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SPIRITUALITY IN GLBT CLIENTS  
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Many of us in the field of social work today are familiar with the concept of the body, mind, spirit connection. In an ideally functioning human being, the body, the mind, and the spirit would work cohesively to strengthen the individual's sense of self in the environment. But, what happens when one of these manifestations of self has been, or continues to be, damaged by the very environment from which it seeks its main source of support? If we are focusing on the body, this would be considered physical abuse; the mind, mental or emotional abuse. When we are treating a client whose sense of spiritual connection or goodness has been damaged either by family, religion, or society as a whole, we are dealing with spiritual abuse. In much the same way as a survivor of physical or emotional abuse loses trust and connection to their abusers, while at the same time, clinging to them for dear life, so the survivor of spiritual abuse clings to a vision of deity that is punishing, all powerful, but holds the key to their very survival. Just as there are varying degrees of other types of abuse, so there is with spiritual abuse. While certain populations tend to be more prone to certain types of abuse (i.e., children to physical abuse, elderly to institutional abuse, etc), so there are significant populations that are especially prone to spiritual abuse.

It may be a difficult concept to fully understand on an emotional level, but the image that many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered people carry of God is not a loving, benevolent one. Picture for a moment, yourself as a child and going to Sunday school (or CCD or Hebrew school or another form of religious instruction). The teacher reads from the religious text that any boy who prefers chocolate ice cream to vanilla ice cream is a sinner. Boys who like chocolate ice cream are an abomination to God and any man who is a chocolate ice cream lover will forever burn in hell! Secretly, you are painfully aware that you love chocolate ice cream! You TRY to like vanilla, but no matter how much you deprive yourself of chocolate, you know that you are not a vanilla kind of kid! In school, the kids taunt you constantly... "You chocolate lover! You're disgusting!" "What's wrong with liking chocolate?" you retort. "Only girls like chocolate, you freak!! God made it that way! God hates Hershey boys!!" At home, things are not much better. "It's not natural for a man to like chocolate, son. It says so in the Bible...see, right here. 'It is an abomination for a man to eat chocolate ice cream, so sayeth the Lord.'" Every morning when you wake up, the first thing on your mind is how you can switch to vanilla. After all, you want God to love you, not be an abomination to him!

Some years later, your church has come down with a new understanding of the Scripture, and the plight of chocolate loving men. It's all right to PREFER chocolate...after all, God created you as a chocolate oriented man, and God does not make mistakes! However, as a man, you can NEVER EAT chocolate! You must learn to like vanilla ice cream, or deny yourself of ice cream altogether. BUT, you will then be "OK" in the eyes of God. Even though it's much better be a vanilla ice cream eater, God will still let you into heaven if you simply REFRAIN FROM EATING ANY ICE CREAM AT ALL.

As the child in this story, will your personal relationship to God be a comfortable,

loving, genuine one? Is this a God you can trust to love and support you throughout your life? More likely, you will struggle with the notion of God throughout your growing up years as an all powerful, arbitrary judge instead of a loving, nurturing parent.

As a therapist specializing in treating members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community, I have often seen first hand the effects of spiritual abuse on my clients. Since I advocate a strong sense of spiritual connection and purpose in treating my clients, this often presents a unique challenge. How does one foster a trusting, loving, accepting concept of higher power in a person whose experience of that higher power through religious, familial, or social teaching, has led them to believe that they are forever tainted, if not lost, unless they give up their "sinful lifestyle"?

Hope\*, a 22 year old lesbian woman, was raised in New Jersey in the Baptist religion, the granddaughter of the pastor of the local church. Her family was very religious, as evidenced by the fact that Hope missed only two Sunday services in her entire life up until the age of 14. At 14, Hope began to sense that there was something different about her...she began to realize she was gay.

"I saw other people 'black sheeped' for not adhering to religious doctrine. I listened to lots of sermons ranting against political figures that were more accepting of homosexual viewpoints. I heard plenty of derogatory comments from other church members about a woman whom they suspected of being a lesbian. I knew that if they knew about me, that I would be ostracized. It hurt. What I was learning about gay people from my religion was incongruous with the person I saw myself as being. I had to start emotionally pulling myself away from the church, because I couldn't accept myself and see myself as evil at the same time."

This depth of cognitive dissonance is a major factor in Hope's chronic depression. While she eventually made the decision to separate from the church rather than reject the person she knew she was, it continues to be a struggle for her to this day.

