

White, W. (1992). Spirituality: Its language and boundaries. In *Spirituality and prevention* (pp. 37-47). Springfield, IL: Illinois Prevention Resource Center.

## **The Role of Spirituality in Substance Abuse Prevention**

Bill White

Is spirituality the breath of God or the whisper of my own deepest fears and yearnings? Whether breath or whisper, it is a power that can nurture and transform.

Religious and spiritual disciplines have long been concerned with the promotion of health and the prevention and healing of disease. Those of us in the field of substance abuse prevention and treatment would be remiss if we failed to inquire what these disciplines have learned that could contribute to the achievement of our missions. This exploration is fraught with difficulty, however. It is particularly difficult to open a discussion on spirituality within a culture that has provided us only a meager vocabulary in which to conduct such a discourse. Much of this paper will focus on the construction of language through which the potential utility of religion and spirituality to the prevention field might be explored.

### ***History***

There has been a growing interest in the role of religion and spirituality as a force for health and healing. The substance abuse field is in a unique vantage point within the spectrum of health and human service agencies because religion and spirituality are deeply intertwined in the initiation and evolution of our field. From the moment boats landed in this country, there were efforts to manage the problem of persons obsessed with psychoactive drug intoxication, and many of these efforts were based on the belief that religious experience was the avenue of resolution when the preferred choices--public humiliation and punishment--failed. The first persons to whom alcoholics were referred for assistance in this country were clergy. Temperance movements of the 1800s sought, in addition to their appeals to individual drinkers and their legislative agendas, the establishment of temperance education in public schools. These early prevention programs often conveyed strong elements of moral and religious education.

Six notorious alcoholics became caught up in the temperance movement and

launched the Washingtonian Movement—a pre-AA recovery mutual aid society. The inebriate asylums that grew out of the Washingtonian Movement understood that they were dealing with a physical disease--the American Association for the Study and Cure of Inebriety was founded in 1870 based on a disease concept of addiction. But treatment methodologies within the inebriate asylums incorporated moral education and religious and spiritual meditation. When the Salvation Army came to the United States in the 1880s, it brought a distinctly religious approach to working with alcoholic men of the Bowery and Skid Row--an approach that explicitly posited that Christian salvation was the only pathway to sobriety. In addition to the individual religious experiences that occurred within the rescue missions, alcoholics bound together to support their continued sobriety and spiritual growth, creating such groups as the Royal Order of Ex-boozers.

In the 1920s and 1930s many alcoholics were drawn to other religious structures in the hopes that such structures would provide an escape from suffering. Most notable among these were the Emmanuel Movement and the Oxford Groups. The Emmanuel Movement combined psychological and spiritual principles of alcoholism recovery that focused on total abstinence, full self-revelation in group therapy, and visits from "friendly visitors (recovering alcoholics). The Oxford Group was a non-denominational, evangelical religious group that stressed self-survey, confession, restitution and service to others. Each of these groups were part of the spiritual traditions that would be shortly crystallized in Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>i</sup>

Two very different views of religion and spirituality within psychiatry would intersect within the history of the substance abuse field. Where Freud was calling religion a "mass obsessional neurosis," Jung was impressed with the transformational power of the religious or spiritual experience. When Roland H. sought advice following his relapse to active alcoholism following treatment by Jung, Jung told him that there was nothing left that medical or psychiatric treatment could do for him, that his only hope was a spiritual or religious experience--a recommendation that led Roland H. to the Oxford Group. Later in a response to a letter from Bill Wilson describing how Jung's advice played a critical role in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, Jung used the phrase *Spiritus contra Spiritum* to reflect his understanding of the power of the spiritual to conquer alcoholism.<sup>ii</sup>

The founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935 marks a particularly important milestone as this fellowship shaped a spiritual approach to alcoholism recovery that significantly influenced the philosophical premises and working methodologies of the field up until the present. AA's non-religious, but spiritual program of recovery focused on ego-surrender to a higher power and a moral reconstruction of one's

character through self-inventory, confession, restitution and service. The 12 step model of spiritual recovery would evolve into a social movement carrying 12-step spirituality and self-help adaptations far beyond the boundaries of the substance abuse field.

