

Therapy and the Social Construction of Spirituality

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In the past decade spirituality has emerged as a predominant consideration in the lives of many people. Conversations that once occurred within theology schools and religious institutions among those dedicated to a spiritual life are now taking place in cafes, bookstores, homes and offices around the world. These conversations are now occurring among people from all walks of life seeking to enhance the spiritual quality of their lives. This new generation of spiritual seekers is approaching spiritual development as a means of coming to wholeness and aliveness. They are seeking to create a meaningful relationship with God, to live in relation to spirit and to express their soul's desires. For many, the journey starts with a pervasive sense of emptiness and a question, "Is this all there is to life?" For others, the journey begins in the midst of a deep despair which gives voice to a plea for help. For still others, the journey begins with an awakening to possibilities so magnificent that the invitation can not be refused.

My purpose here is to illuminate ways in which the consultative/therapeutic relationship may engage both therapists and clients in the construction of spiritually meaningful lives. Consultants, therapists and counselors often find themselves wondering about spirituality in their own lives, while at the same time being called to guide others in the journey of spiritual development. What follows is a brief discussion of spiritual development from a social constructionist perspective. Then follows a series of letters written to therapists and spiritual teachers as illustrations of the social construction of spiritual meaning. The three aspects of the constructionist point of view that are related to the process of spiritual development are meaning-making as a social process, social life as a relational process, and the ecological interconnectedness of all life.

Spiritual development and making meaning

A social constructionist perspective holds that meaning, what people consider real, true and important, emerges through social interaction and discourse. Human interaction is the forum for the creation of meaning, be it political, scientific or spiritual. Viewed in this way, spiritual development is the process through which members of a community enact and create the spiritual knowledge, values and practices of their community.

As people create a sense of the sacred, holy and divine, they, at the same time, allow its presence to infuse their being. Each act of creating the sacred is an act of being sacred. At the heart of spiritual development are relationships among members of a community which serve to initiate, validate and transfer spiritual knowledge, values and practices. Four vehicles frequently deployed to enact and create spiritual meaning are:

- Conversations about spirituality, what it is, what it means to human life, and how to conduct them. The use of spirit talk—words loaded with spiritual significance for the people involved—engenders spiritual possibilities. The absence of spirit talk creates a vacuum of spiritual possibilities.
- Discussion and contemplation of spiritual texts, of stories passed down from generation to generation within a community, and of actions performed by others within the community. In this way one may learn and influence through the giving of attention, what a given community of people considers spiritually real, true and important.
- Rituals and ceremonies dedicated to evoking and honoring relationships with spirit.

- Meditation as a means of transcending patterns of relating and being that were created in the absence of spiritual presence. In rituals, ceremonies and meditation, relationships with spirit, God, the Creator—represented in forms meaningful to the community—become foreground and relationships with other people become background.

Spiritual development as a relational process

A social constructionist view claims relatedness as the organizing principle for life. The primacy of the individual as the unit of life and development gives way to the notion of relationships as the source of meaning and the vehicle and measure of development and evolution. The shift of focus from the individual to the relational is not one of either/or, but a shift of figure and ground. This shift implies a movement from the view of spiritual development as a possession of the individual to a view of spiritual development as a quality of relationship: one's relationship first with spirit, God, the Creator, and then with a web of other relationships which include people, plants, and animals. The way one lives in relation to other life is the measure of spiritual development. Spiritual meaning emerges from relationships. Spiritual practices in relation to other people, nature and spirit beings generate the potential for spiritual development and evolution. Living life as a spiritual practice infuses daily interactions and relationships with spiritual possibilities.

Spiritual development as an eco-social process

As the social constructionist perspective recognizes the primacy of relationships, it raises the possibility that all relationships are related. In this way a constructionist view demands a look at human life from the vantage point of interconnectivity. This suggests that we are all interrelated and that what is enacted among some of us is indeed impactful on the whole. This perspective holds that the whole goes beyond the boundaries of the human and incorporates all that is living and endowed with spirit by any community within the whole. With this boundary wide open the notion of what is real, true and important is also wide open. The lines that are drawn to create meaning among people are drawn in

sand by people who all too often forget the temporary nature of sand castles. Spiritual development carries with it an imperative that we examine not only our sand castles, but also the relationships and processes by which they are created.

