

The Connection between Mental Health and Spirituality¹

By Dr. Marvin J. Southard

The connection between mental health and spirituality is not always an easy topic to approach. Not because we don't know about the mental health field or faith or religion, but because what the term "spirituality" connotes. Spirituality to some connotes an unscientific approach to life, to others it is something positive, but vague, to still others it is the starting point for understanding all existence. I would ask you to consider a broad view that spirituality, because its root meaning (in Latin "spiritus" means breath), is the province of all of us who breathe. If we are breathing we have spirituality. If we draw breath we know about things spiritual. And, so it is not easy to address this because everyone is an expert on spirituality. In fact, this is so universal that it crosses the boundaries of separation typically created by affiliation with a particular religion or faith. Even people who are seen as having hesitations about spirituality, or are viewed as anti-spiritual, if there is such a thing, are speaking from a spiritual point of view because they are seeking meaning, or in other words, they are breathing and in that process of breathing they are seeking to create meaning.

Following is an outline of what this paper entails. First, it will identify a set of working definitions for spirituality, religion, and recovery. Then it will examine three specific ways in which spirituality can help with the process of recovery, including ways in which spirituality helps all of us, whether we happen to have an active mental illness or not. Next, it will discuss the three great gifts the client community has given to all of us, and then it will conclude with how we should use these gifts to promote wellness.

Spirituality and Religion

The working definition of spirituality that I have discovered to be the most useful is that spirituality is the process of pursuing meaning and purpose in life. Any activity that we undertake that has as its goal the pursuit of meaning and purposefulness in life is, in some way, spiritual. So even when a person is writing a book that is negative towards the concept of God or religious practice of any kind, it is still a part of that person's spiritual journey and pursuit, especially if they are not in it to make money but to pursue the profits of purpose and meaning and share those insights with others.

Religion is a group or a community that is tied together by an agreed upon set of beliefs and rituals connected with the meaning of existence. Hence religion implies a group or a community; it is never about one person. The word religion comes from the Latin word "ligare," which means to tie, and the "re" part means to tie again. So, religion is something that ties again. In some interpretations, it is seen as that we were once together and that religion is the thing that ties us once again together in the way that we ought to be mutually connected.

In my view, religion and spirituality are different but complementary. Some see religion as the calcification of spirituality, that when spirituality dies, it calcifies into a series of creeds and rules that is called religion. That's not my view. What I believe is that religion and spirituality are necessarily created for one another. They exist entirely to support one another.

¹ Based on the author's keynote address on June 5, 2009, at the California Conference on Mental Health and Spirituality held in Los Angeles, California.

They don't make sense without one another. It's not merely that they are complementary, as when sometimes spirituality is seen as the private interior part of an experience and religion as its exterior public side. Any spirituality that is developed will reach out of the interior reality of what one person experiences and try to go forth and do things outside. And that movement from the interior experience to the outside, which touches, helps, supports, creates connections and a sense of kinship with other people, that movement is what creates a religion.

On the other hand, if a religion does not support the creation of a genuine spiritual experience for the people that practice that religion, it's missing its point. The purpose of a religion is to create a community in which people have the opportunity to experience interiorly and touch the sacred. So in my view, spirituality and religion are tied together. Each finds its purpose and fulfillment in the other. And as a matter of fact, I think you'll find that the most severe criticism of a religion that does not issue forth into supporting individual spiritual experiences comes from within religious traditions themselves. For example, if you looked at the Hebrew prophets you would find Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi all have God saying something that could be paraphrased like this: "I detest your feasts and your rituals. The din of your singing fills my ears. The smoke makes me sick. I reject those empty sacrifices. If you want to have a sacrifice that pleases me, let justice flow like water, and goodness like an unending stream." A religion needs to produce by its own account in its members a stream of justice and goodness that reaches out to them. So spirituality and religion, need to develop together in the long run, even though in many individual instances they are divorced.

