Practical Strategies For Growing Through Suffering: Personal and Professional Implications of Psycho-Spiritual Growth

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Everyone suffers. This presentation examines why some people come through suffering “better,” meaning – the experience has made them more human, more compassionate toward others and themselves, with an increased sense of gratitude, connectedness and hope, while some people come out of suffering more “bitter,” more resentful and angry, feeling isolated and hopeless. Suffering can be the force that knocks out our illusionary beliefs about life and thrusts us toward a new consciousness about ourselves and the true nature of life. This presentation examines practical strategies for helping us to grow through the natural suffering that is a part of each of our lives.

Practical Strategy #1: Realize what gives life its ultimate meaning...

- Death provides life’s ultimate meaning because the reality of death tells us that everything that we value in life, indeed, life itself is “limited.”
- As death becomes more real to a person, he or she often begins to look at life differently.
- Bonnie Rait - Nick of Time: “When did the choices get so hard? With so much more at stake. Life gets mighty precious when there’s less of it to waste.”
- Facing our own mortality (illness – age) can inspire a “search for meaning” a kind of struggle often referred to as an “Existential Struggle” – Loss of roles – Deep Identity Crisis - Reawakening through this “struggle” = “spiritual growth.”
- The severity of one’s existential struggle as one approaches the end of life is often proportional to one’s lack of (spiritual) growth (authentic search for meaning) throughout life. – “The unexamined life is not worth living.” - Socrates
Advanced and progressive illnesses bring existential suffering to patients as an inevitable consequence of the disease and its treatment. Physicians need a typology of existential distress to aid its recognition and improved management. The major forms of existential challenge include (1) death anxiety, (2) loss and change, (3) freedom with choice or loss of control, (4) dignity of the self, (5) fundamental aloneness, (6) altered quality of relationships, (7) our search for meaning, and (8) mystery about what seems unknowable. An adaptive response to each challenge promotes equanimity, peace, and fulfillment while sustaining engagement with life, creativity, and joy. Physicians can do much to nurture courage and maintain each person’s sense of meaning, value, and purpose.

Definition: Existential depression occurs when one confronts issues of existence such as life, death, disease, and freedom. An individual suffering from existential depression questions the meaning of life and often feels it is meaningless. While some people may experience this kind of depression after some traumatic event, such as the death of a loved one, gifted people may suffer from it spontaneously; that is, there is no apparent triggering event.

Most men (people) lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them” - Henry David Thoreau

A desperate search for meaning...

Logotherapy is founded upon the belief that it is the striving to find a meaning in one’s life that is the primary, most powerful motivating and driving force in humans. Logotherapy is a short introduction to this system is given in Frankl’s most famous book, Man’s Search for Meaning, in which he outlines how his theories helped him to survive his Holocaust experience and how that experience further developed and reinforced his theories.

“Our Hearts are Restless Until they rest in You” Saint Augustine of Hippo Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church

Strategy #2  Commit yourself to “Spiritual Growth”

Spirituality - A working definition:
Spirituality is about “growth in becoming fully human.” It is related to our need to feel connected to the source of life connected to others and the world. Spirituality implies a self-transcendence beyond our personal world and concerns. Spirituality is related to our need for hope, finding meaning and purpose in our lives (multiple web-accessed dictionaries).
Having a spiritual life is about growing in the realization of our “essential oneness with all of creation” and growing in the realization that we are not the center of the universe.

- Process of Individuation - Carl Jung, Psychotherapist

Understood in this way everyone has a spirituality - a spiritual life - a need to feel connected - some choose to express it in religious ways and practices.

Many believe that the Higher Power in life is “God.” Some do not, and yet, feel quite connected and whole, they love and receive love - some deny a connection with the rest of life and the world altogether.

Realize that we are all connected… Even though we are not the center of the universe.

- “We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness” – Thich Nhat Hanh
- The God in me recognizes the God in you (Nomisday).
- Invisible ties that bind

So… if having a spiritual life is about “life long growth” in becoming fully human then the thing we have to do (personally and professionally) is grow...

If you growing as a human being you should not respond like a “jack in the box” (Tina Sidoti).

Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

Practice responding differently
Religious Beliefs and practices

Religion: working definitions

- Religions are bodies of doctrine that specify a way of life centered on the maximization of the good, where the good includes both morality and right purpose. - The Progressive Living Glossary

- The way a group of people choose to express their beliefs about life and their relationship to the source of life (Higher Power or God) and others.

Some Religious actions...

- Reading the Bible
- Studying religious doctrine or theology
- Belief in God or Higher Power (that is involved in our lives)
- Prayer
- Receiving Communion, Celebrating the Seder Meal at Passover
- Service to others
- Observing religious holidays/holy days such as Christmas, Hanukah...etc.

Religious acts can be spiritual but they don't have to be...some very religious people are not very spiritual or spiritually connected.

The relationship between Religion and Spirituality is like the relationship between love and marriage...

- One can be married but not in love; one can be in love but not married; One can be married and in love.
- The ideal is that if you are married you are also in love.
A barometer of religious practices:

- "How do my religious practices or beliefs affect the way other people feel when they are around me?" Do my religious practices help me to become a more hospitable, loving, kind and accepting person? Does my religion help me to have a generative attitude toward others, one that affirms and nurtures other people's growth as a human being? Or does my religion provide me with a reason to feel better than others?
- The goal any healthy religion is to help us to re-discover our connectedness to all of creation and recognize the spark of the divine in each person. It is to help us to realize that there are invisible ties that bind us together. In fact, the more enlightened we are, the more humble we will become. We will consider ourselves better than no one. We will notice a growing sense of gratitude and appreciation for the gracious free gift of life.

