A Conversation in Sacred Space

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> If you cast yourself into the sea, without any guidance, this is full of danger, because man mistakes things that arise within himself for things arising from elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you travel on the sea in a ship, this is perilous, because there is the danger of attachment to the vehicle. In the one case, the end is not known, and there is no guidance. In the other case, the means becomes an end, and there is no arriving.
>
> —Niffari (Quoted in Shaw)

> Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly
>
> —Chesterton

We invite you to imagine that you are sitting in a circle with others, some of whom you may know, some of whom you are meeting for the first time. As the "talking stick" passes from person to person, each speaker responds to this charge: "Share

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with us something about yourself that will help us to get to know you. Tell us how you understand your own unique personal experience of spirituality, including, if relevant, with what religious community you may identify. Tell us a story of your work; a story of how your work is shaped by your life and by your spiritual practice." Because the speakers are identified in some way or another with family therapy, the stories you hear may span generations of the speakers' lives. As you prepare for your turn, notice how the words that you will speak are shaped and transformed by your own experiences of ancestors, spirituality, and complex intersectional identities, and, also, by the stories that you are witnessing as others speak.

Welcome to the conversation among the authors. All of us are committed to cultivating an ethical dialogical meeting place, in which we can resonate with our diverse particular experiences without seeking consensus, or feeling compulsion to agree with particular beliefs. Because one aim of our project is to imagine a global discourse grounded in spirituality, our conversation must remain open to the diversity of forms of human spiritual and religious expression.

Some of us understand imagination to be an entryway to realms beyond the world of everyday experience and believe that gaining access to nonmaterial worlds is a form of spiritual practice. We invite you to imagine, without having to "believe," that our conversation, which in everyday linear time has been going on among us for three years, sometimes face to face, sometimes by video, mostly by e-mail, is taking place in the present, and in a place, that are beyond the limitations of space and time.

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The Conversation Begins

Now, each of us has spoken, passing the talking stick to the next author after our chapter in this book has finished. We have listened respectfully to your, the reader's, own story. As we set the talking stick aside for a cross-conversation, we pause to focus on our breathing. We contemplate the challenge and the obligation we face. We are taking on the paradoxes embodied in criticizing an individualistic global culture, and making the claim for a global human culture that affirms spirituality. We know the history of violent struggle for supremacy by many religions, including, for some of us, our own. In our effort to assert the fundamental importance of spirituality for life on the planet, we recognize the peril of lapsing into a universalizing monologue. How do we articulate an understanding that truly embodies dialogue? Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981), who, in the Soviet era, could not afford to be explicit about his religious faith, asserted that meanings emerge in the space between the speaker and the listener. Dialogue is generative and continuous. It can be interrupted, but never ends as long as there is a relationship between the speaker and the listener. We reflect on the subtle wisdom in Niffari's words, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, knowing that we need to have some form in which to hold our spiritual experiences but recognizing the peril of clinging to our forms. As we stay open to each other's words, our experiences of spirituality are continuously renewed. We bear in mind Chesterton's aphorism (also at the beginning of this chapter), and try not to take ourselves too seriously in our mutual search for understanding of phenomena that are ultimately beyond the reach of our words.

Spirituality and Language

As we engage with the manifold forms of human spiritual tradition, we are grateful for our comfort with paradox, one vital root of the branching tree of family therapy. Many of us have struggled with writing about experiences that are intrinsically beyond the limits of language. Words make distinctions, and distinctions can feel contrary to experiences of a Unity beyond all limitations. How is it possible to share our experiences with each other, without using the vehicle of language? How to hold to that vehicle lightly enough to "arrive" at an "end" that is deeply personal and beyond description? Somehow, we find rich language to engage with each other about experiences intrinsically beyond the limitations of language.

Our conversation draws on Rivett and Street's (2001) distinction between "instrumental" and "metaphysical" interventions, words that we have found useful in our work. As useful as the distinction may be when making clinical decisions, we are finding how lightly we actually hold that distinction in our work. In their chapters, Paulette describes invoking Christian aphorisms to help her patients work toward their goals of growth and personal healing; Hugo describes his healing work with refugees, co-constructing with them metaphors grounded in African spiritual beliefs and practices; Khawla works indirectly with Sheikhs to help Nuha free herself from possession; David translates esoteric ideas from Judaism into Christian theological terms to

help Gracia liberate herself from negative influences; Kiran studies the texts of Guru Nanak with Bani, collaborating with her to interpret the beliefs of Sikhism in Bani's current complex social and cultural context. One could characterize all these interventions as instrumental, as they draw on patients' existing beliefs and practices, helping patients to employ them to make therapeutic progress. Yet they are, for us, also inescapably metaphysical, as they activate spiritual beliefs and practices that we share with our clients. We often live in the same spiritual meaning systems as our clients, and are affected by the words that we utter. Both Khawla and David, for example, took care to protect ourselves from the nonmaterial entities tormenting our patients.

