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**The Unitive Self and its Importance for Mental Wellbeing, Society, and Politics.**

Razzaque, Russell

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The Unitive Self and its Importance for  
Mental Wellbeing, Society, and Politics.

By Russell Razzaque

MB.BS., MRCPsych

Submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## List of Publications submitted for consideration

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### List A: Selected Publications

1. Razzaque R. (2008) *Human Being to Human Bomb: Inside the mind of a terrorist*, London: Icon Books.
2. Razzaque R. (2012) 'An acceptance and commitment therapy based protocol for the management of acute self-harm and violence in severe mental illness', *Journal of Psychiatric Intensive Care*, Vol. 00 No. 0:1-5.
3. Razzaque R. (2012) *Obama Karma: Lessons on living inspired by the 44<sup>th</sup> President*, New York: February Books.
4. Razzaque R. (2013) 'How Teens Become Terrorists: Radical Islamist ideology is a deadly poison disguised as a cure', *USA Today*, Final Edition, 10.
5. Razzaque R., Okoro E. & Wood L. (2013) 'Mindfulness in Clinical Therapeutic Relationships', *Mindfulness*, Issue 5.
6. Razzaque R. (2014) *Breaking Down is Waking Up: The connection between psychological distress and spiritual awakening*, London: Watkins.
7. Razzaque R. (2015) 'Mindfulness and open dialogue: A common foundation and a common practice', *Context*, Vol. 137, February: 45-46.
8. Razzaque R. (2015) 'I Am The Jeremy Corbyn Supporter That Many Will Tell You Doesn't Exist', *The Independent*, July 24th, 2015.
9. Razzaque R. (2015) 'As A Psychiatrist I Find The Reactions Of The Anyone But Corbyn Camp Interesting', *The Independent*, August 21st, 2015.
10. Razzaque R. & Wood L. (2015) 'Open Dialogue and its relevance to the NHS: Opinions of NHS staff and service users', *Community Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 51: 931-938.
11. Razzaque R. (2016) 'Exploration of the effectiveness and acceptability of a professional mindfulness retreat for psychiatrists', *Mindfulness*, Vol. 6, No 5.

12. Razzaque R. & Stockmann T. (2016) 'An Introduction To Peer-supported Open Dialogue In Mental Healthcare', *Advances In Psychiatry Treatment*, Vol. 22, Issue 5, 348-356.

13. Razzaque R. (2017) 'These Are The Alarming Parallels Between Steve Bannon And Those Held By Islamist Jihadis', *The Independent*, February 7th, 2017.

**List B: Articles by others about my publications.**

14. Turner S. (2014), 'Breaking Down Is Waking Up', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 206, Issue 4.

15. Dodd C. (2015) 'Open Dialogue The Radical New Treatment Having Life Changing Effects On People's Mental Health', *The Independent*, December 6th, 2015.

16. Sykes J. (2015) New York 'Parachute' Programme For People With Acute Mental Distress Lands In The UK, *The Guardian*, October 20th, 2015.

17. Gavaghan L., et al. (2015) 'Open Approach To Mental Healthcare', *The Guardian*, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

18. Maisel E. (2016) 'Russell Razzaque on Psychiatry and Mindfulness: on the future of mental health', *Psychology Today*, February 2016.

19. Levy N. (2017) *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul*, New York: Flatiron Books.

## **The Unitive Self and its Importance for Mental Wellbeing, Society and Politics**

The notion of an individual self - a point of locus from which the world is experienced - is the common assumption upon which almost all human thinking is built. Virtually all language is predicated on there being a self; a first person who is conveying the information being imparted. And yet understanding around it – what it is and why it exists - is limited. The purpose of this critical appraisal of my body of work is to shed light on these questions via an overview of my publications and my research, which has increasingly focused on such questions as it has evolved over the years. The aim of my research has ultimately been to formulate something of a theory around the notion of self; both its nature and purpose. My research has always been clinically orientated, with patient/societal benefit at its heart, and so the emphasis of this critical appraisal of my work will be on the practical utility of my understanding of the self, and the way in which such understandings can be of real benefit to people.

The fundamental assertion of my underlying thesis is that the human mind developed out of language. In other words, language gave us the ability to construct complex notions in the abstract and this forms the basis of thought. Thought is the architecture and output of the human mind and the sense of self – the idea of being an individual person; a separate entity walled off from the environment by the physical parameters of our body, rather than being integral to it - then arose as an output, or creation, of the human mind. It is the thinking voice inside that we identify ourselves with and the whole series of barriers between “self” and “not self” that emerge as a result. Einstein described this as our “optical delusion of consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> This construction, I argue, nevertheless serves a profound purpose for us all. That purpose is for each of us to navigate our life stories towards a particular destination, and that destination, I claim, is ultimately a unity or, as I refer to it: the Unitive Self. This appraisal of my work will elaborate on what I construe this unity to be, and how I have understood it throughout my work, and in so much as it can be described with words, and how all “selves” - knowingly or not – are striving towards it all the time.