"I still feel guilty...dirty...like I'm somehow inferior. I feel like I fit into the category of SINNER (with a capital S and underlined); that I'm somehow bad and unredeemable. I couldn't become someone in that environment that could ever be 'holy'. Even though I understand on an intellectual level that that's not true, my emotional experience tells me something different...and when the clinch comes, I go with my emotional experience, because that's more deeply ingrained."

One might think that Hope's story is the exception, rather than the rule, especially in a politically progressive state. In many parts of our world governed by religious fundamentalism, same sex romantic and sexual love is punishable by death. However, even in our American culture, many of our leaders and fellow citizens have labeled the LGBT community as "sick" and "perverted" based on religious reasoning. In light of this climate, less severe forms of spiritual abuse also carry with it themes of fear, ostracism, isolation, and being made to feel "different", "dirty" or "evil". Even many of those clients who have had a relatively positive religious experience, when asked, "Which is the ideal life?" will choose heterosexuality over homosexuality because of what they were taught about values and morality in the context of their religion.

The question then becomes, how can we, as clinicians, attempt to help queer clients connect to a validating, affirming sense of spirit? Some clients continue to value the religion of their upbringing, either because they had a positive experience within their religion growing up, have never encountered negativity within their particular religion regarding different sexual orientations, or because their belief system is so strong that their faith has withstood the negative messages fed to them about being both gay and a member of that particular religion. In any of these cases, it is helpful to encourage the client to find a way to re-establish those ties with their religion or spiritual philosophy. Even in religions that are extremely anti-gay, there usually exists some support group or organization where LGBT members can gather together, worship, pray, have fellowship, and partake in other traditional religious activities as openly gay members. Some examples of such groups are:

Dignity -- LGBT Catholics--[www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org)  
More Light Presbyterians--LGBT Presbyterians--[www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org)  
SDA Kinship--LGBT Seventh Day Adventists--[www.sdakinship.org](http://www.sdakinship.org)  
United Methodists for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns--  
[www.umaffirm.org](http://www.umaffirm.org)  
Integrity -- Episcopalian-- [www.integrityusa.org](http://www.integrityusa.org)  
Lutherans Concerned North America -- [www.lcna.org](http://www.lcna.org)  
Rainbow Baptists --- [www.rainbowbaptists.org](http://www.rainbowbaptists.org)  
AXIOS-- Eastern and Orthodox Christian -- [www.qrd.org/qrd/www/orgs/axios/](http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/orgs/axios/)  
Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns --  
[www.webcom.com/bmc/welcome.html](http://www.webcom.com/bmc/welcome.html)  
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns -- Quaker-- [www.quaker.org/flgc/](http://www.quaker.org/flgc/)  
Maitri Dorje -- Buddhist -- [http://beyond\\_mental.tripod.com/byelaws.html](http://beyond_mental.tripod.com/byelaws.html)  
The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Jewish Organizations --  
[www.glbtejews.org](http://www.glbtejews.org)  
Al Fatiha -- Muslim-- [www.al-fatiha.net](http://www.al-fatiha.net)  
A Common Bond -- Jehovah's Witnesses -- [www.gayxjw.org](http://www.gayxjw.org)  
Affirmation--Mormon-- [www.affirmation.org](http://www.affirmation.org)  
Interweave--Unitarian Universalist-- <http://qrd.tcp.com/qrd/www/orgs/uua/uu-interweave>

Oftentimes, when a client re connects to a childhood religion, there will be a rush of feelings, ranging from the sweetly nostalgic to the bitterly painful. It is important to allow the client to express and process the full range of these emotions in order to draw his/her own conclusions from them. As social workers, we value the client's right to self-determination. In light of this value, our role as clinicians is to guide and empower the client in finding his/her religious/spiritual path without influencing this decision in any way. Adhering to this basic social work value can sometimes become quite challenging in some of these situations, such as when a client's chosen religion is completely intolerant and/or punishing regarding the client's sexual orientation. In these cases, helping the client connect with other LGBT members of their religion (through organizations like some of those listed above) becomes extremely important. Through fellowship and bonding with fellow members, clients can begin to see different and healthier ways to both continue to live an openly gay life and still be a part of their

chosen religious community.

