

Talking with People about their Spiritual Lives

A Meet the Author event with Melissa Elliott

Please read these extracts prior to the Meet the Author event on Tuesday 1st march (Adelaide time). They are extracts from this book:

Griffith JL and Elliott Griffith M: *Encountering the Sacred: How to Talk with People about their Spiritual Lives*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.

from **Chapter One: New Ways of Hearing Sacred Stories** (p1-4)

In these pages we hope to show ways to open therapy to the spiritual lives of people who consult us, to listen for and to their experiences, to learn about their religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and sustaining faith communities, and to recognize and respond when these powers are used destructively. We begin with Devi's story because it is about the heart of this work, which is the practice of wonder. The practice of wonder—being available to what is not yet known or expected-- is a therapeutic practice for the life of conversations, for the people who consult with us, and for us.

When Devi first arrived, she had to check to see if her pager was on. She explained that we might be interrupted because her husband required that she respond immediately if he called to ask her whereabouts. Her request was for help in leaving this marriage. While she had not married for immigration reasons, her pending citizenship would be at risk if she divorced. Though she was successful in her studies and her work and fluent in three languages, Devi had come to believe her husband's insults that she was stupid and inept. She said she had lost her appetites, for eating, and almost for living. "I feel that I am disappearing," she said, and this was reflected in the thinness of her body and the vagueness in her eyes. I (*Melissa*) was the third therapist she had seen. The couple had attempted marital therapy, and Devi had tried to change herself in many ways to please her husband, but she could no longer endure his degradation and threats.

Devi and her mother had journeyed from their homeland of India to the United States to obtain an American education for Devi. She had excelled in school and spoke nearly flawless English. Midway through one of her sentences she paused, apologizing for a minor linguistic mistake. I had not noticed. I marveled at her fluency, but still, I wondered what our conversation might be like if she were able to speak about the entrapment in her marriage in her native tongue. It was then that she told me that her husband would not permit her to speak in her own language, not even when talking with her mother on the phone. He considered her to be culturally and racially inferior and wanted her to disguise as much as possible. I offered to search for a therapist who could communicate with her in Hindi. Devi did not want to see a different therapist. She didn't mind speaking English in therapy, but she did long to speak Hindi with her mother on the telephone in her own home.

Two weeks later Devi came to see me again. She still felt trapped. Although her situation had worsened at home, she was still unable to leave. She had secured a safe place in case of an emergency but insisted that she presently was in no physical danger. The danger, she said, was that she might give up. She was sustained only by her friends and her mother. They were worried about her and called daily, begging her to leave.

I asked that she invite her mother to our next meeting. Her mother, Ms. Chowdry, arrived dressed in a sari with her head lowered, and, after a long period of silence, made only one pleading comment in a soft and deferential tone. I could not understand all of her words, a mixture of Hindi and English, but I needed no translation for the intense love, helplessness and fear in her voice as she entreated her daughter to leave her husband, to come home with her that very day. "My mother is saying that she doesn't want me to become another Nicole Brown Simpson," Devi explained. Ms. Chowdry nodded and again addressed her daughter in Hindi. Devi gently reprimanded, "Speak English." At this moment, I became acutely aware of Devi's earlier description of her husband requiring that she and her mother converse in English.

"Please," I said, "speak in your own language. You don't need to translate for me unless you want. I will ask questions that may be helpful, and the two of you can use them as you wish. I have confidence that you will find a way to talk with each other about what is most important, and that your talk will be more comfortable and fruitful if you talk in your own language."

The conversation seemed to flow and I became optimistic that Devi was unified with Ms. Chowdry in the decision to put her safety first. I was surprised and worried when, near the end of the session, Devi confessed that she was still confused. She said she would stay in the marriage a bit longer until she achieved more financial and immigration security. Ms. Chowdry bent down, hiding her face in her hands. I inquired about her sadness and her worries, expecting her to speak of her sorrow for her daughter. She spoke plaintively in Hindi and Devi translated: “My mother says to tell you that she is sad because she is homesick.”

“What would she do with such a serious problem if she were at home?” I asked.

“If she had a serious problem, she would go to the temple,” replied Devi. They conversed a bit more in Hindi. Then Devi turned to me and said, “My mother says the temple is what she misses most about home. She went to pray there every day.”

I asked Ms. Chowdry to describe the temple and what it was like to be there. “Peaceful,” she answered. I wondered aloud what it would be like to be in the temple together now, “Would the peacefulness bring answers to Devi?” Ms. Chowdry and Devi became quiet. I sensed the sacredness of this moment and felt that more questions would be an intrusion. Then I thought that even my presence might be an intrusion, much like it might be if I were a guest at their temple, present when their need was to pray, undistracted by attention to their guest. I slipped out my office door, telling them I would give them privacy for a while, requesting they open the door when they had finished talking.

