

The Psychospiritual and the Transpersonal

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As a founding member of the Association for Accredited Psychospiritual Psychotherapists I have been asked to write about the distinction between psychospiritual therapy and transpersonal therapy.

For eight years, the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust, the Karuna Institute and the Institute of Psychosynthesis were full members of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. UKCP is an organisation of organisations, all of which are involved in training and accrediting psychotherapists in this country. The UKCP is working towards government recognition as the voice for psychotherapy in the UK and Europe. To this end a National Register of accredited psychotherapists from UKCP member organisations was launched at a ceremony at the House of Lords in March 1992.

The UKCP is differentiated into sections of 'like' schools of psychotherapy and we belong to the Humanistic and Integrative Section. Within that, we were originally three member organisations who shared a similar bias — that of a psychospiritual context to our work. In March 1991 we chose to come together to form a professional association for our accredited members.

Our Vision

The vision which has brought us together is that we share a core philosophy, the elements of which are that:

- there is a direct comprehension of the interconnectedness of all aspects of life;
- the context that provides a ground for all psychological processes is psychospiritual;
- the therapeutic process is one aspect of a larger journey that individuals engage with in their quest for transformation of consciousness;
- pathological processes are seen to be within this larger journey, and are diagnosed as awakenings to be worked through, rather than symptoms to be cured;
- psychotherapists work with different levels of consciousness and are trained in both the depths as well as the heights — working with ego structures as well as facilitating the awakening of potential;
- given that within a therapeutic relationship there are different levels of consciousness involved, frequent therapy is often essential to the organic unfolding within the individual (although some transformation processes occur when the individual withdraws from conscious participation in ther-

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apy, and in this sense, some forms of spiritual praxis are seen to be as valuable as frequent and regular sessions)

- life processes are seen as part of a larger active mystery which reveals itself over time

Why 'Psychospiritual'?

Psychosynthesis has traditionally been associated with the term 'transpersonal psychology', while core process therapy has not used that label. Firstly, we wanted to find an appropriate term that encompassed both of our therapies, as well as being free of some commonly held notions, images and distortions around the term 'transpersonal'. We also wanted to keep the field open for other therapies with a common vision to our own to join AAPP.

Rightly or wrongly, we felt that the term 'transpersonal psychology' had evolved to be equated with transcendence, with height only, with primarily mystical or spiritual experience — sometimes at the expense of psychological well-being. Within this, for us there was an issue of duality to be reconciled: the world of the psychological polarised with the world of the spiritual, as two separate, distinct realms. This duality was not defined in transpersonal theory, but in practice was often so.

The Difference between Transpersonal and Psychospiritual Psychotherapy

I am writing from the perspective of twenty-five years as a psychosynthesis practitioner, trainer and supervisor and consequently my analysis will have this particular bias. Psychospiritual psychotherapy embraces what is known as trans-

personal therapy, but with several expansions and essential differences. They are as follows:

The Interface of the Psychological and Spiritual Realms

Psychospiritual psychotherapy places great importance on the principle that the client most essentially is a Self, a being who has a purpose in life and is on a path of unfoldment which includes challenges and obstacles of a psychological nature. In this sense it reframes psychological issues, problems, difficulties as being intimately connected with the transpersonal dimension.

Self-realisation is not seen as a static condition that is achieved once and for all, but as a dynamic ongoing process of change. It is interwoven with the elements of well-being, which include both spiritual experience and psychological symptoms as confluent, vital elements in an individual's life. The psychospiritual psychotherapist recognises the pivotal role of consciousness in determining the outcome of therapy. Process is a basic parameter and is contacted through the capacity of an individual to be in touch with the truth of his or her experience. The contents of awareness and experience are constantly in a state of flux. The nature of life seems to be one of a continual disruption of the personality. Old forms dying, new ones being born.

Psychological problems are not the result of mere inadequacies and negative conditioning. Psychospiritual psychotherapy is not about problem-solving or the elimination of psychological issues, but actively works with them as an intimate part of spiritual unfoldment. That which

is causing psychological distress will further an individual's unfoldment and is a gateway to enhanced well-being on all levels.