This critical appraisal will begin by outlining the utility in having a sense of self for human beings and how, through my clinical practice and research, I have come to the conclusion that

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<sup>1</sup> Einstein’s full quote: “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.” Einstein & The Raabi, Naomi Levy, Flatiron Books (2017)

personal acceptance of it is fundamental to our wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> After this I provide a more detailed outline of the development of the sense of self according to the conclusions I reached in my writings in this area, including my most recent book.<sup>3</sup> I shall follow this discussion with my hypothesis that nature's cycles move us inevitably towards unity, and, thus, though it may not seem like it sometimes, human behaviour is always fundamentally headed in the direction of connection and integration. Finally, I shall outline the implications of this situation from a variety of perspectives, notably, the psychological, interpersonal, societal, and, more widely, political.

## Acceptance

A relatively complete and robust sense of self is perhaps the most important ingredient to a grounded and stable life. As mentioned above, virtually all human communication and subsequent endeavours are based on the assumption of a sense of self. It stands to reason, therefore, that such notions need to form a firm foundation before one can engage adequately in society and, indeed, even in internal mental processes. Though extreme schisms in the sense of self may be seen in what today's society deems to be severe mental illnesses, degrees of this can nevertheless be seen on a more widespread basis. The development of the sense of self – as will be elaborated upon in more detail below – is very much a core aspect of childhood development. Trauma, abuse or neglect of any kind at this time of life will thus disrupt the process, leading to the development of an incomplete or insufficiently robust sense of self. Relatively subtle aspects of childhood experience can also have an impact too, such as lack of parental connection or intimacy in early life or exclusionary experiences like prejudice or racism later on.

The sense of self has many layers, and all aspects of identity are incorporated into it. As a result, incomplete formations around who a person is or how they fit into society can leave what could be described as lacunae within that sense of self. Such gaps become apparent around the time of adolescence and this is thus a time when young people are most vulnerable. A need to complete the story of self can leave a yearning within a young person. This void can then easily be filled by a group identity, especially one that has a supremacist flavour to it, acting then as a balm to the pain of incompleteness. This group identity then fills

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<sup>2</sup> Russell Razzaque (2012) "An acceptance and commitment therapy based protocol for the management of acute self-harm and violence in severe mental illness", *Journal of Psychiatric Intensive Care*.

<sup>3</sup> Russell Razzaque (2014) "Breaking Down is Waking Up: The connection between psychological distress and spiritual awakening", *Watkins: London*.

the spaces left behind, replacing the feelings of ‘not being good’ or ‘full’ or ‘real’ enough with feeling better than others or feeling different for a specific reason. What may feel like a cure then risks becoming a toxin for the young person, who is then left dependent on the group identity for a sense of self. A threat to the group, however removed, risks becoming an existential one to the relatively removed individual, and the purpose of the group becomes the person’s own purpose too—potentially his or her own purpose in life itself.

In an article I wrote for *USA Today* in 2013,<sup>4</sup> I described how it is at exactly such junctures that radicalisation becomes a genuine risk. Perceiving one’s self through the lens of the group, and the accompanying sense of injustice and rage in accordance with the perceived narratives of that group, can propel the individual towards extreme and potentially criminal acts. If powerful enough, the group identity can start to encroach on the aspects of the sense of self that had developed prior to connection with the group, gradually sapping away the values and norms that were even taught in childhood, clearing the way towards acts of violence, potentially at a lethal level both towards the self and others.

I coalesced all of these ideas together in my book *Human Being to Human Bomb: Inside the mind of a terrorist*.<sup>5</sup> I had seen first-hand, though without knowing it, the radicalisation process in my own student days when I was briefly a member of my Medical School’s Islamic Society, frequented as it was then, by foreign preachers who on several occasions succeeded in luring young men away from their careers in medicine and into new lives devoted to an ever more virulent, radical and anti-western ideology. After the tragedy of the Twin Towers, I felt compelled to learn more, realising that I had an insight that needed to be shared. I studied biographies of the 9/11 bombers as well as those of the London 7/7 bombers using the lens of human psychology and personal experience. In almost every case I discovered a common pattern, namely one of a lack of parental relationships/intimacy, which then led to the development of a fragile sense of self. This fragile sense of self was in turn vulnerable, by the time of adolescence, to the allure of the radical preacher and the toxic pathway that this then led to, and ultimately culminated in the tragic acts of terrorism that followed.

*Human Being to Human Bomb* was very well received by the academic community and the general, popular audience. It continues to sell in significant numbers around the globe today. Perhaps, most notably, its positive reception led to me to establish regular consultancy/advisory work with the Home Office, and to my key role, working alongside colleagues at Cambridge University, in the development of the UK government’s counter terrorism strategy; a role I continue to this day.

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<sup>4</sup> Russell Razzaque (2013) ‘How Teens Become Terrorists: Radical Islamist ideology is a deadly poison disguised as a cure’, *USA Today*, April 25, 2013. Final Edition, p.10. 878 words.

<sup>5</sup> Russell Razzaque (2008) “Human Being to Human Bomb: Inside the mind of a terrorist”, *Icon Books*.