In about ten minutes, they invited me back. Devi and her mother seemed peaceful, and her mother no longer looked sad. Devi had resolved to leave her husband. We set up our next appointment. Devi called the next day to let me know that she had left my office with her mother, never to sleep in her husband's home again. She expressed gratitude to me for holding the meeting, for encouraging them to speak in Hindi, and for leaving the room so that she and her mother could pray. She identified these acts as different from anything that had happened in her previous therapies. It was different for me too, I thought to myself. We chatted a while about our shared admiration for the gentleness and wisdom of her mother.

Relatively quickly, with the help of Indian and American friends and immigration lawyers, Devi was able to obtain a divorce. When I last spoke with her, she was interested in starting a group for immigrant women trapped in abusive relationships.

Devi had many strengths-- intelligence and insight, a good job, a safe place to go, a concerned, supportive friendship network, and the love of a wise and persistent mother. Surely all these contributed to the courageous step she took. However, she was finally able to see clearly and to act when she and her mother entered the peacefulness offered by their spirituality.

What did the therapy have to do with the entry into this spirituality? For us, this is the crucial question. It seemed to “just happen,” a moment of mystery that cannot be fully understood, and certainly could not have been orchestrated. Yet, we want to understand as much as possible about it. Devi's reflections after the session may point the way. “It is good that we spoke in our own language,” she said, “and good that my mother and I could pray.”

Urging Ms. Chowdry and Devi to speak in a language unknown to me on that day was specifically prompted by my wishing the therapy atmosphere to be radically different from the home atmosphere of Devi's marriage. But that specific act is reflective of the general way we aspire to work with people's spiritual experiences in therapy. The two of us are often urging them to speak in languages with which we are unfamiliar. Stepping out of the room, trusting Devi and her mother to determine when to invite me back in, illustrates what often seems to be the choreography of our conversations with people about their spiritual experiences.

from Chapter One (p 11-14)

Melissa's Story

Life in the Mississippi Delta was gentle. At least it certainly seemed so in the neighborhood, church, and family into which I was born. Many years would pass before I would glimpse that harsher side of Delta life and would understand the labors by which the Delta came to gain its fame, the Birthplace of the Blues. As the third of three daughters, I grew up protected by my family and my community, and we, in turn, protected by our middle-class and white privileges. Many of our family friends were part of our Methodist church. Most of our other friends were Protestant Christians, though my parents also had Jewish and Catholic friends. I think that everyone I knew went to church somewhere. I learned the subtleties of cordiality, what one should talk about with whom by observing my parents with their friends. I recall my mother planning menus, serving no alcohol if our Baptist

friends were coming, but having wine with dinner when the Episcopalian friends came. At first, I thought this was hypocrisy. In time, I understood it as thoughtful hospitality. Years later, as a therapist, when I first ventured into speaking with people about spiritual matters, I'd sometimes wish I had the sensitivities in hosting those conversations that my mother had in serving her guests.

Church, more than anything to me, meant a caring community, people who gladly donated their time, cooking, and blood, when you were ill. It was a place for singing, sermons, and fellowship on Sunday mornings and for quiet meditation on Sunday evenings. Religion and spirituality merged there for me, as it served as a center of open connectedness to God and others, a place where kids who were marginalized at school could come and be treated with respect. The wider view provided by time, distance, and inclusion of other's perspectives would reveal that our connectedness was not so open. Our church in many ways benefited from, and too rarely questioned the segregated and unjust society of which it was a part. Paradoxically though, it simultaneously nourished an ethic in a few who would come to challenge and change the culture. And across our town, in the bosom of the churches of the African American community, the civil rights movement was being planned and prayed through. Then and now, I experience the church as an institution capable of both oppression and liberation.

