

RECOVERING FROM SPIRITUAL ABUSE - 1

As I consider the implications of the title of this message I realize that many of us do not think about spirituality as something that can be abused. Even after we have endured significant suffering because of the person we sought out for spiritual guidance is not capable of helping us to heal. We may, even unconsciously, make choices that hinder our spiritual growth. We may remain angry at a church that expected us to believe what we could not believe.

We may, indeed, have survived and managed to cope with the rejection that we experienced in that denomination. But how are we coping? Are we holding it all in? Are we talking about it so much that hardly anyone is listening? Have some of us turned to substances like alcohol, narcotics, street drugs or food to help us to cope with our problems and not realized the risks we are taking?

How ready are we to recover from our spiritual wounds? How committed are we to work together if we've been wounded as a congregation? "Recovery" is a term usually associated with substance abuse (i.e. alcohol, narcotics, food, and other drugs). This came to mind as I reread a blog written by our older son almost a month ago. Jim operates a counseling center. He blogs weekly on issues related to recovery from substance abuse.



He recently wrote this: "I favor using the term 'Recovery' broadly to include any person who seeks to completely change their lives. Whether we are recovering from mental illness, self-harm, an abusive childhood, or an eating disorder—it's seriously the most (important) thing a person can do."¹

In addition to all the topics that Jim and other therapists write and talk about, there is one that sometimes goes undetected. It's spiritual abuse. Before we all jump up and begin to point out the terrible behavior of clergy who abuse children and other vulnerable people, let's look a little more broadly at what I mean when I use the term "Spiritual Abuse." We will need to examine our choice of words.

For example, what do we mean when we use the word "Spiritual." I've written four published papers on the nature and significance of spirituality. In the process of writing these papers I discovered that there are many, many different understandings of what we mean when we refer to spiritual.

We might mean the feeling we get when we look at a beautiful sunrise, a display of the "Northern Lights" or a moment when we gaze at a painting or sculpture or hear a piece of music (Monet's "Garden at Tuileries" or Handel's "Messiah" as examples). Other people refer

¹ Jim LaPierre, "What does it take to recover?" <http://recoveryrocks.bangordailynews.com/2016/09/02>

more to the experience of realizing how small each of us is when compared to the enormity of an expanding universe that is at least 14 billion years old. For some it is the comfort and even joy that they experience when they see a newborn baby. For many of us it is the worship of God or Higher Power. Sometimes it refers to the realization that our decision to embark on a conscious spiritual journey was the right choice.

A working definition of “Spiritual Abuse” for me is this: Any behavior, speech or attitude that is intended to satisfy the needs of the abuser rather than that of the seeker of spiritual wellness. If the teacher, clergy or spiritual guide of any kind uses the client or spiritual seeker to meet their own needs it is abuse. How to prevent it or even whether it can be prevented is a topic for another time.

Right now there are people who claim to be knowledgeable about spirituality. Many of them are able to help others who are spiritually wounded. We look to them to guide us along our spiritual journey. We who are spiritual seekers as well as those of us who have been spiritually wounded have the right to know how the training of the spiritual leader or guide equips them to help us. At the same time we who seek the help of these guides have the right to be treated with respect and not to be humiliated if we fail to meet the expectations of the guide or leader. It is clearly spiritually abusive to use threats of terrible punishment in this world or the next world if we don’t accept the spiritual leader’s authority.

Spiritual abuse can also happen when the spiritual leader or guide judges our beliefs and experiences of spirituality as wrong. It can be devastating to have our spiritual life story denounced as sinful or even “of the Devil”. Certainly, spiritual seekers have the right to expect the leader or guide whom they consult to disclose any biases that might hinder his/her willingness to accept us as we are.

Along with identifying what is spiritually abusive, we need to consider how to help people who have suffered spiritual abuse. The first step in helping a person who feels lost, condemned to eternal punishment, or lacking meaning or direction to their lives is to *listen*. The spiritual guide needs to be open to the seekers spiritual pain. That means listening for as long as it takes for the spiritual seeker to feel that she or he has told their story and that it’s been taken seriously.

The spiritual guide or leader will also need to listen without continually judging either the seekers understanding of what happened or the appropriateness of their response. Rushing in to the seeker’s story of suffering to relieve it by imposing our version of the “truth” just creates inner and perhaps unconscious conflict in any of several ways.

Exactly how a spiritual leader or guide proceeds depends upon their training as well as what they have learned from their own spiritual journey. What they believe about spirituality and religion can be disclosed when it is needed as a tool to help the seeker avoid obstacles to spiritual growth. Since so much more needs to be said, I will revisit this topic.

Feel free to [discuss it with me](#).

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