

Working with Clients in Spiritual Emergency

Gini Witt interviews Paul Perfrement

Paul Perfrement is a psychologist and an ecologist and has been assisting people in spiritual emergence for 20 years. He is director of The Earth Institute in Sydney where he runs an accredited training in shamanic and energetic healing as well as seeing clients. Paul is vice-president of SEN Australia Inc.

Gini: Paul, I'd like to talk with you about how you work with people in spiritual emergency and how you conceptualise it.

Paul: It's twenty years that I've been working with people in states of transformational crisis. One thing that still stands fresh in my mind about professional conversations about how to work with people in this diagnostic category is when I asked one of my trainers, Bhakti Carisbrooke, in the early 90's "Given that you've been working with people in spiritual emergency for a long time, how do you think your approach has changed? What would you do now that you didn't do in the years when you first worked with it?" The first thing that she said she would ask them is: "What do you as a soul most deeply want?" And her second and related question was: "And are you prepared to assist that process?"

I don't know that the answer to the first question would be the same for each client, or that they could necessarily even answer it. To me it's something of a mystery and who's to say that the process is necessarily about what the soul wants. However there is a central aspiration that people tend to have and it usually relates strongly to love and purpose. For her the second question was about discerning whether the client was actually willing to engage. As the Grofs have said: part of the differential diagnosis is whether the client is prepared to work with their process.

Gini: Do you ask those questions of clients?

Paul: I tend to not ask them directly but it's something evaluative that goes on in me, and I am interested in what they most deeply want. Even in the first interview

it's very worthwhile to get a sense of what they are really there for with you. I want to know what their framework is, their thoughts, their inner images of what's going on for them from their worldview.

Gini: Have you worked with people in an altered state who aren't grounded enough to answer those questions?

Paul: Sometimes. Then it's really much more a matter of helping to alleviate some of the fear. That could be through energetic or shamanic work. It could just be through acknowledging and naming it. And usually my clients are somewhat conversational, even in those states.

Would you take being able to have a conversation as a prerequisite to working with them?

I think I would, given that I don't necessarily expect that by the end of the session they are going to be remarkably different. Due to the responsibility of keeping them free from harm from that session to the next, I don't think I would legitimately feel like it was my right to take them on.

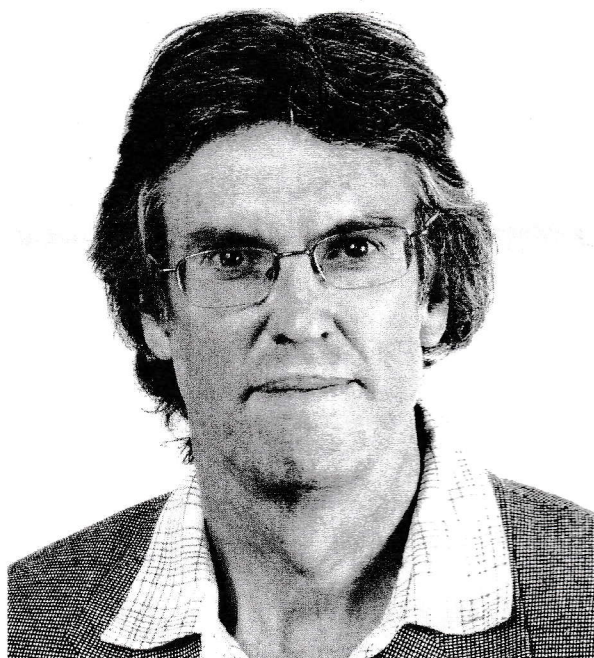
Is that because you don't have access to 24 hour support?

Yes. Or even a sufficiently close therapeutic community of people that could be available in some shape or form.

I've seen clients who are barely communicative. That can settle quite quickly in the session if you get them into a relatively safe space. A lot of that is just about being compassionately present. I don't think that there is necessarily a lot that we actually have to do. Of course we can do energetic work that grounds them and we can acknowledge their experience.