Recovery

Having examined the meaning spirituality, and religion and their mutual relationships, I want to delve into a working definition of recovery. But, we need some context. Recovery did not originate as a result of scientific research. It did not originate from looking at the data about the number of people suffering from schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorders who actually had improved life outcomes, although that data was and is available. The recovery model came from the work of mental health clients as civil rights action groups in the 1970s. From personal stories clients have told me through the years, I have come to know about their involvement in those activities. What the activism of those years did first of all was create among the clients the sense they had something in common with each other and that they did not need to suffer alone. Their suffering brought them together, and then created the opportunity to look toward empowerment. A sense of kinship was created that gave the actions taken together something more valuable than merely personal self-interest.

This kinship fostered a sense of empowerment, which was a part of the civil rights movement of those times, to use the pain and the suffering as a tool for improvement. And it then prompted everyone to notice and look at the data that recovery was not just a concept, that it was a fact. And that with treatment a number of persons suffering from severe mental illness did in fact recover and were able to have large contributing roles in society. Therefore, it was falsity to say to somebody that their prognosis was poor, which for people with schizophrenia at that time meant that their lives were likely to be spent in institutions. This was borne out when data became available. Forty years after the clients gave us the gift of this concept of recovery, I have to say that the meaning of that term is still evolving. It still is not completely clarified and I think that's a good thing.

However, we can better understand recovery if we examine its components. Recovery conveys at least three concepts. The first concept is that recovery means social recovery -- wherein the meaning and purpose are retained in a person's life even though the symptoms of mental illness may not have completely gone away. And guess what? If we have meaning and purpose in our life, then even our suffering makes some kind of sense to us and we are able to move forward with our lives. Meaning creates the opportunity for understanding, which allows going forward with life. That in turn creates opportunities to be of service to others, which then creates more opportunities for recovery. So that's one sense of the meaning of recovery.

The second concept is that of recovery as the act of overcoming an illness. If I had strep throat, took my antibiotics, rested, and drank my chicken soup, I recovered. The illness that I once had is gone. Sometimes when we talk about recovery it is in that sense -- that an illness that had once plagued us is gone. That can happen for mental illness too, not always even though it is a possibility.

The third concept of recovery is the one implied by the term "being in recovery," the kind of recovery that people who are in twelve-step programs talk about, in which recovery is not something that is achieved at one point in time but something that is pursued as a way of life throughout one's entire life. So when we talk about the recovery model, we mean social recovery in some part, being in recovery as another, and aiming for complete recovery as at least a potentiality. These three concepts are tied together when we talk about recovery and the exact components of each part aren't clear yet. And I think that's a good thing because we have to live into the experience of knowing how that is going to operate.

As a live experience, however, recovery clearly means several things. It means improved self esteem, it means having a positive identity, it means living a meaningful role in the community, it means overcoming being stuck, it means improving one's basic level of functioning as a person and a friend. Oddly enough, all of those outcomes, including good self esteem, a positive identity, a meaningful role, and not getting stuck, fit with all three concepts. That is they are a part of complete recovery, social recovery, and being in recovery. Hence in actual practice exactly what components go into the definition of recovery may be less important than the outcomes of recovery. And the client community has made it really clear what these outcomes ought to be and how important they are to them.

Recovery and Spirituality

The next question is how does spirituality work with recovery understood in this way? There clearly is a relationship. If the essence of a recovery process is the discovery of meaning and purpose, and the definition of spirituality is the process of seeking meaningful purpose in life, then it follows that there ought to be some kind of relationship between the two that allows the opportunities for spirituality to create the conditions for recovery. For the purpose of this examination, let us focus on spirituality as being practices that people can engage in that support their finding of meaning and purpose in life. It can be prayer, meditation, rituals, yoga, chanting, or reading scriptures. It could be a variety of different things as long as those things are undertaken with the goal of connecting with the sacred to find meaning and purpose in one's life. These practices take different forms in different cultural contexts, so this paper is not advocating for a particular practice.

