

# Spirituality and Therapy

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## Abstract:

We are spiritual beings on the human path of life. Spirituality and therapy do not have to be in opposition for both seek to develop self-awareness and integration of the person.

In this article, the human body, our own creativity, our human relationships, our connection with Nature and our 'awareness' are highlighted as avenues to access the innate spirit. The practice of 'Mindfulness' brings us into the present moment and expands our consciousness while Logotherapy provides further sustenance in the search for existential meaning. Meditation and access to the receptive and creative domains of the arts are also identified as portals through which we can deepen our spirituality. The nurturing of the therapist's own spirituality helps sustain relational depth in therapy. Ultimately, it is argued that the spiritual life requires to be honoured as the essence of our humanness.

*"We are spiritual beings on a human path"*

(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)

## What is Spirituality?

We are spiritual beings on a human path. We invoke the word spirituality to describe our human experiences of connectedness and depth. The word spirituality itself is derived from the Hebrew *ruach*, or the Greek *pneuma* meaning spirit, breath, wind, that which gives life or animation. Spirituality has been variously described as that which connects us to other people, nature and the source of life. It is about being aware and getting rid of illusions. It is not about the pursuit of devotion and piety but it is a real and practical way of being in the world. (deMello 1990)

David Tacey's description of spirituality is "attentiveness animated by desire" (Tacey 2003). Attentiveness involves living in the here and now. We can be fearful of what others think of us and this fear suspends our living in the present. The realisation of our dreams and hopes is thus delayed or even thwarted. John O'Donohue (1997) is emphatic in his assertion that "we should never allow our fears or the expectations of others to set the frontiers of our destiny". All we have is the present moment and that moment is laden with possibilities.

## Mindfulness

'Mindfulness' offers us that possibility of staying grounded in the present moment. It is concerned with paying purposeful attention to the present moment in a non-judgemental way. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2007) presents 'Mindfulness' as a type of spiritual therapy which brings an increased awareness of what is happening in the here and now in our lives. As such it requires an intimacy with ourselves.

Mindfulness, as an ancient practice from the Buddhist tradition extols the individual to become aware of their patterns of behaviour. We perceive an event which could be external or which could also be a memory or a thought. We can be swept away by our physical, emotional or mental reaction to that stimulus. The practice of 'Mindfulness' brings the mind back to the present moment. It allows the person become cognisant of the fact that they have choices in how to react to a situation. Living in the present moment opens us up to experience the spiritual, the transcendent and the ineffable. In the particular is contained the experience of the numinous.

## The search for Meaning

The second question raised by Tacey's definition of spirituality is 'what do we desire'? If our quest is for finding meaning in life, the eternal questions of "why are we here?" and "where are we going?" remain at the centre of our search.

Viktor Frankl's version of existential analysis is encapsulated in his formulation of Logotherapy where the search for meaning is identified as the primary motivation in life. (Frankl 1959). Having struggled for survival through the horror of life in a concentration camp, he asserted that even if everything is taken away from a person they still have one freedom remaining i.e the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. Even in times of gross psychic distress and abhorrent physical deprivation, the human being is capable of exercising a type of spiritual freedom. This is the freedom which makes life meaningful and purposeful. (Frankl 1959). In the concentration camp Frankl observed that the prisoners who looked to the past for comfort or escape, failed to grapple with the reality of the present situation. They despised their present life and lived in the past. The "now" thus became meaningless. However, in spite of its horror the present still held possibilities and a chance for the inmates to grow spiritually beyond themselves. (Frankl 1959). ). Logotherapy thus advocates living in the present moment, choosing

how to respond to the now, while keeping hope alive in a vision of the future.

## The experience in Ireland

The human spirit in Ireland has, in the past, been subject to containment and repression. In order to be whole and to live life fully in acknowledgement of our humanity and spirituality, we have to face our darkness. (Hederman 1999). In our unconscious lurks what Jung identified as the shadow side of ourselves with the instincts, impulses and attitudes we find unacceptable. We project 'the shadow' onto others in an act of self-preservation and yet to become whole and individuated we have to befriend and own our 'shadow'. This process was buried in the particular type of Irish spiritualism espoused in the educational system under the tutelage of the Catholic Church. Hederman refers to the type of education that was offered as "the strait-jacket of the asparagus plant" where the social, psychological and sexual aspects were left untended and the unconscious world was ignored. It was also the ethos that pervaded religious practice and the core of civil life. It promoted a split between soul and body, between mind and matter. In Ireland the divine invitation was interpreted as one which involved renouncing "our nature, our flesh and above all our sexuality". (Hederman 1999). However to be spiritual is to be fully human with all our fragilities, foibles, instincts, desires, and with our goodness and giftedness also. It is ultimately through our humanity that our spiritual essence is enriched and made whole.

