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

**Isabel Clarke**

*‘O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall*

*Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed; Hold them cheap*

*May who ne’er hung there.* (Gerald Manley Hopkins).

The human being is a meaning making animal. It can be argued that ‘the self’ is a story we tell ourselves. In more traditional societies the story was often given to the individual by the context – following in the family trade; arranged marriage etc., but in our fluid society we are left to fill in large gaps in that story for ourselves. The coming of age of science and technology, enabling control of nature and uncertainty, has played its part in producing this more fluid era. We still need story to navigate our way through life. We need science to determine and build on the details. The argument of this paper is that we are not always good at disentangling the two.

We first need to recognize that there are two – two distinct ways of knowing – and to accord each equal respect. The second step is to acknowledge their distinctiveness, so that each is judged according to its intrinsic properties and mish-mash is avoided.

**Spiritual Crisis Network Dilemmas**

The impetus for this paper arose out of real word dilemmas facing the Spiritual Crisis Network (SCN), the UK organisation set up to support those struggling with anomalous experiences; the ‘cliffs of fall’ of the Hopkins quote, and to promote a spiritual understanding of these. ([www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk](http://www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.uk))

One practical dilemma facing SCN concerns the topic of evolving consciousness. This is rooted in ideas promoted by Grof, founding father of the spiritual emergency community of which SCN is a part. Grof & Grof (1991) write:

Many researchers in the field of transpersonal psychology believe that the growing interest in spirituality and the increasing incidence of spontaneous mystical experiences represent an evolutionary trend toward an entirely new level of human consciousness. (P.237)

So far so good. This notion provides a basis for optimism around anomalous experiencing. However, where it is claimed as scientific fact based on spurious application of 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), of which Grof’s evolutionary theory is one example. The potential of psychosis (anomalous experiencing) to lead to personal growth and development is similarly attested in the post-traumatic growth research literature (e.g.Jordan et al. 2020)

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 SCN 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 are another example. 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, and so unique ‘truth’ status, for particular myths. It is here that I want to step in with the concept of Ways of Knowing, and argue on this basis, the validity of myths – for purposes such as navigating states of consciousness ‘beyond the threshold’ of ordinary awareness; and to help humanity to adapt effectively to our current crises of environment and health, to give two examples. In this way, both myth and science are recognized and respected for their different contribution to human knowing.

**Ways of Knowing**

The idea of different types of consciousness, based on different levels of neural processing is well-accepted (eg. Kahneman 2012, McGilchrist 2009). Myself, and my late husband, Chris Clarke, have developed this argument (e.g.Clarke 2005), based on the Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (ICS) model of cognitive architecture. This basis has certain advantages, including the incorporation of memory, even-handedness (not privileging either side) and the important insight that ‘there is no executive function’, no boss (Teasdale & Barnard 1993, pp 63 & 78).

ICS identifies two main meaning making systems organizing the various neural networks of the brain. Operating smoothly together they afford us a precise but filtered take on reality. This provides the culturally dominant, scientific, way of knowing. When the evolutionarily older, body connected, ‘Implicational Subsystem’ gains dominance, we have access to a way of knowing grounded in experience and relatedness. Normally the exchange between the two takes place constantly and below the level of awareness, but this substrate to our consciousness is nonetheless significant. It means that, because of the way our brains have developed, 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 limits. Some of these limits are scientific. This way of knowing is contextually bounded, and sciences such as quantum theory stray beyond the boundaries of the contextual limits.

Other constraints are moral. The relational and emotional way of knowing is required to navigate moral imperatives. The ecological catastrophe is a glaring example of this limitation. Foucault labelled the other way of knowing ‘subjugated’ in Western society (Foucault 1980, pp 81,84), because of the way it has been demoted in favour of the scientific, and pointed out that in other societies, it is analytical knowing that is subjugated in favour of the prior wisdom of intuitive knowledge. The argument here is that we need both, and that the strengths and limitations of each are to be understood and respected.