The week that we were working on a final revision of this chapter, Griff and I attended a Kristallnacht service, an annual tradition joining three congregations, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal, who gather to commemorate the Night of the Broken Glass, November 9th and 10th, 1938, when the Nazi regime made their first organized assault on the Jewish people in towns and cities throughout Germany. As I understand the story of the commemoration, it was begun by a beloved rabbi in Washington who invited his neighboring clergy to join their congregations in a recognition that this event affected us all. The site of the service rotates each year, and this year brought our Episcopal church the honor of hosting it. The packed sanctuary was silent as the survivors of the Holocaust led the procession, followed by the Jewish, then Catholic, then Episcopal clergy and choirs. After singing, scriptures were read from the Torah, "Love your God with all your heart, all your might, and all your soul," and from the Gospel, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Then, in a gentle clear voice, Mrs. Regina Spiegel told us how it had been for her family in the time of Kristallnacht. She had been thirteen years old when it all began. Before the Holocaust ended, her mother, father, three sisters, a nephew, and a brother had perished in the death camp Treblinka. She herself had done slave labor, imprisoned in both Bergen-Beltsen and Auschwitz. Of all she and her family had endured, she said, "The hardest thing was that our neighbors turned on us. If we had only had neighbors like you, whose churches exhort you to care and speak up for your neighbors, these terrible things could not have happened." Her words remain with me, prompting a hope and a question. How I hope Mrs. Spiegel is right, but I wonder, would we choose to know? To act? To love our neighbors as ourselves? Are we choosing that now?

All the major religious traditions, and many of the newer spiritualities, urge their followers to compassion and justice. If our religion serves only to bind us to those who are similar and does not open our eyes and ears and hearts to those who are different, it does harm to us and to others. If our private spirituality does not lead us in public to be the neighbors Mrs. Spiegel could count on, of what use is it? So, when I converse with someone in therapy about their spiritual practices, when I inquire about their religious community, beliefs, or personal God, it is with the hope of fostering that which connects them to hope and justice, to loved ones and to neighbors yet unknown.

That spiritual convictions do not always lead to greater connection but sometimes to greater alienation was first made real to me one college summer when I worked as a nurse's aide. Rather helplessly, but with intense curiosity, I watched the difference in the suffering between two patients, in pain, the first, a withdrawn, lonely man, thirty years old, with multiple fractures from an automobile accident, the second, a friendly eleven-year-old boy, in sickle-cell anemia crisis. As the man told his story, his God was inflicting pain, punishing him for his reckless driving, forcing him live on to pay with his own pain for those who had died in the crash. He accepted God's harsh sentence by refusing visitors, pain medication, skin care, and even most of the food I brought. His wounds were ulcerating, and he was starving. In contrast, the boy's God was a great comfort. His extended family was ever present and pulled him through the frightening crises with laying on of hands and passionate prayer. He believed God wanted to heal him, and that we, the nursing staff were God's helpers.

I was worried about the man and talked to the head nurse. She told me it wasn't my business to talk with patients about those matters. It was for the chaplain. "But he refuses to see the chaplain, and he talks to me," I persisted. "Nonetheless, it's not our place to talk about it. We don't know why any of these patients are suffering," she explained. "Anyway, maybe that man is right." It was the end of the spoken conversation, but my mind kept on.

What if the boy were to believe as did the man, that his pain was God's punishment? What if the nurses were to believe that?

I don't recall that I ever did talk to that poor man, but his suffering stayed with me as did the question-- Was it my business to talk with him? I agree with the head nurse that a chaplain consultation might have been ideal. Often clergy persons, spiritual companions, and pastoral counselors can speak with an understanding, knowledge, and occasionally an authority that is unique to their expertise and helpful beyond measure. But this man would not speak to the chaplain. He was speaking to me. As nurses, social workers, family therapists, physicians, psychologists, compassionate friends, even as a young nurse's aide, if a story of spirituality is inflicting or alleviating suffering, if the other wants to talk with us, shouldn't it become the business of our conversation? When it does become the business of our conversation, when we are invited in, knowing we do not have expertise in spirituality and religion, how can we creatively and usefully respond? These are the questions that prod us.

Each of our stories gives reasons for our interest in opening therapy to spiritual stories, but we find these questions to be important to others as well, not necessarily because spirituality and religion are central to their own lives or cultures, but because they want to honor what is important to those who entrust their stories to them. Several of our close therapist colleagues were either not raised in religious contexts or have a spiritual or religious framework quite different from most of the people who come to them for therapy. Yet, they desire to respond respectfully, carefully, and creatively when people speak about their spiritual lives. These colleagues tell us that they do not know how to talk about these things, even as we imagine that their not-knowing could be an asset that we can only approximate. Surely our personal stories open doors, but they close doors too.

The Generative Power of Wonder

How can a clinician open therapy to spiritual and religious resources that a person might bring if the therapist shares no common tradition of religious beliefs or practices with the person? Our best clinical outcomes have occurred when we have been able to stay in the position of an anthropologist meeting another person from an unknown culture. We have been least successful when we felt that a prior understanding, whether from religious studies or personal experience, had given us a head start in comprehending the person with whom we were speaking because we could anticipate what to expect. The skills most helpful for opening therapy to the spiritual and religious domains have been those for preparing our own selves to meet someone not yet known-- the fostering within ourselves of curiosity, wonder, and openness to the being of the other.