We play with Rivett and Street's ambiguous phrase, "the same, and different, and the same," which we find suits our efforts to acknowledge our common experiences of spirituality, embodied in the very different particulars of our faiths and practices. Useful but difficult to grasp, the phrase offers us a perspective as we seek words for experiences beyond words. We respect that each religious tradition operates within its own frame of reference, and that its richest meanings may emerge from within those frames of reference. We write to Mark Rivett and Eddy Street, and Eddy responds, [1] "For me this [the same and different and the same] is like a Zen koan…. We are here alluding to a way of orienting to phenomena given the non-dual nature of the universe…. Spirituality and psychotherapeutic practice have differences but are contained within the same universal process of (shall be say,) 'becoming'…" We express our gratitude to Jay, whose nondualistic practice of the Tao helps us to grasp, and to let go of, the meanings in "the same and different and the same." Hugo comments, "My first reaction to this is: the importance of seeking the familiar in the strange and the strange in the familiar. Or simplicity in complexity as we seek complexity in simplicity. In the end complexity and simplicity continually unfold complexity and simplicity. Maybe when we think we have arrived at something we are called to seek to find a beginning. All of this evokes for me what Bakhtin speaks of as 'the unfinalizability' of voices."

Paulette invites us to listen to an audio link,[2] a reading from the words of Neale Donald Walsch (Walsch, 2005), a contemporary teacher who shares his experiences of Divine revelation. We listen to and reflect on these words, offered in the voice of God:

> When we try to speak to each other… we are immediately constricted by the unbelievable limitation of words…. I do not communicate by words alone…. My most common form of communication is through feeling..…. I also communicate with thought…. Thoughts and feelings are more effective than mere words as tools of communication. … Words are really the least effective communicator…. They are not truth. They are not the real thing….Now the supreme irony here is that you all place so much importance on the word of God, and so little on the experience. In fact, you place so little value on what you experience that when your experience of God differs from what you have heard of God, you automatically discard the experience and own the words, when it should be just the other way around…

[1] Street, personal communication, August 24, 2017.

[2] http://www.audible.com/t2/title?asin=B002VA3J6Y&source_code=GO1GBSH09091690EI&mkwid=szqA7GtPz_dc&pcrid=205747089334&pmt=e&pkw=conversations%20with%20god&cvosrc=ppc.google.conversations%20with%20god&cvo_campaign=250472289&cvo_crid=205747089334&Matchtype=e&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIrea7vMjL1QIVAgRpCh2EmA_mEAAYASAAEgIrX_D_BwE.

Our conversation gets animated as we reflect on Walsch's teaching. Paulette says, "I have wondered if my struggle to respond to so many of the questions posed during this writing project has been in part because I connect with the power of my spirituality more often through feelings and experiences that defy words." Linda responds, "I can absolutely relate to Paulette's observation. I have been grappling with the task of explaining the experience of Constellations without making it sound trite. Words limit the experience. So much of what happens is through ritual, and, as such is beyond words. The felt experience of the participants is often described simply as 'peace.'"

David's reaction is also strong, but he resists our coming to a consensus. He says, "I feel tension between agreeing/accepting on the one hand, and disagreeing/rejection on the other. I am thankful for Jay's presence, encouraging me to hold the tension without drawing conclusions, and appreciate the grace in words from his chapter, 'embrace an interactive and absorbing dialogue with other theologies.' Having participated as a representative in a Constellation exercise that Linda led, I know from experience a wordless knowing that guided me to bring into the room the presence of a physically absent person. Yet, I struggle with Walsch's conclusive statements that so strongly dismiss the spiritual importance of language, particularly as I hear the statements uttered in an authoritative White male voice. From a *Kabbalistic* perspective, constriction and limitation are positive, not negative processes. God becomes accessible to human awareness through a process of constriction that reduces the brilliance of Divine light, making it perceptible to the soul. Further, language is fundamental to Jewish theology and mythology, even as ultimate spiritual Truth is acknowledged to be beyond all description in language. In esoteric Jewish thought, the Torah existed in God's mind before Creation, and is Creation's design. It is hard for me as a Jew to reject language, when the world itself is seen as an embodiment of the sacred letters of the Hebrew alphabet! Judaism is not the only faith with reverence for language. Consider the initial words of the Christian Gospel of Saint John (John 1: 1-4, RSV), which resonate with Jewish myths of the role of language ("the Word") in creation: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.'"

Khawla reminds us of her account of her dying sister sharing with the family what she had been told by dead relatives who promised to accompany her to the next life. Members of the family gathered around Khawla's sister did not speak of what she was telling them, "since our socialization does not teach us terminology that may contain this type of spiritual experience in life. Many unique human experiences, in all faiths, are ignored and disrespected because we do not create words for them."

