

Interview

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“Struggles are not necessarily destructive or dangerous”

The Wasan Island talk with Kenneth I. Pargament

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The following interview with Kenneth Pargament has been conducted in July 2012 by Eckhard Frick and Traugott Roser and was published in German (in this journal 3[2014]:264–270). Due to the remaining importance of religious/spiritual coping we decided in agreement with Kenneth Pargament to publish the original English version.

Roser: *So first of all, thank you for being willing to discuss your experience and your approach to the field of spirituality. Just directly: What is your own metaphor for your spirituality? If that is a decent question...*

Pargament: A stream. I think of spirituality as a stream that winds and straightens, widens and narrows, as it makes its way towards some larger body of water – hopefully. My stream is part of other streams that join and feed it. Hopefully, I help to feed other streams as well; we’re all flowing in the stream together.

Frick: *As a clinician and a researcher, what is your experience with the concept of spirituality?*

Pargament: Spirituality adds richness and depth to people’s lives – for better and worse. It’s a dimension that I need to understand, be alert to and appreciate to be fully connected to my clients and help them along on their life’s journey. Spirituality helps me help my clients deal with life’s pains and struggles and keeps me grounded in the process.

Frick: *So this is basically a clinician’s reply. As a scholar who has been doing research about religion and spirituality*

for many years, how do you currently deal with this concept of spirituality?

Pargament: It’s challenging nowadays, because I think spirituality is a core aspect of who we are, at least a core potential. Spirituality is what makes life worthwhile, at its best, and what makes life awful, at its worst. And so, in some ways I’m happy that there’s more interest nowadays in spirituality in academia, in research, and in the world more generally. On the other hand, I am concerned about the way spirituality is being approached now. Spirituality is becoming polarized from its larger social context. This trend toward polarization is part of the larger movement toward the privatization of human experience and an anti-institutional way of thinking about life. People are moving towards opposition against government and politics and family and state; privatization is increasingly valued in all realms. And I think the spirituality movement is a reflection of that trend. The phrase “you can be spiritual without being religious” has become almost a mantra nowadays. And actually I think many people are viewing “spiritual” as a force opposed to “religion”. They have problems with religion and so their spirituality is being taken out of this context and being imbued with wonderful positive qualities. Religion, in contrast, is seen more and more in terms of negative, dogmatic, institutional, rigid, and imprisoning qualities. And so we are seeing a polarization.

Frick: *...between religion and spirituality...*

Pargament: *...between religion and spirituality. It’s a big problem, because it leaves the illusion that spirituality in fact is purely individualized, subjective, positive. And it ignores the fact that spirituality always takes place in a context, that we’re social beings, that we can’t live a life totally divorced from a larger social community and that spirituality at times can be – deadly. Spirituality is not inherently good. There are forms of spirituality that are deeply problematic for people. There are spiritual expres-*

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sions that make bad matters worse. That's the worry I have about the direction we are thinking in our approach to spirituality today.

Roser: *Could this polarization between spirituality and religion also be a reflection of the prominence of religion even in public life and politics in America?*

Pargament: I think so, but I think it could also be seen as another religious reawakening, another reformation movement. Throughout history we've had periods when we feel like religion has lost its way, when it's become too hyper-institutionalized and it's lost its soul – and then another religious movement comes along to inject new fervor into religious life. It's like Troeltsch's church-sect theory. You could argue the spirituality movement of today is another example of people saying: "Well, institutionalized religion has lost its core. So, I'm going to focus on spirituality, the heart and soul of religion, and breathe new life into it." And consistent with church-sect theory, there are examples of spiritual groups developing, of people who have left organized churches. Then, lo and behold, they begin to develop meditation groups, yoga groups, new non-traditional, institutionalized forms of spirituality and maybe in a hundred years from now we'll have the church of Yoga. Maybe we'll have a Meditative Church or the Church of Spiritual Believers Who Don't Want to Have Anything to Do with Religion. (laughter)

