

SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

A Healing Spirituality for People with Mental Illness and for Those
Who Care for People with A Mental Illness

*By Deacon Tom Lambert, Chicago Archdiocese Commission on
Mental Illness*

We are people with a mind, body, and soul/spirit. To become “wholly” human and “holy” human is to be aware of all three and to work at keeping all three healthy. Just as we need to take care of our body and our mind so too, we need to take care of our soul or spiritual side. We need to eat right and keep in good physical condition; we need to keep our minds well by learning and keeping our minds active. When we have an illness, physical or mental, we need to get good treatment for the illness. So too we need to work at growing spiritually. Especially when we feel distant from God. Developing our spirituality comes through prayer and meditation/contemplation in concert with good spiritual advice and caring for each other. These are tools we use to touch that which is deep inside us, at the center of our existence.

Spirituality means being in touch with the sacred. As spiritual people we believe we are created for a sacred purpose, a Divine plan, God’s plan, that gives us hope and meaning. Or as I once

heard it said, spirituality consists of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that animate one's life and which help nourish and deepen a relationship with that which is considered holy. It is about recognizing and tapping into that which is most deeply human and therefore most deeply divine.

The need to tap into the sacred often surfaces in our lives with questions at the most profound moments of our lives. Times of change and challenge present us with questions about the very essence of our existence. Who are we? What is the meaning of my life? Why am I sick? Why am I suffering? Why is my loved one suffering? Why me?

At one time or another we will or have asked those questions or at least attempted to answer them. They are not easily answered. Perhaps that is good, because they require us to look deeper into ourselves and what we are doing with our lives. Questions are a good thing if they prod us to seek answers. The more we work through the questions the clearer the answers become. Just as we can evolve physically and psychologically by working at our health and our education, so too, we can evolve spiritually by working at our relationship with God. The process in spiritual terms is "metanoia" or transformative change of heart.

Spirituality is not a science. Spirituality is entering into the mystery of God's love for us and living out that love in a world that does not always reflect God's love as it should. Spirituality helps us detach from the things that possess us. I know rich people who feel depressed and anxious about retaining wealth. I know poor people who feel very rich because of relationships they have and often are very generous with what little they have. I know many healthy people who are very anxious about maintaining their health and I know many ill people who feel very well because their faith helps them manage their illness. In my experience the difference lies in their ability to transcend or detach from the things that possess them or that they are a slave to, their possessions or their illness for example, and be more in touch with their spiritual well-being. It is our awareness of connection to God and to living out God's plan that can bring healing, hope and promise to our lives.

Our sense of who we are and what we can be is more than just a physical or intellectual state of being. It is or can be much deeper and more powerful than that! We can have the experience of life but miss the meaning. We don't want to miss the meaning.

The experience of life and especially the healing / recovery process from a major illness finds meaning from a spirituality that seeks and finds peace and embraces hope and promise. Peace from knowing we are on a good path by living in right relationship with God and our neighbor. Hope that comes from knowing we are living a life that is fulfilling and finds purpose because it builds up the community. Promise because we begin to understand how God is with us now and forever.

Philosopher Gabriel Marcel once said that “life is a mystery to be lived not a problem to be solved.” Spirituality is about entering into the mystery of the Divine and sacred part of our lives while living in the context of our everyday life.

In other words, while spirituality means looking within it also involves looking around us as well. We experience God’s love when we love unconditionally those whose lives we touch. We are communal people and it is in the community that we also discover and deepen our spirituality. We discover God’s love for us as we recognize the beauty of what has been created around us. A crisp morning sun rise, a walk under the canopy of a forest, a brilliant sun shining through the clouds, the wonder of birth, the grace of

an act of kindness, the wisdom of therapy and treatment – all and more are part of God's creation. We discover Hope in the kindness we give and receive from one another, we find wholeness in good treatment for our illnesses, we discover a life fulfilled by living in peace and harmony with those we share our lives with. We understand that being connected to one another is also part of God's plan because it is through the connectedness that we experience the love of God.

When struggling with issues of illness and suffering, whether our own or our loved ones, we benefit from the wisdom of those who have experienced it and are graced by it. There is something called redemptive suffering which is a means of putting suffering in perspective and looking at it in a way that we learn from it and grow in understanding of the Divine plan.

Let me be clear that suffering is not a good thing and I would just as soon avoid it as to have to go through it. Also, suffering does not come from God. God doesn't give us or our loved ones an illness to test us or because we have done something wrong. Bad things do happen to good people but don't blame it on God!

Suffering is a part of life. We see it around us, we have witnessed it in our lifetime by great people and we have read about it in history books. We have most likely experienced ourselves. With a major illness we sometimes ask "Why me?" Often suffering can lead to our isolating ourselves. In a sense creating our own hells.

In her book "Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness" Estelle Frankel says "spiritual healing is essentially about breaking out of the narrow prison of our own personal heartbreak to enter the heavenly palace of compassion and connection. It is about how the human heart can be broken open, so that the veils that keep us separate from one another and from our connection to the divine can be removed."

Our suffering can be redemptive and healing when we open our hearts to God and one another. When we invite God into our lives and use our suffering in a positive way that helps others. We see how the Divine plan is a healing plan. A healing spirituality is not remote from the world but engaged in it. A healing spirituality enables people to be aware of their own unique gifts and enables us to be passionately committed to a better society, to helping

one another. It respects the dignity of everyone and puts the needs of the most vulnerable as primary. Enabled by the strength and grace of our spiritual well-being we use our experience of illness and suffering to help others. That is the best healing for us as well. We can make the lives of so many others better by supporting them with the experience of what we ourselves are experiencing. And when we give, we receive so much more in return.