The same and different and the same. Although we have not reached consensus about words (indeed, have sought to avoid the monologic risk of mutual agreement), we all acknowledge nameless yet achingly familiar sensations evoked so often for each of us in our community of souls assembled around the writing of this book. When our collective journey began, several of us chose to wait to read others' words

until we had found the words to produce the early drafts of our chapters. When we began to dance together in language, securely rooted in the particulars of our own spiritual faiths and practices, we discovered new wellsprings of spirituality for ourselves. We delight in the flowing dynamic between turning inward to find words faithful to ourselves and to our spiritual communities, and turning outward to share those words with each other. Inward and outward, neither one nor the other yet both, we find experiential meaning for the words, "the same, and different, and the same." Our conversation moves fluidly between agreements and disagreements, respectful of our differences even as many of us become more firmly grounded in our religious beliefs and practices. Ancient words take on new meanings, and new words evoke profound experiences that resonate with the spirits of primordial ancestors.

Some of our traditions have secret words, or words whose utterance is forbidden. In Judaism, the most sacred name of God can never be uttered, and written only on parchment scrolls used in ritual worship. Observant Jews use the term *Hashem* (Hebrew for "the Name") to refer to it, and prayer book translations use the euphemism THE LORD. The word is a simultaneous rendering of the verb, "to be," in past, present, and future tenses. Thus, this name of God can be roughly translated as "Is, Was, Will be." Rockey shares a Choctaw word for a timeless time and spaceless space that is the source of all being, which for David resonates with *Ein Sof* in Jewish *Kabbalah*. Rockey is gracious and compassionate with David when he asks out of his ignorance how to spell the name, which Rockey rendered as "no time, no space" in an article he wrote about his medicine man's practice (Robbins, Hong, & Jennings, 2011). Rockey teaches us that the name is never written; it is a sacred word, which will not appear in any Choctaw dictionary. In fact, because it does not exist in ordinary reality, its pronunciation may change each time that it is spoken. We acknowledge that some sacred knowledge must be kept secret, as it loses its spiritual power if it is shared outside the boundaries of the rituals in which it is embedded.

As we dive deeply into a conversation about the role of language in spirituality, it may not surprise you that we don't take too much time to try to distinguish between the words, "religion" and "spirituality." The question as to which term applies to which human acts, beliefs, or feelings has a different meaning, and different answers, in different cultural contexts. Are traditional indigenous beliefs, for example, Native American or African, "religions," or are they ways of knowing and being in the world, not necessarily distinguishable as "spiritual" or "religious," from within their own frames of reference?

We take a moment to play with words, trying to come up with as many words as we can that may evoke experiences associated with religion and/or spirituality, as follows: abandonment, acceptance, Allah, awe, blessing, Buddha, burden, clean, commitment, community, companion, compassion, corruption, courage, curse, Divine, darkness, dread, emptiness, energy, fear, fullness, generosity, God, grace, gratitude, growth, guide, guilt, Guru, healing, heart, holy ground, hope, humility, impure, Jesus, intimacy, journey, knowing, light, love, mindfulness, Mohammed, obedience, obligation, openness, narrative, pain, perception, power, profane, pure,

quest, redemption, release, remorse, renunciation, respect, responsibility, reverence, rituals, sacred, sacred space, seeking, sensing, shame, sin, stillness, struggle, suffering, Tao, touch, truth, transcendence, transformation, unclean, virtue, vision, voice, yearning… What experiences do these words evoke for you, and what words come to you that you might want to add to the list?

Finding, Creating, Entering Sacred Space and Time

Saliha speaks. Her words move us, literally moving our conversation into a new topical domain, and metaphorically moving us into deep states of inner contemplation: "Even as I hope that my words move you, I yearn to learn the meaning of those words in your responses, and know that the creative, generative process (perhaps the portal to the spirit world?) requires that we never settle or rest on the words alone." Her words, "spirit world," open our conversation to considerations of sacred space and time, domains ultimately beyond the reach of language.

The Spiritans

For several years now, Hugo, Jay, David, and Pat Romney have met to consult about practicing therapy from a spiritual perspective. We dubbed our group the "Spiritans." Often, in the course of our conversations, we encounter experiences of awe and wonder, which we name moments of "transcendence." We have adopted Hugo's use of the term, "sacred space," (Kamya, 1999) to characterize our shared experience of entering domains beyond everyday experience. Physically separated, as we live long distances away from each other, the Spiritans assemble in sacred space using communication technology.

Paulette's words resonate with our description of Spiritans meetings, as she shares her experience of church services, when "Spirit enters the room." Linda says, "Rockey's experience, my friend's in Germany, and my own in countless Constellations as representative and facilitator confirm for me the reality of a spiritual dimension where time and space are irrelevant and where we are all connected."

