

## **Clean and Spirituality: Sharing our experience of the divine**

Is it possible to understand another person's spiritual experience? If the Kingdom of God was within your best friend, how would you know? And in this age of individual faiths, how can we share our experiences of the divine as a community?

I'll admit to being powerfully curious about the spiritual aspect of people's lives. Maybe it's my church school background. Maybe it's just my journalist's nose for a story, or my age. Maybe I've been caught up in the fashion following the success of *The Secret* DVD. Or perhaps I'm simply seeking in others something I've so far failed to experience myself.

Anyway, I just want to find out!

And in this article, I'd like to share with you a rather unusual, but apparently useful, way of exploring people's spirituality. It's called Clean Language.

It was originally devised during the 1990s by a psychotherapist, David Grove, to help people transform their lives after major trauma. It's increasingly being used in coaching and counselling, and with groups in organisations, to facilitate positive change.

It works by exploring the metaphors which underpin a person's thinking, usually below the level of consciousness, and which spill out in the language they use. To do this, the coach or therapist uses a limited range of questions which have been designed to contain the barest minimum of assumptions, and so pollute the client's content as little as possible. The results are frequently stunning, with sessions promoting rapid change which tends to stay changed.

Clean can also be used as a modelling technique – to find out how somebody does something, with no intention to change it. Most usually, that 'how' is in the form of a metaphor – which is a way of compressing a lot of information into a small, easily-communicated package.

Whether or not you agree with M Scott Peck and others that mental and spiritual growth are essentially the same thing, it seems that many of the same techniques can work in both areas. And that seems particularly true of Clean Language. Within the last two years, the idea of using this approach within spiritual exploration and direction has been catching on.

Matthew Dodwell, an active Quaker in his home city of Bath and a member of the recently-launched Clean Language and Spirituality Group, explained: "When I first came across Clean I was struck by how it was absolutely the right tool for this job, without a shadow of a doubt. It seems to me that if we used this tool in our parish communities they would simply become more light-filled places, where people could be free to explore their own spiritual experience with others, putting their attention on their experience rather than on their relationship with the other person."

Matthew described his experience of being facilitated to explore his spirituality using Clean Language. "I felt accompanied on a journey into the most important of spaces.

“I was dipping in and out of my ‘centre’. Being in it has reinforced it and given me some more information about it. I often forget that this space is so important to me – to live in it just a little bit more has been wonderful. It has given my system more information about itself, which has made the whole thing more real.

“The way I am using words in this realm is utterly unique to me, and they are the biggest words imaginable. In giving them space, time and attention and enquiring into them, pulling back the onion layers, they can come alive in different ways. Being in this God-filled space is joy – the field expands and that radiance pours out.”

### **Metaphor and spirit**

“The mechanism by which spirituality becomes passionate is metaphor. An ineffable God requires metaphor not only to be imagined but to be approached, exhorted, evaded, confronted, struggled with, and loved. Through metaphor, the vividness, intensity and meaningfulness of ordinary experience becomes the basis of a passionate spirituality. An ineffable God becomes vital through metaphor: The Supreme Being. The Prime Mover. The Creator. The Almighty. The Father. The King of Kings. Shepherd. Potter. Lawgiver. Judge. Mother. Lover. Breath. The vehicle by which we are moved in passionate spirituality is metaphor.” George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p567.

It’s almost impossible to speak of the divine itself *except* in metaphoric terms. All spiritual and religious thinking and writing is profoundly metaphoric, with metaphor and ‘literal truth’ intimately interwoven at multiple levels.

In the New Testament, for example, it’s clear that many of the parables are not intended to be read as literal truth. On the other hand, the miracles of Christ can reasonably be seen as either literal truth or as metaphor – or, more frequently, both. (“Metaphor” here includes symbols, similes, stories, myths, allegories, parables... any instance of using one thing to represent another.)

In the heyday of organised religion, before literacy was widespread, enormous energy was spent on agreeing common metaphors and symbols. Just how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? What colour should a priest’s robes be, on which day of the calendar? It was worth the time and energy because a metaphor can carry a lot of information in a small, compact package, much more memorably than a ‘literal’ description.

For example, here’s another description of a Clean spiritual exploration. Stephen Cotterell, a trainer and consultant from Brighton, said: “I love this process! It’s illuminating without being blinding, like being in a big, glowing ball. It’s like when you’re driving in fog, it’s as if the headlights are being reflected off a wall. But it’s an illusion of a wall, an edge – the edge isn’t really there and you can go beyond it.”

