SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION AND HEALING

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The Meaning of Spiritual Transformation

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I was unusually troubled in my soul. Suddenly I heard a voice, just as clearly as I have ever heard anyone. . . . The voice said to me, "You must get rid of your self; you must renounce your self; you must reject your self." These were surprising words. I should have not been surprised if the voice had commanded me to stop drinking. But this was not the message at all. It was my self that I was commanded to give up. My self was my trouble—my love of myself, my fear of anything that might frustrate my wishes. My will had always been the central interest in my life. False pride had erected a barrier between my soul and God. (Candler 1951, 55–56)

Laura was raised as a Roman Catholic. Although she knew that [her father] cared about her, she felt that rules, order, and the Catholic church were more important to him than her mother or herself. She saw God very much like her father. . . . After an aborted suicide attempt, Laura asked her father for help, but none was received. "Dad told me, in a not-so-nice tone of voice, that he didn't want to hear anything like that again." . . . In the next few years Laura began to change. She grew attracted to her mother's Methodist church, which portrayed the deity in more personal, less fearful terms. Over time, God took on the characteristics of the father she wanted but never had, someone who would love her unconditionally. In fact, she now refers to God as her "Papa." (Pargament 1997, 214–15)

My motivations and my whole sense of direction have changed. My values changed. What I thought was important changed. I just completely shifted gears. It's given me a sense of purpose and direction I never had before, and I've been searching different avenues but never found exactly what I was supposed to be doing. I've tried a lot of different things, a lot of different jobs, traveled a lot, had lots of experiences in my life. Yet always there was that kind of restless searching, searching. Now I feel like I know exactly what I'm supposed to do. (Miller and C'de Baca 2001, 130)

How could you in all your greatness have abandoned me, a little girl, to the merciless hands of my father? How could you let this happen to me? I demand to know why this happened? Why didn't you protect me? I have been faithful, and for what, to be raped and abused by my own father? I hate and despise you. I regret the first time I ever laid eyes on you; your name is like salt on my tongue. I vomit it from my being. I wish death upon you. You are no more. You are dead. (Flaherty 1992, 101)

Introduction

Traditionally, spirituality has been viewed by social scientists as a source of stability in life, a way to conserve a sense of meaning, identity, connectedness with others, peace of mind, or transcendence. Spirituality has another side, though. It can also be a source of deep and profound change. Although the founding figures in psychology devoted considerable attention to the links between religion and radical change, the topic lay relatively dormant for many years. More recently, however, social scientists have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon of spiritual transformation. This topic is attracting the attention of scholars and scientists from diverse research communities, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and theology. As yet, however, a clear and compelling definition of this construct has not emerged. Although definitional consensus at this early point would be premature, it is not too soon for researchers to begin grappling with the meaning of spiritual transformation. Without a general sense of where this phenomenon of interest begins and ends, this domain of study is unlikely to advance.

Consider the four vignettes above. Each illustrates some form of spiritual change. But do they represent spiritual transformations? In the first vignette, Asa Candler Jr. (son of the founder of Coca-Cola) describes his own religious conversion, his born-again experience, which led to radical changes in his life. Most social scientists would agree that conversions of this kind represent spiritual transformations. What is it about conversions, however, that represents transformations? In the second vignette, we hear the story of a college student who switches her religious affiliation and image of God in an effort to find the love and acceptance she was unable to experience with her father. Does this form of switching qualify as a spiritual transformation? The third vignette describes someone who experiences a "quantum change" (cf. Miller and C'de Baca 2001), a shift in core values in living. Yet there is no mention of God in this account. Is God or transcendence an essential component of spiritual transformation? In the fourth vignette, we hear a victim of incest tell God that He is no more, He is dead. Does the loss of spirituality also qualify as a spiritual transformation? These are simply a few of the thorny questions that arise in the effort to define the meaning of this term.

In this chapter I present one way to think about spiritual transformation. My goal here is not to present the last word on spiritual transformation, but rather some first words. Though my thoughts will not be convincing or satisfying to all, I hope they represent a starting point for further discussion and dialogue about the meaning of this rich and fascinating construct. I will begin by discussing the meaning of spirituality.