The same, and different, and the same. We are engaging with you, Reader, in the "realm" of imagination, enabling you to participate in a conversation spanning several years as though in the same place at the same moment. Space and time are words, vessels that we must hold as lightly as we take ourselves. For many of us, spiritual reality incorporates spaces and times beyond the limitations of the material world. Somehow, we recognize it when our conversation takes us into sacred space. One of us offers the words, "We sojourners are resting in a beautiful, safe, open field to share our experiences of the journey."

Imagining Sacred Space in Global Culture

We treasure the moments when one, more, or all of us are moved spiritually. As one of us speaks from the heart about the particulars of their faith practice, the rest of us enjoy richer and deeper experiences of the particulars of our own spirituality. Hugo shares how his spiritual experience is enriched by our "internested conversations." How can we draw from our experiences together, and from what we know as family therapists, to support cultural evolution that builds universal access to sacred space? How do we understand engaging with our clients from a spiritual perspective?

Citing Saliha's and Kiran's lives as well as her own, Khawla reminds us that many in the world struggle against political and cultural limitations that bar their access to such experiences of sacred space. In the face of such stress, Khawla reminds us, "Some people then become reactive instead of active and end with using the politics of faith instead of focusing on their faith." Hegemonic religions disqualify outsiders, relating to them as "nonbelievers" who must either be converted or kept away. Hugo reminds us how his traditional African beliefs and practices are disparaged by monotheistic religions. Within religions, guardians of orthodoxy stifle coreligionists' efforts to cultivate their own particularities of spiritual practice.

Consider the geographical space of Israel and Palestine, holy to the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but often not the sacred space that we experience in our conversation. Polytheistic Romans, acting from secular imperial political considerations, exiled the Jews in the year 70 of the Common Era. The "Holy Land" came under the Muslim rule following military conquest. The Crusades marked another chapter in the bloody history of military conquest, as European Christians fought for and held territory for a few generations, until vanquished and expelled by Muslim armies. Centuries under the Muslim Ottoman Empire ended with European political occupation following the First World War, followed by the 1947 war that established Israel as a Jewish state, now in perpetual conflict with Muslim and Christian Palestinians, their common holy sites in Jerusalem at the center of an unstable truce punctuated by outbursts of bloody violence.

As you engage in this conversation, how can the case of this region inform your own generative thinking? Both as legacy and as painful present reality, the story of this region illustrates how faith can contribute to bloodshed and hatred. We are asking you to help imagine an alternative global culture that acknowledges universal human spirituality while respecting the destructive potential of hegemonic particularism. How can you respect your clients' particularism with compassion in your therapeutic conversations? How will you connect metaphysically with the spiritual reality of your clients' faith, without contesting or endorsing their assumptions of exclusive claim to the "Truth"?

A Role for Family Therapy

How can we, as family therapists, contribute to cultural change in a world where religion seems so often to obstruct, rather than facilitate, access to sacred space? Khawla asserts that, in parts of the world where economic forces shape "politics of faith," religion actually interferes with experiences of awe in response to natural or spiritual beauty. "War," says Khawla, "uses religion as a cover reason, hampers spirituality, divides mind from body, and religious communities one from the other." She challenges us further, "How can societies in the process of rapid social change draw on spirituality to help people adapt to change rather than suffer from alienation in the process? How can we challenge polarization of the spiritual and the secular that modernity forces on us? How do we resist rejecting parts of ourselves, including family, ancestors, education, culture, and self-esteem?"

Whether we called it "joining" (Minuchin, Nichols, & Lee, 2007) or "multipartiality" (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991), one of our first lessons as family therapists was to ally ourselves with all the members of a family, no matter how polarized among themselves; to see from multiple points of view. Could this stance somehow be integrated into an ethical global discourse of spirituality, marked by curiosity, mutual respect, and appreciation that the individuals engaged in dialogue across differences are deeply grounded in the particulars of their specific traditions?

Several of us align ourselves with the postmodern position, which stipulates that no one has an exclusive claim to the truth. Postmodern respect for the "local knowledge" of lived experience is consistent with appreciating the particulars of religious practices and beliefs, while resisting universal religious claims.

Dialogical practice (Andersen, 1991; Anderson, 1997; Seikkula & Olson, 2003), grounded in the implicit spirituality of Bakhtin's work (Bakhtin, 1981), affords both epistemological and ethical foundations for a global culture that acknowledges human spirituality. Collaborative and respectful dialogical practice seeks the meanings that emerge in the "space between" the speaker and the listener, a space that some of us experience as itself sacred space, particularly as feelings of love mark dialogical engagement in the space between (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

The counterpart of dialogue is monologue, attachment to a single perspective. Dialogue is not necessarily "good" in relation to monlogue as "bad"; each form has its utility in its context. Monologue is conclusive. Rational proof, systematic theology, scientific argument are examples of coherent monologue. Dialogue is generative, creating new meanings in the dialogic space between. Domination and competition between religions, and enforcement of orthodoxy within religions, are monologic practices, examples of "attachment to the vehicle" in the aphorism of Niffari's at the beginning of this chapter. Hugo and David share their compassionate exploration of the discourse of retaliation (Kamya & Trimble, 2002). We saw how the prospect of dialogue between adversaries, seen through the lens of trauma, appears dangerous. The discourse of retaliation is intrinsically a monologue, which eradicates the risk of engaging with the unpredictable subjectivity of the other.

David reflects on his experience with Artsbridge, a leadership-training program for young people living in conflict regions (Barzilay-Shechter, 2010; Nathan, Trimble, & Fuxman, 2015). Artsbridge combines training in the arts with a structured form of dialogue modeled on family therapist Tom Andersen's (1991) reflective approach. Supporting Palestinian and Israeli adolescents to develop language that bridges their embattled "space between" as they create intrinsically nonverbal works of art together affords them opportunities to discover new meanings. In using the vehicles of language and nonverbal experience, Artsbridge resonates with the conversation among us. Artsbridge training seldom results in one side persuading the other. Rather, it enables its students to listen respectfully, to be able to see through the eyes of the other. Years after the training, many Artsbridge graduates, now young adults, sustain relationships despite their differences, and remain committed to fostering dialogue. Given our interest in a discourse of spirituality that does not demand consensus, Artsbridge's use of dialogic theory from family therapy offers us hope. David's personal commitment to Artsbridge is grounded in a dream of reconciliation among embattled adherents of three religions, reconciliation with potential for enormous global influence.

Locating Sacred Space: The Same and Different and the Same

We reflect on the limitations of language as we contemplate the words, "sacred space." For some of us, the words may be metaphorical; others hold beliefs, grounded in the particularities of our religions, of worlds to come, of realms beyond the limitations of the material. As we concentrate on the meanings of the words, once again we encounter experiences of the same, and different, and the same. We talk of an internal experience of the sacred, recognizable but beyond words. Some of us feel ourselves "ascending" to spaces beyond ourselves, simultaneously accessing inner sacred space as we enter worlds beyond our individual embodiment. These very private experiences may emerge simultaneously for us during our conversation. The "space between" becomes a sacred space, which we acknowledge even as we accept that ultimately no words can capture these moments.

We wonder, is it possible to develop a common language for the diverse forms of engagement with spirituality in psychotherapy? Can we make any statement that does not imply a consensus, excluding alternative possibilities? We address these questions from a dialogical perspective, seeking to maintain a listening space for the "not yet spoken" (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006). Among ourselves, we are familiar with "instrumental" approaches to helping our clients cultivate the healing potential of their religious and spiritual practices. We recognize that our own work incorporates something of the "metaphysical," since we all practice mindfully as self-reflective spiritual beings.

We are accustomed to inquiring about spirituality when we meet with new clients, and to helping them explore possibilities for healing and growth in their spiritual experience. It is not unusual for clients to tell us that they do not practice a religion but consider themselves to be spiritual. Inquiring about moments that

clients consider to have been spiritual can uncover opportunities for instrumental and metaphysical healing.

We acknowledge that some clients firmly reject any exploration of the spiritual. Is there a way to engage with spirituality in such circumstances? Perhaps, without naming it as sacred space, we can nurture spiritual possibilities in the space between. Fully and authentically present with the other, we can also be mindful of our inner sacred space, thereby connecting with spiritual realms that are paradoxically beyond and within us. This affords us feelings of love that accompany the shift from monologic to dialogic forms of relational engagement.

Pain and Suffering

We recognize that our conversation must address "negative" experiences, even as we acknowledge Jay's Taoist perspective on the unity of all phenomena, good and evil, up and down, black and white, positive and negative. How can we respectfully address the phenomena of pain, suffering, oppression, guilt, and shame, and the problem of evil, within a spiritual framework?

Several of us speak of discomforts encountered in the process of writing our chapters. We share our feelings of uncertainty, comparing the quality of our writing with that of others, some associating this with a feeling of "not being good enough" that we acquired in our family's religions as children. We share past and (for some of us) present experiences of guilt over transgressing religious prohibitions or failing to respond to religious demands. Linda speaks about our struggles with doubt and fear, saying, "I think when I resist my morning practice, my prayer time, and my journal writing, what is operative is my fear that I will find nothing there—that I am on my own. That's the rational mind intruding and shaming the innocent child that knows from her heart that we are loved, cherished and cared for by a loving Presence that I call God."

We acknowledge that spirituality, particularly in the form of religion, can both comfort and afflict. Christianity and Islam have well-articulated ideologies of reward and punishment in the afterlife. A virtuous life assures eternal joy in the presence of God in Heaven; a sinful life is punished with the torments of Hell. Jewish prophetic literature explains the suffering of exile as a consequence of collective disobedience, and promises collective redemption for following the Law. All three Abrahamic religions temper their strict decrees with assurances of forgiveness and comfort from a compassionate God.

