

embodying and integrating spirituality: a vital role for psychotherapy

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'Integration is at the heart of well-being'

- Daniel Siegel

Introduction

In this paper I explore the vital role psychotherapy can play in supporting clients to integrate and embody their spirituality in as healthy a way as possible. I define spirituality as a process of overcoming self-centredness and argue that an understanding of modern western spiritual forms requires grappling with the nature of cultural/spiritual hybridity and the notion of perennialism. Although I affirm the possible therapeutic value of spirituality, my focus in this article is problematic forms of spirituality, of which I name three: (i) spiritual bypassing, (ii) spiritual narcissism and (iii) dis-integrated spirituality. After outlining various criteria for assessing healthy and unhealthy forms of spirituality, I turn to how psychotherapy can provide the space and tools to support clients to integrate and embody their spirituality. I argue that if spirituality can create problems with lack of integration of the various life domains clients inhabit (somatic process, emotions, thoughts, sexuality, relationships to name a few) the more holistic a therapeutic approach, the greater the ability provide integration.

Locating modern western spirituality: hybridisation

More often than not, therapists

need to contend with issues of religious and spiritual hybridisation (Lahood 2008) when joining with clients and their spiritual concerns. Hybridisation 'concerns the ambiguous mixture of things, processes, and phenomenon—which are thought to be unlike, different, separate, disparate, and unequal—into novel cultural and religious forms' (Lahood 2010, p.5). In our era of globalisation and the new age (Hanegraff 1998), time-honored boundaries between religious/spiritual traditions and practices are becoming blurred through various cultural processes of borrowings and meaning making. This process is embodied in various ways by our clients.

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In my own practice, in the Northern Rivers Area of NSW, near Byron Bay, an area renowned for its mélange of spiritual forms and open spiritual experimentation, the spiritual life that clients bring to therapy can often be a syncretic blend of various traditions and practices.

Understanding the complexities of hybridity within the cultural, and new age, spaces that make up modern western spirituality is a powerful hermeneutic tool that can strongly support therapists to meet their clients. In the spirit of Yalom's (2002) admonition that a therapist needs to create a new therapy with each client, I would affirm that often a therapist needs to create a new of understanding of spirituality with each client.

Defining spirituality: overcoming self-centredness

Creating a new understanding of spirituality with each client notwithstanding, as therapy is not politically neutral (Samuels 1993), in this section I articulate a broad definition of spirituality which I am drawn to and which influences my work. Ferrer (2002) states 'the ocean shared by most...spiritual...traditions does not correspond to a single spiritual referent or to "things as they really are" but, perhaps, more humbly, to the overcoming of self-centredness, and thus a liberation from corresponding limiting perspectives and understandings'(p.145). To Vaughn and Walsh (1993), writing in the transpersonal psychology tradition, spirituality involves 'experiences

in which 'the sense of identity of self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos' (p.203). The argument I will begin to develop below is that whereas spirituality aims to extend and expand a person's sense of self, psychotherapy can provide an important support in helping to actualise this process in an integrative and embodied manner. This support is often needed as the engagement of spiritual practices aimed at overcoming self-centredness often results in its opposite (Kornfield 1993, Battista 1996). I will now focus on how spirituality can lead in this opposite direction.

Spirituality as supporting or hindering personal growth

Spirituality can be part of the problem or part of the solution (Pargament 2007) through either supporting or hindering client personal growth. That spirituality can be part of the solution and support personal growth, physical health and psychological wellbeing is, according to two prominent American researchers, 'turning out to be a robust clinical variable' (Sperry & Shafranske 2005 p.11). I am not arguing that spirituality is problematic per se. The focus on this article is how certain forms of spirituality can hinder personal growth.

I will focus on three ways spirituality may hinder personal growth and thus be deemed problematic: (i) spiritual bypassing (Wellwood 2000), (ii) spiritual narcissism (Ferrer 2002), (iii) dis-integrated spirituality (Pargament 2007).

Spiritual bypassing:

Wellwood (2000) came up with the term 'spiritual bypassing' to articulate 'a tendency to use spiritual practice to bypass or avoid dealing with certain personal or emotional "unfinished business"' (p.11). To Wellwood, the spiritual yearning to find release from 'all the earthly structures that seem to entrap us...such as our circumstances, relationships, personalities, bodies'...

often leads to the use of spirituality to 'try to rise above our emotional and personal issues...and avoid or prematurely transcend basic human needs, feelings and developmental tasks' (2000 p.12). Battista (1996) calls this process defensive spirituality where 'spiritual defences', such as the embodiment of certain worldviews, 'keep people from expressing their actual, embodied, emotional self' (p.251). A psychotherapy that is aware of spiritual bypassing and that can focus on supporting clients to become acquainted with the various life domains that their spirituality is bypassing is not only profoundly therapeutic but can deepen a client's spirituality in many ways (Kornfield 1993, Wellwood 2000, Heron 1998, Heron 2006).

