

Extended version of a plenary presentation: "*The Place of Spirituality in Psychotherapy*" at the UKCP 6th Professional Conference: "**What is Psychotherapy? - Exploring the Boundaries**": Warwick University, England: September 2000. First published in the UKCP Conference Proceedings, edited by Jenny Corrigan.

Preamble:

I would like to start by first setting a direction and then declaring some personal assumptions. The direction of my talk (and I shall speak for about 20 minutes) is to look at what constitutes a "Spiritual Psychotherapist". This is because I think that this is the most efficient way of exploring the overlap of the areas of psychotherapy and spirituality, especially to an audience of psychotherapists, many of whom may already be very spiritual. I hope that you will agree with this direction and maybe find some resonance within yourselves. Just to reassure you, I really and truly hope that I am not going to presume to tell you what your spirituality should be: that really is your personal business. But in this arena where we are considering the place of spirituality in psychotherapy, it is our professional business, and it is also the client's business. And these agendas may, or may not, overlap.

So I would like to explore this question from this perspective. A "Spiritual" Psychotherapist can mean either a psychotherapist who is spiritual in themselves, and/ or a psychotherapist who practices a form of psychotherapy that is spiritually orientated: i.e. that might attract a client who is searching for something spiritual; rather than relationship-oriented; body-oriented; or behaviourally-oriented. As a form of definition, I am clear that I make a couple of assumptions here. We have a problem of language in this field: not all our definitions are the same, so I will try and clarify mine.

The initial assumption is this:

- (1) The client's search for their own sense of spirituality is as much a legitimate topic for psychotherapy as exploring their grief at the loss of a loved one; as working through the somatised reactions of an unresolved trauma; as trying to minimise the effects of a phobia; or as trying to establish a sense of self from exploring one's personal & psychic history.

The legitimacy of this search for their own sense of spirituality is for me is an essential preliminary assumption. The psychotherapist who ignores or glosses over the client's often tentative explorations and the various verbal (and non-verbal) cues coming from the client about their belief systems, or metaphysical constructs, or loss of faith, is not, according to my definition, a spiritual psychotherapist, nor even a very good non-spiritual psychotherapist. The belief systems within which one operates are, for me, an essential component of working with a client; and I would want to know as much (or more) about these as I would about their medical or psychiatric history. A client's inner world is often the most important thing - to them. And the richness of their life is often measurable when their inner world and their outer world begin to have a certain similarity, harmony, and/or con-jointed-ness.

Behaviourism apart, some people would even argue that the eventual 'cure' for any client coming to therapy is when their connections with spirit, or their own spiritual path, are sufficiently and satisfactorily re-established.

Statistically it has been found that recovery from alcoholism etc. is much better (about 65% effective, I recall) when a belief system like the 12-Step programme is involved, rather than not. This is a spiritual path; but it is also very psychotherapeutic. Listen to the Second, Third and Fourth Steps:

We came to believe that only with the aid of a Power greater than ourselves could we restore ourselves to sanity. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of that Power, God, as we understand him. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

The second assumption, and I hope that I am not going to offend any believers in the One True Faith, (whatever that is) is that:

- (2a) There are many, many paths up this particular mountain that we are calling spirituality and all of them totally legitimate, some are perhaps more effective than others for different people: at least one of them is what is right for that person at this moment in time. Some belief systems seem to claim to have a fast escalator all the way to the top, but I am assuming - I'll be open about it - that this is as much hype as the claim that using a certain soap-powder will transform your life.
- (2b) I am also assuming that the spiritual path, or spiritual growth, doesn't have an obvious end, so perhaps the mountain top isn't the best analogy: the Celestial City of John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* is just a metaphor, still powerful after all these years. And if these assumptions are true, it means that, for me, the journey itself is the really rewarding factor. Is this not close to a similar commitment to the psychic process of therapy, growth and change? This assumption clearly takes us quite a long way away from notions of a particular belief causing redemption of sin; of eternal salvation for those who believe in Who ever, or even from the superiority of CBT over psychodynamic processes.