Frick: *The Church of Un-churched People.*

Pargament: Right! The Church of the Unchurched. (laughter)

Roser: *What is your own history of affiliation with institutionalized religion?*

Pargament: Well, part of my interest here is autobiographical. I'm Jewish, was raised in a conservative Jewish environment, but didn't have much strong institutional involvement. Religion for me was largely cultural: being Jewish, participating in family rituals and the holidays. But I also had a strong sense that it's part of who I am and I didn't understand that. Why did I identify so strongly as Jewish if I wasn't particularly religious? So, part of my interest in the field was selfish. It was to learn more about myself and to try to understand myself better. But I decided early on I wanted to study not just Jews but religion more generally. So in college I started going to different churches, temples, and settings. And for a Jewish guy it was a little scary because I didn't know what kind of

reception I'd get. Would people be pointing at me, saying: "Hey, a Jewish guy just walked into this church. Get him!" I didn't know what to expect! (laughter)

Roser (jokingly): *If he goes to the Eucharist.*

Pargament: I didn't know what to do. At one point, I was visiting a Black church, somebody passed around the wafers and I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't want to eat it, because I'm not Christian. On the other hand, I didn't want to slip it in my pocket. What do you do with a wafer? There's no book on "How Jews should handle the Eucharist and Communion." Anyway, I learned so much through my visits – my stereotypes were disconfirmed and I met wonderful people. I started to learn about the religions of the world and then my own work. So there's a connection between my clinical work and also learning about myself, particularly why being Jewish is such an important part of my life. Learning about other peoples' religions and spirituality has enriched my own faith, my own journey. And I never would have guessed that that's where my stream would take me.

Frick: *You have published quite a lot about coping and famous is the distinction between positive and negative coping in this religious/spiritual field. I think the concept of struggle, which is very often linked to a negative coping, is really prominent in the biblical, in the Jewish tradition. How can one discern what may be a real search for the sacred, a struggle with God in the sense of Job and of Jacob, and what could be negative, could be destructive? How do you discern [between these options], especially when you accompany patients?*

Pargament: This is, I think, the cutting edge in the field. We're just learning, so the brief answer is: I'm not sure how to do it yet, I still believe that struggle is not necessarily destructive or dangerous, that in fact it can be a wonderful thing. It can be a necessary ingredient or process in growth and change. How do you grow without struggle? How do you move forward in life without some times of tension and pain and doubt? You do need to have it. I believe it. And yet – that's the clinician in me speaking. On the other hand, the data seem to show that people who struggle, more often than not, experience considerable pain, and loss, and even a greater risk of dying. So I think we have to be careful of romanticizing struggle, and responding reassuringly to our clients: "Oh, you're having pain but you'll grow." Not necessarily! Not everyone does. Part of our obligation, then, is to discern when struggle is in fact problematic and potentially deadly and when people are

taking a more constructive, healthy path through their struggle. Now, how do you do that? How do you distinguish whether struggle is leading people to growth or to decline? I think that's a clinical question, but it's also a vital research question that is as yet unanswered. I wouldn't say that struggle is inherently destructive. That's why I wasn't really happy with the term "negative religious coping" because it suggests that it's negative and that there's no benefit to it. I prefer the term "religious struggle" to "negative religious coping" and I try to use the language of struggle more myself. So there's positive religious coping where we're speaking about religion as a resource to people in dealing with difficult situations. It's a resource that is generally helpful. And then there are people who are struggling with religious/spiritual issues in their coping. These struggles are not necessarily a problem. Sometimes they propel us forward in our lives.

