

CIRCLE OF MEANING:

A Narrative Tool for Exploring the

BY PATRICIA A. BURKE, MSW

There is a growing body of research in the addiction treatment field supporting the “practical wisdom” and personal experience of recovering people and addiction counselors, which confirms that spirituality is an essential part of the recovery process (O’Connell, 1999). For years the spiritual component of the recovery process has largely fallen under the auspices of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and treatment programs based on the principles of AA.

More recently, there has been a growing body of literature focusing on efforts to integrate a spiritually sensitive focus into counseling (Richards & Bergin, 1997); social work practice (Canda & Furman, 1999); and psychotherapy (Miller, 1999; Griffith & Griffith, 2002) inclusive of, but not limited to the principles and practices of the 12 Steps of AA. This body of literature encompasses and honors the diversity of ways people express and make meaning of their spirituality. The Circle of Meaning is a narrative tool developed by this author to help people explore their spiritual lives. This article provides a conceptual framework for the Circle of Meaning and, also, gives practical guidance to addiction counselors, psychotherapists, and other clinicians on using the Circle of Meaning to help them focus their conversations with clients about their spiritual lives in a respectful and culturally sensitive way that honors and celebrates the diversity and complexity

of peoples’ own meanings, intentions, values and commitments in recovery and in life.

Development of the Circle of Meaning

Responding to concerns regarding its growing substance problems, in September 2002, the People’s Republic of China, the World Health Organization, the Peking University Institute of Mental Health, the International Center for Health Concerns, and the New England Institute of Addiction Studies co-sponsored a training institute that brought an international panel of trainers and experts from the addiction field to China with the goal of educating and training medical personnel in the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, and to expand newly established 12-Step Programs and facilitate their integration into a comprehensive treatment model (Powell, Kawabe, Shinfuku, & Edwards, 2002). As a result of the interest in integrating a 12-step approach (with its emphasis on spirituality) into the Chinese substance abuse treatment model, the conference organizers invited two faculty members (Nakken & Burke, 2002) to offer a seminar on Spirituality and Addictions. The Circle of Meaning was developed by this author, as part of the seminar, with the intention of creating a respectful and culturally sensitive means by which to place the people receiving substance abuse services in the center of the conversation regarding their own

Multi-Dimensional Nature of Spirituality

spiritual meanings and how those meanings might be a resource for their recovery from addiction.

Circle as symbol

The circle is a universal symbol of wholeness and completeness. It also can be experienced as emptiness or spaciousness. While emptiness is an experience many people in western cultures avoid, it is highly valued in eastern (including Chinese) philosophical and spiritual paradigms such as Buddhism and Taoism. The value of emptiness is described in number 11 of the Tao te ching (Mitchell, 1988):

*We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.*

In Taoism, the circle, with its innate quality of inclusiveness, contains both light and dark (yin and yang) and offers a symbolic container within which the dichotomization of human existence, where experiences are deemed to be either good or bad, is transformed and all values and concepts are ultimately relative not absolute (Smith, 1991). The circle also is associated with sacred or consecrated space within which all experiences, beliefs, people are equal (Walker, 1988).

The circle, therefore, was chosen as a symbolic representation of spaciousness and inclusion, consistent with Chinese spiritual and philosophical meanings. It also provided an open space within which the either/or, right/wrong quality that often permeates conversations regarding religious beliefs would be diminished. In the center of the circle, all beliefs, meanings, and experiences are welcomed, thus supporting an open and richly textured conversation that can embrace any individual, cultural, philosophical, or language differences that might arise.

Spiritual themes

Once this inclusive and spacious context was defined, the next step was to provide a focus and a way of shaping the conversation about spirituality. To continue with the Taoist metaphor: "What is held within the emptiness of the clay pot?" The literature on integrating a spiritual focus

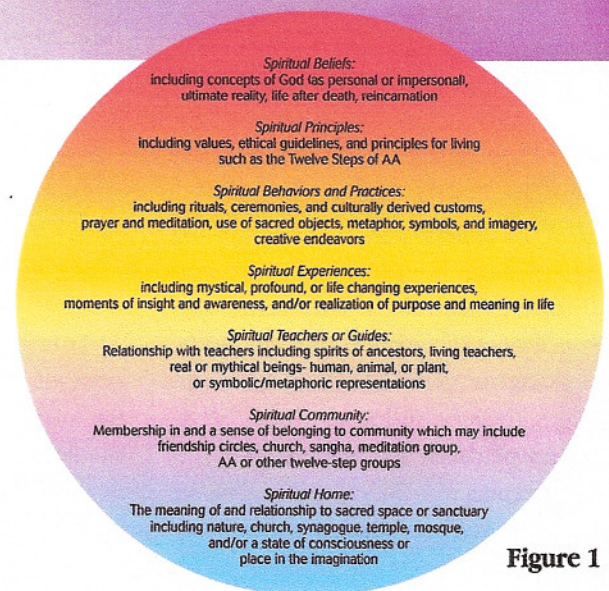


Figure 1

into clinical work and this author's 20 plus years of clinical experience offered some possibilities.

