• Working with Spirituality in Counselling

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“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there”
– Rumi
When I look back upon my life
it's always with a sense of shame
I've always been the one to blame
For everything I long to do
no matter when or where or who
has one thing in common too
It's a, it's a, it's a, it's a sin
It's a sin
Everything I've ever done
Everything I ever do
Every place I've ever been
Everywhere I'm going to
It's a sin
- Neil Tenant Pet Shop Boys
• Freud on religion: “The whole thing is potentially so infantile, so foreign to reality... it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life” (Freud, 1963:11)
• “Among my patients in the second half of life - that is over 35 years of age – there has not been a single one whose problem has not been in the last resort that of finding a religious outlook on life” (Jung, 1933: 164).
• “Our experiences in therapy and in groups, it is clear, involve the transcendent the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension” (Rogers, 1980).
Suffering

• It seems to me that the major religions of the world and counselling share the common aim of being a response to human suffering. Both have an explanation for human suffering; pastoral ways of responding to suffering and have developed techniques to minimise current suffering and to reduce future suffering
Thinking about spirituality and counselling

• 1) As 2 separate circles:
2) As 2 overlapping circles
3) As 2 circles overlapping and indistinguishable
4) As 2 circles in which one contains the other
5) As a spectrum with counselling at one end and spirituality at the other.
Rachel, an experienced counsellor and supervisor

• “Thanks for your paper. It came at the right time because I am reflecting on how deep relating was when I met up with friends in X last week, something that I yearn for and cannot find in my local area and having a new supervisor I cannot yet trust her with any of my special moments. I also realise it could come from me holding back.”
Lousie, a counsellor in training

“I was having a discussion with my client at the end of a counselling session when something happened. In that moment it was as if we were both suddenly 'held'. I had never felt anything like it before. Neither of us said anything, but we both knew that something had occurred ... like an imperceptible seismic shift. It was as if I had stepped out of normal time and space and suddenly felt connected with everything that was, is and would be. I had a feeling of joy and I remember thinking that if I died there and then, it would be OK, because I had experienced this and that was all that mattered! Bizarre. In that moment I felt Blessed and as if we had both received some 'healing' at the same time. “
Counselling as a social and cultural process

John McLeod suggests that we view counselling as a social and cultural process rather than a psychological one: “Counselling represents one of many ways in which cultural norms and values of a society are affirmed, and operates as a means of helping individuals to negotiate their own relationship with these cultural norms” (McLeod 2001:589).
• Question:
  • 1) Which culture?
  • 2) In our postmodern multicultural society what are the cultural norms?
  • 3) What about spirituality?
How I would define spirituality (1)

• The following features are appropriate I believe in defining spirituality in a therapeutic context:
• it is rooted in human experiencing rather than abstract theology
• it is embodied
• it involves linking with other people and the universe at large
• it involves non ordinary consciousness
• that active engagement with spirituality tends to make people more altruistic, less materialistic and more environmentally aware
• it deals with the meaning that people make of their lives
How I would define spirituality (2)

- It faces suffering and its causes
- It relates to God/Goddesses/ultimate reality
- It often uses the word ‘soul’ or ‘higher self’
- Techniques such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, mindfulness, yoga and Tai Chi are often used as spiritual practices

- Any clients actively exploring their spirituality are likely to resonate with much of the above, and may have issues arising from the above, and from residual childhood and adult interactions with organised religion.
Religion and spirituality in Britain today

- ‘Believing not belonging’ most of the Christian churches are in decline
- For many ethnic minority people religion is an important part of coping with white society
- According to David Hay most people (76%) in Britain have spiritual experiences
But

When I was ill, I certainly learned VERY quickly to keep the spiritual side of myself separate from the rest of myself whenever I met with any of the ‘professionals’.” (counselling client in Jenkins 2006: 80)
But (2) Louise again

