SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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I have been weaving this concern through myself for some time now, not in a particularly scholarly way, but more in an experiential and general philosophical way.

There are, of course, several possible relationships between spirituality and psychotherapy, on a continuum between two extremes.

RELATIONSHIP: non-existent (a psychotherapeutic perspective)

BELIEF: Spirituality (religion) was invented by human beings to provide much needed hope and comfort. Realistically, however, all we know for sure is that we are conscious animals who must simply learn to do the best we can with what we are born with.

RELATIONSHIP: co-existent

BELIEF: Both realms exist, human and spiritual, but the spiritual is a personal and private experience of some and we invade and offend by trying to modify or teach it. This is not our job as psychotherapists. We discover and teach only the human experience.

RELATIONSHIP: intertwined

BELIEF: Personal and spiritual are inexorably bound together. We are limiting ourselves in not seeking out and illuminating both with our clients. Humanness is about the relationship between separateness and unity, personness and the beyond.

RELATIONSHIP: non-existent (a religious perspective)

BELIEF: Psychotherapy is selfishness. The major goal of human life is to seek oneness with God, not separation; to seek the giving

up of personal needs and desires for the greater good, not in learning how to demand or expect that our individual needs be met.

Where are you on this continuum? I have respectfully held to the co-existent relationship belief, partly because I don't wish to proselytize my beliefs and partly, from being a Quaker, I honor spirituality as each person's private experience, or non-experience, of course.

In my private practice as a Hakomi Therapist, experiences similar to the following vignette began happening over and over, and I have now begun to see psychotherapy and spirituality as intertwined.

In a number of Hakomi sessions previous to this one, my client, whom I will call Meg, had come to a very uncomfortable place in her belly. She had seen how she would automatically go to her head and start thinking a lot when this feeling in her belly came up. Thirty minutes into this session we were again close to this place:

Therapist: (noticing a little catch in her breathing) "You're a little scared right now?"

Client: "Yes."

T: "What kind of fear is this?"

C: "A...dark, overwhelming fear...in my belly, here."

T: "This feeling in your belly in very strong."

- C: "Yes."
- T: "See what goes on when you hear me say...
 'I'll stay with you while you go there and
 explore this place."
- C: "My head gets less noisy and my breathing goes further down."
- T: "So it's good to know that I'll be here."
- C: (nods)
- T: "So can you hang out in this dark place in your belly and tell me the details of what it's like there for you?"
- C: "It's very dark and very solid like a very large thick rock, thick and heavy as iron"....(more time spent getting the details)
- T: "What does this rock seem to be saying?"
- C: "It says, 'You're not good enough. You are derk and empty, black'."
- T: "Your belly is telling you that somehow you aren't good enough."
- C: (nods)
- T: "How does this voice sound inside you?"
- C: (repeats voice as she hears it)
- T: "Let me take over that voice just the way you hear it and you watch what goes on....'I'm not good enough, I'm dark and empty'."
- C: (nods)
- T: "You nod when you hear the words."
- C: "It's true."
- T: "Something inside you agrees with these words."
- C: (nods)
- T: "I'm going to say the words again and you study the part of you that's nodding....'I'm not good enough. I'm dark and empty.'....How do you know that you're not good enough?"
- C: (long silence) "I know because my mother

told me. She was always telling me I didn't have any 'qood sense'" (dissolves in tears)

(Here we work with the child for a while. Meg spontaneously puts her hand on her belly.)

T: "Something's changing there,"

Meg reaches for my hand and squeezes it. Her face relaxes and opens up, and soon, out of the corners of her closed eyes, I watch now silent tears slide down her cheeks.

After a long silence, she opens her eyes and says, "I don't know how to describe this, but inside the rock is light, a kind of light that is so accepting. All this time I have been afraid that there was something too awful to know about myself. And instead there is light, a kind of light that makes me feel I don't have to be perfect to be good enough, that I don't have to be so scared to go inside anymore, that I am bigger, part of something larger than I had thought." (end of transcript)

There are several ways in which this experience could be interpreted. It could be seen in psychological terminology, as the inner child changing her belief about her self-worth through understanding the origin of her low self-esteem in her relationship with her mother. Changing her belief about her self-worth will obviously make a more nourishing relationship to her world possible. The light in place of the darkness was simply symbolic of her new personal viewpoint.

