

Water from the Well: Spirituality & Social Work

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Pouring little bits of water on our dry land does not help, but...we will find a living well if we reach deep enough under the surface of our complaints. —Henri Nouwen¹

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A person goes to a priest and says, "Father, my soul is in pain." The priest says, "Make a novena and in 9 days you'll feel better."

A person goes to a foot doctor and says, "Doctor, my sole is in pain." The doctor says, "Put this arch in your shoe and in 3 weeks you'll feel better."

A person goes to a social worker and says, "Social worker, my soul is in pain. And the social worker says, [FILL IN THE BLANK].

What would you say? Probably something similar to what other workers have said in completing the above riddle: "Come in, and together, over time, we will find ways to help your soul to heal."

What is it like for you as a worker to be confronted so often with issues of such depth and pain, without having the luxury of a handy prescription which can be given to clients who then leaves to continue their cure on their own? Our work entails a different sort of healing process than other caring professions. It is an honor to be entrusted with clients' confidence that we can help them and a wonderfully creative challenge to determine how to best work with them in finding solutions. However, the amount of energy that we must pour into an ongoing, intimate, intense relationship with our clients can drain our spirits dry and make us thirsty for renewal. By digging deeper into the spiritual dimension of our work we can tap into a source of energy which can yield a continual flow of strength and creativity. Spirituality can also provide us with a well of replenishment from which our clients and we can draw inspiration and nourishment.

When we talk about spirituality we can get into a muddy area of amorphous terms and notions. For instance, this article deals with spirituality, which reflects a more individual expression of beliefs, rather than religion, which is generally more focused and structured. There are many different possible relationships between spirituality and religion, and aspects of each need to be addressed with clients as part of the therapeutic process. For the purpose of this article, I'd like to introduce two definitions of spirituality for your consideration. In the first definition, spirituality (liter-

ally the breath of life) is conceptualized as a complex, intrapsychic dimension of human development, in which the individual moves toward "higher" states of connectiveness, well-being, consciousness, and/or meaning. A desire to realize one's "true self" or "inner potential."²

The second definition states: The spiritual element of the person is the aspect of an individual's psyche, consciousness and unconsciousness, that is also called the human soul. It is in terms of the spiritual dimension that a person strives for transcendental values, meaning, experience, and development; for knowledge of an ultimate reality, for belonging and relatedness with the moral universe and community; and for union with the immanent, supernatural powers that guide people and the universe for good and evil.³

Spiritual beliefs can be as individual and difficult to express as thoughts and feelings. However, people generally find it a relief and a comfort to be invited to express their spirituality. Yet it is only recently as a society and as a profession that we have begun to feel comfortable initiating discussions that can reveal the intimate inner workings of our strivings to make sense of our lives and our place in the world. As social workers we are used to being aware of the interaction between emotional, mental, and physical dimensions in our work. Introducing the concept of spirituality offers us a tool for assessment and intervention which can help bring elements of feeling, thought, and action together into a stronger and more meaningful whole.

Before addressing spiritual issues in our work with clients it is important for us to explore and formulate our own spiritual beliefs. Spiritual attunement is as important as awareness of our own emotional issues

since we communicate so powerfully with clients, both directly and indirectly. First, we need to be aware of possible spiritual countertransference issues. Second, and perhaps more importantly, our own spiritual beliefs can provide a source of strength for our clients and ourselves.

There are a variety of spiritual assessment tools available, which workers can use or adapt for themselves and clients.⁴ Some examples of questions that can help people to consider and express their spiritual beliefs are as follows:

- When you think about your life, what gives you hope?
- What are some of the most meaningful aspects of your life thus far?
- When faced with life's difficulties, what gives you comfort?
- How do you express or experience your spirituality in your everyday life?

After examining our spiritual beliefs about our personal lives, we can then go on to look from a transcendent stance at what we believe about our clients' lives, as well as the therapeutic process itself. For instance, if we can draw upon a strong belief that there is meaning to life, it becomes easier to have faith in our clients' ability to survive and thrive, no matter what their life circumstances:

*"[a] spiritual perspective requires that we look at the meaning of life, that we look beyond the fears and limitations of the immediate problem with the goal of discovering something inspirational and meaningful..."*⁵

While clients' emotional states and/or behaviors may be problematic, these aspects are considered only part of their current functioning and not necessarily the total expression of the individual self. Clients can be seen as having a spiritual dimension, a soul, which is evolving towards wholeness, and a source of wisdom which is intuitive and far-ranging, defying purely linear, rational, left-hemispheric experiences. By becoming more practiced at transcending problems and challenges and placing them in a more expanded view of their lives, clients can become empowered to examine issues in a new and positive way rather than merely repressing them or denying their existence. As a client's perspective broadens, negative aspects can become less overwhelming, diminishing in proportion in relation to the larger issues and strengths afforded by a spiritual outlook.

One client, who continues to struggle with family of origin issues as well as difficult interactions with her husband, periodically credits the therapeutic process with enabling her to "ride the waves" of her life's ups and downs more easily than before beginning therapy.

Although this client finds it mentally or verbally difficult to explain her new-found ability to cope more easily, when describing the change she conveys a sense of peace and strength at the soul level which is manifested through a calm physical and emotional demeanor. When I resonate with the client at such moments, it is not at a purely intellectual or emotional level, but in a spiritual space that both encompasses and transcends the mental, emotional, and physical dimensions of daily circumstances. Even without a clear understanding of the process, my client has indicated to me that she expects that once having learned how to survive that she will be able to go on and thrive. It appears that my client now has a sense that she can tap into a well of spiritual strength that can help her to function in many areas over time.

A spiritual approach can help free us from assuming the responsibility of "curing" clients and instead transform us into channels for healing energy which clients can draw upon and make use of in ways that make sense to them. Our job is to create a safe place in which clients can do their healing work as we help them examine their beliefs about the nature, meaning, and purpose of their lives. While the worker can help clients sort through outward manifestations of inner perceptions, clients themselves must assume ultimate responsibility for the uncovering and full expression of their souls' unique purpose. The worker helps clients reach down into their own wells of strength and inspiration and draw up what is needed. An instrument of focus and intent, the worker suggests possible methods and provides support as clients learn to replenish themselves. The worker empowers clients to be self-aware and self-fulfilling, able to obtain what they need from the environment around them and the resources within them. By accessing the well of spirituality, the work can flow more easily, with both worker and clients able to feel refreshed rather than drained by the process. ■

¹ Herni Nouwen. (1986). *REACHING OUT*. New York: Doubleday, 36.

² D. Derezotes. (1995). Spirituality and religiosity: neglected factors in social work practice. *ARETE* 20 (1), 1; as quoted in Willie F. Tolliver (1997). Invoking the spirit: a model for incorporating the spiritual dimension of human functioning into social work practice. *SMITH COLLEGE STUDIES IN SOCIAL WORK* 67 (3), 478.

³ M. Siporin. (1985) Current social work perspectives on clinical practice. *CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL*, 13, 210-211; as quoted in Patricia Sermabeikian (1994). Our clients, ourselves: The spiritual perspective and social work practice. *SOCIAL WORK*, 39 (2), 180.

⁴ An example of a spiritual assessment tool, along with other reference materials, may be obtained from the author—see contact information at end.

⁵ Patricia Sermabeikian (1994). Our clients, ourselves: The spiritual perspective and social work practice. *SOCIAL WORK*, 39 (2), 179.