I think, for me in my own work these days, compassion is an action, it's not just a way of being. It's an action that has an intent, an intention for the client to be well. And I recognize that there are aspects of my own psyche that are involved in that. I know that I

can influence a client's energy field and their experience of their existence just by wanting them to be in a preferred state. I think we often negate the power of our own thoughts or empathy for a person that's suffering in the session.



I know that I can energetically read, and feel in my own embodiment and knowing, what the client's experience is, so having downloaded that, it's a matter of intentionally grounding their fear.

How long a session does you give a client?

All of my sessions are just an hour.

Have you found that that was enough for someone in an intense state?

I say that's as much as I can do. The constraints of my practice don't allow me to spend more time with a client.

When clients are needing a lot, I find I go into a very sleepy kind of state. I just deeply relax and then so does the client. It's not a structured approach. Over the years, clients frequently report, unsolicited, that this experience of being in a trancey, open, soulful state, aligned with spirit is what they critically needed. I tend to allow room in every session, including the first session, for them to drop into this place of rest and peace.

After all, a spiritual emergency is a contraction against a perceived larger reality. If that's the case, then we just need a safe way to look after whatever that client needs to have looked after within their own psyche. If that's looked after they are prepared to just be and to surrender. And in that surrender they get the help they need.

This is why I say spiritual emergency is a contraction, a severe contraction against love. Part of that contraction is one's psychological, psychospiritual and soul history. I always try to give them a sense of what's going on. I'm always interested in what's troubling them about it. I let them experience comfort and reassurance. Part of the work is to acknowledge that the journey takes time.

If someone presents as having a shamanic opening, then shamanic work presents as the best work to do with them. If someone is presenting with Kundalini, then energetic work is important as well as psychospiritual mentoring and therapy. When I say psychospiritual mentoring, sometimes a word of wisdom is enough to create a subtle energetic and soulful shift for a client.

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Does the shift happen because you dispel fear?

It could dispel fear, if that was their issue. It could dispel confusion. It could shift their orientation to their perceptions and therefore their relationship to it; so much of this is perceptual. It's not necessarily therapy but it is a crucial aspect of professional support for those in spiritual emergence. This is a form of spiritual mentoring where the therapist is a companion to the client's journey.

Sometimes what I say is something I know about the process and sometimes it's something I'm given. I find that sometimes even whole sessions in this area of care can be like a reading for a client. What is therapeutic when it comes to transpersonal work? Some forms of therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioural

Therapy, present a very limiting framework. We need to work in ways that actively engage the client's relatedness to the mystery.

It seems important for the therapist's consciousness to be capable of expanding across all of the levels that clients in these states are experiencing. It is important to meet clients where they are and also to address what is impacting their consciousness that they may not be aware of. This brings more of the actual process into relationship with the client and helps integrate it energetically.

I think there's an enormous gap in the literature on self-help, assistance and therapy for spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency. When you diminish it to narrow ground like Psychosynthesis, or Breathwork or Voice Dialogue or Sandplay Therapy or dreamwork or mandala drawing there's not a lot of good stuff around in terms of how to conceive the client's process and what to clinically inform you.

We don't really know how what we do works. For true healing or transformation to happen I need to be willing to lay my ego-mind aside for whatever has to happen.

It's very challenging to offer practical training for professionals in this area. It needs to involve frameworks that allow room for the prospective healer's own unique orientation and development.

An example of this is the way I've worked with shamanic journeys with clients. I tend to use a journey for many purposes simultaneously. I am open to the journey offering healing, power animal retrieval and guidance. In contrast to this I was taught by the Foundation of Shamanic Studies to do shamanic journeys for one specific purpose at a time. Even my way of doing journeys during the training was different to what I was taught and I couldn't just conform to their method. There were quite a few participants who also had experiences of the shamanic journey work that differed from the guidelines.

In my own use of shamanic journeys I empathically experience a lot of the client's emotional,

psychological and psychosomatic states. My intention, together with the client and the shamanic journey state, is to alter those states to allow the rebalancing and the growth that they need. I can't say how that works. I think one of the greatest things about all this is the enormous naivety we have to accept. We don't really know how what we do works. For true healing or transformation to happen I need to be willing to lay my ego-mind aside for whatever has to happen.