The past two decades have seen the emergence of explicitly religious programs of addiction treatment and such non-religious, non-spiritual self-help alternatives as Women for Sobriety, Rational Recovery and Secular Organization for Sobriety. The treatment field is being forced to become spiritually multi-lingual given the enormous diversity of our clients.<sup>iii</sup>

While spirituality has a visible place within the treatment side of the field, such is not the case with prevention. If we are to explore the potential of this force called spirituality within the prevention arena, we must first forge a language to guide our efforts. The challenge is to create a language broad enough to capture the phenomenon of spirituality while avoiding language so vague and diffuse that it fails to define and delineate.

### *Cultural and Professional Context*

We enter this exploration of spirituality at a particular point in the history of our world, our culture and our professional field. Ideologies and the political and economic structures that supported them are toppling, with the cries of celebration muted by fears of anarchy and civil war. We enter an era in which the world order is tenuous and open to the call of the best and worst within us. In our own country, we are reeling from a decade of narcissistic excess, concerned about the health of our families our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work and our communities. We speak of a lost sense of connectedness and a shift of values from social duty and public service to self-exploration and self-indulgence. There is a cultural hunger for personal meaning and intimacy. We seem to be desperately in search of the social glue that can mend the web of our interconnectedness and mutual support.<sup>iv</sup> Following two decades of unprecedented success, our own professional field finds itself in a crisis depicted in terms of federal and state funding cuts, restrictive third party coverage and managed care. And yet out of our explosive growth, our industrialization, our obsession with profit and regulatory compliance, and our competition with and isolation from one another, has come a growing sense that we are a field whose essential character is being shaped not from within, but from forces outside the field. A growing number of persons are calling for us to re-center ourselves, to re-articulate a vision for the future and a core set of values and principles that will guide our business and service practices. Perhaps it is not surprising in such

a global, cultural and professional context, that concerns about spirituality have intensified.<sup>v</sup>

In the summer of 1992, the Prevention Resource Center brought together a small group of persons to define spirituality within a prevention context and explore its potential contribution to the prevention field. The ideas below emerged out of this interactive and collaborative process. This paper is testament to the belief that we can do together through a synergism of relationship that which we could not do alone. Any failure to capture and convey the clarity of our vision is my own. The purpose of the dialogue was not to draw definitive conclusions, but to lay the groundwork through which more substantive work could occur. As a result, much of our effort focused on defining spirituality and the parameters of its application to prevention.<sup>vi</sup>

### Spirituality and the Human Condition

Human beings, since the birth of consciousness and self-consciousness, have spent considerable time pondering the meaning of their existence and altering their life choices based on the conclusions drawn from these ruminations. Our awareness, our consciousness, our need to give order and meaning to life, and also our need to alter consciousness makes the issue of spirit as old as human life. Through thousands of religions, philosophies, political and economic ideologies, lifestyles, vocations and pastimes, we have sought to make sense of our world and our place in it. Through drugs, music, dance, sport, feasting, fasting, sexual frenzy, and every manner of religious ritual--through episodes of ego-surrender and ego-intoxication--we have sought to alter our experience of ourselves and our world.<sup>vii</sup> This need for meaning and altered consciousness is the root of the spiritual experience. This need has been channeled into the highest achievements of our civilization and our most unspeakable atrocities. We will begin by distinguishing spirituality and religion and then define this phenomenon called spirituality. Our discussion will end with an exploration of the potentials and hazards the exploration of spirituality poses the prevention field.

### *A Brief Note on Spirituality and Religion*

It will be impossible to address the issue of spirituality without defining and delineating the phenomena of religion and spirituality. Spirituality and religion are two overlapping phenomena whose differences, commonalities, and inter-relationships need to be explored at great length, particularly as they relate to prevention. An essential started point is the recognition that there are religious and nonreligious varieties of spiritual experience. In the discussions which follow, spirituality will embrace both religious and non-religious spiritual states and

experiences.<sup>viii</sup>

### ***A Working Definition***

*Spirituality is a heightened state of perception, awareness, performance or being that personally informs, heals, empowers, connects, centers or liberates.*

There is a continuum of spiritual experience that can be plotted based on the source of the experience. There is a spirituality that springs from pain, a spirituality that springs from pleasure, and a spirituality that flows from the simplicity of daily life. The power of the spiritual to throw us beyond our normal range of experience is evident in the language of persons describing this phenomena: awakening, epiphany, rapture, psychological seizure, peak experience, defining moment, struck speechless, awe, release, sublime, rebirth, breakthrough, and ecstasy. The spirituality of fully experiencing the subtlety and depth of the ordinary is described in words such as harmony, balance, centered, bliss, serenity, and tranquility. The fact that these conditions or experiences provide alternatives to or antidotes for chemical intoxication make them a potentially important area of study in substance abuse prevention and treatment. A more detailed examination of our working definition of spirituality could explicate such potential.

