

# Psychotherapy and Spirituality

## by Louis W. McLeod, Ph.D.

The roots of psychotherapy go back to the time of the shaman, medicine woman, medicine man and herbal healer. Their task was to challenge the people to stay in community with each other, to bring healing to the sick and to help the community prepare for the changing seasons of nature. They also helped the community make sense of the crises of natural disasters such as earthquakes and famine or man made crises like war. There was a time when the world was not divided into the spiritual and scientific, the sacred and secular or the non-rational and rational. Theologian Karen Armstrong, in The Battle for God, describes what scholars understand as the consciousness of the time as a unity of these elements. Premodern communities experienced life as a unity of the spiritual, sacred and non-rational with the scientific, secular and rational. This unity was made of two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge called *Mythos* and *Logos*. *Mythos* was the way the community looked back in time to their origins, from which the community understood the meaning of their life and history. *Mythos* was timeless. *Logos* was practical. Its focus was forward to the advancement from generation to generation using their brains and minds to advance the community in science and knowledge. *Mythos* spoke to the meaning of life, *Logos* to the advancement of the rational life. While both were ways of experiencing life in the community, *Mythos* seems to have been primary. Today we would say that *Mythos* was concerned with the unconscious and spiritual while *Logos* focused on the conscious and rational.

Beginning in the seventeenth century with the Age of Reason and certainly by the end of the eighteenth century, we came to believe that the world of *Logos*, science and technology, was the main way to truth. The intellectual way of knowing came to replace the intuitive. Indeed, our culture is the epitome of *Logos*, with scientific advancement in health, space, technology, neuroscience and almost any field that could be named progressing at a dizzying pace. *Mythos*, or the quest for meaning, purpose and connection with the transcendent, was relegated to religious institutions. Religious institutions, seduced by the power of *Logos*, applied reason and critical thinking to the *Mythos* of spiritual texts and practices; thereby draining from them much of their numinous power. Sacred texts and spiritual practices themselves became codified, rigid, and literal, robbing them of their ability to be the repository of *Mythos* for the culture. Armstrong documents the move to fundamentalism in Christianity, Judaism and Islam as an attempt to find meaning, purpose in a world that allowed for less and less *Mythos*.

Perhaps the search for meaning, purpose and spirituality in the midst of our culture of *Logos* is the reason a recent poll found that three times as many Americans are likely to believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus as in evolution. Even 47 per cent of non-Christian Americans believe that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. It seems to me that a psychological and possibly unconscious reason for these surprising figures is that we are reacting to the dearth of *Mythos* in our progressive, scientific culture. Books which have "spiritual" in the title are selling like hot cakes today.

Even ten years ago most of our psychology and psychotherapy communities would not have tolerated the focus on spirituality. Students in graduate school were directed toward the scientific and behavioral. Today some professionals believe that spirituality has no place for consideration in the behavioral sciences or in our consulting rooms. However, there is a growing interest in the culture in spirituality and I suspect our field is following that momentum. A recent issue of *Family Therapy Magazine*, a publication for professionals by The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, was dedicated to spirituality and is only one among a number of professional publications considering spirituality. We puzzle over why so many people in the American culture are unhappy and depressed despite the affluence and abundance. We see many of these in our therapy offices. It may be that these clients are searching for meaning or *Mythos* in their lives. Perhaps we are not so far removed, after all, from the wisdom of Victor Frankel who wrote of our search for meaning. The questions around 9/11 were those of meaning, purpose and how to be more in contact with those we love. The challenge in the aftermath of 9/11 is to continue to focus on community, loved ones and the purpose and meaning of our lives. Spirituality is a crucial aspect of this challenge which deserves our focus. It is inherent in the healing process of psychotherapy and we cannot **not** deal with it. Psychotherapy is a journey with clients to the heart of meaning and purpose of their lives, issues of life and death, both literal and symbolic.

## SPIRITUALITY AND GOD

Walter has been an altar boy and in the parish choir as a youth. His Roman Catholic spirituality and understanding of God and his place in the universe was supported by his religious experience. However, as a boy he was abused by the very priest who led his spiritual life; so he lost his connection to his early faith and experience of God. As an adult when he first came to see me for therapy he was dissociative and depressed. Supporting his recovery was his learning a meditative practice of sitting patiently and allowing himself to be calm and present. He would ask "The Source Within" to be with him and support him as he lived the day. While I had suggested the meditative practice, Walter designed his focus on "The Source" and it was a significant part of his healing. While "God" was not meaningful to Walter, "The Source" connected him to an experience beyond himself which gave his life meaning.

Many of us are like Walter in that we do not have a meaningful experience of God but do touch our spirituality in our connections with nature, beauty and our love of other people. In the last few years I have presented workshops on spirituality and psychotherapy at a number of national and state conferences and have had a great deal of positive response as long as we focus on spirituality. However, when we begin to consider our understandings of God the tension and anxiety in the room increases noticeably. And when I begin to talk about the Christian religion the discomfort is usually voiced. Although my own Christian spirituality is not fundamental or literal and is quite liberal and inclusive, the discomfort seems to come from the tremendous amount of spiritual wounding we therapists and our clients have experienced at the hands of Christian rigidity and exclusiveness, especially in areas of sexuality, sexual orientation and self esteem.

Walter found a name for the Source of his spirituality and recovery. Of course, any time we attempt to describe this source as God, Buddha, Yahweh, Source, or Goddess we diminish some of our experience of connection with the transcendent. When I began to perceive God as feminine as well as masculine, a new way of experiencing God was open to me. The theologian Paul Tillich called God the Ground of Being. In a famous video interview of Carl Jung by Lauren Van der Post, Jung is asked, "Dr. Jung, do you believe in God?" "I do not believe," responds Jung, "I know." Jung, as troubled as he was by religious institutions, had found an experience of God in his own way and in his journey into the unconscious. In my own brief theological training (I dropped out of theology school after six weeks), I studied with Dr. Herbert Braun whose term in German was: "Gott ist das woher mines ungetriebenseins" or "God is the whence of my being agitated." In my own life this agitation has come at times of deep reflection but more recently has come in the agitation from close friends and professional partners for growth to become all that I am capable of being. I have found that partners in committed love relationships or marriages can become the agitation for growth and wholeness.

[Return to Articles Index](#)