The Purpose/Obstacle Principle

Psychospiritual therapy does not hold a normative definition of the healthy, fully functioning self-realised individual. A high value is placed on inner freedom and upon the enlargement of the client's possibilities and choices. This freedom of choice will then enable the client to live as he or she deems meaningful and worthwhile. Consequently, the personality is seen as an instrument for Self-expression — the pragmatic means by which we realise our essential being. The Self is the context for the personality, and it works in time/space to heal, develop, reorganise and utilise the personality for creative expression in an individual's life. Within this context, rather than seeking to create a 'normal, healthy personality', the emphasis is on working on those challenges and obstacles which prevent a person's daily life from being a living embodiment of who they know themselves deeply to be. A perfectly integrated personality is not a goal of psychospiritual psychotherapy, nor is the elimination of all neuroses or imbalances.

Framing of Pathology

Working psychospiritually is not necessarily about 'going somewhere', but concerns the consciousness with which we perceive what is in the existential moment. It is a process to be lived, not a goal to be achieved. The spiritual is also immanent, inherent within pain and crisis, and involves an expansion of consciousness

which embraces and co-operates with the emerging potential. Psychological disturbance is often a response to the transformation process. That which limits us and causes us to suffer can become the source of our greatest strength.

Transpersonal psychology has sometimes (but not always) fallen prey to what Abraham Maslow called 'higher sidetracking'. Over-identification with transpersonal experiences like mystical experience, peak experience, bliss, wonder, unitive consciousness and transcendence of self can lead to duality and the polarising of personal and transpersonal. Psychospiritual psychotherapy hypothesises that the spiritual dimension is also to be found in the core of our pathology, our darker shadow nature. The Self is conceived to be embedded in the personality, not above or beyond it.

Psychological wounding which has developed into psychopathology and dysfunctional behaviour has, at its core, a transpersonal element. The pathological cannot be healed or transformed without touching this deeper, more essential level. Psychospiritual work recognises that much of our pathology is rooted in the spiritual dimension. Negative life experience, childhood conditioning and trauma can damage the connection to our soul or essential Self and, though unrecognised, profoundly affect our life. The pain of this loss of connection may be masked by many personal behaviours, functional and dysfunctional, which psychotherapy treats, often unrecognised for itself.

The term 'soul wound' has been coined by psychosynthesis theorist Tom Yeomans. This wound is not rooted in how the individual was treated as a personal-

ity, but in how they were perceived and received as a soul. For some, compensation for this very primal loss, the need to soften the depth of pain, plus attempts to achieve the experience of being seen and welcomed at a deep, deep level can lead to addictive and dysfunctional patterns and to psychological pain. For others, it can lead to a seemingly normal functioning beneath which lies a secret sorrow and depth of loss of meaning. Psychospiritual work would not take the pathology at face value, assuming that its roots lie in the client's history. Rather, it would acknowledge that this deeper soul wounding lives at the heart of the pathology and seek to work at this level too.

The Pathology of the Sublime

Psychospiritual psychotherapy recognises that the transpersonal dimension of experience is also prone to over-identification, distortion and resistance. Acknowledging and experiencing our true Self is no guarantee of health, but rather brings with it the pathology of the sublime. We may develop defence mechanisms which protect us from our own greatness, from the responsibility of having to fully live our potential. Two often encountered examples are repression and projection of the sub-

lime. Transpersonal development is not free from the usual developmental challenges. Spiritual awakening brings with it a set of developmental tasks, challenges and crises which may be presented as pathological and borderline states.

In conclusion, it is worth stating that neither transpersonal nor psychospiritual psychotherapy are all sweetness and light, nor about living happily ever after. At one moment spiritual experience can be astonishing, sometimes terrifying, as it symbolises a reality different from our everyday one. At other times it is beautifully simple, straightforward and creatively inspiring. Both transpersonal and psychospiritual work are evolutionary in the sense of moving us forward, being our next step in manifesting our potential. However, they are also revolutionary, in the sense that our identifications and attachments are challenged, and old forms have to disintegrate so that the new may emerge. We have to be willing to suffer our death in order to be born again. At times we are called upon to surrender to the experience of uncertainty and to embrace the unknown, which inevitably increases our tolerance of ambiguity. Chaos and disintegration are often the precursors of more coherency.

