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SPIRITUAL JOURNALING

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Journal writing is a voyage to the interior.

—C. Baldwin (1977)

Spiritual journaling is a therapeutic practice that involves clients keeping a written diary of their thoughts, feelings, struggles, questions, and transcendent experiences, as well as their reflections about meaning, purpose, and the sacred in their lives. Journaling can be used to aid clients in (a) exploring their belief systems, (b) deepening their sense of connection to the holy, (c) struggling with unanswered questions, (d) processing loss and grief, (e) examining vocational directions, and (f) coming to terms with mortality. Spiritual journaling can be a vehicle by which clients gain insight into their inner world and connect the spiritual to other aspects of human experience. In this chapter, I review the literature on the relationship between writing and therapy, describe a semistructured approach to spiritual journaling, and illustrate the potential impact of this practice by way of clinical case examples.

VARIETIES OF THERAPEUTIC WRITING

For centuries, people have been writing down their thoughts and emotions as a means of gaining self-understanding, processing trauma, and reflecting on the meaning of life. To set a context for understanding spiritual

journaling, I begin by addressing journaling in its broadest, secular sense. As early as the late 16th and early 17th centuries, diaries of religiosity often were kept as part of a personal devotional practice (Webster, 1996). McKinney (1976), summarizing the practice of therapeutic writing, referred to a physician, Benjamin Rush, who, in the 18th century, prescribed symptom-writing for his medical patients. Allport (1942) was one of the first psychologists to use journal-keeping in the context of therapy.

Ira Progoff's (1975) *At a Journal Workshop* is one of the most influential books on the subject of intensive journal-keeping. Although it was not focused specifically on spiritual journaling, the book and its countless workshops offered throughout the United States popularized the practice of journal-keeping. Progoff emphasized journaling as a creative reflection of life process, rather than as a means to an end. One of the purposes of such an approach was to attempt to integrate the self's conscious and unconscious aspects (Progoff, 1975). Progoff's approach includes feedback, either through a consultant or by the writer reading the journal into a tape recording and playing it back (Riordan, 1996).

Another contributor to the journaling literature is Julia Cameron. In her book, *The Artist's Way* (2002), Cameron suggests readers complete "morning pages" as the first activity of the day. This form of journal-keeping is for the purpose of priming the pump of creativity and awakening the artist within. Although Cameron's intent is not therapeutic per se, she would argue that the process frees the writer from whatever may block creativity.

The narrative approach within couple and family therapy, pioneered by Michael White and David Epston (1990), presumes language and communication are the basis for change. Clients are encouraged to "re-author" their personal stories and construct future chapters of their lives. Essentially, this approach involves clients reframing their perspectives on their existing circumstances (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). One therapeutic writing intervention characteristic of the narrative modality is client-therapist letter writing. Essentially, clients and therapists exchange letters between sessions. Clients' letters offer them an opportunity to incorporate new perceptions and insights from the previous session and the put a new spin on their personal stories (Combs & Freedman, 2004). Therapists' letters grow out of their session notes and their hunches. In these letters, therapists may ask clients new questions that occurred to them after reviewing the session, and they may invite clients to reflect on their stories in new ways (Rombach, 2003). Narrative therapists claim that letter writing cements the client-therapist relationship and ensures that the therapist heard the client accurately (Parry & Doan, 1994).

Autobiography is another dimension of the narrative approach to therapeutic writing. An autobiography is a factual account of one's life events and is usually written in first person (Baker & Mazza, 2004). Many practitioners

have reported positive client feedback to the process of writing a life review (Riordan, 1996). Malde (1988) used such a life review with older adults and indicated that these clients came to appreciate their life's worth as a result of participating in the task. Myers (2003) recommended the use of the autobiography in therapy as a means for clients to integrate events, memories, and scenes from their lives; to come to a deeper understanding of their life experiences; and at times, to make peace with previously unresolved issues.

