

Spiritual Experiences in Therapy

William West

Our experiences in therapy and in groups, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension.

Carl Rogers

Although the spiritual antecedents of psychotherapy and counselling can be found in the practices of witches, priests, and shamans, many modern-day therapists tend to ignore spirituality or see it in terms of regression. This is reflected in psychotherapy and counselling training courses, many of which deal with issues around sexuality and sexual abuse in some depth, but few of which address spirituality. Some of those that do mention spirituality regard it, as Freud did, as negative — something infantile, to be grown out of. Spirituality is almost the last great taboo, especially in the therapy world. A colleague of mine recently said to me, 'I'm very careful who I talk to about it, even my supervisor'.

With the decline in Christianity in Britain has come something of a spiritual



vacuum, a search for meaning that religion used to supply. Nevertheless, many people in Britain have experiences that they regard as spiritual or mystical. Surveys such as that conducted by Hay and Morisy show that over one in three people are having such experiences. However, there is a reluctance to share such experiences, despite a need to. People fear being labelled mad for disclosing that they have heard voices, had an experience of divine union, or felt the presence of a spirit being.

In parallel with this decline in church attendance, there has been an upsurge in

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counselling and psychotherapy. Therapy could be one place where it might be safe to explore such experiences. Indeed therapy sessions are one place where such experiences can occur.

As part of my research for a PhD, I have been interviewing therapists whose work crosses over into healing. One such humanistic psychotherapist shared the following experience of what can happen within his work: 'When a certain level of resonance is achieved something comes in . . . where there is a common purpose and there is something of a common field . . . and there is harmony there, I do think that there is often at that moment something else, something of the "other" comes in at that point, that is my experience, that suddenly there is more than just two people in the room. Now whether that's healing, whether that's God, it depends upon your language — it's certainly, I feel, a qualitative difference.'

Of course you don't have to use spiritual language to describe such an experience, though it is surprising how many people who would claim to be non-spiritual will do so. The increased interest in non-orthodox forms of Christianity, in Buddhism, Goddess worship, and New Age forms of spirituality creates the added complication of what vocabulary to use to talk about spirituality, but it also widens the possibilities of finding a language that an individual can relate to.

One of the delights of modern academic research into Buddhism is a realisation that Buddhist descriptions of meditative states of consciousness are not merely beautiful poetry, but very specific and accurate descriptions enabling one to

distinguish between one state and another (see the Brown and Engler reference in Further Reading).

The main point is that the problem of finding an acceptable language should not lead us to deny the validity of our spiritual experiences. We may with justification feel pain, anger, fear, or grief about the way spirituality has been, and is, abused in us, in others, and in society at large, mainly by organised religions. For many people Christianity is beyond the pale, completely discredited. However, it is absolutely crucial that this does not block our and our clients' spiritual development. The more we deny the spiritual side of our nature, the more extreme the ways in which it will make itself known to us. Again this is something that may arise within the therapy room.

To me, spirituality is about expansion, about seeing myself and other people as bigger than just their bodies, their egos, or their minds. It is also about confronting the myth of our separateness from each other, from the planet and from the universe at large (something which regrettably is maintained to a large extent by Christianity). Some clients cannot heal themselves whilst they cling on to this myth.

To speak of the spiritual as a separate part of life is an error. All of life is spiritual; to deny that is to do harm, to maintain the pernicious myth of our separateness from each other and from the planet. However, we use the word 'spiritual' to refer to those experiences we have of not being separate; they take us into a non-ordinary state of consciousness that can be life-changing.

There is a saying: 'You can only get as

high as your therapist', meaning that your therapist cannot help you explore places they have never been to. To help our clients to explore their spiritual natures in the therapy process, as is their right, we as therapists need to engage in exploring that side of our own nature. As John Rowan says in his recent book on the transpersonal, 'My own belief at present is that anyone who wants to be a good psychotherapist has to have their own spiritual discipline which they follow'. Indeed we also need to be aware of our counter-transference issues, and our own value systems in relation to spirituality and religion, if we are to give our clients the quality of therapy they deserve.

I am not suggesting that the psychotherapist replace the spiritual teacher or

director, priest or priestess. Indeed a distinction can be made between the two roles: that therapy is about relationships between people, whilst spiritual direction is about our relationship with the Divine. However, it can be argued that it is necessary to merge the roles of counsellor and spiritual director. I, myself, see them as overlapping but distinct.

The main thing I want to stress is that spiritual experiences are extremely common, despite the decline of conventional religion in the UK. The therapy relationship can and should be one place to explore safely the meaning of such experiences and of spirituality in general. However, for the therapist to be accepting and supportive of such work by the client, she or he will need to be open to and have explored her or his own spirituality.

Further Reading

D.P. Brown and J. Engler, 'The Stages of Mindfulness Meditation, Parts One and Two', in K. Wilber, J. Engler and D.P. Brown, *Transformations of Consciousness, Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, pp.161-217, Shambala 1986

Carl Rogers, *The Carl Rogers Reader*, Constable, 1990

D. Hay and A. Morisy, 'Reports of Ecstatic, Paranormal, or Religious Experiences in Great Britain and the United States — A Comparison of Trends', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 17(3), pp.255-268, 1978

John Rowan, *The Transpersonal, Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Routledge, 1993