Here is my last set of assumptions, and I will develop these a little more fully later in the article.

- (3a) That the society and culture that we currently live in actively predicates against spirituality: so much so that we do not have a proper language for much of this material. Our concepts are conditioned by a many centuries old tyranny of various forms of religion; and that we may not know what spirituality is when we see it:
- (3b) That religion may, and for many does, touch a person's spirituality, but this is not necessarily so for all, and many times and for many people religion is insufficient in itself: it is a form, rather than an essence; and
- (3c) That many people are increasingly realising this and thus are searching for something better and more satisfying in their lives.

So, what I would like to do now is to use a slightly Socratic method and pose a number of questions, centred around the main question "*What is a spiritual psychotherapist?*" And I have to say that I do not have an answer, or The Answer, to this one; what I want to do is share with you some of my explorations. This search can often be diverted and take the form of various addictions; "retail therapy" shopping; chasing "success"; having affairs; getting involved with a sect or fundamentalist belief system that promises instant Whatever enlightenment; and it also be assuaged by what I call "the smörgasbord approach to therapy" (shopping around tasting a little bit of everything). Eventually Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' kicks in at some point, and we start looking for something much more satisfying and longer-lasting; something that touches our spirit; our truth; our essence; our soul.

Given all that, and it is a lot, and maybe some people will want to challenge some of these assumptions later, and I hope that there will be a suitable opportunity, I come back to the question: **What is a Spiritual Psychotherapist?** As I said, I don't have a specific answer: but I do have a number of questions, so I will try to use them in a sort of dialectic and didactic method, and see if we get somewhere:

- Question: If a client is presenting themselves in a fairly chronic depressed state, with no seemingly relevant exogenous causes, or series of life-traumas, and without an effective response to medication, can a "spiritual" psychotherapist legitimately ask them about their belief systems - could a possible diagnosis be some sort of "loss of faith". Incidentally this category now appears in DSM IV, so maybe a non-spiritual psychiatrist might even ask it as well.
- Question: If a client starts talking about their explorations into (say) Anthroposophy; Buddhism, Alternative Therapies and (heaven defend!) even New Age communities: is a legitimate question for a "spiritual" psychotherapist - "What are you really looking for?" or do we see this as some form of pathology or avoidance of reality?
- Question: If the client is expressing that they are having difficulties with having been brought up in an established church or religion, can one, as a "spiritual" psychotherapist, legitimately question with them the relevance of that particular set of beliefs for them now in their life, if one is also a member of that same church or religion?

I am trying to present to you questions that come up for me when I am working in a particular area of therapy with a client, an area, which is loosely called spirituality, and for which there was very little training or preparation in my training of origin. Indeed, in society at large, there is a presumption against questioning someone about their beliefs. It quite rightly stems from religious intolerance and historical persecution; but please remember, it is the client who is coming with the questions. Do you just refer them back to the minister, the priest, the rabbi, or the imam? Or do you dare to tackle this subject as a "spiritual" psychotherapist? I don't know whether people here have a different

set of experiences. Maybe it is worth a show of hands. Who here, (please raise your hands) had specific training in their 'training of origin' working with some of this material? Thank you - about 20-25 percent.

O.K. Let us approach this area from another direction. One of the principles of any exploration; psychic or geographic; is to discover where the edges are, and that helps define the size and position and extent of the area you are investigating, before plunging straight into the middle, and maybe getting lost. That is what I am trying to work with here. It is not easy, and I am fumbling a little bit, it is not really through lack of confidence, mainly through lack of effective tools, or words.

