

Beyond Psychotherapy

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The bustle in a house
The morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon earth.

The sweeping up the heart
And putting love away
We shall not want to use again
Until eternity.

Emily Dickinson

Over time, the understanding of human beings as individuals, families, groups or societies has been attempted through various lenses. These lenses include the biological lens, which looks at nerves, cells, receptors and neurochemical substances which transmit or block messages within the body; the intellectual lens, including students as Plato; the cognitive lens, through which people see the idea or the thought as the unit of study; the lens of the moral theorist, who sees human problems in terms of right and wrong, good and evil; and the emotional or feeling lens of therapists who construct theories and therapies largely in terms of feelings. All sets of glasses have some truth in them. Certainly the human being operates within a body, can be led astray by faulty ideas and thoughts, and has problems dealing with feelings and struggles with good and evil. These are not totally separate compartments. One clearly affects the other.

The Nature of Stress

I believe it is fair to assume that all therapists would assign a large portion of stress in life to loss. I would go further and state that all stress in life is due to real or imagined loss. I

believe that this is, at best, a statement of truth and, at worst, a useful way of looking at human beings. Loss is used here in its widest sense to include death, the loss of a job, growing older, menopause, children growing up, divorce, losses of material goods, insecurities, loss of control, real or imagined, etc. If this is so, then loss is a built-in, inevitable part of life. The knowledge that we gain from studying mankind from the biological, moral, emotional or cognitive aspects will help us to understand stress, perhaps help us to manage it and even, perhaps, to give us the illusion that we can control it since we know the causes, the results and some statistical data.

But such knowledge is not an immunization like that which will prevent polio, or an antibiotic which will cure infection, or an operation which will remove a cancer. Knowledge does not prevent the sadness, pain and suffering of loss. Any natural disaster leaves us feeling helpless. Disasters are described in terms of Richter scales, frequency of eruptions, amount of property damage, numbers of homeless, the number of injured and dead, and, if possible,

the cause of and responsibility for the accident so that new laws can be passed to prevent such events in the future. This restores some of the sense of control and keeps us from facing the fact that many of the losses in life are beyond our control. The myth is that knowledge allows us to control, but often knowledge is used to blame others, correct them and restore the myth of order and control.

The Missing Piece

If one listens to people over time, a strata of feelings begin to emerge. There is anxiety, which arises when one feels that the world around him is unsafe or he, himself, is losing control. Life is unsafe, unpredictable, unsure. People say, "I feel like I am going crazy," or "My wife is leaving me." The loss of control, or the fear of losing control, is followed by anxiety, and then a state of depression ensues with the attendant feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and a feeling of "What is the use? I have tried everything, but nothing works."

If one can sit with the anxiety and depression long enough or if the loss is so severe that one cannot run from it, feelings of emptiness begin to emerge as one goes through the experience. Depression feels like it will go on forever. A person feels unloved, unlovable, confused, ashamed, a failure, as if he were descending into a "black hole."

An analysis of these feelings, the loss of control and helplessness, leads to the inevitable question, "Control over what? Helpless about what? What is mankind searching for?" After suffering a very significant loss many people will enter therapy saying that "I feel dead inside and this feels worse than really dying." Further questioning reveals that all people have a dream or a series of dreams about life, what it would be, could be, should be, might have been. Each dream is unique to the individual. What these dreams, and fantasies, have in common is that they allow the individual to feel "good," and live in a state that is without anxiety, depression and emptiness. A state where the uncontrollable issues in life are non-existent or are at least at a minimum and one does not feel either helpless or hopeless, and feels loved, lovable and as if he "fits in." This is a state of safety, security, predictability and sureness. All human beings search for this condition which cannot be found alone, but requires some level of fusion with another per-

son. When a major loss is experienced, such feelings of love and security are shattered. There is a missing piece which therapy cannot restore.

The Death of Dreams

When people say "this is worse than physically dying," they are not making a rational statement. They are trying to report the degree of their pain and suffering. This represents something more than depression and feelings of emptiness. It merges into total confusion and feeling that life seems to have lost its meaning and purpose. "So, what is the sense of going on? What is there to believe in?"

In therapy, it is more important to ask people what their dream/dreams, imaginative fantasies of life are or were. For these dreams have to die, either slowly and grindingly or rapidly and smashingly. Keeping them alive after they are dead leads to people being obsessed with what could have been, what should have been, what might have been. This neglects what is. This neglects the here and now and keeps on marinating in the past and prevents one from living in the present.

Ordinarily, this dream will be the nucleus of a person's philosophy of life, and will explain how he understands and deals with his life. This philosophy will be some combination of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, imaginative and crazy elements. Dreams are important to the individual since they promise a sense of completeness in life; but in reality they get in the way of living. But this painful inner death is necessary to teach us the path to wisdom. Unfortunately, there is no heaven on earth because, even if one reaches his dream, he will find some disappointment since nothing ever delivers what it promises. There is truth in the old saying that the worst thing that can happen to you is to get what you want. There is always an empty piece and this is the natural incompleteness of life, both in self and relationships. The death of this dream coincides with the feeling of dying inside and is the ultimate loss.

The Course of Emotional Death

This is such a difficult course to travel, such a lonely and painful course, that no one will do it voluntarily. It is taken only when one

is faced by the inevitable reality, when the dream dies, when the significant loss, real or imagined, occurs. Many try to avoid the pain by substituting anger or bitterness, or some level of denial. This only takes the focus temporarily off the evolution through the process. Enthusiasm, purpose and joy are not reborn. Function may go on but living is flat and chronically depressed and mostly tolerated and aimless.

This is not a course of action precipitated by therapy or the therapist. This is the natural course of events following a significant loss. Empathy, medication, preaching or teaching about the stages of grief will not remove the pain and the loneliness of loss. Something else is called for. This something else is far removed from the scientific.

Dealing with Loss

People who deal with loss functionally try to accept it by defining or redefining what is under their control and what is not. They come to the conclusion that they are largely in control only of themselves. But what to do with the anxiety, depression and emptiness connected with losses that go beyond their control? This is especially difficult when we realize that the major losses in life are beyond our control. Many people turn the uncontrollable portions of life over to something bigger, larger, wiser, beyond imagination. This force may be called God, a higher power, nature. From the viewpoint of the therapist, it does not matter since people often miss the point by arguing over the name or the concretizations of this force. To go through emotional death, one must have faith, which is best defined as belief without proof. This is why it is not scientific. It is not the function of the therapist to enter into the concretization of this higher force, except to encourage the belief in the higher force which is loving and will somehow fulfill the universal desire for completion in all of us. Thus, the context of loss becomes the birthplace of faith, a testing ground for it, an opportunity to realize that faith is not grounded until tested by doubt. One cannot have faith without emotional death and the sense of deep loss and depression which initiates it.

The Essence, the Soul

When one looks inside and sees emptiness

and outside and sees the loss of a "soulmate," as somebody really close is often described, what is left? What support is there to hold onto? No person is truly empty. We have, within us, a core, an essence, a spirit, a soul. This can't be seen but only experienced. Scientists do not like to acknowledge the spiritual or the mystical, because it cannot be seen or measured. They tend to see it as a substitution, a rationalization, or an oversimplification of something that is not yet understood. They equate knowledge with control and lack of knowledge with lack of control and, heaven forbid, we should admit that some events are random, lucky or unlucky, accidental or spiritual. To admit that would be to admit that there are some forces that are unconquerable and beyond control. To admit these forces is not blind superstition, but the only reasonable way to fill out the picture, to answer the universal urge in people for completion. The search for knowledge is a part of that urge, the intellectual or cognitive part, but only a part.

How is the soul experienced clinically? When I tell clients that I could give them anything they wanted — money, power, fame, sex, beauty, and such — and ask which one they want, they usually name one of these things and name somebody who had that quality. Then, if I tell them that in order to get what they want, their present self, person, would no longer be; that they would have no memory of their own existence; that their spirit, their essence, their soul, the core of their self would be obliterated; the response has been universal. They would like to have those characteristics but keep their own essence. They do not want to lose that part of themselves that is unique; their relationships, values, memories, emotions and even their painful feelings; that which belongs to them and they do not want to give them up. The uniqueness of all those experiences represents the spirit or soul of the individual.

Mistrust of Spirituality

Many people mistrust the idea of spirituality because they see it as a product of a sudden flash of insight or inspiration and, indeed, it is often presented as such. Actually it is the end product of a long process. If it is the product of direct divine guidance, it is not what people talk about in my practice. What they do talk

about first are pictures of loss, depression, hopelessness, and feelings of emptiness, confusion and the sense that they are dying inside. This long process includes times when there seems to be no meaning or purpose in their life. There are times of anger, bitterness and loss of faith in anything. This is extremely painful and time consuming, and spirituality is the second point of this deepest soul searching. It is not something that one gets and owns. It is not easy to get there or live there.

This leads to the objection that spirituality should be left to the clergy, priests, ministers and rabbis. But, if all stress can be related to loss, real or imagined, and this leads to a process of anxiety, depression, emptiness, emotional death and a coming alive again, part of which is spirituality, then what is left for the therapist? Family systems theory teaches that mankind can be understood by a process of analysis and synthesis. Analysis breaks the situation down into its component parts and synthesis takes the parts and builds them up into a whole. An intelligent theoretical whole cannot exist with a key part missing and spirituality is the only part which promises an answer to significant loss. It promises that loss is only temporary and that essences, spirits and souls go on to live again and to be reunited with those whom they love and care about. It promises the completion of self which all people desire. It promises to take care of the anxieties and depressions which are beyond our control. It is the link between all people regardless of race, ethnicity or social class.