Additionally, there are certain guidelines a clinician should keep in mind when working with an LGBT client around religious issues. First of all, the clinician should be in touch with his/her own feelings regarding homosexuality and whether s/he feels it is just as valid as heterosexuality. This is a key point in working with LGBT clients in general, and is one of the major differences between a "gay tolerant" therapist and a "gay affirming" therapist. A "gay tolerant" therapist will project the message to the client that being gay is not unacceptable, and that the client is a valuable person regardless of his/her sexual orientation. A "gay affirming" therapist welcomes the client's sexuality as a cherished manifestation of that client's spirit and worth, and celebrates it in unison with the client. If the therapist has unresolved issues due to his/her own beliefs (religious, cultural, or otherwise), about homosexuality, this will automatically become apparent to the client regardless of the rhetoric the therapist uses. Not only will this interfere with the client/therapist relationship, but the client's already bruised sense of self worth may be further damaged by the unspoken ambivalence of the clinician. In contrast to this scenario, an affirming relationship between client and clinician can greatly enhance the client's sense of spirituality and go a long way towards restoring the broken spirit of the spiritually abused client. Just as the effective therapist can become the "good parent" to an abused client with the intended goal of the client internalizing this model and parenting him/herself, so the therapist can also become the model of a loving, affirming higher power who embraces the totality of the client, including his/her queerness, with the love, understanding and passion of a proud parent.

In many cases, a client chooses instead to dissociate themselves from the religion of their childhood.

"It's as if my emotional and my cognitive understanding of God are two different books," continues Hope, "The first one, you can write over. But the other one, you have to live over. Right now, I have to choose do I want to live this over, or pick up another book. It's not easy. If I really wanted to, I could find a guy, settle down. I wouldn't be happy, but I could do it. I feel I would be living closer to God if I did that. God never said you had to be happy...you just had to obey. But, being happy for me is part of being sane. I think I'm leaning towards picking up another book."

When clients express that they no longer wish to pursue any form of organized religion, but want to deepen their personal sense of spirituality, the clinician may employ many different types of interventions and exercises to facilitate this development. Initially, work needs to be done to eradicate any negative images or concepts that queer clients hold onto regarding God or higher power. Once that is accomplished, therapists and clients work together on unveiling Who and What Higher Power represents to clients, and how they can "plug into" their Higher Power on a regular basis. This can be accomplished through traditional models of therapy, such as cognitive and psychodynamic, or through using more creative and interactive methods.

One such method I have developed involves asking the client to write, with the non-dominant hand, in crayon, and on slips of construction paper, any negative or fearful

images s/he has about God. The reason for using the non-dominant hand, crayon, and construction paper is to tap into the deeply ingrained beliefs of the psyche that developed early in the client's life. These slips of paper will be placed into a paper bag marked "LIES". Then, I ask the client to similarly write positive images s/he holds onto about God. These will go into a box marked "TRUTH".

The next session is devoted to creating a new spiritual ritual in which the client and therapist ceremoniously burn the bag containing lies, which symbolize the client's previous vision of a punishing God. Quiet time is observed to enable the client to spiritually release these negative images as s/he watches the smoke rise from the burning bag. The rest of the session is used to reconstruct the client's perception of Higher Power using the slips of paper from the "TRUTH" box. Depending on the client's talents, inclinations, and abilities, different methods of this reconstruction can be used. The artistic client may transform the TRUTH box into a work of art, using it as a focal point for meditation and prayer. The musically gifted client may use the words on the slips of paper in composing a liturgical song or musical piece. The client with a flair for writing may use the TRUTH images in creating a spiritual parable or poem. The therapist can then build on these images in later work with the client involving meditation and guided imagery.

The ultimate goal in psycho-spiritual work with LGBT clients lies in helping the client to establish a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in life in connection to a Universal Life Force that encourages love and celebration of all life, including the life of the queer client her/himself. In enabling the queer client to experience the Divine's love of and pride in his/her uniqueness, we are reinforcing the very nature of the Divine itself—that is, joy and reveling in the sanctity of all singular manifestations of Its diverse creation. It is precisely this diversity and the union which binds it together that make up the nature of what we, as human beings, call God.

The words of Fahkruddin Iraqi, a gay mystic who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, may serve as a reminder of this truth for both the spiritually wounded LGBT client and the therapist devoted to helping heal the wound:

“Although you may not know it,  
If you love anyone, it is Him you love;  
If you turn your head in any direction,  
It is toward Him you turn.

Let go of everything,  
Completely lose yourself on this path,  
Then your every doubt will be dispelled.  
With absolute conviction you'll cry out –  
*I am God!*  
*I am the one I have found!*

In the light I praised you  
And never knew it.  
In the dark I slept with you  
And never knew it.  
I always thought that I was me,

But, no, I was you  
And never knew it." (1)

\*Name has been changed

(1) From "The Essential Gay Mystics", Andrew Harvey. Harper/Collins Publishers 1997.  
Page 98.