Harnessing Spirituality Within Traditional Healing Systems: A Personal Journey

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Introduction

As clinicians, if we are to ask our clients to grapple with and explore their own connections to spirituality, we must be willing to do likewise. To work effectively and ethically with our clients, we must recognize how our own backgrounds, experiences with and perceptions of spirituality and religion, affect our thoughts and our work. As a clinician, an academic, a teacher, and a writer, my personal history and experiences with spirituality influence my work with clients and my thoughts on these topics, in conscious and unconscious ways. My work with clients, predominantly African immigrants who have arrived in the USA after escaping war and political violence, has explored a number of issues ranging from spiritual practices and rituals as forms of worship to metaphysical and mystical ways of being as they seek to find a sense of purpose and meaning of life experiences. In my view, these are invitations to enter into the scared spaces of our work with our clients.

In many parts of the world, and especially in many African societies, religion and spirituality are closely linked and spirituality may be regarded as an extension of religion (Mugisha, Hjelmeland, Kinyanda, & Knizek, 2013). Religion and spirituality may help people to deal specifically with illness by providing a "cognitive framework that can reduce suffering and increase one's purpose and meaning in life" (Kagimu et al., 2013); when people commit themselves to serving God or their higher power through service to others, it may function to divert attention away from their own problems and instill in them a greater sense of self-worth (Kagimu et al., 2013).

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Religion and spirituality are considered to be the most central facets of African heritage and the strongest social forces in Africa today, permeating all aspects of community life and playing a major role in daily decision-making (Mugisha et al., 2013). It has been suggested that spiritual explanations consistent with one's worldview—such as those invoked by the Baganda—enable patients to make meaning of their psychotic experiences in ways that promote social relatedness and cohesion, while the imposition of a purely psychiatric explanatory model has the potential to undermine the "sociocentric model of healing currently engaged in within the community" (Teuton, Bentall, & Dowrick, 2007). This has numerous implications for mental health treatment, given that embracing spiritual and religious frameworks has been found to have a positive influence on both the nature and prognosis of mental illness.

My Own Spiritual Foundations

My own background combines several intersecting narratives, each with internested connections. First and foremost, I see myself as a child of two Ugandan parents who were raised to be strongly religious. My mother's father was Protestant, but she grew up near a Catholic convent and at some point she considered becoming a nun. My father, on the other hand, was mentored by the Mill Hill Missionaries, who schooled him in strong religious values. He too considered becoming a priest. From a very early age, church was very important to my parents and they worked hard to develop faith values in their children. The Christian tradition in which we grew up permeated our work and everyday life. Looking back now, I wonder if this very schooling in a Christian tradition was a form of oppression that my whole being sought to break away from. One memory of this oppressive experience is the way our schooling put missionaries on a pedestal. We were expected to revere them and to serve them. Each day, some of us cleaned their premises and there was no expectation of remuneration. We were lucky if they gave us a piece of bread from their tables that were full of plenty.

My parents made sure we said our prayers and engaged in devotional practices such as praying the rosary, novenas, and praying the Way of the Cross. They sent us to Catholic schools and made sure that we played with other Catholic children. Unfortunately, because of Uganda's religious history, strong suspicions existed between Protestants and Catholics. Since we lived near a seminary, we encountered many young men who aspired to a life of priesthood. At some point, I too contemplated becoming a priest. Looking back, I do not know if it was the life of these young seminarians that attracted me to priesthood, or if I myself also felt a call. Today as I reflect on this, I wonder if indeed the calling can be understood to be the choices that unfolded in my life.

The detention of my father after he had disappeared for several years was one such event. One evening, a group of armed men stormed into our family's house while we were having dinner. The intruders wore military uniforms and carried guns. They demanded to see "the man of the house"; they were looking for my father. My father ran into the bedroom and the men followed. A gunshot was fired. After what seemed a very long time the men walked out of the bedroom with the threat that they would return. We sat motionless, praying for courage. Then, quietly, we walked into the bedroom. There was a *crack in the window* and a streak of blood on the floor. There was no sign of our father. His disappearance left our family with few options beyond hoping for his return. With my mother as the sole breadwinner, our family turned to faith to find a place of comfort and solace. Our faith became the backbone of our life.

