



# From 'secular' to 'sacred', from despair to hope: a therapist's spiritual journey

**Avigail Abarbanel** explores how her own transforming spiritual journey informs her work as a psychotherapist

**W**hen I think of my spiritual transition I think of two parallel but interdependent processes in my personal history. One is the 'discovery' of my God or my relationship with God, and the other involves a fundamental shift in my philosophy of life.

## Relationship with God

I grew up in Israel during the 1960s and 70s in a secular family within a secular society. The term 'secular' here refers to Israeli Jews who identify themselves as non-religious. They identify as Jewish but do not live according to Jewish religious law.

In Judaism, religious law is central to spirituality. According to Jewish religion, it is following the law that brings one

closer to God and makes one spiritual. The implication is that those who do not follow the law cannot have a close relationship with God and cannot be spiritual within a Jewish framework. If a secular person wishes to have a 'proper' relationship with God, he or she would be required to do a 'return' (*hazara bitshuva*), which means that they would have to adopt a fully religious lifestyle. Living fully according to Jewish law requires the sacrifice of many of the freedoms that are part of secular life and the relinquishing of Western principles like social equality for women.

As a result of this stark demarcation between religious and secular, I felt that I did not have a 'right' to a relationship with God unless I was prepared to adopt a religious lifestyle.





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### Spirituality

The other dimension of my journey comes from having been abused in my family of origin. According to Genia<sup>1</sup> childhood abuse can result in not being able to develop 'stable, trusting and self-affirming bonds with others or with God'<sup>1</sup>. What I consider abusive are not just the physical abuses I suffered, but the nature of the philosophy of life that my parents passed on to me. To be able to discuss this I need to look briefly at definitions of 'spirituality'.

It seems to me that in the literature the word 'spirituality' is used to represent two different ideas. Some writers think of spirituality as related to the transcendent or sacred, to love and altruism, hope, connectedness and compassion, harmony and unity in the universe<sup>2,3</sup>; or, according to Young-Eisendrath et al, to 'anything that [seems] to enhance the sense of the sacred in human life'<sup>4</sup>. Frankl defines the spiritual as, 'what is human in man'<sup>5</sup> and includes the capacity to be responsible. This view of spirituality implies something positive, benevolent or

desirable. Even writers who see spirituality in the everyday, highlight the idea that connecting with what appears to be ordinary can be a way of accessing the transcendent or divine<sup>6</sup>.

Another meaning of the word 'spirituality' is simply the collection of beliefs and values about oneself, life, one's purpose, the divine, the world<sup>2</sup>, or in other words, one's existential worldview or philosophy of life. This meaning is neutral and does not have positive, or negative connotations. Considering spirituality according to this latter definition opens the way to discussing harmful or unhealthy spirituality as well as stages of spiritual development.

My parents, and their parents before them, were Jewish. Their interpretations of life events, and the meaning they gave to them, do not just represent their individual psychology but also the social narrative in which they were formed. In other words, I consider my parents' belief system not only personal, but also cultural. Being born into this

cultural narrative, I consider that some of the conscious and less conscious beliefs that I inherited included the following:

- I am a harmful person.
- Most people are harmful to me.
- If someone is kind to me it is either because they are dishonest or because they want something from me. Real, unselfish human kindness does not exist.
- One bad deed cancels out any good deeds I have done.
- A person's inner world is untrustworthy and it cannot change.
- We are powerless to change our destiny and there is no point trying because we are bound to fail.
- Our family, and Jews in general, cannot expect anything good out of life.
- The world is a treacherous and dangerous place; especially for Jews and Israelis.
- Any setback, misfortune, hurt or disappointment is personal. It proves the previous point and signals that something much worse is about to happen.
- If a good thing happens, a bad thing is bound to follow because there has to be a balance.
- All non-Jewish people without exception are anti-Semitic, even if they don't know it. They will betray me/us at the first opportunity.

If I assess the nature of these beliefs using Clinebell's<sup>2</sup> criteria, I would have to conclude that this collection of beliefs did not enhance my human wholeness. In fact it compromised trust in myself, others and the world in general. It also made me fearful and anxious. In the same way that religious fundamentalism can offer 'a vision of divine judgment rather than love'<sup>7</sup>, my parents' belief system offered a vision of life based on fear and doom instead of confidence and security.

### Transition

My transition involved a fundamental shift in both dimensions, my relationship with God and my spirituality (belief system). Through association with a loving community I stumbled upon after coming to Australia, I was introduced to the idea of an unconditionally loving God who accepts everyone, regardless of who they are. I was also taught that having a relationship with God did *not* depend on following any particular religious laws. For the first time in my life I felt that I had a 'right' to a relationship with God. After almost 30 years of believing that there was no God that was accessible to me, this was a great relief and an important part of my transformation. Around the same time I also started psychotherapy for my PTSD. As a consequence of working with a humanistically oriented therapist, I gradually began to question all my beliefs about myself and my life.