Letters to therapists and spiritual teachers

The following letters were written as reflections on relationships between therapist and client, spiritual teacher and student. In each case I have attempted to portray the nature of the relationship as well as the conversational scenarios that created the relationships and were created by them. In some instances this co-creation is more evident than others. Each letter is a story and as such awaits interaction with you and the many relationships of your life. As you read, you give life to these stories. In return, they may engender new possibilities for your relationships.



Dear Barbara,

It's been quite some time since we talked and yet I still find myself engaged with many of our conversations. I am writing to share some thoughts with you. I know we have previously talked about why I ended our sessions, but since these insights are new to me, I thought I'd take you up on the offer to revisit our relationship whenever it seemed important.

I especially remember our last session. It was soon after my brother Freddie died and just about a year after my father died. I was telling you about the pull I was feeling from the dark forces to just drive my car off the side of the road and be dead. I remember your response as something like, "How does this relate to the way your father treated you as a child?" At the time I tried to explain that it had nothing to do with my father, but rather was some psychic process pulling at me that I didn't understand. I was quite frightened at the time and until that session thought I could talk to you about anything.

Your response during that session, and my hesitation in general to talk about psychic and spiritual aspects of my life, created a "do not talk" zone for me. It showed me what you considered real and okay to talk about (that is, important to the task of becoming a

happy and psychologically healthy human being) and what you considered not real and not okay to talk about. I was dealing with a reality that I needed to understand in order to keep on living. My life, not just my psychological health seemed on the line that day. I wanted to talk about psychic things in order to learn who I was in relation to them and what they meant to me.

By not joining with me to talk about what I wanted to talk about, I felt you denied me in two essential ways. First, I felt that you thought you knew what was best for me, without regard for what I thought, wanted or needed. It didn't seem like you were helping me become me, but rather that you were helping me become your image of me.

Second, it seemed that you were not curious and open to learning in relation to me, not willing to go into the unknown with me. Your unwillingness to explore the unknown made it impossible for me to do so in relation to you. As I have later learned, there is not much more important than my capacity to be present in the midst of unknowing. The unknown seems to me now to be the womb of all new beginnings.

I don't think we learn by staying within the boundaries of what we know. Your boundaries became an unacceptable limitation to my learning and growth. Had I let you define the parameters of our conversations I would have limited the creation of who I was becoming. I was compelled to talk with people who recognized and in some way understood psychic processes.

By the way, thanks for all the help you gave me relating to my kids. They are in their twenties now and we're good friends as well as mom and the kids. Within your sandbox you are the best. I guess I just needed to play in a different sandbox. My blessings to you and your family,

With love, Diana

Dear Michael,

How are you? I saw Claire and she said you are well recuperated from your recent heart attack (what a dismal thought, that your own heart might attack). I'm writing to talk a bit about why I stopped seeing you as my therapist. I remembered your call a year or so ago

when I took a temporary break from therapy. You gave me a good model for talking about endings. Thanks.

So here goes. I want to begin by letting you know what I've appreciated in our relationship. First, you seemed incredibly present with me. I felt valued, respected and appreciated. Your presence and attention helped me learn how to be more attentive and present. You were always so curious about me, my relationships, and what I hoped to become in life. I also appreciated that you shared your own process and learnings with me. It seemed as if we were both learning in relation to one another. I felt like the time we spent together was practice for being, relating and living. The wonderful paradox is that what we practiced we became. From a spiritual perspective, there is no difference between practice and life. Life is the practice of living.

Second, your invitation to explore spiritual knowing was expansive. I learned to trust that spirit is omnipresent and that looking, living and speaking from a spiritual perspective is always an option for me. When you asked, "Who is talking?" as I talked, you invited me to discover, to express and to feel comfortable with my multivocal self. Your questions were so inviting and generative of possibilities for who I could be. And, of course, I came to look forward and preempt your question, "What is spirit saying?" It was truly joyful learning that I could talk "spirit talk" and in this way bring my self and my interactions with others to a higher plane of being.

Third, I didn't like it at the time, but the lesson about letting go of the psychic level of spiritual knowing now makes sense. I see what you meant about it being only one step on the spiritual ladder of evolution. Your warning not to get stuck in that space was well taken.

