

An Address to The Right Reverend Peter Maurice

(Because I Liked Your Hat!)

March, 2007

Dear Bishop Peter,

I am sending you this address because I saw your photo on the front page of the Messenger, and was drawn to the design on your mitre. After that, I visited the diocese website, and read that you believed that people should become learners, dreamers and pioneers. Although we have never met, I am drawn to write to you and tell you about our organisation, as I believe that you might be interested.

**Learners, Dreamers and Pioneers**

We are learners because the people that we work with are teachers. We have learnt so much from them – patience, acceptance, gratitude – but the most important lesson is that of unconditional love – they have taught us that unconditional love for our fellows is the most important lesson in the Universe, and I believe that this is their purpose, their mission in life. For my own part, the lesson of unconditional love was possibly the most important thing I have ever experienced. To love another without condition, without the expectancy of that love being returned, rewarded, or sometimes even acknowledged, is to see that other person as your equal and as yourself, and brings about a profound change in perception of the World. To truly do unto others as one does to oneself is a fundamental precept of unconditional love. I believe that, at the bottom line, we are all spirits having a human experience and on that level of being we are all inextricably (and inescapably) connected to each other and all life. Therefore what I do to my brother, I truly do to myself.

We are dreamers because we believe that we can make a difference in the lives of the people we work with because we perceive them as having an untapped potential which seeks to find an avenue of expression; that there are ways to communicate which have not yet been widely discovered or accepted. Because we perceive them as aspects of ourselves, we know that our needs and desires are reflected in them, and search our souls to find the similarities between us, rather than the differences. Although there may be intellectual disparity, the intellect is only a part of the human condition, and often emotions hold more sway, and so it is on this level that we aim our communication strategy – through changing feelings, which consequently change behaviour and self worth.

Most of the important things in life are assimilated through feelings, and although for us, intellect plays a part in this process (for good and for bad), for our people the route can be more direct, without the impingement of logic.

We dream that we will persuade other people to want to follow our example; that they will see what can be done through simple measures and right motivation. As we dream, we also believe that our dream is possible to achieve. A dream is impotent on its own – it has to have belief to fuel it forward. I know this, as once I seemed to dream alone, but now my small team share the vision, and slowly it gathers momentum.

We are pioneers because we are trying to expand people's perception of the human condition, and what can be done to alleviate certain kinds of distress through the informed and directed manipulation of the environment. For nearly 20 years, I have doggedly pursued these principles, being confounded by boulders of various shapes and sizes along the way, always holding to my convictions. I now have proof that I was right. So many people have benefited from attending our sessions that the effects cannot be denied. We continue as pioneers, and begin to feel that we are finally making headway, that the stone is about to roll.

## **Experiencing the Numinous**

In some respects, Atmospherics aims to create a form of numinous experience which is accessible to people who are unable to access higher consciousness through conventional channels due to their sensory dysfunctions and or intellectual disability.

However, I do not believe that this numinous experience (or numinence) is an intellectual response; it is a “feeling” after all, and although some may disagree, that is possibly because they have an intellectual capacity themselves which demands satisfaction.

In the same way that although I have a deep appreciation and love of classical music, I cannot read or understand music, I do not feel that this lessens my appreciation. However, some would say that if I did read and understand the technicalities of music, my appreciation would be more acute. In my own case this would probably have the opposite effect, and I would become focussed on the delivery and not the content, within my natural nature which aims to try and achieve perfection! (A foolish quest!) In a similar way within art, one can be repelled by a Picasso or revel in it. In fact, one may need a considerable amount of intellectual competence to understand Picasso, and many other forms of abstraction in art, which bend reality.

In a nutshell, if one has intellectual capacity, then that has to be addressed in most aspects of life; if one has not then it does not impinge, and one is free to roam in the realm of feelings and emotions, and be unaffected by the intellectual and logical. To many of our people, the intellect is a huge barrier, a high wall which they will never see beyond. It is of little use to offer them ladders - their brains are not equipped to perceive what is on the other side. It is, therefore, more authentic and productive to address these people through channels they *can* access, via the gateways of sensory experience which in turn can create

positive emotional responses – enabling people to achieve *self actualisation* – to become all they can be, to be “whole” in their own unique ways.

The concept of self-actualisation is associated with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, probably his most famous and widely known premise. Maslow believed that “*the only way to understanding human functioning is through a holistic emphasis – to see each person as an integrated biological entity and not a collection of bodily organs, reflexes and mental skills...every individual lives as a whole being, and the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts*”. (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109.)

