



SPIRITUALITY & RECOVERY FROM ADDICTIONS

Mary Ellen Merrick, IHM, D. Min., MAC

THE CONCEPT

“Spirituality and recovery from addictions” may serve to remind us that of all of the wonders in the created universe, the human being is set apart. We are complex and complicated interconnections of physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual mysteries. We could spend days discussing and reflecting on any one of these but the one that this particular presentation will try and focus on can be the most mysterious, a certain core organizing entity that seeks to balance everything else throughout a lifetime. This core is referred to as **spirituality**.

I believe people come into this world from a place of freedom, open to wonder, drawn to beauty and willing to trust. If parents or other caregivers are “good enough” they provide healthy loving guidance, protection and encouragement to the developing child. Now we all know some of the tragic stories and situations where “good enough” never has a chance because the caregivers never had it themselves. Regardless of the circumstances a person has experienced, the spiritual center is there.





A NEED TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

The author, Earnie Larsen, says that people have important needs and two of the primary needs are a need to love and be loved and a need to feel worthwhile/valuable to some other person. This usually starts with a parent. Without healthy interaction/nurturing, a child will figure out what pleases this important person. If this need is satisfied by some behavior then what should be freely given, without strings attached, becomes conditional. Hence the birth of roles in family systems and other systems. This can and does happen in privileged circumstances and in obvious impoverished and abusive circumstances. It can happen at the extremes and anywhere in between. The human being begins to suffer from a lack of balance among the critical aspects of the self. A person's sense of spirituality can be an initial casualty. The term itself usually refers to the human longing for a sense of meaning and fulfillment through morally satisfying relationships among individuals, families, communities, cultures, and religions. It is about responding to the deepest questions posed by an individual existence with one's whole heart. In today's world people are seeking ways to connect with this part of themselves. Interest in Eastern religions, new age practices, alternative therapies, Native American rituals, self-help movements, pursuit of the inner child and numerous applications of the 12 Steps have widespread attention. Some surveys have reported that 80% of people in the US believe in the power of prayer to improve the course of an illness.

ADDICTION – A SPIRITUAL ILLNESS

Addiction has been referred to as a spiritual illness. In the history of AA there are interesting comments about this. Both William James, an American philosopher and psychologist who wrote Varieties of Religious Experience, and Carl Jung, who had treated a friend of Bill Wilson for over a year, felt that a spiritual experience was integral to recovery from alcoholism. Neither man was “religious” in any conventional sense of that term but both took religious insight seriously. That both men felt “the spiritual” could mean something different than what structured religion held was so important for Bill Wilson that he honored them by calling them remote founders of AA. Jung stated that craving for alcohol was really a search for wholeness or union with God. The Latin term for alcohol is spiritus and he remarked, “You use the same term for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison.” Jung felt that the craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst for wholeness, expressed in medieval language, the union with God.

Lee Jampolsky noted, “Addiction is fundamentally a misdirected spiritual search that is rooted in a fundamental belief that, “I am not OK the way I am and there is a void that needs to be filled and something external to myself will fill this void.”

Victor Frankl concluded that substance abuse might be a response to a loss of direction within the person. A spiritual search for peace in a world of restless anxiety. The alcohol, other drugs, work, behavior provide a temporary sense of relief and feeling of control. The addiction says we can have it now, a message reinforced by the wider culture in a variety of ways every day.

Howard Clinebell stated that the insecurity and emotional malnutrition bred by an anxious, violent, and competitive society has resulted in many damaged orphans of the spirit.



SOBRIETY AND ALL THAT IT MEANS

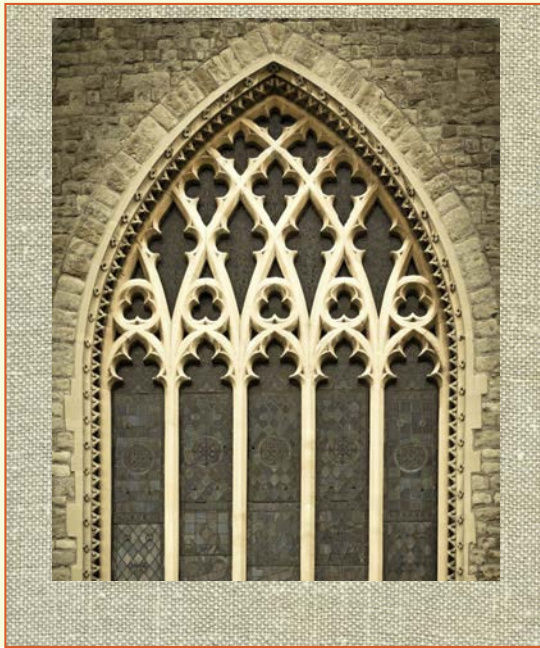
My community has a publication that we make available several times a year and it usually has articles centering on a theme. A few issues back, the theme was “Celebrate” and I was asked to write an article about celebrating sobriety. I took the letters of the word Sobriety and said the following about each letter.