Much of the clinical literature tends to focus on the concept of a spiritual or religious assessment and objective or subjective assessment measures. Richards and Bergin (1997) suggest a number of "clinically important dimensions of religiosity," including metaphysical world view, religious affiliation, religious orthodoxy, religious problem-solving style, spiritual identity, God image, lifestyle congruence with values, doctrinal knowledge, and religious/spiritual health and maturity, that should be part of a clinical assessment.

Gorsuch and Miller (1999) offer three broad areas of focus when doing an assessment of a client's spirituality: spiritual beliefs and motivation, spiritual behavior, and spiritual experiences. Influenced by the philosophical underpinnings of Narrative Therapy, Griffith and Griffith (2002) offer an alternative to the psychological concept of a spiritual/religious assessment. They suggest that the psychotherapist focus on listening for and shaping

relationally derived. Once these themes are placed inside the spaciousness of the empty circle, meanings expand and the richness of an individual's spiritual life (and the ways in which his or her spirituality can become an ally in recovery) become more apparent and present (see Figure 1). The goal of the counselor is to listen for these themes, welcome them into the circle, and ask questions that will help the client expand upon their own meanings.

While the Circle of Meaning offers universal themes to explore, it does not suggest or impose any particular images, beliefs, or meanings onto the client.

conversations with individual clients in a collaborative way regarding their spiritual experiences that honors an individual's language, beliefs, and traditions even when the therapist does not share or has little knowledge of those traditions. Furthermore, they offer a number of ways that clients might express their spirituality including metaphors, stories, personal narratives, beliefs, dialogue, rituals, ceremonies, practices, and community.

In keeping with this collaborative model and Narrative Therapy's emphasis on story in the therapeutic context (Morgan, 2000), this author conceptualized the areas of focus of the conversation between counselor and client as themes. All stories have a theme or themes that thread their way through the narrative of events. In the context of a person's spiritual narrative, themes that often arise in therapeutic conversations include beliefs, principles, behaviors and practices, experiences, teachers or guides, community, and sanctuary or home. These themes, while not necessarily comprehensive, encompass many of the dimensions described above and place them in the context of an individual's personal narrative, shifting the emphasis from assessment and objective measures which are scientifically derived, to meaning and metaphor which are culturally and

erful influence of addiction in their lives.

While the Circle of Meaning offers universal themes to explore, it does not suggest or impose any particular images, beliefs, or meanings onto the client. As a result, the client is free to allow his/her own meanings to surface in unexpected and often potent ways. When asked to identify a spiritual teacher and describe his/her relationship to that teacher, one participant at the training institute in China replied that one of her spiritual teachers was grass. When invited to elaborate she said that grass is trampled on all the time, but in spite of this it always grows toward the sun. The spaciousness of the Circle, the focus on themes, and the intention to keep the storyteller in the center of the conversation in a respectful way enabled this participant to find her own meaning of "spiritual teacher."

Clinical method

The following is an initial method for using the Circle of Meaning to help clients identify the spiritual themes in their personal narratives and begin to understand the relationship between spirituality and recovery.

1) Invite the client to draw an empty circle on a blank piece of paper. If doing the exercise in a group, the counselor should draw a circle on the blackboard or newsprint. Invite the client(s) to take a moment or two to simply notice the circle and their own meaning regarding the circle as symbol.

2) Describe the seven themes and have them available on a poster or handout as a reference. Invite the client to draw and/or write inside the empty circle whatever pictures, colors, shapes, symbols, words, phrases, memories, stories, or images that are associated with each of the themes.

3) Invite the client(s) to look at the circle (which is now filled with words and images) and imagine how it might represent a picture or storyboard of his/her own spirituality. Ask the client(s) to notice any links or connections among the various themes.

4) Invite the client(s) to explore how their spirituality, as suggested by the drawing, might be an ally in combating the pow-

Expanding the spiritual narrative

These spiritual themes may be consciously identified through the use of the method described above or the counselor may simply begin to listen for these themes in the context of therapeutic conversations and hold the image of the Circle and its symbolic representation of spaciousness and inclusion in his/her own awareness. Once a theme is identified, the next step is for the counselor to help the client expand upon its meaning through the use of respectful inquiry focusing on the relationship between that spiritual theme and the person's recovery. Below are some examples of questions and exercises that support this inquiry.

