

## **Is there a place for spirituality and soul in contemporary therapy?**

**Christa Mackinnon**

MSc (Psych), DFC, PgDHyp, DStM

psychologist, family counsellor, clinical hypnotherapist, lecturer, author

Several studies have highlighted a concerning rise of mental/emotional health problems in contemporary highly developed societies, which seems to stand in stark contrast to our relative material wealth and security and also in contrast to the increase in access to therapeutic help. According to the statistics published by the Mental Health Foundation in 2011, one in four people is expected to experience some kind of mental health problem within the year, with mixed anxieties and depression being the most common disorders in Britain. In Europe and the Americas, the burden of mental illness is now over 40% of the total burden of disability.

Dr Lisa Rankin, a medical practitioner describes the rather vague symptomatology that medical professionals and therapists observe in patients: They '... feel fatigued, depressed, listless, unfulfilled...suffer from decreased libido, lack of spiritual connection, insomnia, anxiety, and other vague symptoms' (Rankin 2011, p.1). She concludes that there is a distinct lack of meaning, purpose and connection in peoples' lives. This is echoed by Andrew Powell, a psychiatrist of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, who poses the question: 'Where else should that fundamental loss of meaning and purpose in life go except to the psychiatrist's (and therapist's) consulting room ...' (Powell 2001, p.2).

When I began to research for my book, I was rather astonished by the amount of eminent and established professionals who seemed to ask themselves the same question I did, namely if it is a loss of 'the spiritual', a loss of meaning, purpose and connection to something wider and bigger than ourselves, which could explain our low and anxious states. Before we take the easy way out and argue that the increase in mental health issues, emotional problems and existential angst is partly due to an increase in diagnosis and a change in attitude towards seeking therapeutic help, or solely due to the stressors of our societies, we should begin to question the validity of the road we, as a society and as a profession, have taken.

We have reduced the human being more and more to a body/mind, in accordance with the bio-chemical evolutionary model and scientific requirements, whilst rejecting earlier concepts, which define the human consisting of mind/body/soul and spirit. Could it be that, in our efforts to be taken seriously and adhere to scientific requirements, we threw out the baby with the bathwater and neglected an innate, even vital part, of human existence, namely the soul and with it the idea, that human health is ultimately about 'wholeness'? Whilst pioneers in the field, such as James, Jung, Maslow and many others of humanistic and transpersonal inclinations attempted to understand the human psyche in the original meaning of the word 'soul' within the realm of the transpersonal, modern psychology concentrated increasingly on exploring conscious mind and behaviours within a limited framework of 'mind'. And if we examine the idea of 'health' and healing, we can see a movement away from the original word for healing, 'hal', which means 'whole' towards a reduced concept of diagnosing and alleviating symptoms.

Looking at the mental health statistics, Maslow's observation that 'without the transcendent and the transpersonal, we get sick, violent, and nihilistic, or else hopeless and apathetic' might hold some truth. But it is not only mental health statistics, which give us cause to question our current approaches. In the last 30 or so years, and increasingly in recent years, it seems that an ever growing number of people are consulting a wide range of spiritual practitioners, who are not necessarily therapeutically trained, in the hopes of accessing something that reaches beyond contemporary western mind/body approaches. Like many professionals, I have seen clients suffering from psychological conditions and disorders, who have been consulting spiritual healers and dubious complementary practitioners and have participated in all kind of spiritual workshops with facilitators who had little or no psychological knowledge.

There is an apparent need for the fields of psychology, therapy, and mental health in general, to rethink their clinical focus. Questions such as whether there is an innate part in human beings that is spiritual, whether there is a human need for meaning, connection, purpose and wholeness, whether there is a soul, which needs to be catered for if we want to be emotionally healthy, are questions too easily ignored when we are busy working within a clinical framework.

A growing body of research shows that spirituality contributes positively to mental/emotional and physical health, helps to develop aspects of our personality, is vital if we want to develop our consciousness and enhances our ability to cope in existential crisis, and yet the field of psychology and therapy remains divided in its response. On the one hand, there are increasingly schools and practitioners that try to develop theories and approaches that integrate the mind/body with the soul/spirit aspect (the Royal College of Psychiatrists for example has a very active Spiritual Interest Group). On the other hand, psychology, as a science, together with many accepted therapeutic schools and interventions, as well as NICE guidelines on accepted treatment approaches, still keep the client firmly on the level of mind and focus on symptom alleviation, adhering to the bio-evolutionary, medical model and to current scientific requirements of evidence based practice, defined rather narrowly.

