems of beliefs, even the teachings of the healing schools themselves. As Sandra put it during a meeting one evening with her students, "The rigidity of the mind, our fixed concepts, can create an enormous amount of inner calcification. We can use the rhetoric and teachings of even this school to stay two-dimensional, to think that we have the formula, to imagine that if we follow this path, or understand these ideas and can mouth them, that's sufficient. We don't realize that this attitude itself is just a more subtle box, a fancier mask."

So, if these healing schools are not new religious movements, or monasteries, or churches, then what are they? I would claim that they are contemporary representatives of a stream of unchurched American spirituality that, in the past, has included traditions such as mesmerism, transcendentalism, spiritualism, mind-cure, and theosophy. These healing schools are syncretistic, pragmatic, experiential, and steeped in a psychotherapeutic ethos, and as such, are a postmodern, 21st century organizational response to a deep longing for spiritual growth that appears to pervade much of Western culture. Students in these schools hope that, by attending seven weekend workshops a year, they will be able to satisfy their spiritual longings; they sense that somehow, in this charged context of group processing, lectures, meditations, dyad exercises, hands-on energy healing, sounding, movement work, and dance, that they will find a catalyst for the spiritual transformation (and often physical healing) that they desire.

And yet, paradoxically, over time students also begin to discover that true healing often comes when we learn to accept and even cherish our human frailties. As Sandra put it one weekend (and I'll end with this quote): "The organic nature of ourselves is love. That is the truth of us. It is our complexities that make life difficult. We can paint these very distorted images of who we are supposed to be when we become 'enlightened.' But enlightenment is not about perfection or utter bliss. It is about moving out of our complexities and into more simplicity. It's just being fully ourselves, and that, by itself, is utterly magnificent. We can, and seemingly always will, have our flaws, our humanness, even if we have done tremendous, almost miraculous, inner healing work. Nonetheless, in and through our flaws and humanness, we can be very deeply in touch with our depths, our truth, our love capacity. And, there's always more"

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