



Faith, Loneliness, and Yearning

The recent economic downturn in the U.S. and increasingly throughout the world has thrust everyone on the globe into asking deeply spiritual questions, of what matters most in our lives and how are we responsible to one another.

The universal human experience of “loneliness” and “yearning” have led me to reflect on the dialogue that has taken place for several decades between psychology and religion. In particular, I am interested in understanding specific sources of creativity, vitalization, and transformation that can be available through individual and group experiences that are at the heart of spirituality and religion.

Community support, hospitality, and acts of kindness to people who are suffering and who are in need, are central to the theology and everyday activities of many religions and central to the life of most faith communities. Because my individual, marriage, and family therapy practice includes a referral base from pastors, priests, rabbis, and imams, I have been privy to stories that include both accounts of suffering that have been inflicted by religious leaders and religious communities, as well as accounts of alleviation of suffering and healing provided by religious leaders and faith communities.

Those of us who are therapists hear stories from our clients of suffering. These stories have a particularly tragic dimension when people who are seeking support regarding their most vulnerable needs tell of being met with ill treatment or condemnation and shame. Stories of hurt must be heard and must be told so that processes of truth-telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation may become possible.

For example, a newly separated mother of two young children, whose estranged husband had refused to pay adequate child support and was paying no spousal support, was devastated by the loss of her marriage and terrified about how to find a job that would adequately take care of herself and her children’s needs. In this vulnerable state, she and her children maintained their involvement in a local faith community. It was an inspiring and moving story to hear of this client’s report of attending a church gathering and having several elderly women in the community pull her aside during a community meal and whisper gentle encouragements. My client was the recipient of many acts of kindness from fellow church members, among them, offers of child-care support, shared meals, and numerous acts of hospitality by these friends and “extended family members” of her faith community.

I want to underscore the distinctive resources of music, poetry, and the use of stories in faith beliefs and practices. I think of the Negro spirituals, in the Christian tradition that I call home, as helping the singer of these spiritual songs (and the listeners) to find

mirroring of their pain, as well as hope for comfort in the midst of suffering. For instance, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole...” is a deeply moving spiritual, with its ancient language referring to healing of wounds, powerfully and poetically expressing a celebration of hope and comfort during times of alienation.

In contrast to the life-giving examples of faith and faith community life, we also hear of oppressive and/or irrelevant spirituality and religion.

Glaring examples have been revealed in both the distant and recent histories of destructive spiritual leaders, evident in religious terrorism or in priests who treat young children as sexual objects, and in world leaders who claim God’s blessings for their destructive policies.

If one is fortunate enough to have the opportunities to seek out and receive personal and relational sustenance through a healthy enough faith and faith community, then another crucial longing of the human heart is activated — the motivation for creative “work” in the world. This work includes, most essentially, expressing compassion toward others and taking action toward the righting of wrongs through justice work.

In 1967, Martin Luther King spoke of “[a] worldwide fellowship that lifts neighbourly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation [and] is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [human]kind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of [humanity]. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.” (1967)

Phil Classen, Ph.D., C.Psych., RMFT

For Further Reading:

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Jones, James. *Terror and Transformation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Psychoanalytic Perspective*. New York: Taylor Francis Inc., 2002.

Martin Luther King quote from Speech at Riverside Church in New York City in 1967.

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr.

Nouwen, Henri. *The Road to Peace: Writings on Peace and Justice*. New York: Orbis Books, 1998.

Nouwen, Henri. *The Dance of Life: Weaving Sorrows and Blessings into One Joyful Step*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2005.



3080 Yonge St. • Suite 5034 • Toronto • ON • M4N 3N1
Ph: 416•487•3613 Fax: 416•487•2096
E-mail: ifl@interlog.com Web Site: <http://www.ifl.on.ca>

