

OPENING DOORWAYS TO THE SPIRITUAL IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Joan Klagsbrun, Ph.D.

Guidance streams through the whole of creation and in any moment we can recognize the form it is taking right before our eyes. Patricia Campbell Carlson

A 52-year-old man delivers such a moving eulogy at his wife's funeral that it gets a 3-minute standing ovation. After writing this eulogy, from the depths of his grief, he becomes aware that writing about meaningful topics might be his new calling. In spite of his financial need to continue his business in order to support his children, he is seized by the experience of a spiritual calling to write, which gives him a surprising new sense of himself.

A 36-year-old woman with breast cancer discovers that by using the process of Focusing in therapy she has had a number of experiences in which she can transcend her circumstances and reconnect with a powerful core sense of herself that feels vibrant and alive. She believes this embodied connection to spirit is what helps her to handle chemotherapy so well. She wants to stay connected to this "essential self," and wonders how to make it a central part of her life.

A 48-year-old woman is diagnosed with ovarian cancer and is tortured by her conviction that the cancer is punishment for having had an abortion a few years earlier. The angry ghosts of her punitive God haunt her. She is not sure whether she will survive, or how to create a relationship with a more beneficent God.

A 72-year-old woman whose cat is the most important creature in her life finds that it has gone blind, due to an illness that includes other serious symptoms. She is struggling with whether to put this beloved life companion down. She feels this as a spiritual crisis...wondering what is the kindest response to an animal that has been loyal to her, but that seems to be suffering most of the time. She wonders if taking the life of her beloved pet could ultimately be the right way to express her love.

These examples from my practice speak to my conviction that treatment for problems in living often cannot be limited to "psychological interventions." Many life issues touch on existential, spiritual or religious themes and a psycho-spiritual approach is what is needed.

In this century, finally, we have a welcome trend toward integrating spirituality into psychotherapy. In the latter 20th century, there was a movement away from the original idea of the psyche — the study of the soul, the spirit, the mind, and the intellect — and towards a narrower emphasis on cognition and behavior. In most graduate training programs until

very recently, therapists have not been encouraged to engage with the spiritual dimension — since that was thought to be the domain of the chaplain, priest, minister, rabbi, or spiritual director. As therapists, we now need to become receptive to recognizing and working with spirituality as it shows up both implicitly and explicitly in our therapy sessions.

What is Spirituality?

I see Spirituality as a state of consciousness, a way of seeing the world that provides a sense of unity and consolation. It is that realm of the timeless that can spontaneously inspire us, comfort us, release us, heal us, and fill us with awe, peace or joy. It is a state of being in which we are seamlessly joined us to a larger, interconnected field that is, in that moment, palpable and alive. A spiritual awareness gives meaning to our lives, validating our existence.

As therapists, a spiritual perspective can help us to recognize, listen for, and elicit the spiritual component in therapy, should it arise. Opening to this larger perspective can be an essential part of the healing process for some of our clients.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways to welcome and integrate the spiritual into your therapy practice. I will be suggesting five ways to include this more expansive dimension in your work:

1. To connect to your own spiritual history and to become aware of gateways that open to the larger space for you
2. To explicitly ask about the spiritual and religious beliefs and backgrounds of your clients
3. To include Focusing and Clearing a Space with clients to help them to access a deeper level of experience, and
4. To be the kind of listener who is receptive and can perceive spiritual issues even when they are only implied
5. To notice the positive aspects of our clients' experiences and to bring attention to them

1. Connecting to Spirituality

It is helpful to be in touch with our own spiritual or religious narratives if we are to engage with our clients' deeper sense of spirituality or religion. Often, there are events in life that may be seen in retrospect as gifts of the spirit, perhaps ones that turned life in a particular direction. They may not necessarily be uplifting or joyful moments; they could be times when we have encountered difficult issues, such as a crisis or a 'dark night of the soul' experience. The Sufis have an apt expression, "When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit rejoices for what it has found". And for many of us, it is in moments of crisis and darkness that we tap into spiritual or religious resources that we didn't know we had. We may find connections to something far greater than ourselves. Opening to a spiritual perspective can be revelatory and life changing. The more aware we are of the role of spirit

and the domain of spirituality in our own life, and its meaning for us, the more we will be able to hear the spiritual longings or references to something we might call spiritual, when it arises, either implicitly or explicitly, from our clients.