However, my experience is that something bigger than that happened here. My personal experience was of being part of a sacred moment, being in the presence of a power much larger than myself. There was nothing for me to say or to do, except open my heart and witness. Thoughts disappeared. My awarenss seemed to expand beyond my skin, through my skin. Healing was occuring beyond my control or creation. I had used my skills and sensitivity to assist the process to the threshhold, but now it was one with some larger awareness.

Stepping back from the details of this for a moment and looking at the relationship between psychotherapy and spirituality in its larger context, I see that it is simply anot-

her aspect of an ageold, haunting, and firey theme: religion vs science; art vs reality, God vs politics. Debating these themes has worn scholars and philosophers to the bone. However, the issue underneath them all, I think is the issue of the relationship of separateness and union. This is the issue which lies at the core of being human. We are conceived in union, but we must learn as infants how to differentiate ourselves from our mothers. To survive and function effecwe must learn how to take care of our own needs. We must discover the uniqueness of our selves. And yet we all long for union, relationships, the feeling of not being alone, the joy of being understood.

Focusing back onto psychotherapy and spirituality, I offer some simple definitions.

(I am speaking here of Hakomi Therapy because it is the kind I dom and of spirituality in general.)

Hakomi Therapy: the study of an individual's organization of experience with the goals of self-healing, more accessible nourishment, and fuller personhood.

Spirituality: the awareness of and relationship to that force or sentience which is beyond or greater than human life with the goal of union, larger understanding, and compassion.

These are descriptions of separateness and union. It is of course easiest to follow the path of one or the other, or to keep them separate, since it appears that they cannot both exist in the same time and place. However, a larger truth seems to be emerging: that the tension between, and the intertwining of the two directions is what keeps us lively and in balance. The universe is both expanding and contracting, both moving toward order and toward chaos. There is the new physics and Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields theory. Our survival in an increasingly complex and vulnerable planet depends upon our experienceing ourselves both as separate and unique beings and as one larger beingor consciousness.

Hakomi Therapy is clearly based on principles (core beliefs) that include at least an openness to, if not an understanding of something greater than ourselves. Organicity: the concept that even when a person's

experience seems chaotic, it is moving in the direction of wholeness and healing. The concept of mindfulness: a listening within, apart from everyday consciousness. The concept of shuttling back and forth between the details and the big picture. I think, as Hakomi Therapists, we limit ourselves by not honoring, whenever we recognize it, or the client recognizes it, the fact that besides being about understanding habitual limiting systems, and clarifying childhood beliefs in the light of new information, therapy is also about the forgiveness, healing, and sense of oneness that that can come through the sacred space of present and focused awareness.

I remember a short movie that I saw a number of years ago. First the camera focused on a boy fishing in a boat on a lake. As the camera zoomed upward, you saw the whole lake and then the whole farm, and then the whole state, country, world, solar system. Then the camera returned to the boy and closed in on a mosquito biting the boy's arm. Soon you were looking at the blood cells, then the molecules, atoms and so on. You could see that attention to the smallest details inside opened into a vastness of space as large as the universe outside.

And so also with psychotherapy. Attention to details of seperateness can open into the vastness of union, and vice versa. Here's another illustrative therapy excerpt.

We are about forty-five minutes into this Hakomi session. My client, whom I call Elaina here, is exploring her sense of wanting to hide--a feeling coming from her belly.

Therapist: "Notice what it's like for you when you hear the words:....'It's okay to be seen just the way you are".

Client: "My throat is so tight. It hurts. It's like a searing pain.... I remember I used to have so many sore throats when I was a kid...."

- T: "So pain and a memory comes up. Let's try it once more:...'It's okay to be seen just the way you are."
- C: "I hear all these voices telling me I'm not good."
- T: "What exactly do the voices say?"