The good news that this brings is its dispensing with notions that special "religious expertise" is needed to be of help. We discuss in Chapter Two specific methods that have aided our efforts to remain within a posture of not-knowing and non-certainty when encountering the spiritual experiences of others.

I wonder if you want to consider how your stories may open and might close doors to talking with people about their spiritual lives? Would you like to open more doors?

from Chapter Four: Stories of Spiritual Experience

p 94. Anchoring Chosen Stories

Jean, in one year, had experienced loss at almost every level. Her mother had died, her father had developed Alzheimer's Disease, dramatic workplace shifts had severely diminished support for her, and her marriage, a secure source of joy for many years, now felt threatened. For several months she had spoken with me (*Melissa*) about having a hard time "coming back" to herself. She wanted to respect both her anger and sadness, but instead she felt controlled by them. "I used to be a person who gets excited about a beautiful sunshiny day," she said, "Now I may not even notice it."

I had not spoken much with Jean her about spirituality. Early on in the therapy, she had told about being raised in a very religious family, and said that wasn't for her. For her, spirituality was different-- very personal, very private. It brought her tranquility and a sense of connectedness, she said, but it was not always easy to find these days. She did not want to talk about it but said she would let me know if the time came when she did.

Accustomed to herself as a competent, steady, secure, fun woman, Jean felt racked by the heaviness she felt and the inconstancy of her emotions. She had suffered for several months, and we both were worried that nothing she or we together were doing seemed to bring significant, sustained relief. So, when she came in one evening, her face, body, and voice relaxed, reporting peaceful sleep, I wanted to know what had happened. She explained, backing up in time to set the context, “I think I finally know what did happen to me: I lost my faith.”

“Your faith in...” I floundered.

“In life,” she explained, “I lost my faith in life. Trusting life. For a long time now, I have trusted life. I lost that. And now, I have regained it.”

Recalling her earlier wishes, the private nature of her spirituality, I asked if this was a time to talk about it, or if it would be best kept private. She said it would be fine to talk, so I asked about her regaining faith, trusting life. She described it with words like “letting go of control,” trusting that she should just “do this day” and the next thing would be clear to her. She said that it was about being able to just “go with the flow.” In fact, she recalled that we had spoken months earlier about spirituality and that when she was in touch spiritually, she could go with the flow.

“So, this a familiar feeling, a familiar ability, to go with the flow?” I asked her.

“Oh, yeah, *it is me*, it is the way I have been in so much of my life. Other people have been amazed at how I could do it, you know,” she laughed, “I’ve had some pretty wild things to go with the flow with, and sometimes, I have been amazed myself.” She looked up and away.

“Are you thinking of one of those times now?” I wondered.

“Yes, I was, I was remembering when my son was sixteen, and,— this was years before lots of kids were doing this—he dyed his hair green and spiked it. I didn’t know he was doing this and I walked by the bathroom and there he was, looking in the mirror, preening and adjusting the last spikes. I was horrified! But I knew that would be no good, so I took a few steps away before I expressed my horror and instead, I asked myself, ‘Now if I were going with the flow what would I do?’ I went back down to the bathroom and said to him, ‘I’m just amazed at how you do that. Would you teach me how to do my hair like that?’ And he did! The gel, the spikes, he got all my hair standing up like his. We laughed and laughed, and we decided to take a picture.”

Jean and I laughed, for it was a story to celebrate, a heroic, wise, and outstanding illustration of Jean’s spirituality at work. I had to thank her too, for the unforgettable lesson she had taught me for my own mothering life. I wondered if she still had the photo, if it would serve to remind her of her history of her faith in life, of letting go, and going with the flow. She was not sure but sharing the story and the laughter had made the memory more vivid.

I still don’t know how to understand what all created the change such that Jean regained the faith she had lost. Neither of us expected smooth sailing from that point on, but for that moment in that session, the calm in Jean’s body created unique possibilities for reflection and recollection. Her recalling, my witnessing, a story that spoke of her going with the flow anchored her chosen way of being, attuned with her spirituality, a sturdy truster of life. For our ongoing conversation, we began to collect a canon of calming stories to steady her in the midst of the present chaos.

(Not included in text- just from my notes)

Jean reviewed this account of the therapy and offered the following reflection:

“As I sit here two years after the therapy session and reflect on its meaning for me, I am struck by the thought that faith, like therapy, is a process. Recalling my story about joining with my son in his struggle to find himself reminded me of a part of myself that I had lost. It was helpful to retell the story and talk and laugh about it. It started me on a path that continues today, where I am still learning about my spirituality.

