

WAYNE STATE
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The Essence of Spirituality

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For

The Elizabeth N. Brehler Scholars Program

1996 Manuscript Competition

Wayne State University

School of Social Work

THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUALITY

It was only after the illness that I understood how important it is to affirm one's own destiny. In this way we forge an ego that does not break down when incomprehensible things happen; an ego that endures, that endures the truth, and that is capable of coping with the world and with fate. Then, to experience defeat is also to experience victory. Nothing is disturbed - neither inwardly nor outwardly, for one's own continuity has withstood the current of life and of time.

- Carl Gustav Jung

To suggest the significance of spirituality to social work practice may be perceived as taboo, unconventional, or bordering on the religious extreme. It is, however, a social work value that operates in every therapeutic session and in every dimension of social work practice, yet receives little recognition and a scant amount of publication. Its very existence created a schism between Sigmund Freud and his crown prince, Carl Gustav Jung, primarily because spirituality is often confused with religion, and therefore threatens the empirical boundaries imposed upon clinicians who have labored intensely to analyze human beings and their behavior. The soft whisper of spirituality can be heard in the hushed conversations which took place privately between Freud and Jung, and which take place among practitioners today who confess to communing with the souls of their clients. Spirituality is directly linked to the soul, yet is distinct from it. Elkins suggests that, "Spirit is about height; soul is about depth. Spirit is the phoenix rising from the ashes; soul is the ashes from which the phoenix arose" (1995).

To precisely define spirituality is akin to capturing the wind in one's hands. Therefore, I will define what spirituality is not before attempting to breathe life into what I believe it to be. Spirituality is not religion, yet it encompasses every religion. It does not dwell within the rigid structures of the church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, but leaves an imprint of itself within all of them. It does not conform to scientific laws, yet embraces them. Spirituality cannot be contained, colored, described, earned, bought, or stolen; it is an energy that is boundless, abundant, internal, external, and eternal. It is the dynamic force which unites and transcends the intellect and the emotions. It is the spark of the divine imagination stretching beyond time, adhering to no boundaries, that ignites a

concept to flourish into a burning belief. It recognizes each individual as a unique gift of creation with a contribution to the whole that is unknown at birth and given meaning through the life process. Spirituality is the journey, not the destination. Its obscurity nurtures its clarity. Author John Martin states that spirituality "is in the domain of mystery. It is like love...it is the thing in him (the human being) which makes him alive" (1990).

"The nature of social work is to foster conditions that promote the values of worth, dignity, and uniqueness of all persons," (NASW Code of Ethics, 1971). The focus of my clinical work as a social worker has been with the chemically dependent population. Powerlessness is a concept by which the client initially admits to his/her lack of control over a substance and is willing to develop the practice of delayed gratification. Commonly known as Step One in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, it is also the only step that directly refers to the substance alcohol. The remaining eleven steps address spiritual development by plunging into the depths of soul in order to free the spirit. I am intimately familiar with these steps on both a personal and professional level as a recovering alcoholic and as a clinical social worker. I believe the principles underlying the 12 Steps can serve as a guide for the chemically dependent client as well as a vehicle by which the clinician may incorporate the spiritual dimension of each client into their treatment plan. It is important to accept the chemically dependent individual's reality of self as a survivor of an illness that can be progressive, incurable, and fatal. Spirituality lends an added dimension of meaning to the renaissance of life. "The practitioner should be willing to incorporate goals in treatment that include spiritual values for the accomplishment of tasks. When deciding what is in the client's best interests from his or her own perspective, the practitioner should consider spiritual issues" (Sermabeikian, 1994).

Elkins defines psychotherapy as "the art of nurturing and healing the soul," and believes that, "the primary task of the therapist is *cura animarum*, the cure and care of the soul" (1995). The 12 Step philosophy promotes spirituality, not religion, as a means for personal examination, change, and growth. It provides chemically dependent individuals with the freedom to choose a "Higher Power" of their own understanding. Often, the word God is used in its most generic form and is substituted for the use of Higher Power. It is relevant and different from the religious context in that the only qualifiers for a Higher Power are loving, caring, and greater than oneself. Once the client has arrived at a personal conception of this Power, the excavation process leading to the soul begins through a moral inventory and the making of amends. At this point, the wedding of the soul and the spirit occur. When recovering individuals accept their humanity, they can then soar

into the creative realm of the spirit. This is exemplified by the twelfth step that indicates a spiritual awakening.