And speaking for myself, when I ask Clean Language questions in a session like this, it’s as if I have a magic wand which I can use to stir up a person’s unconscious system. It acts like a prism on light, separating the colours of the rainbow so that the entire spectrum can be seen and appreciated. The wand adds nothing but attention and energy, and yet has the power to transform confusion into clarity.

As you read these descriptions, I wonder if you've begun to get a sense of what that experience might be like? I find that as I discover more about people's metaphors for spirituality, I can 'try them on' for myself if they appeal. Often, I seem to see and experience something of the divine in them.

And at the same time, the person I am facilitating often experiences their spirituality more deeply, as the questions focus their attention on the most profound aspect of themselves, and beyond. The journey may be directed inwards, to their own 'centre' or 'core', or outwards, encompassing the entire universe and beyond. For others, the key point is connection between themselves and the timeless 'other'. And for many, the exploration involves a combination of these elements.

Some examples of spiritual questions that could be explored or developed in a Clean Language session:

- What is my personal, vivid experience of [God, Christ, the Buddha-nature, the Life Force, the Tao, the Great Spirit, the Ground of Being, the Source...]?
- How do I see my spiritual self? What is my mythic, metaphorical vision of myself?
- In images, stories, and pictures, where I am I now on my spiritual journey? Where have I just been, and where am I going now? What would I like to have happen?
- What images do I have of my personal spiritual guides and resources – spiritual mothers, fathers, saints, angels, positive archetypes?
- How do I see my spiritual relationship with others – again in stories, pictures, and images?

Whatever is the question being explored, the 'metaphor landscape' itself will be completely individual, unique and special, constructed from the person's own interpretation of their unique life experience. Some symbols will seem to be recognisable, drawn from familiar religious ideas, from quantum physics (like The Secret) or other scientific disciplines, from books and TV, and even from Hollywood (Star Wars or The Matrix, for example). And yet that similarity is a trap for the unwary facilitator – the meaning the person makes of these symbols, and how they are connected to each other, will be very much their own. A colleague recently likened metaphor to a zip file on a computer – a lot of information, tightly packed, which needs to be unpacked before it can begin to be understood.

Clean is the best way I've yet discovered to do this unpacking, to get under the skin of this individuality. Because it provides a structured way to keep my assumptions and metaphors tucked well out of the way, it encourages the other person to open up, both in the session and beyond it.

For example, Kevin Matthews, a creative coach and designer from Norwich, had this to say after his session: "Since the session I sense that I am more aligned and more able to speak my truth. I have a stronger sense of who I am and I am happier to reveal my true self to others. I have a much greater inner balance and am more aware of my own power."

In summary, it seems that using Clean Language to explore spirituality:

- Provides a non-polluting way to find out about a person's spiritual experience

- Assists the person to talk openly about their experience of divinity
- Helps to increase their awareness of it, to bring them into closer connection with it and 'unstick' them from troublesome thoughts
- Spreads the joy! The process almost always feels good, for both parties.

### **Try Clean for yourself**

Using Clean Language to explore people's metaphors at a deep level is an art, requiring training and practice. And at the same time, because the basic idea is so simple, here's a way that you can try it with a friend straight away.

Remember, though, that Clean Language is powerful! When experimenting, use its power as a force for good by asking your questions about the positive aspects of a person's experience. As a beginner it's best to avoid using Clean to explore problems or unhappy experiences, as this can prove uncomfortable and less effective.

For this activity, start by asking your friend the question: "When you are in touch with the divine (or substitute their preferred term), that is like... what?" Write down their answer. The purpose of this step is to discover a metaphorical symbol which can be used as a starting point for the rest of the activity.

Then spend ten minutes or so asking them Clean Language questions to find out more about their symbol. Mix up the questions, asking them in any order, and feel free to use the questions more than once. Return frequently to ask about their original symbol, rather than always asking about the last thing they said.

Ask:

- *And what kind of X is that X?*
- *And is there anything else about X?*
- *And where is X? or And whereabouts is X?*
- *And is there a relationship between X and Y?*
- *And when X, what happens to Y?*
- *And that's X like what?*

Where X represents one or more of your friends' words.

You may find that, as you uncover more information about your friend's metaphor, they start to experience it. That's a good thing, if they're enjoying it! If not, ask your questions about things they say which sound more enjoyable.

After about ten minutes, you might like to ask some additional questions:

- *And what happens just before X?*
- *And then what happens?*
- *And what happens next?*

Finally, after about 20 minutes (or longer if you're both enjoying the process) you might like to ask you friend to draw or write down what they now know.

### **Personal information**

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company'. She is now a director of Clean Change Company, offering specialist training in Clean Language, Clean Space and Symbolic Modelling.

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