I hadn't connected the story to my spirituality or even my life flow. Making that connection helped me, over time, to remember that my life flow, my spirituality, was based on joining rather than opposing, understanding rather than withdrawing, accepting rather than judging and being patient rather than making it happen now. I wish I could say that all is "right with the world", but I can't. The process goes on. As I live through new experiences, I realize that even the many losses I struggled with two years ago have brought me more in touch with who I am. Is this not what therapy and spirituality are all about?”

from **Chapter Six: Spiritual and Religious Beliefs** (p 137)

In the beginning of our conversation, Mr. Ali only wept. Then he began to speak about what he had endured at the hands of the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. With the Mujaheddin, he had fought guerrilla warfare against the Soviet invasion. The Soviets had captured him, imprisoned him, and tortured him for months. “They put me in prison and hung me up by my thumbs . . . then they would put me on the floor . . .” He paused, casting his eyes downward, “for no reason . . . except that I am a man.” The tears continued to roll quietly, constantly, down his face. He looked up at me (*Melissa*), and, perhaps to allay the worry he might have seen in me, paused to explain his tears. “In my country we have a saying-- One asks the candle, ‘Why do you burn?’ The candle says, ‘I must burn to give off my light.’ For me, I must let the tears fall from my eyes, to give off my light. How else can I live?”

“The guards came to me in prison. They came up to me and screamed in my face, ‘Now we will cut off your hands, then we will cut off your arms, then. . .’ I knew they would do it. They had killed many of my friends. Earlier I had sat in my cell and despaired, but as my body was hurt, my spirit grew stronger. I knew that they could kill my body, but because of God, nobody can kill my spirit. Now they came to me again. I stood up. I thrust out my hands and said, ‘Here, do it, cut them off and drain my blood. You may put my body in the grave, but I am still alive.’ And they just looked at me and walked away¹.”

Mr. Ali called the spirit of his God, “the Light.” His conviction that the Light could not be extinguished enabled him to stand up to his torturers, even to be ready for death. His belief that the Light was within him, and that his weeping would allow him to give off the Light enabled him to endure the separation from his homeland and to do the work of healing.

As research¹ interviewer, I had already been informed by Mr. Ali’s therapist that he was a follower of Islam. I asked him more about how his spiritual and religious life had been important through his suffering and healing. “Yes, the spiritual,” he said emphatically, then went on to make a distinction between the two, “The spiritual is different from the mind. The mind is philosophy, whether you follow Moses or Mohammed, whether you are Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian. These are philosophies. They are only like ladders to put your feet on and go to God. There are many ladders. The spiritual is in the Light-- you cannot see the Light because it is so bright, but you see the reflections of the light in people. I know the spirit of God because I feel the power in my body, and it endures.”

Ancient teachings, metaphors, stories, relationships, and the experience he identified within his body anchored Mr. Ali in beliefs that supported him through his imprisonment, sustained him through separation from loved ones, and steadied him through the difficult therapeutic work for symptoms that were sequelae of the torture. This work was made easier and more effective by appreciating the centrality of Mr. Ali’s spirituality. “All therapists should know about the body and about the spiritual if they want to help people,” he told me.

from Chapter 6 p 155- 157

Attuning To and Honoring the Beliefs of the Other

I (*Melissa*) had not seen Leslie for a few months. She had consulted with me two summers ago, when she was recovering her identity and her strength after she had been systematically harassed and tormented by a clique at drama school. She was now reporting some successful recent months, telling stories of feeling appreciated, taking care of herself, and making good trustworthy relationships. It was all great news, the culmination of hard work. I felt celebratory along with her.

“That’s not exactly all,” she said. “You’re not going to believe this, but I told Tom that if he needed a place to stay in the city, there was an extra room at my house.”

I was indeed surprised to hear this since Tom had been the ringleader of the group who had treated her so cruelly a couple of years ago. This sounded risky to me. My thoughts must have been obvious to her.

“I know that was bad, I can see it in your face,” she added. “He didn’t come, which is just as well. But that’s what I did, and I’d do it again.”

“No, I couldn’t say it was bad. How could I make such a judgment? I am surprised, though. How did you decide to make this offer?” I inquired, wanting to suspend my assumptions so I could understand hers.

“I believe . . . I hope . . . that Tom has changed, that he could be a better friend now. I’ve told you before that I believe, if at all possible, people should never just disconnect. I just believe that at heart people are basically good.”