- C: "It's my mother. She says, you aren't nice to your brother, you're too noisy, you act like a boy..."
- T: "How do you know she's right?"
- C: "I, well, I don't know. She's older?"

(more exploration of all this)

- I: (talking to child as Magical Stranger)
 "Well, I'm not your father or mother, but I
 don't need you to be any particular kind of
 little girl. I'd like to know all about what
 kind of little girl you really are. Would
 you like to tell me?"
- C: "I'm curious, and I'm smart..."
- T: "You're curious and smart, huh? I bet you're curious about lots of things."
- C: "Oh, yes, everything. I like to look at things and listen, and take things apart....
- T: "Well, I'd like you to be curious about something right now. What's going on in your belly?"
- C: "There's a little light in there, a
 little bubbly light."
- T: "Can the light talk to you?"
- C: "No."
- T: "Is there something special you notice about it?"
- C: "It's sort of, um, religious, but not the kind I got taught in Sunday School where you were sinful. It's another kind...."
- T: "This interests you, huh? Well, let's be curious about something else. Why don't you just watch this little light and see what happens when you hear the voices about how you're not good...."
- C: "It goes away. The light goes away."
- T: "How does it go away?"
- C: "I can't see it. I close my throat. The voices drown it out."
- T: "So you make the light go away."
- C: "Uh, huh....oh, I see, the burning in my

throat is the light trying to come out, not something awful like I always thought. Oh."

- T: "So let me talk to the light a bit. (she nods) So, that would be okay, huh. I know it's been hard for you to risk letting yourself out. You felt confused and bad. But you can change your mind and try out letting the light out now. It's safe sometimes... and sometimes you may still want to hide it for a while. But you can play with this light and use that wonderful curiosity of yours with it." (Elaina nods)
- C: "I'm thinking of a song that my grandmother taught me: 'This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" (end of transcipt)

What was this "light"? Again, it could be seen as a shift in self-respect. But again, my feeling was of opening into something greater--spiritual. Elaina used the word religious to describe it. Though each of these transcripts had their own unique scenarios, the central issue was self-worth.

The process was also similar. Both sessions began with physical sensations; for Meg, a discomfort in her stomach and a lot of "noise" in her head; for Elaina, a tight throat and tight belly. By focusing on and giving words to the details of these sensations, the bigger picture began getting clearer: the feelings, the meaning, the memories, the images.

Often in therapeutic sessions, the present experience of the system that automatically operates and gets in the way of receiving satisfaction that the client needs and wants is where the session stops. process is organically complete, nothing more is needed. Elaina, for example, experienced how she tightens her throat and belly in automatic response to feeling she's bad and therefore can't enjoy the satisfaction of letting her true self out. In these two instances, however, something more emerged spontaneously after the system became clear. There is, I think, a core place inside which, paradoxically, often seems deep, dark, overwhelming, bad, and scary which seeks union with that which is beyond us. Psychotherapy can be a doorway into this sacred space.

The experience of union can also open into more acceptance and compassion for the

separate experience of the self. Both Meg and Elaina reported in their next session a deeper and broader awareness of themselves which allows them to feel freer and less constrained about being their unique individual selves.

I feel more and more strongly that the relationship between separateness and union is intertwined: they are doorways to each other. The spirit of union can be opened by attention to details. The spirit of separateness can be empowered by the experience of the bigger picture. Our humanness is held in the tension and aliveness of these two spirits, union and separateness, details and big picture.

I include here one more vignette: one of my own personal experiences of this doorway as a client. About 15 minutes into the session, I start feeling cold and blank and want to curl up and be covered with a blanket. The therapist and assistants help me curl up and cover me. I begin shivering and have a really strong feeling of wanting to hide. Out of the blankness of my mind images of being in school, about age 8-10, begin flooding through me. The safety of being surrounded, curled up, and covered allow my mind to let through in a great flood these fearful images that it has had to defend against.