Structured writing has also been used for therapeutic purposes. In this strategy, clients engage in a detailed process of writing about specific topics relevant to their problem situations. This activity occurs outside of the therapy room and is usually given as a homework assignment. Structured writing for individuals has its roots in the work of Ellis (1965), and writing by couples and families was launched by therapists such as Shelton and Ackerman (1974) and Selvini-Palazoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata (1978). L'Abate (1992) pioneered programmed writing, a form of structured writing that involves clients writing in workbooks about specific topics such as shyness, stealing, couple conflict, or sexuality. The therapist is responsible for giving corrective feedback face to face in the subsequent session addressing cognitive distortions or contradictions in a nonjudgmental way (Jordan, 1998).

Poetry writing also has a therapeutic application. Several researchers (Brand, 1987; Fuchel, 1985; Sharlin & Shenhar, 1986; Silverman, 1986) have reported using poetry diagnostically, and others (Golden, 1994; Mazza, 2001, 2003) have indicated positive outcomes using it therapeutically. Mazza (2003) defined *poetry therapy* as "the use of the language arts in therapeutic capacities" (p. 14). He identified three aspects of poetry therapy: (a) the receptive or prescriptive component involving the introduction of literature into a clinical or community activity; (b) the expressive or creative component using client writing in a clinical or community activity; and (c) the ceremonial or symbolic component that involves focusing on ritual, metaphor, and storytelling in clinical or community activities (Baker & Mazza, 2004). Having clients write poems that express their feelings and reflections on life events makes use of the power of symbolism and metaphor for expressing complex and sometimes contradictory emotions. Such poems form a unique dimension of journal entries.

Couples and families have benefitted from poetry therapy as well (Mazza & Prescott, 1981). In this activity, each partner writes a line of a two-line poem addressing the essence of one of their relationship issues. For example, Baker and Mazza (2004) reported inviting a couple to write a dyadic poem about time, careers, and freedom and pertinent issues in their relationship. They wrote: "Free, free, free, / never there / Was it all worthwhile?" (p. 150). This poem formed the springboard for the couple to discuss their relationship in light of their career demands and their communication patterns.

When clients keep spiritual journals, they participate in a process that makes the unconscious conscious. Imagery in stories, poems, and dreams aids clients in creating a mental picture of what is occurring in their lives and making it concrete through writing (Gladding, 1992). Writing down raw emotions and reflecting on them enables clients to confront their feelings, integrate them into their lives, and gain greater self-understanding (Fuchel, 1985).

Since the beginning of psychotherapy, therapists have used client writing for therapeutic purposes. The approaches have fallen on a continuum from open-ended to structured. The continuum moves from open diaries, journals, and poetry (open) to autobiographies (focused) to responding to prompts (guided) to programmed writing (structured; L'Abate, 1992). Each of these interventions has, according to its proponents, been an effective ancillary activity to traditional talk therapy.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS OF THERAPEUTIC WRITING

Most of the research studies regarding journaling effectiveness have focused on the efficacy of writing in a secular context. I review some of those studies here before moving specifically to the topic of spiritual journaling.

Although a significant amount of evidence regarding the effectiveness of therapeutic writing is anecdotal, there is a small body of empirical studies that supports positive outcomes for this enterprise. Some of the strongest results were found for programmed writing interventions. As early as 1971, Maultsby studied writing interventions among psychiatric patients involved in a rational emotive treatment approach. Those who wrote most diligently about their clinical experiences showed the greatest improvement. More recently, L'Abate (1992) investigated programmed writing on a variety of clinical issues and reported significant success toward resolving the problems.

Some of the most comprehensive research regarding therapeutic writing has been conducted by Pennebaker (1990). His work focused on the physiological and psychological benefits of writing as measured by brain wave activity, blood tests, health care visits, and patient self-report (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). In all of the studies, those who wrote about their emotional states demonstrated better physical and mental health than those who wrote about mundane topics. More recently, Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, and Kaell (1999) found similar benefits of journal-keeping among arthritis and asthma sufferers, and Lepore and Smyth (2002) uncovered more positive associations between writing and physical and mental health.