Later, I found a description of ‘presence’ presented in a book by McLeod and also read an article in the Thresholds magazine, in which a psychotherapist was discussing with another person the internal struggle that she was having with her Christian faith and her psychodynamic work. During their encounter, the therapist talked of experiencing a sense of feeling 'met'. These examples seemed to describe my experience exactly. I then took it to supervision, in great excitement and looking for some help on interpreting it.
“However, we did not discuss it as being a spiritual experience. As a group we described it, in psychodynamic terms, as the client becoming 'attached' to me, which he undoubtedly was, but I felt it was more than that. I felt that something else had happened, that wasn’t created or facilitated by me or my client. So, without getting much further in being able to talk about it in spiritual terms, I put the experience to the back of my mind then, thinking that it wasn’t valid and that it wasn’t helping my psychodynamic training or supervision.
Louise (4)

• During the session with my client that day, I truly felt that, for a few moments, the counselling room really did become a ‘sacred space’”

• I found it hard to describe my experience in a Christian setting too and to find clarification of what, I felt, had been a moment of Grace.”
From my own experience

• With my own therapist 3 or 4 years ago the following happened. One session I noticed that she was wearing a Christian cross. I thought to myself, ‘Oh My God, what on earth does she think of me? Is she a Christian and if so what kind of Christian is she?’

• I had taken her to be vaguely New Age and seemingly accepting of my spirituality but what if...
During the week between sessions I thought to myself, ‘Come on William you’re a specialist on therapy and spirituality surely you of all people could address such a spiritual issue with your therapist?’

So I did and asked her about the cross. Well it was worn as a fashion item not as an expression of belief! My relief was immense but it had taken courage.

How hard it can be for a client to raise questions around spirituality!
From my research

1) “I found that when I did have one client for whom the spiritual was very important, it was quite difficult to deal with, being supervised by someone who had no sense of the spiritual... either I took what I’d done to supervision and got it rubbished or I left it outside supervision, protected it increasingly by not getting it supervised.”

2) “There are moments I think when you almost feel a presence... I feel most humbled by those experiences, it’s almost like, being present to something that’s really beyond what you could do, there is a sense of at one-ness... This would not be easy to share with my supervisor”
“The work I do there I circumspect in how I work with my supervisor... I’m cautious there. It’s about wanting to remain credible... I think my supervisor would be right to question if I wanted to spend too much time on what are for me questions about my own practice, contextualising my work within the spiritual dimension.”
Carl Rogers on Presence

“\textbf{I find that when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful. There is nothing I can do to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes.}”
But these strange behaviors turn out to be right in some odd way. At those moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.”
Brian Thorne on therapists’ rejecting spirituality

• “The therapist can reject the reality of spirituality and see so-called spiritual phenomena as ultimately explicable in psychological terms and therefore not requiring an alternative framework for their conceptualisation. A second position is to acknowledge the validity of spiritual experience but to exclude it from the therapeutic arena on the grounds that counsellors and therapists are not equipped to respond to it and have more pragmatic behavioural, cognitive and affective objectives to achieve.” (Thorne 1997 p. 11-12)
Knowing me – Knowing you : AHA!

• “When I am clear about my faith and comfortable with it – whatever it looks like – then that is good. I know what I think. I know what I believe and I know what I do not believe. I know what my values are, or I know that I don’t know. Then, when I am like that, I can listen to clients.” (Wyatt, 2002: 182).
How to do it?

1) Know yourself in relationship to spirituality and be at ease with it
2) Have some awareness not just of the major religions but of human spirituality which is especially important in Britain
3) Be ready for moments of presence and I/Thou occurring and be accepting of how clients frame such moments
4) If none of your clients ever discuss their spirituality you should be concerned
Where do you stand?

• “The practice of therapy always feels sacred to me. I consider the client’s spiritual well-being and spiritual path, even if we do not discuss it as such. I consider the therapy room to be sacred space, a sacred container for the issues of the soul. Generally I do not use this language with clients, however, it is my personal frame for the process.” (extract from interview)
Finally

• “I ain't lookin' for you to feel like me, See like me or be like me.” – Bob Dylan
References