## Spirituality in other traditions

Modernity, with its emphasis on the material world has not satisfied the deeper longings of the human spirit. There is a societal shift today towards secular or non-institutional forms of spirituality. A myriad of meditative practices, mind, body and spirit movements and philosophic quests have become more pervasive. They involve the exploration of person-centred, nature-based, creative, body-centred, non-gendered forms of spirituality. They highlight the spiritual lacuna that humans, as spiritual beings, seek to fill. The need for the inner journey is therefore more important than ever in these times of social alienation, economic chaos, spiritual void and "existential meaninglessness" (Frankl 1959).

## The wisdom of the body

*"If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred"*  
(Walt Whitman, 1903)

The human body is the home for the spirit. In ancient times Plato viewed mind and body as separate entities. The Greeks perceived the gravity in the body as a negative force in opposition to the divinity. The Christian tradition was in turn heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. An acceptance of this dualism relegated the body to a lesser position. This reflected the Platonic idea of the soul or spirit as a rider on a trenchant horse that had to be tamed. In the same way the spirit was seen as the assuager of the wayward body. (Johnston 1988). The legacy of this dichotomy is still with us.

There is however an integrity about the human body. It is a kind of external frame for an internal storehouse. In order to be congruent we must tap into this treasure house of information which the body conveys to us. (Thorne 2002). If we accept that a spiritual person searches for meaning and purpose in life it follows that they seek to be fully alive in their body. If we live with an awareness and a respect for our body we become attentive to the experience of the moment. In meditation the body is permitted to speak and reveal its truths to us.

### Meditation

The process of meditation is simplicity itself. The paradox of its simplicity is tempered with the requirement of discipline. Meditation invites us to enter into a loving silence and a deep peace. (Johnston 1988). As we practise periods of quiet meditation we begin to hear more from our inner voice, from our spiritual selves. The deeper part of our human nature can be best expressed when the outer part of our being has quietened and is still.

For many people the discipline and practice of meditation is a challenging task. They find it difficult to spend time with themselves. The agitation experienced in the silence is the agitation of the undigested past. The human spirit is calling for attention and healing. We need to befriend the act of 'non-doing or just being'. When we live in the present moment, we find through meditation and through mindfulness that it is full of interesting possibilities. We nurture our body and spirit in the entry into awareness through the fruits of meditation. (Kabatt-Zinn 2007).

### Imagination and the arts

The creative and receptive processes in the arts are also pathways of connection to the spirit. The creation and appreciation of art forms, lead us to the divine self. The arts allow access to our deepest feelings and to the world of our imagination. Through the arts we tap into our right brain with

its holistic, imaginative, spatial, non-sequential mode. Natalie Rogers (2009) writes of the symbolic and metaphoric messages inherent in the arts which give us insight, if we take time to allow the arts speak back to us. Aside from the aesthetic and craft elements of the arts, they are a form of expression and of letting go. The arts allow a connection with the inner self where we are most authentic, most at home with our humanity and spirituality.

### Nature

Nature has long been a source of solace, of contemplation, of nurturing and of healing for human beings. The spiritual life is also accessed through the world of nature. Poets and mystics have written of the redemptive power of nature. They speak of becoming aware of the divine, the ineffable and the numinous through creation. Nature's elemental forces, its grandeur, beauty and complexity inspire awe and wonder. In his sonnet "The world is too much with us" (1802) William Wordsworth laments our separation from the world of nature. He extols our relationship with nature as one of spiritual advancement. To be distanced from nature is to be at distance from our spiritual essence;

*Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

Two centuries on, we are challenged by his words in our society's pursuit of consumerism and in its worship of externality. Pantheism, Buddhism and Christianity alike all extol the life-giving, healing and liberating presences in Nature. She can teach us to listen, to look, to be present and to be aware. Nature teaches us to be in awe at the wonder of creation. Thorne asserts that she helps us experience a sense of connectedness. (Thorne 2002). Jung also believed we had to see ourselves as belonging to a wider cosmic purpose in order to be spiritually alive. (Stevens 1990). Lovelock's theory of 'Gaia' developed in the 1970's is an expression of "the interdependence of all life on this planet, and for many people this energetic ecological reality is experienced as deeply spiritual. (Lovelock, 1979 cited by West 2000). In a cosmological and existential way we are inextricably linked.

### Implications for Therapy

When we view the human being as an embodied spirit it has implications for how we practice therapy. The counselling process can facilitate acceptance, challenge, understanding and a fostering of spiritual growth. Therapists who are

open to the transcendent and comfortable to explore the spiritual domain can work with clients in their search for meaning and deeper spirituality in their lives. (Faiver & Ingersoll (2005) in Kelliher (2009). The therapist also needs to explore with the client whether there are other developmental or emotional issues masqueraded by the overtly spiritual focus. Cashwell, Myers & Shurtz (2004) warn against using a spiritual bypass where “the spiritual identity becomes the individual’s persona while the unfinished psychological business, considered too undesirable by the person to acknowledge, is repressed and relegated to the ‘Shadow’”. With this caveat aside, there are many points of convergence between therapy and spirituality in their pursuit of meaning, their struggles with existence, their exploration of values and their forgiving of self and others. Corey (2005) asserts that dealing with a client’s spirituality will often enhance the therapy process

In Counselling and Psychotherapy there is a recognition of the ‘numinous’ in several of the modalities of therapy. Psychodynamic, Jungian, Transpersonal and Humanistic models have all addressed themes of a spiritual nature. Many therapists themselves believe that therapy is in essence a spiritual process. While there may be a tension inherent between the empirical schools and those with a more mystical inclination, there is a general trend towards a more eclectic and integrative approach in the realm of Psychotherapy in today’s world. (Lines 2006). This is a positive advancement recognising the inherent spiritual nature of the human being. We are not solely cognitive and emotional beings, we too have a spiritual essence.