## **Research into the correlation between spirituality/religion and mental health and emotional well-being**

### **Spirituality and Psychological Well-being:**

Research seems to confirm that spirituality influences positively our overall mental and emotional well-being. The Handbook of Religion and Health, the culmination of a decade's work by Koenig, McCullough and Larson, published in 2001, includes 1200 research studies and 400 reviews. Looking into the relationship between religion/spirituality and a wide range of physical and mental health conditions, this profound review found a sixty to eighty per cent correlation between religion or spirituality and better physical health. Being embedded into a religious or spiritual context also improves people's overall well-being, happiness and life satisfaction. It furthermore increases hope and optimism, gives more purpose and meaning in life, results in higher self-esteem, greater adaptation to bereavement, lower rates of depression and faster recovery from it. Spiritual/religious people showed less anxiety,

fewer psychotic tendencies, less delinquency and lower rates of alcohol and drug use and abuse. (Koenig et al 2001)

The success of the AA 12-step program is by no small means due to the focus on the spiritual component of a 'higher power'. John Swindon (2001) advocates the inclusion of spirituality in *Mental Health and Psychology* and so does Schermer in his book *Spirit and Psyche: a new Paradigm for Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (2003). Both base their insights partly on work with and research into addictions, realising that one of the key therapeutic healing factors is the development of a spiritual component within the addict's belief system and life. 'I witnessed significant healing of patients with substance misuse disorders and trauma occur through means, which could only be described as spiritual' (Schermer 2003, p.24/25).

The increasing need to care for elderly relatives seems to provide a fairly new source of emotional stressors. A recent study into family caregivers for the elderly addressed this issue and found that elders' and caregivers' spirituality significantly influenced their own psychological well-being, with a caregiver's spirituality significantly also influencing their elder's psychological well-being (Kim et.al 2011, p.103-115).

Neurological research has also begun to explore the correlations between brain changes and spiritual practice. For instance, Hoelzel et al. (2008), based on fMRI scans of 20 mindfulness meditation practitioners and 20 controls, found amongst other results that the increase in size of their medial frontal cortex correlated directly with the total hours of meditation training. As the orbital frontal cortex plays a crucial role in emotion regulation by down-regulating the activity of the amygdala and is directly involved with extinction retention after fear conditioning, the researchers suggested, plausibly, that this might explain the ability of meditators to modify their emotional responses. Or, in other words, if we meditate regularly and over a period of time we will be less at the mercy of our emotions, as we will be able to calm ourselves down more easily and increase our ability to extinguish our fear responses after the fear-provoking event (for overview: Fenwick 2011).

### **Spiritual Practices and Personal Development**

Not only will spirituality help us to feel better, but spiritual practices, not to be confused with a set of religious dogmas and rules, but consisting of practices that aim to foster development to higher, transpersonal states, contribute to the positive development of many facets of the personality. Various researches into Near Death Experiences, regular meditation practices or spiritually-infused nature experiences confirm desirable changes in human attitudes, capacities, behaviours and values. We become more connected, less fearful, more selfless, more caring towards others, more appreciative of all life and more inclined to treat all life as being sacred (e.g. Kuebler-Ross 1997; Moody 2001; Bartlett 2008; Van.Lommel 2010).

Roger Walsh (2010), an eminent professor of psychiatry, philosophy and anthropology at the University of California, after studying the field intensively over a period of time, lists seven positive outcomes of spiritual practices that aim at reaching the highest level of human consciousness: Living ethically; Transforming emotions; Redirecting motivation; Training attention; Refining awareness; Cultivating wisdom; Serving others.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2010) adds better judgement, honesty, enhanced ability to 'let go', feeling more peaceful and relaxed and being able to be with people's suffering, among other outcomes of spiritual practice. Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese opposition leader, who has spent many years under house arrest and in Burmese prisons and is a practicing Buddhist, mentioned 'freedom from fear' as the most important outcome of ongoing spiritual practices such as mindfulness meditation and practising loving kindness (Kyi 2011). Prof. Peggy Bartlett found in an extensive study that spending 'spiritual' time in nature strengthens our connection to the divine, enhances emphatic states as well as our overall well-being, produces a sense of enchantment and helps us to develop a deep understanding that we are part of this living, interconnecting system (Bartlett 2008).

### **Spirituality and Coping in Existential Crisis**

Whilst we may be able to ignore the positive influence of spiritual practises and spiritual beliefs when it comes to everyday living, we can certainly not ignore them when it comes to existential crisis and existential questions, especially when we encounter clients who have to cope with their own life-threatening illnesses, the life-threatening illness of a loved one, or with loss.