A Definition of Spirituality

Elsewhere I have defined spirituality as "a search for the sacred" (Pargament 1999, 12). There are two key terms in this definition: *search* and *sacred*. Before elaborating on these terms, I should emphasize that this definition rests on a particular assumption about human nature: that people are more than reactive beings, shaped by evolution, genetics, biology, early childhood, or the environment. People also strive (cf. Emmons 1999). Striving toward goals is a basic imperative of life, one that organizes and directs other di-

mensions of human functioning: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Klinger 1998). Empirical studies have shown that goals and intentions can be the strongest predictors of human behavior (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Of course, people strive toward a variety of significant ends: psychological (e.g., meaning, self-esteem, peace of mind); social (e.g., marriage, family, status); physical (e.g., health, fitness, appearance); and material (e.g., money, possessions). Differences in configurations of goals help distinguish individuals and groups from each other, and have important implications for health and well-being (e.g., Ford and Nichols 1987; Kasser and Ryan 1996). One goal many people strive toward is the sacred.

The Sacred

Though scholars have defined the sacred in a variety of ways (Idinopulos and Yonan 1996), my view of the sacred is grounded most deeply in the works of Durkheim (1915) and Eliade (1958). In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *sacred* is defined as the holy, those things set apart from the ordinary and worthy of veneration and respect. The sacred includes concepts of God and the divine (Oxford English Dictionary 1980). Other aspects of life though can become sacred or can take on transcendent character and significance by virtue of their association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament and Mahoney 2002). As Durkheim wrote: "By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred" (52). Sacred objects include time and space (the Sabbath, churches); events and transitions (birth, death); materials (wine, a crucifix); cultural products (music, literature); people (saints, cult leaders); psychological attributes (self, meaning); social attributes (compassion, community); and roles (spouse, parent, employer or employee). Regardless of its particular form, however, the sacred is, in the words of Eliade, "the one unique and irreducible element in [religious phenomena]" (xii).

The sacred can be understood from both traditional theistic and nontheistic perspectives. From a theistic vantage point, the sacred encompasses both concepts of the divine and embodiments,

manifestations, or symbols of a higher power. Nontheists can also hold many aspects of their lives sacred by imbuing them with divine-like qualities, such as transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness. For example, Durkheim (1915) noted that "in default of gods, [Buddhism] admits the existence of sacred things, namely, the four noble truths and the practices derived from them" (52).

It is important to stress that the reality of the sacred cannot be determined from a social-scientific perspective. We have no tools to measure God, nor can we assess the authenticity of miraculous healings. However, we can study perceptions of sacredness and their implications for people's lives. In fact, there is growing evidence that people who see the world through a sacred lens experience life quite differently than do their more secular counterparts (Pargament and Mahoney 2005).

The Search

The sacred is the central focus of spirituality, the feature that gives spirituality its distinctive, even unique, character, for no other human phenomenon centers itself around the sacred. However, spirituality involves more than the sacred; it is a search for the sacred. The term *search* indicates that spirituality represents an active verb rather than a passive noun. Spirituality is not static. It does not refer to a stable, unvarying set of beliefs, practices, or experiences. It is, instead, a process in motion. There are three critical, interrelated elements of this process: discovery, conservation, and transformation.

The search for the sacred begins in childhood. Although questions have been raised about the child's capacity to grapple with spiritual abstractions (Goldman 1964), rich anecdotal accounts of children suggest otherwise. Consider the words of one nine-year-old Jewish boy:

> I'd like to find God! But He wouldn't just be there, waiting for some spaceship to land! He's not a person, you know! He's a spirit. He's like the fog and the mist. Maybe He's like something— something we've never seen here. So how can we know? You can't imagine Him, because He's so different—you've never seen anything like Him. . . . I should remember that God is God, and we're us. I guess I'm trying to get from me, from us, to Him with my ideas when I'm looking up at the sky! (Coles 1990, 141–42)

The discovery of the sacred may grow out of several forces. Some have suggested that there is an innate, genetic basis for spirituality (e.g., Bouchard et al. 1990). Others maintain that conceptions of God are rooted in the child's intrapsychic capacity to symbolize and fantasize superhuman beings (Rizzuto 1979). Some have asserted that spirituality is stimulated by critical life events and challenges that reveal human limitations (Johnson 1959; Pargament 1997). And others have emphasized the importance of the social context of family, institution, and culture in shaping the child's spirituality (Kaufman 1981).

