

The Fifth Province, Spirituality and Love: Co-Creating a Sacred Space Therapy Conversations

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“Whenever you get into a state of love you are really entering the spiritual domain.”
Sri Vasudeva

Introduction

The Fifth Province is a metaphor taken from Irish Celtic mythology and represents a therapeutic ‘space’ where the realities and stories of clients are voiced, heard, accepted and respected in a dis-position¹ of love. When we listen to the storied lives of our clients we are constantly challenged to place our ‘selves’, our stories and our constructs at risk so that we can be open to receive their gift of soul baring. To open space for another, we are called on to be present and to let go of our personal prejudices and agendas. It is in this kind of relational atmosphere that the sacred can be sensed. Also in this atmosphere possibilities are created for the emergence of a wonderful collective wisdom through those gathered. It is in this process of inter-viewing, inter-acting and inter-being that spiritual connections happen and co-created solutions can emerge.

With the increased re-awareness of spirituality in the lives of both clients and therapists today, this chapter presents a spiritual reading of the fifth province approach. The term, ‘spirituality’ does not refer to any specific religious affiliation but is an umbrella term covering a multi-verse of

possibilities where a person experiences connectedness to an expansiveness beyond their everyday, material and emotional appreciation of themselves. It is an experience where we become one with who ever or whatever we are in relationship with. In this expansion we come to know ourselves for who we truly are. It can happen anytime - when we are involved in sports, at play, in the garden, playing or listening to music and so on. It can also happen during religious practices but is not confined to them. In my experience it happens frequently in therapy only we have rarely referred to it as spiritual.

History of the Fifth Province Approach

Popular myth has it that the fifth province, if it existed at all, was sited at the centre of Ireland in a place now known as the Hill of the Kings. Today, all that remains on the summit of this hill is a single standing stone. It was here that the Celtic Druids were thought to have counselled kings and chieftains from the four corners of the island. The provincial leaders would come unarmed to encounter in peace. Here their conflicts and oppositions were presented, accepted and re-viewed in dialogue.

My colleagues, Nollaig Byrne, Philip Kearney and I were attracted by this indigenous metaphor. Like many good things in life, it came to us by way of serendipity from the work of two Irish philosophers, Richard Kearney and Mark Patrick Hederman. (Hederman & Kearney, 1982, 10 - 12) The former is now one of Ireland's noted philosophers while the latter is a prominent member of the Benedictine Order in the South West of Ireland. What attracted us to this metaphor was its orientation towards holding the viewpoints of all those we saw in therapy in great respect. The space of the

fifth province was also imagined by us to embrace the multiplicity of stories that constitute what it means to be in a human experience, no matter how difficult or abusive that experience seemed or was judged to be.

(McCarthy & Byrne, 1988, McCarthy & Byrne, 1995, Byrne and McCarthy, 199). Furthermore, within this space emergent solutions and realities were seen as co-created in the relationship between clients and therapists.

Therefore, therapists would not have the final say or the last word in relation to the lives of those who came to them for help.

The Fifth Province as a Portal to the Spiritual?

Working with the processes of co-creation, I became aware that we were tapping into a greater field of consciousness. This occurred when we became part of a collective wisdom. This collective wisdom emerged in the inter-actions in the team and between the team and whoever they were in conversation with around a presented difficulty. What emerged was often surprising and unforeseen. Through each 'surprise' our minds were expanded to encompass other possibilities. Yet this expansion was not achieved through individual effort alone but as part of a collective expansion in consciousness.

Throughout the development of the approach the following are some of the key principles of practice which emerged. We talked of a *non-imposing therapeutic dis-position*. We talked of a *dis-position of openness, acceptance, curiosity, enquiry and love*, We talked of the *co-creation of a still-point, a 'space' for reflection* where we could become witnesses to the stories of clients and be present with them. We talked of *the co-creative*

process where outcome was emergent within the *collective wisdom*. We talked of a *goal-less process*. We talked of a *both/and process in the transcendence of dualisms*. We talked of a *resonant mood* and so on.

While these principles may seem exemplary, We wondered if our clients experienced our work in a reciprocal way. We sought to answer these questions by inviting clients to come back and describe the process of therapy as they remembered it. Only they could confirm if our imagined dis-position and the co-creative process was in deed a lived reality. If the client's 'feedback' re-presented our approach then we would have some indication that we had been engaged in a co-constructive process where collective wisdom flourished. Such processes of collective wisdom or 'systemic mind' highlight that there was no individual 'doer' as such. Rather, actions, questions and solutions came from the 'collective we' of a larger wisdom. In this, therapist and clients become instruments as it were of the higher order wisdom I have been talking about. It was the experience of this process that we had imagined as a fifth province and it is that which leads me on to proposing it as a portal into the domain of spirituality.

The remainder of the article will concentrate on one of the major hallmarks of the fifth province approach which integrates a spiritual orientation, a dis-position of love.

A Dis-Position of Love: Listening with the Heart

Within the fifth province approach we have used the definition of love given by Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana. He says that love is creating space for another in co-existence with oneself within a particular domain of interactions. Love for him is a biological and social phenomenon. We cannot live without it. Every time we open space for another we share in love. In those moments, we open our hearts as we listen and speak. I have previously called this the ethics of speaking and the politics of listening. (McCarthy, 1998, 2002)

Sri Vasudeva, my meditation teacher, has referred to this as a language of the heart and like Maturana, he feels that it is more fundamental than spoken language. By this he means, that a language of the heart takes us to a place that is beyond the spoken word. If our language can be inspired by love then a lot more communication is made possible because there is something beyond words, even if and when we misinterpret the words. We can trust the love we sense and the communication can be easier as it is based on that trust. So, if we can talk and communicate on a heart level more is possible. (Sri Vasudeva & McCarthy, 2002)

Listening with the heart also facilitates others to speak and to share. A subtle energy is shared, that is non-verbal. All of us are aware from our relationships that we as human beings can transmit something in the way we interact, something that is subtle and not definable by physical standards. We transmit this in conversation and in silence. We can generally feel whether we are being welcomed to speak or not. We can sense environments where space is opened for us to 'be'. We can actually sense the field of positive emotions surrounding us in such an environment. So, if

we bring forth an atmosphere where there are judgments (personal or theoretical) our clients are usually very much aware of them. One of my clients referred to such environments as “anti-septic and cold”. Another commented that the therapist seemed like they were “reading from a book” rather than listening. Shotter and Katz (1999, p 152) talk of it in the following way:

Only if ‘ you’ respond to ‘me’ in a way sensitive to the ‘relations’ between your and my actions, can we ‘act’ together as a ‘collective we’: and if I sense you as not being sensitive in that way, then I feel immediately offended, ethically offended: I feel you lack respect for me in some way

However, this does not infer that therapists leave behind their theories or training. In this, I am always reminded of the words of Salvador Minuchin. He said, first of all we need to learn the ‘tools of the trade’ and then integrate them in a way that they become second nature. He called this, ‘training for spontaneity’. (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, pp 1 - 10). When spontaneity is achieved then the essence and spirit of the teachings are integrated and technique is transcended. The goal, if there is, one is to transcend technique. He says, that only a person who has mastered technique and then contrived to ‘forget’ it can become an expert therapist.

So, if we can stay in the present, in the here and now or the ‘now here’ as I like to call it, then our awareness, energy and being become fresh and available in our inter-viewing, inter-acting and our “inter-being”. (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1999) Interestingly, the language philosopher, Ludwig

Wittgenstein says that eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. When we bring ourselves into the present, we bring all of ourself (ourselves)! In this movement, we can combine all of the meanings of presence. We are present in the present as presence. This is surely the most precious gift of therapy! It is in those moments of presence that the co-created magic of therapy happens. (Sri Vasudeva & McCarthy 2002)

Some Client Feedback

In knowing whether the therapy you are engaged in is as you say it is professionally then it is my belief that clients need to have a similar view. Otherwise, there is no co-creation between therapists and clients, just therapists giving their own opinions. Here below are some small examples of what clients have said about a therapy that was imagined as a collaborative co-creative process with clients. Below Mary a middle aged single parent, stated that when she came to therapy first she was bleeding all over and wanted to get rid of all these awful feelings all over her. She described the process of the therapy as a kind of mothering although she did not see this as a deliberate activity on the part of the therapist. As she saw it, it was part of the empathy that she felt in the relationship. Here are her words:

Mary: The first word that came to my mind was, mother, mothering. I feel there was a kind of mothering going on. I don't think that it was deliberate on her part.

Mary also referred to her therapy as “being in hands”. Being in hands conveys a message of surrender to and trust in the process. Trusting the process in which collective wisdom can manifest takes us beyond any idea of the therapist themselves controlling the outcome along pre-set parameters. This trust also takes us to a position of surrender not only to the process but also to the outcome. Attending and attuning to the process of interviewing, inter-acting and inter-being takes us away from any notions of pre-ordained outcomes. Feedback such as, “I never planned what it say in advance, it would just happen”, “the therapist did not impose questions, sometimes I was in the lead and sometimes they were”, “The kinds of questions asked left me feeling that I had the power within myself”, “things were mutually decided”, “the process empowered me” and so on, highlight the mutuality of the co-creative process. The process appears to flow freely’ and yet it is not without form.

When we think of the form however, we might think of it as an elegant and graceful (grace-full) moving form. The elegance comes about through rigor combined with imagination and intellect combined with intuition. Another way of expressing this is that the head and heart unite in a coherent way of being-with-clients-in-Spirit. When we unite in Spirit, the form and indeed the formlessness experienced in communion may become truly graceful in every sense of the word.

Footnotes

1. hyphenations are used to draw attention to words as sites of multiple readings. They point to words as non-fixed re-presentations of a multi-layered process.

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