### Countertransference

If therapists however are not aware of their own attitudes with regard to spirituality, these may block the efficacy and integrity of the counselling process. Any countertransference responses to spirituality need to be explored. Many people carry negative religious experiences with them from childhood into adulthood. The exploration of these in personal therapy can free the therapist.

The nature of counselling work involves therapists paying attention continually to their own internal processes. This is, in essence, a spiritual exercise which leads over the years to spiritual development. (Tart and Deikman, 1991, in West 2000). The reflective therapist is constantly engaged in personal development. That process is part of the bedrock of the therapeutic relationship.

### The centrality of the therapeutic relationship

Humanistic, transpersonal and existential therapies have all been influenced by the works of Martin Buber, Carl Rogers and in more recent times by the writings of Brian Thorne. For Buber “the purpose of relation is the relation itself-touching the You”. (Buber 1970). To Buber all actual life is encounter. When the human being is responding to his ‘You’, he is then living in the spirit. He is in relation with his whole being. He recognises the whole person with the spirit as core of the human being. The challenge for the therapist is to be aware of the sense of unity and absorption. There is an intensity of engagement with the client while still remaining grounded and separate. The boundaries of the therapeutic relationship have to be respected always.

### The Rogerian approach

Carl Rogers viewed his core conditions as somewhat akin to Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ relationship. Roger’s core conditions place the therapeutic relationship at the core of the counselling process. It is a one to one existential encounter and it is also a spiritual encounter. Unconditional positive regard can be also understood as a form of love where the client is offered understanding and acceptance. Rogers placed congruence at the core of the therapeutic encounter. To be authentic is to live in truth and love and as such it is the very essence of the spiritual quest. (Van Kalmhout 2006 in Moore, Campbell & Purton).

Furthermore in the last decade of his life Rogers admitted that something else happened in terms of relational depth when the core conditions were adhered to faithfully. Rogers recognised a type of transcendental experience when one inner spirit touched the other and the relationship became a part of something larger. When he came to acknowledge a spiritual dimension in his work, he then added a further quality to the core conditions, that of *presence*. Rogers asserted that when he was in touch with his inner, intuitive self he was a source of healing. He described something ineffable when he wrote that “at these moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other.....Profound growth and healing energies are present”. (Rogers, in West 2000).


Rogers was moving closer to spirituality in this revelation of a mystical element in the therapeutic relationship. He came to admit to having “underestimated the importance of the mystical, spiritual dimension.” (Rogers 1980). The adherence

to person-centred principles thus allows the therapist to pay attention to the spiritual dimension in the counselling process. The spiritual search of the client is acknowledged as he/she struggles to become more fully human in facing their problems and pain. To be open to the numinous, the ineffable and transcendent is to deepen the therapeutic exploration.

### The concept of tenderness

Brian Thorne (2002) similarly recognises the person as a spiritual being, constantly facing existential questions. He also postulates that the optimum position a person-centred counsellor can hold is to accept spiritual experience as one of the 'givens' of being human and to engage fully with it. Thus in acknowledging his/her own spiritual dimension the counsellor can be more fully present to the client. Thorne acknowledges that his own attempt to involve his whole self in the process and not to deny his spirituality leads to a greater capacity for 'tenderness' in the therapeutic relationship. Thorne's 'tenderness' is somewhat akin to Roger's 'presence.' His nurturing of his own spiritual essence informs and enriches his relationship with the client in the counselling room. (Thorne, 1991). As spiritual beings we have a creative and resourceful dimension, that of our own spirituality, to bring into therapy.

In the final analysis, the practice of psychotherapy in a person-centred way can be regarded not only a psychotherapeutic method but as a philosophy of living. When we pursue our true self we are responding to the quest for our authentic identity. To be in connection with the inner true self is to access our spiritual core. Rogers later in life recognised the development towards the self as one involving change and flow. This can thus become an intersecting point between the humanistic idea of achieving one's potentiality and the spiritual notion of search for our inner selves and authentic identity. (Van Kalmthout 2006)

Ultimately the therapist who is open to the transcendent, the mystical and to the inner journey is also aware of the societal dimension in life. A deep sense of self awareness coupled with heightened social awareness allows the therapist help the client in a way that is mindful of their spirituality. The therapeutic relationship works best when the therapist brings the whole self into the relationship. The spirit and body are together in this quest for wholeness. 



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