**At the Intersection: language, science, imagination and metaphor.**

While the two ways of knowing complement each other at the same time as retaining distinctiveness, even this combined operation does not deliver full knowledge of what is ‘out there’, and we need to accept this necessary limitation. This co-operation only succeeds when we recognize and respect both the distinctiveness and the limits of what each contributes. We are accustomed to navigate between the two whenever we use language. Language has the potential to define and specify, thus reflecting analytical knowing. However, it can simultaneously introduce multiple resonances that add richness or confusion to meaning, depending on how you view it. Poetry and oratory exploit this richness, which can embellish or undermine neutral communication. Think of the difficulty of finding an acceptable label for talking about people of diverse skin colour, or diverse intellectual ability. Teasdale & Barnard (1993. P. 73) illustrate the point about contrasting use of language by comparing a verse of Tennyson in the original with the same subject matter translated into prose

The two ways of knowing are similarly entwined within science, which relies on co-operation between them. Professor Tom McLeish elucidated this very clearly in the 2021 Boyle Lecture, hosted by the International Society for Science and Religion. He labelled what is here referred to as the intuitive, relational way of knowing as imagination and contemplation, and pointed out that, while the analytical faculty was indispensable when it came to testing hypotheses, those hypotheses would never be arrived at but for the operation of imagination etc. This does not detract from the point that, for its complete operation, science depends on the analytical way of knowing with all its strengths and constraints.

Another example of the subtle interrelationship between the two ways of knowing is the use of scientific ideas as metaphor. Making connections and eliding concepts is the relational way of knowing’s natural mode of operation. It adds richness and depth, provided a distinction is drawn between what is metaphor and what is scientifically proven. A fertile source of such metaphor is provided by quantum theory. Its ‘wave/particle’ distinction, for instance, is a brilliant metaphor for the two ways of knowing, as the precision of the particle state and the fluidity of the wave reflect precisely the distinction outlined above. The problem arises where this metaphorical use is presented as scientific proof of something that essentially lies outside the scope of hard science – in the terminology adopted here; a myth. The fact that quantum theory is enticingly mysterious and generally only fully understood by people who do not engage with this type of discourse, makes it a popular candidate for this sort of fudge.

If we accept that myth does not need a scientific fig leaf to be significant, we can call upon myth and imagination to take over where the analytical way of knowing lets us down. We need the wisdom of the spirit, of relatedness, of love, to wake up to our real situation within creation – to wake up to the fact that we are 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, as we are discovering with flood, fire and melting ice. We need the contrast between cold, analytical thought and the warmth of relatedness to remain true to her.

However, those like Goswami (2012) and Chopra (1990) who argue that this other way of knowing must be harnessed to science for authentication, are, I would suggest, engaging in a dangerous and unnecessary fudge. Dangerous, because the actual arguments about the need for these qualities are indisputable, but basing the argument on shaky foundations merely risks getting it side-lined. Unnecessary because we can engage the power of myth without reducing it to pseudo-science.

Analytic reasoning, informed by the corpus of soundly verified scientific data, has an important role here. It is to define the limitations of what can be determined with certainty; being clear about this; and then handing 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 and helping to navigate where reality dissolves into anomalous experiencing, as in Spiritual Crisis.

**Paradox and Understanding mythic ‘truth**

In discussing language, the characteristic of relational knowing to seek connection has been noted. In more extreme relational states, this tendency to elide leads to the dissolution of boundaries; synchronicities rule, so that more and more, all is connected; all is one. The individual can lose their distinctiveness in an ecstatic experience of oneness with the whole; or they might feel very important; or simply lost. Handy concepts such as time and space become out of reach. Stepping beyond the safe boundedness of individual self-consciousness like this can lead to vulnerability and strange experiences, which is where SCN comes in.

As faith and spiritual traditions have always recognized, this is a place of paradox. Paradox leads onto another fertile source of misunderstanding in relation to science, which is illustrated by another trick of language caught between the two ways of knowing; the meaning of truth and hence the operation of logic.

Arguing for myth to be taken seriously comes up against the dominant scientific discourse where the word ‘myth’ has become debased; it carries the connotations of something that is not ‘true’. It follows from the distinction between the two ways of knowing outlined above that ‘Truth’ has more than one sense. Whereas scientific knowing makes clear distinctions and specifies, relational knowing joins things together. Thus, in experimental type science, truth is relatively straightforward – something either is or it is not. A way of demonstrating this empirically needs to be devised and agreed, and once this is accomplished, certain facts can be accepted as proved and incorporated into the body of knowledge until refuted. This is possible because the scientific way of knowing is governed by a logic of ‘either/or’; asymmetric logic, in Matte Blanco’s terms (see Bomford 2005). The other way of knowing is governed by a logic of ‘both/and’ or symmetric logic, hence the paradox; 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 asymmetric logic. But to insist that one particular myth is proved by science, implies unique validity, and this excludes other paths to mythic truth.