- S** ~ for many people sobriety is a **SECOND** Chance. A second chance to fulfill a covenant between a God who loves unconditionally and a human child who comes to understand that truth in a deeper way.
- O** ~ for the **OPPORTUNITIES** to be of genuine service to other people who are also in need of understanding and compassion.
- B** ~ for the ability to understand what **BALANCE** means in the daily living of one’s life. It includes leisure and prayer.
- R** ~ for the desire to be in **RIGHT RELATIONSHIP** with oneself, others and the God of my understanding. This may necessitate learning skills that will enhance communication.
- I** ~ for the effort to become a person of **INTEGRITY**. Does the inside match the outside when I am alone and when I am with others?
Who gives me feedback about myself?
- E** ~ for the **EFFORT** that is foundational in order to do the daily work of remaining sober.
- T** ~ for the **TRUST** that is needed to sustain a program of recovery.
- Y** ~ for the **YES** to believe in the possibility of continuing sobriety and to accept it as gift.

BILL WILSON SAID ALCOHOLISM IS A FORM OF SPIRITUAL BANKRUPTCY

Bill Wilson referred to alcoholism as a “soul sickness or a form of illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer.” Bill was not an immediate supporter of spirituality. He had an experience while in the hospital yet again from the impact of his drinking on his body. In an address at the “Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age Convention” in 1955 he said:

“My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly at the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, “If there is a God, let Him show himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!” Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in my mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of presence, and I thought to myself, “So this is the God of the preachers!” A great peace stole over me and I thought, “No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are all right. Things are all right with God and His world.”





Bill Wilson became intrigued by this experience and kept working with it as the fledgling program grew. Gradually the term “Higher Power” was used, or “God as you understand God.” It moved away from religion. Religion is not spirituality. Religion seems to be more about organized structures, particular beliefs, behaviors, rituals, ceremonies and traditions that different faith traditions use. So, there are people with spirituality that are part of a religious group and people who are not. The point is they are not interchangeable. Spirituality seems to be the organizing energy that assists people in seeking, achieving, and maintaining right relations with self, others and God (by whatever name).

Now it takes something very powerful to sidetrack people from this innate journey. Some people develop a brain disease called addiction where healthy predictability and choice disappear. Good people disappoint, lie, cheat, steal, and hurt those closest to them and whom they say they love. This happens because a primary relationship with a chemical/behavior develops and takes the place of all others. Addiction takes human desire and attaches its energy. It bonds and enslaves it to the point of preoccupation and obsession. Basic humanity is compromised. It makes for a more powerful image to consider the word attachment as coming from the Old French word meaning “to nail”. People who develop an addiction begin to experience “a great wasting of the spirit.” The first time I heard this phrase I imagined a slow drip, drip, drip of a vital life force. I recall feeling frightened. I had entered treatment at Alina Lodge in Blirstown, NJ. This was the beginning of true surrender and a much deeper understanding of spirituality and the relationship with the “God of my understanding.”

What I learned was that spirituality involves not just talking about something, not just reading about or considering something, not even just doing something. It takes actually experiencing life in a new way.

WHERE HEALING IS FOUND

AA discovered that healing was found, in part, in telling the story and listening to others' stories. This experience has led many people to be able to move toward spiritual qualities such as gratitude, tolerance, forgiveness, and being-at-home. These experiences have differences but they share this in common ~ they can't be commanded, directed or given. They can't be called forth when we feel like it. They become available to us when we need them, if we are available to them. They happen; we experience. The AA storytelling style ~ "what it was like, what happened, what it is like now" provides the template for the process. Spirituality must touch all of one's life or it touches none.

This idea of spirituality as pervasive was conveyed at a talk given at Hazelden's Renewal Center. The presenter was talking about the nature of spirituality and one of the participants asked for an image that would help her to "picture" the words. The presenter was stumped for a while and he began to look at a massive stone fireplace in the room. The stones were from the Minnesota area and were different types of rock and stone. Which one of these beautiful species might provide the needed picture? The deep reddish rocks, flecked with golden specks; the green-hued pieces, irregularly marbled in white; the many-shaded blue slabs, their shallow niches sparkling as if with silver. Which would best represent "the spiritual?" He mused and then suddenly he saw the chimney as a whole. He saw the mortar – the grayish, pebbly "stuff" that held everything together. That was the spiritual. It wasn't some separate category, one specific type of stone or a particular one of great beauty, but the substance that held everything together. So, he said to the young woman who had asked for the picture,

"Spirituality is like that mortar in the fireplace. Just as the mortar makes the chimney a chimney, allowing it to stand up straight and tall, beautiful in its wholeness, 'the spiritual' is what makes us wholly human; it holds our experiences together, shapes them into a whole, gives them meaning, allows them and us to be whole. Without the spiritual, however physically brave or healthy or strong we may be, however mentally smart or clever or brilliant we may be, however emotionally integrated or mature we may be, we are somehow not 'all there.'"



