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Working with Spiritual Difference, or "You Believe WHAT????"

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Abstract

Issues of spirituality, defined here as those values and insights that give meaning to a client's daily life, are increasingly a part of what we must be prepared to deal with in the counselling room. Traditional religions, particularly Christianity and Judaism, are viewed by many clients as being too confining, devoid of spontaneity and imagination, and out of touch with the experiences of the young in particular. Working with spirituality in counselling relationships requires us to begin where our clients are, resisting any temptation to pigeonhole their search for meaning in their lives. Unlike religion, which is regulated corporately, spirituality is often about spontaneity, surprise, and the struggle to articulate insights and comprehend experiences that are uniquely a client's own.

Keywords: Spirituality, spontaneity, imagination, insight, meaning-making

Story #1

In 2007, I moved back to the US after teaching in Auckland for 15 years. I was very very tired at the end of 15 years of an international career, and as well, my mother, at 92, was nearing the end of her life and I felt it was important to be closer to her. During my time in Auckland, I had returned to the US every year to visit her (and various other relatives, including my two kids), and each time I went to see her, she would ask, "What do you think happens after we die?" I would always reply, "I don't know, Mom. What do you think happens?" And she would answer, "I think I'll see your father [who had died 30 years earlier] and he and I will be reunited."

That question and answer, almost a call and response, was so habitual that I sort of stopped listening—until one day when she asked (again), "What do you think

happens after we die?" I replied, "I don't know, Mom. I'm having enough trouble with THIS life, and don't really spend a lot of time thinking about the NEXT life. What do you think happens?" And she said, "I don't know either." You could have knocked me over with a feather. We had that same interesting exchange one year later, before she died suddenly at the dinner table in a retirement centre.

The traditional answer she'd been looking for was for me to assure her that Dad was waiting for her in heaven. That had not been my belief for about two decades by the time she died, but I had never expressed my opinion to her for fear of upsetting her relatively simplistic, traditional faith. And suddenly, for reasons I don't understand, we were in concert again, together holding an unknowing about something we had no control over anyway.

Story #2

Not long after Mom died, one of my PhD candidates—a very smart and talented Samoan—asked if he could come live with me for a while. He was having an enormous amount of interference from his extended family and his church, so much so that he was making very little progress on his doctoral thesis. I said yes, and so he moved to California and lived in my casita—my stand-alone office, or "little house"—for nearly a year. One evening I popped next door to my office to ask him something and I noticed that the curtains were all drawn on the office windows. I asked him why, and he answered: "Do you have any idea how busy your backyard is at night?" I said, "No, though I know my backyard used to be part of the lands deeded to the local Native American tribes." He said, "There is a constant stream of people walking back and forth in your yard all night long. They distract me from my work, and frankly, they scare me, because I think they can see me through the windows, so I've drawn the curtains."

I was a bit jealous that I couldn't see the Indians, and really wasn't sure what to do with my student's interpretation of my "busy" backyard. A few weeks later I went to a birthday party, where I met a young photographer. When I asked him to describe the sort of photography he liked doing, he replied, "I photograph the indigenous people here in the valley." I asked, "You mean the descendants of the early tribes who lived here?" and he replied, "No, I mean the original people who lived in this valley. Some people call them the Indians." He then took me outside, in the evening's waning light, and showed me silhouettes of faces in the mountains that surround the valley. He said, "They left behind their images in the mountains so that people would know who this land really belongs to. I photograph them and display them so that others won't forget."

Story #3

In November of 2011, when I was riding in an old clunker being driven by one of my students in California, we were hit head-on by a car driven by an elderly woman who was blotto on prescription painkillers. I suffered a concussion that resulted in a frequent inability to remember a lot of facts (for example, my mailing address) and was sent to a counsellor to help me gain some ability to cope with the memory loss. Leaving the house to drive to the twelfth session with the shrink, I hopped in the front seat of my car. Mom hopped in the passenger's seat beside me. The problem, of course, was that Mom had been dead for nearly two years. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, and she had on her favourite pale-blue linen suit. She didn't say anything to me. When I got to the shrink's office, I jumped out of the car and headed up the stairs to his consulting room, with Mom right behind me. I sat on the sofa; she sat next to me. I introduced her to the shrink, and he introduced himself back to her. The shrink and I chatted a bit about how unusual this was, but then proceeded with our business of sorting out my memory issues, while Mom sat in silence and listened. About five minutes before the session ended, Mom got up and left the room. I don't know what Mom wanted, but I did feel comforted by her visit. I stopped my therapy four sessions later.