In our conversation, there is little talk about the problem of evil. Perhaps we implicitly recognize that there are culturally bound differences in our understandings of that term. We respect that some hold beliefs in a world embodying a cosmic struggle between good and evil, while others believe that all existence embodies a sacred, indissoluble unity.

We reflect on the problem, and the meaning, of suffering. We recognize the power of spirituality to comfort and soothe, to take people beyond the limitations of

their own personal situations into broader perspectives that afford meaning, and the power of love in sacred space. We also acknowledge the suffering of people who may feel that they are not living up to the standards of their faith. Although none of us are practicing Buddhists, we are grateful for the teachings of the Buddha that recognize suffering as integral to the human condition, and that value detachment and compassion.

We ask the difficult question, "Is suffering itself integral to spiritual practice?" Christian theology assigns cosmic significance to Jesus's suffering, a deliberate act of redemption from sin for those who believe in him. Isaac Luria, the *Kabbalistic* spiritual master in sixteenth-century Sefirot, often prescribed fasting and other forms of self-deprivation for spiritual clarity (Fine, 2003). Mystics in many traditions practice asceticism. As we listened to Rockey's account of his experience of *Hanblechia,* we resonated with the painful sensations and emotions that framed his entrance into transpersonal experience.

Exploring this difficult theme of suffering makes us aware of the need for humility when we engage with clients about their spiritual experiences. We need to be openhearted, compassionate, and deeply respectful when we negotiate access to sacred space with people who are in pain about their religious lives, and whose beliefs may be very different from our own.

Responding to *An Interview with God*

(Editor's note: The following conversation embodies the practice of meeting dialogically in sacred space. Though the best way to engage with this section is to experience the video that we are discussing, what the authors wish for you to see is that, as different as our experiences are as we watch the video, each of us feels our own experience of spirituality become richer and deeper as we witness each other. The same, and different, and the same.)

Paulette shares another link to the work of Neale Donald Walsch.[3] In the video, breathtaking pictures of natural beauty are accompanied by moving, wordless music, and text that describes one of Walsch's encounters with his God, as follows:

> I dreamed I had an interview with God. "So would you like to interview me?" God asked. "If you have the time." I said…. "What surprises you most about humankind?" God answered…"That they get bored with childhood. They rush to grow up then long to be children again. That they lose their health to make money and then lose their money to restore their health. That by thinking anxiously about the future, they forget the present, such that they live in neither the present nor the future. That they live as if they will never die, and die as if they had never lived."…. I asked, "As a parent, what are some of life's lessons you want your children to learn?" God replied with a smile. "To learn that it is not good to compare themselves to others. To learn they cannot make anyone love them. What they can do is let themselves be loved. To learn that a rich person is not one who has the

[3] https://www.youtube.com/embed/moBvLFbFdJ4?rel=0&autoplay=1.

> most, but is one who needs the least. To learn that it only takes a few seconds to open profound wounds in persons we love, and it takes many years to heal them. To learn to forgive by practicing forgiveness. To learn that there are persons who love them dearly, but simply do not know how to express or show their feelings. To learn that two people can look at the same thing and see it differently. To learn that it is not always enough that they be forgiven by others. But that they must forgive themselves." …."Is there anything else you would like your children to know?" "To learn that I am here. Always."

Walsch's words embody wisdom, and are not identified with a particular religion. Always the Editor in this conversation, David is concerned about the risk that Walsch's words could generate a monological consensus among us. He challenges each of us with the question, "Did watching the video activate your spirituality?" As we respond, we witness a polyphonic diversity of responses.

Kiran shares that she felt "calm and worry simultaneously. The images are serene and made me think of the vastness and unknowingness of God. I felt worry because although I agree with the answers God was giving and I believe them, I am not sure that I can carry the answers out better at the moment. I don't feel that watching the video activated my spirituality—but I am not sure of this. The worry kind of surprised me. Maybe given what is happening in the country and the world—I just am not sure how to slow down. That's all I have right now. Sitting with worry."

Khawla says, My first reaction was total appreciation and love to the pictured nature mixed with fear for the person who wants to interview God…. Nature shows the greatness of the creature, the greatness of God…we keep learning from God's messages and messengers to us. God teaches us that when we teach ourselves to appreciate the outside beauty in Nature and the inside beauty in our relation with ourselves and with others, then we will reach satisfaction of our experience in this life."

