

Psychotherapy as a Spiritual Process

The relationship between psychotherapy and spirituality is one of the most fruitful areas of Transpersonal Psychology. The historical roots of each discipline are separate which at times has created conflict. However, there is now great need and benefit in exploring their commonalities. Psychotherapy is one of the avenues through which the principles of Transpersonal Psychology can be embodied in a concrete way. Psychotherapy can be a bridge between the often esoteric studies of altered states of consciousness and daily, ordinary life. Transpersonal Psychology adds dimensions of complexity and depth to the reductionistic models of humanity from which psychology emerged. Transpersonal psychology lifts psychotherapy out of a dreary, often boring, barely alive and usually unacknowledged mechanical view of human nature. It points the way toward spiritual dimensions of life which psychology itself is poorly equipped to handle.

This article discusses ways in which the fields can infuse each other. It begins with a story challenging the division of the cosmos into so-called 'secular' and 'sacred' parts. Following this two views of psychotherapy as a spiritual process are presented. The first view sees psychotherapy as spiritual when it aids in the healing of suffering. The second view takes the approach of seeing psychotherapy as spiritual when it evokes the deepest essence of a human being.

AN APOCRYPHAL STORY

At the time of the Copernican revolution the Christian Church was in an uproar. The cherished dogma that the Earth was the center of the universe was being proven wrong by the fledgling science of Astronomy. The Ptolemaic view of the solar system, which held that the sun and planets revolved around the earth, was considered to be an article of faith. This view was challenged by, among other things, Galileo's telescope and the calculations of Copernicus. As a new view of the cosmos began to emerge, a conclave was called to discuss the issues. True to form for the church, the evidence was ignored and believers were instructed to hold fast to their faith in the Ptolemaic view. The Copernican view was banned.

However, travelers especially those responsible for navigation of ocean going vessels, pleaded for a change. Apparently, the methods of calculation for navigation in the Copernican system were infinitely simpler than those required in the Ptolemaic system. Sailing, travel and commerce would be speedier and more lucrative with the new system. So the church reconvened its conclave and amended the teaching with an interesting compromise. Basically the new teaching said, "You may use the new system but don't believe it." (1)

It would be easy to see this as a hypocritical position. But it is actually a very valid approach to all understandings about the universe. We can use approaches, cosmologies and perspectives, but it is important not to mistake them for Truth.

One of the most common, important and often unquestioned understandings of the cosmos is the assumption that reality is easily divided into parts, subdivisions, sections

and segments. In the context of this discussion the most relevant division is into spiritual and not spiritual, or sacred and secular, or body and soul. The tendency in modern thought is to divide people into parts: biological, psychological, intellectual or spiritual. The number of parts depends upon the system being advocated. Inevitably there is a power struggle between parts for which one will be dominant.

Originally the division of people into parts had a positive function. It permitted easier study, research and progress in many dimensions. The human, individual equivalent to the Ptolemaic view of the universe was to view all things as being one big mass of undifferentiated spiritual essence, fully described by religious dogma. Prior to the enlightenment, religion, art, science, ethics and politics were fused into one. This is true to such an extent that a heretic was tried as a traitor in the Middle Ages. Ken Wilber (1996), the transpersonal philosopher, points out the division into separate realms originally permitted research in one realm to progress without intrusions or even punishment from other domains. He reviews the development of what he calls the 'rational-industrial' worldview and its accomplishments that include the rise of democracy, liberal feminism, ending slavery, the emergence of empirical science and dramatically increased life span. However, along with these not inconsequential achievements came problems. The newly separated domains began struggling not for integration but domination with each often denying validity to the other. The divisions became dissociations.

Psychology was born into an environment in which dissociation of fields was at its height. Dissociation from philosophy and religion dominated its early years. In

addition, psychology was initially controlled by a model that viewed human beings as not very different from steam engines. Increasingly this view has declined only to be replaced by a different form of reductionism. Biology has become the dominant force colonizing increasing territory. Human struggles are reduced entirely to biological processes.

Depression becomes primarily a matter of Serotonin regulation. Certainly, depression has significant biological components. There is a biological level to every experience. All experience has its empirical, objective, measurable chemical aspects. The only valid data for the field of psychology became that which was empirically verifiable. In this world-view, there is Science and there is Religion. Primarily, the two meet in either conflict or in one analyzing the other.

The spirituality of psychotherapy is best understood when it is remembered that the model which so dissociates disciplines are mere maps. They are meant to be used when useful; not clung to as Truth. The divisions are human constructions which have for the most part outlived their usefulness. They once created safety and freedom of thought. They now foster dissociation, reductionism and fragmentation. The deeply ingrained, often unquestioned, assumption regarding the separation of the sacred and secular, which has so dominated psychology from its inception, needs to be replaced with a more integrative view. This can be accomplished through emphasis first on psychotherapy as a healing process and second on emphasis of the role of the Soul in psychotherapy. (2)

PSYCHOTHERAPY, HEALING AND SPIRITUALITY

From the first perspective, spirituality inevitably becomes the heart and center of psychotherapy. *As people heal spiritual processes emerge from within the fabric of psychotherapy. Whenever healing takes place in psychotherapy it becomes a spiritual process.*

Spirituality is not an aspect of psychotherapy that can be divided from other aspects of therapy but is its essence. The focus is not on some spiritual realm, holy arena or divine addendum. It is not an orientation like other orientations; cognitive, behavioral or psychoanalytic. It is also clear that it is not that some topics are spiritual while others are secular. Spirituality is not defined by particular words, bible references, meditation techniques or the ideas of the participants involved in the process. The Ultimate arises where it chooses to arise and often does so in spite of any overt religiosity.

Overcoming of deficits in our being- our personality, psyche, self- is in itself a spiritual process. It takes the kind of heroic effort similar to the voyages of Ulysses or the search for the Holy Grail in the Arthurian legends. When the bonds of human constraint are removed and people freed from slavery to inner bondage a spiritual experience is happening.

The experience of healing and liberation is the critical element that points to the spiritual nature of psychotherapeutic processes. There are many concrete examples of this. When the tentacles of childhood sexual abuse are slowly removed from the psyche a profoundly spiritual experience is occurring in this liberation. When a woman learns that intimate relationships do not have to be violent the Eternal emerges. From the opposite part of that experience, when a man learns that intimate relationships do not require

coercion and that a partner can freely choose to be with him the Ultimate is present. When a person wracked by repeated panic attacks begins to experience that there are ways to control symptoms through breathing, relaxation and visualization a spiritual experience in renewed trust in the Divine is occurring. Finally, when a person diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder stops cutting and moves away from the edge of suicide to a more normal, ordinary life the Non-ordinary Cosmic Absolute is present.

The Ultimate arises whenever healing takes place. In psychotherapy spirituality is evoked by the experience of healing which is a miracle whenever it occurs.

Within the Judeo-Christian theological tradition the spirituality of psychotherapy is a radically immanent spirituality. Within Judeo-Christian theology God is seen primarily as either transcendent or immanent. The transcendent involvement of the Divine is from the outside into life, striking much as lightening from the heavens to the earth. The immanent involvement is seen as rising from within the fabric of life. Mathew Fox (1988, p. 155) writes, “The divine mystery and the miracle of existence is laid bare in the unique existence of each atom, each galaxy, each tree, bird, fish, dog, flower, star, rock and human.... To experience compassion and to identify with the suffering of others- as well as their joy- is to experience the Divine One who suffers and rejoices in each person.”

As a young seminary student in the 1970's I was deeply impressed with the biblical vision of The Final Judgment related in Matthew 25:31-46. The crucial qualities, which separate the righteous from non-righteous, are feeding the hungry, clothing the

naked, visiting the sick or imprisoned. Typical of the times, I read this as a call for social and political justice.

Psychotherapy seemed to be a way to work with “the least of these” who needed comfort, feeding and freedom. Today the passage seems far more profound. While it is clearly about political and social justice there is another level to it. For it is in human need and suffering that the Divine is encountered. (Boring, 1995, p 454-459) as people are fed, clothed and comforted in psychotherapy the Ultimate is encountered in a very real and practical way.

This is one of the ways in which the world’s spiritual traditions ground the Divine encounters within the human realm. Buddhism is remarkably similar in its understanding of the unity of all things including the human and divine. As we discover the human heart we discover the universe. “When we discover the Buddha that we are, we realize that that everything and everyone is Buddha.” (Chodron, 2000, p. 76) Psychotherapy at its best is a healing experience. In that healing the divine is encountered.

This view is an important addition to the understanding of psychotherapy. However, it is also incomplete. There is another way in which psychotherapy is a spiritual process. This second approach takes these considerations one step further to consideration of the place of the Soul in psychotherapy.

A SECOND VIEW: SPIRITUALITY AS EVOKING THE SOUL

A major problem with the field of psychology is that it is so very limited. It comes to a blinding, screeching halt with the personality. It is a discipline that initially worked

very hard to distinguish itself from religion and philosophy. Consequently any concepts implying an overt metaphysical connection were banished. The discipline began as determinedly materialistic, empirical and scientific. There have been lengthy critiques of psychology as a discipline that is more aware of and dedicated to its methodology than its content (Koch, 1962). One of the founders of behaviorism, John B. Watson, speculated that religion was primarily a tool to control children and exploit others. Bernham, (1985, p. 326) quotes Watson saying, “No one knows how the idea of a soul or the supernatural started. It probably had its origins in the general laziness of mankind.”

It has often been noted that the words for psyche and soul have similar origins. Soul is translated from the Greek word ‘Psyche.’ In much ancient literature, including the Jewish and Christian scripture, the reference is less to the immortal soul than to the life principle, or animating principle, or even essence of life. In the Jewish scriptures it appears related to the Hebrew words “napasu,” “Neshamah,” or “Ruah” all of which, it is commonly noted, refer to breath. *The Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Neusner, 1996, p. 599) says the soul is, “The innermost, most vital, and intimate part of a human being- the part that is sentient, decision making, morally responsible, subject to emotion and feeling, susceptible to religious experience, and liable to divine judgment.” The Soul can contract or expand its strength or the life force (Buttrick, 1962). On occasion, the word Soul may denote the self or the full range of emotions and experiences. (Bromley, 1988).

Psychotherapy is spiritual when it evokes this aspect of a human being. The consideration of the Soul deepens and broadens the potential range and effect of

psychotherapy immeasurably. The inclusion of the Soul in psychotherapy has the potential of being the most broadening and significant event since Freud's inclusion of the unconscious. In fact Freud may have been much more open to spiritual insights and considerations than he is often given credit for (Bettelheim, 1982).

In the context of psychotherapy, the Soul has a dual and paradoxical meaning. On the one hand the Soul is that which is deepest, most truly unique, particular and individual about a person. Soul is a person's essence, core and center. On the other hand, the Soul is that within the person which is divine, infinite, eternal and universal. Soul refers to a person's cosmic nature. It is the divine within. Soul in this sense is that within the person that is 'other.' The Soul is the primary agent in human life rather than the personality (Yeomans, 1999).

There is more to a human being than can be known through only the personality. The finite human personality has its own worth, value, majesty and glory. Much of psychotherapy that treats personality wounds is of great worth and as a healing experience is itself spiritual. But there is more. In this view personality becomes the vehicle through which the Divine and Cosmic is realized in a given life. The Soul uses the finite personality to expand the human being exponentially beyond the personality. The Soul both informs the personality of eternal perspectives and uses the personality for expression of the values associated with those perspectives. This is a much broader view of human life and the place of psychotherapy.

In summary, the Soul has four functions. First, as indicated earlier, the Soul is that within which is both most uniquely individual and universal, human and divine, unique

and cosmic. Both sides of these polarities need to be seen if one is to have a full view of human nature. The emphasis on the Soul brings a depth to psychotherapy not encountered in work with the personality alone. The Soul both grounds a person in his or her own unique, personal, individual life and it gives expression to cosmic, divine, spiritual energies. Second, the Soul is the capacity to hold all of one's experiences without judgment or comparison. The Soul holds every experience including shadow elements, higher qualities, successes and so called 'failures' or 'mistakes.' The Soul holds all aspects of experience without disowning any energy. In psychotherapy, when previously disowned energies are newly accepted the Soul is evoked. It is important to stress in this context that while it is commonly understood that 'negative' qualities such as rage, fury, hate and guilt are often disowned, the positive qualities such as love, compassion, and beauty are also often repressed and disowned. (Haronian, 1974). Third, the Soul is the organizing principle of a lifetime. As such it is able to approach situations with a perspective of long-term benefits, risks, consequences and values. The Soul is able to view experience from the perspective of an entire lifetime and perhaps even lifetimes. When the Soul is evoked in psychotherapy the individual is less weighted down by the day-to-day fears, anxieties and worries that so dominate the personality. Fourth, the Soul is the infinite seeking expression through the finite personality. It both informs the personality of eternal perspectives and uses the personality for expression of those perspectives. At all times, and in all situations, the Soul seeks to express qualities such as love, compassion and joy. The Soul uses each individual experience as an opportunity to

learn about and more fully embody transpersonal values. Psychotherapy which evokes the Soul widens the individual's awareness of and commitment to those values.

There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to this approach to human beings, values and psychotherapy.

The major disadvantage is the fear of a reification process in which the Soul is established as another theoretical construct which is simply deeper, truer or more spiritual than concepts like Id, Ego, Super-ego or True Self. The Buddhist doctrine of 'no-self' is aimed at this difficulty. By taking the Soul seriously one takes the risk of postulating a being within a being which requires another being within it to monitor it *ad infinitum*. This ends up becoming one more form of dualism along side the other dualisms of object vs. subject, true vs. false, good vs. bad, self vs. not self, spiritual vs not spiritual. *The Spectrum of Consciousness* by Ken Wilber (1993) is a brilliant analysis of this very real problem that plagues Western Philosophy.

However, the Soul is not some separate self, part, aspect or object within the person. The Soul needs to be seen in its connectedness to all other aspects of a person. All phenomenon are deeply interwoven and interconnected. The organizing principle of a life is not separate from that life. The Soul and the personality are like the colors of the rainbow that at points are seemingly distinct and separate but which actually blend into one another.

The major advantage of seeing the Soul as central is that it takes very seriously the potential depths of a human being. It provides an alternative to the grasping, clinging style that so dominates the personality. Personality is primarily concerned with its own

survival. As such it has little interest in infinite and eternal concerns. The Soul takes a deeper, wider, life-long perspective. The Soul sees the larger picture. Qualities such as awe, love, compassion and courage emerge through the Soul. The Soul sees events through the lens of the eternal. The Soul paves the way beyond fear, control and immediate survival toward trust, freedom and thriving. Psychotherapy that stops with the personality has little to say about the deeper qualities that flow from the most mature experiences.

This focus on the centrality of the Soul changes the practice of psychotherapy is a variety of ways. The major approach involves seeking to clarify Soul energies as they emerge. While old wounds are not ignored, they are seen in a different light. Wounds, trauma, emotional struggles and relational discord have a role and need to be faced head on in all psychotherapy. But these experiences are seen in the light of the emergence of the Soul's energies. When this happens, people experience themselves as finding new possibilities in their lives. Increasingly I find myself working with people who are essentially happy in their lives but are finding new kinds of issues emerging. Often, long dormant inner yearnings are emerging. What is crucial is that while the wounds need to be taken very seriously and not ignored, the presence of inner transformative energies of the Soul are equally important.

Two examples will help explain this.

First, a woman in her fifties began to feel the need to sing classical music. She took singing lessons for over three years making some significant progress. But then she encountered a 'wall.' She had developed a measure of technical expertise but found

herself unable to forget technique and flow with the beauty of the music. She has lived a life in which she over came numerous traumas primarily through exercising her considerable will- power. For most of her life she accomplished things by working very hard at them. In this arena, the harder she worked the more difficult singing became. She was tempted to quit. But, she said, "I can't quit. I know I'll regret it later if I do. This yearning to sing is deeper than anything I have ever felt before. I can't let go of it."

Reviewing her adult life she knew things had gone well for her and she was satisfied with much of what she had done. However, now, something deeper and essential had claimed her. Issues related to survival and self-esteem were in the background. For her she was dealing with the meaning of her life in the time that remained for her. And, she had been grasped by beauty and awe and wanted to respond with her full being.

Second, a successful businesswoman came to therapy because of 'depression.' She said, "I have everything I need. There is no reason for this. I have everything a person could want and I don't care if I get up in the morning." As we talked it became clear that although she had accumulated many material possessions and had many of the external signs of success, she had very little of what she actually wanted. None of it mattered to her. Within the so-called 'depression' she was really experiencing an unnamed sense that there were deep inner yearnings that had been unrecognized throughout most of her life. She came to see that what really interested her was what she called her "hobby" of meditation and exploring spiritual paths. With considerable fear and anxiety she decided to make some drastic changes. She gave up her job, went back to

school to study alternative healthcare and has now developed a successful practice as a body therapist.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the interface between spirituality and psychotherapy. There is a great deal of room for further exploration into this topic using alternative approaches and clarifying details. It is especially important that the nature of the Soul be discussed from a variety of perspectives. This is an exciting arena for further investigation whose possibilities are quite limitless.

Footnotes

1. This story is subject to the vagaries of memory. It is all that remains from several semesters of church history while a seminarian in the early 1970's. I have no idea if it is an adequate representation of the proclamation of the church council. It does I think represent the essence of how it was explained by the professor. Nevertheless, the poetic meaning of the story is valid. The story, in that sense, needs to be applied to itself.
2. Throughout this article I will use the word Soul rather than the more cumbersome Transpersonal Self primarily because I consider it more accessible and overtly spiritual.

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