Some researchers found negative outcomes for therapeutic writing. In particular, Spera et al. (1994) found that some participants who wrote about traumatic events remained depressed for hours or days. This finding was echoed by DeSalvo (2001), who reported that her personal experience with unfocused, random writing about feelings may have made her feel worse rather than better. Other researchers (Murray, Lamnin, & Carver, 1989) found that therapist-assisted journaling resulted in greater problem resolution than writing alone. Perhaps the presence of a therapist makes a difference in whether writers have positive rather than negative outcomes. It is also possible that those journal keepers who felt depressed after journal writing had preexisting mental health problems that were exacerbated by the writing.

GUIDELINES FOR THERAPISTS REGARDING SPIRITUAL JOURNALING

Therapists may ask their clients to consider keeping a spiritual journal to integrate the psychological and spiritual aspects of themselves. It is critical, however, that therapists are thoughtful about assigning this activity. First, they will want to be sure clients give informed consent to participate in journal writing as a process complementary to psychotherapy. If all or parts of the journal are to be shared with the therapist, confidentiality (within legal and ethical limits) must be kept. Second, therapists will assess clients' emotional stability such that they are fairly certain the journal writing will not evoke issues or emotions clients are unprepared to handle (Riordan, 1996). Third, therapists will want to make sure journal writing will not harm clients. Riordan (1996) suggested therapists may want to consider whether the writing is a substitute for either client or therapist action if the writing is "more intellectual self-absorption rather than a self-reflective exercise" (p. 268) and if the writing "contributes to new perspectives and solutions, not to increasing obsessive thinking" (p. 268) in ways that are not helpful. Fourth, therapists will want to be sensitive to disabilities, educational level, or other factors that may make writing difficult or impossible. In this case, tape recording could be a worthy substitute (Riordan, 1996). Fifth, therapists will want to determine what kind of feedback they will give clients regarding their journal entries. Some experts (Blanton, 2006; Riordan, 1996) have suggested giving written feedback in the form of comments between sessions or letters exchanged over the course of therapy. Finally, therapists who want to "walk the talk" may wish to keep their own spiritual journals to become familiar with the practice, to gain empathy for client resistance, and to address self-of-the-therapist issues that may interfere with their therapeutic effectiveness. By keeping their

own spiritual journals, therapists will be willing to risk doing what they ask their clients to do.

KEEPING A SPIRITUAL JOURNAL

Having clients keep a diary of their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to what happens to them has long been a popular and efficacious therapeutic technique. Therapists may explain to clients that a **journal is**

a book in which you keep a personal record of events in your life, of your different relationships, of your response to things, of your feelings about things—of your search to find out who you are what the meaning of your life might be. It is a book in which you carry out the greatest of life’s adventures—the discovery of yourself. (Cargas & Radley, 1981, p. 8)

Keeping a spiritual journal is the same process; however, its focus is on **spiritual issues that surface for clients. By encouraging clients who are wrestling with spiritual or religious concerns to keep a journal, we are providing them with a tool for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a safety valve for their emotions, and a mirror for the spirit** (Klug, 1982). **Journaling can be a means through which clients respond to the therapeutic endeavor and integrate their psychological and spiritual growth. After experiencing significant breakthroughs or simple “ahas,” clients may wish to write about how their shift in understanding is connected to their religious or spiritual beliefs or their faith.** For example, Rhonda, a 34-year-old Caucasian woman, struggled for years with an eating disorder. As she began to accept herself and to improve her body image, her therapist suggested she write about what her new awareness meant for her spiritual life. Rhonda wrote the following:

I had always known about the concept of “grace,” but I had never experienced it in my personal life. Beginning to accept myself, including my imperfect body, I think I am starting to get what it means to believe God loves and accepts me the way I am. I don’t think I really ever took that in.

In addition, journaling may be complementary to meditation (Frame, 2003). In fact, some clients may find it helpful to keep responses to prayer or meditation in their spiritual journals. Therapists may encourage clients to share relevant journal excerpts during therapy sessions, always taking care to safeguard clients’ confidentiality and their right not to disclose their journal’s content (Frame, 2003).