### ***Defining Spirituality for the Prevention Context***

The first half of the working definition attempts to describe what spirituality is; the second half seeks to describe spirituality through its effects.

**HEIGHTENED:** This word implies an acute sensitivity, an intensity of consciousness that transcends the ordinary, a sense of the peculiarly authentic, an amplification and elevation of one's experience, an openness to awareness. Heightened states are often self-perpetuating--a quality reflected in Nathaniel Branden's observation on "the capacity of ecstasy to re-generate itself."<sup>ix</sup>

**STATE:** State can reflect a unique, time-limited experience as in Groff's concept of "spiritual emergency"<sup>x</sup> and White's concept of "conversion crisis"<sup>xi</sup> in addicts, or an enduring condition or quality, as in the statement, "She is a very spiritual person." State may or may not involve full personal consciousness of the condition. Spirituality doesn't require intentionality. The spiritual person may not have sought this state as a goal and may not self-identify himself or herself as having this quality. Intentionality and awareness notwithstanding,

heightened state suggests an elevated readiness to experience or respond. Spirituality as a condition is the framework of valuing out of which we commit our energies in a sustained way. Spirituality is to one's life what the brain is to one's body: it is the central processing station that integrates and gives meaning to our choices and actions.

**PERCEPTION:** Heightened state of perception suggests an unusually sharp clarity and depth of seeing, a capacity to see previously unseen patterns and relationships and meanings, and a breakthrough in the perception of the self, the world and the self-world relationship. There is a piercing through the superficial to see that which is of ultimate value and importance--described at its most intense as a mind-shattering vision.

**AWARENESS:** Heightened state of awareness implies that which is perceived is now organized into patterns of meanings. Awareness implies cognition and an ordering of sensory and emotional data into a meaningful whole. It is an understanding of relationships, an ordering of values, a framework for choices out of which one can say yes and no. It is an ordering of priorities which reflects a deep appreciation of one's ultimate concerns and personal destiny. This heightened state of awareness that is spirituality often breaks into awareness through symbols, songs, metaphors or stories. Awareness can break through as logic, as intuitive instinct, or the gleaning of paradox. Spiritual awareness often involves seeing the great issues of one's age played out at in the microcosm of one's own life--a perceived thread between personal destiny and human destiny.

**PERFORMANCE:** Heightened state of performance is the execution of behavior in an extraordinary manner. It is the lost contact with everything in the universe except the instantaneous execution of this act or series of acts. It is the mother lifting her car off her child, the altruistic suicide of a soldier throwing himself or herself on a grenade to save his or her comrades, the athlete who gets "in the zone," the artist whose performance is driven by a mysterious source of power and passion. It is the acting out of one's ultimate values in a "moment of truth."

**BEING:** A heightened state of being is an experience of emotional harmony and balance, a feeling that one is on the correct path of self-destiny--what Joseph Campbell frequently referred to as "following your bliss."<sup>xii</sup> It is a congruence between our aspirational values and our personal choices and actions, in short, our process of living.



The second half of our working definition describes how spirituality is experienced and to what effect. The elements below are at the same time consequences of the state of spirituality and mediums through which spirituality can be accessed or transmitted: informing, healing, empowering, connecting, centering and liberating.

**THAT PERSONALLY:** The experience and effects that flow from this optimal state called spirituality are experienced uniquely within each individual. There is no generic spirituality. Spirituality--the condition--and spiritual experiences--high intensity episodes within this condition--affect humans in a number of ways that have relevance to substance abuse prevention.

**INFORMS:** Spirituality teaches and guides. The lessons may be highly personal or may involve a personal filtering of a universal spiritual truth, e.g., you reap what you sow. Spirituality involves teachers as well as lessons--indigenous sources of wisdom and guidance within the human community, e.g., teachers, elders, high priests/priestesses, storytellers, and tricksters.

**HEALS:** The spiritual has long been seen as a source of healing. Spirituality brings dimensions of cleansing, self-forgiveness, a restoration or creation of wholeness. Healing can involve self-inventory, touch, confession, and restitution. Spirituality can be a powerful transformational force.

