Exploring New Frontiers in Psycho-Spiritual Integration

“We are in the midst of a profound social/cultural revolution” driven by a “strong inward longing in our society for well-being, meaning, and connectedness” Jon Kabat-Zinn

“If a union is to take place between opposites like spirit and matter, conscious and unconscious, bright and dark, and so on, it will happen in a third thing, which represents not a compromise but something new.” C. G. Jung

“The next stage in our spiritual evolution is emerging...and requires the development of a personal connection with the sacred, unencumbered by doctrine, dogma, or preconceived ideas about the divine. It also involves approaching problems such as the existence of evil and suffering with all the new insights that developments in depth psychology can bring to bear on this and other human predicaments.” Lionel Corbett

From the beginning of psychoanalysis Freud cautioning against inviting a dialogue between the disciplines of religion and psychology, stating that religion was an illusion, one that derived its strength from the fact that it falls within our instinctual desires (1933). Because Freud wanted psychoanalysis to be seen as an objective science, thus joining the momentum of the growing scientific movement in Western Europe, Freud declared a strong stance against matters of spirit. He compared religion to “a childhood neurosis” (1927), and stated,

“Our knowledge of the historical worth of certain religious doctrines increases our respect for them, but does not invalidate our proposal that they should cease to be put forward as the reasons for the precepts of civilization. On the contrary! Those historical residues have helped us to view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics, and we may now argue that the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect. (The Future of an Illusion, 1961b, p 63.)

It is interesting that as we move further into the 21st century, it is the “objective sciences” that have provided evidence that have opened doorways to rethink the artificial divide between psyche and spirit. Discoveries from neuroscience and physics have helped us reexamine beliefs about the human psyche and also challenge the construction of psychoanalysis as a meta-theory grounded in mechanistic, linear observations and hypotheses. Contributions from neuroscience, involving brain research and the impact of mindfulness meditation practices, have increased our understanding of the neuroplasticity of the brain.
Contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation actually change the brain, increasing capacities for empathy, self-reflection, kindness, and even longevity. Neuroscience researcher, Dan Siegel (2012), states that the consistent practice of mindfulness meditation for as little as five to ten minutes a day can increase the brain’s neuroplasticity. In general, prayer and religious affiliation have been demonstrated to be associated with increased longevity and well-being, and as Siegel states that religious and spiritual contemplation changes your brain by “strengthening neural circuits that enhance social awareness and empathy while simultaneously subduing destructive feelings and emotions (p.14)”.

Similarly, mindfulness techniques used in psychotherapy have helped with symptom reduction, relapse prevention in substance abuse and the prevention of relapse in chronic depression. It has also been shown to be effective in the treatment of borderline personality disorder. Trauma researcher, Bessel van der Kolk, looking for a way to help people to regulate their core arousal system in the brain turned to yoga as a way to help people safely feel their physical sensation through developing a quiet practice of stillness through yoga. As we can see, findings from the numerous researchers in psychology and neuroscience lend strong evidence that the use of the spiritual practice of mindfulness meditation can augment psychotherapy treatment.

From the field of physics, the development of relativity and quantum theory served to challenge fundamental assumptions at the base of Freud’s materialistic model. Physicist Thomas J. McFarlane (2000) states that theories of relativity forced physicists to revise their basic conceptions of space, time, movement, gravitation, matter, energy, and the nature of the cosmos, whereas quantum theory forced a revision of the concepts of causality, determinism, and locality (p.2). Physicist, Galatzer-Levy, (2009) applied developments in non-linear theory, otherwise known as “chaos theory” to the application of transcending Freud’s mechanistic worldview. Galatzer-Levy insists that we must accustom ourselves to the fact that non-linear dynamics are actually much more common in the world than linear dynamics.

Non-linear thinking not only allows us to consider how parts connect to other parts and to the whole, it also creates a context that affirms why inter-subjective and relational theories have created a resonance with larger groups of practitioners. It also invites us to attend to examining how parts of the psyche that are visible might connect to parts that are yet to be seen or acknowledged. As new discoveries in physics challenge our assumptions around linear causality, time, matter, and energy, is it possible that yet another doorway is opening to the examination of energy as the spiritual part of the self that has yet to be connected to the larger whole of psychic experience?

