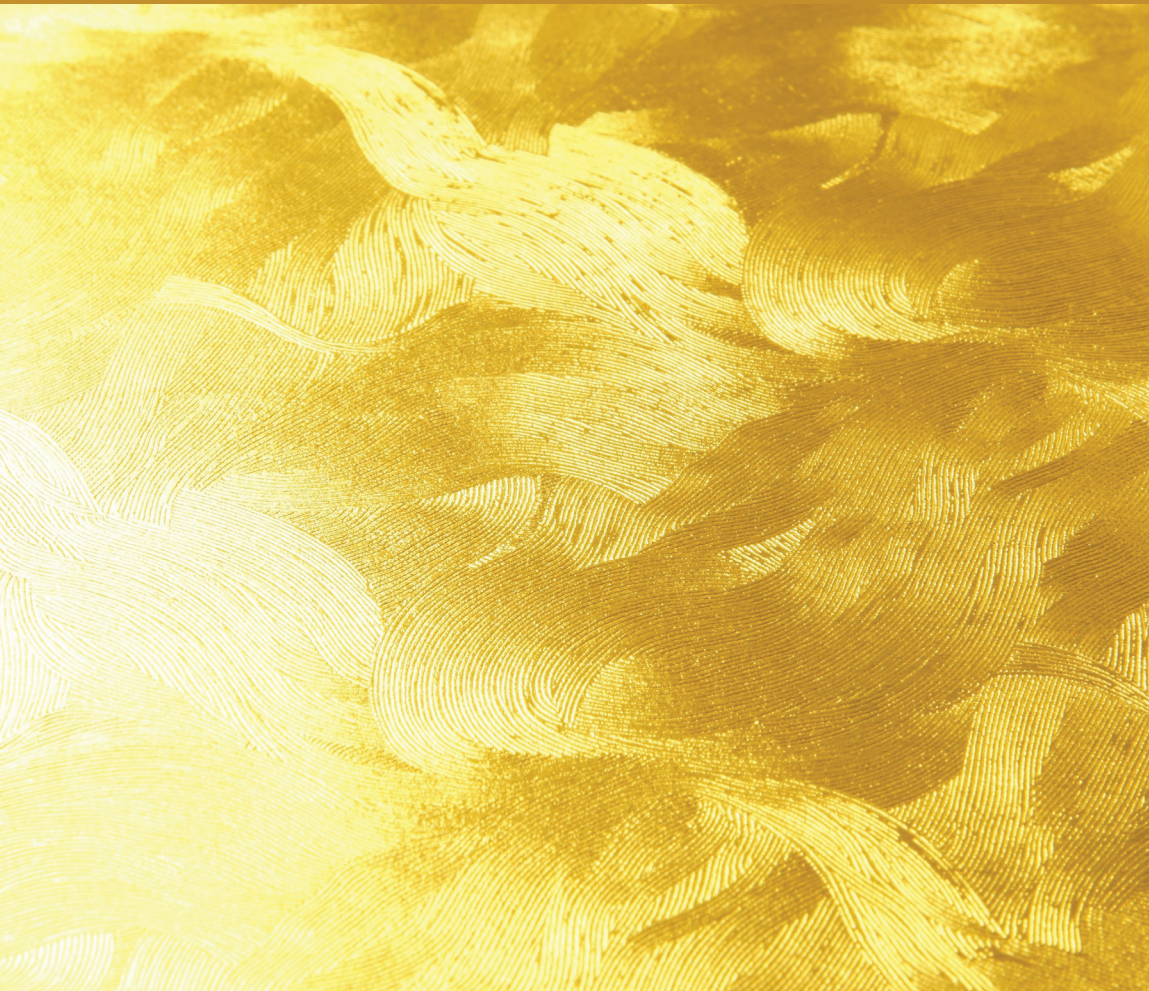


# Mystery, Hope and Reason

Faith in the Therapy Room

Kate Graham



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*Kate Graham*



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*To my parents*

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## About the author

**Kate Graham** is a UKCP-accredited psychotherapist, supervisor, and Quaker living in Ilkley, Yorkshire. Before becoming a psychotherapist, Kate enjoyed a wide-ranging career incorporating charity fundraising and management, international development, evaluation, policymaking, and coaching. With two partners, she created the Outcomes Star to measure how people change in social projects, a model then replicated over many sectors. Kate has always been interested in our internal journeys, how we change and grow, and how we bring a myriad of life threads together to form a coherent whole. She loves walking, fiddle playing, and swimming in the Wharfe.

# Introduction

Mystery, Hope, and Reason are sitting at a table. At one end, Reason, a solid sort of gentleman, sits squarely on his chair, ready for a good discussion to sort things out once and for all.

Hope is a rather beautiful young woman, clear-eyed, sitting gracefully, if a little anxiously, between the other two.