The next set of questions comes from where there is a potential (not conflict, but say) difference, between your set of beliefs and the client's. Maybe you are Catholic, they are Protestant, which might not be too problematic working in England, but in Northern Ireland or around Glasgow, it may be. Or (say) the client firmly believes in reincarnation, and you don't. Maybe this doesn't arise in the therapy for a while, but then the client discovers that they have a potentially terminal illness. Or, what happens if it is the other way round? You believe in reincarnation and they don't.

- Question: As a "spiritual" psychotherapist, how do you work with this difference of belief systems? How conscious are you of your own belief systems? How careful are you not to impose these, even by assumption or by absence of question, onto the client? If you have the same (broadly similar) belief systems, how collusive are you in this? Maybe the client is looking for or needing something else? How convinced are you that if only the client could see or understand *this* or *that* (your belief) then they would feel better?
- Question: When one works as a "spiritual" psychotherapist, do you lead or do you follow? How directive are you? Do you suggest a particular text: (say) *The Road Less Travelled* - an excellent psychological / psychotherapeutic text on Love and Spirituality? Maybe, that is O.K.: but what about the teachings or writings of Krishnamurti, or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or Carlos Casteneda, or Freud and Jung, or Shirley MacLaine, or Ron Hubbard? Or maybe all of them are valid?
- Question: When the client is struggling with something within their belief system, something that you may not hold to: let us say the sense of shame around indulging in pre-marital sex. Maybe they are Catholic or Muslim, and this is a biggie for them, especially if the client is female: maybe you are male, and were around in the late 60's and early 70's. You have different mores; different belief systems. Do you tell them, "That's nonsense: everything is fine. If you want to, go ahead. It's your life"? What about someone who is struggling with their conscience about "whistle-blowing" - betraying their friends and colleagues; or about "environmental activism" - anti-social and possibly illegal actions: both taken up because of their own (radically different) belief-systems: maybe these are different from yours, or maybe different to the rest of society's. The actual angst of pre-decision-making may be a familiar topic within

therapy, but what about the long-term consequences? I think that these may be more relevant within a "spiritual" belief system.

At this point, I would like to tell a little story: - a sort of case history. For those of you who don't know, for the last 14 years I have been living within an international spiritual community in north-east Scotland: called the Findhorn Foundation. About 12 years ago, a man, in his late 20's came to me for a session. He was just passing through; he had a rucksack and guitar case and shoulder-length dreadlocks. He wanted some help. His story was that he had studied Tibetan Buddhism a lot: he had been into Tibet, to some of the monasteries still remaining there and had been 'told' that in a previous lifetime he had been a Tibetan monk who had done something dreadful - really horrible - perhaps killed somebody (maybe another monk). I don't think that he actually told me what it was, as he was too ashamed. Anyway he was now, as a punishment, on the "wheel of suffering". He had (then) been excluded from all monasteries for several lifetimes and (even now) was still 'barred' from all contact with Tibetan monks. This was his story. His immediate problem was that he now could not actually and physically be in the same city as any Rinpoche (senior Tibetan monk). He had very severe psychosomatic problems whenever this happened. He felt almost cursed. There was, for him, a sort of exclusion zone around these Tibetan monks. And it was getting worse, as he now could not come within about 200 miles of any Rinpoche. Well, there is a large Tibetan community (with many Rinpoches) near to Glasgow, about 200 miles south of Findhorn, and there is not much else beyond us to the north, except the Highlands and then Iceland. He felt very cut-off from his spiritual source and was quite desperate. He was also leaving tomorrow. Could I help him in any way? Well

I said that I had heard his story and that I would have to consult with someone, and could he come back tomorrow, which was just before he was due to leave. He agreed to do this. I did not know what else to do, except to talk with a fellow community member who was familiar with the whole Tibetan Buddhist scene and who had lived at Samye Ling for a while. He confirmed that - within the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism - his story was indeed possible - credible, if you were a Tibetan Buddhist. However this guy might also be totally paranoid, and deluded, etc. So we also meditated a bit about this guy's story and his problem, and we both came up with a similar 'insight'. So, when this man came back, I told him this almost exactly:

"I don't know if this can be of any help to you at all, but when this friend of mine (who is familiar with Tibetan Buddhism) and I both considered (meditated on) your situation deeply, we both seperately got this insight. If, as you say, you are "banned" from Tibetan Buddhism for several lifetimes, and as you seem to have "chosen" to be born into the Western world - for this lifetime, at least: in order not to interrupt your spiritual growth, why not concentrate on the Western way for a while, instead of trying to keep to the Tibetan Buddhist way, and see what you get out of that? Apart from the variety of established Christian churches, there is the whole field, for example, of the Celtic mystery tradition that is a very long-established spiritual path. It has many similarities with some of Tibetan Buddhism, and it is also very different. Maybe, just maybe,

this is a significant beneficial part of your karma, and that you can still grow as a result, even though it may feel like a punishment initially, and you have been ignoring this area in favour of your old path."

I expanded on this theme a little and also suggested a few books that he could read, or even purchase in the community's bookshop, which was excellent. That was the end of the session, and he then left the community. I have never heard from him again, which may or may not be significant. But I still feel reasonably content with my intervention or advice and the way I obtained it. Within the framework of his belief system, which I would have no possibility of altering even if I wanted to, there was little other positive advice I could give. He had expressed a strong resistance towards any form of psychiatric or medical intervention - even if that was suitable. He was very rational (even in his story) and seemed to be no danger to anyone else. So, back to the questions:

- Question: What is a spiritual psychotherapist? How does such a person help somebody with his or her spiritual path?

In John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress*, the Angel offers only the prospect of one choice, other than destruction. It is just the Celestial City. No other goal is offered, except failure in the Slough of Despond, the Valley of the Shadow, the City of Vanities, etc. So Christian, the pilgrim, really got stitched up by the times he was in. Within Christianity, there is still the concept of a Spiritual Director, a person who 'directs' your spiritual path. Nowadays I prefer the wider choice of the image of being a mentor, or a guide: maybe even having a midwife approach to someone's process.

- Question: As a Spiritual Psychotherapist, how does one actually help, assist or guide someone along *their* spiritual path without getting in the way, without directing it, "guiding from behind"? Reflection rather than direction, seems more relevant, perhaps: giving the person an open choice, but I'm beginning to answer my own questions and I didn't want to do that.
- Question: As a Spiritual Psychotherapist, how can we relate with integrity to where someone is at, unless we have had similar experiences ourselves? Does this begin to define a quality of a Spiritual Psychotherapist? And working with clients exploring different areas of spirituality, how eclectic does one have to be?
- Question: As a Spiritual Psychotherapist, what tools do we need in our tool bag? Do we need experience of Art Therapy and Dream Therapy, as many people explore these realms whilst on their spiritual path? Do we need awareness of Esoteric Healing - as for many, the body is intimately involved or affected in many subtle ways? What about (legal) techniques that help to "blow your mind" or take you to different spaces; (LSD is now not a legitimate therapeutic technique, though it was when I was first sent to a psychiatrist at the tender age of 15.) Re-birthing, Holotropic Breathwork, Hypnosis, NLP, are somewhat more acceptable nowadays.

There is another area, with which I have become quite familiar, but which often still takes me by surprise, and that is the area called “Spiritual Emergence” and “Spiritual Emergencies”. These are phrases coined by Stanislav & Christina Grof; Grof was a Czech psychiatrist who was part of the early research into, and psychological experimentations with, LSD, when it was still legitimate. He devised theories about the benefits of this form of drug-therapy, as did many others at the time. He subsequently discovered certain breathing techniques (definitively non-drug based) that have seemingly similar beneficial results. He was then working in the community at Esalen, in Big Sur, California, for a while and had a number of cases that started to fall into certain groups or categories; so he developed this concept, which I find very useful. I hasten to add that I do not use, nor indeed totally approve of his actual methods of working therapeutically, called Holotropic Breathwork, though some of his concepts are quite useful.