I did recall hearing her articulate those beliefs two years before. These convictions had been a mainstay in her struggle against becoming cynical and detached. At that time Leslie had given me a window into her spiritual

life. She was Jewish, and celebrated holidays with her family, but she drew wisdom from many sources, including the character of her grandmother, reflective moments in a Quaker meeting, and the support of a nun friend in college. She believed in and allied herself with those who were willing to struggle with forgiveness, tolerance, and a commitment to connect. Perhaps it was not only Leslie's persistence in hope in the face of injustice, but also her Jewish heritage that made her words echo to me the words of Anne Frank. I told her that a passage of the diary kept coming to me. "Do you know it?" I wondered. "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are still truly good at heart'"

"Yes, that page is on the wall of the house in Amsterdam where she was hidden. Did you know that? I have seen it That is what I believe."

Through this process, I was moved to a position of deep respect for her belief. Earlier in the conversation my wish to see Leslie protect herself might have pulled me, at least inwardly, to contradict her belief that "people are good at heart." I could have considered it naïve for her to act as she did, offering hospitality to Tom. But a desire to understand Leslie's conviction and honor it guided my thoughts to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, locating her conviction in a noble, wise, and courageous lineage. In making this connection, I, and certainly Leslie, would never want to imply an equation of her suffering to those who suffered and died in the Holocaust. It would dishonor them. Hopefully we bring honor to them when we let their words and lessons permeate our thoughts, inform our beliefs, and open our hearts.

Working with beliefs means that therapists examine not only the beliefs of the other, but our own beliefs and how they influence relationships with self and others. Sometimes the belief systems of clinician and client collide. One can be drawn into paternalism when a person articulates a belief, or plans a belief-based course of action, that seems to be against his or her best interest or to run counter to "known" psychological principles. Avoiding that, we want to be honest about the difference, yet open to dialogue and change. Perhaps we will come to understand that the belief works well for that person. If we listen broadly and deeply, perhaps we will hear wisdom from other cultures or religious traditions.

from **Chapter Eight: The Community in Spirituality** p 202-208

Often is in therapy that we can be introduced to unseen members of a spiritual community. Only when the person speaking with us perceives that we know them well enough to honor those they honor.

Thus I (*Melissa*) believe it was no accident that it was only at the end of a fruitful series of meetings with Julia that she spoke with me about her Committee. In a planned conclusion to our therapy, we were conversing about the changes Julia had made in that helped her to manage the difficult circumstances in her life. She said that one of the most important changes was that she thought now of the gifts of even her most difficult family relationships. "I have begun to realize and receive the gifts," she said.

"When you say gifts," I wondered, "does it imply a giver? Is that the important thing? Or is more about your keeping an attitude and a stance of a receiver?"

"Both," she said, "Some people would say something like, 'God is the giver,' but it's not that way for me. I do think of a giver, but it's kind of strange." She paused and I listened. "It's a group of women, of my ancestors, who are watching over me. It's like a whole committee looking out for me."

I was intrigued. "Who is in this group? People you know? People you have been told about?"

"Some I know personally," she replied, "and some just by the stories that have been told. I think of women like my grandmother and her sisters who came to this country, not knowing a word of English. They worked so hard! I think of how much they had to go through, their courage and their wisdom, and their longing for Lebanon. But it's not all ancients in this group. I think of my aunt of whom I've often spoken here. She is a model for me, including the way she divorced, and lives her life with such zest."

"So, it's a collective, a whole committee of women, watching over you? Wow! What is it like to be under their watch?" I asked her.

"It's good. It is a gift. Among them there's pretty much wisdom. Perhaps I don't call on them enough. I really like thinking of my connection to them."

"So, you can call on them? Ask them for help? Like for an answer to a question? Or just to be with you?" I wanted to understand.

“Sometimes I think to myself, ‘I’d better ask the Committee about that,’” Julia elaborated, “And sometimes I just send up a question, and let it be. Maybe I don’t get a specific answer, but I get to release the question.”

The opportunity, as Julia said, “to release the question” captures what community about-- a place is where one can know that questions and needs can be released, even when not perfectly fulfilled. By contrast, a community that through transformation of the group or individual, has become a place in which questions cannot be released, can be experienced as counter-spiritual.

Helping a Person Restore a Spiritual Community

When a spiritual community has been fractured by conflicts over values and beliefs or by personal injuries in its relationships, the work of therapy often is that of restoring and rebuilding community. Key questions that must be addressed include:

- Which relationships can serve as the core of a new community because their capacity for dialogue has been preserved?
- Which relationships potentially can be healed if needed steps toward restitution, penance, or forgiveness can occur?
- Which relationships will not be available for a foreseeable future because the trust, openness, and acceptance needed for dialogue realistically will not be present?
- Where is God or the Spirit positioned in this rebuilding process? What guidance for this process is available from God, or from one’s sense of spiritual principles?
- What other steps in this process need to be taken to restore the structure of a participant democracy, in which all members have an assurance they will be respectfully heard, understood, and taken seriously in the dialogue?