**Historical Overview:**

Although Freud’s early influence on the analytic field exerted firm parameters around the bounds of psychoanalytic practice with sanctions against inviting conversation with patients on their religious or spiritual beliefs, a sizable collection of early analysts existed who objected to Freud’s polarizing stance. Contemporaries including Ernst Jones, Otto Rank, William James,
Gordon Allport, Sandor Ferenczi, Franz Alexander, and Carl Jung were all interested in ideas about Eastern mysticism and made attempts to address philosophical and applied practices from a psychoanalytic perspective. The school of humanistic psychology which originated with Maslow and Rogers emphasized the uniqueness of the self, and the importance of integrating the whole person which included feelings, intellect, physical, and spiritual self care. Jung himself believed that spirituality was such an essential ingredient in psychological health that he could heal only those middle-aged people who embraced a spiritual or religious perspective toward life (Epstein, 1995, p. 2).

Over 100 years ago, William James brought our attention to the psychological sophistication of Buddhism and its parallels with psychological practices. James proposed that “the exercise of returning a wandering attention to its target again and again would be the ‘education par excellence’ for the mind (Siegel p. 25-2).” During the late 1950’s and 60’s several psychoanalytic pioneers most notably Erich Fromm and Karen Horney were drawn to exploring the intersection of these two practicing disciplines. It is noteworthy that William James’s idea of the “spiritual self,” helped shape Horney’s conception of the “real self.”

These early bold analytic theorists maintained an open curiosity around the intersection between psychological and mindfulness practice. They also set the stage for the emergence of contemporary discourse on the topic of psycho-spiritual integration. It is within the context of this backdrop that we begin our conversation. As with all conversations, it is best to begin with questions.

Questions for Discourse:

Five questions that I have used to broaden my own thinking with regard to how I approach the psychodynamic interaction are as follows:

1. How does psychology’s polarization around the topic of spirituality, treating it as less than a dynamic subject, affect our ability to expand our meta-theoretical orientation to incorporate even more holistic methods of treatment?

2. How might we begin to think about the social and cultural dimensions of psychotherapy differently? Are there methods that could expand both individuals and groups to enter into a dialogue about what give life greater meaning and purpose?

3. How do we assist our patients with practices that are intentionally aimed at holding the existential tension between transience and permanence?

4. How do we entertain the topic of psycho-spiritual integration without participating in what is often called “spiritual bypass” or grandiose attempts to achieve elevated status or a wish for a magical cure from pain and suffering?
5. How do we remain open to dialogue about spirituality without practicing in areas beyond our expertise or venturing onto the slippery slope of “anything goes”?

Although there is not adequate time to address these questions in the time allotted for this paper, I do encourage you to think about them privately as well as engage in conversation with your own colleagues and peer groups.

I would like to say a few words regarding the concept of spiritual bypass, that is, using spiritual disciplines and spiritual communities as a way of making up for failures of individuation and inadequate parenting. It becomes a pitfall to use spirituality as a way of avoiding psychological work needed to shore up a fragile sense of self.

When it comes to examining the parameters and limitations of psychological and spiritual practices, it becomes important to understand compensatory mechanisms that may be at play, such as longings for escape, salvation, or a need to feel special or holy. Psychologist, John Welwood (2000), a practicing Buddhist, examined what Eastern spiritual teacher initially confronted when Western students began flocking to Buddhist and Hindu practices in the later part of the 20th century.

Because the West values the gifts of individuation and personal ambition, Eastern teachers had difficulty recognizing when students’ efforts in meditative disciplines were used to compensate for an insecure attachment. Welwood noted that early spiritual communities and ashrams often acted as surrogate families when the teacher represented the parent, and practitioners often strived to use the spirituality communities and practices to reinforce defensive-driven relational patterns. Individuals who felt inadequate in interpersonal relationships can use meditation as a detachment to justify their aloofness and disengagement. People with compliant personalities can use the security of an ashram as a way of gaining approval through volunteering with associated over-idealizing of the teacher. Self-negation becomes confused with inner freedom.

