SPIRITUALITY IN COUNSELLING

by ***Ann Long***

Abstract:
This paper is designed to invite counsellors to review and examine what spirituality means to each and every one of us as unique human beings. The paper is not written with the intent of being prescriptive. It depicts, merely, one woman's attempt to unravel the enigmatic and mysterious meanings inherent in and around the concepts related to the phenomenon of spirituality and my endeavour to relate these paradoxical themes to counselling. The works of spiritual philosophers are used to reflect on some of these mystifying concepts. Counsellors are providers of a sacred space known as the therapeutic relationship. They are guardians of that essential humanity, which ensures that clients never become less than full human-beings whatever life stories they share or whoever they may be. This paper reflects on some of the fundamental concepts embroidered within the tapestry of the phenomenon of spirituality.

Introduction

Sometimes the very use of the term 'spirituality' stirs up some confusion. It can conjure up iconic flashes of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and so on. Spirituality, as conceptualised in this paper, is not equated with any of the varieties of religious experience. This is principally because it is explored within the context of counselling. To link the conceptualisation with one or all denominations, or creeds, only leads to bias promotion and perhaps to the counsellor's patronage of their own religious views to clients with different belief systems. Throughout history religion has, in some instances, played a part in creating barriers to communication. When extrapolated to counselling, this may become evident when counsellors wear certain jewellery, badges and symbols when working with clients. These actions, sometimes unknowingly, may create barriers, or warnings to clients that certain life experiences are best left unsaid (Klein, 1975).

The current examination of spirituality intends to step over all cultural and religious divides and all other partitions that consciously, or unconsciously, separate one human being from another. The classifications and labels that segregate individuals and nations crave to be overcome. At the same time, it is acknowledged that all creeds, classes and cultures can communicate on a spiritual domain and still maintain their individual choice about being, or not being, affiliated to a certain religion. Consequently, throughout the text the common thread of spirituality will be used like a therapeutic catalyst, which helps to unite humankind like family (Fromm, 1961).

In this paper the term spirituality is used to refer to each individual's right to discover and own his or her interpretation of spirituality. This may be a religious free, culture free, bias free representation, which rests (sometimes quietly) within the being, self, or essence of each and every one of us as unique individuals.

Freedom to be me

Freedom of choice is used as a backdrop to this discussion together with a heightened awareness that there are as many different interpretations of spirituality as there are people on this planet (Gandhi, 1982). With this perspective in mind, the phenomenon of spirituality may be defined as something ideal, in that in one sense it is part of our selves, part of our human inheritance and, therefore, very human, and, in another sense it is greater than ourselves. This mysterious part can be defined as a form of intangible energy that exerts an influence, raises our centre of personal energy and generates developmental, regenerative and healing properties that are unattainable in other ways (James, 1962). This unseen force, or energy, guides each of us and propels the *self* of human beings forward towards self-actualisation (Maslow, 1987) and self-realisation (Rogers, 1993).

Acknowledging the existence of this imperceptible spiritual energy suggests that there is a wider world of 'being' than that of our everyday consciousness and that it is possible to experience union with this something that is greater than our self (Jung, 1989). Moreover, we discern that we have embraced this union when we find our greatest sense of direction in life, a direction that is grounded solidly in higher level principles, values and core human-care qualities (Rogers, 1993; Carkhuff, 1969). Embracing these qualities and using them to guide our actions and hence our counselling practice, enables us to act and to work in accordance with what if felt as deepest and truest within our own self, and in so doing, we find our greatest peace.

Self

The term '*self*' as used in this paper, refers to our innermost being, our essence, our soul. It may be described as analogous to the voice of consciousness and the feeling of wellbeing and of a job well done. This definition of self should not be confused with the notion of cognitive wellbeing, which refers to knowledge we have gained in life from academic experience or from psychological and semantic memory processes. In this paper understanding the word *self* differs from materialistic, academic and worldly knowledge and possessions. Angelus Silesius (1986) eloquently described this notion in his work on the spiritual maxims.