The concept of Spiritual Emergence suggests that there is a latent spirituality within everyone that usually emerges at a certain point in one’s life. The hypothesis is that this is a natural part of human psychic development: just as, somewhere between the years of 12 and 16, adolescence and puberty is a natural physical emergent phase, prior to full adult sexuality. This spiritual emergence process is an emotional maturation usually happening sometime between about 30 and 50. Many cultures actually and practically recognise this, the symptoms are known and respected, and the various aspects of a spiritual emergence process are built into the culture and even ritualised. □

However, in our culture, that of the Euro-American Western world, this doesn’t happen. Christianity has effectively killed it. So at this point I may be speaking a foreign language to you. The symptoms of this emergence process are often seen as something of a deviance, or an aberration, or as pathological by our western materialistic culture. Please imagine, for a moment, a culture or society where adolescence and puberty is denied: a society fixed in the pre-pubertal stage. In such a culture the growth of breasts becomes a deformity needing surgery; facial and pubic hair are seen as an aberration, not to be spoken of, and thus depilation is a social requirement. The relatively normal symptoms of adolescence; dizzy spells, puppy fat, facial spots, etc. are all abnormalities needing treatment. Our present society treats the symptoms of spirituality similarly. If you hear voices in your head, you are schizophrenic. If you start to emulate the behaviour of a wolf you are psychotic. If you think that you can predict certain events, you are deranged. Physiological processes that wrack your body; that might make you seem pregnant without so being; are all psychosomatic. The actual physical manifestations that often accompany changes in spirituality are almost totally denied or wrongly ascribed.

Now, in a society and culture that ignores much of spirituality, or dismisses it as a New Age phenomenon, we will find certain aberrations built into that society. The mystics and people of undefined spirituality are often denigrated. Someone who has visions is not elevated to the priesthood, or made a shaman priest; instead they are given psychiatric tests. Even if their visions are eventually confirmed, the Catholic Church (a state institution) might beatify or sanctify them, but usually long after they are dead.

Unless you have been effectively “shunned” by business partners, family, friends and society around you, you cannot imagine sometimes how hard it is to experience the many manifestations of spirituality, as well as the social disapproval. Even the Dalai Lama was, this month (Sept 2000), not invited to a major international conference on world religion on the political and economic grounds that it may offend the Chinese government.

Here’s another little story. A good friend of mine was responsible for the Spiritual Emergency Network, a phone-line reference network for spiritual psycho-therapists dealing with Spiritual Emergencies in the USA. She got rang up one day by a little old lady from somewhere in Texas. This person said; “*Can you help me? God came and sat in my head last Christmas, and I don’t know how to cope with it all.*” My friend asked her what were the effects of this, what did she actually mean by God sitting in her head. The lady replied, “*Oh. I know what people are thinking when they come towards me. But my Minister thinks I am of the Devil; my women’s group think I am a witch; and my husband doesn’t want to know.*” So the question I have for you is “*Who has the problem?*” For the lady it was obviously a spiritual and psychic experience as “God” came and sat in her head at Christmas time. For everyone else around her it seemed to be an aberration. So we have some more questions:

- Question: As a Spiritual Psychotherapist, what training might you need to recognise the many different manifestations of these Spiritual Emergence processes? How feasible is it to introduce such modules into present day psychotherapy training programmes? If we continue to ignore these phenomena, how many more people will continue to end up being wrongly diagnosed? Is an experience of shamanism, mysticism, channelling or psychosis a necessary qualification for a Spiritual Psychotherapist?
- Question: As a Spiritual Psychotherapist, how easy or difficult is it to ‘buck the trends of society that requires that everything gets put back into the box (so to speak), and instead to relish and encourage these phenomenological changes to come out in your client, even at the risk that they may be judged (by the rest of society) as psychotic, mystical. New Age, aberrations, or whatever? How brave are we, as Spiritual Psychotherapists, to support the individual growth of their spirituality against the mores of the surrounding society? If you had been Martin Luther King’s or Nelson Mandela’s Spiritual Psychotherapist long before they became who they are now, how would you have fared? Could you have stood up to your more conservative supervisor?

