

The Journey of the Spirit

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Many authors have sought to describe the spiritual journey of human beings. H.R. Moody did so in *The Five Stages of the Soul* (1997. Anchor Books. ISBN 0-385-48677-4), while Ernst Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham describe a more central aspect of the journey in *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (1992. Bantam. ISBN 0553371320). The insights of these books are helpful for clinical work in that they chart elements of the spiritual journey that may be common to us all no matter what our religious or spiritual beliefs might be. The following are four stages of the spiritual journey that I have found to be helpful in identifying in order to provide spiritual care in a clinical setting.

The first stage is called “struggle.” Struggle happens when old ways of thinking and believing and old foundations or values are challenged by new experiences in life. For example, a person can believe that God loves them until they suffer from a stroke. This struggle could be similar to philosopher Hegel’s notion of “antithesis” in which a person may believe that life is going along fine, he or she has beliefs or theses that work until they are confronted with “antithesis.” The result is internal struggle as thinking, values and beliefs are challenged.

The second stage of the spiritual journey is “wounded-ness” which happens when a person confronts internal conflicting ideas, but also comes to realize that life is not as simple and straight-forward as once thought. To struggle is bad enough, but to be wounded and become conscious of one’s essential humanity and vulnerability is something else. The fear of going to the place of wounded-ness is often the reason people become incapacitated by their struggles. It may feel safer to struggle than to become aware of one’s fragility or wounded-ness.

In truth, it is only by embracing the wounded-ness that a person is able to move on to the next stage of “naming” what is truly happening to them. Naming can take many forms as the wounded person comes to new understandings and perspectives that expand and enhance their life. Naming can mean change of the self, change in the expectations of others and change in the individual’s perspective of the world.

Following the process of naming is the final stage, “blessing” where the fresh perspective, changed insight and altered understanding add to the view of one’s self, others and the world around them. They are no longer seeing dimly in a mirror, but instead their perspective is enriched, expanded and grows. They are now a different person, having struggled with something new in their lives, have confronted their inner doubts and needs, acknowledging their wounded-ness and embracing the new blessings that follow the person who has the courage to complete this journey.

Where are your clients/residents in their spiritual journey? Are they new to the struggle? Or have they gotten caught up in the struggle for fear of experiencing wounded-ness. Are they on the brink of naming, needing someone with whom they can clarify the issues, or do they need the encouragement that suggests that there is light at the end of the tunnel if they will only continue to search? Have they completed the journey and need someone with whom to share the blessings or are they resting in the blessings and are thus ready for a new struggle that always seems to come in life?

These are the four stages of the spiritual journey that I believe are we all in one way or another follow. Sometimes it is helpful to the client/resident, who is having difficulty seeing the bigger picture as in seeing the trees instead of the forest, to find encouragement from someone who can still see the bigger picture, as in seeing the forest instead of the trees.