WHERE FAITH AND THERAPY MEET

On December 20, I attended a seminar by Joseph Currier on *Spiritual and Religious Competencies for Mental Health Care*. The seminar was put on by Duke University’s Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, under the direction of Dr. Harold Koenig, a leading researcher in the field.

Much research has been done on how religion and spirituality affect our mental health. This seminar explored how the results of this research could be put into practice by clinicians. Among other things, attendees learned how to appreciate and access their client’s spiritual and religious strengths

Those who read my blog know that I take whatever opportunities I can to let the voices of those with mental health issues be heard. This seminar, with professional clinicians as the primary audience, prompted me to have my perspective as a receiver of counseling heard.

I have a secular therapist who has shown himself to be a spiritual person, though he’s not religious. Because of my strong faith, I’ve spoken a lot about it in my therapy sessions. He has been very open to listening, asking questions to further his understanding. I benefit from his clinical skills, yet we don’t ignore the Christian faith that’s important to my ability to cope. I could not imagine receiving therapy without paying attention to my faith.

A recent session is an example of how Tyler (not his real name) managed to help me adopt a more positive attitude to my difficulties by helping me focus on my faith. The improved shift in mood that developed could only have been accomplished by his implicit reminder of what God means to me.

It was only in the following days that I recognized what Tyler was up to when he told me how some of his clients had reported finding joy when they pray. Some of them had found a greater closeness to God. He asked me, “Have you had such experiences?”

At first, all I could remember when I thought about being close to God, were the times I was suffering and felt Jesus close, as he too was suffering. I remembered the fellowship I shared with him. That experience had meant a lot to me. But it wasn’t joy.

As I mulled further over the question Tyler had asked, my mind went to what I believe was one of the most powerful prayers I had ever uttered. The most powerful, yet smallest.

I told Tyler about how, one spring day, I had come upon a garden with many crocuses. The wonder of it took my breath away. And all I could say was a quick but heart-felt “Thank you, God.” I will always remember the great joy I felt dancing inside me as I did so. And it all came from this brief expression of gratitude. “Thank you, God.” Brief but meaning so much.

Tyler showed how it was possible for a therapist to help me access my prayer life without him actually praying with me—something that would not fit with the role of a counselor. He reminded me of my relationship with God. He got me thinking about where my faith had helped me in the past and where it could help me again.

The session was a successful one. I went home, having experienced a release from the distresses I had brought into the office with me. My therapist had done double duty—using traditional counseling skills and reminding me of the faith that he knew was important to me.

The lessons I learned during that counseling session are staying with me and probably will for some time. I was reminded of the many things God has given me to be thankful for. I had found encouragement in my faith and a strengthening of my ability to cope.

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