I think it might be useful at this stage of my soliloquy, to examine the nature of a numinous experience. My experience of the numinous manifests in a feeling of a deep pervading peace, a deep happiness, a joy, a feeling of connection and knowledge, indeed the peace which passes all understanding – certainly a feeling which I do not wish to leave or abandon, but wish to stay with me forever. It often causes tears to run down my cheeks which are tears of emotion and euphoria. These tears are not intellectually based, but rise from a wellspring of emotion, and seem to be a physical manifestation of the intensity of the feeling. It seems to me to be a personal connection with God.

Perhaps that is how it feels for everybody, perhaps not. Each person experiences human life uniquely, and it does not matter to me if they experience the spiritual in a different way or through different means or beliefs. The significance is in recognising and acknowledging the spirits existence. Indeed, I consider that many problems are occurring in our society because people fail to recognise the spiritual element within themselves and focus only upon the physical being, material wealth and intellectual prowess – all tangible expressions of humanness. How can you satisfy a need if you do not know that you need it? Without acknowledgement of our spiritual component, a person must feel a constant yearning, a hankering, a dearth, a kind of permanent deficit. I think that it is typical that, in the mystery of life, our most significant expression, our spirit or

soul, is mostly intangible, and requires both inner search, and the understanding that life is a mystery, and acceptance that we will never know all the answers. But that was always the idea!!

(Anyway, I digress now on to one of my other soap box topics, so I will get back on track!)

People with severe and profound learning disabilities do not appear to actively seek spiritual experiences. Perhaps part of seeking the numinous is to seek answers to the age old questions of who we are and what we are doing here, and they do not seem to ask these questions, again probably because these questions are intellectually based as a need to know and to understand the human predicament.

### **Creating Sacred Space**

Most religions attempt to create a scenario which promotes the manifestation of the numinous experience, which “sets the scene”. Through the use of colour, image, music and smell, the spirit is encouraged to connect with its Creator. There is usually some form of structure through rituals and repetition, promoting predictability and security. The Buddhist format is entirely different from the Christian, Jewish or Islamic, but these fundamentals, these cornerstones, remain. A Christian may be uncomfortable in a Buddhist place of worship because they do not know or understand the pattern of events, or the language, and could not anticipate the order of ceremony, etc. Yet, watching unfamiliar ceremonies and rituals we intellectually perceive similarities – the pressing together of palms in prayer, the closing of eyes, the tone of voices, an impression of reverence, a gathering of like minded people.

However, if we are unable to make sense of religious principles and paradigms, we are left with aspects we can relate to – colours, music, smell and simple imagery.

We use these sensory portals to set our scene, perhaps not with a clear intention of connecting with one's Creator, but to promote conditions where people can find that deep, inexplicable peace which resides within all human beings. We aim to create a "sacred space".

Our scenario is completely non-verbal; we use colour, image and music to create a familiar and predictable structure, and a single fragrance as a signature, sometimes as an object of reference – for example, where people can neither see nor hear, the smell can tell them where they are and what they can expect. We allow colour, image, music and smell to speak their own languages, and within this established and safe environment, people often do achieve a connection of some sort, be that with their inner self, higher consciousness or a profound peace.

We also include touch and movement within our system. Touch can help people to connect to their experience and surroundings in a more concrete way. The close sense of touch may become more significant to those who have minimal or no sight or hearing, because the wider perspective is less, or not, discernable, and holds less meaning. Many people with sensory impairments learn to disregard sights and sounds because they cannot make sense of them or are unaware of them, and can only distinguish things - other people, objects, etc. when they are close to them, or have relevance or reward. For example, many of our people have poor or minimal eyesight, so colours and images have to be near them to have any impact. They would not be able to see the beautiful stained glass windows in Wells Cathedral, and even if they could, they would not make sense of the depictions, just the colour and shape.

For some people, the tactile response may be the only avenue of making sense of the world. To touch something is to know that it exists. It provides a vital source of information about our close surroundings, our state of being and our contact with reality.

People with autism often cannot make sense of the world even though they often have considerable intellectual ability. Often their perception of the world varies vastly from our own; their brains restrict (and in some cases expand) their experience. Although they do experience emotions, they are often confused and confounded by them, making it very difficult for them to function in a society which relies so much on relating to, and understanding other people's meanings and motivation. Communication through words, written or spoken may even add to the confusion. Many of the people with whom we work are unable to access religious teachings which rely implicitly on conceptual ability to be understood, and therefore other avenues have to be found to enable people to access higher consciousness without the limitation of words.