Following my research into the psychological pathway of radicalisation - from the initial problematic development of sense of self to the ultimate pursuit of a radical and potentially lethal cause - I started to notice other cases to which this same template applied. Most notable was my discovery of the fact that a very similar personal development journey could be traced on the opposite end of the political spectrum; namely those on the extreme right looking to eradicate, not just Islamism – the virulent, anti-Western perversion of Islam - but Islam itself. I deduced that a similar detachment or derangement in childhood tends to be followed by a period of vulnerability, and then by the person settling upon a world-view and seeking a community that supports a supremacist notion of self. It is as if the two polls in this conflict need one another to function, but in fact, deep down inside, I concluded that they really are not all that different from one another.

I put forward this hypothesis in my analysis of the former Chief Strategist to US President Donald Trump, Steve Bannon. Steve Bannon is ongoing supporter and advisor to Trump and also to a growing stable of British and European right wing politicians. My analysis was published in *The Independent* newspaper.<sup>6</sup>

I have thus sought to demonstrate in my work that development and acceptance of a full and robust sense of self is key to an adjusted life and overall wellness. A key finding of mine in relation to this hypothesis came about in an innovative mindfulness group I established within a Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). In this Unit, high level care is provided to those who have committed a violent offence in the community or had been violent on the open acute wards. Bipolar Affective Disorder was one of the most common diagnoses of people admitted to the ward. A therapeutic group of this nature had never been established in such a ward before, and my research led me to establish one based on an intervention known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). At this time, ACT was a newly developing psychological therapy, designed originally by Prof Steven C Hayes in the US, as a flexible intervention that can be used in conjunction with any other form of mental health treatment modality. The core feature of the group I established involved asking patients to describe themselves and their values in the present moment. Given that people do not tend to possess deep-level values that are overtly harmful or negative, the group was then directed to sit mindfully with the feelings brought up by their descriptions of who they really are at a core level, based on the fundamental values they described. The process of being present in this way, with what is important to them - and thus who they are – rather than the cloud of thoughts they frequently reported they had during an acute mental health crisis, had a dramatic effect for them. People in the group reported that they felt a sense of acceptance pervade them; and for once, through their turmoil they regularly experienced, they reported

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<sup>6</sup> Russell Razzaque (2017) “These Are The Alarming Parallels Between Steve Bannon And Those Held By Islamist Jihadis”, *The Independent*, February 7th, 2017

on finally feeling good about themselves. In other words, what I was doing in this group was helping them to connect to a deeper sense of self, and then, by helping them to sit with this sense of self, I encouraged them to appreciate it.

I ran the group daily on weekdays, and I taught other staff members to continue it at weekends. Over time my methods were found to produce powerful shifts within people who attended the group regularly; reducing their levels of distress and the medication needed on an urgent basis. I published my key findings in *Journal of Psychiatric Intensive Care*.<sup>7)</sup> The findings were very clear. To quote myself from my paper:

In the patients with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, a clear reduction in aggressive and abusive behaviour was observed during the treatment period, and each developed an increasing confidence in their ability to manage such impulses in future... The patient feedback regarding the intervention was universally positive, with each feeling that the ACT sessions contributed significantly to a reduction in their impulsive and violent behaviours.

Following the publication of my findings, I received many dozens of enquiries from clinicians around the country, who were keen to replicate my methods and establish similar therapeutic groups to mine.

Acceptance of ones' sense of self can be seen in many ways as the ultimate pass of non-judgement. Judgemental attitudes to others are often a mirror of the judgemental attitude one possesses towards oneself. This view was first described in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Sigmund Freud in letters to his good friend, Dr Wilhelm Fliess,<sup>8</sup> and later elaborated upon by his daughter Anna Freud.<sup>9</sup> Working on one's self-judgement and reducing its hold over us is highly beneficial therapeutic work. The notion of improving one's attitude to oneself - appreciating, indeed, loving oneself more – is, however, an attitude that society recoils from. It is not uncommon for such things to be considered indulgent or selfish, and this can even be the case in the most progressive political and spiritual communities. In the latter, for example, followers may be told to combat, even 'kill', the ego - a term often used interchangeably with "sense of individual self". Yet, without it, how could anyone exist in a meaningful way? Is it really right to take a hostile posture towards the very notion of our own personhood? Clearly,

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<sup>7</sup> Russell Razzaque (2012) "An acceptance and commitment therapy based protocol for the management of acute self-harm and violence in severe mental illness", *Journal of Psychiatric Intensive Care*.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud & Ernst Freud (2014) "Letters of Sigmund Freud", *Courier Corporation*: London.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Young Buehl (2008) "Anna Freud; A Biography", Yale University Press: New Haven.

on the other hand, it is important not to form an overly-idealised attachment to it, to the exclusion or detriment of the world around. The notion that one must be in a conflict with one's ego or sense of self, though readily promoted in so many subcultures today, can in fact be a very harmful one.

A more integrating, and thus uplifting and beneficial spirituality would, I argue, be one based on acceptance of the sense of self, within a wider context of the unknowable world beyond it. I will move on to address elements of this hypothesis later on in this critical appraisal of my work, as I elaborate further on my research in this area over the years.