Another important influence was the life of my brother, Joseph whose struggles through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood came to embody my family's own self-understanding. With the realization that Joseph was hearing impaired, unable to speak, and struggling with many challenges, I came to appreciate the blessings in my life and family. Joseph's difficulties with communication alienated him from all of us as a family, perhaps including himself. His inability to speak was a silence that affected us all, and came with a costly pain as we all struggled to make sense of it. It also revealed yet another aspect of the many silences we lived through as a family. Unfortunately, his challenges were not diagnosed early in his life. He struggled with anger and angry outbursts that he often unleashed on all of us, his younger siblings.

My life was also profoundly shaped by the narrative of Uganda as a "colony" of Britain. Growing up in a postcolonial country, I struggled to understand the "benevolence" of Uganda's colonial masters and their sanitized oppression. For my country, colonialism found other names that justified it. Uganda was a "protectorate" rather than a "colony" of Britain. When repressive regimes succeeded colonial imperialism, there was little incentive to resist those who claimed to be our protectors. On the one hand, religion that came with colonization was oppressive. On the other hand, traditional religion provided a sense of comfort. Traditional religion and cultural traditions of harmony and preservation of life grounded me in the need to build understanding. As a member of the largest tribe in my country, I felt a sense of power that was checked by the helplessness I felt throughout postcolonial Uganda. This enabled me to understand the powerlessness embedded in retaliatory discourses (Kamya & Trimble, 2002). Perhaps even more pressing for me was the anger I intensely felt as I struggled to construct "the other" in those who oppressed my family. Although this anger gave me a means to deal with my pain, I could not live, and chose not to be, consumed by my anger. A path through restorative justice became an opportunity to embrace this challenge. This has become my faith and hope especially in the face of struggle and pain. The *crack in the window* became a metaphor through which I felt a sense of hope and deliverance.

The years that followed the disappearance of my father were harrowing as all of us, as a family, sought to find some sense of meaning in the events that had befallen us. What made it even more senseless was the fact that we could not identify who our enemies were. So, we lived with this lack of knowing and uncertainty that good could ever come out of it. Fear, anger, frustration, and confusion engulfed our entire being. These emotions created a strong sense of silence we lived with. The only thing that kept us going was the hope that one day our father would return to us.

The *crack in the window* soon came to have important symbolic meaning for me. The day the intruders invaded our home left an indelible mark in my life. The events of that day and those that followed created both chaos and opportunity. The *crack in the window* at first shattered my hopes of ever seeing my father again. However, it ultimately provided me a sense of hope and determination to live on. It was not until much later that we learned the fate of our father. For years, we sat, we waited, and we hoped. Our waiting took on a new meaning and perseverance that provided us a sense of purpose. This waiting and not knowing became the "positive motivational state… derived [from a] sense of successful agency" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 287). It has also become an important lens through which I have come to view my work with immigrant and refugee populations. As we waited for the return of our father, we prayed and sang songs of hope. My mother took on a job at a local training institute for ministry. She worked long hours washing and cleaning rooms and dishes. As siblings, we pitched in to take care of house chores. Two youngest siblings went to live with our grandmother 50 miles away. We took turns to go visit them on weekends while our mother worked to support us. At times, we survived on one meal a day. Regardless of the challenges, we were determined to survive.

As I discuss spirituality and integrate the spiritual into my own clinical practice, I do so from the foundation of these experiences. But, I have also wondered about myself as a spiritual being who is located beyond what my parents have taught me, the political hegemony that I, my family, and many others lived through. I have often thought about that defining moment in my family's life. I have asked myself many questions. What kept us together? Why did we not fall apart? Why had the events of that night remained so significant in the face of what we had together as a family? But, I also ask myself other questions. How come we survived this ordeal? Why did we survive when many other families did not?

These questions catapulted me into meanings that are foundational anchors of my life. I have come to think deeply about my spiritual roots and ask myself even more questions: Who am I as a spiritual being? What sustains my sense of being? How does myself as a spiritual being intimately relate to myself as a human being? Indeed, the words of Teilhard de Chardin ring true. I ask myself if I am a human being having a spiritual experience or if I am spiritual being having a human experience (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955). I also wonder about the spiritual import of the practices and rituals that were part of my growing up as African. My life as an immigrant and as a refugee echoes the lives of many immigrants and refugees that I work with. I know my work with refugees and immigrants often echoes my own story. I often hear reverberations of my own story as I seek to make meaning of their own story.

One such a story is my work with a young man from Southern Sudan who traveled a long distance looking for his family. His journeys took him into Ethiopia before he ended up in Uganda and finally in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. He told his story with so much grief and pain describing the challenges he encountered along the way. He could not trust the people he encountered on his journey. He felt

God had abandoned him. Yet, he also knew that he was alive while many of his people were killed. He struggled with all kinds of feelings in him: fear, uncertainty, sadness, anger, and more. He lacked a country he could call his own and kept asking himself questions: who am I and where do I belong? What does the future hold for me? And whose future is it?

This young man's story reminded me of my story. The political turmoil in Uganda led me to flee my country into Kenya. I traveled at night, hitching rides from strangers and walking on foot as I crossed into Kenya with very few belongings. The journey across the border would not allow me to carry much luggage for fear of detection and the uncertainties that lay ahead. I traveled in a minibus with at least 13 or 14 fellow travelers. None of us said a word to each other. Although it was clear we were all escaping Uganda, none dared to mention our final destination or why we were traveling at all. I still vividly remember sitting nervously in that minibus without daring even to make eye contact with another passenger. Everyone was suspect. No one could be trusted. As much as I wanted to connect with someone on that bumpy ride, I had to maintain a distance to ensure that no one asked me questions or recognized my nervousness. Our distance from each other, when tightly squeezed in such a small vehicle, was a necessary protection.

At various roadblocks, soldiers would pull us out of the vehicle; soldiers would yell at us in Swahili, a language none of us spoke, but which many of us identified with intimidation and brutality. Our fate depended on the whims of the soldiers who manned checkpoints. Some people were hauled out of vehicles, interrogated, pushed around, and eventually released before the vehicle took off. Others were not as lucky. They were hit with gun butts and threatened with barrels pointed at their heads. The name on one's identification card often sealed one's fate. If you belonged to a tribe that was not in favor of the government, you were a prime suspect. We were all trying to escape fear, intimidation, and uncertainty that came with these wars. We also lived distrusting everyone else, including people who were supposed to be our neighbors.

The Life of Immigrants and Refugees

Most of my work has been with African immigrants. Although some immigrants come to the USA for economic and educational reasons, more have had to flee their homelands, often against their will and under horrific conditions. When they arrive, they find that the skills that assured them economic stability in their countries of origin are not valued here. Moreover, immigration laws and economic difficulties prevent family members from joining their relatives in the USA Families may have to shoulder the burden of bringing in others who, without appropriate immigration papers, fear deportation. Parents work long hours leaving them little time and energy to pass on to their children the cultural traditions, values, and rituals that have sustained them in their home context.

Most immigrants experience a deep sense of loss of their culture associated with loss of language, not only for themselves but also for their children. Parents lament their inability to communicate with their children as they could in their home countries, and feel a deep sense of regret when their Americanized children fail to learn their language. Prolonged separation of family members often creates gaps in shared family history. Family members become strangers to each other, leading to major strains and disappointments. For many, losing contact with loved ones can affect connections within families. Most frightening of all is the fear of deportation for those who have arrived with no proper documentation.

One young man from Uganda reported that he wished so much to pass on to his children his culture, spiritual, and religious beliefs and practices but lacked the structures he enjoyed in his home country. "My children will never be able to worship in the same way that my parents taught me," he lamented. He also felt so alienated from his own cultural rites of passages that he could not provide in the same way to his children.