> *'Love goes into God's presence unannounced,*
> *While at the gate*
> *Reason and knowledge must remain,*
> *And for an audience wait.'*

Self care

A spiritual perspective of counselling has become increasingly important among counsellors who wish to work holistically with their clients. However, counsellors need to first feel comfortable with, and have the ability to care for themselves, emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually before they can truly care for others. Otherwise, it is not possible to care for and respect other people's holistic health, wellbeing and well becoming. Counsellors might find it difficult, if not impossible, to co-travel with other human beings (clients) into the emotional, spiritual and mental domains, if they had not first travelled inward into the self and discovered a new and liberated self-awareness. It would be difficult for counsellors to accept and honour a client's perception of his or her spiritual aspect of self and of the truth within –with unconditional positive regard- without counsellors first discovering a personal understanding of spirituality (Rogers, 1993). It is not possible to know other people better than we know our own self. Our capacity to feel for and with other people –a capacity that is vital for the nourishment of spirituality - and counselling - is limited by the extent to which we are able to feel compassionately for and with our own self.

Exploring the spiritual aspect of self, therefore, may begin with the belief and understanding that all our relationships start with our own self. The subtle combination of how we feel about our own self, how well or little we know about our own self and, how healthy and alive we feel inside, largely determines the quality of time we spend comfortably alone, in solitude, coupled with the quality of relationships we have with others. This is particularly noticeable in those interactions that are intimate, self-disclosing and self-revealing such as in the healing encounters that occur in the counsellor-client relationship.

Human being or being human

The experience of 'being' is also central to understanding the concept of spirituality. At moments of 'being' in touch with the spiritual side of self, there is no specific content to consciousness, no colouration,

no qualification, but simply a 'beingness' that is both powerful and all pervading. There is no 'where' to go with this experience, it is 'here and now' (Ferruci, 1983). Experiences of peace and tranquillity often accompany moments of 'beingness'. These experiences permeate every aspect of the psyche and reach out to other people and the world. Consequently, it is an experience of 'being' both unique and universal; having transcended all aspects of our everyday self and yet, at the same time, 'being' oneself more fully than at any other time. 'Being' is present now and forever and is not dependent on change of lifestyle or circumstance. In Psychosynthesis, for example, 'being is, and always has been, a touchstone for healing and human development (Assagoli, 1974).

Spiritual work in counselling, therefore, is not a matter of expanding awareness to obtain more psyche content, but simply a matter of intensifying essential 'being', of removing obstacles or growth blocks to that 'being', and to making choices to allow that 'being' to shine more clearly and brightly through the 'lenses' of the psyche and the body.

The spiritual dimension of self

The 'self' is what an individual is when considered separately from other human–beings. It is 'me' in my individuality, in my inwardness, in my uniqueness. It is my closeness with my own self in times of solitude. Searching for the spiritual dimension is 'an inside job' that begins from within one's own self.

Co-evolving with the 'self' is the concept of 'becoming a person' and self-actualising (Rogers, 1993). Becoming a person is 'me' considered in relationship with other human beings, in my social context, in my solidarity, 'in-touchness' or communion with others in moments of sharing and at times of listening. It reflects my inner world as almost nothing else does. It reveals my innermost self in silence. How I experience having a sense of self dramatically affects how I experience 'being in touch' whether this is with others (clients), as in the; I-thou relationship, or with my innermost self (Buber, 1935). For Buber, 'in-touchness' meant the development and maintenance of spiritual; 'I-thou' relationships. This is a life-long developmental process of discovering how to make enlivening, rewarding, nurturing and caring contacts with other people without losing the sense of and being at ease with who I am - in a self–nourishing and self-affirming way (Vaughn, 1986).

Touching the untouchable, hearing the unspoken and seeing the unseen

Relationships with others, of this nature and wonder, may also happen with individuals we have never met, as I am attempting to do, now, with you the reader. This makes the job seem worthwhile. Further, even as you read you may be 'tuning in' or 'becoming in touch' with me, now, as you read. This makes both of us seem worthwhile (through the channel of a journal).