Mark Epstein (2007) pointed out similar pitfalls, noting that Eastern spiritual practices tended to attract a high percentage of people who hide behind narcissistic defenses, using spirituality to make themselves feel special or important while devaluing others who do not make the effort to exert the rigors of spiritual discipline. Epstein summarizes his observations by stating, “In my experience, therapy and meditation, psychological development and spiritual realization, seem to be intertwined. One can facilitate the other, or retard the other, or subtly infuse or contaminate the other (p. 16).”

These cautionary observations can apply to the psychological side of the equation as well, as patients also come to us with hidden agenda for the therapist to provide a magical cure and rescue from pain and suffering. However, our understanding of personality structure and our specialized training in working with transferential defenses and longings hopefully help us to
understand the psychological over-compensations of individuals raised in contemporary American culture.

Whether we approach psycho-spiritual integration from the psychological or the spiritual end of the continuum, it is best to view growth in both of these domains as an engagement in a process that is circular, not linear. Spiritual exploration can facilitate an awareness of our psychological blind spots and limitations. The process of psychological healing and growth will eventually bring us to existential questions around meaning, purpose, values, and anxieties around impermanence.

To date, practices that have begun to integrate meditative techniques with psychotherapy have largely come from the influence of Buddhism. Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius have noted that although the various “contemplative traditions” have much in common in terms of quieting the mind and entering into the present moment, “science has engaged Buddhism the most. Like science, Buddhism encourages people to take nothing on faith alone and does not require a belief in God. It also has a detailed model of the mind that translates well to psychology and neurology

**What is Missing?**

As exciting as the recent contributions from neuroscience are, one aspect of psycho-spiritual integration that I believe is under-represented in our examination is the importance of community. In Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, community functioned as a container or holding environment for individual and group well-being. All ancient spiritual traditions relied upon community as a major leverage point in a number of key ways.

- Communities helped facilitate growth and transition throughout the seasons and throughout the life cycle.
- Communities buffered against individual isolation creating connection as well as personal accountability.
- Through the use of ritual, community members could cope with various external situations such as famine, tragedy, grief and loss, as well as rites of passage through normal life transitions in a way that could be used as an opportunity for personal and collective transformation.

Currently, psychology and neuroscience have embraced a natural fit between Eastern meditative practices, psychological healing, and increases in brain health, and psychologists have begun to incorporate these disciplines as an adjunct to traditional psychotherapy. However, we are still missing a key component in the flow of interconnectivity. In terms of providing a structure or milieu for group interaction, mirroring, and support, psychotherapy continues to primarily rely on individual therapy to facilitate change and growth. Although group psychotherapy is also practiced, its scope has remained largely unchanged. Some might argue that moving outside of traditional practices falls outside of the parameters of psychological practice.
This raises the issue of values in Western psychotherapy. American cultural over-emphasis on individual personal expansiveness, material success, and “me” at the expense of “we” attitudes seems to be stretched to the limit, as evidenced by an increase in bullying, social isolation, disharmony, lack of balance, increased stress, and the loss of direction, purpose or meaning.

Churches and synagogues that once provided the connective tissue for mainstream communities are in marked decline. According to the Public Religion Research Institute, there has been a significant decrease in church attendance over the last several decades. While only 7 percent of Americans were raised outside of a religious tradition, nearly 19 percent are affiliated with no formal religion today. According to the General Social Survey, the number of Americans who say they have “no religion” has more than doubled since 1990. One-third of Americans under the age of 30 say they have no religion. Mainline protestant denominations have shown a steady decline over the past two decades; however, according to Christian pollsters even the evangelical churches are losing followers due to their anti-science stance and their sexually repressive teachings.

Equally interesting, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life states that more than two-thirds of those unaffiliated with any church or synagogue believe in God; nearly four in ten say they are “spiritual” but not “religious; more than one-fifth say they pray every day. The Pew Forum loosely refers to this group of people as the “Nones” taken from statistics in hospital records that ask to mark your religious affiliation, one of which is “none”.