Empirical research on the origins of spirituality is not plentiful. In one exception to this rule, Lee Kirkpatrick (2004) has elaborated on Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, and posited that the child's mental models of God are likely to correspond to the models of self and others that emerge out of repeated interactions with primary attachment figures. In support of this notion, Kirkpatrick cites a number of studies among children, adolescents, and adults that demonstrate parallels between the quality of attachment to God (e.g., secure or insecure) and the quality of attachment to parents. Research such as that of Kirkpatrick suggests that the discovery of the sacred grows out of a variety of personal and social factors. Even so, this research cannot tell the full story, for the child's emerging spirituality is more than a reaction to his or her personal and social world. Interview studies of children underscore their capacity to reject, elaborate, or move well beyond the spiritual views of their parents, teachers, and religious leaders. Consider, for example, the words of one ten-year-old Brazilian girl whose mother was dying of tuberculosis:

> Mother used to tell us we'll go to heaven, because we're poor. I used to believe her. I don't think she really believes that herself. She just says that—it's a way of shutting us all up when we're hungry! Now, when I hear her say it, I look up at Him, and I ask Him: What do *You* say, Jesus? Do you believe her? (Coles 1990, 91)

It appears that children are far from passive when it comes to matters of faith. They might be described more accurately as spiritual pilgrims or seekers of something beyond themselves, motivated by a desire to discover the sacred itself.

The search for the sacred does not come to an end when people feel they have discovered something of spiritual value. People then

try to hold on to it, to preserve it, to experience it, to consolidate it, and to integrate it more fully into their lives. There are a number of spiritual methods for conserving the individual's relationship with the sacred, including prayer, meditation, ritual participation, spiritual study, social action, and daily spiritual experiences (e.g., Poloma and Gallup 1991; Underwood 1999). In addition to these day-to-day forms of spiritual involvement, people can draw on a variety of spiritual coping methods to help them conserve the sacred in times of stress. For example, they may seek out spiritual support or reframe negative events from a benevolent spiritual perspective to sustain their connection to the sacred (Pargament 1997).

Much of the scientific study of spirituality has focused on the conservational functions of spirituality; that is, on how people sustain their relationship with the sacred over time. Important as these functions are, though, spirituality involves more than the discovery and conservation of the sacred. In spite of our best efforts, few of us are able to avoid threats to, challenges to, and losses of the sacred over the course of our lives. People may struggle to hold on to their relationship with the sacred, but faced with trauma and tragedy, normal developmental transitions, or simply personal growth and change, old sources of value and meaning may stop working. And when these sources lose their power, people enter a period of transformation when they have to fundamentally change their understanding and experience of the sacred. Transformation is the third process that is critical to the search for the sacred.

Spiritual Transformation

Although most social scientists have viewed spirituality as more of a force for conservation than transformation, not everyone has agreed. The connection between radical human change and the sacred was a core interest among many early psychologists, including William James, Edwin Starbuck, James Pratt, George Coe, and Elmer Clark. They focused much of their attention on religious conversion, a process that was understood to be a normal rather than a pathological human experience (Rambo 1993). Later, however, social scientists took on a more critical attitude to radical religious change, and the topic grew out of favor. Freud (1928), for instance,

viewed religious conversion more critically as a regressive attempt to resolve hatred toward the father by total submission to a higher power. Other mental health professionals were alarmed that religious conversion represented a form of "brainwashing" or "thought reform" by new religious movements or cults (e.g., Sargant 1957). Only in the last twenty-five years has the study of spiritual transformation received new and more balanced attention.

What Transformation Is Not

As a prelude to defining spiritual transformation, it is important to consider the meaning of *transformation*. First, let me suggest a few things that transformation is not. Transformation is not doing more of the same thing. Watzlawick (1988) presents a striking illustration of this point. When NASA began building larger rockets in their race to the moon, they had to create larger hangars to protect the rockets from inclement weather. In designing the new hangars, they simply multiplied the dimensions of the hangars by a factor of ten. Unfortunately, they did not realize that hangars of this size create their own climate, including clouds, drizzle, and electricity. Paradoxically, this "more of the same" solution produced the very problem it was designed to eliminate. To solve the problem more effectively, NASA engineers had to go back to the drawing board and fundamentally rethink rocket hangars. Similarly, transformation refers to fundamental change, a change in the basic character of a system, rather than more of the same.

