

Robert K.C. Forman, *Enlightenment Ain't What It's Cracked Up To Be: A Journey of Discovery, Snow and Jazz in the Soul*, Alresford, O-Books, 2011, pp. 214. ISBN 978-1-84694-674-5 (Paperback). £9.99.¹

Dr. Robert Forman is co-founder of the Journal of Consciousness Studies and founder of the Forge Institute for Spirituality and Social Change. He has many years experience of meditation and academic work in religion and mysticism. His stance on the latter led to the 'Katz-Forman debates' regarding Perennialism versus Constructivism. He gives lectures and workshops globally and has written numerous books including *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, and *Grassroots Spirituality: What it is, Why it is here, Where it is going*.

The first thing that should be said about this book is that, in contrast to most of Forman's other work, it is not an academic text. Instead Forman has chosen to write a personal, auto-biographical account of his own spiritual journey, which is accessible to non-academics. Although he mentions the so-called 'Katz-Forman debates' he does not get side-tracked into putting forward an academic argument about his views on what he terms 'pure consciousness events'. Leaving aside this debate Forman emphasises some important, and possibly controversial, points about 'enlightenment'. Having gone through his own process of spiritual awakening, he is in a position to be able to do this from a first-hand perspective.

Forman's 'experience of vastness' began on 4th January 1972 after he had been diagnosed with 'generalised anxiety disorder' or 'post adolescent anxiety diffusion'. He describes himself as '...spiralling into what I can only describe as psychological collapse'. He recounts hearing voices and having suicidal thoughts. Then, one day, he had his first spiritual experience. Whilst racing a car at high speed, his life's concerns just dropped away. He took up Transcendental Meditation (TM) and within two years his life had improved. However, he didn't undergo a profound personal transformation or achieve some enlightened state. The peculiar silence that he encountered within his head was too puzzling, confusing and weird for him to talk about until he discovered others who had similar experiences, 'Yippee' he cries 'I am not alone! There's a league of the transformationally confused!' He lists five characteristics of his new state:

- 1) thinking didn't stop but became more focused and the constant background noise in his mind disappeared,
- 2) a shift in identity where boundaries between himself and the vastness became blurred,
- 3) effortless witnessing, he became more alive to the world,
- 4) he experienced an increased depth perception,
- 5) he experienced wakefulness in sleep (as opposed to insomnia).

All of this, Forman emphasises, came partly through meditation, partly by grace. Later, he discovered post-modernism and learned that TM was just one system amongst many others. He states that having a tradition is important to ground spiritual experiences but that clinging to dogma can become restrictive to further

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growth. He came to the realisation that his experience was the same as that described as fullness in Hinduism, and as Nirvana in Buddhism; 'Enlightenment, as I was seeing it described in countless texts from every major tradition, is a shift in the relationship between consciousness and its objects. Enlightenment is the unmingling of a commingled reality'.

However, he objects to the way that spiritual experience is promoted by various gurus and modern spiritual organisations. He denies that one can be utterly egoless, that one can attend to thought processes often enough to change them, that gurus are egoless, that one's life will be made complete and easy, or that there are any kind of spiritual goals. These latter, he says, do not take into account complicated modern life. He quips, 'I was looking for spiritual party favours. What I got was an existential earthquake'. He does admit that he benefited from his experiences. They motivated his academic work, removed his constant anxiety, led him into psychotherapy, and helped form his ethics. He argues that, whilst spiritual experiences can offer 'warmth and strength and peace in a storm-tossed mind and a fragile world', we still need to engage with that world and our place in it; the spiritual and the psychological or what Forman terms 'enlightenment plus'. He stresses the importance of the inter-personal relationship as sacred, not just the individual inner-experience. There is a tension throughout the book between reconciling his spiritual experience with the reality of everyday life and being. This gives rise to some memorable quotes such as 'I am way too much beast to be a god-man and far too much god to be a beast', and 'I don't know if I am a human being held in the arms of an endlessness, or a vastness having human fears.' He advocates a down-to-earth, life-affirming spirituality that embraces silence, critical intellect, painful memories, and sexuality without being bogged down by unimpassioned sobriety or retreat into defensive, mystical fantasy.

Whilst Forman glosses over the academic debates about Perennialism, a single reality that underlies all spiritual experiences; and 'pure consciousness events', experience of pure consciousness devoid of any content including self concept, these debates can be found elsewhere in Forman's publications. Indeed, these views may be open to criticism and disagreement. However, his analysis of modern gurus and spiritual movements seems appropriate and a timely warning to bear in mind. It also serves to remind us that spiritual experiences are not always blissful and ecstatic leading to profound spiritual transformation, but can be puzzling, confusing, and even frightening. They are not panaceas or gateways to a personal utopia and, despite a glimpse into another way of being, life goes on with all its trials and tribulations. To me, it seems that too much introspection can become its own sickness. We can unintentionally define and create our own illnesses, which we can only then cure by ourselves. Perhaps the crux of Forman's insights is that spirituality needs to be realistic about its goals and how it grounds itself in everyday life. My view is that spirituality is, or should, ultimately be about the relationship between self, others, and the world. Forman seems to agree, 'The shifts I had been witnessing were mostly changes in how *I* hold *myself*, another or the world'.

Forman's book may offend some and court controversy. Nevertheless, it presents an important, realistic, and down-to-earth view of spirituality and spiritual experience that is often overlooked. Forman's website can be found at <http://enlightenmentaint.com>

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