These statistics clearly point to a gap in institutional support that was once provided by belonging to a religious, spiritual, or contemplative community. At this point in history, I would ask, where in the secular arenas will new structures emerge to take up the slack? Interestingly, corporate America has begun to address the relationship between psychological health, spiritual practices, and increased productivity by offering practices such as yoga and meditation as a part of their daily office routine. Companies such as Target, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and a number of high tech industries in the Silicon Valley are introducing spiritual practices in the workplace. In addition, Aetna Insurance began introducing mindfulness and yoga programs to its employees in 2010. General Mills has now embraced the benefits of spiritual practices on the workforce and has installed a meditation room equipped with sitting cushions and yoga mats. In addition General Mills introduced a Mindful Leadership program for its executives, with the idea that calmer workers will be less stressed, more productive, and demonstrate better leadership skills, something that can benefit the entire organization (Gelles, 2012).

Will psychology join corporate America’s lead in taking an active role in addressing this gap? As brain research continues to reveal contributions from contemplative and mindfulness practices on stress reduction, including the healing of trauma, and increased physical and emotional well being, we certainly can make further inroads with more holistic forms of psychotherapy. However,
• How can we as therapists collectively address issues of isolation and loneliness on a secular and community level?
• How can we begin to create group structures that replace a sense of community, even on a micro-level?
• Can we learn from corporate America’s lead and design new programs that incorporate the knowledge we possess from depth psychotherapy with rituals and practices that provide interpersonal connection, a sense of purpose and acts of service aimed at giving back to the larger whole?

Application:

In the next section of this paper, I offer a method that illustrates how I have begun to apply psycho-spiritual integration in my own practice. These groups were designed as continuous monthly gatherings conducted over a ten-month period of time. The second example is a case vignette of an individual who used psychotherapy with his own daily meditative practice and church community.

Application of Psycho-Spiritual Integration with Groups

I will begin by discussing how psycho-spiritual groups can offer a secular alternative to the dimension of community connection through the use of ritual, guided exercises, the practice spiritual regular spiritual discipline, and group discussion. Before describing the basic design of these group retreat gatherings, a word should be said about the definition of spirituality from a non-denominational, non-religious/lay-person’s perspective. Definitions of spirituality encompass a broad range. I offer three definitions from sources that helped shape my thinking in the design of my group retreats.

The current Dalai Lama writes in Ancient Wisdom, Modern World that “spirituality is concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which brings happiness to both self and others…”

Psychologist, Betty Hughes (2011) states, “Spirituality, as used in the context of psychotherapy, is the perspective that one can have a personal relationship with a higher form of consciousness that exists outside the five senses. The experience is open to individual interpretation and can include a particular religious affiliation or a more generalized belief system. The creative use of spirituality can enhance the process of psychotherapy; it does not replace it or become the higher framework (p.2).”

Dan Siegel began asking people who attended various conferences he conducted to define what they meant by the word spiritual. Over the span of several years here is his amalgamation of over 100 people’s responses that I am including with his permission.
Spirituality is the fundamental truth that we are a part of an inter-connected whole. Spirituality is the connection or link to “the we”; it is one of the vehicles that helps us move from a mind-set that is personally focused to one that reaches beyond the self to include an attitude that embraces the inter-connection between all sentient beings.

Based on these descriptions of what it means to be spiritual, I decided to leave the definition of spirituality open to personal interpretation. Group members were invited to define spirituality in a way that was relevant to each individual. Suffice it to say that I wasn’t as interested in reaching agreement about definitions of spirituality as I was in engaging in dialogue around what it meant to incorporate a sense of the spiritual into daily living.

Some group members defined spirituality as accessing, trusting, and further their own inner wisdom. Others defined it as some form of contact or communion with a divine energy source, others as a belief in God. Some, who were self-declared Atheists, wanted to join a spirituality group because they sought shared conversation around deeper questions and life purpose. Several individuals were attracted to a non-religiously based group because they had suffered damage in childhood from their religious communities or teachings, damage that left scars or a deep-seated uncertainty about their value and goodness as a person.

