NATIONALLY SPEAKING

Acknowledging a Spiritual Dimension in Occupational Therapy Practice

Phenomenology, an approach for understanding the essence of how people experience living, has been a frequent topic in recent occupational therapy literature. Interest in this topic has been inspired by the belief that purpose and meaning are important dimensions of occupation that can be harnessed to foster success in the intervention process. Some articles have suggested that creating meaning through occupation requires not only great skill, but also knowledge of the clients’ “stories,” described as narrative understanding (Helfrich & Kielhofner, 1994; Helfrich, Kielhofner, & Mattingly, 1994; Mallinson, Kielhofner, & Mattingly, 1996; Mattingly, 1991). Through narrative understanding, therapy practitioners can help clients create meaning through what Englehardt (1977) described as the central value of occupational therapy: “engagement in the world” (p. 672).

This emphasis on the relationship between meaning and occupation has deep historical roots. Neuropsychiatrist Adolph Meyer (1922) avowed that occupational therapy represented an important manifestation of human philosophy, namely “the valuation of time and work” (p. 6) and the role of performance and completion in bringing meaning to life. Meyer cited Pierre Janet’s reference to the “fonction du real”—the realization of reality, bringing the very soul of man out of dreams of eternity to the full sense and appreciation of actuality” (p. 6). Meyer’s treatise on the virtues of occupation contains two important observations: that persons experience life through daily occupation and that they concern themselves with finding meaning from experiences over time. Popular author Fulghum (1991) termed these two aspects of occupation—one concerned with present meaning and the second concerned with overall understanding—meaning in life and meaning of life. Each type of meaning has spiritual connotations, yet the profession’s renewal of interest in meaning and purpose has avoided reference to spirituality. The terms spiritual and spirituality do not appear in the indexes of major U.S. occupational therapy textbooks. Additionally, models of occupation refer only to mind and body, ignoring the mind-body-spirit references that have characterized healing philosophies since the time of Hippocrates. If occupational therapy is to be complete and genuine in its consideration of humans as occupational beings, it must acknowledge spirituality as an important dimension of everyday life.

Considering Spirituality: Relevant Issues

Some of the issues germane to a discussion of human spirituality include how it is defined, how it differs from religion, how it is expressed through occupation, how it influences health and well-being, and why it has been largely avoided as a dimension of concern in the U.S. occupational therapy literature. Addressing these issues may lead to an identification of practical ways for accommodating a spiritual dimension in occupational therapy theory and practice. The intent of this article is not to provide an exhaustive review of these topics, but to highlight them in order to provide a backdrop and context for further examination and discussion.

Describing a Spiritual Dimension

Spirituality is a metaphysical phenomenon; thus, by nature, it is difficult to...
define. Both its prevalence and its nature are captured in the word *quintessential*, which means pertaining to the fifth essence. In ancient and medieval philosophy, the *quintessence* was that element beyond earth, air, fire, and water that constituted the substance of the heavenly bodies. This essence permeated (and thus was thought to be present) in all things. This notion of spirit as essence was adopted by Egan and DeLaat (1994) who viewed human spirituality as the essence (or true nature) of a person expressed in daily actions, as influenced by values, belief systems, and sociocultural background. The client-centered model of practice adopted by the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (1991) views spirituality as one of four components necessary for a holistic view of humans (Urbanowski & Vargo, 1994). (The model also includes mental, physical, and sociocultural components.) The inclusion of a spiritual dimension acknowledges a person’s sense of self and his or her beliefs about power, control, and meaning in life because these are formed internally and influenced by environmental forces.