### **The Developing Sense of Self**

In my explorations through my writing, research and clinical practice, of the importance of the individual sense of self, and, moreover, the importance of connecting to it and nurturing it, I started to think more philosophically about its nature and purpose—about what it was exactly and how it might develop over time. At this time, I was myself involved in my own mindfulness practice, and I attended retreats frequently—I was influenced by descriptions of the Buddha, who engaged in extensive research of his own, but with a sample size of one! In other words, the Buddha's research involved a detailed investigation of his own subjective experiences. In some ways these teachings gave me the inspiration to do the same myself, while at the same time continuing to observe closely the experience of my patients. Many of the men in PICU, where I worked, were experiencing extreme psychotic breakdowns and, as a result, the entire structure of their sense of self appeared to be fragmenting. They would describe aspects of the environment 'coming alive', and their sense of self merging with it. In my own mindfulness practice I would also notice a deepening awareness of the sense of myself – the Russell that I know myself to be – but also an awareness of a sense of myself existing beyond it. Over the millennia many meditators have described similar experiences, but all have found it difficult to articulate in words. In my position—being able to juxtapose my own experience upon the sometimes seemingly parallel ones of my patients—I realised it was important, once again, for me to record my findings. As a result, I started to establish a set of theories about the self, which I published in my book, *Breaking Down is Waking Up: The connection between psychological distress and spiritual awakening*.<sup>10</sup> My formulation of these key theories began with a return to and re-examination of my understanding of childhood psychological development.

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<sup>10</sup> Russell Razzaque (2014) "Breaking Down is Waking Up: The connection between psychological distress and spiritual awakening", *Watkins: London*.

When a child is born they have no individual sense of self. The items, floors, walls, ceilings and people around them are all part of a whole which they experience themselves in various ways. The distinction between a “me” and a “you” or a “here” and a “there” has no meaning as their self perspective does not yet exist. Instead they experience the world as a series of happenings, without any central locus noticing or directing them. In my book, *Breaking Down is Waking Up* I consider how this sense of self emerges. The perspective I elaborate on in the book is that it is gradually taught over time. I argue that being an individual self is not an innate state, it has to be learned. A person is taught to understand themselves as perceiving the world from the ‘inside’, while the world is happening ‘outside’ of them. This takes a lot of trial and error as the child may, for example, name someone else’s attire when asked what they themselves are wearing. A parent will correct this and teach them that their description referred to another locus – another self – and not themselves. The notion of a “Jenny”, or whatever the child’s name is, starts to slowly build almost like scaffolding slightly outside of her person. She will start by referring to it in the third person, “Jenny is walking now.” It is like a suite of armour that is being constructed and one step at a time, the child slowly starts to merge with it. Finally, the word “me” emerges and then we know the ground of the sense of self has developed.

I argue that powering this is the underlying process of neuronal development, which is occurring at a rapid rate in those early months and years. Indeed, in the first two years the baby forms 1.8 million synapses (nerve connections) a second. Then, over the next several years, a mass cull occurs, where over 50% of the child’s neuronal connections are destroyed in a process known as “synaptic pruning”.<sup>11</sup> This ensures that the learning and shaping going on in the outside world is reflected internally with the formation of permanent circuits, so the world they start to relate to is interacted with in an increasingly reliable and repeatable way. And, of course those teaching them to develop this device known as “self” had themselves been taught it by their own ancestors in the same way. Indeed, if we go back to the younger ages of our species as a whole, we will see that there was perhaps a time when the self perspective itself started to develop.

Approximately a million years ago the size of the homo erectus skull doubled, likely representing a substantial increase in brain size. Further expansions of significant degree then recurred at 500,000 and then 100,000 years ago.<sup>12</sup> Not long after that, relatively speaking, the first signs of human art started to emerge. This has long been identified as a key distinguishing feature of our own species compared to others and, of course, in order to do so one must first possess some degree of a self-perspective. Depicting one’s place in relation to

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<sup>11</sup> Chechik, Gal; Meilijison, Isaac; Ruppin, Eytan (1999). "Neuronal Regulation: a mechanism for synaptic pruning during brain maturation". *Neural Computation*. 11 (8): 2061–80.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Beals, Courtland L. Smith, and Stephen M. Dodd, (1984) "Brain Size, Cranial Morphology, Climate, and Time Machines" *Current Anthropology* V01. 25, No 01984

nature and the world around us requires many aspects of a sense of self to be in place. In the same way that a child develops its sense of self over time, therefore, it appears that our species did too. And just as with children, it is only when the sense of self starts to develop that language can emerge. Indeed, over time, the two start to develop together in somewhat of a symbiotic swirl. Language helps to build upon the sense of self with a string of words - adjectives and understandings – and as the sense of self grows so does one's language ability; the capability to refer to oneself in more complex and abstract ways and then incorporate that into the language that is spoken.