Doubts in the world of psychology include the charge that spirituality is "unscientific." "Science is the observation, identification, description, experimental investigation and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena." It is also defined as knowledge, especially that is gained from experience. It is a natural phenomena that loss is built into life. These losses take on all kinds of identifications and descriptions. Theoretical explanations do not solve the losses or the pain and suffering. The *New York Times* notes that a recent Gallup poll shows that 90% of Americans believe in God. It is a clinical fact that many people gain significant relief with a spiritual approach to loss. It is also difficult to imagine a complex world such as we live in without an ultimate

Cause. None of this is proof but it all slides in the direction of belief in a greater, larger, impossible-to-imagine entity. At worst, it is a comforting choice to make that decision to believe, with nothing to lose. It does demand faith, but what does not in life?

The Meaning of Spirituality

Spirituality, as used here, means "of or pertaining to the soul or deific, to God." It is a word carefully selected to be abstract and not concrete. The word "religion" often turns people off in therapy because they associate it with a particular set of beliefs or a specific clergyman. From the viewpoint of the therapist, it is sufficient to raise the issue of there being a greater force without a specific name, that this entity loves us no matter what we are or do and only we can turn off that love, and that we relate to that God by loving our fellow human beings. Existence, as we know it, is only a part of the process of living and fulfillment; completion will come only after our physical and emotional death. People can move spiritually into whatever concrete religion they wish or not move in at all as far as the therapist is concerned. If they are interested in religion, they need to be encouraged to begin by studying the religion of their extended family. Specific religions are avoided in therapy since this often leads to arguments and rationalizations which miss the point of faith and hope and love and consolation. People use spirituality as a prayer or request for a specific favor, rather than as a plea for the strength to accept painful loss. Disappointment can, and often does, give rise to skepticism, and skepticism can cancel out faith.

Clinical Evolution of Spirituality

After the experience of "dying inside" following loss, many people alternate between the feelings of anger, bitterness, defeat and the struggle to accept the reality of loss. The loss is experienced as irreplaceable. From the confusion comes a search for a new purpose, some reason to keep going. As Nietzsche said, "If something doesn't kill you, it probably makes you stronger." If not overwhelmed by the anger, defeat or bitterness, some people learn to accept their destiny, examine their life and learn to give to others with the giving being its own reward. They stumble onto or are taught

in therapy or by experience that this is the definition of love — to give without expectation. The one who gives gets more from it than the one who is given to. Bitterness kills off one's own soul and the key to overcoming bitterness is to do something for the person who hurt you, something nice, something that you are not currently doing for that person. From the pain of this severe loss and the discovery of love comes the realization that much of our life has been filled with clutter. This clutter dies after the loss of the loved object and a search for what is truly important in life begins. It becomes clear that defining and struggling to live up to what one believes in is enough to keep anyone busy for ten lifetimes. There is no time to control others.

Big issues such as forgiveness and smaller ones such as refusing to gossip are examples of the work each of us has to do. Respecting the uniqueness of ourselves and others, while realizing that each of us is one of about five billion people, heads us in the direction of humble significance. One of the aspects of life that emerges is how important it is to be connected with people. Unable to relate directly to a God, we must relate to this force through people and through relationships. To make these relationships work, we must often put our own interests on the shelf for a while and sometimes even change our interests. All of this must rest on an act of faith, often meaning that one simply chooses to believe. It is the function of therapy to foster this process. There is no end to the struggle and to the process, which must go on and on. One does not own the peace of mind which comes from this process, but over time catches glimpses of it and then loses it again. But a glimpse is enough to encourage the pursuit. Eventually faith is confirmed by experience.

When one starts to come alive, it can be sensed both in the person and those around him. There is a sense of placidity, enthusiasm, and a sense of humor so that everything is not taken so seriously. There is an ability to laugh at oneself and one's pretensions. Doing good to

others becomes not so much a responsibility but an opportunity and a privilege. This reality, this discovery, arises from the death of our dreams. Emotional death does not give rise to the birth of another dream but to a reality that is possible and, at least at times, is under our control. What is left over can be placed in the hands of a Superior Being. From the perspective of time, this new reality pushes us to focus on the here and now, on this minute, for this is when and where we live. Surely we can learn from the past, and must provide for the future; but we must do our living this very minute.

One final result of this trip from anxiety to spirituality is the development of real humility, not mealy-mouthed helplessness. It is as if one feels so fortunate to have been able to take the trip that the trip is entitled to the credit and not oneself. "There but for the grace of God go I."

Summary

This paper presents a process for dealing with loss through the use of spirituality and is based on the clinical observation of many patients as they handle stress over time in a functional way. It is written for therapists so that they have a road map to identify where patients are at any given time. Knowing the route, they should be less apt to interfere and stop the process, as it evolves, because of their own anxiety. By no means will all patients follow this route. They will only go as far as they wish or can tolerate. It does offer hope. No one should be pushed because only hope and faith will pull people along on their own. The therapist should avoid concretization and be content with encouraging belief in a Supreme Being, in some kind of continuing existence, a reunion with loved ones after death, and in an ever-loving God. The therapist needs to encourage people to redefine love as something given freely without an expectation of receiving anything in return. This definition of love combined with faith and hope will make a person's journey through life something a therapist can learn from and will be privileged to witness.