When using therapeutic spiritual journaling, the client’s spiritual orientation should be considered. Clients whose spirituality grows out of Eastern worldviews or religions may wish to write about the tenets of their beliefs and how they integrate them into their particular life context. They may reflect

on the writings of spiritual leaders in their various traditions or explore the meaning they derive from reading sacred texts. If these clients use meditation in a spiritual practice, they may write about insights gained and other aspects of the meditative experience. **Bringing together spirituality, culture, and psychotherapy in a spiritual journal can help clients address the incongruent aspects of the self and work toward self-transcendence.**

Clients whose background is centered in Western religions or traditions may choose to examine how the beliefs and practices with which they were raised are assets or liabilities for their mental health. Such clients may consider using the journal as a means of making a deeper connection to God or their higher power through writing prayers, reflecting on sacred writings, or engaging in stream-of-consciousness writing that causes them to be more introspective. In addition, clients may use their journal as an aid to their devotional life (e.g. reading sacred texts and inspirational materials, engaging in prayer and meditation). They can also explore how their current spiritual perspective is related to their psychotherapeutic issues.

Clients who claim no spiritual affiliations nevertheless may benefit from keeping a spiritual journal. Although their belief system may not include a deity, a broad understanding of spirituality allows room for such clients to explore the existential questions of life such as, “What is the meaning of life?” “What is my purpose?” “How will I contribute to the world?” “What is the meaning of death?” For clients who claim to be nonspiritual, a humanistic perspective may form the framework for the journal. These clients may use the journal to write about their life goals, to record significant conversations, to reflect on quotations, to review their accomplishments, or to discern how therapy is contributing to their growth and well-being.

Addressing Resistance

Some clients are reluctant to keep journals of any kind for several reasons. A major reason is their fear of having their private writings discovered by others. This same fear may extend to the keeping of spiritual journals. It is important for therapists to confront this anxiety in clients and explore it with them. Therapists might ask clients, “What worries you about the potential of having your journal discovered?” “Who specifically is a threat to the privacy of your journal?” “What do you think would be the outcome if someone read your journal?” “How would you respond if someone read your journal?” Having clients discuss their worries about journal discovery helps clarify their anxieties, improves the likelihood they will engage in the activity, and aids them in making a plan to safeguard their privacy. Similarly, it may be useful for therapists to help clients decide how to increase the security of their journals. First, therapists may ask clients what they can do to protect the privacy

of their journals. Second, therapists may suggest clients have a conversation with family members or others with whom they share living space and inform them about the decision to keep a spiritual journal. Clients may then ask family members or roommates to commit to respecting the journal writer's privacy by not reading the journal. Third, therapists may suggest clients attach a message to the front of the journal indicating the contents are personal and confidential and requesting that anyone who may discover the journal return it to its owner without reading it. Fourth, if clients continue to worry about their journals' safety, therapists may suggest clients obtain a lockable box or cabinet in which to store the journal. Fifth, clients may select a trustworthy person to be the guardian of their journal. This person would have access to the journal, make a commitment not to read the journal, and be given the authority to destroy it on the death of its owner. Given technology's omnipresence, some clients may wish to keep their journals electronically, protecting access to them via passwords. But despite putting safeguards in place, no one can guarantee complete privacy for a journal, and clients must come to terms with this reality before they can relax into the process and reap the benefits of this powerful spiritual tool.

Another resistance to journal-keeping often encountered by clients is the fear of not knowing what to write and experiencing "writer's block." Therapists may assist clients with this issue by suggesting they write in a stream of consciousness style if they feel blocked or at a loss as to what to write. Another strategy to getting started is for clients to write prayers or petitions or hopes. Acknowledging that not all clients subscribe to spiritual systems that include deities, these clients could write about how they understand spirituality, what their vision is for their spiritual life, and what their hopes are for their lives.

Some clients are self-conscious about their ability to write and resist keeping a journal because they have experienced some form of shame about their writing. They may be anxious about their ability to spell or to use correct grammar. Therapists may remind clients that the journal is for their personal growth and will not be evaluated. Giving clients permission to write any way they want can be a means of liberating them from concerns about writing mechanics and opening them up to a spiritual discipline that can deliver insight and support them in their journey toward wholeness.