Strategy #3 For "Growing Through Suffering": Discover a Larger Perspective:

- Helping others (and ways we can help ourselves) to discover a larger perspective is experienced as healing.
- As physicians, other health care givers, ministers and friends we must understand how loss of roles promotes diminished worth and value, and assist in negating the existential trauma associated with this emotionally disabling loss (health). We must facilitate a process of letting go of former roles, and help patients to reframe the illness and life through a sense of renewed meaning within a larger context of life, a more integrated and self transcendent context.

So how can I help someone discover a larger perspective? Appropriate intervention that helps to heal the human-spirit:

- Takes time - It is centered upon having unconditional positive regard and of acceptance of the other.
- Seeks to Create a "Sacred Space" where people can share "who they really are" in a safe non-judgmental dialogue and find acceptance - and to realize that it is okay to be "fully-human" and all that being human implies - including "surrender."
- Can provide a healing context for everything we do in Patient Care and is not only provided by the chaplain.
- Is designed to lead a person to discover their own inner resources by helping them to realize their "essential connectedness" to all of creation.
To discover a larger perspective...a few suggestions

- Look to nature. The Eagle Nebula 7 million light years away.
- Read a book that comes from a perspective "other than yours."
- Visit (be open to) to other "Faith Traditions"
- “Become a Lake”

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol (3500 years old) that represents wholeness and as such can help one to reframe what they are experiencing in a larger context of their life.

The process of mindfully walking or tracing your finger through a labyrinth can help you to realize and remember that life is a journey and where you are in the process.

Strategy #4 Recognize and Stop Self Imposed Suffering

- There is enough natural suffering in life. Get rid of the self imposed.

- Get rid of perfectionism (Make Peace With Imperfection) - Richard Carlson.
Make Time For Silence, Prayer and Meditation

Learn to appreciate silence - Clear your mind from your 24/7 agenda for 10 minutes (preoccupation)

• Discover the joys of prayer and meditation with others through a place of worship or spiritual community.

Growth Strategy #5
Grieve

• Recognize and acknowledge when you are grieving ...
• Grieving often involves the loss of a role(s)
• Give yourself to the grief process
• Let yourself feel the pain
• Sometimes find diversions...
• Express your sorrow, talk about it...
• Forgive yourself
• Get help if you need it

Strategy #6 Count Your Blessings and Discover the Power of Optimism

• "No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit." - Helen Keller

• No one knows enough to be a pessimist." - Dr. Wayne Dyer
Strategy #7” Unburden yourself by surrendering those things you cannot change

• Discover the power of the “Serenity Prayer”

• God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

A good question to ask yourself...

Do I really believe there is a higher power in life?
A plan other than mine...?
How do I react when my plan or expectation doesn't work out...?
How do I respond to interruptions to my plan in my agenda for the day?

In order to grow it is a good idea to examine your desires....What do you really want? Do you really want inner-peace or do you want what you want?

How do you catch a monkey in India?

Can you relate this lesson to your own life?
Strategy #8 “Open to the Flow in Life”

Living in harmony (peace) involves being open to change and newness of life in myself and in others...opening to the “flow” in life.

- Realize there really is a flow to life and that there’s something being born from what has died. There’s more to come...but you might have to wait a while...

- Discover - Accept - Surrender and Embrace the cycle of “life, death and rebirth” constantly at work in your life and the world. Learn to trust in it...Spring / Summer / Fall / Winter...Day turns to Night / Old die / Babies are Born...

Realize that if you struggle with change, and waiting...“Your In Good Company...”

“What is most personal is most universal” Carl Jung

- Realize that we all struggle with change at different levels. None of us like to wait...

- The great act of faith is when we finally realize “we” are not God (Oliver Wendell Holmes).

- In our excessive complaining, worry, our attempts to control life and other people we assume God’s role. There is a sense in which we all live like little “gods” trying to recreate the world in our image – the way “we” think it should be - Give it up!...surrender.

“With Open Hands”

Free me Lord from the inner-bondage and endless cycle of what I think needs to happen before I can be happy.

Free me Lord from my idea of the solution.

Help me to wait with open-ended joyful expectation and experience your peace. Amen.

- Chuck Sidoti
A friend of mine she cries at night, and she
Calls me on the phone
Sees babies pretty everywhere she goes and she
Wants one of her own.
She's waited long enough she says
And still she can't decide
Pretty soon she'll have to choose and it tears her up inside...
She's scared...scared she'll run out of time.

I see my folks, they're getting old, I watch their bodies change...
I know they see the same in me. And it makes us both feel strange...
No matter how you tell yourself, it's what we all go through...
Those eyes are pretty hard to take when they're staring back at you.
Scared you'll run out of time.
When did the choices get so hard?
With so much more at stake,
Life gets mighty precious when there's less of it to waste.
Hmmm...scared to run out of time.

Just when I thought I'd had enough
All my tears were shed...
But my heart was a-wound.

There were no painful words unsaid.
You came along and showed me
How to leave it all behind...
You opened up my heart again and much to my surprise.
I found love, Love in the Nick of Time. 3x  - Bonnie Raitt Nick of Time