

Spirituality in Systemic Practice: An Internal Family Systems Perspective

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Introduction

I asked the client if the part of her that had just appeared had a name. She asked inside and replied: "Window"... "Window to your soul"..

As a "rational," "scientific" therapist, what do I do when a non-psychotic client I am working with tells me that an image in her mind has just identified itself as the window to her Soul? This was the beginning of a remarkable process where the client appeared to have a direct encounter with God. It left me wondering what I had just observed, and how is it that a client in my office at a community mental health center had just had a spiritual epiphany.

With my introduction to Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model (Schwartz 1987), I had found a bridge between spirituality and psychotherapy whether I was ready for it or not. For many years I have kept spirituality and psychotherapy separate, out of a sense of "professionalism". I told myself that if people came to a mental health clinic they were looking for secularly oriented services, otherwise they would have gone to a religiously based counseling institution. Yet perhaps the belief in "professionalism" had more to do with not wanting to be "tainted" by spirituality, to lose status as an "objective", "rational", "scientific" clinician. At the same time, however, I felt that as therapists we were missing a powerful force in healing by not engaging the client's spiritual life.

My first attempt to bridge the two worlds had occurred fifteen years ago while I was doing my doctoral internship. I had a client who had both seemingly intractable psychological problems and grave religious doubts. Having drifted away from any religious life myself years earlier, I was puzzled as to how I might work with the deep religious struggle this client brought into my office. Somehow a flyer announcing a "Spirituality and Counseling" workshop lead by a man with a name I couldn't pronounce (Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan) appeared on the office bulletin board. I decided to give it a try. The workshop was presented by a teacher of a universalist mystical tradition, the Sufi Order of the West. Without going into details I will only say that this workshop provided me with a spiritual framework, one which could hold the complexity of my world view while at the same time allow me to experience a personal spiritual opening. I carried back with me a belief that my client needed to reconnect to her spiritual life in order to break through her impasse. This client "Joan" had the perfect symptoms for dramatic healing; psoriasis had covered her body with sores for years. Within weeks after we began to work through her spiritual conflicts, her anxiety reduced and her sores began to disappear; after six weeks they were totally gone. For years I looked back at this event and asked myself what happened that changed this person's life so powerfully. This experience remained an isolated event in my clinical practice. I continued in my secular psychotherapy practice and didn't have many clients who presented with spiritual issues, so I didn't make it part of the process. It wasn't until I was working with clients using Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model several years ago, that I was confronted again with the power of a person's spiritual life in his/her own healing.

The Internal Family Systems Model

Schwartz's model emerged out of an attempt to apply family systems principles to the individual system of a bulimic client who would not change even though the family system had been reorganized. Schwartz found that people consist of a multiplicity of subpersonalities that operated with each other very much as a family system and that the same principles which worked with families were applicable to the internal family of subpersonalities. In addition to the different subpersonalities or "parts" of the person, Schwartz found what he has termed the "Self," which is a different level of entity. The Self is the center of the person, the place from which one observes. According to Schwartz "The Self can and should lead the person's system. The Self has a "meta" or systemic perspective that

permits this leadership." (Schwartz, 1988, p.62). The first goal of the therapist is to help the clients to differentiate the Self from the parts so their Self can take a leadership role, much as a therapist might help the parents get back in charge of a family where the children had taken over. The therapeutic work focuses on bringing balance back into the system. This involves working with polarizations and helping the various "parts" find their preferred valuable role in the internal system.

An aspect of the work that is most powerful and innovative is the process of internal dialogues with the various aspects of the internal system. The IFS therapist requests that the person identify the parts of himself/herself activated by the problem situation. Often the client can picture the part and is able to begin an inner dialogue. One of Schwartz's important contributions is his development and articulation of the process of guiding this inner dialogue according to systemic principles while utilizing the clients' own inner guidance system. These principles are introduced in some of his articles (Schwartz 1987,1988) and will be more fully presented in his soon to be published book (Schwartz, 1994). Other authors who have written on methods for work with subpersonalities include Rowan (1990), Satir (1978), Stone and Winkelman (1989), and Johnson, (1986).

In this article I will present inner dialogues with significant spiritual content that I have heard from clients while using the IFS model. These reports by clients have forced me to confront the issues of how I use spirituality in therapy.

Case Example # 1

The quote with which I began this article came from a session early on in my work with the model and raised the question of the role of spirituality in this work. I was co-therapist with Nancy Nesselth, a therapist at an outpatient mental health center where I was consulting. Nancy had been were working with her client "Jan" for several months. Jan is a women in her mid-thirties who experienced considerable trauma as a child and as an adult had a history of engaging in self-destructive relationships. Nancy had used the IFS model in some of her work with Jan and I began to do co-therapy with Nancy as part of a research and training project.