Contrary to popular perception, however, I argue that there is no point at which the sense of self ceases to develop. It is always undergoing a constant process of evolution. New experiences are happening all the time and every reflection that arises within, being language based, will necessarily involve the self as a point of reference and all of this, I contend, impacts on self-perception, therefore, in one way or another. Life and self are thus entwined in a never-ending dance. In some ways we could therefore say that, rather than human 'beings', we are actually human 'becomings'. What, nevertheless, has become evident to me in my research, is that this entwinement has an overall direction of travel. I have argued that a movement is occurring that is in a particular direction, and like any trajectory, this can be discovered by looking backwards to the start and mapping the course taken from there. I contend that an awareness once existed for each person that was wholly open, more like a ray of light, than a torch light, more like a wave than a particle. The world is experienced in infancy through a very wide lens indeed and, over time, this starts to narrow to a focal point, looking out from which all things are then perceived.

What I started to argue for in my book *Breaking Down is Waking Up*, however, is that a cyclical process is also going on. Millions of people obtain flashes again of that wider connection – a sense of oneness with all that feels like a 'coming home'. In broad terms, I argue that this tends to come about in one of two ways; either through the engagement of esoteric practices, like meditation or yoga which are designed intentionally to bring about such experiences as part of a spiritual path, or they may come about through the experience of trauma. In the former case it is a question of purposefully attempting to look behind the narrow sense of self (often referred to as the ego) and appreciate deeper levels of being; and in the latter it is a result of injury to the sense of self — a piercing of a hitherto intact boundary that has led to an instability in the constitution of the self. This then precipitates experiences that are often defined as psychosis. On closer scrutiny, however, as is elaborated upon in detail in my book, the presentations involved have strong parallels with a more awakened ego-less state. I have found that in neither case is the state permanent, though. All that tends to be achieved are glimpses. However the sense of self is, nevertheless, changed permanently as a result and, many would argue, with deeper wisdoms and connectedness emerging too. I have encountered examples of this in my patients as well as in my own experience and that of other meditators. I explore many of these in *Breaking Down is Waking*

*Up*, ) where, again, parallel processes – short lived experiences as well as longer term effects – become evident between the sufferer of a purported mental disorder and the meditator.

Interestingly, I acquired further evidence of this in the reaction to the book itself. After the launch of *Breaking Down is Waking Up*, I received a regular stream of messages from around the world by people, who had just read my book and who wanted to thank me for putting words to their own experiences. It was often someone who had been through the psychiatric system and who knew that there was more than ‘just a disease going on’; indeed, they sensed some form of deeper connection was also being established - a sense of existence beyond the sense of self.

There was a palpable impact across the field too and, to my surprise, the *British Journal of Psychiatry* published a glowing review of my book soon after its release.<sup>13</sup> “Psychiatry is undergoing an identity crisis” it started, before outlining the way in which the arbitrariness of classification systems and the over reliance on medication have led to profound unease both within the profession and without, leading people to ask the question: what might a new future for psychiatry look like? “In this book,” the review continued,

Dr Russell Razzaque offers an answer to this question... He argues convincingly that a paradigm shift in our approach to mental distress is necessary and it is one which concentrates less on looking on patients as being ‘diseased’ and more on seeing them as experiencing a sense of disconnection from themselves.

Clearly the book had struck a chord for many people, and I also started to receive increasing numbers of supportive and touching messages from clinicians near and far. Here is an example I received a year after its launch, typical of many:

*Hi Russell,*

*I have just finished your book breaking down is waking up and feel it was probably the most important book I have read in my life. I'm a registered nurse in Murwillumbah Australia with a young family and I'm sure the lessons I learned from your book will benefit myself, my friends and family and patients I care for. Thank you for taking the time to write it.*

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<sup>13</sup> Turner S (2014), “Breaking Down Is Waking Up By Russell Razzaque” *British Journal of Psychiatry* Volume 206, Issue 4.

*Kind Regards*

*Greg Hill*

## **Cycles Within Cycles**

The positive reception of my work spurred me to continue thinking about the notions I had been describing, and to develop and apply them further. What was becoming increasingly evident to me was that an underlying natural cycle was in play for our sense of self. I concluded that the original infant perception has a tendency to return in adulthood, and so, perhaps in some way, the intended trajectory for self-development involves a move backwards to re-engage with it. I think these insights tend to become clearer when contemplating them in the context of nature more widely.

Cycles are the hallmark of nature, from the microscopic to the macroscopic. The seasons change regularly from spring, where much of life blossoms and opens, through to winter, a time of closing down and hibernation, and then back to spring again. And life on the planet, in all its forms, tends to move along with this cycle, undergoing changes in concert. This has similarity with the diurnal cycle where a time of rest, closing down and zoning out is followed by a rising and opening up to the light again. All of this, of course, reflects the wider macroscopic cycles of planetary motion; travelling into darkness and cold and back into the sun's rays and warmth again. And then the sun itself travels in its own cycle around the galaxy. The biggest cycle of them all is the creation of the universe. Indeed the entire trajectory of the universe is, as speculated by many, possibly part of a cycle also. It commenced with the Big Bang, followed by a rapid, then slowing expansion outwards and many eminent physicists now predict the possibility of a Big Crunch at the end (of our cycle) that then returns to the pre-singularity state, before another Big Bang and so on.