**EMPOWERS:** Spirituality is about power. It is a connection with powers within the self and powers beyond the self. It is inspiring, horizon-raising, energizing, galvanizing. It is contagious. It is joy and exaltation and ecstasy. Spiritual empowerment also bestows an inescapable duty and responsibility. It is the tempering of character through the fire of suffering and adversity.

**CONNECTS:** Connects reflects an empathic identification, the capacity to project oneself into another's experience--to link the experience of the self and other as one. It is a linking back to the past and a bridge into the future. Connection is reaching out. It is a communication of relationship. Connection is atonement and reconciliation. It is the experience of intimacy--the experience of "we." It is the antidote to isolation and alienation. Connection is based on truth-telling and a covenant of fidelity to the proposition that our interests and destinies are irrevocably linked. It is mutuality, reciprocity and interdependence. It is a celebration of the paradox of simultaneous diversity and unity.

**CENTERS:** Spirituality is that ability to hour-by-hour, day-by-day re-center ourselves by bringing our choices and actions into compliance with our aspirational values. It is moving back in harmony with self and with others. It is the gyroscope that keeps us morally upright. It is discipline, duty and responsibility. Centering implies balance--an antidote to excessive behavior--a cultivation of openness, flexibility and tolerance. It is a comforting and sustaining process.

**LIBERATES:** Spirituality is fuel for struggle against internal and external shackles. It challenges us to cross barriers and break imposed limits. It is responding to the heart rather than mechanistic compliance with externally imposed expectations. It is the collective genius, endurance and resilience of oppressed individuals and peoples. It is detachment. It is the transcendence of biological appetites. It is the transcendence of the excesses of prosperity and hardship. It is a raw force or energy that inevitably struggles against the structures that attempt to contain it.

### *Spirituality in Action*

What does spirituality (S) have to teach us about the prevention craft. S says everything is personal; we are touched only by that which reaches us at a personal level. We each possess spiritual receptors that can only be accessed through prevention messages couched in the specialized languages, symbols, and stories which we are able to receive. S says there are alternative states of consciousness that can compete with the seductiveness of drug intoxication. S says we can be called and challenged to higher levels of expectations because others exist at that level. S says many people who are wounded can and do get well outside the boundaries of organized treatment. S says that religious experience and religious practice is a viable alternative to drug use and a legitimate pathway of transformation from the state of self-destruction to the state of becoming. S says that there are indigenous people and indigenous institutions--weakened as they may be--that are sources of healing and reconciliation. S says that religious organizations are an underutilized resource. S says everything we do in prevention hinges on building a foundation of connectedness between all people. S says we must help build and nurture community. S says we must begin to person-by-person re-establish the web of interdependency and mutual respect that is the essence of community. S says people need opportunities for introspection and self-inventory. S says self-awareness, self-affirmation and empathic identification with others are incompatible with drug abuse.



In some ways, exploring spirituality may lead us simply to describing what we already do in prevention in a different language. There are many ways in which the functions of spirituality defined above parallel the currently articulated prevention strategies. But there may be whole new technologies available to us if we explore the mediums through which spirituality is experienced: sacred objects, sacred places, special people and roles, core ideas, core values, special language, literature, music, dance. We may through this exploration of spirituality discover new rituals for listening, identifying, remembering, cleansing, forgiving, centering, grieving and witnessing and testifying that bolster chemical health and emotional health.

### *The Dangerous Side of Spirituality*

While affirming the potential contribution of a more focused examination of spirituality in the prevention field, it would be best to proceed very cautiously in this exploration. Spirituality, like any power, may be bent to serve different purposes and ends. Clinebell's distinction between pathogenic (sickness fostering) religion and salogenic (wholeness fostering) religion can be applied to spirituality.<sup>xiii</sup> There is the potential for unexpected and harmful consequences in the exploration of religion and spirituality as a dimension of behavioral health. There is the danger of rigid promotion of particular brands or forms of religious or spiritual belief and practices. There is danger that the historical separation of church and state could be breached through the use of public funds to promote or otherwise advocate religious and spiritual experience, no matter how broadly defined. There is danger that a movement recognizing the legitimacy of many religious and spiritual disciplines will be attacked by those individual groups who claim exclusive legitimacy. There is the danger of the spiritual con--the manipulation of religious and spiritual forms for personal aggrandizement, political power and profit. There is danger that the utility that comes from a clearly defined concept of spirituality will be lost through a plethora of revisionist profiteering--a phenomenon some say has happened with the concept of codependency. The field has had enough contact with cults the past two decades to justify suspicion of any prevention or treatment medium that presents itself in the cloth of charismatic leadership, authoritarian structure, exclusive ownership of truth, aggressive and deceptive recruiting practices, possessive isolation of its members or participants, and a propensity for coercion, manipulation and exploitation. All of these factors pose risks to the prevention field that must be weighed and actively managed if a deeper link between prevention and spirituality is to be explored.