In the helping professions, systematic attempts to describe spirituality in ways that are practical for theory and research have been offered in the literature. For example, Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) adopted a phenomenological and humanistic perspective in identifying nine aspects of spirituality: transcendence, meaning and purpose, mission, sacredness of life, the rejection of materialistic values, altruism, idealism, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality. In the health professions literature, the term *spiritual health* has been used widely to refer to the extent to which a person’s need for spiritual expression and growth are met (Carson, Socken, Shanty, & Terry, 1990; Morrison, 1990; Scalford, 1990; Young, 1984). The literature indicates that spiritual health is influenced by the development of a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of connectedness with self and others, and one’s acceptance of a greater purpose or reality (Bellingham, Cohen, Jones, & Spaniol, 1989; Chapman, 1987a, 1987b).

**Spirituality and Religion**

One cannot discuss spirituality without recognizing its relationship to religion. Religions are organized traditions of rules and orthodoxy that attempt to serve the spiritual needs of their followers. All major religions have some ideas in common, including the importance of love, the value of individual growth, and the benefits of demonstrating concern for others. But the influence of major religions has diminished over time partly because of their failure to enact their teachings in practice and thus demonstrate the power of their ideas (Campbell, 1988). This failing has led to reduced trust and has caused some spiritual terms to take on unfortunate negative connotations because they are associated with formal religion (e.g., dogma, orthodoxy, catechism, catholic) (Campbell, 1988).

**Expression of Spirituality in Daily Occupation**

Mythologist Joseph Campbell (1988) observed that in earlier times, a spiritual dimension permeated daily life, manifesting itself in common symbols, in objects, and in rituals. One example of an everyday spiritual symbol, still apparent in many locations throughout Europe, is the cathedral. In the Middle Ages, the cathedral dominated the landscape, tolled bells to communicate important events, and displayed shapes and symbols that had universal meanings of transcendence and obligation to the self and community. Well-established rituals marking important life events occurred in cathedrals, which made cathedrals towering symbols of purpose and meaning, connected people to others, and influenced people to act in ways that demonstrated respect for their world as a sacred place. Even today, people visit cathedrals to appreciate beauty, meditate, walk, and reflect on the *"silence beyond sound"* (p. 99). Campbell lamented the decline in these spiritual manifestations of daily life, which he attributed to modernization, the diminished influence of formal religion, changes in belief systems, and the misapplication of democratic thinking to personal and spiritual matters.

Reminders that sacred, soulful, and spiritual opportunities are found in everyday living have dotted the popular literature. For example, in *Care of the Soul* (1992) offered many suggestions for finding spirituality in ordinary events, noting that acts as simple as hanging clothes on a line can be soulful. Fulghum (1995) observed that appreciating the beauty and simplicity of everyday occupations can meet spiritual needs. Reading (especially poetry and mythology); expressive arts; visiting museums, historical places, and galleries; music; walking in and retreating to nature; meditation; gardening; and letter writing are among many specific activities that nourish the soul by providing opportunities for creating meaning. A useful term for these is *activities of spirit*. It has been suggested that any occupation can be spiritual if attention is given to its style and context (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, Sexon, 1982).

**Spirituality and Well-Being**

Within the occupational therapy literature, Sharrott (1983) noted that the quest for meaning is associated with seeking the answer to "a fundamental question concerning human existence: Why do I exist; what is the meaning of my life?" (p. 216). He drew from social anthropology to explain the existential importance of everyday activities and the importance of shared meaning within a culture. The implication was that everyday meaning evolves over time to a personal view of life's meaning, and Sharrott espoused that occupational therapists have a role in helping their clients create and affirm such meaning.

Whether such meaning improves a person’s health or well-being may be a question of considerable interest in a health care system concerned with cost reduction and efficiency. Hawks, Hull, Thalman, and Richins (1995) concluded that there is scientific evidence for the importance of addressing spiritual concerns in achieving health-related outcomes, but more research is needed.

Activities of spirit can create oppor-
tunities for meaning making, which is necessary for establishing an identity, gaining a sense of control, and connecting one’s personal story or narrative to something greater than self. Antonovsky’s (1975, 1993) research on sense of coherence showed that understanding, managing, and deriving a sense of meaning from one’s life are powerful factors in coping with high levels of stress and adversity in life. On the basis of her phenomenological research, do Rozario (1994) suggested that activities that connect personal stories to a universal mythology and ritual are instrumental in fostering rehabilitation. She noted that the process of therapy itself can be viewed as "a journey of spiritual reconciliation and transformation" (p. 51).