The transcript which follows came toward the end of a session. In the process of imagery work with the client's internal system, the image of a light had appeared and out of this light a small child emerged. In working with clients who have experienced childhood trauma, a frequent component of the work has to do with retrieving child parts of the person who are trapped in the past memories and experiences (Schwartz, 1992). This is done after the person has stabilized their current inner system of parts and the Self is in a position of leadership in the system.

In the process of working with this child part of Jan, she had a memory of herself as a two year old walking in on her parents while they were making love. She saw an picture of her father yelling at her and the child part her going into shock. At this point the client was asked to find out what the child needed and how she could provide that for her. This process went smoothly and the child was feeling comforted.

We were suggesting to the client that she find out where the child would like to be now and to arrange for that to occur. This went well again. Afterwards the normal procedure is to inquire about any parts of the person that might not be happy with the reemergence of a formerly hidden part. In this case a skeptical part emerged, perhaps similar to the one arising in you as you read this account. At that point the client was flooded with a series of conflicting parts. In order to differentiate the Self again, I suggested that she might, in her mind, place these parts in a room that was separate from her. The parts went into the room, though with some reluctance. At that point a different image emerged, a transparent form moving back and forth across her chest. My co-therapist Nancy asked if this part had a name? The following sequence occurred:

Client, Jan: Yes (Pause)

"Window"...and then .."Window to your soul"....."

(Quotes signify the clients directly quoting a voice speaking to her in the inner dialogue)

Client: I don't see anything but the light.

Nancy: Does the light have a voice?

Client: Yes, it says "it's time you asked"

(Pause)

Client: In explanation: The voice was talking about the child who saw the sexual act. The information it gave me is that we looked at that, and there is a truth in that..but not to get tied up in that.....It is not necessary to go back into it..

(Pause)

Client: I double checked that, because I don't want to cop out.

Yes, it says:

"You can go back if you want, but it won't get you anywhere other than where you are now "...."What is, is what is"

The phrase "Trust yourself. It is time to move on."

(Pause)

Client:Then it said: "You are a power unto yourself...no need to be afraid"

(Long silence ...voice filled with emotion)

Client: It's a... It is almost like looking up and seeing God... It is just rushing down...Kind of piped or coming right down into me.

Nancy: How does it feel?

Client:It is very moving.....I can't believe it is happening ... it touched me...

This is the God in us?.....

(Silence)

Tom: From that place with those feelings .. can you visit the other parts?

(The parts she had been working with earlier in the session and had imagined placing in a room)

Client: When I brought that focus back to them... They were all talking quietly... When I came into the room they fell silent... It was like.. they were in awe...the word power comes to mind

But they were not fearful...

A voice says..... "She knows the truth".

(crying)

Client: Voice from somewhere...it must be the voice of God?

(Pause)

Client: It is saying... All the answers are within me....and I am truly a magnificent creature.

(Pause, filled with emotion)

I am feeling a lot of love and peace... And the voice keeps saying .."It is okay. Just keep feeling that" I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed now.....

(Pause)

Client: The word trust keeps coming.. and the loving ...It's just....Stay in the loving ... in the lovingness...feel that and live your life from that. That's all I figured out...That is the answer and key to everything.....

Tom: Anything any part wants to say at this point?

Client: The compassion self just said, " thank you.." Reached up and touched me on the forehead. and said thank you...there was a real peace and lovingness.

Clinical Implications

So what does a rational, objective therapist make of a client having an epiphany in the mental health clinic office? The client made considerable gains in her personal integration during subsequent sessions. She gradually moved out of a very destructive relationship she had been in for years and began to form new and more balanced relationships. But what was this power she seemed to connect with in the sessions? How should we be working together with this power in order to optimize its healing and guiding capacities? Would other clients have similar experiences if we encouraged them to experience these kinds of connections?

In order to answer some of these questions I began to explore these issues in my own personal therapy with the IFS model. I have always believed it a good idea to receive therapy in the model one is working in, in order to know it from the inside out. In this work I had a somewhat similar experience although it is not nearly as clear. I experienced a connection to something that appeared as a light. I had a wonderful peaceful feeling while connected with the image. I asked this image if it had any guidance for me and it replied only that all I needed to do was breathe with awareness and it would be with me. Not exactly the kind of epiphany one might hope for, but it turned out to be wonderful advice.