Studies find correlations between spiritual well-being and positive psychological responses when people are confronted with existential crisis situations. A recent study with 60 lung cancer patients in America, for instance, found that aspects of spirituality, namely meaning in life and prayer, have positive effects on psychological and physical responses and an in-depth study of 160 terminally-ill patients in palliative care comes to the conclusion that spiritual well-being provides a sense of peace and offers some protection against end-of-life despair in those for whom death is imminent (McClain et al 2003). Two longitudinal studies (study 1 included 418 breast cancer patients and study 2 included 165 cancer survivors) confirm that it is meaning and peace that help with existential crisis. Without going into details of all the findings, which are not straightforward, the authors stress that 'Results from both studies underscore the importance of achieving meaning and peace; although not consistent for all outcomes across the two studies, having a sense of meaning and peace....and gaining meaning/peace over time (in both studies), predicted enhanced adjustment. These findings add to emerging evidence that the ability to find meaning in life is a potent predictor of adjustment to cancer .....and well-being more general.' (Yanez, B. et al 2009, p.1).

It doesn't take much imagination to understand that we will reach our limitations as professionals if we cannot use a wider frame of reference, a frame that reaches beyond the physical life, when it comes to existential crisis and to facing death. I will therefore not cite more research at this point but share with you an unusual case that illustrates the advantages of having a wider frame of reference at our disposal.

(Case 1: Overcoming overwhelming fear: changing a belief)

## **Soul and Spirit: A different paradigm and a different definition of the human**

When we begin to attempt defining the human within a wider field, consisting of body, mind, soul and spirit, rather than seeing them within a bio-evolutionary model consisting of a body/mind, we move into the quantum realm, the underlying, energetic realm of the 'unseen'. We move in a direction that leads us to the edge of our current materialistic and scientific paradigm. There are many components that resist our current way of thinking and our current research designs, too many to address within this short period of time.

One of fundamental connections between all spiritual systems is the assumption that there is a kind of field that underlies manifested creation. This field is seen as a power, energy, essence or consciousness that initiates, energises and sustains all of creation, the universe in its many manifested forms and appearances. This basic energetic building block of existence is viewed as being shared by all of life, with the various manifested life forms emerging from it, vibrating on different levels. It is this innate energy life form of 'all there is' that is called Spirit or Good or Allah or Great Spirit or 'the Buddha nature'. In a classical spiritual sense, this force, I will call it spirit here, is neither good nor bad, neither holy nor evil. It just IS, manifesting itself in different forms within a universe that is harmonious, in the sense that it works in an inter-relational flow, that it creates and re-creates itself and manifests itself without limits in time and space, ever expanding. In that sense we are all 'spirit' as we possess this innate life force, manifesting/ expressing itself through everything, and thus also through us in a physical world.

This view therefore suggests that, like everything else, humans are essentially spirit in manifested form, with the manifested form being our body/mind. As, within this theory, humans are just one such form, albeit a complex one, our lives are expressions of a 'spiritual intent' that works towards 'becoming'. This intent is contained within our spirit essence, which is more than our DNA, it is a pattern of information and potential. It can be seen as a potential that seeks to manifest itself to the fullest, meaning that, as a species, collectively and individually, we have an innate drive that spurs us to develop to our highest level of possibilities and, ultimately, to our highest possible level of consciousness. This idea corresponds of course with Maslow's concept of the inherent need for self-actualisation. But not only are our lives expressions of a spiritual intent, we are, on that level, connected to all other 'spiritual intents', to everything else, and, via spiritual practice we will experience this, which changes our view of the world from a disconnected, material one, to a connected, energetical one.

### **Spirit**

If we are spirit in manifested form, it is vital to define 'spirit'. Quite simplified, spirit consists of frequency, of that which moves, vibrates. In indigenous terms, for instance, if one refers to the spirit of a particular plant, a specific star, a person, an animal or any object, one talks about its unique patterns of frequency, its unique vibrations and, most importantly, the information these unique patterns carry. Every living being vibrates at a certain frequency at a certain moment in time. Vibrations are not static: they can and will change and of course what we define as a 'living being' depends on our viewpoint. The answer to the question whether a stone is a living

being depends on whether you view it from a matter perspective of a ‘frequency and matter perspective’. If you do the latter, then the stone is alive, vibrating at a certain level. Whether you experience it in its solid form, made from particles, or in its ‘energetic form’ consisting of vibrations, depends on your intent and of course whether your state of consciousness is altered or not.

When we talk about ‘Spirit’ in the above sense, we could replace it with the word consciousness, which is a more contemporary term for, as far as I can see, the same field that underlies everything. If we use the word ‘consciousness’ the story unfolds roughly like this: In the beginning there was this consciousness. It is perceived in all spiritual systems as whole, undivided, as the source of all creation. This Wholeness, this state without division, this Oneness, this God-mind, this Great Spirit created all the aspects of creation. In scientific terms we might call the beginning of this act of creation the ‘big bang’. In spiritual terms we talk about creation from the Source. The source can only create if it divides, or, as Deepak Chopra says: ‘Out of itself, oneness creates the many’ (Chopra, Ford and Williamson 2010, p.88). If we look at nature we can see that out of a single cell-division all life evolved. All the different aspects of creation are already, in the form of possibilities, inherent in this Oneness. Deepak Chopra presents a map that might be useful. He says that this source is like a small dot, something that is smaller than the smallest particle we have ever discovered, but its manifestation, the source or God as the manifest universe, is larger than anything else and is ever expanding. If we see the human as also being created from that source, the basic energy is that source, and it is whole.