Getting Started

Some of the first questions clients will ask when they are considering keeping a spiritual journal are, "When and where should I write?" "Should I write in long-hand or use the computer?" "Do I have to write every day?" "How long and how much should I write?" "What should I write?" Because a

spiritual journal is a tool for individual personal and spiritual growth, there are no hard and fast rules about how the journal is to be kept. If the writer is too focused on “doing it right,” then journal-keeping may not be as beneficial as it could be. Instead, each person must determine the time and place and approach for him or herself. However, some general guidelines may improve the journal-keeping experience.

First, clients will want to select a time when they feel alert, can avoid most interruptions, and are able to be in touch with their deepest selves. For some, this time is in the morning right after awakening. In fact, Cameron (1992) recommended writers set their clocks half an hour earlier so they can begin the day with morning pages. Writing at this time of day enables journal keepers to address anxieties and concerns that may linger from the previous day and prepare themselves for the day ahead. For others, late in the evening is the best time to be quiet, to avoid distractions, and to put to rest any thoughts or feelings that may interfere with sleep. Evening writers are able to review their day and write about their spiritual journeys. In the Jesuit tradition, there is a discipline known as the *daily examen*. The spiritual journal is especially appropriate for those who engage in this spiritual practice.

Second, having a place dedicated to journal writing is also important. The place needs to be private, free from interruptions, and conducive to self-reflection. Some journal writers have a favorite chair, desk, or table. Some like to play music or light a candle. Others prefer silence. Regardless of time and place chosen, the regularity of these aspects of journal-keeping allows clients to associate them with the spiritual discipline in which they are engaged.

Third, some clients will prefer to write in commercially produced blank-paged journals. Some will use spiral-bound notebooks. Still others will use loose-leaf paper, and others will type their spiritual reflections on the computer. Although some journal enthusiasts recommend writing in long hand (Cameron, 1992), the important thing is the writing, not the medium by which it is done.

Fourth, clients can be encouraged to write for the amount of time that seems necessary and feasible on as many days as possible. Any amount of time between 15 and 30 min can be helpful (Riordan, 1996). Typically, the amount of time will vary depending on the salience of issues at hand, time available for writing, client mood, and a host of other factors (e.g., access to privacy, work and family demands, illness). That clients are writing is the important thing. Worrying too much about how often one writes and how long can turn the journal writing process into drudgery and an obligation rather than a gift to the self.

Fifth, clients will want to date their journal entries so they can ground them in time and then see their progress when they reread them in the future. Some choose to reread old journals at particular times of the year—on New Year’s Day, for example. Conversations about journal reviews can be had with

therapists who may share their recollections as well as themes from their progress notes to enable clients to recognize their growth and to “see” the changes that have occurred in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Contents of the Spiritual Journal

Many clients wonder what they should write in a spiritual journal. Unlike a diary that typically provides a chronicle of events and activities, a spiritual journal has a reflective and introspective purpose. When clients use a spiritual journal as an ancillary tool to psychotherapy, they are doing so to gain insight into the ways their psychological and emotional issues connect to their spiritual understandings and experiences. Therefore, a therapeutic spiritual journal will include a variety of writing with the goal to assist clients in integrating the spiritual into their lives. In the following sections, I describe some possible topics and approaches to use in writing a spiritual journal. I also showcase each type of writing with a clinical case example. (In these cases all identifying information has been changed to protect the identity of the clients.)

Struggle With Beliefs

Clients wrestling with their religious or spiritual beliefs may find the spiritual journal a useful means of sorting out what affirmations truly make sense to them and those to which they can no longer ascribe. Assessing one’s theological perspective is an important way to be sure that ideas and beliefs introjected during childhood have been examined and claimed anew in adulthood. Frame (2003) suggested the following questions as guides for spiritual reflection:

- How do you view human nature? Are people good, evil, neutral?
- What about free will? Do people have the human agency to make their own choices or are their thoughts, feelings, actions determined by some other force such as instincts, reinforcements, God?
- How would you respond to the question, Why do bad things happen to good people? Is [a] god responsible for evil? Is there an evil spirit that struggles against a good spirit? Is God powerless to contain evil? Do bad things happen because people make poor choices? Do bad things happen to good people because the “good people” aren’t really as good as they think they are? Do bad things happen randomly?
- What happens to people after they die? Is there some form of afterlife? If so, what does it look like? Who decides what happens to whom?
- Do you believe in a higher power? What are the qualities of the supreme being, if you believe in one? Why do you believe in a

higher power or God? If you do not believe in a higher power or God, what are the reasons for your disbelief?