Frick: *As a psychotherapist, how do you integrate spirituality into your work? What is psychotherapeutic intervention? Is there any spiritual intervention as a psychotherapist?*

Roser: *Or even, how do you get to the spirituality? Asking about spiritual history – how do you do that?*

Pargament: Well, for every one of my clients I open the door to a spiritual conversation. They can welcome me into their spiritual world if they choose and if they see it as relevant. By my openness and by asking a question or two, I communicate that I'm happy to talk about spirituality if they choose. In addition, I try to listen with the "third ear," listening for that deeper dimension. When people begin to speak the language of spirituality – and I think it is a different kind of language – they use words like "surrender" and "solace" and "finitude" and "transformation" and "hope" and "faith" and "forgiveness". I listen for this language and welcome it because it can lead to a profound dialogue and a profound connection. Interpersonally, I try to see someone at their deepest level, even more so if I'm working with a client who is difficult to connect to for one reason or another. If they're being defensive, putting me off, or if for some reason I just can't connect to them. I try to ask myself: "Who is this person really? Who is this person in their heart of hearts?" And I try to see beneath the surface, so as to form a kind of spiritual connection with them, which I find very helpful especially with my difficult cases. Depending on what comes out of that, there may be spiritual interventions, meaning we may talk about spirituality, their understandings of God in the contexts of their life, their spiritual beliefs and practices, and their problems. We may talk also about their spiritual communi-

ty and how they may want to foster their relationship to it, if that's relevant to the issues that they're facing. I may suggest particular spiritual resources in treatment. For instance, if I work with clients who are struggling with anger and bitterness towards someone in their family, I may give them some readings on forgiveness that become a topic for conversation in treatment. Of course it is always important to tailor work with clients to the particular person, the particular case.

Frick: *You spoke about the "third ear" concept of the analyst Reich. Is there any link between the unconscious and how to deal with the spiritual, since you are speaking about implicit messages, interventions? What about the unconscious dimension of the spiritual?*

Pargament: Well, yesterday I mentioned that we're onions and I think that that's not far removed from the psychodynamic notion that we have layers to ourselves of which we're not fully aware, or layers that may be pre-conscious, not exactly unconscious but in-between conscious and unconscious. It is important to recognize that not all of spirituality is necessarily fully accessible at a cognitive, verbal level. In working with someone, other layers may come to the surface, very much consistent with the dynamic formulation. And that's part of what therapy is about: helping people become aware of and mindful of their onion-like character, to be able to see it, to be able to accept it. And part of therapy also involves helping people develop more power and mastery, more ego-function, to be able to shift layers. With some clients I've used the related metaphor of a tower. [It's a notion] that we have floors that represent different levels or layers of experience. So we have our conscious work floor, where we're very much on top of things, where we dress up, and behave professionally. We have floors of what we're like with our families and floors of what we're like when we're alone. We have floors of our fears and anxieties. And then we have a basement, where we keep our dark things that we would never want to share with anyone, things that we feel ashamed of, or things that make us feel dirty. Yet they're all part of being human; each floor is an essential part of the tower. But clients often get stuck, perhaps on a depressed floor. [I want] them to be able to take a step back and see that they're actually a tower and that they have other floors besides depression. To take the metaphor even further, we want our clients to develop some mastery of the "elevator" in their tower. We might say: "You have some power to shift floors. You can be depressed and it's part of who you are, but there are other parts of who you are and you need to be able to be the master of your elevator." So how do you

get from here, the basement, this awful, dark, scary place, to a more elevated floor? Years ago, I saw an artist who was quite depressed when she first came to therapy. We spent a lot of time in therapy helping her see that she was more than a depressed woman, that she had many floors to her tower. She began to draw pictures of the floors of her building, and we spent considerable time in therapy going over her beautiful rendition, with all the floors elaborated. The act of drawing helped her articulate other non-depressed aspects of herself that had been forgotten. That's part

of depression: It feels timeless, as if there is no future, as if there is nothing but depression. My client was able to start to see herself as a full human being, a tower of strength, through this spiritually integrated form of therapy.

Roser: *Thank you.*

Frick: *Thank you.*

Pargament: I hope this is helpful.