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### Levels of narration

Steere<sup>8</sup> lists four levels of narration in people's personal retelling of their life stories in and out of therapy. The 'public story' refers to our public image, what individuals and families are prepared for others to know about them. The 'private story' includes themes or secrets that individuals share only with close confidants, and a family only with 'insiders'. The 'transformational story' is a more complete story in 'search of healing and reconciliation'<sup>8</sup>. It involves change in perception and includes taking responsibility for the part we play in our story and understanding better the roles others play in it. The 'sacred story' contains all that we have learned through the process of transformation and healing and includes what we have come to view as sacred, which according to Steere<sup>8</sup> lies at the centre of our being, our *axis mundi*.

When I first began my therapy journey to heal from my childhood trauma, I was living my life primarily through my public narrative. I presented a happy, competent and optimistic image. I did not reveal to anyone what happened to me in my childhood and what I really believed about life and other people. I began to develop a private story when I started to share my real history with my therapist and my ex-husband. My private narrative included what I knew about what my parents did to me. In my family we were not allowed to talk to anyone outside the family about anything that went on within the family. Therefore, sharing 'family secrets' with my counsellor, an outsider, for the first time in my life, was challenging, and scary, confronting me with guilt, and fear that I was betraying my parents. It was also liberating because it opened the way for a new personal narrative, independent of my family's private narrative.

I believe that my ability to heal from my trauma depended on realising that I had a *right* to my narrative (just as I had a right to a relationship with God); indeed, that I was free to construct a transformational narrative in order to heal. I was no longer a prisoner of the private and public narratives imposed on me by my family. The permission to construct a





new narrative involved a new freedom to also question what I believed about life and about myself. I no longer automatically trusted a view of the world that saw everything as uniformly negative and myself as wicked, unable to change and fundamentally doomed.

One of the most significant changes or transformations I went through was when I began to realise that what I hold sacred in life is the inner world of experience, of thoughts, feeling and beliefs, my own as well as that of others. This was reinforced during my psychotherapy training when I studied person-centred and Gestalt theories in which acceptance of the inner world, and inner experience, by others and the self, are central to healing and to healthy development. This was a major departure from a belief system that considered the inner world to be wicked and unchangeable.

### Implications for my work as a psychotherapist

Many writers argue that it is essential for counsellors to be actively engaged in developing their own spirituality. This is

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important so that they can identify and engage with their clients' spiritual dimension or issues, avoid inappropriate biases or blind spots and be able to be fully present with the client<sup>2,3,9</sup>.

I do not believe that it is possible, or even moral, for a therapist to accompany a client on a journey that the therapist is not prepared to go through. It will be hard or impossible for the therapist to understand, empathise or support the lived experience of such a client if the therapist does not understand the type of existential terror that needs to be negotiated along the way. Moreover, I think that not only clients, but therapists, need to be courageous. Courage comes from having faced one's own 'demons' and this is needed in order to sit with our clients through their terrors.

When clients come to therapy they are often distressed and desperate. They may feel a lack of direction in life, and while they sometimes hope for a positive change, they often do not believe that it is possible for them, or indeed that they even deserve it. If I had not changed my negative philosophy of life, I do not believe I could work safely or effectively with clients. For example, how can I help a client believe that therapy can help them change if I do not believe that change is possible? If a traumatised client needs to learn to develop trust and I myself do not trust life and the world, how would I be able to help? My old philosophy of life made me a suspicious person who did not trust anyone, especially non-Jews. Would it be possible for me to accept that a non-Jewish client is a good and worthy human being who deserves my empathy and compassion? It seems to me that without re-evaluating my philosophy of life, I would not have been able to perform even the most basic therapeutic tasks.

Therapy involves a great deal of contact with difficult or disturbing material. I would not have survived in this work for as long as I have, or been able to maintain a fresh and positive approach to my work, if I continued to hold on to a negative philosophy of life. Clients' tragedies would have reinforced my negative views and would have led to more disillusionment and bitterness, possibly to burnout. To remain healthy in this profession it is necessary to have a balanced view of life, which includes a generally positive outlook, together with awareness that life also contains the unfair, tragic and disturbing.

Discovering my own relationship with the transcendent was also crucial for my work as a therapist. Having a faith sustains me when I have to deal with difficult or disturbing stories. It also makes it possible for me to be naturally respectful of clients' beliefs in the divine, or transcendent, without judgment and without being concerned about whether or not a divine entity exists.

### Conclusion

I consider therapy to be a spiritual journey because it is a developmental process in which clients can find themselves re-evaluating their core beliefs and values. To be able to support and help clients in this journey, I must be engaged with my own.

### Biography

Avigail Abarbanel is a BACP accredited psychotherapist working in private practice in Inverness, Scotland.



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### Your thoughts please

If you have any thoughts or responses in relation to the issues raised in Avigail's article, we want to hear from you. You can write a letter, or respond with an article or story of your own. Email [thresholds.editorial@bacp.co.uk](mailto:thresholds.editorial@bacp.co.uk)