The relocation of immigrants typically awakens fear, depression, and insecurity along with excitement and hope. Immigrants must adjust both attitudinally and behaviorally to a new culture and environment. Immigrants often have difficulties locating housing and jobs. Poverty and unfamiliarity with the US social cues leave them vulnerable to crime and in some cases to exploitation by the host culture. Anti-immigrant sentiments have also exacerbated the life of many people as they seek refuge in the USA.

There are others for whom even escape from war in their home country to the USA does not offer any promise of safety. A 50-year-old man who escaped the killing fields of the Democratic Republic of Congo was plagued by nightmares in his sleep and was constantly reminded of the killing fields when he opened the daily newspaper. When he sought a church to find a community that he hoped would provide him some comfort and connectedness, he instead found huge divisions among his own country folks, reminders of the intense divisions back in his country of origin. Often these experiences are felt with a strong sense of betrayal.

My work with refugees and immigrants has uncovered important considerations for me, including appreciation of the spiritual connections to my core being. My spiritual connections are anchored in my African traditional religious beliefs. Similarly, I have come to appreciate my family in the context of these beliefs. These traditional religious beliefs comfort many Africans facing life's hardships and permeate all areas of life. African beliefs are rooted in the power of both the natural and the spiritual worlds. These worlds are experienced as both "instrumental and metaphysical" (Rivett & Street, 2001). Spiritual powers, which include the supreme god, other divinities, the spirits, and one's ancestors, are invoked and prayed to, and sometimes libations are poured to honor them. They constitute the religious systems through which most people understand themselves. Over the years, I have come to understand these religious systems in contexts including history, economics, politics, and colonialism among other powerful influences on life.

I have come to appreciate the beliefs of my African ancestors for whom spirits reside in the mountains, rivers, lakes, trees, rocks, and other objects. These natural objects are seen as carrying extraordinary powers in life and people's worldview. Unfortunately, many traditions and rituals that Africans have built around these natural objects have been dismissed by major monotheistic religious traditions as pagan or uncouth. Indeed, in most cases the monotheistic West has placed African religions at the lowest rank of the religious evolution toward monotheism, below Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This perception of superiority rooted in colonial imperialism created an uneasy tension between African spiritual beliefs and the major monotheistic religions. Yet, as I work with many immigrants and refugees they remain key anchors of their own self-understanding.

My sense of self as a spiritual being is rooted in my being as part of a religious tradition which permeates all aspects of my life as an African. I embrace all the mystical powers of the universe. I believe nothing happens by chance. I think of the mysterious mystical powers that are always operative in my life. In some ways, I am aware of these mystical powers; in other ways, I am not. My belief in the divine or spiritual beings translates into a commitment to worship in varied forms, whether in open, private, or public forum that sustain a sense of connection, purpose, and meaning. Worship is a form of prayer that helps me to find my own sense of connection to self and to the community around me. My African beliefs have also helped me to realize my own deep connection to community. These views have helped me to begin to dismantle the dominant Christian discourse that has plagued and created hegemony over my African traditions. As my clients have described their journeys, I have listened closely to the oppressive discourses that have enslaved them and habituated them into submission.

I have also come to value the world of Africans that is populated with spiritual beings, spirits, and the living–dead (Mbiti, 1990) all of whom play a major role in the culture of Africans. Many Africans find their sense of purpose and meaning in the relationships that individuals or community have with the spiritual beings, all of whom are seen as guides to a well-lived life. Some Africans consider major objects in nature, like the sun or moon, as spiritual beings. Indeed, many Africans revere these objects of nature. They name children after these objects out of respect and to seek protection from them. Protection provides them comfort, connectedness, and control. Most Africans hold their belief in powerful spiritual beings with reverence and transcendence. Spirits guide family structure, child rearing practices, and indeed the entire life cycle. Africans believe in preserving harmony with these spirits. When parents lose control of their children, spirits are invoked to provide guidance and solutions. Among my tribal group, the Baganda of Uganda, the living–dead, who are believed to dwell around homesteads, are considered to be benevolent spirits. Africans live out their spirituality through elaborate dances that invoke these spirits. In some groups, people enter into trances, meditative states believed to connect them to spiritual beings. Spirituality and spiritual beings are also intimately connected to the notion of community.

