



The Institute of Family Living

SPIRITUALITY IN COUNSELLING

The clients with whom we are privileged to work at IFL bring issues and questions surrounding spirituality into a particular focus for us as therapists. Namely: **how do human beings make meaning of our lives?** What are the stories and symbols that we use to organize our need for community and connection, for being and belonging, as well as for doing?

I am intrigued by the varieties of ways people search for and experience intimacy: intimacy with self, with others, with God. The word “intimacy,” derived from the Latin ‘intima,’ means ‘inner or innermost.’ So the sense of touching our innermost core is the essence of intimacy. This is part of one’s spiritual quest, and it is heightened today in our society as we witness a renewed hunger for the sacred permeating all areas of post-modern life.

Many of our clients are people of explicit faith: Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu. IFL therapists are mainly Christian, and we have an interfaith dimension to our team.

As therapists, we are all challenged to integrate spirituality into our therapeutic paradigm. Just as ethnicity, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation issues were ignored until fairly recently in the training of therapists, so too were issues of religion, spirituality, values, and beliefs. The result has been that marriage and family therapists have often overlooked the systemic effects of a person’s or couple’s spirituality on their self-understanding.

For example, we have taken our clients’ faith at face value and have not always asked perceptive questions about how their faith community helps them to live out their faith in day-to-day relationships.

Likewise, as eminent family therapist William Doherty has pointed out (*Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility*, 1995), therapists often fail to help their clients deal with moral issues because we fail to focus on “interpersonal morality,” on the consequences of our clients’ behaviour on the welfare of other people. His concern is that a vacuum of moral discourse exists in all the dominant models of contemporary psychotherapy.

Part of spirituality is a journey into **authentic personhood**. Such a journey requires courage, connection, community, commitment:

- **Courage:** The struggle to become fully human includes facing what is past, present, and the future, trusting that what is discovered will be a source of strength and of identity.
- **Connection:** Some define spirituality as “connection.” The therapeutic process is itself based on the understanding that healing and change take place in a relationship that is grounded in a trusting connection.
- **Community:** We are relational beings, and as therapists, we need to seek to understand the wider communities with which the person or couple or family is connected. These may include kinship networks, religious affiliations, the workplace, recreational and volunteer organizations, and neighbourhood relationships.
- **Commitment:** The process of healing requires commitment to staying in the journey, trusting that the discovery of truth will result in freedom: even when that truth is painful and the freedom is uncomfortable. Therapy is about commitment to becoming authentic and growing in love.

James Olthuis (*The Beautiful Risk*, 2001) speaks of a “radical spiritual psychotherapy of caring rather than curing, of connecting rather than controlling” where the therapist is involved in a two-way process of

“caring-with” one’s clients. Thus, he goes on to say, “the inner work of psychotherapy is not a journey toward self-separation and self-absorption, but a journey to deeper connections with self, others, and God.”

As therapists, we must be honest with ourselves and have the courage to recognize how our own faith and spiritual values affect the way we work with others.

While we may not agree with the values of our clients, it is essential that we respect the rights of our clients to hold different sets of values. On the other hand, it requires wisdom to determine when we cannot work with certain clients due to a clash of values.

Some questions I ask clients, which can be useful in discussions about spirituality, pertain to their sense of meaning and wholeness. A few of these are: **What nurtures your spirit? What gives you meaning? What gives you a sense of rootedness? What gives you joy?**

As we sit with our clients’ darkness, often of despair and hopelessness in the face of life crises and relationship pain, our challenge as therapists is to help the individuals, couples, and families with whom we work to draw on their deepest resources. This may include helping them to embrace change, to pray, and to encourage them to find the hope that will sustain them in their lives.

It is a profound challenge to listen to, and to be present with, our clients’ faith journeys and to take their spirituality seriously in the counselling relationship.

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