Our evidence of these occurrences is via observable changes in people's behaviour. A number of people who attend our sessions are very noisy and disruptive, and know no other way of being. Yet when they attend the sessions, most become quiet and peaceful, happy, relaxed and content, only reverting to their normal behaviour when they leave. For some people, it is a miracle. It has changed one man's life so much that he now attends all of our Glastonbury sessions. At Somerset Court, there have been such remarkable changes in people's behaviour during the sessions that they have asked us to increase our provision.

### **In Conclusion**

We recently presented a new theme which is simply called "Four Angels" – this uses four images of Eastern European Angels and sacred music. I was

absolutely amazed when I observed the great majority of all our groups consistently raising their heads to look into the angel's eyes, and watching them as they moved. Although I have observed individuals watching and responding to other aspects of other themes, never have I witnessed the majority being drawn to the same thing – eyes. People have commented that this is our best theme yet – this is the first theme where we have used specifically religious icons and music....interesting!!

A number of the staff who support people in the sessions, sometimes the most unlikely people, have remarked upon their own experience, which has not either been sought or expected and their comments certainly correlate with a spiritual experience.

Our base is the Scout hall at the bottom of Benedict Street, and although certainly not salubrious, has served our purposes. The Scouts were interested in who was using their hall, and we were asked to put on a session for them one evening, some time ago. I was somewhat apprehensive about this, and had preconceptions about how 12–15 year olds would react – we don't exactly have "street cred"!

At the end of the session, I asked them, ad hoc, to write down their thoughts and reactions. My suppositions had been widely incorrect:-

*"It felt like I was in another world – it was very calming like there was no fears – it felt like you were completely protected."*

*"It felt like I was travelling through time and space at the same time. It was a relaxing experience. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Thank You."*

*"I felt relaxed and not a care in the world."*

*"I felt very tranquil and spiritual."*

*"I felt totally relaxed and enchanted. I never wanted it to stop."*

*"I felt relaxed and tired from the waves".*

(Spelling mistakes corrected!)

I was taken completely by surprise by these responses, as they were so concurrent with comments which so many ordinary adults had made in the past, and still make. In some of the homes where our people live, they have had to produce rotas, as there is such a demand to support people in the sessions. Occasionally, I ask people to write down their reactions, and to end my unintentionally long address, I will quote just a few.

*“Here at Somerset Court we have witnessed the exceptional benefits Atmospherics has had on our service users. People previously anxious and highly aroused when faced with a new environment have been relaxed and content as a consequence of these therapeutic sessions. I cannot praise the Atmospherics Trust enough and look forward to continued partnership working with them”.* Brian Currie, General Manager, National Autistic Society, Somerset Court.

*“My first experience of Atmospherics work was watching a small group in Glastonbury....what struck me was how difficult it is to create such a safe and restful environment in our busy, noisy world....the props themselves are not what creates this space; it is also the sense of being “given” to by the staff and volunteers who create the space; this is a very “human” experience ...which feels as unconditional and as safe as being supported by the most benevolent and loving parents you can imagine”.* John Cousins.

*“From the moment you’re born into the world, people, situations and a million outside influences start to mould and shape you, your attitudes, your values, your beliefs and your image of yourself. The older you get the more you learn about the world but this seems to be at the expense of losing the ability to communicate with your original true self. Atmospherics puts you back in touch with your true self, and reminds you of who you are supposed to be”.* J. Yelland 17/2/1994.

*I was intrigued by Atmospherics, and what it was all about until I eventually went for the first time...there was music playing, I began to lose myself, I was feeling very heavy, my eyes shut at this point, I think I must have dozed for a while, but seemed to know what was happening. It was amazing how serene I felt, it was like I was in heaven...I felt like I was floating as if I was weightless, it was incredible...It seemed to me that God was there with me in the room... it made me feel very religious and whole". R. Francis 13/8/2006*

### **Abraham Maslow**

Regarding your sagacious comments about realising that we are unlikely to find all the answers to our questions, I would like to refer back to Abe's work. I have most of his books, being drawn towards his tremendous scholarly wisdom and knowledge, but also warmed by his kindness and his love of humanity. He was also a man of particular courage, prepared to stand up for his beliefs. He argued against the negativity of Freud in a climate and culture which, at that time, in the thirties and forties in the USA, was afraid of everything. Abe believed in the goodness of man, and how this could be expanded. It is quite possible that you are familiar with his work, particularly about the Being values.

His work was my initial inspiration to start my own studies and research. I would like to offer you a couple of quotes from his biography "The Right to be Human" by Edward Hoffman (1988 Tarcher publishers).

*"I consider it quite scientific to work with vague concepts, doing the best we can in the face of complex problems....the true scientist lives in the land of possibility, the land of questioning rather than the area of final and complete answers. He is not content to rest on the achievements of his predecessors ...the true scientist continually tries to extend the areas of knowledge and therefore...works primarily with questions rather than answers....Each new invention, each great discovery creates turmoil behind the lines. The people who have settled down comfortably are shaken and disturbed out of their comfort. They must learn new ways of doing things. They must see things in a different*

*way. It is clear that any great discovery, any new invention...anything that will require a reorganisation of the conquered territory, will be fought against, will not be accepted easily”*

### **Perceiving the Spirit Within**

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*“The body would be but a pile of disordered chemicals were it not for the animating life –force that maintains and organises our molecular substituents into living, breathing, thinking individuals. This life-force is part of the spirit that animates all living creatures. It is the so-called “ghost in the machine”. It is a unique form of subtle energy that has yet to be fully grasped by the scientists of the twentieth century. This spiritual dimension is an aspect of human nature that is not taught in medical school nor well understood by most physicians. But the spiritual element is a part of human existence that must be taken into account if we are to truly understand the basic nature of health, illness and personal growth”.*

Richard Gerber, M.D. from “Vibrational Medicine”.

A “holistic” approach recognises that a human being comprises of mind, body, spirit, emotions and environment in constant interplay. This approach also recognises that each human being is unique, possessing individual perceptions and a diversity of personal needs. Each human being is motivated by “inside”

factors – thoughts, desires, past experiences, feelings and attitudes. Numerous “outside” factors may include environment, social conditioning, other human beings (their attitudes, perceptions and values) and opportunities to expand and experience. In order to create balance the needs of the whole person should be addressed. To maintain this state of well being, all people need diverse avenues of expression to channel their feelings and needs, and to feel valued and accepted for who they are.

The holistic or “wholeistic” approach is not new, or a concept devised in recent years. Many great and ancient physicians and philosophers expressed the need to view human beings as “whole” organisms, and consider all aspects of their lives before making diagnosis. The “Father of Medicine” Hippocrates (460 b.c.) stated that the physician should work, not for personal gain, but for the love of humanity; that disease should be studied by meticulous observation – making use of touch, sight hearing and smell as part of the diagnostic procedure. He stated that disease was often the result of environmental factors, including diet, climate and occupation.

We see these considerations very clearly in today’s society, where many people suffer with stress, depression and life distorting disorders which have now been linked to today’s pressured life style. Western materialistic society has in many ways become like a treadmill which is very difficult to escape from. We seem to move further away from our natural state, in tune with the forces of Nature, towards a robotic soul-less existence.

People with learning disability often have little control about their diet and environment. Many have minimal control with regard to who comes into and out of their lives – care staff, etc. Many have little choice but to accept what is given to them, needing other human beings to supply all their needs, opportunities and environment.

When I am teaching, I always ask people to be aware of what they are taking into the workplace as people in their care have no choice but to accept whatever they bring, whether it is a positive, caring, interested attitude or negativity and indifference. I ask people to become aware and observant of the environment which exists in the workplace, and to see if there are any ways in which it can be improved for the well-being of those in their care – utilising the concepts that I teach – but essentially to examine their own attitude and motivation.

In most cases, physical needs of food and shelter are met, and opportunities for education and stimulation are recognised. There is, however, often minimal consideration given to the spiritual and emotional needs of many people with learning disability; this may be because there is considerable difficulty in defining what they are. People's emotional needs are somewhat easier to define, although they may vary drastically from one person to another. They encompass senses and feelings without tangible foundation and logic. I believe that emotional and spiritual aspects of human beings are closely related.

The word “spiritual” often suggests links with religion, but the spirit exists within all of us, whether we are “religious” or not. Orthodox religion is presented from a relatively intellectual standpoint; from within a belief system in the invisible, intangible and often distant. There are many people without the disadvantages of learning disability who have difficulty relating to these concepts, especially in today's technological and scientific climate.