And Mystery? They are there all right, probably at the other end, though quite hard to pin down, sometimes disappearing, sometimes taking an almost human, though certainly not a gendered, form.



“So, this book you are writing, what’s it about then?”

Joe leans forward from the seat behind me, and I turn round to talk to him, wondering if I will be able to cope with the inevitable queasiness that ensues as the minibus sweeps round the hairpin bends of the mountain road, beech trees climbing the slopes above us and falling away below.

On the opposite side of the valley, a medieval village glows white in the afternoon light, behind it, wooded slopes, topped by grey limestone crags, reach up to a blue sky disturbed only by a solitary cloud. We are leaving the Abruzzo National Park,<sup>1</sup> just a couple of hours outside Rome, relaxed and tired after four days of wildlife watching, waiting in the twilight periods of dawn and dusk, seeing each day start, and each day come to an end. It has been a time of connection: to the landscape, to the changing hours of the day, and to some extent, to each other.

Joe has come with his sister as she loves wildlife. A Northerner in his mid-fifties, he is happy to give everything a go, and he is brilliant at asking questions. He doesn't hold back or feel he ought to know the answer. His curiosity and his openness create connections wherever he goes. "It's about therapy and faith, about how we talk about faith in therapy, and how they come together."

I'm not sure if he is just being polite or how interested he is, but I appreciate him asking, so I continue: "Because, often, therapists don't feel comfortable talking about faith, and it can be, for some clients, the most important thing they need to talk about."

To my surprise, Joe nods.

"Absolutely. You know, when my Mum died, I was overwhelmed, not just by losing her, but by my own mortality, suddenly feeling my mortality. I couldn't cope with it; it was taking me over, so I went to see a counsellor. After some sessions, she started asking me, you know, about my beliefs. I had the sort of feeling that she was the same as me, brought up a Catholic, but not really practising any more. I don't believe in God now, but I did find it really useful to talk about this stuff."

I'm intrigued. I know I shouldn't be surprised by this conversation, but it wasn't what I expected.

"So did she ask you about what you believed happens when you die, that sort of question?"

"Very much so. We talked about all that sort of thing. And you know, that was the most useful part of the whole work with her. Out of all the sessions. I don't know what I believe, but I do know that there is something, something here."

He brings his fist to his heart, a gesture of connection, of strength and emotion. As his eyes water, my heart wells up, and I feel the importance of this unknown, bigger thing.

He continues:

"It's spiritual, I guess. Spirituality. Something so much bigger than me, so important. But it was the talking about it, feeling it with her. That was what made the difference."

I appreciate this so much, despite the incipient car sickness rising in my stomach.

“Thank you. Thank you for sharing this with me.”

I turn to face forward again, touched at many levels, moved by the depth of the emotional and spiritual connection, feeling the encouragement that this is relevant, a potentially important part of therapy. I’m grateful that he went to look for help and that he found a counsellor who was not afraid to venture into the arena of beliefs and worldviews, whether similar or different.

My intention in this book is to make it easier for many more therapists and counsellors to engage with faith, to be curious, to give themselves permission to ask questions, to be okay and compassionate with their not-knowing, whatever their beliefs.

It isn’t always easy to talk about faith, and each reader will have a different relationship to faith and belief, just as therapists of different modalities will have different beliefs about how therapy works and the rules therapists should follow. However, talking about faith matters because what we believe in, our worldview, and our relationship to these beliefs, determines how we make meaning of the world and how we connect to ourselves and others. It is an integral part of who we are.

I use faith to include religion and spirituality, philosophical frameworks such as Humanism and the therapy process itself. Faith is also an everyday belief in things that give your life meaning and hope. This could include your football team, politicians, doctors, or teachers. People we hope will work miracles on our behalf. It is a worldview, and when we lose faith in something, it can be devastating, whether a cleric losing their faith, or the emptiness and disappointment that comes when someone or something you had faith in, believed in, or placed hopes in, disappears or changes.

Both therapy and faith are important now. We live in a time of fear and uncertainty. Throughout my life, there have always been potential external fears: the Cold War, the fear of nuclear devastation and World War III. And we have survived, and life, at least in the prosperous Western world, has gone on. But things have changed. Inequality has spiralled out of control. Huge numbers of people are displaced by war, starvation, and poverty. International justice to protect civilians is being challenged throughout the Middle East, in Ukraine, in Sudan.

Climate change has brought an existential threat to life on this planet, massively increasing the unpredictability and intensity of our

weather, fires, and floods, and the stability of our ice sheets, sea-levels, ocean currents, permafrost, jet streams, and tectonic activity. In the course of my lifetime, biodiversity has fallen by fifty per cent. That's a huge number of animals and species that existed when I was young that are no longer here. There is a war in Europe that threatens to spread, inspiring defence chiefs to call our young people "the pre-war generation". Politics is increasingly polarised, and caring for our environment has moved from being irritating to governments to an imprisonable offence.