We never lose the connection to this source, to this consciousness, completely, but we get attached to and lost in our ‘created world’, the world of the physical body, of our emotions and thoughts, our beliefs and the world that we, as a species, create around us - our work, our families, our societies, our laws and rules and so on - because we only experience this manifested world with our senses. If we want to experience the energetic levels of creation, and ultimately the consciousness of Oneness, we need to alter our mental states and return to the source. As far as I can see, this is the aim of most spiritual practices.

## **Soul**

Closely connected to Spirit is the concept of Soul. Spirit and soul are at times used interchangeably because their subtle shades of meaning vary from culture to culture. Both terms reference an invisible force, but the term soul often refers to something immaterial and independent of the body, that is specifically within human beings, whilst spirit is, as explained above, a force more generalized, inhabiting all of nature. For example, Carl Jung defines the soul as ‘the living thing in Man, that which lives of itself and causes life’ (Jung 1959, p.26).

Soul, in many traditional spiritual and religious cultures, is an immortal/energetic life force within the human being with the function to guide the mind/body consciousness, that which we humans call ‘I’ towards - and on - the path which is most aligned with the desire and wish of ‘Spirit’ to express itself through us in its purest or highest form. Or, in other words, it is originally Spirit that seeks to manifest itself through us, and it is our specific human essence, our soul, which impels and drives us towards growth, towards change, towards becoming. For instance it is our soul that provides us with a

kind of inner voice, a moral compass and direction. It is our soul that we hear as this 'little voice inside' reminding us that there is more we can become and it is our soul that suffers when we don't nourish it by integrating a spiritual component into our lives and striving to give our lives meaning and purpose.

Consequently, we consist of a life force that we can call spirit and a soul, which consists of this life force field contained within the physical body, together with imprints we carry in form of individual and collective experiences or karma. Spirit, as an essence, contains all the life force possibilities, whilst it is our soul that is individually ours and drives us towards becoming all we can become, and can be altered by our individual and collective experiences during every lifetime.

## **Spirituality and Psychology**

On the whole, our assumptions about how the world works, based on our learnings, personal experiences, social norms and general beliefs of the society we live in will determine which view we subscribe to. We do know that spiritual practices lead us to experience the world more in energetic form, changes what we perceive to be real, expands our world and puts us into a wider context. It is only from within this world-view that we understand definitions of spirituality and how they differ from psychology.

According to the BPS, Psychology is generally defined as the scientific study of the human mind and behaviour, how we think, feel, act and interact individually and in groups. It addresses the mind within the social structure of this material world of duality, utilising 'science' as a means of exploration and description.

Spirituality is about the soul and spirit embedded within creation as a whole. It encompasses that which needs to be experienced, cannot be accessed within a normal state of consciousness and leads, for most people over time and with practice, to different, energy-based world views that push the edges of current scientific models and means and cannot easily be fitted into the requirements of evidence-based approaches within psychology

Fennwick (2011) gives us a psychiatrist's definition of spirituality: ' Spirituality addresses the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to Nature, and to the significant or sacred'. Whilst psychology and therapy in its many forms help us to unravel, heal, integrate understand and change the various strands of our personal psyche, spirituality helps us to directly experience and perceive something greater, some force or forces outside ourselves into which we are nevertheless embedded, of which we are a part, from which we arise, to which we return after the body dies, and by which we are influenced. Spirituality helps us to access that greater reality and the information held within this underlying field. With continuous spiritual practice we internalise and absorb, for want of a better word, those experiences and information within our being, a process that will alter us. The psychological and spiritual influence each other and, if we want to move forward as a species, as well as in the field of psychology, both need to be taken into account and, if possible, integrated. Or, as Larry Culliford,

another psychiatrist, remarks: “Spirituality links the deeply personal with the universal...the psychology of spirituality in its purest essence involves recapturing an appreciation of wholeness, of indivisibility, and concerns reconciling this with the apparent disjunctions of material reality, of time and space” (Culliford, 2011)

**Christa Mackinnon is the author of: Shamanism and Spirituality in Therapeutic Practice’ (2012) London, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Singing Dragon Imprint: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1848190816>**

**She offers training courses and CPD courses for therapists on the subject.  
Information: [www.christamackinnon.com](http://www.christamackinnon.com)**

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