In designing the psycho-spiritual groups, I relied heavily on Siegel’s idea about the importance of creating a group structure that would provide participants with an experience of being a part of an inter-connected whole. Drawing upon the premise of “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, I crafted the three components or pillars to anchor our process and our discussions.

- The first component focuses on the importance of maintaining a spiritual/contemplative discipline. I asked individual members were to design a spiritual practice of their own creation, one that they would commit to on a regular basis for the ten month duration of our meetings. Practices might include prayer or meditation, Yoga or Thai Chi, or they could design simple activities, such as taking regular walks in nature. Through the ten months, I also introduced various meditative techniques including: mindfulness meditation, centering prayer, the practice of “Metta”, walking meditation, chanting, silent meditation that included focusing on a question followed by journaling to music.

- The second structural component was directed toward the examination of belief systems. We began by examining personal beliefs and traditions, where they came from, and whether those traditions continued to fit. We engaged in discussion and readings, exploring how other traditions could further shape or expand psycho-spiritual growth and development. Writings from spiritual leaders were explored including: the teachings of the Buddha, Christ, as well as teachings from the Islamic, Hindu, and Native American traditions. Primitive religious beliefs were also used to provide a broader historical perspective. Finally, readings from contemporary religious, spiritual, and psychological writers became a part of our discussion as well.

- The third structural component was that of community. I began by examining what activities, rituals, reflective exercises, and questions could be incorporated into our retreat gatherings that would foster Siegel’s definition of inter-connectedness. I looked for
similarities within various religious and spiritual practices and designed a “ritual induction process” as a way of beginning each group. Every gathering circle included an altar that often incorporated seasonal changes or symbolic elements that represented a particular theme for a group meeting. After several months, I invited group participants to help in the creation of the altar and contribute ideas for each month’s gathering.

The overall design of these 10 month groups not only included the dynamic unfolding of the group process itself, it also included activities that occurred during the interval of time between group meetings. Activities and exercises were designed to maintain ongoing self-reflection while attending to the goals of each member. Participants were given creative projects to help stimulate non-linear modes of approaching daily life as well as psycho-spiritual balance. In addition, group members met in pairs with different pairings individuals meeting each month to discuss the assignment as well as to deepen the relational connection between members outside of the group. Finally, everyone was report on progress, insights, frustrations, or difficulties maintaining momentum with their chosen spiritual or contemplative discipline and as the group progressed.

Themes for group discussion included conversation on topics such as:

- creating a sanctuary space in your home,
- how spiritual disciplines change your brain,
- intentional passage through life transitions,
- examining one’s inner gifts and/or the essence of individual authenticity,
- letting go of unfinished business/regrets that might be holding each member back from moving into fuller purpose,
- feelings, beliefs, and fears about death, loss, and impermanence,
- how to create a spiritual or contemplative community after the group ends,
- and how to approach vocation/service in a way that integrates your gifts and authenticity, or as Parker Palmer says, finding the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.

Group meetings were offered at outside retreat facilities, and each meeting was structured as either daylong or half day retreat. Group membership ranged between 7-12 people, who remained together as a closed group for the entire 10 months. Members were given the opportunity at the end of their first 10 month experience to rejoin another group the following year that met quarterly for day long retreats. The individuals whose data I will discuss represent group members who participated in extended group experiences over the course of no fewer than three years, and up to seven years consistently.

Age demographics of these all women’s groups ranged from late thirties to late sixties. Of the 33 members who were asked to participate in the survey, professions included: 9 business professionals, 2 artists, 7 psychologists/therapists, 1 physician, 2 nurses, 1 Episcopalian priest, 2 chaplains, 3 university professors, 1 free-lance writer, and 5 teachers/guidance counselors in school systems. Several of these women were retired from their professions. Group members were selected through a careful screening process. Clearly, this is not a representative sample of the population at large. However, my goal was to gather groups of women who would not use
the group experience, as Welwood cautioned, as a forum to enact unresolved psychological issues. Of course, we all bring some degree of unfinished business into the present moment; however, I hoped to gather sufficiently grounded individuals so that we could observe how the blending of these two components of the psyche would unfold. When I started this project I considered it to be an experiment, waiting to see where this structure and format would lead us.