Everyday “Gateway” Experiences

In addition to reflecting on pivotal spiritual moments or critical turning points in life, it is also useful for therapists to reflect on the kinds of experiences that occur in everyday life when the doorway to something *more* opens. The link or resonance to something larger than oneself might come through being touched or moved by another, through music, the arts, movement, through being outdoors, through religious practices or rituals, through meditation or Focusing or other experiences in which the “larger space” seems to break into our lives. This awareness helps us to look for the gateways in our clients’ lives, and to name them as resources.

2. Welcoming the Spiritual Dimension

Connecting to our own spiritual life makes it more likely that we will hear the spiritual overtones from our clients, and we can also let clients know explicitly that they can speak about spiritual issues. At the start of therapy we might ask, “Has spirituality or religion been a positive force for you, a negative force, or a neutral part of your life?” We want to let clients know that we would welcome both the positive and negative aspects of spirituality or religion, and that this topic may be relevant in the journey of psychotherapy.

3. Focusing as a Doorway to the Spiritual

One method that can function as a gateway to the spiritual is Focusing. Focusing is an awareness practice that has been integrated into therapy for almost fifty years (Gendlin 1969). It is a bridge between lived experiences and deeper meanings, which are accessed through the body. In Focusing, we have a very powerful practice that opens the door to the spiritual by what we call “The Focusing Attitude”. This attitude is a way of treating ourselves — with compassion, kindness, gentleness, respect, reverence and also curiosity — and when therapists model this attitude, it encourages clients to befriend whatever they find within, helping them to reduce inner critical voices, and to access greater self-compassion.

Another way that Focusing opens a gateway to the spiritual is by bringing us into the body, where we can *feel* how we are carrying our problems. An embodied experience opens the possibility for experiencing the physical relief of ‘felt shifts’ — those moments of letting go and transformation that move us in a new direction. The further away from their bodies that clients live, the less alive they are likely to feel. Focusing invites us to pause and to come directly into the body, to experience both ourselves and our situations “from the inside”. Our minds may be racing, but when we come into the body, we naturally slow down and come into the present moment — we move towards “being” and away from “doing”. We’re much more likely to open the door to spirituality from a place of “being”. Coming into the body helps us to be present with ourselves — to be intimate with what we are experiencing. This

intimacy with inner experience allows both the client and the therapist to know the texture and the sensation of what a particular situation feels like, and then, as more emerges, what it means.

Clearing a Space

Clearing a Space, the first step of Focusing, often brings a larger perspective, because that step allows people to unburden themselves, and to then experience how their life would go forward without all those obstacles. Clearing a Space allows people to get underneath their problems. Clients are guided to ask inside “If all my problems and difficulties were resolved, how would I be or what might I find inside myself?” People are often surprised to find spaciousness or calmness or stillness and sometimes a larger connection to something greater. Discovering that capacity to move away from pressing problems and to find inner wellbeing and a greater perspective, even in the face of challenging issues, can be a powerful spiritual resource. As one client remarked, “The process of Clearing a Space is like taking off a very heavy overcoat I didn’t even know I was wearing. I feel free and liberated without it. I’m not going to rush to put that back on.” In the ‘Cleared Space’ when we access a larger perspective or spiritual awareness, we come to see that we have a choice about how close or distant we can hold our issues and how empathic we can be towards ourselves. Gene Gendlin has a wonderful expression that I often share with clients; “You don’t have to stick your head in the soup in order to smell it.” In Focusing we practice how to just give a “whiff” of difficult issues and not be plunged into them. This right distance offers us a larger overview and that can be both freeing and empowering.

4. How to Listen for the Spiritual

Focusing and Clearing a Space are both processes that take clients to a deeper place where access to the spiritual can be experienced. Another way to invite the spiritual into our therapeutic practices is by changing how we listen to client’s issues and narratives. When we are open and receptive to the implicit spirituality, when we listen for metaphors or hold a spiritual perspective, we can help people open to that higher level. What follows are three examples of how I invited the spiritual dimension into the conversation by elaborating or encouraging more from what I heard in my client’s words or non-verbal expressions as implicitly spiritual.

A 20 something male client I will call Ben was complaining about his job. “It’s just soul-sucking, and I’ve got to get out of there,” he said. I heard the word “soul-sucking,” and asked him whether he could say more about what that word meant to him. He replied, “The job feels dry and not particularly meaningful, and in no way am I helping to serve humanity. It feels like it isn’t important work — I am just a cog in a big machine.”