- What is your understanding of spirituality? How have you experienced it in your life? (p. 32)

Case Example



Yolanda, a 27-year-old African American woman, came to therapy because she was attracted to women and was afraid she was a lesbian. Yolanda worked with her therapist, Grace, to try to reconcile her sexual identity and her spiritual identity. Raised in a Southern Baptist church, Yolanda had been taught that homosexuality was a sin and an “abomination” in the sight of God. Grace suggested Yolanda explore her spiritual beliefs through journal-keeping. In one of her journal entries Yolanda wrote, “I can’t believe a loving God would condemn someone to hell because of who they love.” In another entry, she wrote:

I’ve searched the scriptures [Bible] and I can find only a few passages that even mention homosexuality and one of them is in the book of Hebrew laws. I even read all the red-letter words of Jesus in the gospels and Jesus is silent on the matter. Why would preachers make such a big deal about this issue?

In subsequent entries, Yolanda was able to come to terms with her sexual orientation, struggle with her religious upbringing, and eventually integrate both.

Reflection on Meditation

For clients who use meditation in their spiritual practice, writing about the meditative experience can be an appropriate use of the journal. Clients can record insights that came to them during or after the meditation, their challenges with maintaining focus or openness in meditation, how they perceive meditation is affecting their health and well-being, or how they make contact with the “holy” or “other” during meditation.

Case Example



Liam, a first-generation Chinese American, was struggling with bouts of anxiety regarding his academic performance at a prestigious university. His parents had pushed him to excel and to become a physician. Liam had complied with his parents’ expectations during his childhood and adolescence, but once admitted to the university he became so anxious during exams he could not remember the material he had studied. Liam’s therapist, Greg, discovered Liam had a meditation practice that had fallen by the wayside in the wake of his anxiety attacks. Greg recommended Liam resume his meditation

and keep a journal about his experience with meditation related to his anxiety. Liam began meditating again and started writing almost daily in his spiritual journal. In one entry he wrote, "During the meditation I am peaceful inside . . . the noise in my mind becomes quiet . . . I am no longer terrified by my fear of bringing shame on my family." After a particularly difficult morning before an exam, Liam practiced meditation and later wrote the following:

I can calm myself with my breathing . . . I can remember the peacefulness when I feel the threat . . . I centered myself before the exam . . . I started to get anxious, but I closed my eyes for a second and took some breaths. . . . I am more focused today.

After Liam shared these journal entries in the therapy session, Greg was able to work with him on his fear of bringing shame to his family through academic failure. Liam was able to use his meditation practice and journaling to better manage his anxiety.

Capturing the Numinous or Transcendent

Some clients would not claim to be "spiritual" per se; however, they are deeply attuned to the numinous and transcendent in their lives. These clients may record moments when they experienced expanded consciousness or the collapse of time and space.

Case Example

Gretchen, a 52-year-old Caucasian woman, was the victim of a hit-and-run automobile accident in which she sustained serious internal injuries and some broken bones. The door of her car had to be pried open and she was flown by helicopter to a trauma center in a nearby city. Gretchen reported to her therapist, Margaret, "They almost lost me during the flight. I think I flatlined on them in the helicopter." Gretchen began working with Margaret to address the nightmares and flashbacks she continued to have almost 2 years after the accident. She indicated she was "not a religious or spiritual person" but that "some pretty weird things happened right after the crash." Over time, Gretchen felt safe enough to confide in Margaret that she had undergone a near-death experience in the helicopter. Margaret suggested Gretchen write about this experience and explore what meaning it had for her. In one of Gretchen's journal entries she wrote,

I think I was dead . . . it was like everyone says . . . I saw the bright light . . . I felt compelled to follow it . . . and I was resisting with all my might. It wasn't scary at all . . . it was welcoming and full of love.

