

Healing from 'Spiritual Abuse'

Assisting Gay and Lesbian Clients

I entered the addictions field as a chaplain in an adolescent substance abuse unit. When I first conducted 4th and 5th Steps I made the mistake of assuming Roman Catholic patients had an advantage of understanding how the 5th Step worked. After all, they were familiar with confession. Wasn't that a freeing experience?

After hearing horror stories from many of those clients regarding their experience with confession, along with today's media coverage of sexual abuse by priests, I have learned not to assume that people have had positive histories with their religions of origin.

Working in that adolescent unit prepared me for my later work with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) clients. I formed an understanding of what I call "spiritual abuse." Spiritual abuse occurs when a person's spirit, or ways a person practices spirituality, has been attacked.

Many of my early substance abusers refused to go to 12-Step meetings because of the "God" talk. They would start reading the steps on the wall and see "God as we understood him" in Step 3, "Admitted before God" in Step 5 and then say, "I'm out of here" before getting to "Asked God to remove" in Step 6! They would argue that they had such terrible memories of Sunday School, church, or other religious activities that there was no way they would subject themselves to that kind of negativity again.

I quickly learned that we needed to distinguish between religion and spirituality. When conducting groups, I place these two words up on the white board: RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY. I then ask the group members to yell out what comes to mind when they hear each of those words. Typically, they start with words associated with religion: rituals, money, rules, Pope, priests, nuns, ministers, rabbis, confirmation, confession, abuse, obligation, homophobia.

Eventually, someone starts yelling out words for spirituality, such as peace, serenity, nature, hope, trust, acceptance, unconditional love, individual, personal, fulfilling. We discuss attaching a positive or negative to the lists and everyone agrees that the words on the spirituality side are more positive than those on the religion side. I emphasize that if they are able to see the difference between the two, they are more able to work a program of spirituality.

Those who have such negative feelings about religion may

have to go about the process of healing from spiritual abuse in order to work a 12-Step program. To ignore spiritual abuse is the same as ignoring sexual, physical or emotional abuse as a part of the healing process. Most of us who are experienced in this field recognize that unless we work on the whole self, including physical, sexual and emotional, a person cannot stay sober. I believe we need to add "spiritual" to that list. A person with a damaged soul cannot be a healthy whole person.

I began applying the principles of what we know about sexual and physical abuse to spiritual abuse. First of all, we have to name it: spiritual abuse. I invite clients who have had negative experiences with their religion of origin to consider what happened as spiritual abuse. Next, name the abuser: the name of the denomination, the local church, clergyperson, parents, whoever it was for them.

Depending on the severity of the abuse, clients may need assistance in working through the anger and hurt of what happened — before the healing process and rebuilding of a spiritual program can begin. I remind clients of the program cliché, "Take what you can use and leave the rest." There may be aspects of that religion of origin you can use in your new spirituality, but you don't have to believe it all. As an example, I had a group of gay men come to my office when I was directing a GLBT inpatient program. "We appreciate that you offer to take us to the various gay churches in town on Sunday morning. Many of us happen to be Roman Catholic. We know what the Vatican teaches about homosexuality, but we still find aspects of the Mass meaningful: particularly the rituals and Eucharist." I arranged for them to attend a GLBT-affirming Catholic church.

Clients' vulnerability

GLBT clients are especially vulnerable to spiritual abuse. When they hear comments such as "homosexuality is a sin, an abomination; sodomizers are condemned to hell" coming from the pulpit, they experience spiritual abuse.

Who someone is at the core of their existence is their spirit. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is at the core of someone's existence. These struggling recovering persons know that sexual orientation is not a choice. If it were, they would have taken the easier way long ago.

They have struggled with their identity, and often that



struggle is what has led them to addictive patterns and behaviors. The shame of not being what their family and religion of origin told them they should be has caused them to hide behind alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, spending, workaholism, or other compulsive behaviors.

We cannot expect persons who have been so brutally wounded in spirit to welcome a 12-Step program based upon spirituality with open arms! We need to recognize the effects of spiritual abuse, help the people we serve name it, and assist them in finding a spirituality that works for them. For some, they will be able to “take what they can use and leave the rest” by going back to their religion of origin. For others, they will need to explore other forms of spirituality and will need our assistance in finding those resources.

For those GLBT clients who desire to stick with their religion of origin, I offer information on local groups that have identified themselves as welcoming of GLBT folks without judgment and in full participation. Many mainline denominations have national programs that local churches may use to identify themselves. Examples are the Open and Affirming Churches (United Church of Christ and Disciples), More Light Churches (Presbyterian), Welcoming and Affirming (American Baptist), Reconciling Congregations (United Methodist), Reconciled in Christ (Lutheran), Supportive (Brethren and Mennonite), Oasis (Episcopal), Affirming (United Church of Canada), Inclusive (Great Britain), and Welcoming Congregations (Unitarian-Universalist).

For those who do not have welcoming churches in their denomination or who just want the experience of going to a predominantly GLBT church, I recommend looking in the GLBT newspapers for the GLBT-identified churches. The largest GLBT denomination is the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. MCCs are found in just about every metropolitan area in the United States and many other places, including Russia, South America and Australia. There also are a growing number of non-denominational GLBT churches.