That's quite a roll call of doom. What do we therapists have to do with this? How does it tie into faith?

At the moment, our greatest defence against this ocean of fear is distraction, covering it up with the white noise of social media and busy consumerism. Marx famously called religion the opium of the people, numbing them to their suffering. Consumerism and busyness could be our opium now, keeping us from contact with ourselves and others, from contact with the reality of what is happening around us, what is needed from us.

This is where both therapy and faith come in. Therapy is about connection: our connection to ourselves, to others, to our environment, to our greater consciousness. It is about our inner worlds, the parts of ourselves that we are less familiar with, that we may fear. It is about connecting with the uncertainty that is intrinsic to being human. Therapy can connect the seen with the unseen, the conscious with the unconscious, reason with mystery: the unexplained and unexplainable.

Faith in whatever form also gives us this connection. Spiritual practices lead us into our inner worlds; religious communities, whether forms of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Paganism, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, or any other faith help us to connect with others. Worshipping together or alone can help to connect with a wider sense of mystery, and however we understand God.

All of these aspects of faith are important to talk about in therapy: the more spiritual and religious they are, however, the more difficult they become to talk about. Most of us don't find it easy to talk about religion or spirituality with our friends (student days excepted), and this is also the case in the therapy room. And that is a loss.

## There is interest, but it is still a taboo

Over the years, many excellent books have linked psychotherapy to religion and spirituality.<sup>2</sup> The Royal Society of Psychiatrists' Spirituality Special Interest Group has 3,000 members. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has produced the magazine *Thresholds* for many years. But faith, religion, and spirituality still seem a taboo area, both for therapists to ask about and for clients to talk about. Therapists hold back for a whole range of reasons, which we explore in Chapter 4, and clients may not feel their views are welcome or safe to express. The Royal College of Psychiatrists' Spirituality Interest Group (RSPsych SIG) cites research from the US that found that some fifty per cent of mental health service users turned to spirituality to get through their crisis, but that crucially, they didn't share this with their therapists. Chris Jenkins' research<sup>3</sup> picks this up from a counselling client:

When I was ill, I certainly learned very quickly to keep the spiritual side of myself separate from the rest of myself whenever I met with any of the "professionals".<sup>4</sup>

Most (not all) therapists I interviewed when researching this book were, at least, wary of broaching the subject of faith. Religion is associated with rules, with judgement: as the Christian psychotherapist Brian Thorne points out, how does that sit with "non-judgemental, positive regard that underpins humanistic therapy"?<sup>5</sup> How do we cope when someone's beliefs seem to get in the way of therapy, when their very human pain is amplified, rather than ameliorated, by their beliefs?

Avoiding talking about faith doesn't make sense if we consider the importance of faith, whether God-focused or not, to our understanding of who we are and what it is to be human. If we do hold back from these important, personal, fragile conversations, we are potentially missing a great deal of what really matters.

## Mystery, reason, and hope

I started this chapter with a scene introducing Mystery, Reason, and Hope, and these characters will accompany us through the book. They reflect my internal struggle between Mystery and Reason, and a rather

elusive faith. I am drawn to mystery and wonder, whether in nature, the unconscious, or the supernatural, and I also want explanations and certainty, resolution, and clarity.

Whilst Mystery and Reason tussle inside me, they are joined by Hope—Hope I hold for my clients, for myself, and for humanity. Particularly, when I think of all that is happening outside the therapy room, the environment in which our work takes place. Mystery and Hope inspired this book: Reason has helped me to make it comprehensible.

### How my faith helps my therapy

As a Quaker, I have a faith that is short on rules and long on doubt and free thinking. We believe that there is “*that of God*” in everyone, however awful and bad they may seem. Sitting together in silence, we anticipate a direct experience of whatever we call God: using words such as Love, Spirit, or Light. Not all Quakers believe in God, and fewer would call themselves Christians. It gives a lot of space to explore what I believe. It doesn’t offer certainty or clarity, but it does offer community: being with others, accepting each other, and seeking together.

I have started to explore the practice of contemplation, described by my teacher Stephen Wright as contrasting with meditation: “In meditation we are required to work, in contemplation we are invited to wander.”

This book could invite you to a form of contemplation, secular or spiritual, as we explore our inner worlds and allow our curiosity and attention to wander around this fascinating space.

I experience faith and therapy working hand in hand much of the time. I have a passionate curiosity about how we each make our way along this human journey. I want this book to be a support to those struggling with the difficult steps we meet along the way.