So, how do we assist people to move from a misdirected spiritual search toward a freedom that liberates the human soul? It might include the following:



Understand that addiction is not a choice. People have been on an odyssey of shame and pain, they are carrying unbearable guilt and are filled with remorse and humiliation.



Understand that addiction serves a deep unmet need. We try to accept them in their brokenness, affirm them in their worthlessness and love them in their loneliness.



Explore your own sense of spirituality and religion. Can you be open enough to explore another's, especially if it is very different from your own? Ask ~ listen ~ don't judge.



Be honest with your client. This is a difficult thing to do.



Be aware of some of the psycho-spiritual movements that your clients may need to experience:

- *From a lack of conscious awareness to living in the now
- *From self-deception and control to humility and letting go
- *From fear to trust
- *From immediate gratification to asceticism (discipline)
- *From perfectionism to acceptance of limitations
- *From never enough to gratitude
- *From isolation to community

From an article entitled **Psycho-spirituality of Addiction**

By Kevin P. McClone, M.Div., PhD.

THE “WIZARD OF OZ” AND THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF THE DISEASE

Sometimes, in working with my clients, I use the story of the Wizard of Oz to talk about the spiritual aspect of the disease. You know the story. Dorothy becomes displaced and is looking for home, the Cowardly Lion for courage, the Scarecrow for brains, and the Tin Man for a heart. They are thrown together and learn that there is a great wizard, Oz, who can grant what each desires. They have a series of adventures and challenges and when they have managed to slay the Wicked Witch of the West, they return for their rewards which of course, the Wizard is incapable of granting. In their frustration they realize that they already have what they need. For the Scarecrow, it was not a problem of lacking brains, but of avoiding the experiences that would yield knowledge. Now that he would risk making a mistake, he could sometimes act wisely. The Tin Man was not lacking a heart, but rather a willingness to bear unhappiness. And the Lion came to understand that it was not courage he lacked but the confidence to know that he could face danger even when he was afraid. And Dorothy? She could go home anytime she wanted. What she learned was that she had that power to make changes in her life once she was ready to take the responsibility of recognizing and using that power. Now, the real message of this tale lies in the aspect of relationship. Initially, the four central characters are isolated even though together and each sees the Wizard as the answer. Only through their struggles and relying on one another does each discover that what each wants is actually present within. They have a type of spiritual awakening and the Wizard loses power. The story is about coming to right relationship. (Guru by Sheldon)





In my initial years of recovery I attended a meeting where a man by the name of Jim C. was a regular. He had white hair and a face that was etched with experience, kindness, and deep understanding. He made many simple and profoundly wise comments during that time in my life but one has remained in my memory. When he took his turn and introduced himself, he would say, “Hi, I’m Jim. I am a recovering alcoholic and, today, I am a reasonably happy man.” In him, I began to see where spirituality had taken root. I began to believe in the possibility of sustained recovery. What an incredible blessing to be able to say during the course of any given day, “I am a reasonably happy woman.” I say this with humility and gratitude. I say this with full awareness and acceptance that my growing edges still need attention and effort. I say this because my most difficult day sober is far better than any day when I was not sober. So, celebrate sobriety? What’s not to celebrate?!



Mary Ellen Merrick, IHM, D. Min., MAC, first shared her thoughts on Spirituality and Recovery From Addictions at the January 21, 2008 National Catholic Council on Addictions Drug and Alcohol Addictions Workshop in New Orleans. Sr. Merrick has taught courses on Substance Abuse and was Clinical Supervisor at Loyola College in Maryland and served as Clinical Director at STTAR (Specialized Trauma Treatment, Advocacy and Recovery) Center in Columbia, Maryland. Sr. Mary Ellen is now Director of Women's Services at Guest House, Inc. You can reach Sr. Merrick at memerrick@guesthouse.org

“...my most difficult day sober is far better than any day when I was not sober. So, celebrate sobriety? What's not to celebrate?!”

-Mary Ellen Merrick, IHM, D. Min., MAC

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This book is brought to you courtesy of
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Find out more about NCCA Spirituality Support Resources at nccatoday.org
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