In this context, as a side note, I want to add a brief caution about the role of therapists. One of the dangers to certainly avoid as the idea of spirituality in public mental health evolves is

the therapist becoming the spiritual director. Therapists should be allies in a variety of ways for clients to lead a better life, but clients don't need a therapist as their spiritual leader. What therapists should be able to do is find ways in their therapy to be supportive of their clients' spiritual quest, but not direct their spiritual quest. This would be an important issue to address as the work continues.

Going back to the connection between spirituality and recovery, I believe there are three ways in which any spiritual practice is meant to help in a recovery process, and this applies to all, anyone who is breathing and not just for those who happen to have a mental illness. As we develop, grow up and live our lives as human beings, all of us have faced issues in three areas -- control, safety, and self-esteem. This is not because we are bad, or our parents didn't do what they were supposed to do, or that our cultures were rigid. It is because we were all babies once. And when we were babies, we had issues with these things. In order to survive, we needed to be kept safe, in order to survive we had to have the bond created between us and our caregiver, and there needed to be some kind of reciprocation of that bond. Research shows that babies' smiles and the wonderful faces they make are an adaptive evolutionary response. Babies who don't do that have a much harder developmental time. So every one of us had these issues - how do we control ourselves, how do we control our environment, how do we stay safe, and what do we do with the esteem and affection of other people.

A spiritual practice is meant to help us grow and become aware of issues that come up in those areas of control, safety, and self esteem. Whatever those issues are, our ways of dealing with those things can be improved by engaging in a spiritual practice. But it's not the purpose of the spiritual practice. We may, as a result of a spiritual practice, be more relaxed, but that's not why we engage in a spiritual practice. Engaging in a spiritual practice lowers our blood pressure, but we shouldn't engage in a spiritual practice in order to lower our pressure. All of those are side effects. The purpose of the spiritual practice is to engage that part of human experience that is in touch with hope and meaning. That is why spirituality is important. Anyone who engages in a regular spiritual practice, whether s/he has a mental illness or not, will have the opportunity to deal with the inevitable human issues of control, safety, and esteem and affection.

The results of that engagement can be liberating. We are able to forgive things that we didn't even know we were holding a grudge about. We are able to experience reconciliation; the barriers that stood in the way of community and relationships before are suddenly gone. We become less judgmental; our snap judgments about other people and what they meant to do and they meant to say, and why they were doing whatever they do, decreases. Maybe, most important of all, we become less dependent on the affection and esteem of other people and instead have a greater sense of our own inward sense of autonomy. These are all the side effects of applying spirituality in anyone's life.

The Three Gifts

What about hope? The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health's vision statement reads, "We create partnerships with clients, families, and communities to support hope, wellness, and recovery." It is a new vision statement that was created in the last several years. The statement's wellness and recovery elements are things we've been working on for literally ten years. But, the hope element is new. And the hope element was added to our vision statement only because clients demanded that we put it in. So hope is a clear gift from the client community to us as mental health providers, and family members, and the community at large.

Every time I give a new employee orientation at the Department, to orient new people coming into the mental health system, one of the things I do is ask them to be to consider the kinship they have with the clients who come in for services and gratitude for their emphasis on hope and how that changes everything we do. Our work is so much more meaningful when it's focused on that arena of hope.

Research shows that spirituality, particularly the experience of hope in spirituality, is a very powerful variable for predicting better outcomes. That's true in mental health and in physical health. In this recovery model that we are considering, I think the equation is simple: clients gave us the notion of the recovery, and it was a profound gift to all of us. We found, however, that the recovery model doesn't work without the inclusion of hope, so hope is the second gift. Then we find that sustaining hope is difficult without spirituality. So the first gift of the recovery model to us by the clients ended up creating the next step, which is the emphasis on hope, which is now creating the next step, which is the emphasis on spirituality. It has to work backwards. We can't have sustained hope without spirituality; we can't have sustained recovery without hope. So hope and recovery and spirituality are tied together.