To have faith in, and appreciate religious principles and teachings it is necessary to possess a basic understanding of society and its structure. If you cannot comprehend these values and principles, their message cannot reach you. Many religious aspirations may be out of reach to those who have impaired intellectual ability. Other avenues must be found to offer a spiritual dimension to people who cannot (apparently) access this for themselves.

There are many views on what the “spirit” is from worldwide religions, philosophies and many ancient and venerable sources. I suggest that in order to address this seemingly elusive and nebulous aspect of ourselves, we should look at what affects it. Our language is littered with references to the spirit describing many emotions, feelings and states of mind. We may say that a person is “low in spirit” suggesting that he has no drive or desire; a person may be “high in spirit” inferring that they are full of life and happiness. “When they saw the rescue plane their spirits lifted” – a sense of joy and relief. “She is a spirited girl” – she has a strong will and will not conform. “Since his wife died he seems to have lost his spirit” – he seems to have lost the desire to go on living alone. We know what people mean when they say these phrases. We seem to refer to the spirit as high or low; lifting or falling, heavy or light. It would appear that our “spirit level” changes with circumstances and situations – elements within the environment – other people’s actions, reactions and expectations, and how we are feeling about ourselves – to cite just a few examples. (My spirit falls considerably every time I stand on the scales!!).

*“Leaving the spirit out of the equation is like trying to bake bread without any yeast”.* Allegra Taylor from “Healing Hands”.

I suggest that the spirit is the “vital force” within all beings of all races, creeds, ages and disabilities. I believe that it can be influenced by many “inside” factors including self perception, self esteem, past experience and especially our own thoughts. Potential “outside” factors include acknowledgement and acceptance (or lack of it) positive affirmation, affection and kindness (or lack of it) monotony, fear, insecurity and boredom.

I believe that among the motivators of the spirit, love, peace and beauty (or lack of them) are the most important. These latter three aspects are fundamental to the health of the spirit and therefore to the health and well-being of the whole person. This applies to all of us whether we consciously realise it or not.

The perception and appreciation of beauty and peace does not rely on intellectual ability. It does not rely on being able to walk or speak. Where people have no sight or hearing these elements can be communicated through touch, smell and vibration – and especially through the quality of love and caring from another human being – from one spirit to another.

Learning disability does not present any barriers which may prevent this expression taking place. In my own experience, working with people who have profound learning disability, it is a very simple matter to achieve this. This love in itself can be very profound and beautiful for both parties. It is an “unconditional” love – a love which asks for nothing in return. A love which simply means “I love you because you exist and you are important to me”.

Many years ago, I attended a workshop lead by Wolfgang Stange) a former principal ballet dancer from Germany). The day’s course was about dance and drama, but it was a day that changed my whole perception of care. The man is brilliant – it was the last part of the day and he danced for us. He picked up a beautiful African mask and “made love” to it in dance. He then picked up someone’s camera – an inanimate cold object, and danced in exactly the same way to that. Lastly, he took off a shoe off a mans foot. We all made appropriate “Cor-poo” noises and giggled – the smell was dreadful and it was a large room! He “made love” to the shoe in exactly the same way as he had dance with the camera and the beautiful mask. He seemed impervious to the smell. I was reduced to a pool of tears, and so were many others. He said that this was how to break through the barriers of physicality – to see only the spirit within and remember that the physical is of less importance. It is a lesson I have never forgotten.

*“The spirit can directly influence the body through images, energy flows and vibrations...the influence is two-way – the conditions and adventures of the body instantly feed back to the spirit and become part of its permanent repertoire”.*

J.L.Simmons, PhD, from “The Emerging New Age”.

It is not difficult to reach “the spirit within” if you can recognise that it is there, in all of us – and in yourself. There are many ways to provide for and nurture it, once perceived, by providing opportunities for peace and tranquillity, beauty, love and harmony. The inclusion of these aspects in our lives is a vital human need, and yet it is so often overlooked when moderating the lives of people who cannot advocate for themselves.

Many people consider themselves to be bodies which happen to have a spirit; I believe that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. Our spiritual needs are of great importance, and recognition of them can considerably expand and enhance our lives. It may not be possible to address these needs in a conventional way within a particular doctrine, especially for those people who have profound learning disabilities, but other avenues and methods do exist. By providing simple beauty, through colour, imagery, sound smell and touch which is directed towards higher planes of existence, it is possible to create and offer elements of peace and beauty – to raise the consciousness above the mundane – to offer “spiritual food” – food for the soul.

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