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## A beautiful and challenging metaphysic

**Grace Connor**, a volunteer at the Beshara School, relates how the understanding she has acquired there has transformed her perspective on life

The Beshara School at Chisholme House is a retreat situated in the Scottish Borders set within 200 acres of beautiful forested land. The education offered at the school is based on the principle of the unity of being. It comprises four elements: study, work, meditation and devotional practice and the study texts all affirm this fundamental unity. There are no teachers at Beshara, only fellow students and the wisdom of the texts, which stem from a range of traditions. I arrived here to begin a six-month course in intensive esoteric education in October 2010. My perspective on life was about to be remarkably transformed in a way I could not have foreseen or imagined.

The relationship I had towards the metaphysical was dualistic from the outset. My mother was Christian and my father an atheist (although I didn't discover this until after my mother died as he simply never discussed faith or religion). Several times my mother changed affiliation and attended a few different churches in search of one that concurred with her inner belief. I attempted to follow in my father's footsteps in as much as I aspired towards his extrovert nature and sociability. It also appeared to me that men held the power in this world and I felt especially powerless being at the mercy of four older male

siblings! But inwardly I held a deeper respect for my mother with her quiet, gentle nature and the unseen depths that I was then too young to decipher. It's clear to me now how the pattern of behaviour during my life reflect both of them alternately in an attempt to find synthesis as I struggled to find my way.

I stopped attending church once I was old enough to realise that it held no interest, but later became curious regarding the meaning of life, especially as I'd had a rather joyless and often painful existence so far. At 18 I took an interest in philosophy and looked towards alternative cultures such as the punk rock movement. I was especially drawn to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche whose ideas on religious belief met with my scepticism. I identified with anarchy, the unconventional and sought to be different.

An experience when I was 23 offered a glimpse of the unity of being (although I wouldn't have named it as such at the time). I was walking in a busy part of London near the Elephant and Castle roundabout when I became aware that everything was intimately connected and without separation on some unseen level. This vivid insight fostered a new direction in my search for truth and meaning.

Soon after, I joined a spiritual

healing group in West London. I also began a lengthy course in one-to-one therapy. This effected a process of healing which I desperately needed, including weaning me off the dependency on drugs and alcohol which had developed during the preceding years, as well as allowing an openness to my emotional life that had been deeply suppressed. During this period I attended a year's study in cultural studies and began to reconnect with art, an early love of mine that I'd lost touch with since leaving school.

My first retreat was two weeks at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland when I was 28. This time gave me a great sense of hope: it offered a living example of a way of life so different from social norms, conditions that I believed were largely responsible for my discontent. The spiritual integral community of Findhorn was a close reflection of the ideal image I held of how people could live together harmoniously. If it wasn't for the fact that I was about to embark on an art course leading towards a degree, I would most likely have stayed in the community at that time.

During my fine art degree course my partner and I founded an underground cinema group. By this stage I was no longer in therapy and became fully embroiled in the culture



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of art and the underground movement. Contact with spiritual pursuits diminished. Many of my new friends and associates were highly sceptical, analytical and altogether suspicious of the metaphysical realm, not least my partner. In this context, spirituality was pretty much a dirty word. The lifestyle was exciting and highly social, the concepts seemed original and suited my tendency towards difference and the unconventional. It was easy to slip back into old habits. The culture of healing gave way to nights of drinking, recreational drugs and a loss of integrity. I almost forgot the import of my hard-earned experience of becoming well and the spiritual insights that had made such an impression prior to this. Truth and meaning were no less important but I was seduced by the impressive personalities who frequented this milieu and was eager to comprehend the intellectual terrain in which I was ensconced. Yet without the focus on deep spiritual connection, I fell once more into excess.

This was also a time when I decided to dispel any superfluous beliefs that I'd gathered in preceding years through the varieties of new age aspirations. I thought that if there was a truth to spirituality, then truth would prevail no matter whether I believed in it or not and only erroneous beliefs could

be lost in this manner. So for a number of years I lived as if there was no spiritual dimension to life. Ultimately this resulted in my becoming deeply unhappy. I gained my BA in fine art but was totally disillusioned with the art world, my relationship ended acrimoniously and I fell into depression and despair.

Fortunately I soon found a job in further education which suited my skills and entered into a relationship with a new partner who was very supportive emotionally and who cared for me a great deal. Reflecting on what I'd been through I noticed that the quality of life had increased whilst I was actively engaged in spiritual pursuits and decreased whilst this was absent and the yearning for a deeper connection with a spiritual reality hadn't died.