Over the years I have been asked questions from people with mental illness and families: where is God in all this? Has He abandoned me? Is God punishing me or testing me or my loved ones? These questions come from our questioning God's relationship with us. Does HE hear us? I believe the scriptures give us guidance on these questions. Here are some that help me:

- **Is God punishing me? NO! God loves me unconditionally.** With the familiar Prodigal Son story, Luke 15:1-10 Jesus tells the story of a son who demands all his inheritance and then squanders it on dissolute living. The son regrets his choices and returns to his father to seek forgiveness. The Father's

response is exactly how God relates to us... “But while he was yet at a distance, His Father saw him and had compassion, **RAN** to his son, embraced him, and told the servants to prepare for a celebration.” This is how God loves us unconditionally. He does not punish us, we at times create our own hell, or as Estelle Frankel would put it - our own narrow prisons of personal heartbreak. God does not punish; He always stands ready to embrace us.

- **Does my illness make me unworthy or less worthy? No!** In Genesis Chapter 1, **The first** creation story tells us we all are “original blessings” made in the image and likeness of God. In Genesis 1, verse 27, “God created humanity in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This affirms that we each have dignity and value. Again, in Genesis 1, verse 31, At the end of the sixth day “God looked at everything He had made, and He found it very good! I like to say God is part of our DNA.
- **Has God abandoned me? No !** In Genesis Chapter 2, we read about the 2nd Creation Story set in the

Garden of Eden. The plentiful garden I believe can be seen as a metaphor for God providing what we need to spiritually navigate the world we live in. God gives us the grace and the wisdom that leads to true happiness and joy. The grace that transforms and sustains us. The grace that gives us hope in times of need. As the metaphor of the Garden of Eden portrays, His gifts to us are in abundance and readily available to us and God wants to be part of our lives. However, as the story indicates, we have the freedom to reject God's gifts which results in feelings of being alone and unloved.

- **Does God love me? YES! Gospel of John 1 vs 4:16**

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” There are so many examples of God's love in the Gospels when Jesus reaches out to those that society has often discriminated against or pushed to the margins. People were stigmatized by their illness and called unclean. Jesus healed and restored them to their

rightful place. God loves us and when we return that love He heals our spirit.

- **Where is God in all this? Right by our side!**

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is told in Luke 24: 13-35 illustrates the process of how we can recognize God's presence when we feel all is lost. In this story the two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem on the way to Emmaus. Luke says the two were conversing and debating. I imagine they were trying to figure out what had just happened. They had been following Jesus and He had been crucified. I'm sure their hopes and dreams had been shattered. When Jesus appeared to them on the road their eyes were downcast and they didn't recognize Jesus. Clearly these two disciples were so depressed by what happened to Jesus on the cross that they didn't even recognize him as they walked back home. So, Jesus went through the scriptures – the unfolding of Salvation history and that evening celebrated the Eucharist in the sharing of the meal. The two disciples said "Didn't our hearts leap for Joy" as they recognized

Jesus! We too can remind ourselves of God's presence by being inspired by scripture and participating in the Eucharist. We can make our hearts leap for joy through the word of God and participation in our Eucharistic community.

In closing, I feel the heart of our spirituality is through our connection to God and to one another as well as the world around us. Rita Lambert has written a beautiful meditation called "Each Day" that reflects and draws us deeper into how we can experience connections in our everyday life. It goes like this:

EACH DAY

By Rita Sebastian Lambert, Spiritual Director

Each Day:

1. I will recall that I am a child of God. I am one who is created out of Love. I am chosen, good, holy and have purpose...a task to perform here on Earth before I return to the Father. I deserve to be treated as a person who has value and dignity.

2. I will embrace my illness or my family member's illness as a friend this day looking for what it is teaching me about the mystery of God and Life.
3. I will not allow the stigma of mental illness to defeat me this day. I will choose to have power over stigma by detaching myself from the stigma.
4. I will talk to someone today who will encourage me to see my goodness and holiness as a child of God. Maybe we will share a prayer together for one another.
5. I will look for humor and reasons to laugh and be happy. Quiet joy will be my goal.
6. I will read a passage from Scripture or something from a book of devotion, inspiration or spiritual reading that will encourage me to trust and hope in the power and love of God.
7. I will seek twenty minutes of solitude, silence, prayer this day. If my mind won't quiet down, if my thoughts keep racing, I will offer that as my prayer to God. If necessary and helpful, I will listen to soothing instrumental music or inspirational/religious music to quiet me and remind me that God is present.
8. I will walk outdoors marveling at a sunrise, a sunset, the song of a bird, the song of a bird, the soothing colors of nature...the serenity of green grass, a blue sky, the softness of the pastel-colored blossoms of Springtime and the peaceful waters of a river, lake or stream that ripple and

flow. I will remind myself that everything in nature is a reflection of the Creator and pleases the Creator just as it is and so do I just as I am.

9. I will delight in the knowledge that we are each created different because it is in our differences that we make a more powerful and beautiful whole. We each reflect a different aspect of the mystery of Life and God. Individually and together, we are a Masterpiece!
10. In God is my hope and my joy. I will give honor, glory and praise to God knowing and trusting what God has in store for me. We do not seek or like suffering but our suffering can make us strong in many ways and more compassionate and loving to others...our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Knowing for sure that although I long for God, God's longing for me is even greater. I will rest in that knowledge this day. Amen

May the Peace of Christ be with you always,

Deacon Tom Lambert – 12/15/2021