Now the last point I want to make is about actual spiritual experiences themselves. Grof categorises them into about ten different types, and I don’t want to go down that list for the moment, but there are some startling similar characteristics that are often found in a spiritual experience. Joan Borysenko, in her book, *Fire in the Soul*, describes one character, Fritz, who had a spiritual experience whilst in hospital intravenously receiving a high-calorie feeding solution. His perspective suddenly expanded and “*...he knew at the deepest level of his being that everything was perfect. Everything that was happening was perfect.*” Please think about that for a minute.

Have you ever had a realization that the whole beautiful terrible crazy drama of life was perfect? What might that do to your 'world view'? He also had a realization of his own inner purity. Think about that! How-might it feel to know that despite all the times you have felt foolish, unworthy, bad or just plain 'not good enough,' you suddenly saw that your core self was perfect, pure, without blemish and filled with light. This is the experience of seeing or realizing the Higher Self, the true nature of who we are. It is far removed from improving one's self-esteem. These things just happen. They happen to a lot of ordinary people. You do not hear about them often, because, when the person report these experiences to others, close friends, family, etc., they experience some very strange reactions. So they shut up, and they may even deny these, or forget about them, and carry on "as normal".

- Question: and this is the final one from me. If we want this sort of experience for our clients, (and possibly for ourselves) how can we best support this? What do we need to do to help and maybe even encourage our clients in this direction? Do we teach them meditation? Do we require them or cajole them so that they have times of reflection and introspection outside of the therapy room, as a regular practice? □ Do we suggest them to read certain books? Are we, as Spiritual Psychotherapists, proactive when we hear of these phenomena happening to our clients?

I believe that we should. I believe we need to help people to change and we should not proscribe the direction of that change. The UKCP was founded as a reaction to the sect or cult of Scientology in the mid to late-70's. The many people attracted to such sects were, and still are, definitely looking for something more than society currently provides. We should be, maybe even must be, starting to provide it, or guidance towards this and with this phenomenon. But how? How do we provide a much needed impetus towards spirituality, rather than towards a sect, and without avoiding it through many years of psychotherapy, religion or the materialistic thinking that pervades our culture? So I make a plea for direct action, from the profession of psychotherapy, now.

Psychotherapy is, along with other forces like the feminist/anti-sexist movement, the ecology movement, and other grassroots, a people-powered movement (as are the recent petrol blockades, anti-war marches, pro- and anti-hunt parties, the animal rights movement, and so forth). Society desperately needs this type of change. The individual members of society desperately want this kind of change, diversity of choice and enrichment, and are prepared to inconvenience themselves considerably; (I don't need to quote you the statistics, they are ever present in the newspapers). The planet desperately needs this type of change; and we, as individuals on it all need to recognise this and ourselves become the agents of change. We cannot just objectively support these things, as and when they happen in our clients: they are not aberrations or pathologies. If we are truly Spiritual Psychotherapists we will respect them, even though we may differ, and support them, even though we may disagree.

I believe that, as a profession, we must move away from complacency and apathy, towards a higher level of conscious awareness and compassionate action. I believe that spirituality is the source and the pathway for many of

these movements and that without it an active and alive spirituality, psychotherapy will become dry and dead and going nowhere. Thank you very much for listening to me. Thank you. □

Note of Acknowledgement: There is an interesting article on this topic that I found helpful in the shaping of my ideas for this talk:

Dishington, Lani F. (1996) Spirituality and Psychotherapy: In *Progress: Family Systems Research and Therapy*, Vol 5 (pp 99-110). Encino, CA: Phillips Graduate Institute.