Spiritual narcissism

According to Evans (1993), 'spirituality consists primarily of a basic transformative process in which we encounter and let go of our narcissism' (p.4). He continues by suggesting that any authentic spiritual transformation 'involves a shedding of narcissism, self-centredness, self-separation, self-pre-occupation, and so on' (p.158). Spiritual narcissism is the direct opposite of the above description, and reflects where spirituality is used to strengthen a sense of self or self-centred ways of being. Chogyam Trungpa (1987), came up with the term 'spiritual materialism' to refer to 'an ego-centred version of spirituality (in which) we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our ego-centricity through spiritual techniques (as cited in Ferrer 2002 p.35). Although clients who have a strong 'spiritual narcissist process' may not find themselves too readily in therapy (Battista 1996), exploration of their spiritual identity, their misuse of spiritual practice and its consequences is a starting point for this work. A solid understating of various spiritual practice can help therapists join clients who are strongly attached to their spiritual practice.

Dis-integrated spirituality

To Pargament (2007), dis-integrated spirituality is where the various domains of a person's life are 'out of balance and working against each other' (p.134). This involves situations where clients may find their spirituality conflicting with their close relationships, where their intellect may war with the vital needs of their body, where the spiritual path they are on does not seem to lead to the spiritual goal they are aiming at: 'problems of spiritual pathways' (Pargament 2002, p.151) and 'problems of spiritual destinations' (p.129). Any therapeutic approach that looks at resolving conflicts that clients have with their spiritual concerns is yet another support towards enhancing their spiritual life. The aim here is holistic; to create greater communication between all the various domains of a person's life and thus to support a healthier integration and embodiment of a client's spirituality. In the words of Ferrer (2003), 'embodied spirituality is integrative insofar as it seeks to foster the harmonious participation of all human attributes in the spiritual path without tensions or dissociations. (p.5). Ferrer (2002) calls the opposite to this integrated and embodied spirituality 'integrative arrestment' (p.36), where certain domains of human experience are more developed than others.

Perennialism: a particular problem in contemporary western spirituality and often at the heart of problematic forms of spirituality

A problem that I often encounter in my practice is a belief in the idea of the 'one truth' that supposedly underlies all religions or spirituality. In the literature, this is called perennialism (Lahood 2008, Heron 1998 & 2006, Ferrer 2002) after Aldous Huxley's (1945) influential book *The Perennial Philosophy* which claimed that underneath all religions and spiritual traditions lies one truth. In the words of Jaenke (2003), 'the metaphysical assumption of a single

ultimate spiritual reality that is both pre-given and universal...is captured by the analogy “all rivers lead to one ocean” (p.10). Lahood, (2008), argues that beneath the multifarious hybridised versions of contemporary western popular spirituality what is often found are allegiances to an eastern version of transcendent reality; a state of oneness to which this world is but an illusion. I believe that inquiring into contemporary forms of western spirituality will reveal traces of this common pattern. In my corner of the woods, just outside Byron Bay, NSW, this worldview is highly prevalent.

Spirituality can be part of the problem or part of the solution...

The practical consequences of adhering and attempting to embody such a worldview can often lead to the three problematic forms of spirituality named above. Spiritual bypassing can easily occur if this world is deemed unimportant or an illusion. If the transcendent oneness is what I should focus on then I will most likely not attend to many important areas of my life. Spiritual narcissism can arise through attempts to identify with this oneness, often leading to inflation, dissociation and interpersonal difficulties (Ferrer 2002). Dis-integrated spirituality can arise through the conflicts that can occur between the idealised transcendent oneness and the claims of ‘this world’ such as work, relational and ethical commitments.