In order to advance this debate, two interesting perspectives will now be explored. From a metaphysical perspective, a counsellor may be looking at the moon or a star and realising that this same sky can be seen in other countries, at the same time, by other human beings. This type of self-awareness has the power to connect us all together, as one family, in one universe.

From an existential perspective, the spiritual dimension of self enables us to make connections with other human beings in their pain and suffering. For example, when atrocities happen in other countries, as well as our own, other people's suffering has an impact on the self of the person choosing to make that connection with his or her brothers and sisters, on this planet, at this moment in history. In so doing, this connects the self of one person with the self of others. In communion with others we reach out and touch the untouchable, and, in so doing, we become one in our humanness, using the channel of spirituality to hear the unspoken and see the unseen.

Embracing the essence of humanness

The spiritual dimension of self, therefore, refers to the intangible, non-physical part of human beings. The non-physical facets of thought, feeling, and sense of purpose were identified by the early Greeks as the 'psyche' (Saks and Krupat, 1988). Many people and religions tend to use the word 'soul' for this non-physical aspect of human beings (Peck, 1996). People who have a sense of 'soul' have an inner reality, something virtually as precious as life itself, because it distinctly influences the way in which we experience ourselves and relate with others. Von Franz (1975) said: 'The experience of [the soul] within self brings a feeling of standing on solid ground inside oneself, on a patch of eternity, which even physical death cannot touch.'

It is vital therefore for counsellors not to view spirituality as synonymous with religion. Religion is considered by some to be of divine origin, with a set of revealed truths and a form of worship (Peck, 1996). Spirituality is regarded to be of human origin, not based on worship or creed,

but paradoxically from something inherent within the self of the person, which symbolises his or her spirituality in humanness.

Using this frame of reference, it is easy to see that many people who are **not** affiliated to a religious group may be very spiritual and that adherence to a religious group does not automatically guarantee that one is spiritual. To believe that spirituality derives from religion (usually only one religious denomination- depending on what the person is affiliated to) poses many ethical dilemmas for counsellors as witnessed anecdotally in counselling. The following vignettes highlight this quandary.

Incident 1. Counsellor A. could not understand why a client had chosen not to believe in any form of organised religion. After every session she whispered some prayers asking that he might 'see the light'.

Incident 2. During a supervision session counsellor B. disclosed that she was working with a young woman who had gone to England for an abortion. The supervisor asked: 'What is it like to work with a murderer?'

Endeavouring to change counsellors' attitudes about each individual's freedom and right to choose, or not to choose, their own personal form of worship is difficult when it concerns the counsellors' deep and heartfelt understanding of his or her own religion. Yet, if people believe that 'what is right' for them must also be 'right' for all other human beings, we become reductionist in our thinking and in our counselling practice. Hence, we are automatically diminished in our humanness. We no longer practice the core conditions of counselling as we are placing conditions on our clients.

Further, 'In putting ourselves up' as being right (in any scenario) we are simultaneously 'putting others down' as being wrong.

Conclusion

To be spiritual means paradoxically to become fully human. The reverse is also true, with all its pain and beauty, trauma and healing, living and dying. People who are troubled emotionally, or dying, search to find freedom from the bondage of excruciating suffering, and for healing (or a peaceful death).

Counsellors are in a privileged position when journeying with other human beings (clients) who bare their souls while sharing their lived experiences within the sacred space that is called the therapeutic relationship. Moreover, this soul sharing is a much needed life-affirming force for many human-beings like our selves. However, sometimes we may shy away from exploring the spiritual dimension of self. Perhaps because we see it as something different from being fully human, hence fearing it rather than embracing it. Regardless of our own interpretations we should not deprive our students or clients from exploring natural, human, life-giving and life-nurturing spiritual experiences.

Alice Walker (1982) writes eloquently about Shrug experiencing one such moment:

> [Shrug says] *One day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it comes to me; that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact when it happens you just can't miss it.*

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