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Now, I entitled my keynote address "Working with Spiritual Difference: You Believe WHAT????" because I understand these three events to point to a distinction between the culture of religion and the culture of spirituality. The culture of religion, in its traditional form, generally does not recognise the validity of any transcendent reality outside of those condoned formal structures that are grounded in scripture and tradition, while spirituality is often more amorphous, personal, and ephemeral. I would classify all three of the stories I just told you as spiritual, but not as religious, in that none of the three fall easily into the categories of either institutional doctrine or dogma.

My experience as a therapist in Auckland taught me, by way of my clients, that the people of Aotearoa New Zealand are deeply spiritual, but not very often religious. Even this distinction is artificial to a degree, and it's important (for me) to recognise the delicacy of the distinction. If it's any help, Linda Brown Holt articulates it this way:

> *In the West, Augustine, Hildegard, Meister Eckhart and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are examples of individuals whose lives were balanced by the experience of spirituality discovered in the practice of religion. But not every person can find spirit in form. Some, like Thoreau and Emerson, eschewed established religion to pursue a*

> *universal understanding of truth. Others like Mary Baker Eddy charted other pathways to explore consciousness, in effect creating (though that may not have been their intent) innovative forms. One may be a spiritual person, living in communion with God, nature and one's fellow beings,* without *the structures and formulae of organized religion.* (Holt, 2006)

But in contrast to Holt's clear and succinct definition, I would offer a recent explication by Nancy Ammerman, one of the leading sociologists of religion in the United States.

> *In Europe and in the United States, both scholarly and popular perceptions seem to tell a story of declining "religion" and growing "spirituality"—a zero-sum movement from one to the other. What is declining in this picture is "religion," usually assumed to be organized, traditional, and communal, while "spirituality" is often described as improvised and individual. In his study of the spirituality of artists, for instance, Wuthnow notes that his subjects see spirituality as "more authentic" than organized religion because they themselves have created it (Wuthnow, 2001). Accepting that individualized view has often meant that sociologists have ignored spirituality entirely, sticking to measures of organized religiosity and relegating spirituality to the domain of psychologists and religious studies scholars. As Bender (2010) argues, when we define a phenomenon as an interior individual "experience," we place it conceptually beyond the reach of sociological explanation.*
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> *Sociologists who have taken spirituality seriously and have resisted the zero-sum reading of the trends have discovered that there is actually a good deal of overlap between spirituality and religion, at least in the American population. In Hout, Fischer, and Chaves's (2013) reading of the General Social Survey, fully 80 percent of American adults claim to be* both *religious and spiritual. Marler and Hadaway (2002) compared data from several surveys to show that the people who consider themselves most strongly spiritual are also the most religiously active. In addition, Roof (2003) has provided an in-depth exploration of the overlap. As Pargament (2011) notes, one of the several problems with the "polarization of religion ('the institutional bad-guy') and spirituality ('the individual good-guy')" is that it does not fit the empirical evidence (p. 31).* (Ammerman, 2013, p. 259)

While "fully 80 percent of American adults claim to be *both* religious and spiritual" (Ammerman, 2013, p. 259), such was not the case with some research that I co-conducted in 2011, by interviewing 18- to 22-year-old males at nine private

four-year church-funded universities in the United States. The distinction between religion and spirituality which seems so widespread in New Zealand is also gaining currency in America. Eighteen months ago, then, I published my eleventh book, entitled *Forging the Male Spirit: The Spiritual Lives of American College Men* (Longwood, Schipper, & Culbertson, 2012), analysing the data from our study of the nine private church-funded universities. The descriptive blurb on Amazon.com goes like this:

> *Young men undergo significant changes during their years in college. They wrestle with "big questions," which are essentially spiritual questions, as they ponder who they are, what they believe, what kind of persons they want to become, and how they might shape the world into something they can feel comfortable being themselves in. Those who participate in men's groups realize that their involvement can nurture their inner lives as they explore these questions and connect to transcendent values and a vision of a larger whole… The book's most extensive discussion is based on a qualitative analysis of thirty-six interviews with male college students, focusing on their understanding of the relationship between their masculinity and their spirituality, and how spirituality groups provided a venue in which they could begin to engage what it means to be spiritual and what it means to be a man.*

The young men we interviewed had very little use for organised religion. Most had been raised in the church until somewhere between ages 15 and 18, and then had left it because they felt the church had nothing to offer them. The church seemed completely unconcerned about meeting these young men where they were, providing a worship service that nourished them in any way, or talking to them about the value of faith in an increasingly brutal world. So they just quietly left, and apparently, no one came after them to ask what had gone wrong.

Instead, recognising that most people crave some sense of the transcendent, they had turned to forms of spirituality that nourished them, in the following order of importance: intimate conversations with other male friends in a regularly structured environment such as a men's group to explore the relationship between masculinity and spirituality; music (both playing it and listening to it with others); physical activities out of doors, such as hiking or camping; and group sports with friends, such as a casual game of soccer.