At the other end of the spectrum—zooming right down to the microscopic—we have cycles among all matter and chemicals. The water that we shower in every day is part of a water cycle – from the seas to the clouds and back to the seas again - the nitrogen in the air is part of a nitrogen cycle, the very carbon that constitutes our bodies is part of a carbon cycle. And every single one of these cycles represents a dispersion into small separated units, with a narrower interface, followed by a recombination into a larger more connected whole, followed by dispersal again. Everything is part of a cycle, which is part of another cycle, which is part of another cycle. And there is a method to the cycles; in very general terms openness

and exposure, expansion, connection and light, lead later on to narrowing or collapsing, more limiting, darker experience, and then back to a phase of reopening and reawakening again.

The sense of self that we therefore all possess - the narrow window through which we perceive the world - is taking us to another place; one that we may remember vaguely from before, but one that is undoubtedly more expansive, open and by definition connected and whole. What the actual experience of this might be like, however, is a different question entirely.

## **Not Knowing**

In understanding our wider existence and attempting to formulate what exactly a more expansive, non-ego limited experience of the universe might be we need to look at how smaller entities tend to perceive wider systems and contexts, several orders beyond them. The simplest example here would be fish in a pond. They may be aware of the other fish, the stones, algae and the plants that constitute the pond but they will have no awareness of the wider context of the garden, the property or the street in which they exist. Indeed, not only do they not know, but they have no way of knowing. It is simply beyond their capability. This is ultimately reflected almost universally in nature. Larger orders remain unknown at a lower scale and, furthermore, where a system might be in overall equilibrium, its constituent parts may, nevertheless, exist and have an awareness of an entirely different state. Let us look at the human body for another example. At the microscopic level there is, most of the time, a broad and often tumultuous upheaval taking place. Frequent incursions into the system – physical, bacterial or viral – are being met with massive defensive responses as our immune system works round the clock to battle all threats and protect us. In many respects much of our bodies, from the deepest twists of our bowels to the most external layers of our skin, are in a state of permanent conflict. White cells, mast cells and other allies join together to meet threats, foreign or domestic/internal and after one is neutralised, the next battle is enjoined. At this level, the relative harmony of a peacefully sleeping human is entirely incomprehensible. Yet the microorganisms, cells and organelles in our body do have intelligence. They have perceptive abilities of their own and some degree of autonomy in the way they act (observe the cancer cells deciding to follow a wholly different plan based on what, as yet, we know not), but that has no capability whatsoever of knowing, in any meaningful way, its wider context. There is no reason for this exact same paradigm to not apply to ourselves. Perhaps our species' greatest flaw is the belief that we must be able to comprehend all levels of reality.



In the previous section my description of a broader unity experience was by necessity broad and relatively general in its articulation. An attempt to examine the actuality of this status will quickly bring us to the absolute limit of human language, logic and therefore understanding. Let us consider, for example, the notion of oneness. This refers, in popular understanding to a state where there is no separation; no point A and point B – only one. But for this “one” to exist in our imagination, it would have to have a front and a back, an up and a down. But this too is the language and description of separation. The top and the bottom, the back and the front must themselves be the same place. And so we quickly realise that the notion of oneness is not something we can actually understand or imagine. In some respects we may say it is indistinguishable from nothingness, which is indeed how Taoist philosophy describes it. Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, prefers “emptiness”. Both point to something beyond the reach of our physical understanding. Not a thing of any kind.

The position of not knowing is paradoxically, therefore, vital to reaching deeper understanding of our actual experience and where it is that our evolving consciousness is taking us. Over time I have come to realise that the attitude of not knowing is indeed vital across a range of areas in life. It is a fundamental skill to be cultivated, one that will assist us in developing a wide variety of understandings. A core example of this, for me, is in my work as a psychiatrist. I believe that it is this attitude in the face of often acute and powerful distress that helps me form a bond with my patients. I do not know and can never know what it is to be them and have their experience. Dropping that expert pretence makes me more real, more earnest in the empathy I am able to express and, as a result, the people I see report feeling more connected to and heard.

This non-judgemental stance is also a fundamental tenant of mindfulness. Here it refers not just to pejorative judgements, but any form of judgement or assumption that we might find ourselves making. In many respects, the entire practice of mindfulness is the ever deeper excavation of assumptions that our entire perspective rests upon. This is something that I have, for years, taught psychiatrists across the country in the mindfulness retreats that I run. They started around the year 2006 and since then I have introduced many dozens of psychiatrists to the retreat experience. It involves a series of talks and instructions over 3 days and a 24 hour silent period in the middle part. After running several such retreats, I decided to measure the change in mindfulness and related perspectives in the clinicians who undertook them and the finding was clear. There was a substantial build up in mindfulness scores as a result of that training. Most noteworthy was the fact that this was also associated with an improvement in the therapeutic relationships these clinicians – mainly psychiatrists – had with their patients<sup>14</sup>(14). Again this, to me, was a clear indication of the way in which a more humble, judgement free approach to therapeutic engagement allowed for deeper connections and understanding to arise.

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<sup>14</sup> Russell Razzaque (2016) ‘Exploration of the effectiveness and acceptability of a professional mindfulness retreat for psychiatrists’, *Mindfulness*.