Hearing the phrase “soul-sucking,” I asked if we could pause for a moment, and perhaps he could notice what his soul was truly hungry for?

“What would be soul-satisfying work?” I wondered. What came next were fresh feelings and an inner knowing that surprised my client.

“I guess I need to serve in order to feel like I am a useful person on this planet. I need to really be contributing in some positive way.” And then, “The other thing my soul needs is to be close to the ocean. I want to live someplace that I can go to at least a few times a week.”

“What happens for you at the ocean?” I asked him.

He was quiet for a few while, then said: “It’s the vastness. It helps me to get things in right proportion, because it’s so vast and also somehow calming.”

As he spoke, I could see that something important was shifting in him. Knowing how vital it was for him to do meaningful work and to be connected to the power and vastness of nature was an important step for him. It meant that he would now be more aware of these spiritual values in seeking future work. These insights offered him a life-forward direction, and over the course of the next few months he was able to take steps to finding more fulfilling work.

Ben used the word soul, but many times the language one hears is not recognizably religious or spiritual.

In the second example, a couple I see were having their ritual argument.

She: “I can’t stand where we live. I need to move to the country. I’m so unhappy here.”

He: “You’re depressed. You’d be unhappy anywhere. You’re looking for a geographic cure. I don’t really believe it would make a difference.”

She: “If you really loved me, you’d live where I want and need to live.”

After listening for a while, I asked the woman Susan, “Would you be willing to share with your partner what it is about being in the country that’s so important to you?” She perked up and said, “If we moved out west, I would be able to walk out my front door and not have to get into a car, to get on a trail and be in the woods not seeing another human for 45 minutes. For me this is like being in church — it’s a religious experience.” She went on: “It’s the trees, the smells, I can hear the sounds of the animals. I get refreshed in a way that just doesn’t happen in the city for me”.

I reflected that it seemed to be a sacred experience for her to be in the country. She nodded and seemed to feel heard. I understood that her desire to move had a spiritual component and was not just a way to control her partner or to run away from her problems.

Later in the session, I turned to her partner, Tim, and asked him whether he would share more about his passion for living in the city and what about that lifestyle proved so positive for him.

“You know,” he said, “I have two brothers, but they live very far away, and I have got these three friends from college in the city who are like brothers for me. We hang out a lot together, and when I’m in their presence I feel so connected, so relaxed, and I like myself. I feel like we have a tight community.

He turned to his partner: “And their wives really like you, and I know you like them. I don’t think we’d have those kind of deep friends if we moved.”

I reframed their familiar conflict in a fresh way by suggesting that there might be a spiritual issue here. “It seems where each of you find meaning, sacredness, and joy are different but you actually share a similar need.”

The conversation that ensued was softer, without rancor and with more curiosity about how they could find common ground. They had begun to acknowledge their differing needs for spiritual connection and were addressing each other with more compassion.

A third example is about naming spiritual qualities that the client has, that can be utilized in opening to a larger dimension.

A client whom I will call Jane developed some serious neck pain. She had been someone who liked to read and garden. She had a high-powered job and had been a very active and connected person. Over a number of months, as the pain took over her life, she retired and then retreated. She wasn’t able to read for long periods of time. She had to curtail her gardening and then stop completely. Understandably, she began to feel more and more victimized by her pain. Her only contacts were with other pain patients, mostly on the Internet, though she also attended a pain support group. Her therapy sessions were centered on how intense the pain was that week, how family members lacked empathy for her situation, and how miserable the lives were of other pain patients who related their narratives on an online chat group for chronic pain sufferers.

“I’m just feeling that my whole life has become filled up with struggle, with fighting the pain. It’s always there, and it feels like that’s all I’ve got left,” she told me. I asked her if there were any times when the pain was at its worst. “At night,” she said, “when I’m alone in the apartment.” “And when is it at its lowest ebb?” I asked. “Oh, probably when I go to my (pain support) group,” she replied.

I asked her what that was like. “Well, we complain a lot, but sometimes we get into this funny state where we all start laughing.” She paused. “And once, we all went out to dinner afterwards.” “How did that feel?” I asked her. “It was nice to be around people who understand what I’m going through,” she said. She paused. “We’re actually really kind to each other. Sometimes I just feel blessed to be in their presence.” “Say more about feeling blessed,” I

suggested. “Well, we all have become really connected to each other through our suffering,” she said. “And that makes the pain a little less important.”