Community Identity as a Spiritual Identity

Community relates to spiritual identity. Africans believe in communal identity, involving both the living and the dead. Mbiti (1990) noted that African personal identity is found in the context of their community's identity. One African proverb found in many languages states: "I am because we are." Africans try to integrate their sacred and secular into one harmonious, cooperative, and communal orientation without formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the nonreligious, and between the spiritual and the material areas of life (Mbiti, 1990).

As spiritual beings, Africans organize this sense of community around major events of the family life cycle, frequently engaging others in planning celebrations around births or marriages, funerals, and mourning rituals. Relatives and friends will travel long distances to attend these key moments. Elaborate meals with displays of traditional ethnic foods mark family get-togethers. These rituals underscore the spiritual beliefs and practices of our lives as Africans. My work with African immigrants and refugees has sought to connect to the depth of meaning and purpose that these rituals and practices address. They underscore a connection to the past, the present, and the future. They evoke the sacred in the life of the community.

These beliefs and practices have guided my self-knowledge in my work with immigrant and refugee populations. I have often reflected on the meaning of these formative experiences and their relationship to my life as a spiritual being. In the same way, I have reflected on how my life as a spiritual being with this spiritual legacy of my traditions intersects with the lives of immigrants and refugees as spiritual beings. They have also helped me to enter the world of my clients as I have sought to find a sense of meaning and purpose in the seeming hopelessness and helplessness that surrounds them.

I value the history of ancestors, the practices, and beliefs that have held me as an African and as an immigrant in a new world. My practice is anchored and guided by a commitment to understand the depth of loss and disruption suffered by refugee and immigrant populations. As a group, they are negotiating many life losses through their immigrant and refugee journey. For my part, I have come to learn that their journey has been a search for renewal, healing, and harmony.

The Story of Mot

The story of Mot captures what I have come to understand as my relationship with my own spiritual core. It is also emblematic of the lives of refugee and immigrant populations in my clinical work. Mot was one of the many refugee children from Sudan who came to be known as the "Lost Boys" (a term they disliked, since they did not think of themselves as lost). Mot, who lived with a foster family, was referred to me for therapy because of increasing behavior problems at school.

The story of Mot captures the struggle of his relationship with a higher power, his search for purpose and meaning, and healing in his life. Mot, 19, comes from the Sudanese Dinka tribe. At a very early age, he spent days roaming the devastated war fields in Southern Sudan, crossing several rivers and chased several times by wild animals. He spent days hiding from various warring groups, often without any food. He ended up crossing into Northern Uganda and finally settled into the refugee camp at Kakuma. His is a story of great pain and suffering, dotted throughout with questions such as: "Why did this happen to me?" "What about my brothers and sisters, what happened to them?" "Why did the gods do this to us?" Why do brothers kill each other?" "How can I forgive them as we have been taught by *Deng*?" (a spirit God in the indigenous spiritual tradition of the Dinka tribal group).

These are essentially spiritual questions with psychological and existential challenges. They speak to important issues in his relationship with God and search for purpose and meaning in life. Mot's questions echo those of other refugee children who have seen and been wounded by so much evil. They question and search for answers as they attempt to make meaning of their lives. In their struggle to deal with the psychological impact of these events, they try to make sense of senseless atrocities.

In fleeing from their country, these refugees have had to overcome the traumas of war, persecution, torture, and inhumane treatment. Their sense of basic trust and security has been shattered. Their struggle also includes trying to understand themselves in the context of challenges faced by most immigrants in adaptation to a new life in a foreign land far from home. The migration process involves multiple losses, including loss of kin and social support systems, identity, belief systems, and status (Falicov, 2002). Separated from familiar and cherished people, places, and possessions, refugees often go through prolonged transitions. They must begin to build new reconfigured identities and lives, learning new customs, language, norms, and values. Host societies present challenges of loneliness and alienation. African refugees and Muslims, in particular, often face racism and discrimination. In short, immigrants, and especially refugees, experience varying levels of physical, psychological, sociological, emotional, and spiritual/religious rootlessness.