Circle of Meaning initial questions and exercises

Spiritual Beliefs: Since beliefs are most often couched in the language of assertions of truth, when people with differing beliefs begin to assert them in the context of dialogue, conflict is often the result (Griffith & Griffith, 2002). As a clinician trying to help a client explore the meaning of his/her spiritual beliefs, it is therefore not helpful to focus on simply identifying a

belief and then assessing its merits as if it were an objective truth (which will lead to debate rather than conversation), but to collaborate with the client in “studying its ecological impact in the life and relationships of the person” (Griffith & Griffith, 2002). For example, if a recovering person holds the belief that a higher power can restore him/her to sanity (as in the second of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous), the counselor might want to explore “the real-life consequences of holding the belief in order to learn how it makes a difference” (Griffith & Griffith, 2002).

Here are some questions that might be useful in this collaborative inquiry after the client has identified a belief from the Circle that he or she would like to explore:

- How has this belief influenced your relationship to the drinking/drugging?
- How has this belief supported or been in alignment with your commitment to sobriety or contributed to relapse?
- What are the consequences of holding this belief in your everyday life?

It is important to note that when engaged in this inquiry with clients, that spiritual beliefs may have both positive and negative consequences and influences in a person's life. The goal of the counselor is to help the client investigate both and derive his or her own meanings from the inquiry.

Spiritual Principles: Beliefs are ideas or concepts. Values are qualities or ideals that are culturally derived and highly regarded by a group or society. Principles describe a code of conduct or a framework for action that moves people toward the realization of those values. For example, in his work on developing culturally specific addiction recovery for Native Americans, Coyhis (2000) asserts that honesty is a value implicit in the first step of AA. This step is based on the belief that alcohol is more powerful than the human mind or will. The principle, or honest plan of action, derived from this belief, is therefore, to admit powerlessness over alcohol. The following is an exercise that this author has

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found to be valuable in exploring the relationships between beliefs, values, and principles:

- Invite the client to draw another empty circle and place a belief, value, and principle inside.

- In collaboration with the client draw a map of these relationships: noting the underlying assumptions of his or her

Spiritual experiences may be moments of clarity or a felt sense of wonder, elation, peace or fulfillment.

beliefs; where these relationships are strong; where there is conflict or disconnection; and how these relationships support a person's recovery or detract from it. Diagramming these relationships and the implicit assumptions underlying beliefs, values, and principles makes them explicit and open to further inquiry.

Spiritual Behaviors and Practices: In addition to spiritual behaviors often focused on in the literature, such as prayer and meditation (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999; McCullough & Larson, 1999; Griffith & Griffith, 2002), clinical practice with the Circle of Meaning has demonstrated that people engage in a great diversity of practices that express their spirituality. Some examples include walking in nature, reading poetry, lighting a candle, reading sacred texts, and listening to music. Again, the focus of the counselor is not simply to identify these practices, but to help the client expand upon their meaning and relationship to recovery.

- How has this spiritual practice sustained you during difficult times in recovery?
- How has this practice added to the richness and texture of your spiritual life and your meanings, intentions, values, and commitments in recovery?
- Describe the relationship between these practices and your beliefs, principles, and values?

Spiritual Experiences: In addition to mystical, profound, or life-changing experiences, spiritual experiences may also

simply be moments of clarity or a felt sense of wonder, elation, peace, or fulfillment. Please be aware that profound spiritual experiences may also be disorienting, confusing or frightening. For example, Peggy related a story in which she felt the presence of her deceased mother next to her while sitting by the hospital bed with her niece who was in a coma after a drug

overdose. She was both comforted by her mother's presence and disturbed by the potency of an experience that she feared people would judge as bizarre or crazy. Understandably, she was initially reluctant to tell this story. It is the counselor's task to communicate an openness (as in the spaciousness of the Circle) and a curious, non-judgmental attitude toward the client. In this open and respectful space the client often expresses a sense of relief (as in Peggy's situation) and will feel more freedom to expand upon the meanings of these experiences and link them to the larger meanings and purposes in life and recovery. Below is an example of an exercise to initiate the exploration of this theme.

- Invite the client to recall a spiritual experience that is linked to his/her addiction or recovery narrative and write or tell the story.
- Listen for particular words, images, or metaphors in the story that seem to be potent with meaning and highlight them by inviting the client to highlight them with a marker or pen in their written story or asking questions like: I am curious about that word, image, metaphor; can you tell me more about what it means to you?

