

Review

Christopher Goodchild, *Unclouded by Longing – Meditations on Autism and Being Present in an Overwhelming World*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017, 167 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-1-78592-122-3, £9.99.

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Christopher Goodchild lives in London and works as an Alexander Technique Teacher. He is a Quaker, a spiritual teacher and has a deep interest in Eastern philosophy. His autobiographical book *A Painful Gift: the Journey of a Soul with Autism* was published by DLT in 2009. Christopher is an Ambassador for the National Autistic Society. Anyone with an interest in meditation, contemplative or reflective work or who is engaged in health-care chaplaincy might find this book engaging. The lens of autism through which the book is conceived offers insight for those wishing to understand autism better but more importantly opens windows out to exploring a range of issues.

After a Foreword by Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*, and a helpful introduction by the author where he explains something of the spiritual habitat of the book there follows a series of 60 meditations each of about two pages in length. Each meditation begins with a spiritual or philosophical quote (from the Bible, Upanishads, Rumi, Rilke, Pascale etc.) followed by reflective writing on that meditation's theme (*Dancing with Fear*, *The Gift of Not Knowing*, *The Ocean and the Waves*). It took Goodchild nearly a year to write the book and I would suggest that the meditations need time and silence to digest. I did use a couple of the meditations successfully in a group discussion. Each one is rich with religious and philosophical references and echoes of various meditative and mystical writings. Each invites the reader to a deeper awareness of self and relation to one's surrounding environment. Writing in the second person draws "you" in more deeply and makes it all so much more personal.

I was particularly drawn to this book by the title words *Unclouded by Longing* and much less so by the reference to autism. The words come from

Lao Tzu, “*Truth waits for eyes unclouded by longing*”. Goodchild explains how he sees “the spiritual journey as a continuous unfolding into the truth of who we really are. Being most human, which invariably means being most vulnerable, then becomes a script for the awakening of a deeper and more authentic spirituality”. These meditations help to achieve that.

The rich diversity of all faiths and cultures is not represented. Some may find the spiritual perspective too specific to the author and the presence of autism distracting but that is perhaps something of the nature of the thing and what gives it its true worth. Autism is a painful gift and each of us perhaps has our own painful gifts to be explored.

As a hospice chaplain I am particularly interested in what we might refer to as the liminal. There is much in this book to explore the inner and outer limits of “self” and much to disturb: “Now your work is simply continuing to tend and ‘simply be’ in the garden, being nothing special” (Meditation 40). I found myself being reminded of many old truths and insights somehow forgotten as well as exploring familiar territory afresh.

There are many meditative texts available. In this collection Goodchild offers hope as well as tools for the journey found through meditation and silence. The world may be overwhelming but being present in it need not be. After describing something of the journey and difficulties of the past year Goodchild’s last meditation ends, “Today I can see that everything is perfect. Such perfection is not something that can be worked towards; it is simply a falling ever deeper into a profound acceptance of what *is*”. I would not hesitate to recommend this book to any who wish to explore what truly is.