### *Finding the Beam in Our Own Eye*

As we proceed cautiously through the potentials and pitfalls of an intensified exploration of spirituality for other people and other systems, we would do well to explore spirituality as a source of renewal for our own organizations and our own workers.

To speak of spirituality in an organizational context does not rely on the religious or the mystical. It simply says that there are resources and relationships beyond the organization that can empower and imbue hope. It simply says that a commitment to service brings duties and responsibilities that transcend individual and institutional self-interest. Spirituality ...is igniting and nurturing hope within the organization and the transmission of that message of hope into the world.<sup>xiv</sup>

If spirituality is indeed a force that can be intensely explored in the prevention and treatment contexts, then perhaps a beginning point of this exploration is ourselves--those persons and institutions that practice the prevention and treatment crafts. We can provide opportunities that allow us to individually and collectively center ourselves--to get in touch with the best within our individual and collective experiences. We can test the capacity of this power (spirituality) to nurture and heal by applying it to our own organizations and our own workers. Our ability to use spirituality as a medium for personal and social transformation rests ultimately on our ability to use this power in non-coercive, non-violent, non-hierarchical, non-exclusive, non-possessive ways within our own spheres of professional influence--within our own organizations.

Religion is a system of beliefs about the nature of the universe, the nature of the ultimate concerns in life and the meaning of personal destiny which are usually explicated and affirmed through creeds, prescriptions for living, and rituals of worship.

- i. For a review of this early history, see White, W. *The Culture of Addiction, The Culture of Recovery*. Bloomington, Illinois: Lighthouse Training Institute, 1990.**
- ii. Spiritus contra Spiritum: The Bill Wilson / C. G. Jung Letters. *Parabola* Volume 12, Number 2, pp 68-71.**
- iii. The basic Text for Rational Recovery is Jack trimpey's *The Small Book* New York: Delacorte Press, 1989; The primary text outlining the Secular Organization for Sobriety Program is James Christopher's *How To Stay Sober: Recovery Without Religion* Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988; The primary literature for Women for Sobriety includes Jean Kirkpatrick's two books: *Goodbye Hangovers, Hello Life* New York: Ballantine Books, 1986; *Turnabout* New York: Bantam Books, 1986.**
- iv. For a complete study of this cultural transformation, see Bellah, R. et. al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* New York: Harper and Row, 1985.**
- v. For a more detailed discussion of these observations, see White, W. *In Praise of Service*. Bloomington, Illinois: Lighthouse Training Institute, 1992.**
- vi. Participants in this roundtable discussion included Theodora Binyon, Joan Daumen, Cy Fields, Jose Oporto, Bill White, Jim Winters and Pam Woll.**
- vii. For fascinating discussions of the alteration of consciousness as a basic human drive, see either Weil, A. *The Natural Mind* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972, or Siegal, R. *Intoxication* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989.**
- viii. For a working definition of religion to compare and contrast with the definition of spirituality, I would offer the following: Religion is a system of beliefs about the nature of the universe, the nature of the ultimate concerns in life and the meaning of personal destiny which is usually explicated and affirmed through creeds, prescriptions for living and rituals of worship.**
- ix. Branden, N. *Judgement Day: My Years with Ayn Rand* New York: Avon Books, 1989.**
- x. Groff, C. *Addiction as Spiritual Emergency* Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True Audiocassette, ND.**
- xi. White, 1990, pp. 458-460.**
- xii. Campbell, J. *The Power of Myth* New York: Anchor Books, 1988.**

**xiii. Clinebell, H. *Understanding and Counseling the Alcoholic Through Religion and Psychology* New York: Abingdon Press, 1956.\_**

**xiv. White, 1992, p. 16**