Later, Margaret invited Gretchen to write more about what the near death experience meant to her. Gretchen wrote the following:

I now know there is more to this life than the physical dimension . . . I'm not sure I believe in a god, but I can still remember a benevolent presence . . . I want to know more and not be afraid of my inner world or what may be beyond.

Gretchen reported to Margaret that she felt more at peace since she had begun writing in her journal. She also indicated she was opening herself up to “whatever the universe wants me to learn from this.”

Communication With a Higher Power

The journal may be used as a means of being in touch with God or one's higher power. Some clients will write prayers or poems of devotion, intercession, confession, praise, or rage depending on what is transpiring spiritually and their relationship with God or their higher power. Such writing draws on the self's emotive side and enables clients to learn more about their beliefs about divine nature. Blanton (2006) suggested one might respond to the question, “What is God [higher power] saying to you in the events of your everyday life about the kind of self God intends for you?” (p. 81).

Case Example



Julio, a 43-year-old Mexican American man, was referred to therapy by his supervisor because of concerns regarding substance use that was interfering with his functioning on the job. His therapist, John-Paul, worked with Julio to address his use of alcohol and marijuana. Julio also joined an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group and, in the course of his involvement in AA, was asked to surrender to a higher power. Julio was raised a Roman Catholic but stopped attending church in his teen years when he got involved in a street gang. He later left the gang, went to trade school, and started to work as an electrician but continued to use alcohol and some drugs. John-Paul suggested Julio might get back in touch with his childhood God by writing thoughts and prayers in a journal. Although Julio resisted writing at first, John-Paul invited him to write in Spanish, an invitation Julio accepted. In one journal entry Julio wrote this prayer: “God, are you there? Do I matter to you? Can you help me overcome my problems? Are you more powerful than the drink or the weed? Show yourself to me. I am waiting.” Julio wrote in the journal after almost every AA meeting and began sharing some of his entries with John-Paul. The journal became a friend to whom Julio turned when he started to crave a drink or a smoke. Although he had relapses, Julio reported his work with John-Paul helped him understand some of the sources

of his addiction, and his involvement in AA put him back in touch with his higher power.

Reflections on Sacred Writings

The spiritual journal may be the vehicle for clients to write about their reactions to reading the Bible, Qur'an, Abhidharma, or other sacred text. Clients who claim no religious or spiritual traditions may reflect on historical and contemporary writings that they find meaningful or inspirational.

Case Example

Lily, a 36-year-old biracial (Caucasian and Korean) woman, sought therapy because of her self-loathing that had led to isolation and depression. Lily had been raised in a conservative Christian church and reported to her therapist, Carol, she had felt “unworthy” of her blessings and “guilty” for falling short of God’s expectations of her. Although she had graduated from college and secured a good job in a publishing company, Lily always felt inadequate. Carol used a cognitive-behavioral approach with Lily in therapy, confronting her cognitive distortions and supporting her efforts to change her negative self-talk. Yet Carol believed she must also work with Lily regarding her spiritual beliefs because it appeared some of Lily’s low self-esteem was rooted in them. Carol, also a Christian, suggested Lily keep a spiritual journal. On one occasion, Carol asked Lily to write a reflection on Psalm 8, personalizing the passage by substituting her own name in the text. Thus, starting with verse four, Lily wrote the following:

What am I that you are mindful of me, that you care for me? Yet you have made Lily a little lower than God and crowned her with glory and honor; you have given her dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under her feet.

Carol asked Lily to write about her reaction to reading this text as if it were spoken directly to her. By reading, reflecting, and writing on specific scripture texts and sharing the entries with Carol, Lily began working on her ability to accept God’s love and care for her, thus freeing her from imprisonment by low self-esteem.

Dealing With Emotional Reactions to Life Experiences

The spiritual journal may also function as a tool for processing challenging emotions that arise in the context of daily living. Clients may write about their worries and anxiety, their sadness and depression, their anger, guilt, or shame. They may use their spiritual traditions to make sense of these emotions and may also connect their feelings to the work they are doing in psychotherapy. Thus, the journal can serve as a means of bridging the client’s spiritual and psychological worlds.