Perennialism, of one sort or another, is such a ubiquitous facet of contemporary forms of western spirituality, so prevalent that authors (Hanegraff 1998, Lahood 2008) have attempted to bring to light its globalising character, a subtle colonialism of the spirit (Lahood 2008). It is often at the heart of spiritually oriented psychotherapy models, such as found within and

influenced by Ken Wilber’s (1986, 1999) work. Wilber, in numerous publications over the last thirty years, has attempted to bridge spirituality and western psychotherapy through the creation of a synthetic, integral and developmental model which posits an eastern form of oneness, or non-duality, as the highest pinnacle of human development. This model has been hugely influential in the area of transpersonal studies and spiritually oriented psychotherapy (Sperry 2001), and I mention it here to highlight its prevalence and to raise awareness of the possible consequences of its use in clinical practice. In the context of my argument, there are two fundamental problems to it: (i) its allegiance to an eastern ‘oneness/non-duality/emptiness’ as the truth of all religions is an ethnocentric claim to that can silence cultural difference (e.g. Indigenous Australians don’t traditionally believe this), and can lead therapists to ‘homogenise’ (Ferrer 2002, p.101) clients’ spiritual experience, and (ii) my argument is that a focus on the end goal of the spiritual life as ‘oneness’ is often at the heart of the spiritual problems outlined above.

Criteria for evaluating spirituality in therapeutic practice

Being clear on how we, as therapists, evaluate healthy or problematic forms of spirituality is vitally important in making sound therapeutic decisions. Pargament (2007) offers three criteria therapists can evaluate a client’s spirituality with: (i) truth based criteria, which focus on whether what the client is talking about is ‘true’ or ‘real’, (ii) pragmatic criteria, in the same vein as William James’ (1902), who in his classic, *The varieties of Religious Experience*, argued that the value of religion is its practical fruits; these pragmatic criteria focus on whether the practical consequences of the client’s spirituality is useful to them, the wider community, or not and (iii)

process criteria, where the therapist assesses whether clients appear integrated and congruent (Pargament 2007, p.133). Whereas in my practice I prefer to put my therapeutic focus primarily on the last two forms of criteria, the usefulness of the practical consequences of a client’s spiritual life and how congruent and integrated a client appears in relationship to the various domains of their life, some therapists and some therapeutic schools may want to make a stronger alignment with notions of truth and ‘the real’ when it comes to spirituality.

Although I certainly believe that some situations call strongly for ‘reality testing’ or confronting problematic forms of spirituality, I believe I can undertake this in a therapeutic manner without needing to rely on notions of truth. Even where there is the need for hospitalisation due to delusion I can still ground my actions based on the second and third criteria: a client needs psychiatric support due to problematic consequences of their spiritual practice/worldview, including lack of integration and coherence with what is taken for commonsense reality. It is my belief that spirituality can be engaged within therapy without being constrained by simplistic notions of truth. Spirituality’s validity in people’s lives can take many forms (Heron 1998, Heron 2006).

Embodied spirituality and integrative psychotherapy

I have used the term embodiment in relation to spirituality various times in this article and it could seem a fairly redundant usage as all forms of spirituality are embodied in one way or another. Yet, as various proponents would argue (see Coakley 1997, Law 1995, Ferrer 2008), many religious and spiritual traditions and practices can be called disembodied through their ignoring of vital facets of the whole person and rendering them illegitimate as ‘reliable sources of spiritual insight in their own

right' (Ferrer 2003, p.1). Some of these domains of the whole person (i.e. somatic process, emotions, sexuality, relationships) have often been articulated as a 'hindrance to spiritual flourishing – a view that often has often led to the repression, regulation or transformation of these worlds at the service of "higher" goals of spiritualised consciousness' (ibid.). The notion of embodied spirituality, a spirituality that does not denigrate facets of the whole person but embraces all of who we are (our bodily and emotional life, our thoughts, visions and aspirations, our relationships, sexuality and much else) as equal partners in our spiritual life, is a useful heuristic that, I believe, psychotherapy can usefully work with in understanding dis-embodied and unintegrated spirituality.

A holistic approach to spiritual concerns

In general, working holistically means my attention is paid to each facet of the client equally (Brownell 2010), not one area being prioritised over another. In focusing on helping clients to integrate and embody their spirituality in the healthiest manner possible, my holistic focus is changed. In these cases my intention is to support the client to become acquainted with and to participate in the life of the various areas of their being that is not being addressed by their spiritual practice. Specifically, when working with clients who bring problematic forms of spirituality, such as the three outlined above, and consequent issues arising from adhering to some form of perennialism, I find that my work often involves a tripartite focus: on somatic process, on the emotional life and on interpersonal dynamics.

Somatic process and the emotional life

I primarily work from a neo-humanistic, relational and process-experiential therapeutic approach with all clients (Greenberg, Watson

& Lietaer 1998). Within the process-experiential tradition a basic tenet is that 'people experience the world in the present in their bodies... they gush with feeling and sensation before any words provide containers for their feelings (Greenberg 2002, p.18). Somatic process and affect arise before language and cognition and Leslie Greenberg (2002) has outlined an emotion-focused therapy perspective which articulates a way of resolving personal difficulties that involves accessing somatic process and affect prior to working with reasoning and processes of narrative making (2006). Within this tradition listening to the voice of one's somatic and emotional life can provide vital data about important self needs and action tendencies. This data can vastly inform and enrich reasoning and life choices due to being based on information gleaned from manifold regions of one's life.

