

## Reflections on Spirituality and Mental Health

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A few weeks ago Rebecca asked me if I would be willing to share with you some thoughts about college student mental health as part of our fall focus on mental health awareness. I told her that I would be pleased to do so, and would also be glad to speak more broadly about mental health and its relationship to faith and spirituality.

The connection between psychology and spirituality is something I've been interested in since my undergraduate days at Cornell where I majored in Human Development. As some of you have heard me say, during those years I developed a close relationship with Jack Lewis, who was the Director of Cornell United Religious Work. Jack was pioneer in many ways, including in the area of mental health, both for Cornell and the Ithaca community.

Part of my role at Cornell is to guide the university's efforts in the area of mental health promotion and suicide prevention. We have a comprehensive, campus-wide approach that has many elements, but when Jack arrived on campus in the 1960's there were very few resources. In response to a series of campus crises, he organized a group of leaders to create the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service of Tompkins County. When it started, it was a just a telephone on Jack's desk in his office at Anabel Taylor Hall. Today it is a vital resource serving the entire community.

With Jack's guidance I pursued graduate studies in theology and then clinical psychology. At the time, these were largely separate academic disciplines. In my training as a psychologist in the early 1990s, little consideration was given to role of faith or spirituality in the lives of our clients.

I remember learning how to take highly-detailed personal histories during a course on psychological assessment. When I asked the instructor whether we ought to ask whether clients are part of a faith community or whether they hold any particular religious or spiritual beliefs, she seemed almost startled. Well, yes, she said, that might actually be a good thing to explore.

Fortunately, times have changed. Increasingly, psychologists and other health professionals have come to realize that if we are to help people heal and grow, we must understand the totality of their life experiences, including the role of their beliefs or personal philosophy.

Part of what helped this change occur has been the development of the field of positive psychology. Whereas clinical psychology historically has focused on how to alleviate suffering, positive psychology seeks to help people thrive and flourish in their lives, to fulfill their potential, and, essentially, to be happy. A growing body of research looks at the idea of resilience, or the ability to thrive in the face of adversity and bounce back from the inherent stressors in life. Mental health professionals increasingly recognize that whether we are trying to help those who are suffering, or are helping people to be resilient and lead fulfilling lives, the role of religion and spirituality, especially in relation to hope, meaning and purpose, are important for many people.

In today's scriptures, we hear Jesus and Paul talking to their followers about worry and anxiety. While these words were written long before our modern understanding of psychology, they point to the universality of anxiety in its various forms. In today's terms we understand anxiety as being a normal part of life for all, and a problematic experience for some. Anxiety and depression are common experiences and exist along a continuum from mild to severe. Who doesn't experience periods of worry or sadness? Things go wrong,

failures happen, and disappointments occur. Indeed, anxiety is a normal, helpful response when we anticipate something threatening in the future. However, this is different than when anxiety, or depression, lasts for weeks, months or years and interferes with a person's ability to function. That's when it rises to the level of being a disorder or illness.

At Cornell we've been doing surveys of students for several years in which we ask about their mental health. In 2015, one third of undergraduate students reported that they had been unable to function academically for at least a week in the past year due to depression, stress, or anxiety. The good news is that this percentage has been going steadily down over the past decade as we've expanded our efforts to support students and provide them with the knowledge and skills to help them not just survive school, but to thrive. During this time the proportion of students who use our counseling services has increased significantly. That's actually what we want to see, because treatment works. Psychotherapy and medication can make a big difference in people's lives.

Over the past twenty years, psychology has made strides in understanding what helps people heal from emotional distress and flourish in their lives. It turns out that in some ways we are re-discovering insights, both from the founders of certain branches of psychology, and from ancient wisdom as well.

What we think, what we do, and what we believe matters for our mental health and well-being.

Our experience of life is constructed by both the external experiences we have and our inner, subjective thoughts and feelings about them. What we tell ourselves about these experiences and about ourselves matters. It can affect, for ill or good, our emotional well-being.

The great psychologist and philosopher of religion William James said, "The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human can alter his or her life by altering his or her attitude."

One of the attitudinal habits that can contribute to well-being is the intentional practice of gratitude. Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast, who lived here in Ithaca and at Mt. Savior Monastery near Elmira for many years, has written and spoken extensively about the importance of gratefulness as part of spiritual growth and mental health. He even has a TED talk online about it. He writes, "The root of joy is gratefulness...It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful. Look closely and you will find that people are happy because they are grateful. Gratefulness is the key to a happy life that we hold in our hands, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy -- because we will always want to have something else or something more." In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul encourages us to pray with grateful hearts: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Paul's joyfulness permeates this letter. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" Is he joyful because of a wonderful circumstance? Hardly. Paul is writing from a prison cell. But despite this, he says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have."<sup>12</sup> I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need." For Paul, his faith in Christ is the key. As he says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

A different story from a prison, nearly two thousand years later, provides another window into the human capacity to shape our lives through what we choose to believe, by the attitude we take toward our condition. Victor Frankel was a prominent neurologist and psychoanalyst in Austria at the outbreak of World War II. As a Jew, Frankel was arrested and sent to a series of concentration camps, including Dachau and Auschwitz. He

survived the horrors of this experience and later wrote about it in his classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it he makes this observation about the power and potential of attitude to shape our lives:

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

For these individuals, the exercise of this freedom to care for others brought meaning to their lives in spite of the horrors they endured.

And while this example demonstrates the human capacity for finding meaning and purpose through service in an extreme circumstance, each of us can experience purpose through compassion for others.

Jack Lewis had a daily prayer or motto that some of you may recall me mentioning, one that I repeat often myself. "Today with God's help, I'll do the best I can, with what I have, where I am, and I'll care about others."

In my view, that's good theology, and good psychology.

Being in relationship with others, to be with and for each other, is psychologically protective. Being helpful releases the neurotransmitter dopamine, which improves mood.

Do the best you can, with what you have, however modest it may be.

Consider this example. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story a little boy who told his mother that he was late returning home because he met a boy who was crying because his bicycle broke and he was helping him. "But you don't know how to fix a bicycle," his mother protested, "how could you have helped him?" "I didn't know how to fix his bicycle," the little boy agreed, "so I did the only thing that I could."

"I sat down on the curb and I cried with him."

As Paul says to the Philippians, it was kind of you to share my distress."

The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung came to believe that much of emotional suffering and the path to healing is has a religious quality. In looking back on his years of helping people with their struggles, he concluded this:

"The greatest and most important problems of life are all in a certain sense insoluble.... They can never be solved, but only outgrown.... This 'outgrowing' was seen to consist in a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest arose on the person's horizon, and through this widening of view, the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms, but faded out when confronted with a new and stronger life-urge."

When Jesus tells us to seek first the Kingdom of God, he is telling us to broaden our horizons. It isn't that our material needs and our daily concerns and worries don't matter, but we need to approach them through the lens of faith. We need perspective. A wider view.

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have," says Paul, "I have learned the secret." In Christ his life had meaning and purpose, and he persevered in spreading the Gospel despite his plight as a prisoner.

As the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche said, "He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how."

Near the end of the war, Victor Frankel faced a choice. The Germans knew they would soon be conquered, and they were stepping up executions and then destroying the evidence of their atrocities. Prisoners began to escape, and Frankl was provided the opportunity to do so by a friend, a chance which he prepared to take. But at the last minute, he changed his mind, deciding instead to remain behind with his patients. He writes,

“I ran out of the hut and told my friend that I could not go with him. I did not know what the following days would bring, but I had gained an inward peace that I had never experienced before.”

“Through this widening of view, the insoluble problem faded out when confronted with a new and stronger life-urge.”

I’d like to share with you one last story of how a widening horizon can help alleviate mental suffering.

The renowned psychologist Milton Erickson told the story of a client he met with once in the 1950s. She lived in Milwaukee, was independently wealthy, never married, and was very religious. But in her early 50s she developed health problems that required her to be in a wheelchair. She never left the house except to go to church, and then she would sit in the back and have her aide wheel her out early so that no one would notice. She became deeply depressed for nine months, to the point where her nephew asked Erickson if he would pay her a visit when he was in town to give a lecture. And he agreed to do so.

When Erickson arrived he introduced himself, explained that her nephew was concerned, and asked if she’d be willing to talk with him. She agreed, and he requested to be taken on a tour of the house. It was a dark, depressing environment with little light being let in. But in one room Ericson noticed three African violets and a potting pot with a leaf in it being sprouted as a new plant. Erickson knew enough about plants to know that growing African violets was not an easy task, so clearly the woman had some skill with them.

He immediately diagnosed her problem and prescribed the treatment.

He said to her, “I know what your problem is.”

“What?” she replied.

“You are not being a good enough Christian,” he said.

The woman was stunned. But Erickson was not passing a moral judgement. That was just his way of telling her that she had an amazing gift that she was not sharing with others, and that she needed to do so.

So he told her, “I want you to buy a couple hundred potting pots for you to sprout new African violets, and buy a couple hundred gift pots.” He then told her to monitor her church’s announcements, and,

“As soon as the sprouts are well rooted, for every birth announcement you send an African violet; and do the same for every Christening; for every engagement; for every wedding; for every sickness; for every death, and every church bazaar.” And so she did.

Erickson kept in his scrapbook a yellowed newspaper clipping of this woman’s obituary from more than a decade later that read:

*African Violet Queen of Milwaukee, Mourned by Thousands.*

Erickson did not try to solve her depression on its own terms. He did not deny her pain. But he invited her to see a wider horizon, and in doing so, she found a new life urge, and a community of connection and love.

Are there violets in our own lives or that we see in others that can be grown and shared?

How do we do the best we can, with what we have, where we are, and care about others?

How can we practice gratitude in our daily lives?

Each of us must answer these questions for ourselves, and surely each answer will be different.

But if we try do so, if we seek first to follow the ways of Christ, by prayer with thanksgiving, the God of peace will be with us.

Amen.