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. 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. Such myths can be literally life-saving, but that does not mean that they have a unique truth value.

Having argued that scientific verification is a red herring, thus accepting that everybody does not need to run with the same myth, there still needs to be some way of navigating between the variety of myths presented. Myths (and ideologies as these are covered by the same way of knowing) are not value neutral, as we have seen from the effects of the recent ‘Make America Great (White?) again’ example. The relational way of knowing has a number of other features, along with symmetric logic, including a sense of unshakable conviction; comparison with delusion is not accidental – I have written extensively on this elsewhere (Clarke 2010, 2008). We need to remain firmly grounded in both ways of knowing, and be able to apply asymmetric logic while not ruling out the other, in order not to be swept off our feet. This means hanging onto our individuality at the same time as venturing beyond it.

**The example of Horizontal and Vertical Spirituality**

A debate within Transpersonal Psychology, summarised very briefly here, illustrates the process of discernment needed for distinguishing between myths, once it is accepted that they are not mutually exclusive. New age spirituality from 1960s on developed a tradition that privileged individual pursuit of enlightenment in a perennial philosophy context (e.g Wilber 2000). In a special issue of the Journal of Transpersonal Studies, Hartelius and Harrahy (2010) call for a relational and developmental model:

The relational refers to a psychology of the situated individual, the person embedded in community, culture, and cosmos. The developmental indicates a psychology of transformation, both individual and social, that seeks out the processes and paths that lead to psychic integration, kindness, and grace.

This perspective builds on Ferrer’s participatory formulation, where a single sea can have many and varied shores to accommodate different spiritualities with equality (Ferrer 2002). This is an example of fruitful debate between myths. The myth based on a more hierarchical, perennial, philosophy clearly had its strengths and had enabled people to navigate spiritual realities for decades. Others noted some limitations, in terms excluding or downgrading the rich field of indigenous spiritualities, and leaving room for the sort of ego inflation that can turn the head of the successful guru.

**The two Ways of Knowing in the real world**

These issues might appear metaphysical and esoteric. I am aware of straying into territory contested by philosophers over the ages concerning the nature of reality. It is time to return to the practical challenge presented at the beginning; applying these principles to the real world task of supporting people contacting the SCN for help, where they have strayed too far into the relational way of knowing and are in danger of losing their footing in consensual reality.

Taking our cue from ‘both and’ of symmetric logic, at SCN we simultaneously hold out hope that what they are experiencing has transformational potential, while stressing the vital importance of grounding in the present, engaging with ordinary (boring) life and, for the time being, eschewing rigorous spiritual practice. Techniques such as mindful grounding in the present really work and have scientific backing. This has been investigated through clinical research into application of mindfulness to psychosis (e.g. Chadwick 2019), and theoretically, the role of mindfulness is recognized within ICS as the means to hold each of the two ways of knowing in mind simultaneously (this type of application of mindfulness is most fully developed within Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Linehan 1993).

The mythic story is equally important for SCN’s voyagers in uncharted territory, and the task here is not advance any one way of making sense of the experience. Instead, any particular myth the individual has identified as helpful is validated; resources that cover various different myths are offered, along with opportunity to meet (virtually nowadays) with others on the same journey and compare notes.

**Conclusion**

This paper has taken a broad sweep across a number of areas of study, (the subtleties of which have doubtless been blithely ignored), in the service of making arguments with real consequences. The task of enabling individuals to navigate the ‘cliffs of fall’ of the mind via the Spiritual Crisis Network is just one example, and there are many other ways in which our society gets tangled up in the concealed gap between our two ways of knowing. Conspiracy theories, fake news and pandemic denial, are all examples of myths, presented as ‘truth’. There is a need for wider recognition of the ungrounded volatility of the relational way of knowing and its paradoxical logic, that can be particularly pernicious in combination with its aura of unshakable conviction. This needs to be accompanied by a proper respect for the tools that do enable the analytical mind to attain precise knowledge within the limited context where this is achievable. However, there is equally need for proper respect for relational knowing and myth, in the areas beyond the reach of that precision, provided paradox, multiplicity of myths and the tricksterish potential of mythic knowing are also appreciated. To conclude where this paper started, while we need to recognize that myths (and ideologies) have the power to lead us astray, we can welcome them as essential for the construction of an adequate story about who we are – a self.

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