It is my belief that spirituality can be engaged with in therapy without being constrained by simplistic notions of truth.

In a similar vein, Hinterkopf (2008) has reworked Gendlin's (1996) body-oriented therapy method, Focusing, into a spiritually oriented therapeutic approach that places client congruence between the body, the emotions and the mind at the heart of the work, where creating dialogue between all these domains is the way to health.

This way of working, I find, is suitable to clients struggling with spiritual concerns, as outlined above. In my experience, spiritual bypassing (Wellwood 2000) and dis-integrated spirituality (Pargament 2007), are highly prevalent, with many clients struggling with conflicts between

spiritual ideals and the needs of the body and emotional life. Often spirituality is embraced by people in a highly intellectual manner and the best way I know of how to address such issues is to help clients access their somatic and emotional experience and allow the added information they now have to support them in making healthier, more integrated and embodied, choices in their life. This way of working does not denigrate cognition, thought processes or thinking but simply gives reasoning and decision making greater access to information of personal significance on which to base its choices.

Spirituality and the relational life

Problematic forms of spirituality, such as the three outlined previously, can often lead to a variety of interpersonal difficulties. If, for example, oneness and non-attachment is a goal of the spiritual life then how do you manage attachment and the messy emotions that arise from relationships? Often people take up various solo spiritual practices in order to transform interpersonal difficulties with dubious results (Kornfield 1993). According to John Heron (2006), 'many basic modes of human development – e.g. those to do with gender, psychosexuality, emotional and interpersonal skills, communicative competence, morality, to name but a few – unfold through engagement with other people (p.7). For Heron, 'the spirituality that is the fullest development of these modes can only be achieved through relational forms of practice (ibid.). Psychotherapy can provide such a 'relational form of practice' which not only heals interpersonal difficulties brought about by problematic forms of spirituality but is also able to enhance and deepen a client's spirituality within the relational domain.

I personally find that working interpersonally, in the here and

now, utilising the 'real relationship' (Duquette 2010) and how I am being impacted by the client is very helpful for clients 'to begin to develop some awareness of the way in which aspects of their characterological styles (interpersonal spiritual habits) and unconscious ways of being may impact on others' (Safran & Muran 2000, p.126). Two further ways that help me raise awareness of a client's interpersonal dynamics are (i) the notion of modifications to contact from Gestalt therapy (Mackewn 1997), which gives me a template to work in the here and now and explore how the client moves out of contact with me and in which way this is related to his spiritual life and (ii) the processes of interpersonal dynamic psychotherapy, as outlined by Levenson (2010). These are very useful in framing the problematic issues a client brings to therapy within an interpersonal dynamic framework related to a client's spiritual life.

Loss

Often the clients' work of embodiment leads to feelings of loss, of losing cherished notions and ideals that, in the face of somatic, emotional needs and relational needs, do not seem as important or valid (Kornfield 1993, Wellwood 2000). This process of loss can involve a letting go of spiritual forms which do not serve the client, allowing an opening to the new and may also deepen their spirituality as they uncover more important needs and spiritual yearnings. These two processes are not mutually exclusive.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that psychotherapy can play a vital role in supporting the healthy embodiment and integration of spirituality within the various domains of their life, what Wellwood (2000) calls 'embodying our realisation' (p.1993). I argued that a therapist does not have to problematise spirituality per se but can work with its consequences by focusing on integrating and embodying it, a process that may lead to the loss of

cherished spiritual goals, notions and attachments, yet may also lead to a deepening of a client's spirituality. In order to support a therapist in assessing spirituality in clinical practice, I outlined three criteria for assessing spirituality's validity and offered an outline of various approaches to working with somatic process, affect and interpersonal issues which may help in the work on integration and embodiment.

What this paper does not explore is the other side of the 'grounding' and integration of spirituality in psychotherapy: the much more complex and thorny issue of how psychotherapy can be framed as a spiritual undertaking which promotes 'a fuller participation' (Ferrer 2002, p.145) in the various spiritual worlds articulated by the many spiritual traditions we have access to. I have no doubt that psychotherapy can be framed in this manner, although that inquiry will be left to another piece of writing. ♦



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Any comments or suggestions are welcome.

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