For many refugees like Mot, attention to spiritual resources has been key. These resources have included the use of prayer and metaphor to build toward healing. Over time, I have come to appreciate their value for healthy integration of life. Both prayer and metaphor have come to represent the instrumental and the metaphysical in the lives of immigrants and refugees. I will discuss prayer and metaphor in relation to my work with Mot.

Prayer as a Form of Communion and Healing

Across cultures and religions, most people turn to some form of prayer in the face of adversity (Walsh, 2008). The value of prayer for health, well being, and healing has been well documented (Dossey, 1993; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001).

For refugees and immigrants, prayer is a major spiritual resource, both within communal services and in personal practice. On a number of occasions, Mot has spoken about the value of prayers and rituals in his life. Mot was raised Christian and he has had to find some way of integrating his Christian upbringing with his African traditional prayer worship. Repetitive prayer, recitation, and chanting have been part of Mot's prayer life. This exercise has often created a centering practice for Mot in which he is able to recollect himself when he is overwhelmed or flooded with painful wartime memories. He has shared with me his ability to say certain words and phrases that he repeats to himself as a way of finding comfort. In my work with Mot, I have sought to understand with him how he uses prayer to express his faith, his work, and his life as a religious person. When he utters prayer he experiences various transformations, some of which reveal new identities and life possibilities. For instance, he has named himself as a warrior who will always act on his own behalf, underscoring a new sense of self-agency.

For Mot, prayer has carried with it a protective power, one that offers him protection from evil and misfortune. Prayer has also strengthened his conviction and determination to overcome his life difficulties. At times, his prayer has also been a form of admission of his vulnerability or an assertion of some sense of control over his life. When Mot has used prayer to connect to his existence, I have also observed his wish to enter into communication with and willingness to surrender to something larger than himself. Thus, as he shares with me in our conversations his use of prayer, it has become an opportunity for us to explore his growth in awareness of his own condition. It has also become a way of connecting to others, like family members and friends, whom he cannot touch or reach at this time in his life. He feels their spiritual presence as he mentions them in his prayers. Prayer has become a transitional object for him. His prayers have been both vocal and silent. In vocal prayer, he has openly prayed for loved ones left behind or those who have died or been killed. Remembering them in prayer has been a way of honoring them.

As well as a sense of connection, refugees also speak at times about their sense of disconnection from loved ones and from protective communities. Mot has often talked about "those people who lied to me," referring to families that took him in as he trekked south to escape the killing fields of Sudan. He recalls on many occasions people who offered him and others a "home" but ended up abusing them, placing them under hard manual labor to earn their upkeep. He often talks about living with a sense of betrayal and with the suspicion that no one really cared. That leads him to question whether God can be completely trusted.

While prayers seeking deliverance and protection tend to preoccupy the life of refugees and immigrants I work with, other prayers acknowledge with gratitude God's presence and role in taking away their troubles. Many have talked about being created by God and owing their very existence to God. The belief in a caring and loving God often helps to sustain them in their tribulations. It has therefore been important to ask about their perception of God and God's willingness to step in when life becomes difficult. Such a sense of hopefulness is no clearer than in Mot's own words:

> Sometimes, we crossed the same river two or three times to escape being noticed by the enemy. We kept running. We did not know who we were running away from. We could not trust anyone. It was very scary. Some of the children belonged to the enemy and they reported on us. We were too scared to sleep at night. We wondered what would happen to us. We hated them and I suppose they hated us. We hoped God who created all of us would save us from danger. And God did!

Aylward Shorter is an anthropologist and a priest who worked in Africa. In his book, *Prayer in the religious traditions of Africa*, he cites the work of Fran Heiler, *Prayer: A study in the history and psychology of religion.* Heiler understood prayer as a communication and as a communion of the social human relations (Shorter, 1975). For Heiler, prayer is an awakening into one's consciousness. It is a dimension of life that transcends and reinterprets every social relationship and social experience. Whether uttered formally or informally, it also serves a number of social purposes.