The results were beyond my expectations. As I continued these groups over the years, I became more firmly convinced that there is a hunger amongst people who are not affiliated with a religious faith for spiritual connection, meaningful dialogue, in a group/community environment. To give a flavor of the end result of these group gatherings, I have included several qualitative responses to several survey questions to help illustrate this point.

**Survey Responses:**

The survey design consisted of 10 questions. The full list of questions is included in an Appendix. For the purposes of this talk, I will focus on qualitative responses addressing three of the ten questions.

1. What aspects of our community experience do you still draw upon?
2. What value did this group structure have that was not provided by more traditional religious experiences?
3. How did this group structure differ from (or augment) traditional psychotherapy experiences you have had?

**Question 1:** What aspects of our community experience do you still draw upon?

- I have continued friendships made in the group(s). This is invaluable as the spirit of the sacred and the openness that was present in our group continues in my 1-on-1 relationships with these wonderful women. I also find myself in deeper relationship with people who have been in my life for a long time, allowing myself to be more authentic and vulnerable. When this is difficult, I remember the work done in our spirituality groups and take strength from this to do what needs to be done now.

- This is the hardest part. A spiritual life is not passive, I’ve found. It requires attention, which modern life ill affords. I have created a small altar where I light a candle and meditate or pray or sometimes just sit near. This helps me remember – it’s like a muscle memory that instantly returns to a place of stillness. Beyond these small moments, I also am actively seeking community in my world, in my friendships; looking for places where the soul can take flight, where authenticity is valued, where small talk takes a back seat to ‘being’. I suppose maintaining the spiritual practice, for me, is about remaining true. As long as I am on the path, I believe that people will find me there. I can’t quite explain it, but this is a big thing that I learned – spiritual practice isn’t just about “working hard to find something”. It finds YOU, too. As long as I show up (all of me), the universe does too. So while I think
spirituality is about an active practice, I also hold now a deep belief that I am not alone. It is not like I have to move mountains. I just have to breathe in and out and stay open. God will find a way in.

- My life is essentially the same but I want ongoing connection with people who are willing to consider/discuss/ act upon the deep concerns or beliefs they espouse. I do think that every time I have the opportunity to be in a circle of people who are willing to be vulnerable and have deep conversations about what is important in their lives, I grow stronger in my spirituality. I think it helps me to learn to live more deeply in regard to my convictions. It provides an opportunity to be vulnerable...open myself to whatever may be.

- I have gained lasting friendships. These are people who I am able to call on when I need honest, supportive feedback. We shared a journey together. In some ways these women know me in a more intimate way than members of my own family. I am also able to call upon some of the experiences we shared, words that were said to me and the feeling of being safely help by the group's wisdom.

- The particulars of my life have not changed dramatically since I began the group.... still a busy mother, professional, wife, community member. What changed in my life is my level of attention/consciousness/awareness about the presence of spirit and the spiritual dimension of life -- mine and others. I still draw upon that. My definition of spirit changes from day to day -- from "life force," to relationship and connectedness, to breathing through a quieted mind. Since participating in the group, I more frequently turn my attention to the energy of spirit.

**Question 2:** What value did this group structure have that was not provided by more traditional religious experiences?

- Traditional religious experiences are usually formed around liturgical events and specific values and philosophies of particular religions. These can be wonderful, and I like to participate in them when possible. However, the gift of our spirituality group is about self-discovery without boundaries of a particular belief system. It allows for us to experience ourselves at a very deep level, to enable us to bring our authentic selves into communion with the Divine, the world in which we live and the people with whom we interact.