Not knowing is therefore a way in which we can attain a form of deeper understanding of the world around us and, in the wider sense, the overarching paradigm within which we exist. We can understand better that it is a unity we are heading towards when we accept at the same time that this unity is not something we will ever be able to fully comprehend.

## Implications

The implications of understanding the unitive nature of the self, even given the inability to fully comprehend its ultimate destination, are substantial. They range from how we relate to one another interpersonally – socially and politically – to how we relate to ourselves and our bodies at an individual level as well. On almost every plane we can see that a tendency exists towards integration; a wholeness that can be described as unity. In many ways it appears as a natural force shaping things in multiple dimensions. On the physical, embodied plane, it's clear that our bodies experience pain when veering away from a trajectory of integration. Some of the greatest physical pain a human can experience occurs when a group of cells breaks out of the cohesion and unity that it exists within. It ceases to act in concert with the whole and manage itself out of consideration for the requirements of the wider organism. This is cancer and its fundamental characteristic is of cells in some way forgetting about their profound interconnection with their surroundings.

More generally, a lack of presence within our bodies – a failure to take the time and effort needed to just sense our inner experience e.g. in meditation – can lead to increased stress and burnout. One of the findings that emerged from the study of the retreats I ran (and still run) for psychiatrists and other health professionals, was that their levels of stress and burnout reduced (14), after a retreat and consistent period meditating subsequently.

Integration, presence, unity – a movement towards experiencing ourselves as a whole – is always healthy and our bodies evidently respond favourably towards this, as do the people around us. Further studies I conducted looked specifically into this as well. We measured the therapeutic relationship that clinicians had with their clients against how mindful they were in their own being and daily lives. We found a strong correlation that more mindful clinicians, who spend time being with and listening to themselves more, also form better relationships with the people they care for.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Razzaque, Emmanuel Okoro, Lisa Wood (2013) 'Mindfulness in Clinical Therapeutic Relationships', *Mindfulness*, Issue 5

On an interpersonal level, the same applies. The emphasis of my research in the last few years has been on a very different model of mental healthcare known as Open Dialogue. This is a model of care that centres around bringing people's families and networks together. Rather than seeing the mental health issue as something that exists in isolation within one person and their individual mind, Open Dialogue, works on the basis that the issue is a shared one and so the approach to recovery needs to be shared also. Staff are therefore trained to work systemically and they are taught mindfulness in order to then help create a space in which dialogue can occur between the participants so that their own stories and understandings can emerge – rather than being imposed by outside professionals. In many ways it is trying to recreate the more holistic community centred approaches to crisis seen more in developing countries and indigenous populations, where people rely on their own resources to conceptualise and then resolve the problem. The clinicians role is thus one of “space creator” rather than active interventionist. The latter may be required, of course, where risk concerns arise, but as much as possible this is only a potential rather than an actualised power. Flattening the hierarchy in this way is thus crucial to what is known as the dialogical way of working. It was developed in the 1980s in Finland and the outcomes they found and recovery rates they seemed to be achieving led to attention from around the world.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014 I led a coalition of Trusts across the U.K. to start training staff in this model to see if we could start to introduce pilots in our local services. While we did that, we also ran conferences to gauge interest in this way of working, particularly among healthcare professionals and the responses we received made for a very clear message.<sup>17</sup> This was by far a way that people wanted to work more than any other; the merits of a network (rather than individualised) approach to care were recognised by large majorities and yet, at the same time, there was widespread acknowledgment that our own services were a far cry from this.

In some senses, Open Dialogue can be seen as a form of mindfulness on a systemic scale. Being present and connected on a group basis and organising a whole service model around that. The strong parallels between mindfulness and Open Dialogue has become a particular specialism of mine, with my first paper on it published recently in the *Family Therapy Journal, Context*.<sup>18</sup> People around the world have since thanked me for making the connection and in

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Razzaque, Tom Stockmann (2016) 'An Introduction To Peer-supported Open Dialogue In Mental Healthcare', *Advances In Psychiatry Treatment*, Volume 22, Issue 5 pp. 348-356.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Razzaque, Lisa Wood (2015) 'Open Dialogue and its relevance to the NHS: Opinions of NHS staff and service users', *Community Mental Health Journal*, vol 51: 931-938.

a number of countries, mindfulness is now being introduced as a core aspects of the Open Dialogue training.

The demand to move in this direction has been clear for some time now and two year ago I teamed up with a panel of senior academics from UCL, Kings College, Birmingham and Middlesex Universities and we were successful in obtaining a grant of £2.4 million to run the world's largest trial in Open Dialogue. It will be a multi-centred cluster randomised controlled trial with a large qualitative arm running alongside it also. We launched the pilot phase this year and the main trial is due to start next year. Though we are not yet at the stage of statistical analysis, the anecdotal responses from families are very powerful. So much so, indeed, that they received substantial national media coverage, which I was also asked to participate in myself.<sup>19</sup> Consequently interest has been consistently building and we have now trained 300 staff across the country working in mental health services. The running of the course is something that I coordinate personally and as a sign of the enthusiasm this has generated, a couple of years ago, after convening a conference on Open Dialogue attended by over 500 enthusiastic delegates on NHS Change Day, a group of us – professionals from across the country - wrote a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper to promote this new way of working and the revolution we believe it represents.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the wider societal and political level, we see the same trends again. It is becoming increasingly clear, for example, that our current political system is not fit for purpose in many respects. In November 2008 I went to the US partly on a holiday but also to soak in the jubilation that would ensue on the election of Barack Obama. It was clear that Obama was no ordinary politician. Not only was he a historic figure, given his combination of heritage and rare political skill, he was also a man of genuine depth and emotional intelligence. I studied him closely and realised that he represented an example of a well poised, balanced and high EQ personality. As a result I wrote a book about him with the idea that it could perhaps teach some of his many followers about personality traits that are of universal value.

