

**Researching Our Own Practice  
(Possible) Three-day international conference  
September 2013**

**Setting the context for the conference**

Marianne Williamson said: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.’ We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?”

Even if we accept the basic principle of this proposition, a consequent question might be: how powerful, brilliant, talented and fabulous is it possible for any one of us to be?. We need also to ask ourselves what limits the extent to which any one person can be powerful; because ‘powerful beyond measure’ suggests there is an infinitude to what is possible.

So is Marianne Williamson correct in her view that we are ‘powerful beyond measure’? If so, what makes it difficult for many of us to believe it? And even if we believe it in theory, makes it difficult for many of us to fully demonstrate it through the living of our lives?

It may well be that our beliefs about the world, the beliefs that have been taught to us from our very early days, limit our views about what is possible. The most dominant story that is told to us in the Western world is the scientific one, which is based on the assumption that the history of the universe and of humanity is one of physical evolution, with all psychological and spiritual experiences being secondary and emergent experiences from physical origins. This leads to the view that matter is primary; and a belief that although we all experience ourselves as conscious and aware human beings (otherwise I could not be writing this, and you could not be reading and reacting to it), our consciousness is created by, and dependent on, matter.

We know that matter has limitations; it is limited by the physical properties that determine its constitution and functions. Consequently, consciousness and all that we experience within consciousness, must ultimately be limited by the same properties. There is no true creativity; neither mass nor energy is ever created nor destroyed, they are conserved, and manifest themselves in different forms at different times (so says the law of conservation of energy).

If we hold the belief that matter is primary, and that what we can be and do is limited (for example) by the properties of the brain, then we may be self-limiting ourselves. How indeed can we be ‘powerful beyond measure’, if our brains are eminently not powerful beyond measure. When we analyse them, they are (outside of the body) inert pieces of matter, only stimulated into creative dynamic action when infused by some kind of ‘energy’. The combination of the physical matter, and a ‘life giving energy’ together enables our experience of consciousness. Is this ‘life giving energy’ an emergent property of the material brain? Or does it have an existence prior to, and independent of the brain?

In exploring this question, the first challenge we need to address is to examine how we have come to believe that matter is primary. When I inquired for the first time into this issue, I realized that this belief was ‘given’ to me within my educational experience, in the course of

scientific experimentation, and I had come to assume its truth. This was confirmed through living in a society which (often implicitly rather than explicitly) accepted the core assumption that matter was primary. The difficulty with this is that the educational process does not at the same time make us aware that there is no provable evidence to support the view that matter is primary, and that consciousness has emerged from matter.

It is equally possible (in terms of what can be proven) that matter is an emergent property of some other kind of reality (which I am at the moment terming ‘consciousness’.) If we think about it, there is nothing in our experience that exists outside of consciousness. Everything we think, do, feel and believe exists within our experience of consciousness. Our observations of others (including the observation of brain activity by neuro-scientists) is planned and takes place within our experience of consciousness).

My proposal is that there would be value in questioning the assumption that matter is primary; and be prepared to consider an alternative hypothesis: that is, that consciousness is primary. (Perhaps some people may wish to use a different form of terminology, such as ‘energy’ or ‘an intangible reality’). The main principle though, is, to accept the possibility that matter is emergent rather than primary; and that if we accept this as a hypothesis, it opens up the way to exploring the possibility of a different order of reality altogether, quite different to the one that we have been encouraged to take for granted in our contemporary western world.

If we now hold in our mind the possibility that who we are and what we are, may have emerged from a form of reality that we know very little about (we certainly don’t know anything about its properties and nature other than how we experience it when mediated through matter); then it may well be that we have access to a source of power that could enable us to be ‘powerful beyond measure’.

If we are open to exploring the hypothesis that ‘consciousness is primary’, but we don’t know what we mean by ‘consciousness’, we don’t know what its scope, properties or possibilities are; then we need to think about how we can engage in appropriate research. As the only primary source of data any one of us has in relation to consciousness is our own experience of it, then a critically important element of the research is to inquire into our own experience. Any other form of research (e.g. observing or asking other people about their experiences, or observing the workings of the brain) is secondary data. This not only validates first person, subjective research; but makes it essential if we are to improve our understanding of what it means to be human. We need to understand more clearly the nature of the relationship between what goes on in our subjective experience, and what manifests in the external world. Even in science, through quantum physics, there is a realization that there is a dynamic relationship between the ‘observer’ (the presence of human consciousness), and the formation of physical reality. How can we learn more about this without researching our own subjective experience?

If researching our own experience is our only source of primary data, then we each can explore what are effective ways of doing this. It is at this point that I think the idea of ‘mindfulness’ (Kabatt-Zin) is significant; paying attention to what is going on right here, right now, in this present moment, non-judgementally. If we can focus on this present moment, reflecting on what we are experiencing, and making choices about how we want to be in the world (rather than be distracted by thoughts about what has happened in the past, or concerns about the future); then we are likely to make ourselves more open to the

possibilities, opportunities, richness and energy that is available to each of us ‘in this present moment’. Being aware of the choices we have, and the bases on which we make those choices requires ‘reflecting in action’ (Schön), which is written about extensively in the literature. It also, however, requires each of us to develop our own ‘living theory’; because reflection in this present moment includes us being aware of the educational influences that have brought us to where we are, the values that we hold which we try to stay true to in the living of our lives, the living contradictions that we experience as we aim to live the lives we want to lead, and the ways in which we are influencing the lives and practice of others, and of the social contexts in which we live and work.

The suggestion here, though, is that the development of our individual living theories can be enhanced by opening ourselves up to what the universe might have to offer. The possibility that ‘consciousness is primary, and matter is emergent from consciousness’ is one that is worth exploring; and who knows, that unknown ‘consciousness’ (or whatever term we ultimately choose to use that is responsible for our own individual experience of consciousness) may hold openings and qualities that enable us to be ‘powerful beyond measure’; may be the source of a ‘life-affirming energy’ that is limitless in ways not possible within the parameters of the known properties of the material world.

I am suggesting that we do not hold this as a belief, but as a hypothesis; but that in accepting the hypothesis, we remove the (often unconscious) self-limitations we place on ourselves, when we believe that everything we experience not only derives from the brain, but is bounded by the finite capacity of the brain; and that if we believe in an ‘evolution of consciousness’ rather than ‘evolution of matter’, we may find that this offers us hope for humanity in ways not possible when we rely solely on the mindset that we are no more than the bodies we inhabit.

I am further suggesting that researching our own lives, and in professional terms, researching our own practice, through developing our own living theories, both individually and collectively, is perhaps the only way, and certainly a significant way, in which we can explore the hypothesis that ‘consciousness is primary’.