- Intimacy and trust; a way to bring our full selves into the conversation. It was a dialogue of love, not a sermon and response. There was no single dogma to conform to -- rather, a sacred ritual emerged from our communion that offered a structure that was built from the inside out. Created from our brokenness, from the cracks -- light found its way in and light found its way out -- and we gathered around it and celebrated it.
• Although I have enjoyed the community opportunities my past religious experiences have provided, I never felt the same level of understanding or connectedness with a group. I felt that the structure of the group allowed us to connect to our minds, body, and soul. That we were encouraged to take care of ourselves as well as others. In my past experiences, the structure was much less personal and much time was spent on religious lessons. I did not always walk away feeling satisfied or in touch with my spirituality. The structure of this group gave me the ability and flexibility to discover what spirituality means to me, where I can find it, what I want it to mean to me, how I can discover it in the people and places I interact with every day. I now feel like it is more a part of me that I can continuously experience, rather than a part I just visit.

• The group provided sanctuary, structure, alternative avenues for accessing God without running into so many of the barriers that my personal experience in traditional settings kept provoking. It allowed time to heal, be creative and valued just as I am rather than as many "think one ought to be." Some of that judgment was accentuated by the fishbowl of public life but it exists in any group as part of human nature. The small group setting of the spirituality group minimized that.

• The group experience really provided active “communion” in the sense that each woman was received deeply by everyone within the circle and in a way that judgment was suspended in preference for shared experience and learning. We literally broke bread together during supper breaks that were like living communions, where the sacred space of the circle was tested in a sense and practiced in a more casual atmosphere around a dinner table together. The spiritual exercises delved deeply and creatively into each woman’s belief systems, and helped us to create a sacred space in the center of our homes (I still have my altar which I have added to since the group ended).

• Inclusiveness. Coming together in a small group, allowing deep connections, sharing, growth, both personal and spiritual. The individuals, who joined the group, seemed to have a common desire for a connection/opportunity which provided support and encouragement. I have not been able to find this in a church group. I recently joined a church but found that it did not nourish me in the same way that this group did. Even though there may be opportunities in a church to get together, I have not been fortunate enough to experience anything that provided what our groups allowed. In one way, this group provided a Sabbath opportunity. It was a time of prayer, song, laughter, deep conversation, food… a time away from our ordinary day. A time to be….no expectations necessarily but an opportunity to renew yourself, experience something new, and grow. A special time in a calming environment away from daily responsibility where the women felt connected and supported.

Question 3: How did this group structure differ from (or augment) traditional psychotherapy experiences you have had?

• I have continued to be in therapy while participating in the spirituality group, and found it to be an important addition to traditional psychotherapy. Spiritual exploration and healing has
been key to addressing many of the psychological issues addressed in therapy. It enabled me to open doors that otherwise might have remained closed, to meet my authentic self in a way that allowed me to more honestly access and address deeper psychological issues. It allowed me to be more compassionate with myself, and this promotes healing.

- You can’t deny love and God when it is staring you in the face through the eyes of 12 different individuals. I found myself deeply loving, as well as being deeply loved. There was a transformative, tangible quality of light, of being, that I’ve come to recognize and name as love. While I have felt seen in therapy, and cared for in therapy, I did not quite understand my place in the world until this group. I did not yet hold myself both as “one” with the world, and also as “separate and unique”. The group allowed – in fact encouraged – a sense of appreciation for all that makes who I am, and also, all that I have in common with others. I am one of a kind, and I am one of many – somehow this combination of deep union and celebrated individuality shifted my center in the world around me, in a way therapy had yet to do.

- The structure and practice of this group allowed for synthesis between the psychotherapy and religious worlds in my life. During my training as a therapist in the late 80's and early 90's there existed a somewhat hostile suspicion between these realms which frustrated me then and which I have spent my professional life as a therapist and in my capacity as clergy spouse bridging. Integration spiritually, psychologically, thoughtfully and in many respects, physically allows for growth and healing that I believe better serves us all and makes us better stewards of God. Although there exists great diversity of expression in both religious and psychological practice, to deny, reject or hold in critical judgment parts of ourselves from other parts is as destructive as when we do that to one another in community and globally. Integration is hard work but essential to our well being, individually and collectively.

