

The Joy of Acknowledging Spirituality in Counselling Practice

DEVELOPED FROM A PAPER FOR MASTERS COURSE IN HUMAN SERVICES COUNSELLING

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During my Masters studies I was asked to reflect on Weingarten, K. 1999. *Stretching to meet what's given: Opportunities for a spiritual practice who informs the reader of how she integrated her stories of grief and loss into her spiritual practice as a therapist.* I pondered on my own journey, and reflected how this had similar parallels to the author. I discuss the importance of therapists being aware of their own spirituality, and of their clients.

Simon in Miller et al (1996:47) states that "spirituality may be defined as an intense awareness of being alive, breathing, being present in this moment..." As a spiritually sensitive practitioner, taking one breath at a time, there develops an awareness of the amazing capacity for resilience and creativeness in us and our clients. For each crisis or problem that is presented, there develops a spiritual encounter and transformation which acts like a bridge...."a mutual caring...like an unexpected gift". (Clinebell 1995:37).

My own spiritual journey spans over 27 years when I first became a Christian, starting out on my journey to become a counsellor. Just as Weingarten expresses; my journey also became "my spiritual practice". I found myself on a spiritual journey of exploration, adventure, experiencing suffering, yet having the assuredness that God was very close to me. My own story of grief and suffering - unable to bear children, adopting a baby girl, and then attending her funeral 10 weeks later; getting to know my mother in the last few weeks of her life, the highs and lows of adoption, the loss of a business, moving to another country, feelings of homesickness

and marriage difficulties are all parts of me that integrate into my spiritual practice.

Coincidentally, Weingarten (p244) states "finding connection in loss has stood me in better stead as a clinician and a person....than any professional training...", I believe this to be true. However for me, as a believer in Christ, I am assured that I have a God "who took our infirmities and bore our diseases who has empathy....and a sharing in our hardships". (Isaiah 53). Yancey (1995:257) refers to Scott Peck's portrayal of Jesus; "I was absolutely thunderstruck by the extraordinary reality of the man I found in the Gospels.....a man who was continually frustrated....a man who was terribly... lonely, yet desperately needed to be alone...." At times, I find myself feeling incredibly frustrated, lonely and yet desperately needing to be alone with God – God desperately wants me to express my honesty within my frail humanity – this is the only way that God can use us – when we are weak, He is strong. At times when I have felt weak and tired and no strength left to counsel, God reached down and took over. This is when we let go and let God - being real, authentic and open to the Holy Spirit.

We are encouraged to bring into our practice an awareness of our own humanity, asking the very difficult questions of life, reflecting on our own spiritual journey. When we can do that, there becomes an immense respect and honouring of our clients. Crabb (1993:29) refers to the pain "that opens our hearts to search for God.....it makes us stand still, think about something outside of ourselves".

Recently, I read Larry Crabb's "Soul Survivor" and was inspired by his honesty that often we as counsellors miss the mark – we say all the 'right' things, but if we counsel in our own strength then we are just like the noisy gong without love (1 Cor 13). I found myself gasping for breath when I read Crabb's encapsulation of the human heart; "All across the world, people ... are living the tragedy of an unobserved life." That so resonated with me – in that we can easily miss the reason why we counsel in the first



place - we are encouraged to be Christ's ambassadors and counsellors to our clients – their stories are waiting to be heard, observed and valued; they need a place of recognition and they need space to receive forgiveness and to forgive. And that also applies to us as counsellors – we need a place to be honest, a place to be heard, a place to be forgiven and a place to forgive.

An insight I gained personally (and which Weingarten encourages through her work) is to refrain from constructing a picture of how a client may portray. Narrative therapists; Freedman & Combs (1998:118) emphasise that we need to be in a position of 'not knowing', where every story brings an element of surprise. People are amazing, and it is only when one discovers that there are other parts to the picture, that the richness of the emerging whole is appreciated in a new light. I am reminded of our uniqueness as God's creation – more than what is seen, heard, felt or assumed.

The spiritually sensitive counsellor is likened to one who has been on the journey before. It is like being a seasoned gardener, knowing the seasons and that there is a time for everything – it takes great patience. Often we wish our clients to work through issues quickly, we may see the solution and often attempt to offer shortcuts.

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I was reminded of the time when I endeavoured to help a duckling come out of its shell. Through my 'caring', the duckling died in its shell. This became a major spiritual learning experience, enabling self reflection on treading carefully and allowing clients to sit within their own suffering, without trying to systematically problem solve. Crabb (1993:61) exhorts; "By thinking hard about the human condition and coming up with theories...., we destroy mystery There is more to life than recovering from hardship".

I have such a joy when I consider the spiritual interaction that can take place between the client and therapist. It allows for a place of reverence, awe and wonder. At times, spirituality in therapeutic practice can feel like an "uncertain terrain of unpredictable chaotic life". (Miller et al (1996:50). However, uncertainty and unpredictability give certainty that nothing will stay the same. As Crabb (1993:60) states, "when the Spirit opens the door, we catch a glimpse of the other side...we cannot stay where we've been".

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References

Weingarten, K. 1999. Stretching to meet what's given: Opportunities for a spiritual practice in Spiritual resources in family therapy, ed. F Walsh, 240-255. New York: The Guildford Press

