

The uncarved block

Our new columnist, **Sabnum Dharamsi** introduces herself to readers and shares her spiritual outlook



With every beginning, something dies. You carve out a space for something new, and in doing so, other aspects are denied. Like many of our clients, I find it painful to begin, to commit, but I also want to share. I see being on this page with you as relationship, and it feels utterly beautiful and an immense privilege to be asked by *Thresholds* to be here.

I am Sabnum Dharamsi, and the deepest engagements of my life are spirituality, humanity and therapy.

As I write, I'm imagining readers who, like me, are on the quest of life; sometimes with passion, sometimes apathetically, but always with meaning.

I'd like to share a bit about me and the things I hope to bring here. I originally trained in person-centred counselling, but I have been influenced by my deep and continuing apprenticeship with the great Sufi teacher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri. From my first encounter, I felt I had 'come home'.

I'm still amazed by how an apparently chance meeting changed my life (I'm sure many *Thresholds* readers will say, 'No, it wasn't chance'). We'd been discussing meaning and spirituality in my friendship group, and then one of my friends alerted me to a forthcoming talk on Islam. I wasn't intending to go. It was raining. It was far. I wasn't at all interested in learning about Islam, given my vaguely Muslim upbringing, but *somehow*, I found myself leaving my cosy home and arriving at the door of a house in West London. I experienced a profound recognition that I would now say came from my soul. It's an experience which is common to many 'seekers' and can be found in many different paths. As Rumi says, 'There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground; there are a thousand ways to go home again.'¹

Those moments, seemingly magical, were also trustworthy in a way that I hadn't expected. Perhaps because of this, I'm interested in pivotal moments,

and their relationship to time. I often wonder at the way powerful moments are processed in our clients' lives inside and outside therapy, and what that says about time - something I hope to touch on in this column in future.

But back to that meeting and the many meetings after, I realised that what we were learning in those spiritual circles was replete with knowledge that was healing - therapeutic in its original meaning, full of divine grace. As I developed, I introduced aspects of

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these ways of being into my practice. It felt congruent, wholesome and transformative.

It is over 30 years ago now that we (my partner Stephen Abdullah Maynard and I) formalised this learning as a modality. Abdullah developed The Lateef Project, an Islamic counselling non-governmental organisation, initially serving clients in Birmingham within a GP practice, but then extending to London and working predominantly online. I took on the role of developing a curriculum - a school of Islamic counselling, with accredited courses up to practitioner level. When we started, Islamic counselling was a radical perspective (and still is in some ways) because it's based on different theoretical perspectives of self, wellbeing and methodologies which challenge the status quo. I think that different perspectives help us all to deliver better services, to understand more broadly and profoundly what it means to be a therapist in today's challenging world, so I hope to share some of what my work looks like, especially from a teaching perspective.

I also want to recognise that none of our work happens in isolation. There is beginning to be a more nuanced recognition within the wider therapeutic community of the different dimensions and intersections within our work.

I have found greater receptivity for the decolonial aspects of the work we do, and a willingness to consider critiques of Western forms of therapy and secularism. We understand that therapy can be both a force for freeing the self, as well as a field which re-enacts white supremacy and its privileges.

As a brown heterosexual woman, it's important to me to share my perspectives on this, both from within and outside of the therapy field. Privilege and oppression impact the lives of our clients, from their trust in the process, to their ability to access therapy, to the content that clients feel will be heard by their therapists, to the congruency of the methodologies we use, and the safety and success they bring to our work with diverse clients. I feel strongly that spirituality is something which should and can include social justice - imagining and hoping for a world which is better. This is something I hope I will be able to share in more depth in future writing.

As for the title of this column, I'll speak about that next time, but for now, I remain, yours, *walking lightly*. ●

Biography

Sabnum Dharamsi is co-founder of the first accredited (by CPCAB) Islamic counselling training in the UK. In addition to teaching, supervising and client work, she has run numerous workshops, presented at conferences both nationally and internationally, and is a published author. She is currently working on a book for Cambridge University Press.

Reference

- 1 Rumi J, Barks C, Moyne J (tr). *The essential Rumi*. San Francisco: Harper One; 2004.