When Melanie called for her first appointment, she told me that she hoped that I (*Melissa*) would engage with her struggle without pushing her back to the church or presuming to know what was best for her. She said she felt “pulled” by God, but unable to respond. She had spent her early years in the bosom of the Episcopal church, assisting in the Eucharist as an acolyte, serving as a youth leader, and even spending a brief sojourn in seminary to prepare for the priesthood. But an open-hearted friendship with a married student became too intense, leading to an affair. Melanie ended the affair before it was discovered. She confessed her wrongdoing to her own priest, who offered her grace. By her own choice, she left the seminary and the church. Now, six years later, she still struggled with a deep sadness and spiritual yearning.

“I still pick up the prayer book and read it at night when I cannot sleep,” she said, “It gives me comfort, but when I imagine returning to church, I feel acutely uncomfortable.” I wondered if her discomfort was with the people at church or with God. She thought it might be both. When she imagined being at church, it was “like there is this coalition of people, a stadium full of them, and they are all looking down at me.”

“And would they have words to say to you?” I asked.

“Not many words. It is mostly in the way they look at me. Their look says, ‘You have a lot of fixing up to do.’”

“Now this stadium coalition,” I inquired, “as you look up into the stadium, can you see individual faces or just a mass of people?”

“It seems like just one big group. I’m sure there are individuals-- I even know who is there. They aren’t bad people. In fact, they are wonderful people, good friends. It’s just that they can’t imagine that anyone would ever entertain the thought of adultery, much less do it.”

I realized along with Melanie that this Coalition was quite unapproachable. I wondered if its members had been very experienced in life. “No, they are mostly young people,” she answered. I asked if there were any among her spiritual community who had longer, wider experience with life. “Yes,” she smiled. “There is this group of middle-aged women-- I call them the “wild women”-- several of them are my friends. And they are not up in the stadium.” We both became curious about how they would receive her. She could imagine one of these friends welcoming her saying, “Come and bring all your doubts and hold on to them and hold on to us.” They would not be appalled by her past actions. In fact, she said, they would hug her and take her in. “And,” she added, “they would let me be where I am, but assure me I would not remain there.”

I thought to myself that if these Wild Women were able to hold both the paradox and Melanie, then maybe they could both hold and expand this conversation. I placed a notepad on the table between us. “Okay, can we

look at this? If they are here (making a dot and labeling it “Stadium Coalition”), and if these others are here (locating another point, labeling it “Wild Women”, then drawing a line to connect the two points), where is God?”

“Maybe here,” she put a point out from the two in the middle, making an equilateral triangle when the points were connected.

“And you?” I wondered.

“I am right smack dab in the middle.” She positioned herself in the center of the triangle.

That seemed to be both an interesting vantage point and a position of entrapment. I was intrigued, but unsure what to do next.

“What do we do with this?” I inquired. “Could you imagine a three-way conversation, between the members of the Coalition and the Wild Women and God?”

“Oh, I think it is already going on, but it’s something to think about,” she said.

I gave her the notes, making a copy for myself as we prepared to conclude, but before we parted Melanie had a question for me. “Actually, I think of you as a part of the Wild Women. Is that OK?”

“Absolutely! I would be honored to be in with those women.”

Many of our future conversations drew on the Wild Women, both through her intentional real-life contacts with some of them and also through responses she imagined they might make. The Coalition continued to appear also, but less as a powerful block of people and more as separate individuals, with varying degrees of openness to Melanie.

Melanie had not decided to return to the church by the conclusion of our therapy. However, she had a sense of there being not one, but many doors to that spiritual community, doors which she could choose to open or not to open, and a sense of what might be behind those doors, some hostility and some hospitality.¹

Re-Membering

Of the therapeutic practices we have illustrated for restoring community, many resemble what Michael White has termed re-membering. This phrase comes from anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff. White (1995, 2000) highlighted and elaborated her ideas for therapy. Problems “dis-member” people, (Madigan, 2000) by shame and isolation, separating them from nurturing communities, and even the knowledge of their identities, skills, and abilities. As a counter to this, White points us to re-membering, providing a forum to identify those who have and might contribute to one’s desired identity and the knowledge and skills needed for one’s life. White points us to Myerhoff’s words, that re-membering calls “attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one’s life story, one’s own prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story. Re-membering, then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous, fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness.” (1982, p111)