- Personally, therapy that I had engaged in several years ago, allowed me to take risks and be vulnerable. Coming to this group and getting the most from it, required me to continue to allow myself to be vulnerable. I believe that you as the leader with your background knew how to analyze certain situations or conversations and direct or redirect the individual or group to consider different options, think about a situation in a different way. In my case, the one situation that you challenged me to address did make a difference in the group. I think it made the group come alive and I believe it presented an opportunity for some members of the group speak up and move forward. Something changed in the nature of the group, that day (in my opinion). So again, the challenge to allow myself to be vulnerable once again proved to be a value that enhanced my sense of self.

- The group provided a forum to explore many emotions and information in a communal setting. It was a time to learn how to take risks and get honest feedback. In individual therapy I could clarify those experiences and examine them more closely and in a more intimate way.
It was extremely helpful for me to have both. For me, the group experience often highlighted
the progress I was making in individual therapy.

- In psychotherapy, I puzzled and grieved and lurched through my experience in a very private
  and self focused manner. In group, my focus was less about me and my particular “box of
  rocks” but instead on the energy created while in communion with others. To me, spirit takes
  you OUT of yourself while psychotherapy invites you to look IN to yourself. What I
  experienced in group was the holding hum of my spirit in communion/process with others'
  spirit.

Reflections and Observations:

I hope that these verbatim responses give you a flavor of the depth and richness of what unfolded
through these extended group meetings. Although each 10 month group was different, having a
unique combination of energies, perspectives, and personalities, a deep bonding occurred
between the participants within each group. As reported, many of those connections remain as
strong friendships today.

In general I found the dynamic process and evolution of the groups to be circular in nature.
Spiritual exploration not only led to new discoveries and insights, it also led to the exposure of
buried psychological wounds and unfinished business. Group support and mirroring helped
group members to find the courage to take personal risks. Several ended marriages or change
careers. The group structure also provided a sense of safety and sharing from a deep place of
intimacy for each of these women. As a result personal confidence grew, but there was also an
internal quieting that began to occur. People began to put less pressure on themselves, and they
began to challenge each other when a particular member was being too hard on herself. As a
result the group culture grew to a place where members were able to give each other permission
to rest and be gentle with themselves. And that message is in very short supply in this culture.

Summary:

Growth and transformation extend beyond objective science. Anyone who enters into the field
of psychotherapy knows that collectively and individually our blind spots or biases prevent us
from seeing parts of the larger whole at any given time in history. In the thirty years I have been
in practice I have witnessed numerous changes in the field, not only in the theory that grounds
us, but how we conduct the practice of psychotherapy as well. Beginning with the classical
analytic position whose primary focus was intrapsychic dynamics, we broadened our attention
to include first an object-relations perspective, then an intersubjective and relational perspective,
and finally socio-cultural perspectives. We went from a minimization of the impact of gender,
race, and class, to an awareness of the effects that trauma, shame, unequal opportunity, and
insecure attachments have on the psyche.

The theoretical frameworks that we use affect what we see, how we listen and intervene, and
how willing we are to sit with clients in an experience-near posture in the present moment. Now,
at this juncture we are entertaining exciting dialogue around how to hold the complexity of
multiple factors that affect not only the development of one’s sense of self but the impact these factors have on our brain as well as physical and mental well-being. Being willing to hold the complexity, looking for how parts connect to other parts and the whole, is a never-ending discovery process. Perhaps, the new frontier that is before us is to understand the importance of integrating the split off parts of the self, including aspects that contain spiritual longing.

Reflecting on title of this conference, “Transience and Permanence”, I found my thoughts frequently drifting to my own mortality. After thirty years in the field, I wonder what further changes I will see that will impact our knowledge base and practices. I wonder if I will see the spiritual and contemplative part of the self be seriously integrated into the mainstream of clinical work. I suppose the answer to these questions is, “you’ll never know.” Finding peace with this uncertainty and my own limited time reflects my own experience of holding the dialectical tension between transience and permanence.

References


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