One of the most challenging things for a professional is knowing where to draw the line between trusting intuition and being in touch with some clinical or professional sensibility as to why you are doing what you are doing. In Amy Mindell's book "Metaskills"

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she talks about there being a continuum from being a scientist through to being a shaman or being a clinician through to being a zen-like experiential practitioner that works with enormous immediacy and transpersonal openness. A practitioner could responsibly be at either end of that continuum or somewhere in the middle at a given point in time. Sometimes you need to be clinically informed about what you are doing and why whereas, at other times, you are in the here and now with the unknowing wisdom that is arising in the moment, being a conduit for change, being a channel if you like.

She says that they encourage practitioners to consider that there is a continuum: that it may or may not be appropriate to be at a given point on that line at a given point in time. I think when a client is in an extreme state and profoundly needing help, it's inappropriate to be sitting there clinically assessing the client from your ego. You're not really being present to their process and you're not enabling them to experience that there is someone really present with them. Sometimes when a client is in an extreme state, being somewhere along that line can be useful - where you're communicating with the client and helping them to work with their mind/body process in a Gestalt or other kind of way.

Could you give some other indications for being at one end of the continuum rather than the other?

Some cues for needing to be in a more clinical position (assessing things) could be that the work has reached an important juncture and there seems to be a stepping off point to a range of other directions and you're not sure which way it needs to go. It could be that there is a presentation of complexity in the client's process such that the client is in one state one moment and suddenly in another state in another. You might want to know what's going on here – is it related to something of a non-ordinary nature that needs to be explored? Or is it perhaps related to unresolved trauma which we haven't been aware of, or perhaps haven't adequately addressed? Where do my responsibilities lie with this client at this point in time? It's important to assess the situation, firstly from a position of doing no harm, and secondly, from a position of being efficient and effective in the interventions that we do.

On the other hand if a client is in an extreme state and needs deep connection – if someone's drowning you don't think about whether it's the right time to get in the water. You just get in. I think unfortunately in a lot of standard approaches to therapy they never get into being with the water (or emerging unconscious) material of the client.

Research on practitioner reactions to a client stating a felt sense [a term used in Eugene Gendlin's work on Focusing, Ed] has shown that in a very high proportion of cases when a client stated a felt sense and articulated its nature, if the practitioner didn't respond at that mind/body level, the next client response was frequently significantly flattened; it was not at that experiential edge. So part of professional competency is about being present, open and relational at an appropriate level.

How do you train practitioners to work at that level?

You can train people to be aware that there is a whole range of levels of client experiencing, how to recognize those levels, how to open and be at different levels. And also when it's appropriate to be at a certain level and when it might be appropriate to work with the client in such a way that that shifts.

For example a client could be excessively emotionally engaged. In order to process material they might need to be able to stand back a bit. A client may not know how to productively work with somatic states or emotional states in the body from a place where they can open into a mind/body, then soul and spirit level of work where healing and transformation can actually happen.

Prospective therapists in the area of spiritual emergence need to be able to teach clients the skills of self-regulation. Clients need to learn how to step back sufficiently from their process in order to ground it, contain it or integrate it. They need to be able to be with their process and not overwhelmed by it.

What technique do you use for teaching self-regulation?

I use Eugene Gendlin's Focusing technique. Some of the basic things in the Focusing work are to help people get an appropriate distance from their process so that they are not overwhelmed by it and yet not splitting from it, colloquially this is called right distance. This can be very important because you are teaching them how to self-care.

The value of helping clients to be more self-regulated is that, whatever arises, they are going to be in a better position to manage. And by manage I mean be open to, embrace and integrate. This is a basic competency for any professional working with spiritual emergency.

Thank you, Paul. I've not only found out a little about how you work but I feel as though I've been on a rich journey through some of the issues related to working with spiritual emergency.