

BOOK REVIEWS

LISTENING TO THEIR VOICES: The Person-Centred Approach to Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Jan Hawkins. The Foundation for the Developing Person: London, 2017

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Jan Hawkins has devoted three decades of her life as a therapist and educator to the task of understanding and communicating with those whose experience of the world is profoundly different to that of most of us. In this new book she turns her attention to those with diagnoses of Autism and Asperger's Syndrome - the current collective term now employed being Autistic Syndrome Disorder (ASD).

The central section of the book consists of unedited transcripts of interviews with people on the autistic spectrum, their parents and siblings and support workers. As a result the reader is granted privileged access into a world which is seldom revealed in all its complexity and seeming impenetrability. Indeed, the whole book may be seen as a determined and deeply moving attempt to come alongside those who are often grossly misunderstood, treated in inappropriate ways and not infrequently abandoned by the 'neurotypical' world. It will be a hardhearted reader indeed who is not moved to tears by the stories and poignant vignettes with which Jan Hawkins illustrates the experiences and the pain of those with the ASD syndrome and the suffering of close members in their families. Her book constitutes a wake-up call to the helping professions to fully embrace the challenge which is presented by a significant minority of our fellow citizens. What is more, she demonstrates convincingly that acceptance of such a challenge will entail dedicated commitment, infinite patience and a profound humility, which do not sit comfortably with therapeutic approaches which aim at rapid results and swift behavioural change.

The book argues powerfully for the efficacy of the person-centred approach as the preferred mode of response to ASD clients. The approach's emphasis on unconditional acceptance and empathic responsiveness allied to authentic relationship is shown to create the kind of environment where the ASD person can discover validation and hope for the future in an otherwise alien universe. At the same time Jan Hawkins offers the fruits of her own experience in the form of much practical guidance in the use of language, the cardinal importance of consistency and dependable structures and the deep and genuine willingness to accept the client's lead even when this appears to run counter to 'neuro-typical' norms. For me, one of the most moving chapters explores the, at times, awesome appreciation of spiritual reality by ASD clients who might so easily be dismissed as incapable of spiritual insight and practice. There is much for institutional churches to learn in this chapter alone.

This is a book by a therapist who is a committed believer in the power of experiential learning – although her writing also demonstrates an impressive awareness of the published literature - and the reader is offered in its pages the vicarious but immediate experience of entering into the world of the ASD person and learning to move around in it. Therapists and support workers who read it will not only be richly rewarded professionally but will have their humanity immeasurably enhanced. ASD persons and their families will find hope in its pages and the proof that, after all, they can perhaps be understood and accompanied.

Brian Thorne

Emeritus Professor of Counselling, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Co-founder, The Norwich Centre for Personal, Professional and Spiritual Development.