



Center for Psychotherapy, Education & Spiritual Growth, Inc.

Psychotherapy and the Spiritual/Religion Dimension of Life Curtis Abbott

The relationship between psychology, psychotherapy, religion and spirituality has been a complex one throughout human history. Some believe that psychotherapy is the contemporary parallel of a religious Retreat often done by persons in the Middle Ages and other times when they faced troubling, traumatic or depressive experiences. Psychotherapy certainly has some of its roots in the religious Confessional - a confidential time to reflect on one's life and troubles in the presence of one who listens, cares and offers ways toward a newness of life. Both the spiritual/ religious life and the psychotherapeutic endeavor are concerned mostly with the inner well-being of a person and with ways to transform suffering into peace and purpose and renewal.

In the article on this website about how psychotherapy works we discussed that, in an important way therapy seeks to assist persons in making meaning of personal history, relationships, self experiences and identity. At one level, psychotherapy is a hermeneutical activity. Hermeneutics (after Hermes, the messenger in mythology) is the Discipline of interpretation - of understanding and making meaningful sense. Hermeneutics is originally a theological Discipline concerned with interpreting and understanding a "Sacred Text" and making it speak with power and relevance in the contemporary world of real people. For psychotherapy the "Sacred Text" is the life of the person in therapy. The therapist seeks to understand and interpret the life in a way that allows the person to see the meaning of his or her life journey and find freedom from troubling patterns of living. Depending on what the client/patient brings to therapy this can also be a spiritual activity. Some people find life's meaning solely on the plane of daily existence finding an existential courage in not seeking a God they cannot verify. For others, meaning making and an understanding of life inevitably involves exploring and relating to the spiritual aspect of reality. For them, an essential part of the hermeneutical activity of psychotherapy is discovery and understanding the spiritual dimension of their life. In fact there are many studies which show that those persons who have a spiritual/religious life tend to be happier, healthier and more fulfilled. In psychotherapy a person's belief in God and the spiritual life can be a valuable resource in helping achieve a healthier deeper and better life.

The Discipline of Pastoral Psychotherapy was developed expressly to understand the role of spirituality/religion in mental health and the practice of psychotherapy. Through believing in the rule of therapy which is that the therapist never imposes his or her values on the client, the Pastoral Psychotherapist is trained not only in the methods and theories of dynamic psychotherapy but in the understanding and interpretation of the



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spiritual/religious dimensions of life. To the Pastoral Psychotherapist the therapeutic exploration of the faith or spiritual exploration of a client allows for the possibility of a deep understanding of the role of God in that person's life and how that relationship informs and empowers him or her toward wholeness. Since the religious/spiritual dimension of life is so powerful, the pastoral psychotherapist also assists the person to explore places where religion can serve a troubling role creating enslaving guilt and shame, a fear of imperfection or a defensive superiority.

The Center staff are trained and certified Pastoral Psychotherapists or other mental health professionals who work with the Pastoral Psychotherapist and have special training in understanding the spiritual dimensions of life. All are committed to the standards, goals and values of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.