Then I discovered Tantra courses led by John Hawken in Cornwall. After an initial weekend I was so taken by it that I followed up with a year's training. It was an attractive practice from many aspects. The form is mostly experiential with some discussion, and in essence Tantra advances the totality of being as its principal aim. It is radical, unconventional and focuses very much on the here and now. I have an anathema for the solely transcendent aspects of spiritual work as this seems

incomplete to me, 'All you need is love' was never my mantra! During this time many wounds were healed, layers of conditioning uncovered, and I learnt revolutionary ways of relating to myself and others.

I carried on attending Tantra groups during the following eight years, first as a participant and later as an assistant. Yet no matter how brilliant this training, my social life persisted in having an adverse influence and city life left me feeling isolated from the deeper connection these groups brought about. I often felt like a spiritual tourist whose adventures in self discovery were soon swamped by the creeping monotony of habitual behaviours. For many years I ignored the quiet call to commit more completely to my spiritual quest. I lived a schizoid existence, secretly in disquiet and openly as someone having a good time. My diary was full, friends were many, the job was pretty good and yet I wasn't fulfilled where it matters. I often hoped for the wherewithal to escape from this trap. The opportunity finally came in the guise of major loss when I lost my home of 24 years and the job I was in for 11 years ended. This was a very difficult period that occurred across several years, but once I'd accepted the loss of these attachments, I realised the liberty it afforded me.

A chance meeting brought an invitation to a road trip around France and this sounded like the perfect remedy after the trials of the preceding few years. My companion had a shared interest in spiritual community and on our journey he spoke with great reverence but in no way proselytising about an educational retreat in the Scottish Borders with which he'd been involved: the Beshara School. After our trip I signed up for a six-month course there in esoteric education with very little information of what it entailed, and without having visited the school. Yet, from the outset, as the principal read the introduction to our group of 10 students, my heart expanded and I knew for certain I was in the right place.

What made the experience at the Beshara School so special? First was the overwhelming sense that I had at last found the spiritual connection I had been looking for and I could trust my intuition regarding it. It also seemed important to put aside prejudices for the duration and honour this new receptivity. They say knowledge is subject to the thing known, and because I was open to the possibility of finding a perspective on myself and my beliefs that in some sense transcended my current vision, I was in a position to really learn something new. In fact, it was less like discovery and more like an unveiling of what was always present but unseen until now.

The attempt to view my experience from the perspective of unity seemed to free me from what had become my habitual dualism. It was as if I was, at times, shown things – my life, myself – from a great height. You might say it was like being able to see the whole



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earth rather than one small corner of my own country. According to the metaphysics of unity that lie at the heart of the Beshara School studies, the numerous forms seen from the horizontal perspective are distinct, differentiated, and appear to be independent, while, viewed from the vertical, they are an inseparable unity

With this beautiful and challenging metaphysic in mind, I began to comprehend the possibility that my being is in some very deep sense identical to the being of everything; that every individual is infused with this same being and that uniqueness runs through everything in existence. My reality is no other than this essential reality and every quality that can be attributed to it. This realisation has had a real effect on my life. In every domain I always saw two worlds, one against the other. I could see the truth and value in each but never without conflict and consequently never knew which way to turn. Try as I might, I was bound by a deep, often unconscious, belief that I was alone and so was everyone and everything else. I believed in the existence of a spiritual dimension because experience opened my awareness to it, but had dismissed the God of religious belief as mere superstition belonging to a bygone age. On closer examination I found

that my disbelief in God was in fact based on a partial belief, a construct made from many formative impressions. It was quite sensible not to believe in this limited image. I am happy now to attribute the vastness that is reality, both the hidden and the visible, to the being of what may or may not be called God but is real under whatever name.

The understanding I gained at the Beshara School required intensive focus and a lot of sustained effort. The four elements of the course are designed to bring about a deep transformation if one commits to it wholeheartedly. Not only has this education positively transformed my experience, it has placed the trajectory of my personal history into relief whereby I see that every episode, both good and bad, has somehow led me towards a deeper appreciation of this life and my unique place within it. It is no exaggeration to say that this course at the Beshara School has been the single most important thing I've ever undertaken and I'm extremely grateful for it. ■

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