In a personal letter to Bill W. (co-founder of AA), Carl Jung equated the craving for alcohol with the spiritual thirst of the human being for "wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God" (Wilson, 1988). Jung maintained that the only "legitimate way to such an (spiritual) experience is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher understanding" (Ibid). Therefore, it becomes an important task for the therapist to tease out these spiritual awakenings in our clients, or to reflect their significance back to them. Equally important is the ability of the therapist to recognize and accept the concept as an integral component of the therapeutic relationship. "The practitioner who respects the client's spiritual values and beliefs may discover that therapeutic benefits can be accomplished through them" (Sermabeikian, 1994). I use the following example from my own experience to clarify the spontaneous nature of spiritual awakenings:

Alan Z. came to my office early on a Sunday morning to ascertain if I remembered him from a previous treatment attempt. He had spent three days in detoxification during which time I had led a group discussion on the concept of powerlessness. Alan was a chronic, long-term alcoholic who had multiple attempts at sobriety. He was convinced that he was hopeless and had challenged me during the group. That was my only recollection when he appeared at my office. He began to describe what had happened to him following his discharge from the detox unit: He had continued drinking and had consumed approximately two to three fifths of liquor when he began hallucinating and was taken to the local hospital. He had a blood alcohol level of .74 which should have been lethal. When Alan regained consciousness, his physician informed him that his recovery was nothing short of a miracle and that Alan had broken the hospital's record for the highest blood alcohol level ever recorded of a patient who lived. The physician told Alan that he had given up on him because there was nothing, medically, that he could have done for him. It was at this point in his story that Alan looked into my eyes and asked me if this, indeed, was a spiritual awakening.

The fact that Alan should have been dead, yet survived this medical dilemma, is a common theme underscoring many accounts of the chemically dependent population. It is what Jung

referred to as "*spiritus contra spiritum*," (Wilson, 1988). My own battle with alcoholism included many unsuccessful attempts to control my consumption utilizing a will power model of abstinence. My own awakening erupted from the depths of my soul in the form of an appeal to whatever force existed: "God help me, I can't stop!"

Martin contends that "It is at the point of darkest despair, within the deepest confines of the being himself, that this primeval communion with anything healthy, positive, akin to life itself, takes place. This is the first connection with truth ...an impulsive cry from the deepest part of the person is addressed to the inside God, or the life force itself. It happens in a moment of deep communion with oneself...when the addict is most connected with his pain and the part that hurts most deeply" (1990). This impulsive cry is echoed by Elkins, "Psychopathology is the cry of our souls, and symptoms are messages of pain from the deepest part of our being... When our soul is deprived, neglected, hungry, thirsty, wounded, or abused, it suffers" (1995). My work with Ann M. further illuminates the plea of the soul:

Ann M. had a treatment history that would challenge the most seasoned practitioner. A highly creative woman in her mid-thirties, with seventeen episodes in a variety of substance abuse facilities, she presented as hostile, belligerent, and demonstratively resistant. Her creativity and her curiosity were her greatest allies. Her history was rife with strong, persecutory, religious demons raging internally from her childhood cauldron. Alcohol was her only weapon to quench the blazing inferno within. Spirituality was the only vapor I could offer to dampen this tempest. After months of disillusioning encounters and with termination looming on the horizon, I suggested to her one simple invocation: Heal what needs to be healed; reveal what needs to be revealed.

I had no further contact with Ann until six months later. I received a lengthy typewritten letter in which she described, "something which died in her soul," following our last session. She had spent these months isolated and, "overwhelmed with the prospect of merely existing and finding a way to survive ...hopeless, hurting, and merely clinging" to her one year of sobriety. One evening, in desperation, she cried out the prayer that I had suggested and promptly fell asleep. She emphatically reported that she did not experience a, "wild bolt of lightning anointing her with a spiritual lobotomy...but rather a gradual, inexplicable,

enlightening, progressive something," which led her back to the road of recovery. She described this something as a thirst for recovery and an anchor in her storm. In her words, "I feel more hope. I feel more guided. I feel like someone scooped me up in the nick of time and saved me from my chronic negativity" (Ann M., 1994).

Ann M. is currently in her third year of sobriety.

The thirst for spirituality is not limited to the chemically dependent population. If one turns to the Greeks for the true meaning of psychopathology, one can appreciate the literal translation as "the suffering of the soul." A medical model reflects a deficit approach to psychopathology as a "disease of the mind" and limits the therapeutic intervention to medication and symptom reduction. A Jungian approach allows for a strengths perspective by including the body/soul duality which is more in keeping with the holistic interventions utilized by social workers. Borenzweig contends that Jung's, "postulate that the Self is *a priori* to the ego has important practice implications" and, "makes a considerable difference if one approaches one's clients as if one believes they possess an *a priori* essence known as the Self, or if one approaches one's clients as mere products of their psycho-social histories" (Borenzweig, 1984).

Establishing treatment goals with clients presents additional challenges when the practitioner espouses the spiritual dimension. Effective casework entails linking the client with the provision of services which can best match the client's needs. Food, shelter, and safety are of paramount importance, yet many clinicians do not attend to the client's plea for serenity. The soul emanates from the fodder of the earth and requires hope, insight, and guidance. Jung emphasized an alternative to the limitations of external success and happiness by allowing the inner personality to emerge. He related the inner division existing within the individual to the larger struggle present in nature itself to free consciousness from unconsciousness and provide meaning, insight, and purpose (Charet, 1993).

The life and death nature of alcoholism and addiction creates a tremendous spiritual dilemma in the newly sober client. Abruptly thrust into the world of reality, people may express bewilderment, shock, or even wonder at the mere fact that they are still alive. It is as if a veil has been lifted and perception has been sharpened. Clients are often baffled by a new sense of reverence for nature that mirrors their own restorative process. The treatment environment

becomes a secure womb and it is here where the practitioner and client can explore the depths of the soul. Therapy nourishes the "conscious retracing of the heretofore unconscious journey" (Borenzweig, 1984).

The process of individuation entails owning one's shadow and contrasting it with the persona. While the persona is the appearance, or mask, one presents to the outside world, the shadow consists of those traits that one habitually hides from oneself or prefers to label as "not me" (Borenzweig, 1984). It is in the therapeutic relationship where clients explore the nature of their shadows. The process begins with a dawning realization that the shadow represents a more profound reality than the physical substance of alcohol. This, in turn, creates an intense cavern of loneliness and a loss of identity for clients. Years of addiction have laid their spiritual soil barren and yet they are still alive. It is this keen sense of alienation from the very essence of self that stirs individuals into surrendering isolation in order to restore their connection to life. "Something in us must die before we can be resurrected into our individuated Selves. One must allow oneself to become less in order to become more." (Borenzweig, 1984).

The vestiges of the past must be stripped away, examined under a new light, and sifted through for precious remnants to ease the client through the transition period. Freshly bathed in the springs of a baptismal fountain, the therapeutic intervention unfolds. "Solutions to problems usually require us to humble the ego by submitting to the healing waters of the unconscious," (Borenzweig, 1984). A communion takes place within the individual integrating thinking, sensation, feeling, and intuition. The initiation process into the treatment milieu, family sessions, group therapy, and support groups intensifies the communion experience by enveloping the client in a soothing balm of dialogue and kinship. From this simple birth, the soul ascends to touch the spirit.

In emphasizing the therapeutic relationship as the vehicle by which to incorporate a spiritual component, it is necessary for therapists to be intimately connected to their own souls. If we are to start where the client is at, we must extend our soulful intervention to the depths of our own soul's genesis. "We reach only as deeply into the other as the place from which we are coming within ourselves." (Elkins, 1995). The creative interaction taking place within the therapist, within the client, and between the two is further enhanced by discovering those things which hold beauty, value, and truth for the client. It is my firm conviction that every individual has the capacity to destroy and to create. When the soul has suffered long and endured the "rocky paths and

obstacles" which Elizabeth Brehler knew so instinctively, it has laid the fertile soil from which the spirit can burst forth with illuminating intensity.

Elkins suggests exploration of the meaning of soul and the importance of nurturing the soul as part of the therapeutic process. He advises the recollection of "those experiences in life that have touched or moved the client most deeply," (Elkins, 1995). This exploration is a delicate one and can only be accomplished with empathy, respect, compassion, trust, and acceptance. Each client is unique, and the journey of his or her soul will reveal the tenor of that soul. Inspired and imaginative interventions tapping the artistic flair of the particular client through writing, art, poetry, and music can provoke the spirit and stimulate the healing process. If we are to call forth the spirit, we must charm the soul. Ours is not an arduous task, unless we keep still our souls and our spirits.

The work of Carl Jung resonates of a life well lived. He has laid the foundation for a theory of spirituality that unites science with art, life with death, and good with evil: Paradoxes, which co-exist since time immemorial. Elizabeth Brehler met these same paradoxes with the desire to grow intellectually, socially, and spiritually as evidenced in her faith in a supernatural being and belief in all people.

The true essence of spirituality in social work practice is the recognition and development of the energy that flows between the soul of the practitioner and that of the client in the therapeutic relationship. This dynamic is expressed symbolically as the process of rebirth, which is encircled by a halo of gratitude. Gratitude is the reawakening of the spirit to the gift of life following an immersion into the shadow. "Gratitude is a mind-set, a way of seeing and thinking that is rooted in a remembrance, the remembrance of being without the gift," (Kurtz, 1992). When clients have truly experienced the passionate cries from the life force within, gratitude springs forth for the rebirth that has been given freely and spontaneously. It is at this juncture where clients assume responsibility for their renaissance and actively pursue a meaningful life: a life that is in sharp contrast to the lifestyle that preceded it.

The gratitude of the survivor is best exemplified by the poignant words of Elie Wiesel in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

"No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night.

We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

-Elie Wiesel

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