Transformation is not the same as statistical significance. As social scientists are well aware, even small changes in some dimension of human functioning can reach a high level of statistical significance when the changes are observed in a sufficiently large sample. Statistically significant changes in affect, cognition, or behavior that are associated with spirituality, then, do not necessarily indicate that a transformation has taken place. The more appropriate analogy for our purposes here is clinical significance rather than statistical significance. Clinical significance refers to changes that are large enough to hold practical and more profound implications for human functioning.

Transformation is not necessarily positive. If people are capable of extraordinarily powerful, life-affirming changes, they

are equally capable of destructive changes that result in deep and long-lasting damage.

Finally, transformation is not necessarily spiritual. People can make profound changes in many aspects of their lives—career, residence, spouse, political affiliation, or values. Transformations of this kind may qualify as "quantum changes" in the words of Miller and C'de Baca (2001), but significant as they may be, none is necessarily a spiritual transformation unless it involves in some fashion the sacred.

The Meaning of Spiritual Transformation

What then is spiritual transformation? We can distinguish between two types of spiritual transformation: primary and secondary.

Primary Spiritual Transformation

At its heart, spiritual transformation refers to a fundamental change in the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred in the life of the individual. Spiritual transformation can be understood in terms of new configurations of strivings. In the classic conversion scenario, illustrated by Asa Candler Jr. (1951), the individual experiences a shift from self-centered strivings to God-centered strivings. Other forms of spiritual conversion are also possible. Mahoney and Pargament (2004) note that the classic form of conversion is particularly applicable to people "caught up in the trap of pride" who replace self-exaltation with self-sacrificial love (487). They contrast the traditional conversion model with the feminist model in which an abdication of personal dignity rather than excessive pride sets the stage for transformation: "Conversion from self-abnegation," they write, "involves learning self-affirmation in union with God and compassionate love" (487).

New configurations of strivings may center around sacred entities other than God or a higher power. The individual can reorient himself to a new religious group or to universal concerns. For religious group converts, the group, its leaders, and its mission become the new organizing force, lending coherence and direction to life. Universal converts attempt to re-create not only themselves but also the larger social matrix to more closely approximate an ideal tran-

scendent vision. Thus, we find figures from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. promoting nonviolent resistance to social and political oppression and injustice throughout the world.

We can also speak of spiritual transformation in terms of a change in the character of the sacred. Changes in the nature of the sacred are not restricted to any particular period of life. In her classic text *The Birth of the Living God*, psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto wrote: "The God representation changes along with us and our primary objects in the lifelong metamorphosis of becoming ourselves in a context of other relevant beings" (1979, 52). Consider one example. Following the death of his young son, Rabbi Harold Kushner found that he could no longer believe in a loving, all-powerful God. He could not reconcile the idea of a loving God with the notion of an all-powerful God who would allow the death of his son. After a great deal of struggle and soul-searching, Kushner ultimately transformed his understanding of God from a loving, all-powerful being to a loving, but limited God—a being unable to intervene directly in our lives but a being who could share in our pain and suffering. He concluded:

> I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. . . . Because the tragedy is not God's will we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are. (1981, 231)

Kushner's is only one of many possible spiritual transformations people make in the character of the sacred. People can also shift from punitive to loving conceptions of God, from images of a distant to a personally involved being, from belief in a personal God to a sense of transcendence in all things, from "false Gods" (e.g., alcoholism, drug addiction) to "true Gods," and so on. It is also possible to envision negative spiritual transformations, such as changes from a sense of a larger presence in the universe to feelings of spiritual emptiness, or from belief in a loving God to belief in a harsh, malicious God. Thus, the loss of spirituality experienced by the victim of incest described in the introduction to this chapter would qualify as a spiritual transformation, albeit a negative one.

Secondary Spiritual Transformation

While primary spiritual transformations speak to fundamental changes in the place or character of the sacred as a goal or destination that guides the individual's life, secondary spiritual transformations have to do with changes not in goals or destinations, but in the pathways people take to the sacred. One type of secondary spiritual transformation is religious switching. For instance, Laura, in the second vignette of the introduction, switched denominations in an effort to find a God who would provide her with the unconditional love and acceptance she could not find from the denomination of her childhood and relationship with her father. This is not an unusual case. Empirical studies suggest that people are more likely to switch religious groups when they find alternatives that offer more compelling pathways to their personal, social, and spiritual goals. For instance, in a study of twenty-five people who became involved in the Divine Light Mission, Gartrell and Shannon (1985) found that 100 percent felt that their church of origin was hypocritical, 80 percent felt it could not help them with their most important needs, and 100 percent believed that the Divine Light Mission provided them with more viable solutions to their deepest problems.