In its survey results released on 8 October 2012, the Gallup Poll revealed that 19.6% of American adults overall claim no religious identity, and 32% of American

adults under the age of 30 claim no religious identity. In some cases, this departure was precipitated by the climate of gay-bashing within American organised religion (Besen, 2012). In the polls, this group of church leavers is named as "The Nones," and they are the fastest growing "religious" group in America (Crosier, 2013). What is said here of the churches in the US can also be said of American synagogues.

Two reasons are usually given for this exodus from organised religion: congregations are dominated by the elderly, including elderly clergy, and church political and moral positions are too narrow and rigid, and may be out of step with larger public opinion. New Zealand sociologist Alan Jaimieson adds two further groups of people who have reason to disassociate themselves from institutional religion; he calls them "the Reflective Exiles" and "the Transitional Explorers." The Reflective Exiles are those who are deconstructing the faith they have been taught, seeking ways to connect it more closely to the way we live now. The Transitional Explorers are those who want to restate the faith in their own words and to commit to putting the parts of their faith together in ways that more frequently meet their individual needs. Jamieson remarks, "It doesn't take a psychologist or therapist or a Scott Peck aficionado to recognize that both the Reflective Exiles and the Transitional Explorers are on a faith journey, an individuating process that was somehow restricted by their involvement in a faith community" (Hjalmarson, 2010; see also Jaimieson, n.d.).

The research for our *Forging the Male Spirit* study of American university-age males was undertaken in 2011. By 2012, there was a whole new array of research on the market, this time about men and women in their 30s and 40s who were leaving the church, people commonly referred to as Generation X or Gen-X. Furthermore, 46 years ago, when I began my master's degree in Theology in preparation for ministry in the Anglican (or Episcopalian) church, I was the oldest person in the entering class. I was 23. Today, the average age of a student enrolled in a master's degree in Theology in preparation for ministry in the Episcopal Church in the US is 49. Across the board, whether Conservative Evangelical or Liberal Protestant, congregations and their clergy are ageing together, and creating no significant increase in formal affiliation with a specific church or denomination.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, according to the 2006 census, 55.6% of the population identifies as Christian, but only about 15% attend church, and this count has been declining from one census to the next for many years. The fastest growing groups are those who identify as having no religion, at 35% and rising, and the remaining 10%, made up of traditional Māori religion, Judaism, Bahai, Buddhism, Hinduism, and

Islam; these last three have shown significant growth recently, primarily through immigration (Tan, 2012).

Rovers and Kocum (2010) remark that

> *spirituality as a concept has been dissected into fairly minuscule experiences… Spirituality is better understood as a multidimensional space within which every person may be located. As such, spirituality has many domains, dimensions, and definitions. Spirituality can be conceived of as the driving force which gives meaning, stability, and purpose to life through relatedness to dimensions that transcend the self.* (p. 3)

Spirituality, then, is a better descriptor of the ways that New Zealanders in general seek to find and then to articulate some dimension of "otherness" that gives meaning to their lives. In an earlier journal article (Culbertson, 1998), I attempted to sort spirituality into four general subsets, each defined by what its particular adherents were seeking. The four were: The Search for the External Transcendent; The Search for the Internal Transcendent; The Search for the Truth of the Personal Self, and The Search for Integration. The category "The Search for the External Transcendent" assumes the existence of some external authority, nurture, love, or truth, which is often personified. It offers the believer a sense of "vertical security," of belonging to something in the universe that is beyond the immediate human dimension. The category "The Search for the Internal Transcendent" assumes that transcendence is found within each human being. Once accessed, it overpowers egocentricity and self-absorption. While the category refers to "transcendence," this does not necessarily imply a traditional deity or higher power, because one finds the transcendent by going inward, not outward. The category "The Search for the Truth of the Personal Self" makes little or no reference to the transcendent, suggesting instead that the ultimate goal of spirituality is personal growth and self-awareness. The category entitled "The Search for Integration" recognises the connectedness of all that is within one and the relationship of that connectedness to the whole cosmos, including or not including a transcendent being or power.

These were intended to be categories for me alone, not for clients. They provide structures that I can use in my own head to make sense out of what a client is saying to me. In such scenarios, I have felt invited to engage with the spirituality the client uses to make sense of being in a world that doesn't itself make immediate sense. The person sitting across from me seems in need of help and support, and perhaps even liberation, in ways that may jeopardise, or perhaps strengthen, the client's sense of personal

health and ability to manage relationships with others. And of course, a spirituality can be a part of Peggy McIntosh's (1989) "invisible knapsack of privilege," in that to even have time to focus on spirituality is for some people a luxury, while others can get confused by a bout of the "oughts," such as "my spirituality OUGHT to conform to the expectations of others."

