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Spirituality and therapy : reflecting on the role of the therapist

George E. Trippe

**Spirituality and therapy:
Reflecting on the role of the therapist
The Revd. Dr. George E. Trippe**

Following on from the conversation in the public forum at the ARTCAP Symposium, I want to reflect briefly on the role of the therapist, in the therapeutic encounter, in the client's development of his or her spirituality. I assert that the therapeutic encounter is a spiritual process that serves the development of the spirituality of the client. This is in no way a denial of the clinical nature of our therapeutic work, but an attempt to place clinical methods, strategies, insights and practices in a larger, more comprehensive framework of a deep and transformative spiritual process.

First let me offer a definition of the term, "**spirituality**." My work has been largely within the confines of the organised church, Anglican and ecumenical circles, but my definition, I believe, is applicable to anyone. This definition grew out of my work with The Revd. Dr. Alan Jones in the United States during the time we were involved in training spiritual directors in regional programs. It was originally Alan's insight, which I have adapted to fit my experience.

Spirituality involves the art of making and discovering connections. I see these connections as essentially fourfold: connections with divinity, with myself, with others in the human family, and with the world, or creation. First we connect with whatever we perceive or envision as the divine life – the Other, cosmic energy, the Life force, God. This, for me is the essential starting place. I subscribe to the idea that how I see the universe in which I live sets the parameters for what I believe to be possible for me and all humanity. Second, we connect with ourselves in the context provided by this first connection. In the therapeutic encounter this may be our primary focus. Third, we connect with other people both in our own personal spheres, and in the larger human community. Fourth, we connect with the created order of the world in which we live, which sustains us, and of which we are a part. The order here is not meant to be one of diminishing importance, except to affirm again, that the first connection tends to set boundaries and parameters on what I believe to be possible in life. In the definition statement I assert that these connections are both made and discovered. While the notion of our work or effort seems self evident, the notion of discovery may seem surprising. The word image is meant to include what in traditional religious terms is called grace. Jung used the word synchronicity to describe those moments of meaningful coincidence that seem to visit our lives. My experience leads me to affirm that while I work hard for certain connections, others seem to appear to my surprise and delight.

In a final word about my definition of spirituality, I want to affirm that these connections are organic and dynamic in nature. There is movement among them and at times one or the other may seem the most important. While they are laid out here in a simple scheme, the experiences to which they point are part of the natural flow and rhythms of life.

In this context of a therapeutic encounter, which includes the development of a personal spirituality, what images might we use describe the role of the therapist? I imagine there are many, and each of us who practices must sort out those that have meaning for us. It is, I believe, an essential exercise. From our conversation in the public forum at the symposium, an interesting image emerged that I had not considered before. It is that of the **Intercessor**. There are three implications of the role of the therapist that occur to me as I consider the therapist as an intercessory person for others.

1) In traditional religious circles the word "intercessor" applies to those who pray on behalf of others. A friend of mine recently described the intercessor as "the one who comes between." I do not recall all of our conversation from the forum around the

image, but the one image I remember clearly was of the intercessor as the one who carries the burdens of others. This sense of carrying the sufferings of our clients is a primary manifestation of the compassion and empathy we experience toward those who place their lives before us in the therapeutic encounter.

The therapist does in a sense carry the burdens and suffering of the clients with whom she or he works. An image that supports this notion for me is to imagine that my consulting space is like a sacred container in which the client's life is sustained and held safely as part of the transformational work. Realising that we carry, support and contain the burdens of our clients explains why the therapeutic work can seem, at times, very heavy, and why we need supervision regularly to debrief and separate ourselves from the agendas of our clients. In the midst of an empathic response, the intercessor must learn to maintain a boundary between the compassion for a client who suffers, and identification with that client's issues through counter-transference. Without this boundary we may well find that we are no longer helping a client through the tortuous path of redemptive suffering, but seeking to resolve our own issues through the client's process.

2) Part of this intercessory role includes a commitment to believe in the possibility of healing on behalf of our clients. Often we will carry that faithful hope for healing for our clients, until they can begin to believe for themselves in the reality of their own transformation. One more than one occasion along the way I have been sustained and encouraged by others who have believed in me and for me, when I couldn't do so for myself. This was especially true when I faced the issue of alcohol addiction and was confronted with a long road to recovery. As I faced what seemed to be a daunting task, I was greatly encouraged by those who believed for me that I could succeed in sobriety.

3) This intercessory role implies the presence of another reality in the relationship with the client. As above, we can name the presence as we will: the Other, cosmic energy, the Life force, God. It is this sacred life or divine energy that we perceive to be the healing and transforming reality engaged in the therapeutic process. As intercessors, we seem, at the beginning, to stand between the client and this healing, transforming energy. We might see ourselves as representatives of this larger, cosmic healing reality. Certainly the dynamic of transference implies that our clients see us as imbued with an energy that is "larger than life." We stand between not to block or obstruct, but to mediate and to channel this healing energy into the client's process.

As the transformative process unfolds in the therapy, we may find ourselves placed differently from time to time. Sometimes we stand between to mediate, at other times we stand next to, or behind, to support our clients. In a sense then the role of intercessor is a flexible and organic one, in that we must know when to mediate and when to step aside so that the client may engage this healing energy for him or her self. To reflect on this aspect of the Intercessor's role and to know where to stand as the process unfolds, is to honour the power dynamic in the relationship and to seek always to empower the client to be the centre of his or her own life.

The conversation at the forum has given me a new insight into my work as therapist in the image of the intercessor. It is a potent image that informs the role of the therapist in the development of the spirituality of clients in the therapeutic encounter.

My final thought is to affirm a point made strongly in the conversation with the larger group at the forum. It is the importance of doing my own therapeutic and growth work. In this instance this applies directly to conscious reflection on the nature of my own spirituality, and intentional action in the implementation of my spirited living. I need to remember that I cannot support others on a journey I have not taken myself to

a significant degree. So, I come away from the forum reflecting again on the nature of my own connections that assist me in finding meaning as my life unfolds.

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