I also began to explore more actively the spiritual life of the clients I was working with to see if there might be a connection made through the imagery work used with the IFS method. Not surprisingly I found that those with a strong religious or spiritual life independent of the therapy process, very readily connected spiritually in the therapy. An interesting feature for some clients was that inner work with imagery seemed to deepen their spiritual life. The spiritual connections they made in therapy sessions seemed more real, alive and healing than that which they connected with through their church.

Case Example # 2

A one woman I was working with in my private practice, "Cheryl", was a member of a fairly conservative Christian church. As part of the imagery component of the therapy I had asked her to make a connection with some source of spiritual guidance within herself. She very readily reported an image of Jesus and felt great comfort in his presence. In the course of therapy I would often ask her to call on Jesus if she was feeling overwhelmed or in need of guidance. One of her painful psychological conflicts was around the fact that she had an abortion when she was younger and that this was an act of killing a child according to her beliefs, both now and at that time. When she encountered her memory of the abortion in our imagery work she was overwhelmed with guilt and the horror of what she felt she had done.

I remember wondering about the wisdom of her asking for Jesus's assistance when she felt so much condemnation coming from the church for her actions, but the presence that she had always connected with when she talked of Jesus was so full of compassion and wisdom that I really had no doubts about the course of action needed. I suggested that she might ask for assistance from Jesus. Following this, Cheryl had an image of Jesus soothing the young women part of her who had experienced the abortion. This young women was in pain about what she had done to the child. Cheryl reported Jesus showing her an image of the child in his embrace and reassured her that the child was with him. He then took the young women to a place of healing where she might recover from the trauma that she had experienced. There remained work to do regarding her guilt about the abortion, but the tormented quality of the obsessions had subsided and the image of Jesus was available to aid in that process.

Case Example # 3

Each person seems to have a unique way of experiencing their inner world. A therapist, "Sue", who was working in the IFS model as part of her training, did not have a religious figure, but rather had a globe of light that would transform the atmosphere of her surroundings in a peaceful way. Her experience with this globe of light provides an illustration of a number of risks inherent in working with these kinds of internal forces. She had been working with a part of her that was a performer. The performer was always doing a balancing act on the high wire. She was quite successful at this high wire act, but many of Sue's other parts were becoming exhausted through the effort and anxiety which was required to sustain this act. Through an inner dialog this part agreed to come down off the high wire. Subsequently the performer went into a depression, however. In an effort help her to adjust and find a new more balanced role in the personality, Sue brought the globe of light over to be with the performer part. This had a transforming effect. The performer was renewed and actually became an almost superhuman figure. I was somewhat concerned about this because of the effect on the other parts, which was to create a state of fear. It was near the end of the session, however, so I left the work at this point and was curious to see what would come of this transformation.

When she came in the next week, Sue reported being very energized, but also reported some relationship issues which we decided to work with. In the process of this work we began to identify an angry part which was seen as a bear in a cage. As I began to urge a dialogue with the caged bear the whole image was lost and the client reported that the image had vanished altogether. As is standard procedure in these instances, I asked if there were any parts that did not want to go forward with the imagery dialogue. At that point the performer part came forward in all her glory and said that she had stopped the imagery because there was no need to deal with petty feelings like anger, that she was beyond all that. Then a whole group of parts started talking about how all week she had been pushing them around. At this point the client decided to have a conference meeting of all the parts and as a result decided to separate the globe of light from the performer.

The lesson from this experience seemed to be that if these spiritual energies get attached to a part of the person, rather than working through the Self, they can bring imbalance to the system allowing certain parts to dominate and others to be excluded. An interesting side note to the inner world of parts is that at one point the globe of light appeared, but it was making a lot of demands of the person and this was not our experience of the normal behavior of authentic spiritual parts. They usually have no agenda for the person other than being affirming and assisting in some way. I suggested to the client that she ask this part what it was and at that point it became an impish part which had disguised itself as the light because it felt that was the only way it could get her attention. This illustrated both the potential imbalance that could come from attending only to higher spiritual aspects of the inner world and the notion that parts are not always what they appear to be.