If we can talk about faith with a client, it can help us to understand them, enter into their world more fully, and start to understand more of their strengths and dilemmas. It is their relationship to their faith that matters: is it a strength, a supportive core, a space of confusion, the cause of their distress and why they are seeking therapy? We need to find out.

This book aims to help you do this. It is aimed at therapists who are interested but wary, uncertain whether this is a good idea, seeking ideas and suggestions as to what might be helpful and unhelpful in talking about faith. My intention is that it should be accessible, enjoyable, and meaningful to anyone who is curious about the interplay of faith and therapy and their own personal development.

It is inspired by the clients who have an active faith, possibly not knowing where it fits in our apparently secular society, and those who don't, but are seeking some way of making meaning of their lives and experiences. It is inspired by the many refugees I have worked with whose faith is keeping them going, despite their experiences, even if their beliefs caused their flight in the first place. And it is inspired by my own struggles in trying to connect to a sense of faith that seems both elusive and important.

There are a lot of stories in this book, some from my own life experience, and some created from the clients I have worked with. With three exceptions, where permission has been explicitly given, these latter stories are composites of relationships, people, and conversations that have emerged in the therapy room, and as such, should not be recognisable by those who have inspired them, though they may spark some memories. My intention through these stories is to allow the reader to wander off into a wider landscape, a deeper reality surrounding the everyday words on a page, a world of images, symbols, life that is less visible to the naked eye, a world of mystery where not everything can be explained.

## The questions this book addresses

### *What is going on beneath the surface?*

Chapter 1 starts by exploring the mystery of therapy itself. Therapy is an exploration of our inner worlds, where our inner meets the outer, where the seen meets the unseen. Mystery is an integral part of this, just as important, but less valued than Reason, less explainable, less replicable, certainly less predictable, but for me is the lifeblood of presence, connection, and our greater humanity as we sit together in the room. Without Mystery, therapy would be a lot less fun and a lot less effective.

***What do the words mean?***

Reason then takes charge, with Chapter 2 clarifying the meaning that I am giving to words such as: faith, religion, spirituality, philosophical frameworks, relational, integrative, psychotherapy.

***Why does this matter?***

In Chapter 3, I explore why talking about faith is important, the benefits that it might bring, and how recent neuroscience research can inform this approach.

***Why is it difficult?***

Chapter 4 looks at why we might struggle to do this, and common problems people encounter, coping with beliefs that seem to be conflicting with therapy.

***How do you do it?***

Chapter 5 looks at the competences, attributes, and skills that we can develop to do this well, drawing on published competences, and the core skills of curiosity, attunement, self-awareness, and helpful knowledge.

***Can I say no?***

Chapter 6 explores the boundaries of this work, where discomfort becomes intolerable, where we are outside our expertise, or where a different approach is more appropriate.

***What about Hope?***

The next three chapters look at how faith and therapy interweave with a third element to influence our inner worlds. Chapter 7 looks at where we stand as therapists in relation to Hope. Is Hope central to our work, or a distraction, leading us to overidentifying with clients and wanting to rescue them?

### ***More complex?***

Chapter 8 explores the relationship with neurodiversity, realising that many of my clients are probably neurodivergent, and that they may have a complex relationship with their worldview and beliefs. Neurodiversity can amplify gifts and difficulties, just as faith does: together they can be a powerful mix.

### ***Changing with age***

In Chapter 9, I explore the way age can change our relationship to mortality and the need for spiritual meaning and exploration. How do we help clients address the deep spiritual questions that come with facing our mortality, coping with our ageing and the transitions that come with this?

### ***Reflecting together***

Chapter 10 brings these connecting strands together, reflecting on how you, your practice, and your confidence may have changed, and how my own journey has moved through writing this book.

### ***Moving out***

Chapter 11 looks at how we expand our connection, how we are listened to and supported, and our connection with nature, leaving the separateness and duality that may have characterised our views to date.

Through these pages, you will find experiences and stories to generate your own ideas about what is important. Themes of connection, presence, and relationship run through the book. Many of the stories are about my relationship with nature and all the life around us. Limestone appears frequently, offering landscapes of structure, beauty, and mystery. Nature sustains me and is part of me. My work with refugees and asylum seekers has changed me and left me with memories that I hope translate into useful ideas for your practice and development.

## How to read this book

I hope to take you on a journey, recognising that many of us start from a default, protective setting often established in childhood, a fear of being judged, excluded, thought weird or different. That said, the order of chapters is the one that made the most sense to me: it may not to you, and you may find dipping into chapters as they appeal to you works better for you. Each chapter starts with a scene between Mystery, Hope, and Reason, who accompany us through the book, and ends with reflection questions, which you might use to journal or discuss in supervision.

Most of us want to feel more at peace with ourselves, to find out more about who we really are, and to work this out in relation to our beliefs and faith. My intention is that this book will help you along this path and make you feel welcome as we travel together.