Now for why I left our client-therapist relationship. I felt like I was learning to do a spiritual bypass in relation to you. I had a bunch of feelings locked into my body from my childhood that needed to be expressed. Sometimes we created a place to talk, feel and express them but after awhile we spent more time in spirit zone than in the psychological world. I needed to clear out the emotional foundation of my being and not just zoom up to spirit zone. I know you understand healing to occur on many levels and yet, in relation to you, I didn't get enough time talking and feeling my emotions.

To heal my body and psyche I had to go into the fire and come out like the phoenix. I couldn't ignore my physical manifestation or its emotional information. I've come to believe we are spirits learning to live in bodies, rather than humans learning to be spiritual.

It was a great couple of years working with you. Thanks and I will let you know when we're having a sweat lodge. You are in my heart and prayers. Be well, my friend.

Love, Diana

Dear Howard,

Happy New Year. I hope it is a good one for you and the family. It promises to be a year of expansion for many people. Personally, while everyone else is dancing, I'm going to fly. I had a dream with you in it a couple of weeks ago. I'd like to get together next week and talk about it.

You might be wondering why I'm writing this letter, the only one in twelve years. Well, I want to reflect on our relationship and what I've learned and how I've grown in relation to you.

I remember the first time I met you, I was terrified. I knew my life would never be the same and it hasn't been! I asked if you would accept me as a student. You asked why, and when I told you I wanted to learn about Native American ceremonies and symbolism, you said no. I was stunned but had enough wits about me to ask what would have been the right answer! I remember it clearly. You said, "If you want to learn about yourself and your relationship to the Creator, I would be honored to help you." I was doubly stunned and said I'd think about it. Three weeks later I called and began my process of spiritual development. Actually, it was going on all the time without my voluntary participation. Deciding to study with you was a decision to cooperate with and take responsibility for my own life in relation to the Creator. It was my personal relationship with God that I set out to discover. Now I realize that it is a Lakota view that all of life has its relationship to the Creator, and does not need to be mediated by another person, like a priest or minister. I am grateful that as my teacher you stayed out of the middle and supported me in discovering my own relationship with God.

There have been milestones along the way.

You quickly sized me up and told me, "You have succeeded in the man's world and you have done it as a man, now your challenge is to find out what it is to be a woman." "How do I do this?" I asked. "Watch women. When you see something you respect, make it your own; when you see something you don't value, change it in yourself." Easier said than done. I'm still working on it and probably will for the rest of this life. But I have embraced the practice of learning through observation and imitation, not only of other people but also of our plant and animal relatives.

And then there was the month of humility. You told me to watch and see when humility was present among people and when it wasn't, and to notice the difference in the effects produced. I didn't even know what humility meant let alone what it looked like. And during that time we talked about false humility and how and what it creates among the people. Humility is so central to a people's capacity to create community among diversity. It is a relational virtue. Humility is a quality evoked in relation to others—humans, animals, plants or spirits.

"We do these things so the people may live." It took me a long time to understand how what I did had any bearing on "the people." Now I live each day knowing that my actions, thoughts and words are creating the world. At the same time I have let go of trying to influence others to be better people. All I can do is be what I wish the world to be. If I want peace I must be peace in relation to others. If I want gentleness, I must be gentle in relation to others. If I want generosity, I must be generous in relation to others. Every action I take is in relation to all other life and creates our way of life.

Your relationship with spirits was enigmatic to me for a very long time. Initially, I thought of it as heightened intuition. Then I considered it channeling. I didn't really understand what you meant when you said you have a relationship with them until the first time they talked to me. We were in the lodge and you told me they were going to tell me some things for the others in the lodge. I sure was surprised when I saw images and heard exactly what to say. What was most surprising is that the images and messages made little sense to me but were very meaningful for the people to whom they

were addressed. Thank you for introducing me to your spirit relatives. It is an honor to know them and to get to talk with them every once in awhile.

Then there was the time that I told you I felt angry at God and I asked you what you considered God to be. You said God is everything that ever was, is and will be. We had quite a laugh when I realized that I was angry at everything that ever was, is and will be. I quickly decided that wasn't a very feasible life stance!

Even though you listened to my feelings whether talked out or cried out, I never felt like they were okay with you. I thought you tolerated them because you tolerate everything, and your view was that I'd outgrow them. You were right, but outgrowing my feelings came only after I'd had a chance to express them from my mind and my body. Lots of body work and great psychotherapy helped the process.