Discussion and Conclusions

I must say frankly that I don't fully know how to understand these experiences. If I take an "objective" stance, I see that these clients seem to have connected to a place in themselves where they can retell the story of life's traumas in a way that allows them to heal from their wounds. Somehow they are able to find an image within themselves that activates a deep and compassionate state from which they are able to find both guidance and wisdom on a level that I as therapist can not approach. Given this situation it seems that one of our most important roles is assisting clients in connecting to those places of great healing and wisdom within themselves and that while they need a skilled therapist guiding the process, insight, knowledge and direction can come from the clients themselves. Many people experience this wisdom and guidance as coming from the state that Schwartz calls the Self. For some people, however, it often seems to come from connections to sources of spiritual guidance perceived as separate from themselves, such as a "window to the soul," an image of Jesus, or from something less clear such as a white light. So how does this all fit with systems theory and systemic therapy? It appears to me that conceptualizing the individual as a system rather than a monolithic structure opens up the possibility of getting more directly in touch with our clients' spiritual natures. Interestingly Schwartz's model and other literature on the multiplicity of the inner system such as Rowan (1990), Satir (1978), Stone and Winkelman (1989), have some close parallels to traditional and current Buddhist thought.

An example of a clear parallel between the Internal Family Systems model and traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings is found in a Tibetan parable about the nature of the human psyche reported by David-Neel (1978): "A 'person' resembles an assembly composed of a number of members. In this assembly discussion never ceases. Now and again one of the members rises, makes a speech, and suggests an action; his colleagues approve, and it is decided that what he has proposed shall be executed. Or now several members of the assembly rise at the same time and propose different things, and each of them, for private reasons, supports his own proposal. It may happen that these differences of opinion, and the passion which each of the orators brings into the debate, will provoke a quarrel, even a violent quarrel in the assembly. Fellow-members may even come to blows.

It also happens that some members of the assembly leave it of their own accord; others are gradually pushed out, and others again are expelled by force, by their colleagues. All of this time newcomers introduce themselves into the assembly, either by gently sliding in or by forcing the doors.

Again, one notes that certain members of the assembly are slowly perishing; their voices become feeble, and finally they are no longer heard. Others, on the contrary, who were weak and timid, become stronger and bolder; they become violent, shouting their proposals; they terrify their colleagues, and dominate them, and end by making themselves dictators.

The members of this assembly are the physical and mental elements which constitute the 'person'; they are our instincts, our tendencies, our ideas, our beliefs, our desires, etc. Through the causes which engendered it, each of them is the descendant and heir of many lines of causes, of many series of phenomena, going far back into the past, and whose traces are lost in the shadowy depths of eternity. (David-Neel, 1978, p. 130-131)

The parallel with Schwartz's model is striking. Later Buddhist teachings also parallel Schwartz's model. Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the most well known Buddhist teachers of our time, talks about becoming aware of our feelings such as anger or hurt and imaging ourselves holding them and looking upon these feelings with mindfulness and

compassion (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991). He teaches that through this mindfulness these mental formations can be transformed and brought in balance. He stresses, however that this is different from allowing ourselves to be taken over by these feelings, which could create imbalance. The effect of this approach is very similar to Schwartz's method of separating from parts of us that are experiencing intense feelings so that we can see them from the Self, an observing place of compassion and understanding.

I have observed that the spiritual life of the IFS clients often takes on a much more direct and living presence in their lives. Perhaps this occurs because the therapeutic methods developed by Schwartz are so accommodating to and responsive to the client's inner world that they would deepen whatever perspective the person brings, spiritual or humanistic. Another possibility is that the spiritual emerges as important because the internal systems view of the world is very similar to ancient religious views of the world and these frameworks promote the activation of a spiritual life. Recently "Margo", a client of a colleague, was referred to talk with me about her experiences with IFS therapy. She had been strongly affected by her work with the IFS model and as a person with a Ph.D. in the biological sciences she wanted to discuss the process in order to gain an intellectual understanding of her experience. I asked her what the effect of IFS had been on her spiritual life. Upon reflecting, she reported that prior to the IFS work, religion and spirituality were not something she had much interest in at all. After doing the IFS inner work, she said her way of seeing the world had changed and spirituality and myth had become a very important way for her to understand the world around her. Her experience seems to support the notion that somehow the IFS work does activate the spiritual dimensions of peoples' lives...

What are the implications of this for the systemic practitioner? It appears to me that the power of the spiritual connections that emerge in the IFS work is undeniable in its ability to transform the internal systems of clients. These spiritual "parts" appear to be fundamental forces moving the system towards balance and dynamic equilibrium. They can almost be said to have a depth of wisdom and knowledge about the client. They also are often connected to regularly occurring events in the person's life so the learning can be sustained by the environment. They are potentially available twenty-four hours a day if they can learn how to access them. Perhaps most important, our ability to activate and join with spiritual resources is a major step forward in terms of empowering the self-regulating capacities of our clients' internal systems.

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