Case Example



Jim, a 62-year-old Caucasian man, was recently divorced after discovering his wife of 30 years, Barbara, had been having an affair with his brother, Raymond. Jim sought therapy with Robert to address his deep and unrelenting feelings of anger and betrayal toward both his former wife and his brother. Jim reported he was not particularly a spiritual person, but he believed he should forgive Barbara and Ray. As hard as he tried, he was unable to forgive them. Instead, he felt both enraged and devastated by these painful events in his life. Robert suggested Jim start to keep a journal of his thoughts and feelings and to explore what meaning they had for him and his current circumstances. Jim wrote the following:

I am furious with Barbara! She and Ray have destroyed my life and wrecked our family. I am all alone and nearly broke. This isn't how it is supposed to be at 62 . . . we should be planning for retirement. Instead, I am hoodwinked by my own wife and brother!

Robert supported Jim as he wrote and wrote. After a few months, Jim's journal entries focused less on his rage and more on his quest for meaning. In one entry he wrote the following:

What does this mean for me? If there is a God out there, what is he [sic] trying to tell me? Is this horrible thing that happened about a door closing and a window opening? Is there any hope that I can be a phoenix rising from the ashes of my life?

Creating a Paper Trail of Personal Growth

The spiritual journal enables clients to develop a concrete record of personal and spiritual growth. By reviewing the journal at regular intervals (weekly, monthly, yearly), clients have the opportunity to witness how much progress they have made toward emotional and spiritual wholeness. They can track their thoughts, feelings, and activities across time and document ways they have grown, struggles they have overcome, conflicts they have resolved, or relationships they have improved, reevaluated or ended. By rereading their journals, clients can document their spiritual development and their psychotherapeutic progress.

Case Example



Gabriela, a 33-year-old Caucasian, was a survivor of severe domestic violence at the hands of her husband, Tony. She presented at a women's shelter and entered therapy with Linda for the purpose of "learning how I can improve myself so Tony will stop acting so mean to me." In the course of therapy, Linda discovered Gabriela had the spiritually buttressed belief that God

expected her to submit to her husband. Although Gabriela spoke occasionally about leaving Tony, she always changed her mind, supporting her decision with rhetoric regarding God's expectations for her as a good wife. Linda continually assessed Gabriela's risk, shared her concerns for Gabriela's safety, helped Gabriela make a plan for escape if the abuse escalated, and suggested she keep a journal of her thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about her relationship with Tony, particularly regarding the violence she endured. Over time, the abuse worsened and Gabriela felt endangered, so she enacted her plan to leave Tony. Throughout the entire ordeal, which lasted over 3 years, Gabriela wrote faithfully in her spiritual journal. When she had finally rebuilt her life after a particularly difficult divorce, she made another appointment with Linda and shared excerpts from her journal over the previous 4 years. In the beginning, Gabriela had written, "I guess God wants to teach me how to be strong and be a good wife. That must be why he allows Tony to hit me when he is unhappy with me for some reason." Later, a subsequent journal entry read as follows:

Why would a God who loved me allow me to suffer like this? I am doing the best I can. I think God would want me to be happy. How can I convince God to deliver me from this pain?

Months later Gabriela had written, "Maybe God is calling me to leave Tony . . . maybe there is a promised land for me out there. . . . Maybe I have to be brave and trust God to help me get free." The years of keeping the journal helped both Carol and Gabriela note the growth and the changes that had occurred, especially in spiritual perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual journal-keeping is a strategy that may prove useful for clients who wish to explore the intersection of spirituality and psychotherapy. Research has demonstrated writing to be an effective means of improving one's mental and physical health. By using a spiritual journal, clients may work through their struggles with their beliefs, reflect on their meditation experiences, capture in words transcendent experiences, communicate with their higher power, explore the meaning of sacred texts, express emotions in response to significant life events, and keep a record of their personal and spiritual growth. Therapists may find the spiritual journal an important ancillary tool to psychotherapy, and when they provide clients feedback, they may witness notable progress toward clients' resolution of their mental health issues. Keeping a spiritual journal enables clients to record and reflect on their life's journey such that they may better understand themselves and their lives.

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