I reminded Jane that before the pain had taken over her life, she was known to be very perceptive, warm, and an extrovert who loved to be in groups. She recognized those qualities in herself. I asked her how she could have more of that “blessing” in her life, that feeling of connection to others in pain, and she told me she had no idea what she could do. But, within a couple of weeks it came to her. “I’m going to ask the pain support group leaders whether I could be an assistant. They once had an assistant there, and I’ve been there so long I might ask. I think they like me.”

They did accept her offer her to assist in the support group, and I noticed that increasingly her life was engaged with helping newer pain patients enter the group. She was engaged on how to best reach certain group members, and I heard a lot less about her own pain, because her identity and her life had expanded. She no longer defined herself solely by her pain and the restrictions that the pain imposed. Her self-esteem increased, and her pain decreased as she felt she was once again making a contribution — was in service to the others and connected to something greater than herself. “I’m still in pain,” she said, “but now it is not all of who I am.”

In mentioning these three clients, it is clear that we can listen for the spiritual without the usual words about God or church, or religion, or even spirituality. Each of these clients was speaking implicitly about some aspect of the spiritual. Ben, the young man, discovered his deeper need to contribute more in his work and to be closer to the natural world. The couple, while not naming religion or spirituality, was talking about where they found meaning and joy. And Jane, the client with neck pain, offered her caring to others, she became more alive and less consumed with her chronic condition. We need to listen for explicit and implicit longing for belonging, for meaning and for joy. These emotions can act as a path to the transcendent — to a feeling of oneness or connectedness. When we do highlight these intimations of the transcendent, we help clients to see the spiritual as an authentic and valuable aspect of their lives.

5. Listening for the Positive

Whatever we bring attention to in therapy is what grows. While the field of psychotherapy has been focused, since its inception, on pathology and on symptom relief, it should not be our only approach. While alleviating suffering is an important part of our work, we also need to help clients discover and amplify the positive aspects in their lives. When a client says, “I had the most special moment with my daughter this week, but anyway, let me get back to that problem we were talking about last week,” I am likely to say, “Please wait, can we stay right there? Tell me more about what was so special.” Then we slow down, and I invite her to notice what about that moment touched her or felt so special. By savoring positive moments in therapy, either moments in the client’s life, or moments shared between therapist and client, we are creating openings for connection or delight or meaning to enter

and grow. When a client has done a deep piece of work in therapy, I try to take time to have her feel how it was to have done something so courageous or hard and to process the good feelings between us. When a client who had been unemployed for three years was offered a position, we spent a good portion of the session on what it meant to him to finally have gotten a job offer. The depth that came from that inner exploration of this positive event revealed that he not only felt his enormous sense of relief, “like a thousand pounds lifted off my shoulders,” but there was something else he could not quite name. I invited him to attend to how it felt inside and what else it meant to him. He slowly realized that while unemployed, he had lost his sense of both justice in life and of hope for the future. Now, he reflected, he once again was starting to regain the sense that fairness and goodness were present again. This made him feel lighter, more whole, more connected to his faith and more deeply at peace.

Often, the positive experience has in it some aspect of the spiritual. Focusing on positive affect can open us to a deeper meanings and can help us experience the wonder and joy and depth that can otherwise elude us. Positive moments in life tend to move us towards more connection, more reverence and more peace.

Summary

The spiritual is an intrinsic dimension of being human, one that can enrich and sustain us during times of stress and suffering, as well as to give purpose to our lives. The spiritual is a *felt* experience during which one has a shift in perspective. It is one of the cornerstones of what it means to be human. Connecting to something more or deeper can provide a profound sense of well-being that transcends our physical and psychological situation. This paper has suggested the importance of acknowledging and engaging the spiritual in psychotherapy. We need to remember that this aspect of human consciousness has a profound power to comfort and to heal, to give meaning to our client’s lives.

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Joan Klagsbrun, Ph.D. a practicing psychologist and certifying coordinator, and has taught Focusing internationally for over three decades. She also teaches graduate classes in Focusing at Lesley University in Cambridge Massachusetts. In her therapy practice, in teaching and in writing, Joan is developing a way to integrate her three passions: Focusing, Spirituality, and Positive Psychology. Joan can be reached at joanklag@mac.com and is on the website for Focusing in New England at focusingnewengland.com/directory

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