

Heaven and earth

Sabnum Dharamsi looks at the importance of processing moral injury as a form of self-care in psychotherapy



There's so much I want to say this time, as we *walk lightly* together. I'm here at my open window, overlooking my garden, with gentle breezes caressing my face. The poetry of Shabistari, a mystic deep within the Iranian tradition, comforts and inspires me.

به نام آنکه جان را فکرت آموخت، چراغ دل به نور جان برافروخت -

In the name of Him who taught the soul to think, and kindled the heart's lamp with the light of soul!

As I read, 'I' am located in an expanded self. I recognise my humanity and its rootedness in divinity. But how does this mystical understanding hold the painfully bitter experiences of life? Especially right now, in a world buckling under the weight of state-sponsored violence. To be human requires attention to this, or else I am in danger of spiritually bypassing it. It also requires self-care, especially as a therapist, and an understanding of the sacredness of our own and others' lives.

While these fiercely painful earthly realities can take our consciousness to more constricted places, I think we are also meant to 'go there'. It's difficult because it doesn't 'feel' spiritual, but I believe, in common with most transpersonal approaches, that the journey of being and becoming ourselves comes about from the engagement of our 'heavenly' or transcendent consciousness *with* more 'earthly realities'. We have to go to Mordor.*

Self-care as avoidance

On that difficult journey, self-care, especially in the commodified form in which it often appears, feels far away. Are wellbeing rituals, too, becoming part of a culture of avoidance? I've heard so many people quote beloved Audre Lorde's statement: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'² However, sometimes

that quote gives permission to forget how much of her work was dedicated to fighting for liberation. She, and those in the fight, needed that reminder. But for me, self-care right now is the fight against oppression and the fight against apathy and feelings of powerlessness.

Over this last year, I notice that my 'self' is changing, and with it my self-care. Many things feel so clear now, striking me with the force of absolute and inviolable truth. Yes, it is utterly wrong to kill children. Yes, my privileges are part of this system. Yes, being aware of what governments and countries do to others is crucial to my understanding of self in the world.

Moral injury

I'm describing the effects of moral injury, defined as the strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person's moral or ethical code.³ Whether in relation to the climate crisis, or the government funding of deadly arms, I believe that moral injury demands a different response from self and our notions of spirituality, therapy and self-care – it requires moral healing.

Challenging though it is, I believe that spiritual wellbeing in this context might mean embracing and channelling the pain of moral injury. It may not feel that it takes us heavenwards, but moral injury is also related to moral clarity. Perhaps that inner pain confirms our soul-knowledge and reminds us that injustice is threatening to darken the light of our hearts and our world.

Bearing witness

Where silence means being complicit with wrongdoing, attempts to soothe the pain compound the moral injury and create cognitive dissonance within. 'Feel, and let it be unbalanced', my self-care cries. Don't take the deep easy breaths of a pretended shared humanity, when it is clear some lives are being othered with such contempt. Bear witness!

As I taste this alienation (a moral injury 'symptom'), I am heartened that people are becoming more activist, taking actions that might, in other moments, be defined as self-destructive. Some therapists too are speaking up and becoming increasingly politicised, joining movements that challenge the hegemonic narratives designed to manufacture consent.⁴ In this context, self-care becomes about the confidence to speak, to find solidarity, to make moral decisions and act consciously. The story of this moment is still being written, but in this aspect, I feel the tendrils of hope, coming together to share fundamental principles again, like truth, courage, equality and human rights. Perhaps my earthly body, hearing the hurt in the ever-fluid yet embodied self, is being called to a deep heavenly learning of moral courage, to know in my bones this: parochial self-care at the expense of others is not self-care. ●

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.

References

- 1 Lederer F. The secret rose garden of Sa'd Ud Din Mahmud Shabistari. London: John Murray; 1920.
- 2 Lorde A. A burst of light: essays. Firebrand Books; 1988.
- 3 Williamson V, Murphy D, Phelps A, Forbes D, Greenberg N. Moral injury: the effect on mental health and implications for treatment. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2021; 8 (6): 453–455.
- 4 Chomsky N, Herman ES. Manufacturing consent. London: Vintage; 1995.

*In the Land of Shadow in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, a brave collaboration called the Fellowship of the Ring sets out on a quest to destroy absolute evil power, symbolised by the One Ring. To do this, they must go to Mount Doom, a volcano in Mordor.