Saliha: "I was torn between the images and the words…. And in some ways, as I write, it strikes me that video could be a metaphor for the tension between the spiritual and the material. The images are so big and alive and in some way when one is in nature, I often find myself in what I would describe as in awe and in connection with something bigger. I can feel the incredible bigness that surrounds me and is unfathomable. I am in awe of how it all functions together, just like my body, in how it moves together. The mystery, beauty and the power of it all. So, the images in the video capture the spiritual while the words are the material life.... The words felt so human to me. How we make sense when we talk about 'money and health,' 'forgiveness,' 'time,' etc. It felt so cliché and yet if I allowed my mind to wander away from the critique, I could also hold the 'spirit' in the words, i.e. the meaning, the message…. And that right there is the reminder that in any one moment, there are so many voices and dichotomies. And yet being able to be, feel the tensions and see that all of it is in relationship to each other. The beauty is not only in the images only in that moment, but it is also in the tension, in the dichotomy that transforms itself into the dialectics—the tension in which each voice gets its definition by being in relationship to the other voices. That relationship is hard to fathom but often easier to experience as being in-tension (at least for me). I think that is the beauty of life, which is a fleeting moment of spirituality I believe…. So, in some strange contradictory way, maybe I am saying that this moment—the moment of making sense of the video—is the spiritual moment that got activated…."

Paulette: Initially, I was overwhelmed with the beauty of the natural 'wonders' depicted that represent the four corners of this earth, now and in the beginning of time; the extent to which the perfection portrayed is indisputably beyond human capacity to create; and the sense there is a relationship between all things. On second viewing, I became more aware of how challenging it is to attend to the words on the screen and the backdrop of the beautiful music and scenes simultaneously. I am left to wonder whether this tension mirrors our reality in some way. When I ponder the words, I tend to look inward, seeking to see whether there is any noticeable trend between what our human inclination leads us to do and what embracing our spirituality allows us to move toward. When I focus on the unspeakable beauty, I accept the imitations of my own understanding.

Linda: It gripped me immediately because of the beautiful video and music. Felt l could easily cry—with the fullness and magnificence and intricacy of nature's beauty. It transported me to my favorite space—Nature. Then, when the "conversation" began, my tears were more for how often I miss the mark—especially about wanting to grow up and then wanting to go back to childhood. If by spirituality, you are referring to that space that connects me to my Self, to God, to nature and to others, then yes, the video opened me up and got the energy flowing, making me feel more alive.

Hugo: I was filled with awe and wonder as I watched the video. There were many moments that each message brought me…. For me, I was transported in some of Henri Nouwen's work, *The Life of the Beloved* (1992), in which he explores spiritual living in a secular world. He discusses how one becomes the Beloved by exploring three moments: Taken, Blessed and Broken. To be Taken we have to remember that we can desire to become the Beloved only if we are already the Beloved. Therefore the first step in the spiritual life is to acknowledge with our whole being that we already have been taken. Indeed, as children of God, we are God's chosen ones. The word chosen kept speaking to me as I listened and watched the video. Indeed, that sense of specialness held me as I watched the video. I constantly feel thankful that God's graces continue through my life. This leads me to feel a sense of being blessed by all that God provides me. There are countless blessings in random acts of being. I cannot but stop thinking of my parents' blessing from long ago. I hold dear all the blessings that have come my way. These daily acts of affirmation and validation continue to give me the stubborn optimism that I so much cherish. But I also humbly appreciate that my life as a human being is broken which speaks to the continual learning and challenge that daily lies before me. My brokenness is an invitation to live humbly and to keep searching to learn beyond my small self. It is also an invitation to seek and find communion with others. This helps me appreciate who I am and who I am invited to become. It also offers me hope as I sit with the world's brokenness of the people I am called to serve especially those I speak about in my chapter.

David: I did experience sensations of transcendence as I read, looked, and listened to the video. Thanks to the personal transformations that I have experienced over the time that we have been writing, several of which I have written about in our email exchanges, I was far less ambivalent or frightened to allow myself the feelings

of personal intimacy in an "interview" with God that the video evoked for me. By the time that I reached the end of the video, I was ready to take in the assurance from God, "I am always here." And yet, there was a part of me that wondered how this would land with someone who does not experience a God as a being in personal, intersubjective relationship with that someone.

Most of the ethical and mindfulness injunctions seemed and felt to me as universals; yet, again, I struggled with universals becoming monological impositions. I have saved the link, and plan to access it from time to time, to reconnect with my Spirit.

Rockey: I think that we are to learn to look through our eyes rather than with them. Maybe that is why, as the text says, "We get bored with childhood." We cease to use our childlike imaginations to interact with the beauty around us. I had the yearning to be in those environments as I watched them materialize and evaporate. While the paradoxes and wise words were beautiful I was distracted with the words. I wanted to absorb myself in the light that bathed the natural scenes. But then when it ended, I saw the morning sun dancing through the branches of my backyard tree. The light was making flickering designs on the back of a wicker chair in my room. Sometimes I need to be reminded to see the light. Thanks for the wonderful video that woke me up for a little while.

Jay: My initial reaction is profoundly spiritual and full of gratitude AND awareness of tsunamis, hurricanes and tornados, deserts and floods, the earthquakes and volcanoes that produce extraordinary and spectacular visions combined with catastrophic death and destruction (yin and yang).

