

Revitalising Holism

We need literature of wit and grit
more than piety and idealisation

David Zigmond

© 2016

'Holism' can easily become a politically correct, liberal healthcare catechism. A recently published book of sterling values, *The Snake in the Clinic*, illustrates the problem. Here is a review.

Book Review

The Snake in the Clinic: Psychotherapy's Role in Medicine and Healing

Guy Dargert. Karnac Books. 158pp ISBN-13: 978-1782203742

This short book beckons with a handsome cover festooned with eulogistic endorsements. I started it with effervescent anticipation, but finished it feeling unexpectedly flat, burdened and tired. Why?

Dargert's book is admirably intentioned, but I found it leadenly executed. He writes as a veteran, liberally spirited psychotherapist about the subtle role his craft may take in the relief of suffering. His views are wide-ranging and his ethos will be welcome to most readers of this journal. Some better, briefer lines capture this:

We forget that healing is about 'wholing' – the bringing together of disconnected parts of a whole with the hope and expectation that this will help to harmonise and lessen the disease between them.

Or

That of which we are unconscious we are destined to enact.

Alas, such pithy depth is too occasional. The commendable mission of the book deserves wide support, but is often compromised by writing that becomes earnestly prolix and religiose.

If as healing professionals and as psychotherapists we can see beyond the presenting symptom; if we can recognise the archetypal forces (or gods) that underlie them, then maybe we can help to open a channel through which they make their way into conscious life and then, through the individual, into the world at large ... We act as midwives to the soul and serve the gods. We value and welcome pathology knowing that the energy that lies within it potentially enables wholing or healing ... (This goes on considerably longer.)

For a small book there are a remarkable number of such long passages. While reading them I felt like a trapped congregant having to listen to a very long sermon from a sincerely insistent, yet avuncular vicar. Much of the book is suffused with this kind of high-minded guidance. Ideas are conflated with ideals, and thence become idealised. Amidst this I hungered for sharp-minded philosophical enquiry and more real, messy, human-odoured human description or dialogue.

Dargert's benign abstractions are often fuelled by lumpily detailed accounts of ancient and Eastern healing practices, classical myths and the historic and fictional ghosts that Dargert believes still live on in the inhabitants of his beloved Cornwall. He is clearly indebted and fascinated. To my mind all of these should have been relegated, if anywhere, to brief footnotes.

As if this is not enough, Dargert seeks to convince us with scientific explanations and evidence. There are long forays littered, for example, with technical words for brain structures and neurotransmitters. He even managed to recruit a Psychoneuroimmunoendocrinologist (yes, really!). What is achieved? This is, to my mind, scientism but not holism.

The Snake in the Clinic is a conscientious creation from a scholar with evidently humane values. Dargert has clearly read widely and offers himself as a committed and devout emissary. But his message is now perennially familiar and axiomatic for many of us.

The problem is importantly instructive for us: it is that holism can all too easily be abstracted, then venerated, as a religious or philosophical text. Our greater and more cardinal challenge is to apply all this in situations that are often stressed, conflicted and unreceptive: the dilemmas of NHS practitioners is a current and massive example. For this we need a different kind of language and discourse.

To engage interest and exert leverage, we now need literature of wit and grit, more than piety and idealisation. Current and spark are necessarily related, but they are not the same.

Published in *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*. Vol 13, Issue 3, Winter 2016

Interested? Many articles exploring similar themes are available via David Zigmond's home page on www.marco-learningssystem.com

David Zigmond would be pleased to receive your **FEEDBACK**