



NEW JERSEY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The Head, Heart, and Soul in Psychotherapy

By Charles Dodgen, PhD

In the nursing home where I provide services, I do not think it possible to overestimate the importance of spirituality (expressed through religious practice or more informally) in the maintenance of the well-being of its residents. My observations have brought me to the conclusion that individuals who routinely engage in spiritual activities (whether through prayer, meditation, or other value-laden practices) receive benefits of enhanced meaning, and reduced loneliness and suffering. And, I have asked myself, if such activities are beneficial for the elderly or disabled, why not for others? Must we “hit bottom” and be humbled in some way before we recognize the value of attention to matters of spirit? Simply put, one undeniable lesson from my nursing home work which applies to all of us is that we would be hard-pressed to find any down-side to meditating, praying, practicing gratitude, providing service for others, attending a religious service, or admiring nature. Such behaviors appear to only be advantageous and we would be well advised to engage in them in the same way we employ other healthy habits relating to nutrition and hygiene.

Although the care facility I work in has no formal religious affiliation, the presence of spirituality is evident. It may come as a surprise to some, but what I witness usually does not involve worship or prayer in an attempt to achieve a magical restoration of youth and health. Instead, I see a more realistic and positive attitude that involves love, gratitude, and the receiving of comfort, purpose, and meaning in the face of physical and mental decline, loss, and suffering. A positive focus on spirituality provides many benefits: it can be a strong tonic to relieve suffering; it can counteract negative attitudes and emotions; and it can ease loneliness. An enhanced sense of community is often realized for residents who might otherwise share little in common, but who meet regularly at religious services offered in the nursing home. Even for individuals who privately

engage in spiritual practice, the sense of the presence of God, or other higher power, provides much needed fellowship.

The advantages of religious practice were most obvious with Tina, an eighty-nine-year-old widow whose nursing home stay was necessitated by debilitation from multiple serious medical conditions including cardiac, respiratory, and endocrine diseases. Always physically uncomfortable, relatively immobile, and a social isolate, she retained her vision and mental faculties that allowed for her favorite activity and only apparent source of pleasure: reading the Bible, prayer books, and other Christian-themed literature. I do not believe that I am being overly dramatic when I state that the difference between life and death for Tina was her religious faith and practice. For her, there was no other reason to endure the physical and emotional discomfort she experienced. Through her reading and attendance at weekly religious services and prayer meetings in the facility, Tina maintained her mental sharpness, engaged in some physical and social activity, and reinforced her motivation to live. With so little enjoyment in her day-to-day existence, life would have been intolerable without spirituality. Much of my time with Tina was spent in discussion of her readings; my support of her interests was an intentional intervention. Since her only stated purpose was to “honor the will of my God,” to redirect her from this singular aim would have been folly.

In a setting where life could be described as slower, simpler, and more basic than in the community, and where individuals like Tina often have been stripped of physical and mental abilities, and most material possessions, intangible matters of spirit are of primary importance. The psyche in psychology does not just refer to the mind as the center of intellect and emotion, but also to the soul or spirit of an individual. To address all of the needs of their patients, and to optimize wellbeing, psychologists must concern themselves with the thoughts, feelings, *and spirits* of their patients. As individuals, we should develop these practices as well. The emotion-balancing, serenity-enhancing benefits of spiritual practices can, and should be, enjoyed before old age, pain, or suffering prompts us.