Re-membering practices have been quite fruitful in our experience and are often initiated and embraced by the people who consult us. Earlier in this chapter I wrote about Julia’s telling me about her guiding and supportive Committee. Julia had begun that conversation by referring to the Committee as “the giver,” tying her identity to theirs, in a way that was the beginning of a re-membering process. Much later, we had an opportunity to extend what she had begun. Three years after our last meeting, Julia called me, wanting to talk together just a few times to get through a seemingly impenetrable barrier of self-doubt and anxiety that were blocking the completion of her dissertation, a long-awaited achievement in her life. “I’m afraid I can’t do it. That I’m just not competent. I just keep hearing, ‘Why did you ever think *you* could do this?’ And I freeze.” I was eager to be of help to Julia in getting through this barrier. I knew how persistent she had been, against the odds, keeping the vision of herself as an anthropology professor. She was the first in her family to pursue a doctorate and events had occurred earlier in life that had obscured her own recognition of her intelligence and scholarly skills. I knew also that many people, with seemingly lesser obstacles, had deferred or missed their goals at the point of their dissertation. When Julia arrived it quickly became clear to her and to me that the physical symptoms of anxiety were nearly overwhelming her. They had taken on a life of their own, and she and I wanted to employ all avenues to end anxiety’s sabotage of her goals. As we neared the end of our conversation, I recalled the Committee. I wondered aloud how they might be responding to her now. She said she knew they were in her corner and were supporting her, but she became curious, wanting to ask what they might actually say to her. Together, Julia and I made a plan that she would try to discover and write down their responses, so that she and our work together might be informed by them. She arrived at our next meeting quite enthusiastic, bringing with her two diagrams and a story. “I decided to also write my questions to the committee. Then I wanted to think about just whom I was addressing, because I figured they would each have a different thing to tell me.

When I visualized the Committee, I was surprised to see that my father is there! So it isn't just a group of women after all." She described the other members, some recalled from years past, some still living. I could see them all in the first diagram Julia displayed. They each held their place, making a circle, surrounding Julia.

My Committee

Aunt Lena

You're capable.
You'll do it.
I'm impressed!

Situ & Grandma*

You need to go back to the basics.
Eat more & dress warmer. You can endure.
Look at our genes!

Me

Aunt Larissa

You're smart..
You're good enough

Aunt Sucena

You make your parents proud.
You make all of us proud.

Dad

You know what's best kiddo.
Trust your gut.
I believe in you.
I'm so proud of you.

*Grandmother in Lebanese

"I did my committee," Julia said, "and I really loved looking at their words. Then I realized I also have a peer-review! I have friends who love me, here now, who can say to me the words I need to hear. Some I could have imagined, but some I needed to hear. So, I asked them. You know the wonderful thing was they not only gave me their words of encouragement, but their presence. My Lebanese cousin even brought me some soup to keep me going. I wrote their words down too, so the anxiety could not make me forget them. I'm keeping them right by my word processor, to read when I get stuck. "My Peer Review" was at the head of Julia's other diagram. Again, she was encircled in the drawing by her friends who were saying things like, "You can do whatever you set your mind to. You've proven it. You're so capable and a hard worker." "You've come so far. You work so hard. You've really got it together." "You rule! You're so thoughtful and nurturing. You're a great friend. You can do it." "I know it's hard, but you are so strong. Cut yourself some slack. Take care of you."

Julia kept not only her friends' words before her, but, because she was not cowered by the critical, anxiety making voices, she was able to ask for and receive their support till she met her goal. In retrospect, looking over my old notes from these sessions, I can see even more of the creativity and complexity in Julia's re-membering. Giving the usually intimidating academic status of "Peer-Review" to the friends who mattered the most to her was a perfect antidote to the scrutiny of the world of graduate school, the expected evaluation that would qualify or disqualify her from that professional peer-hood. Within the circles of her Committee and her community of friends she could again know herself and reach into the future.

We are keenly interested in how therapy works in fostering communities, in congregating voices, in establishing identities. Julia's comments on her pre-publication review of this text were informative. "Prior to my disclosure to you that day, my committee was an unnamed, underdeveloped idea. As I began telling you about it, however, the idea grew very tangible and real. I remember naming this group of women 'my committee' in your office, and for the very first time I truly understood their potential."

White says that, "through re-membering practices, self and identity cease to be synonymous."(2000, p70). The many voices surrounding Julia reach far beyond the either/or description of competent or not-competent student. She is described as nurturing friend, wise daughter, dedicated worker in all arenas, an already tested and well-proven person. The members of both her communities provided her with a multi-layered, multi-faceted identity.