The therapist gives me space to talk about them: standing on a stage as the announcer of a play and not remembering my lines; not getting them all right on a spelling test; trying to make a picture come out right, reading too slow in reading group, etc.

Therapist: "Can you say something about the kind of feeling that goes with all these memories...."

Client: "I'm scared."

T: "Yes, you're shaking. Would you like us to help you hide even more.?"

C: "Yes."

T: "Lots of fear, huh. Can you stay with that and tell us some more about it?"

C: "Well, I don't do things good enough.
(10 year old voice).....I feelunworthy."

(At this moment I become aware that something bigger is beginning to take place. I feel suddenly very still inside and begin to experience a dark swirling thing in the sky (this is hard to describe as it's beyond words).)

T: "Something's changed."

C: "Yes, something big is happening. I can't talk about it. I just can't talk now. Please stay with me."

T: "We'll be here."

The dark swirling thing seems very powerful and some part of it is directed toward my heart. I feel an overwhelming sense of union with the four people around me. I can literally feel their hearts beating with mine.

Several awarenesses come to me, not as thoughts but as realities. "I am already worthy. There isn't anything I have to prove to anyone first. Using, relating to this power beyond is not earned. It's simply available. I can call on it, connect with it anytime....."

After an unknown period of time, I return to the group, noticing that my body has opened out again, the fear is gone. I feel strong, connected, tall. The Therapist and assistants had also felt some kind of larger presence.

During the next few days, this sense of union, was a doorway in the other direction--back to seeing how I would let the details of my life pile up, to overwhelm, thinking I had to do it all myself and so not being able to organize them so that I could get either human or spirtiual help. (And, who knows, they may be both the same.)

As human beings we need to develop the awarenesses and skills to deal with both our separateness and our oneness. I often encounter situations in therapy in which the client finds him/herself stuck in only being able to function in one direction or the other: toward separateness (protection) or toward giving him/herself away (union) and stopping him/herself from using the other mode.

For example, Paul had decided that he

needed to constantly keep his heart closed off (separateness); as a result he found himself in chronic crisis and literally, heartache. He needed to discover that is was okay and safe to open his heart and feel communion with others sometimes. The way the heart functions is by opening and shutting valves, keeping the blood flowing. If the valves get stuck either open or shut, the organism stops working.

Nancy, another client, felt she needed to always be available and flexible to her husband's needs and desires. In experiencing her system, she began to discover that she needed to pay attention to and stand up for her own needs in order for the marriage to survive. Learning to weave these two directions together is one of the biggest tasks we have as human beings.

Each person's experience of self is as individual as their experience of union. Over and over the paradoxical thing that I discover is that by getting more and more clear about the details that form a system, the more the personal details open out into a larger and healing mystical awareness.

If we conclude and begin to act on the belief that psychotherapy and spirituality are indeed intertwined, then, I think as we work as therapists, we need to keep several cautions in mind.

- We need to recognize that each clients' experience and verbal methophor for spirituality will be his/her own and may be quite different from ours. Therefore we need to avoid as much as possible putting our words or understanding to their experience, or at least to recognize and point it out when we are doing that.
 - 2. Spirituality will always be a mystery, and something beyond words. As therapists, we want so much to understand with great precision. Instead of trying too hard to understand, there are many times when we instead need to simply step back and honor the mystery.
 - 3. We need to expand our therapeutic framework to leave space open for spiritual events. Because it's beyond our control and precise understanding, it's all to easy to keep pulling and redirecting spiritual experiences back to childhood memories, simply by not recognizing the doorway.

- 4. And of course, there's the opposite problem. That of thinking and seeing everything that goes on in therapy as spiritual. Sometimes therapy is very practical and straightforward.
- 5. And as a last caution, it is important to make sure that clients don't come to the conclusion that spiritual experiences are only available through the rapy.

In conclusion, the thing that we can do as therapists, aware of both the need for union and for separateness, is to assist our clients in examining the details of their lives so that their whole Being can illuminate from them. We can recognize healing as coming through and beyond us. And we can honor individual experience of spirituality as well as individual experience of person-hood.