Sometimes I give my clients the assignment of attending one of these churches just so they have the experience of being in a predominantly gay environment that is not a bar! GLBT clients are apt to tell their counselors, “But the only place I can meet people like me is at a bar.” When I give them the assignment to go to an MCC or other predominantly GLBT congregation, they often say, “But I’m not religious.” I tell them I want

them to go and experience a large group of GLBT people who are there to celebrate who they are (their spirits). They don’t have to sing the hymns or pray the prayers. Just sit and take it in.

Alternative spiritualities

For those who want alternatives to traditional Judeo-Christian congregations, there are growing options as well. The Radical Fairy Movement in the GLBT community has its roots in paganism. Paganism is an ancient religion often confused with Satanism. Paganism is a positive spirituality that appeals to those clients who want a program based upon nature.

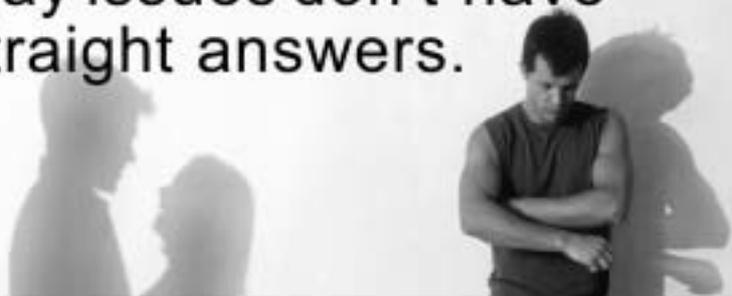
Again, Pagan groups can often be found in the alternative newspapers of a community or through more traditional groups such as the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowships. Challenge your clients to look in newspapers or online to find a group that matches their needs or expectations for a spiritual program.

Ancient Native American spirituality has risen in popularity among some GLBT folks in the last two decades. The attraction is the way most Native American tribes incorporated what we would call GLBT persons into “normal” tribal life. They were often honored for their unique talents and skills. For example, in some tribes, what we call a GLBT person may be referred to as a “two-spirited person,” meaning they have special insight into both male and female spirits. For that reason, they were often chosen as the medicine man or woman, or shaman. Imagine that! Instead of being treated as the outcast for being different, they were chosen as leaders because of their special gifts.

I have worked with clients who have found serenity in their spiritual quest by turning to Buddhism, Zen, Tao, and The Church of Self Actualization, just to name a few others. I tell them it’s not necessary to be religious to work a program of spirituality, but it certainly doesn’t hurt to have a supportive community to combat the isolation of addiction. It’s also important to have some kind of program or support for your own spiritual program.

In summary, it is important to recognize that GLBT clients may have experienced spiritual abuse. They may need help in identifying such action as abuse in order to find ways to heal and work a spiritual-based program. Even my clients who are not in 12-Step based programs benefit from working through these issues. I always ask during my intake questions, “In what

Gay issues don't have straight answers.



Many lesbians and gay men don't succeed in traditional, straight-run treatment programs. (How can you recover if you can't be yourself?) But most patients do succeed at PRIDE.

PRIDE INSTITUTE is the nation's leader in treating the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender communities for over 17 years.

Visit www.pride-institute.com and find out why Pride is the place to deal with mental health, chemical dependency and other addiction issues if you have Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender patients.

Just Call
PRIDE
INSTITUTE
800-54-PRIDE

www.pride-institute.com

Dallas, TX New York, NY
 Fort Lauderdale, FL Summit, NJ
 Minneapolis, MN Chicago, IL

religion were you brought up?" I then ask, "Are you active in any religion/spirituality now?" Their responses to these questions assist in developing treatment plans on these issues. Assisting clients in finding a healthy spirituality is an important component to full recovery. ■

Joseph M. Amico is executive director of the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Addiction Professionals and a member of the Addiction Professional editorial advisory board.

Resources

Conover, P (2002). *Transgender Good News*, New Wineskins Press

Helminiak, D (2000). *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Alamo Square Press

Larkin, J (1998). *Glad Day: Daily Meditations for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People*, Hazelden

McCall Tigert, L. & Brown, T (2001). *Coming Out Young and Faithful*, Pilgrim Press

McNeill, J (1988). *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends*, Beacon Press

Neisen, J (1993). Healing from cultural victimization: Recovery from shame due to heterosexism. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 6 (2)

O'Neil, C & Ritter, K (1992). *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men*, Harper Collins

Picucci, W (1998). *Journey Toward Complete Recovery: Reclaiming Your Emotional, Spiritual & Sexual Wholeness*, North Atlantic Books

Roscoe, W (1998). *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, Palgrave

Roscoe, W (1988). *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, St. Martin Press

Roscoe, W (1995). *Queer Spirits: A Men's Myth Book*, Beacon

Scanzoni, L & Ramey-Mollenkott, V (1994). *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, San Francisco: Harper

Wilson, N (1995) *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, Harper Collins



**YOU CAN HELP TO REVERSE
THE SPIRAL OF ADDICTION**

Contact us today 800-585-6310
www.graceland.edu/addiction

IF YOU...

- ... are interested in entering the addiction field and need the necessary education and training.
- ... are working in the addiction field and need a baccalaureate degree to enhance your skills and future opportunities.
- ... have professional training or experience that may be equivalent to college education.

YOU CAN... Earn a Bachelor of Science Degree with a major in Addiction Studies at Graceland University.

The Addiction Studies Program offers:

- ◆ Credit for experience and previous training in addictions
- ◆ Regional accreditation through North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and NAADAC approval
- ◆ Education and networking with 1 five-day Focus Session