Shorter outlines 15 themes recurrent in African prayer, subsumed under four major categories: relational themes, situational themes, purposive themes, and universal themes. One relational sub-theme is that of divine governance: in God's master mind, God both protects, and challenges. Mot's words echo this both/and paradox, revealing both a sense of despair regarding the challenges, but also a sense of hope in God's protection and provision. In my work with Mot, I have invited him to share prayers and intercessions in his own life. Listening to his prayers, I have heard some of Shorter's themes. Together, we have delved into the wishes his prayers express, the values they hold for him and the direction they point toward. I have also wondered with him about the commitments his prayers are making in these utterances. What has become increasingly clear to us in our work together is the interconnectedness of these utterances for him with the community in his life. Above all, I have also begun to notice how much his current situation is related to other people in his life, the purpose and meaning in his life, and ultimately his own commitment to bigger and greater hopes for his life.

Clinical work with refugees is about exploring ways of connecting. Prayers offer one important way to reconnect refugees and immigrants with loved ones left behind. They truly serve as transitional objects. Prayers invoke relational themes in which refugees and immigrants also connect with family members who have died. Prayers are not just about intercession. They are also about honoring family members and the gifts they have given each other. Ultimately, they are about celebrating life's rites of passage. They are indeed an instrumental aspect of spirituality (Rivett & Street, 2001).

Metaphors as Conduits of Healing

Metaphor is another tool that is useful as a spiritual resource for refugees and immigrants, which I have used in my therapeutic work with them. Metaphor can be seen as a metaphysical lens with tremendous possibilities. Babits (2001) has described metaphor as holding “the inner edge of possibility.” The use of metaphor can expand clinical possibilities. Metaphors often suggest more than one way of understanding reality. They provide new windows of understanding even as they leave a lot to interpretation. Metaphors are often alive and rich in meaning. For Babits (2001), metaphor is “most readily associated with image, vision, which is our most developed sense, occupying a larger area of the cerebral cortex than any other” (p. 23).

Metaphors are employed in many cultural groups, including different indigenous traditions. Among immigrant and refugee groups, metaphoric pictures seek to explain reality and mystery. Metaphors provide the living documents through which mystery unfolds. The use of metaphors to reveal and hold complexity can be a valuable spiritual resource in therapy with refugees.

Meaning making is a crucial process for recovery and resilience, particularly in the wake of trauma and loss (Walsh, 2007). Critically important are efforts to gain a “*sense of coherence*” (Walsh, 2008, 2007), through new perspectives on senseless atrocities, unbearable suffering, and overwhelming struggles: to see them as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful challenges. Clinical work with refugees’ metaphors can indeed provide that sense of coherence.

A careful exploration of metaphor, therefore, is key to therapeutic work. I have used metaphors to transcend polarized “either/or” choices in the lives of immigrants by offering a rich and complex way to understand the personal, family, and social transformations they experience and their capacity to find both/and solutions (Falicov, 2002, p. 2). For instance, viewing their new community as a “spiritual home” and “spiritual extended family” which enables refugees to feel connected without cutting off from their deep bonds with their family and culture of origin. As Falicov stresses, adaptation and wellbeing are fostered when immigrants and refugees can forge a bicultural identity, with roots in both worlds.

In my work with Mot, as with many other refugees and immigrants, I have used metaphor to provide a window of understanding into the plights in his life and his life journey ahead. Metaphors have also offered him ways to interpret important messages and to assist him in holding on even when things seem impossible. “A river flowing with joy” is one metaphor that Mot has used frequently to describe his wish in life. He has described many rivers he has crossed. “Most of these rivers were furiously angry at us. They swept everything that came our way. They carried off my cousin. We never saw him again. I would like to swim in a new river that flows with joy…” These images speak about Mot’s relationship to the ordeal he went through as he traveled to find a new home. He has often depicted his own sense of peace as—“a river that flows with joy. Together, we have explored this image and found ways to expand this imagery. I have asked him how the river gives to him—what soothing he feels as he imagines the river in his life. While he recognizes the turbulence that comes with the river, he also notices the calmness of the river. Such ability to acknowledge goodness alongside tragedy has been very effective in managing moments of frustration in his life. Together, we have sat with the pain of his situation and the helplessness that comes along with it. We have also been able to sit back and unpack the resilience, and the joy that comes with it. We have been able to embrace the complexity and the simplicity that this situation presents. This exercise has provided our work opportunities to transcend into new territories.