The Neglect of Spirituality in U.S. Occupational Therapy

Given the history and importance of spirituality as an essential dimension of living, why has it been relatively absent from the occupational therapy literature in the United States? In his writing of a similar absence of spirituality from organized psychiatry, Peck (1993) pointed out that in ancient times, science and religion were integrated in philosophy. During the 17th century, in what he described as an unwritten social contract, a separation of science, religion, and government ensued. Increasingly, science divorced itself from metaphysical concerns, and science-based medicine viewed the domain of spirituality as outside the legitimate concern of practice. Because medicine has profoundly influenced occupational therapy, spirituality in occupational therapy has also been viewed as an inappropriate concern for practice.

Specialization and fragmentation in the field have also contributed to this absence. Although “holistic practice” has been a time-honored and self-proclaimed virtue of occupational therapy philosophy, it has not been reflected in many areas of specialized practice. McColl (1994) noted that contemporary definitions of holism in occupational therapy tend to contradict the suggestion that a person is an integrated whole. Instead, accounts of function tend to explain the person as influenced by many interacting subcomponents. According to McColl, these accounts may reflect the ambivalence of a field enticed by the social and political advantages of aligning itself with scientific medicine (with its reductionistic influences) while still valuing its heritage of viewing the person as an integrated whole.

The Underground Practice

This ambivalence is captured in the phenomenon of the underground practice, a phrase used by Maringly and Fleming (1993) to describe dimensions of occupational therapy observed during their study of clinical reasoning:

Many therapists were masterful at understanding patients and the illness experience and helping patients to formulate, either through words or actions, deeper understandings of themselves and their experiences. Because they valued this work, they continued with it. But because it was not "reimbursable," they did not document it.... Their values concerning action, engagement and quality of living in the everyday world often bring them into conflict (though often a silent conflict) with the values of the dominant biomedical culture held by other members of the clinic world. (p. 296)

Occupational Therapy Practitioners: Technologists or Meaning Makers?

Noting this competing purpose of biomedicine and meaning, Englehardt (1983) recommended that occupational therapy practitioners avoid following a course that would develop the field purely along technological lines (i.e., viewing occupations only as means for promoting abilities and skills). He argued instead that the field must recognize its sacred role in promoting occupation as a context for appreciation and enjoyment of living and as an opportunity for gaining meaning in everyday endeavors. He further noted: “Humans constantly seek meaning and significance. They hunger for more than scientific accounts of why things happen” (p. 141). Englehardt described the roles of the therapist as that of technologist and custodian of meaning, suggesting that the two roles are complementary.

Acknowledging Spirituality in Occupational Therapy

If occupational therapy practitioners are to be true custodians of meaning, they must first take inventory of the items of value entrusted to their care. This will require acknowledging that the meaning associated with occupations often has spiritual dimensions. Although there is no suggestion here that occupational therapy practitioners should become spiritual counselors, it is apparent that matters of spiritual meaning must be accommodated carefully and sensitively in the practice setting. Failure to acknowledge that a spiritual dimension influences clients and their lives is neither realistic nor authentic (Wood, 1996; Yenta, 1967).

By failing to acknowledge a spiritual dimension, occupational therapy practitioners lose important opportunities for understanding the full potential of occupation to enhance the health and well-being of clients. Denial of a spiritual dimension fragments our understanding of humans as occupational and spiritual beings and thereby does not reflect holistic practice. Such denial also deprives occupational therapy practitioners of experiences and understanding that can enhance their own psychospiritual growth. The publication of this special issue of The American Journal of Occupational Therapy on occupation, spirituality, and life meaning can mark the reversal of a trend of neglect and provide a useful beginning for acknowledging a spiritual dimension in occupational therapy theory and practice in the United States. ▲

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