Ana-Maria Rizzuto wrote an excellent book on the relationship between psychology and spirituality, entitled *The Birth of a Living God* (1981). Her premise is that, as children, we begin constructing our own version of who God is, gradually making that god image more complex and adapted to our individual expectations. But when severe crisis strikes us, our complex image of God falls apart, leaving us with a simplistic God who is a rescuing parent. A client in this position needs the help of a counsellor who is experienced in supporting those in existential crisis as they rebuild a spirituality that gives them the strength to go on. Again, this demands a therapist who is able to recognise when a client is working out of an infantile God-image versus what a healthy spirituality could look like, even when it does not match the spirituality of the counsellor.

All of this argues that people may easily bring insecurities and anxieties about spirituality to our counselling rooms, having lost confidence in organised religion's ability to answer all their questions. This means we have to be open to conversations about spirituality, and aware of the major dos and don'ts when the topic is raised in our professional relationships. In fact, in your capacity as a counsellor, you may be functioning as the most influential spiritual guide that a typical New Zealander ever has.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, we as mental health professionals have one further challenge to face when dealing with spirituality among the varied populations of this country. Fijian scholar Konei Helu Thaman (2003) calls the combination of Christian and pre-Christian thinking among Māori and Pacific Islanders their "Indigenous Ways of Thinking." My experience working as a researcher and theologian among this population is that the majority of peoples indigenous to the South Pacific adopt a complex combination achieved by setting evangelical Christian theology on Sundays alongside the traditional Pasifika world of spirits on weekdays (see Culbertson & Caygill, 2010). In so many ways, our job in this huge difference gap is to ask the right questions and to listen very very carefully, for it is not just a spirituality that is at stake, but a whole identity.

I will close with two more stories.

Story #4

When I left this land at the very end of 2007, I was really tired. I'd been teaching full-time at the University of Auckland, running a half-time therapy practice, teaching part-time at Auckland University of Technology, and authoring academic books and articles. I missed spending more time with my two grown children, and I also sensed that my mother was at the end of her life. Having lived so long outside the US, I wasn't sure where to move to, so I picked the warmest spot I could think of: Palm Springs, California. And somewhere in that transition, I lost track of who I was…and I became spiritually bereft. The valley in which I now live is surrounded by the most majestic mountains, called the San Jacinto Range, rising to 3,302 metres, or 10,834 feet, and I have a magnificent view of these very mountains from my backyard. I would wake up every morning, aware that I was lost emotionally and dying spiritually. I would look up to the peaks, and would recite out loud the words of Psalm 121, verse 1: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help." Except that I said it differently: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence cometh my help?" And the answer was silence. And every morning that I was in Palm Springs for the first four years, when I woke up I would repeat the routine, and of course, the same answer was given: Silence. I felt abandoned by God. I felt like God couldn't see me. I tried jumping up and down a little bit, hoping that God might notice me that way, but nothing: Silence. I thought going to church might help, at least on Sundays, but I couldn't bring myself to do that either. I went once, midweek, and felt like I was being smothered, like my will to live was leaking away, like I was already spiritually dead.

Story #5

In February of 2012 I was attending a fundraiser for the Palm Springs Film Festival, and a man I didn't know came up to me and said, "We know who you are, and we'd like to invite you to join us." I was intrigued, mostly because I had no idea who this guy was. He then introduced himself, and told me that he was a member of the local synagogue and that he wanted to invite me to attend a worship service with him. A few weeks later I attended the Friday night service at Temple Isaiah in Palm Springs, a "Conservative" synagogue, a form of modern Judaism that sits in-between Orthodox Judaism and Liberal (or Reform) Judaism. Immediately I felt I'd come home. I'd spent nearly half my time between 1971 and 1994 living in Jerusalem, and studying ancient Jewish texts for hours under the tutelage of a prominent Orthodox rabbi, but had firmly chosen to remain an Anglican minister, even through all that education.

Now it was as if all my prayers to the mountains in my backyard, my feelings of being lost and spiritually dead, had at last led me to where I needed to be. Today I am under instruction weekly with the rabbi in order to convert to Judaism. I have found a loving and creative community at Temple Isaiah, a mix of old and young, gay and straight, born Jews and converts, educators, retirees, religious activists, mental health professionals, community leaders, and people who are committed to practising a deep faith in THIS world rather than in a world to come or in a particular form of an anticipated afterlife. I'm at the beginning of a new phase in both my religious and my spiritual lives. My children and my close friends in Palm Springs have commented on how centred and self-assured I now seem, after what those around me who love me could feel was a deep loneliness and sense of being lost. And yes, some say to me, "You believe WHAT?" I understand why they respond to me this way, for my journey is far from "normal," but I also believe that as my life begins its slow march toward the moment of death, I am spiritually alive deep inside a community whose values and way of life match mine, and I am where I belong.

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