Spiritual Teachers or Guides: A useful idea from Narrative Therapy is that a person's sense of identity is created through interactions in relationships (Freeman & Combs, 2002). Therefore, in a person's spiritual narrative, relationships with spir-

itual teachers may be important in the development of a sober identity. Remember that spiritual teachers may include religious or spiritual figures like Jesus Christ or Buddha, spirits of ancestors, people who are currently in a person's life, like a sponsor, or mythical beings. Teachers might also include animals in the wild, pets, plants, or symbolic/metaphoric representations. The following questions are adapted from the relational identity work of Jill Freeman and Gene Combs (2002).

Pick a spiritual teacher from your Circle of Meaning and answer these questions:

- How would you describe your relationship with this teacher?
- What would this teacher appreciate about the development of sobriety in your life?
- If this teacher were here right now, what would this teacher say about the stand you have taken against addiction?
- How do you imagine that your sobriety contributes to your teacher's experience?
- How would you describe your identity in this relationship with your spiritual teacher?

Spiritual Community: Membership in and a sense of belonging to community, as in the fellowship of AA and NA, has supported countless persons' recovery from addiction. However, not everyone is willing or able to attend 12-step programs. Therefore, in exploration of the theme of community in a client's narrative it is important to be open to other possibilities of what community means to that person. For example, Joe had just been arrested for the second time for DUI and his wife filed for divorce. He had made the decision to stop drinking and wanted some support for maintaining his commitment to sobriety. He had been to AA once previously, but did not feel a sense of connection or belonging there. When asked about other experiences of community or connection, he told a story about a religious radio talk show he

listened to every morning on his way to work — how the minister on the show said a lot of things about leading an ethical life that made sense to him, and that the drinking did not mesh with this teaching. He also felt a sense of camaraderie with the people who called in. The following are some questions that helped shape the conversation about spiritual community with Joe:

- What do you mean by community?
- How does your sense of belonging to this community influence your daily life and your meanings, purposes, and intentions?
- How does your feeling of connection to the people in this community support your stand against the drinking/drug use?

Spiritual Home: Griffith and Griffith (2002) write, "Metaphors play a critical role in most forms of spirituality by posing abstract concepts in terms of images and events drawn from daily life." Spiritual home or sacred space is one such metaphor. For many people in recovery, the dark basement of the church which houses their home AA or NA meeting is their spiritual home. In many persons' stories about their early experience in 12-step meetings (and other sacred places) you will hear phrases like, "I finally felt like I had come home," or "It is the only place I can relax and be myself." For others, sacred space is not a physical location at all but a state of consciousness (sometimes achieved through meditation) or a place in the imagination. The focus of the counselor's inquiry is to listen for the metaphors that point the client to an experience of sanctuary and sometimes, in a respectful way, offer alternative metaphors as if they were small pebbles dropped into a still pool, with the intention of noticing and exploring the ripples that arise. The following is an example of a brief exercise that is like dropping a small pebble into a still pool:

- Invite the client to become still for a few moments and gently notice the breath.

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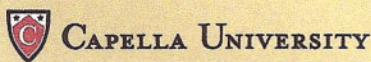
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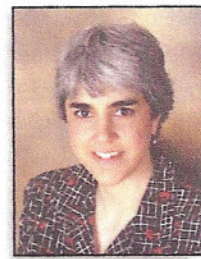


- When the client is in a mindful state of open attention invite him/her to contemplate this question: “What is my house of worship?”
- Invite the client to notice thoughts, feelings, images, memories, stories, or sensations in the body that arise in response to this question.

This exercise can open the conversation to multiple metaphors that not only describe sacred space for the client but, also, the nature of his or her relationship to that space, and how the images, feelings, and stories associated with that sacred space are linked to the client's recovery. For example, Lisa told of her early experiences at AA meetings, in which she would often sit, exhausted, frustrated, and unable to focus on the content of what the speakers were saying. She soon discovered that instead of trying so hard to focus on the message she could simply listen to their voices as if they were different instruments in a jazz ensemble. This music had the impact of helping her relax and feel more focused.

Conclusion

In *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith (1991) uses the metaphor of a “stained glass window whose sections divide the light of the sun into different colors” as one way to describe the relationship among the world's religions. The light is one energy source, but when reflected by the different sections of glass, a multitude of colors become apparent. This metaphor also describes the rich texture and multidimensionality of peoples' spiritual narratives and the relationship among the various themes highlighted in this article. The Circle of Meaning and the exercises and questions discussed here offer addiction counselors and other clinicians a framework for helping them focus their conversations with clients about their spiritual lives in a respectful and culturally sensitive way that honors and celebrates the richness and diversity of meanings and purposes in peoples' lives and their recovery from addictions. ©



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