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<sup>18</sup> Russell Razzaque (2015) 'Mindfulness and open dialogue: A common foundation and a common practice', *Context*, vol. 137, February: 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Celia Dodd (2015) "Open Dialogue The Radical New Treatment Having Life Changing Effects On People's Mental Health", *The Independent*, December 6th, 2015. See also: Joe Sykes (2015) "New York 'Parachute' Programme For People With Acute Mental Distress Lands In The UK", *The Guardian*, October 20th, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Gavaghan et al. (2015) "Open Approach To Mental Healthcare", *The Guardian*, March 12th 2015

Integrative and communally centred interventions like this are thus further examples of the way in which, at an interpersonal level, a tendency towards integration and unity is evident. Not only is it becoming increasingly apparent that this is how people prefer to be, the evidence base for the efficacy of such models is becoming clearer over time as well.

His equipoise, his clear sense of duty and evident compassion were all highlighted in the book, *Obama Karma*.<sup>21</sup> I succeeded in acquiring a good publishing deal and went on a tour in the US the following year. There I observed more of his impressive calm and judgement. What also started to become clear, however, was the fact that great waves of disappointment and disillusionment – including among many who voted for him – remained. Clearly there was a sense of continued dissatisfaction in the country and within two years his party's majorities in Congress had been completely overturned. It taught me that if even a person of such evident abilities could become so quickly unpopular then perhaps the problem was deeper than one or two or even a swathe of individuals. Perhaps the problem lay in the system itself. The tide of disgruntlement is actually a current that has run very deep for very many years. Its evidence is all around us from Brexit, to Trump to profound disputes in today's Labour Party, which I addressed at its height in another column for *The Independent* a couple of years ago.<sup>22</sup> What I came to appreciate was the way in which possible solutions to the current malaise need to be as profound as the malaise itself. This is something I alluded to in another *Independent* piece later that same year.<sup>23</sup>

Whole new ways of organising ourselves around more participatory systems of democracy are now needed. I believe that rather than electing a single individual to represent and make decisions for tens of thousands of people, we need to bring those decisions down to the local level where local people, through arrangements such as policy conventions and citizens juries, can actively participate in their own governance. It is a lack of this that I believe is causing much of the current malaise, sometimes without people even knowing it. In the *Independent* piece I make reference to a more dialogue based collaborative approach; one that encourages proximity, connectivity and indeed a sense of unity. Clearly, therefore, at this wider 'meta' level it is again towards a form of integration and coming together that we are wanting to head.

## Conclusion

My argument in this work is that, far from random, life and the universe is carrying us purposefully in a direction and this is evident on every level and plane of existence. Where that direction is headed is dependent, however, on where in the cycle we currently sit. Though I cannot claim that unity is a sole and final destination it is evident that, from the

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<sup>21</sup> Russell Razzaque (2012) *Obama Karma: Lessons on living inspired by the 44<sup>th</sup> President*, February Books.

<sup>22</sup> Russell Razzaque (2015) "As A Psychiatrist I Find The Reactions Of The Anyone But Corbyn Camp Interesting", *The Independent*, August 21st, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Russell Razzaque (2015) "I Am The Jeremy Corbyn Supporter That Many Will Tell You Doesn't Exist", *The Independent*, July 24th, 2015.

place we find ourselves in today as a species, it is indeed where our current trajectory is headed; even though we might not fully be able to grasp intellectually what that actually means or what it might look like physically.

Throughout my career and research the emphasis has always been on connecting to ourselves and each other at deeper levels; whether that means working collaboratively between people, or sitting mindfully in one's own presence.<sup>24</sup> And it is through connections like this that we can ultimately understand and accept our ever changing and impermanent nature. In our distant past we engaged in a journey that transformed us from wholeness to manyness; from unity to multiplicity.

That multiplicity and division is now reaching its zenith. It is something many feel today at a visceral level. As a result I believe it can credibly be argued now that it is in the direction of unity, of rediscovery of our more integrated and interdependent nature that we are moving on all levels; individually, interpersonally and societally. Great changes are afoot, great tumult is ahead, confusion is inevitable but underneath it all a deepening connection is constantly forging as we move collectively within the experience of the unitive self.

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<sup>24</sup> Eric R. Maisel (2016) 'Russell Razzaque on Psychiatry and Mindfulness: on the future of mental health', *Psychology Today*, Feb 2016.

## Appendix: The Works Themselves

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