One of the most important things I've learned from you is that love does not prescribe its form of expression. It has been very expanding to come to trust love without having to make it meaningful through some socially defined form of expression. This was a difficult lesson for me. As you know, in so many relationships I talked as if I wanted the form—partnership, engagement, marriage, good parents, best friend. For quite awhile I had it backwards. I thought that love came with the form. Now I realize that love is its own energy and can be expressed and manifested just for fun!

I've also learned over these years that just as I cannot will my way through life and expect it to endure, I also cannot just turn things over to the Creator and expect to live happily ever after. Composing a life, to borrow a phrase from Mary Catherine Bateson, is a process of socio-spiritual creation. I remember a sermon in which the minister counseled the congregation, "Live as if life is all up to us, and pray as if it is all up to God."

Thanks for all the support over the years, for being there no matter what. Most important, thanks for helping me become me and dodging my attempts to be you!

Love, Diana

Dear Andy,

Well, it's a year since we started talking. I just love our relationship. It is so post-modern. I jokingly tell my friends that you are my "1-800" counselor because I have my sessions with you over the phone. And it's wonderful that your wife and I work together and are friends with our own relational dramas and that I have a unique relationship with you. Just as boundaries are shifting among my multinational clientele, so too are boundaries blurring in our relational lives. Do we have a real relationship or a virtual relationship?

By way of reflecting on the past year I want to share some thoughts with you. I am deeply appreciative of our relationship and what it has brought to my life. Your studies of psychotherapy and spiritual development have come together in a practice that is just what I needed at this point in my process. The Buddhists say, "When you are ready the teacher will show up." I was certainly ready for integration and you showed up. I appreciate your ability to traverse the range from spiritual to psychological and in between. While the path has many steps, some psychological, some social, some spiritual, the nature of being is not separated but rather is the ability to be present at the point of integration—allness, oneness, unity, divinity.

We've never talked about it, but I am aware that you have done your own work. It seems as if you've traveled the path ahead of me and I benefit from your incredible capacity for silence and profound listening. I spend a lot of time in silent meditation and contemplation and have come to trust and value the knowing that springs forth from the silence. I am grateful that you have been willing to listen to angel talk, body talk, mind talk, emotion talk, heart talk, spirit talk and most recently soul talk. I feel completely accepted in relation to you, and with it comes a sense of completeness—wholeness in my divine human beingness.

Your openness to my body's childhood pain of polio and surgery enabled me to release memories at the cellular level that hurt, physically and emotionally. I know that my body was physically formed through the consciousness of the people around me—how they treated me and what they said to me—in relation to what I was able and allowed to express. As I have in relation to you

unraveled the tapes of my past and at the same time participated in sacred ceremonies for healing, my body has changed. For me, life itself is a miracle, each day a new creation unfolding as we meet and greet all our relations. I am grateful we have met in this life time. Perhaps in the next I can be as helpful to you as you are to me in this one.

While I still am not at ease with the heightened awareness and energy surging through my body, I am comforted to know I can talk to you and I won't have to analyze, interpret or be anything other than I am. Blessings for a healthy and prosperous 1995.

Diana



Dear Readers,

Thank you for this opportunity to be in relation to you, in a space filled with what I love most—the process of spiritual unfolding. In writing to you I have learned. I offer this piece of writing as a gift. When unwrapped, I hope it will illuminate the brilliance in your work by reminding you what you already know. In addition, if it moves you to think, maybe, just maybe, I can do something different next time, then we have both learned. It is an honor to be on the path with you.

Love and blessing in all you do.

Diana

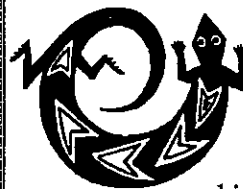


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AFTA Diary of Healing and Transformation

Edited by Sheldon Z. Kramer

Healing comes from the word "hal," which means wholeness, also defined as "holiness." When one is involved with healing encounters, one brings a sense of integrity and the sacred to individuals and their relationships.



These kinds of therapeutic moments also help heal and transform the therapist.

In this debut column, I am asking readers to submit thoughts, ideas, and experiences that involve the topic of healing and transformation in their own personal and professional lives. More specifically, I would be interested in what your definitions of healing are in your work.

I would invite you to write about healing moments in psychotherapy and about what created those particular times when something special occurred between you and your client, or among family members. In addition, it would also be of interest to me for folks to write about how spirituality is important in their own personal or professional lives.

Send your entries to

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