Acknowledging Transformation

From a Bakhtinian perspective, conversation is "unfinalizable." Because each utterance derives its meaning from the response it evokes, conversations may be interrupted but they never finish. To join our conversation, you will need to read our words. Recognizing that we have to interrupt our conversation for our words to make their journey from the sacred space we are sharing into publication, we pause to reflect on whether and how our experiences of spirituality have changed over the three years we have been working together on this book.

Linda shares, "Being in our writing community this past year has been a blessing that confirms the innocent child in me…. My spirituality has not so much changed as it has deepened—I guess that is a change—as a result of our collaborative sharing. I have been at this place before where it is easy to see God in everything (immanence), but like all of life, this has come in cycles…God's Presence again reassuring me, reminding me not to take my life so seriously. It did not guarantee or spell out what would happen next, only that I was not alone and that truly it would all be ok…. Our process has inspired me—reigniting my spirit, removing internal obstacles to meditation, spiritual reading and journaling, and returning me to regular reception of the Eucharist mostly during the week…. I am reminded that 'every-

thing belongs' and has a place in our incarnated life, that there is a mutuality in all that occurs…."

Rockey says, "I am so very grateful to be with all of you spiritual seekers. To sum it up, your journey has been a light to my own. My heart is filled with love and gratitude…. We need that strange element of love that hates that which is against love, righteous indignation. But we also need the awareness that God is in everyone. Just seeing that others are working on this just as I am is centering. Thanks for traveling on this boat with me for a while."

Kiran tells us, "I can feel myself growing and expanding over the course of working on the chapter with Saliha. While I have always identified as a Sikh, I have found myself much more curious about the intricacies of the words in our holy text, *Guru Granth Sahib.* I feel spiritually quieter as if I am on solid ground. I have more trust in things working out, in finding the answers that are meant for me. Reading others' chapters has reminded me of the threads that bind us together. I felt so many similarities between us as authors despite our different paths of spirituality. I feel hopeful and brave. I also find myself wishing we as people spoke more about faith and spirituality openly. I feel so connected to the authors through this dialogue, who else could I connect to? Where else can I create and nourish community that is inter-religion/spirituality and not just *intra*? I find myself wanting to translate some of the Sikh concepts to everyday modern life. This is easy to do but I haven't spoken much about spirituality, even with my Sikh clients. This is crazy!! Where and how did I learn not to do this? I am also wanting more contact with members of my faith community (not so many here in NYC) and it just occurred to me today that this yearning could be linked to the unraveling of my work in this book. I just looked up from my computer and saw a framed photo of the Harimandir Sahib (our most holy Gurudwara) on my wall. I bought and framed this photo in April—so many reminders of how I've added spiritual reminders in the past several months. I am grateful to be part of this journey. I want to continue expanding at the heart from what I am learning through this project."

David speaks. "As I read through the correspondence among the authors, I am struck again by the depth of personal, spiritual, emotional experience embodied in our words for each other…. I certainly am experiencing transformation in the process. A lifetime spiritual and emotional wound has marked my journey. God appeared to me in a dream when I was 9 years old, abandoned me, and left me with crushing responsibility. It was after an authors' videoconference that I experienced an assurance from God: Now having seen that I could carry on the work with which I had been charged, God would always be available in personal form as a Presence in my life. That has indeed happened. I think that, if God had called me in the way that S/He called my ancestors, I would have been a reasonably good Christian minister. The painful, paradoxical experience that I had in my personal relationship with God took me on another path, for which I am grateful…. I am sometimes moved to tears reading the words of my fellow authors, as I see the realization of a dream. We are engaged in deep conversation about our spirituality, activating Spirit in the space between our utterances, *without* being tempted to shape yet another religion. What I hope that we are shaping is a culture of respectful conversation between people

deeply grounded in their own specific beliefs and practices. In so doing, we are contributing to the creation of a human culture that can some day replace the current soulless individualist global culture that is destroying humanity and the life of our planet."

Our Invitations to You

We hope that you are touched, as we are, by kaleidoscopic wonder at experiences grounded in the diversity of human religious, spiritual, and metaphysical traditions. May your experience of joining our conversation inspire you to reach out, explore within, and live your truth in relationship with the world and its peoples. As you engage with spirituality, we hope that you will find courage to address the problematic implications of religion and spirituality, for example, fundamentalism, particularism, and hegemonic aspirations. We hope to hear your voice as you contribute to a global discourse that respects universal human spirituality and celebrates the glorious particularism of human search for the Ultimate—not authoritative monologue, but generative dialogue.

We invite you to discover more of your own approach to making the therapeutic conversation a sacred space. How will you and members of the family in the room (and perhaps ancestors beyond the boundaries of the space and time of the room) engage in rich dialogue, each speaking from the particulars of their spiritual practice, as different as they may be from each other, so that all experience the familiar yet indescribable, the same and different and the same? As Saliha says, "I yearn to learn the meaning of those words in your responses, and know that the creative, generative process (perhaps the portal to the spirit world?) requires that we never settle or rest on the words alone."

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