More recently, Mot has begun to expand the river metaphor to his ongoing life challenges. A river that flows with joy holds a sense of hope for him as he constructs a new life in the USA. When things have not gone well at his school, in his foster family, and in his community, he has talked about his "river letting him down" and his wish that things were better. Although he is gaining grounding in his new home, he continues to describe his life as a "river that still flows in many different directions."

For my part in our work, I have wondered with him about other ways the river could provide more opportunities for healing. We have talked about water and its life giving force. He has described how he walked miles in his little village to fetch water that was used in his home. He remembers how the river provided habitat for fish that was food for his tribal group. The waters of the Nile also provided irrigation for their crops and farms.

We have also expanded the metaphor to seek new meanings of water and river in his life today. He now describes his life in the USA as a long river with "winding twists and turns." "Sometimes, I like them;" he says, "sometimes, I hate them." The river has become one way to unpack good days and bad days in his life.

Mot's use of metaphors is common among Africans to comprehend their world and their place in it, which are existential, spiritual matters. Many will use figures of speech because they speak to a core understanding unmatched in other more concrete or factual ways of speaking. Often these figures of speech provide a window in their self-understanding and their core beliefs. They also allow them to enter a world of transcendence.

As Mot and others have talked with such rich imagery, I have also tapped into figures of speech that express my core beliefs with the hope that I can connect to their core beliefs. In doing so, I have come to a happy realization that it is not just the figure of speech that matters, but also the very experiences that underlie them. My own life experiences and the attack on my family when I was a 10-year-old boy brought me face to face with a crack in the window, the result of a shot fired at my father as he escaped through the window. Over the years, what was once a literal crack became a metaphor for me. I have come to realize that what gives me hope is less about a particular figure of speech, the "crack in the window" which for me was a—"ray of hope"—but the events that surround that crack in the window.

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage is an African spiritual tradition that celebrates major transitions in the life of Africans. The rites of passage are markers of transitions from one moment to another. Among Africans, these moments, which include birth, naming, childhood into adolescence then youth-hood into adulthood and beyond, signal movement from one stage to another. They look forward even as they look backwards and serve as important transitional objects in the life of Africans. These stages are marked with key events as circumcision, marriages, giving birth, and celebrating life and death. They offer connection to permanence and existence. In my work with immigrants we have returned to the rites of passage that characterize their life and their self-understanding. It has been helpful to examine key moments that have helped them transition. These moments have included events such as an escape, a river crossing, a witnessing of a death or even finding oneself alive after everyone else has been killed off.

The crack in the window was one aspect in this traditional African practice—the rites of passage. My father's experience that became my family's experience helped my family to transition from one key moment to another. It was a cleansing of sorts as it allowed us to reevaluate our lives in the context of our plight. It opened us to a place we had never been bringing with it new responsibilities. Similarly, Mot's immigration journey, just like mine, were transitions into new spaces. They revealed something we were leaving behind into something new and different.

As I have described elsewhere (Kamya, 2005), no event has been more hope filled for me or given to me as the crack in the window that I noticed after armed men attacked our home, shooting at my father. I can vividly recall that each time I looked at that crack in the window I held some hope that my father was still alive and would return to us some day. Although it took many years for my prayers to be answered, the crack in the window gave me a secret joy and expectation I so badly needed. It has continued to hold hope for me both in my personal and professional life. It provides the passion to do the work. My work with African immigrants and refugees has been one of "faithful companioning" and faithful hoping as we all have sought to locate that "inner edge of possibility" within the metaphors we have consulted, and in the process, created even more metaphors that have helped to ground us in our work. These sacred spaces have become brave spaces without which my work with immigrants would be meaningless.

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