Secondary spiritual transformations can also take the form of switches in other pathways people take to the sacred. In his book *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (1993), Roof notes that many people in Western culture are now engaged in highly individualized spiritual experimentation in their quest for the sacred. Over several years, one person becomes a vegetarian, leaves his job in marketing, joins an eco-awareness group, and learns tai chi. Another jumps from interest in astrology and tarot card reading to music and meditation. Still another experiments with alcohol, drugs, and sexual liaisons. In spite of their differences, each of these individuals is involved in secondary spiritual transformations in the search for the sacred.

Secondary spiritual transformations also include efforts to overcome obstacles that block the individual's spiritual journey. These obstacles may be self-created, as in the case of spiritual transgressions that separate the individual from what he or she per-

ceives as sacred. The religions of the world have developed a variety of purification rituals (e.g., repentance, sacrifice, exorcism, isolation, ablution, confession) to help people reorient themselves to the sacred following their transgressions (Pargament 1997). Other obstacles to the sacred may come upon the person, as in the case of a medical illness. Any illness can pose a threat not only to physical health and well-being, but also to the individual's sense of hope, meaning, and connection with the sacred (Csordas 1994). In response to this threat, many religious traditions encourage their adherents to redefine the meaning of healing from a "cure" to that of a final and ultimate union with God (see Poloma and Hoelter 1998). Spiritual direction and spiritually integrated psychotherapy are also called upon to help people overcome barriers to their search for the sacred.

Conclusion

Spiritual transformation refers primarily to a fundamental change in the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred as an object of significance in life, and secondarily to a fundamental change in the pathways the individual takes to the sacred. Defined in this manner, spiritual transformation is neither rare nor incomprehensible; it is, instead, part and parcel of spiritual life, one of the three processes critical to spirituality. In the search for the sacred, people engage in efforts to discover the sacred, conserve or sustain a relationship with the sacred once it has been discovered, and transform that relationship in response to internal or external trauma and transition. But the search for the sacred does not come to an end once the individual's relationship with the sacred has been transformed. Following this transformation, the individual's task shifts to the process of conserving this new understanding of the sacred. In this fashion, the search for the sacred evolves over the course of the individual's lifespan.

It is important to emphasize that people do not follow fixed and invariant stages in their search for the sacred; rather, each individual's search is likely to have a distinctive trajectory. Some

people experience a relatively smooth process of spiritual development characterized by lengthy periods of conservation and gradual, unobtrusive transformations. For others, the spiritual journey is rockier, marked by sudden and unexpected twists and turns and only brief periods of spiritual continuity and calm. Still others, unable to transform their spirituality in response to internal or external change, may disengage from the spiritual search only to rediscover the sacred at a later point in life.

There are several advantages of this definition of spiritual transformation. First, it is inclusive, being broad enough to encompass the variety of subtypes of spiritual transformation that occur in cultures throughout the world. These subtypes include sudden and gradual spiritual transformation; spiritual transformation that occurs within a denomination, between denominations, or outside traditional religious institutions; and transformation in both theistic and nontheistic representations of the sacred. Second, though it is inclusive, the definition has a substantive core, the sacred, that sets it apart from other types of transformation, brings a potentially fuzzy construct into sharper focus, and lends a much needed boundary to this new area of inquiry. Finally, by defining spiritual transformation as a process rather than an outcome, the value of this construct is not prejudged or predetermined. Instead, social scientists can examine the implications of spiritual transformation empirically by studying how this construct relates, positively or negatively, to various physical, psychological, social, and spiritual outcomes.

For too many years, social scientists have neglected the study of spiritual transformation. Fortunately, the picture has begun to change. Knowledge about this phenomenon of interest is likely to expand in the years to come. Hopefully, these initial thoughts on the meaning of spiritual transformation will contribute to greater knowledge about a construct that is critical to an understanding of the meaning of spirituality and, more generally, of what it means to be human.

Note

Portions of this paper were adapted from Pargament and Mahoney (2002).

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