I also want to talk a little bit about wellness. The book, "Outliers," by Malcolm Gladwell talks about a strange experience that researchers had with a town called Roseto in Pennsylvania. People in this little hill town generally didn't get heart disease or cancer, and died usually from old age. Researchers were engaged to find out why everybody there lived a long time. At first they thought it maybe because the residents had brought from Sicily the healthy Mediterranean eating and diet practices. But when they looked into it, they found that people of Roseto were making their pizza with lard instead of olive oil, and they were heavy on the pepperoni. So, it wasn't the diet. Next they considered the notion that the people of Roseto came from extremely enduring physical stock, and that maybe it's genetic. So, they studied other groups of families who had migrated from the same part of Sicily to the U.S. but not to Roseto, Pa. But they found those other people from Sicily got sick and died like everyone else. Puzzled, teams of ethnographers were sent to Roseto to find an answer. They found that it was neither the genetics, nor the diet and exercise of the people of Roseto. There were other towns in the area with different ethnic stocks, with the same climate, and the same working class doing the same hard work. None of those were the reasons.

The major factor that set the people of Roseto apart from others was that they were well-connected. They had created a community. They supported one another. The social rule was that one did not flaunt one's success to make other people feel bad. If someone was doing poorly, everybody helped out. It's not that there weren't differences in economic status, but those differences were not made the central thing. Everyone supported everyone else. In a town of six thousand people, there were twenty-two different civic organizations. People were focused on the activities of their church. The protective factor ended up not being individual, not being dietary, not being exercise, it was in the creation of community. The lesson for us is that we should do the things that help create community in order to create and support wellness.

So, in conclusion, let me address what we should do with the gifts of hope, recovery, and spirituality that clients have given us. Quite simply, our goal should be to use these gifts, these tools, to create community. But what does community mean? Community comes from two Latin words: "Com," that means "with," and "Unus," which means "one." So a community is those with whom we feel at one with. It's our job as human beings as we develop to enlarge that circle of those with whom we feel at one. So when we're babies we feel at one with our mother, that's our world. As we get a little older, it's our nuclear family, then our extended family, then our

neighbors. Then it's who we define as people like us. That may be defined geographically, it may be defined by religion, and it may be defined by race. But we can't stop there. The spiritual challenge is to use our spirituality to increase that circle of those that we feel at one with. Our job is to always push the boundaries of that circle out to make it ever larger to experience a sense of kinship with people who appear very unlike us in some ways. Sometimes religions can appear to be one of those boundaries, we feel at one with those who share our religion. Even there it must be our spiritual goal to push beyond that boundary of the religion that we practice or are born into so we can feel at one with even a larger circle. Because in the end what our spiritual goal is: to extend the circle of those we feel at one with to all human beings, to everyone who breathes. That's the goal of what we're trying to accomplish. We use our spiritual tools, our spiritual practices to push those boundaries out. Ever more and ever further we can feel at one with more and more human beings and make our community bigger, and make our community better. We owe the client community our profound gratitude for giving us the gifts of hope, recovery and spirituality to enable us to make our community bigger and better and our sense of kinship stronger.

About the author:

Marvin J. Southard, D.S.W., the Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health since 1998, leads a \$1.5 billion public mental health system that serves over 200,000 clients annually in one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the nation. He was awarded the 2008 National Network for Social Work Managers Exemplar Award, the 2006 Social Worker of the Year-California Chapter, the 2003 Award for Excellence in Community Mental Health Services by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and the 2003 Tom Bradley Equal Opportunity award from the Los Angeles Metro Chapter of the American Society of Public Administration. A past president of the California Mental Health Directors Association (CMHDA), he is a Commissioner on Los Angeles County Children and Families First – First 5 LA Commission. His academic experience include serving as an Associate Clinical Professor at UCLA School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences; as a Senior Fellow, Public Policy at UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research; and as a Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine.