Abstract:

This chapter examines applications of Systems Centered Therapy with individuals and groups that are engaged in spiritual practice. I first examine the goals of spiritual practice. In particular, I am concerned with helping a practitioner live a life that is both transcendently centered and immanently involved with the concrete realities of this world. I look at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals. I also examine some ways that spiritual teachers and practitioners may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual psychodynamics that may lead them to misinterpret the underlying motivation that drives their spiritual work. I then apply the Systems Centered understanding of the phases of systems development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and show how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases.

* A note about pronouns: In this chapter, the author has used the masculine pronoun 'he' generically as a matter of style and not as a gender description.

Systems Centered Therapy and Spiritual Life and Practice
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Introduction

As a meditation teacher and psychotherapist who works with people who are involved with spiritual practice, I have often observed individuals and groups who are fixated at some stage of their spiritual and psychological progress. When this occurs there can be great confusion as to how to extract themselves from the morass. In many cases a path that looks promising will dead end. Even if it is a wise strategy, the individual or group

may not have the resources to fully resolve the thorny issues in which they are waylaid. Spiritual teachers can sometimes be extremely useful to dislodge these stubborn blockages. They can also unwittingly be caught on the horns of a group dynamic that is larger than any individual (including the teacher!) or blind to the particular psychological level at which an individual is stuck. In the worst cases this can create a great deal of tragic and unnecessary suffering for all concerned. Even with the best of intentions, both students and their teachers can end up frozen in a repetitive pattern of destructive relationships that the particular method they are using is doing little to melt. This may have nothing to do with the soundness of the practices that they are using. It may simply be a confusion of levels. In the same way that one would not use a paintbrush to cut a pineapple, meditation or other spiritual practices may not be the tool of choice to resolve a problem in group dynamics or a psychological issue.

It is an unfortunate reality that the modern history of spiritual groups is rife with examples of teachers who have committed boundary violations and either consciously or unconsciously abused their power (see Kornfield, 2000, p.139 -157 "The Dirty Laundry"). Similarly, history is filled with cases of individuals who have used all sorts of 'spiritual' rationalizations to justify behaviors and ways of thinking and feeling which when looked at with a grounded and sober eye, prove to cause harm to themselves or others. As our collective spiritual and psychological wisdom matures, we are discovering progressively more skillful strategies and resources to help individuals and groups reach the goal of psychological and spiritual maturity. Systems Centered Therapy and Training is one approach that can have enormously beneficial applications for individuals and groups who are involved in spiritual practice.

There are many reasons why a Systems Centered approach is a good match for people that are involved in spiritual practice. Three stand out immediately. The first is the attention that SCT pays to our relationship with the unknown and the vehicle it provides for a careful and developmental working through of our defenses against the

unknown. The capacity to dissolve the habits of mind and body that keep one from living at the edge of the unknown with full openness and sensitivity to our environment is at the heart of many spiritual disciplines. The second is the absolute attention SCT pays to our moment to moment inquiry into experience from the standpoint of the inner observer. This can make SCT seem almost like an open eyed, interactive, mindfulness meditation. The third is the Systems Centered understanding that we are always embedded in a context that is greater then our personal perspective. SCT provides both an experiential process and an intellectual framework that can help us to move from our personal perspective to an experiential and cognitive understanding of the different systemic contexts of our experience. The movement from the personal, to the dyad, to the group, to the environmental and ultimately to the universal is a transformational process of deep concern to people who are involved in spiritual development. The ability to understand group process from a systemic point of view is also particularly relevant for spiritual groups and leaders.

My focus here is with the goals of what might be called the 'non-dual' spiritual traditions (Wilber, 2000). These traditions are concerned with helping a practitioner live a life that is both transcendently centered in the creative emptiness that lies at the center of Being and immanently involved with the concrete realities of life. I will look at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals. I will also examine some ways that spiritual teachers may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual psychodynamics that may lead them to misinterpret the underlying motivation that drives the spiritual work of their students. I will then apply the Systems Centered understanding of the phases of systems development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and show how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases.

Systems Centered Therapy and Spiritual Work

Over the past ten years, I have led ongoing groups, weekend retreats and workshops integrating the practices of non-dual traditions, particularly Taoist and Sufi practices, with the methods of SCT. Using these approaches in a complementary fashion has accelerated the individual group members' spiritual and psychological development and the group as a wholes' capacity to observe and modify the obstacles that they are facing at every stage of development. Systems Centered Therapy gives the group a powerful method that makes it possible to resonate with each other around the conflicts which they may be experiencing and to work towards authentic resolutions. The spiritual traditions offer a wide range of methods to address and neutralize the energetic underbelly of stubborn charactarological problems which may be stuck in someone's nervous system, energy field, breathing patterns and musculature. A skillful integration of these approaches has appeared highly beneficial in terms of helping people to reach both their spiritual and therapeutic goals.

Teachers in these traditions usually have an extremely well developed capacity to touch very expanded, luminous states of consciousness and to transmit them to their students. However, they usually have very little training in the area of group or individual psychodynamics. Many students come to spiritual work with a variety of traumas, developmental issues and charactarological problems that are unresolved. When these problems are not addressed they can contaminate a students spiritual progress and confuse both the teacher and the student. Something that looks like spiritual work may actually be a psychological issue masquerading in spiritual clothing. It is vital that both teachers and students learn to recognize when spiritual work is being used in the service of unworked psychological issues or as an avoidance of trauma. Many spiritual groups also act out issues of authority and intimacy rather than explore and resolve

them. The Systems Centered understanding of group and individual dynamics can be extremely helpful to both groups and individuals when these problems arise.

An Overview of the Phases of Development from a Systems Centered Perspective

There are three basic stages to the SCT model of development. The first phase addresses the conflicts with both outer and inner authority. The second addresses the conflicts around intimacy. The third is the functional stage of a working group and is called the stage of love, work and play. In this last phase, a group extends its intuitive and analytic knowledge in the context of its current realities with common sense and existential humor (Agazarian, 1997). For the rest of this chapter I will be using the SCT understanding of the phases of development and relating them to the spiritual life of individuals and groups.

The Authority Phase in Systems Centered Training and Therapy

The authority phase deals with the conflicts around compliance and defiance as well as with flight and fight. This phase culminates in working with the habitual 'one up' or 'one down' roles that one plays in life and the stubborn resistance to do the hard work that each of us must do to support real and lasting change (Agazarian, 1997).

The Authority Phase in Spiritual Life

In Individuals
a. The Issue of Compliance

At some point on the spiritual path, a spiritual seeker will confront an aspect of himself that has projected the image of an idealized, omnipotent parent onto his spiritual teachers or onto God. Often he discovers that he has made some kind of unconscious bargain with his teacher or with God that in exchange for following the 'rules' of his spiritual path he will be protected from the unpredictable suffering and tragedies of life. This expectation can be very deep, insidious and embedded in the unconscious of even sophisticated and psychologically astute seekers.

An example of this is a friend of mine whose son was born with a birth defect. His rage with God at the unfairness of his family's misfortune was intense. The pull to collapse into a bitter pool of self-pity was almost irresistible. As he meditated on his feelings he realized that somewhere inside of him he had been making the following bargain: "I will do my spiritual practices and contribute to the alleviation of suffering, and in return for this, You (God) will protect my family from misfortune." As he let go of the belief that he could have magically controlled the unpredictable nature of his son's illness, he was able to open his heart to a much deeper level of compassion for the reality of human suffering.

This particular issue is as ancient as the Biblical story of Job. Systems Centered Therapy conceptualizes this conflict as an authority issue. In this phase of development, we project power and authority onto some force or person outside of ourselves as a defense against experiencing the chaotic, the unpredictable, and the mysterious. As we come to some sense of peace with the reality that life is shot through with unpredictable experiences, we move from a passive dependent relationship with a protective Deity or spiritual teacher, into an active, co-creative stance. We take our authority back into ourselves and struggle to form a creative response to the unpredictable events in our lives.

SCT Application

A Systems Centered therapist might have worked with my friend in the following manner. The first step would be to help him to undo the cognitive misconstructions and beliefs that were generating his emotional distress. Once he had made conscious his thought that he could have magically controlled the universe through his spiritual practice and questioned his projection of an all-powerful parent onto God, the therapist would then help him to make a choice about whether to stay related to his thoughts or to attend to the moment to moment unfolding of his experience as he explored his pain. As he did this, he could begin to discriminate between his depression, self-pity and collapse on one side of his experience and his outrage on the other. The therapist would then help him to explore each of his impulses, without acting them out! As he learned how to contain each side of himself, the therapist would help him to feel what each of these patterns felt like in his body. SCT conceptualizes each of these experiences inside of him as different 'subgroups' which are held within the larger context of his personality. As these experiences were contained, a level of experience might appear in which he could explore what it is like to sit with the existential fact that we cannot control reality and that we are all relatively helpless in front of certain existential facts. As he made room for this primary level of experience, the therapist would stay attuned and in eye contact with him and encourage him to fully experience his feelings without defending against them. These defenses against exploring his experience might show up as a cognitive attempt to 'solve' the issue, physical tension or psychosomatic symptoms, acting out his pull towards depression or going into a an outrage against the 'unjustness' of life. SCT sees all of these, the cognitive defenses, tension defenses, depression and outrage defenses, as defenses that relate to the first phase of systems development; the authority phase (Agazarian, 1997). By weakening these habits of the mind and body, the person begins to come into contact with his

deeper conflicts around dealing with his inner and outer reality as it is, rather than as he would like it to be.

The Issue of Defiance

A different version of the authority issue in spiritual work is the seeker who has never completely mastered the mundane realities of daily existence. This person may not be able to earn an adequate living or have consistent problems working within the structure of a school or work environment. This is the opposite pole of the authority issue as the person is stuck in a defiant position, passively ignoring the demands of reality. This problem is particularly rampant in our time as many people engaged in spiritual practice are searching for a 'high' rather then the slow, often painful process of spiritual inquiry and self-reflection.

A young client of mine is an example of someone who was searching for a spiritual high. From the moment I met him I was immediately struck by his charm, charisma and creativity. At the time that he started to work with me he was living off of an inheritance from a relative. He came to me because I had a reputation for knowing something about the interface of psychology and spirituality and for working with some pretty 'far out' healing techniques. His goal was to grow spiritually as quickly as he possibly could and to this end he had worked with some of the best spiritually oriented therapists and healers in town. At the beginning of our work, I was seduced by his charm, intelligence and obvious joie de vivre. However, as we worked together I began to notice that his life was littered with unfinished creative projects and half-baked dreams. Every other week he would tell me about a new project or spiritual adventure. Like a beautiful butterfly he drifted from one artistic or spiritual interest to another. As long as his funds held out there was very little real pressure for him to develop the discipline, focus and concentration that completing his projects or cooperating with the

structures of the working world would require. Unfortunately, he used the spiritual philosophies and practices that he was learning to rationalize his bypass of the frustrating business of mastering the practical realities of life.

SCT Application

I used Systems Centered Therapy to work with this client in a similar way to how I described the process with my friend. The first level of defense to address from a Systems Centered approach are the cognitive misconstructions that generate feelings that have no basis in reality. I helped him to notice his unconscious belief that it was not necessary for him to deal with the 'boring' realities that less 'spiritually gifted' individuals had to deal with. As this thought became conscious, he began to question the arrogance of his position. When he gave up this idea, he was face to face with his feelings of omnipotent, defiant rage. This led to an exploration of his stubborn refusal to deal with the world as it is rather than as he would have liked it to be. As he contained his rage and explored his stubbornness he gained mastery over his impulses to act out. Over the years that we worked together, he began to realize the cost (both spiritual and financial!) of his inability to focus and discipline himself. Together we defined the next step in his development as cultivating the capacity to follow through with the 'boring' details of his creative projects. Eventually, he was able to find and hold onto work that he was interested in and stop using spirituality as a way to avoid the demands of mundane existence. For him, spirituality had become a defiant flight away from the anxiety of mastering his life problems and learning how to cope successfully with the external authorities of 'this' world.

The Authority Issue In Spiritual Groups

Spiritual teachers are rarely aware that from the first moment that they address a group of students, they are setting norms that will influence the life of a group and dictate the sphere of possibilities that will be available for their followers. The boundary between an individuals' outside life and his role as a member of a spiritual group can be a turbulent one that can stimulate deep fears around a loss of autonomy. This conflict around autonomy will usually manifest in a variety of compliant and defiant behaviors. If the work of the group is the exploration of feelings, group members have the opportunity to explore the intense emotions in relationship to authority and the fear of losing their autonomy that may be aroused when they join a group. Unfortunately, spiritual teachers generally have very little experience helping groups to explore these conflicts. As a result, these conflicts are frequently acted out in gossip, complaining, righteous indignation, outrage, or acted in through depression, passivity and a variety of psychosomatic complaints. These behaviors can eat away at the vitality of a group's work and even destroy it.

SCT sees the core issue for every group to explore in the first phase of development as their relationship to the authority of the group leader and the structure of the group (Agazarian, 1997). In the case of a spiritual group, this means dealing with their feelings about the teacher, both his or her gifts and failings, and the structure of the spiritual practice which the teacher is teaching. The clearer a teacher is about the norms and values of his or her group the easier it will be for an individual to understand the requirements of group membership and to decide whether or not they want to become a member.

An example of a spiritual group getting stuck in the authority stage occurred for me in a group I belonged to that was studying the dynamics of the human energy field. The leader of this group had a very particular system of psycho-spiritual exercises that needed to be followed exactly to achieve the desired results. He also had a dogmatic and rigid teaching style. Inevitably, the group had all sorts of responses to his level of

precision and to his style of delivery. Some group members became compliant and even started to behave like 'energy exercise police', making sure that all the group members were following the teachers' instructions precisely. Other group members became defiant and compared the teachers' system with other systems they had studied, invented their own exercises, or put the teachers' exercises down. Outside the group meetings the gossip mill was turning at quite a furious speed as people jockeyed for political position in the group. Fairly quickly a number of what SCT identifies as role pairings and role locks (Agazarian, 1997) developed between group members and between the teacher and group members. These role pairings were of identified patients and helpers, victims and bullies, and scapegoats and scapegoaters. While the group was acting out these roles the group process stalled and many people left the group. Unfortunately, although the teacher was highly skilled in the particular system that he was teaching, his work floundered, as he did not know how to work with the group dynamics that occur during the authority phase of group development.

SCT Application

The value of a process such as Systems Centered Therapy for a group stuck in it's authority issue is that it can create an environment in which group members can explore the pulls towards compliance or defiance rather than acting them out. As these experiences are contained and explored the group can begin to experience and understand the feelings that are being managed by their compliant or defiant roles. Similar to the work with individuals, an SCT group facilitator would first help the group to undo it's cognitive misconstructions, which are usually in the form of negative predictions and mind reads, and hold group members in the box of exploring their moment to moment experience rather than explaining or trying to solve it. Often these negative predictions and mind reads are concerned with fears of retaliation or being

shamed or humiliated if one explores the feelings that are being managed by acting out a compliant or defiant role. The group facilitator would then help the group to undo any psycho-physiological tension that group members felt as they explored their experience. After their tension was undone and the group members had made room for the experiences they were blocking with tension, the group leader would help the group find the fork in the road between exploring their retaliatory impulses and discharging them in outrage or repressing them in depression. Systems Centered Therapy focuses on undoing these first level 'flight defenses' in order - the cognitive misconstructions first, tension defenses second and the tendency to discharge our retaliatory impulses 'out' in outrage or 'in' by becoming depressed, third (Agazarian, 1997). This lays the foundation for the group's capacity to productively explore their compliance or defiance towards the leader and the structure of the group and to experience their primary feelings as they struggle to take responsibility for their choices.

As group members develop the capacity to contain and explore their conflicts, the group will naturally split into two camps or subgroups; those that love the leader and agree with what he is doing, and those that want to change or modify the leader or in more extreme cases overthrow him. The crucial issue here is psychological survival, as group members must come to terms with the reality of the structure that the leader has chosen and the demands of working together. As both the defiant and the compliant sides of the group are explored, the group can than begin to grapple with the reality of the particular group that they are a part of as well as with their real responses to the particular teacher or leader, who is always both gifted and flawed. When this exploration is done well, it can create an environment in which a functional dependency between the teacher and the students that is based in reality (rather then in the wish to control or flee from reality) can develop.

Confronting the irrational and wild nature of the Unknown is both devastating and opening. SCT frames this challenge as learning to 'sit at the edge of the unknown'

(Agazarian, 1997). As we separate from our attachment to a magical, parental image of God or our spiritual teachers we can be thrown into a real dark night of the soul. In Sufism there is a saying "Smash your ideal on the rock of truth". This ideal is not simply our idealized version of God or our teacher; it is also our idealized image of ourselves. Before we can truly land in the center of our authentic self, we must be willing to hunt down and dissolve the stubborn patterns that keep us from taking full responsibility for our lives in the context of the real conditions into which we are thrown.

The Intimacy Phase in Systems Centered Training and Therapy

After a group or an individual has confronted and contained their stubborn resistance to change, SCT conceptualizes the next phase of development as working with the conflicts that we have around intimacy (Agazarian, 1997). The first sub-phase works with the idealization defenses of enchantment and hope. During this sub-phase, a group or an individual explores the pull towards blind trust and fusion with each other, which is a defense against the real acknowledgment of difference and the hard work of separation and individuation. The second sub-phase deals with disenchantment, and the defenses of alienation and despair, which are a defense against recognizing our real similarities and the capacity to work interdependently with each other. This phase is resolved when an individual or a group comes to terms with the existential paradox that in our intimate relationships we are always both together and alone.

The Phase of Intimacy in Spiritual Life - Enchantment and Disenchantment

In Individuals

The issue of Enchantment

An example of someone fixated in enchantment was a client of mine who had spent years in a spiritual community with a rather charismatic teacher. Inside the aura of this community she had tremendous feelings of oneness and bliss. During her time in the ashram, she had several romantic relationships that she had left as soon as conflict arose. Conflict in relationship disturbed her 'high', and her first priority was to preserve her feelings of oneness and bliss.

Her strategy worked fairly well within the protected walls of the ashram, but when she left, she fairly quickly became despairing and hopeless. As she investigated her despair, she came to understand that much of her spiritual bliss had been based on siphoning away as much difference as possible. She began to notice how she had been careful to hang out only with those people with whom she felt a close resonance and how she had maintained herself in a comfort zone of ecstatic 'spiritual' merging. As long as this illusion of 'oneness' - or more precisely the absence of difference - could be maintained, she was in a state of ecstasy. As soon as she began to deal with the disenchanting reality of difference, she also had to stop using spiritual philosophy to justify her flight from the rigors of intimacy.

SCT Application

I used a Systems Centered approach to help her contain her impulses towards merging. Whenever she felt the frustration of encountering difference, either in her intimate relationships or in her therapeutic relationship with me, I helped her to contain her powerful impulse to flee and asked her to observe her experience with acute awareness. As she did this, she discovered a primitive terror of being abandoned, which had early roots in painful childhood experiences. As she developed the capacity to separate the past from the present in a visceral as well as cognitive way, she became

more capable of developing intimate relationships that had an acceptance for differences as well as similarities. The reality that all of our joinings are imperfect, that there is always a gap between us and our loved ones that exists side by side with a profound connection, gradually became more bearable. Over time, she learned how to separate the experiences of unbearable misattunement which she had as a child from the present where, as an adult, she had the skills to manage periodic misattunements.

The Issue of Disenchantment

The flip side of this dilemma is the seeker who comes to spiritual work as a way to avoid intimate relationships altogether. An example of this is a client who worked with me after spending years as a monk. During the course of our work together, it became clear to him that much of the spiritual work he had done had been used as a way of managing the tremendous longing that he had for an intimate relationship and his terror that if he opened up this well of longing he would be devastatingly disappointed. To avoid his dread of opening up to the possibility of a warm intimate connection, which was based on very real childhood disappointments, he had developed a philosophy of loving in a general, almost abstract way. This form of spiritual bypass had created a saint who loved humanity in principle - it was just individual people that he had a hard time with! In his case meditation and spiritual work was blocking his entrance into a more profound knowledge of intimacy both with others and with himself.

SCT Application

Using the Systems Centered technique of the fork in the road, I helped him to explore his experience whenever he felt a warm, intimate relationship either with me or with others, and helped him to restrain his impulse to act out by 'spiritualizing' the

relationship into some ethereal abstraction. As he was able to bear feelings of genuine attachment and closeness he had to confront deep fears around being taken over and psychically swallowed up. Similar to the previous case, his fear had early psycho dynamic roots. His therapeutic path was to carefully discriminate between the painful experiences that he had overcome in childhood by fleeing into a fantasy world, (which later became the foundation of his 'spiritual' practice), and the reality of his present relationship both with me and with his potential partners. Over a period of years I helped him to recognize and use the real resources that he had as an adult to overcome his fear of being left alone. The only way to achieve this goal was to establish a deep and empathic therapeutic relationship and to continually test the reality of his inner and outer resources.

In Groups

Similar to the work of individuals, the intimacy phase poses the group with the conflict of integrating the polarity of their impulses to merge in blissful enchantment, at the cost of recognizing their real differences - or to distance in alienation and despair, at the cost of recognizing their real similarities. Again, using SCT, this conflict is explored dialectically, in functional subgroups, until the group has achieved an integration.

In one group in which I was a member, the meditations were often ecstatic, and there was a lot of high, loving energy both during the meditations and in our social interactions with each other. Often I couldn't wait to go to these meditations to get my hit of this ecstatic atmosphere. For years we were living in a blissful space of enchantment with each other. Difficulties in the community began when several of the group members' marriages began to blow apart. As a group we had lots of skills for getting into a very high attunement, however we were lacking the ability to deal with the frustrating reality of difference in our intimate relationships. Most of us were in denial of

the existential paradox that we are always both together and alone! When we came up to this frustrating reality, rather than work with it, we often acted out and went in search of the next ecstatic union (or perhaps to be more psychologically accurate, one might say the next ecstatic merging!). This issue culminated when two of the leaders who were in a long-term marriage, split up. This precipitated a group crisis after which many of the old group members drifted away. At this point you might say that many of us were acting out the second sub phase of intimacy - disenchantment, alienation and despair.

SCT Application

A Systems Centered group process would have helped this group to contain its impulses towards both enchantment and disenchantment without acting out. An SCT group leader would help group members both bear and explore their feelings on each side of the existential paradox that we are always both together and alone. For the 'merging' sub group, the task would be to explore their impulses to fuse until they noticed just bearable differences. For the distancing sub group, the task would be to explore their impulses towards despair and alienation until they noticed just bearable similarities. As the subgroups integrated both sides of the split an integration would occur at every level, in the group-as-a-whole, the sub groups and in the individual members. The group would then have the capacity to embrace and explore both their similarities and their differences without making a defensive flight into either enchantment or disenchantment.

General Reflections on the Intimacy phase in Spiritual Groups

In my experience, the sub-phase of enchantment is particularly problematic for spiritual groups. The psycho dynamic forces that are at play during this phase are

extremely compelling. Group leaders that are addicted to the state of blissful merger often collude with group members to keep this game alive. In spiritual groups this is particularly dangerous as it is during this phase that a cult can be created. This state can be so addictive that group members will often deny their own perceptions of reality and allow a lot of unsavory things to happen so long as they can keep that 'loving feeling' alive. Unfortunately, the history of many modern spiritual groups is filled with the stories of boundary violations that occur when a spiritual group is fixated at this stage of development. This often occurs in the form of sexual acting out between teachers and students, but it may also show up in the financial life of the group or in other abuses of power (Kornfield, 2000). The forces that are unleashed during this stage are so primitive and powerful that even wise and experienced teachers have been swept up in this dynamic.

The underlying dynamics that are stimulated in the intimacy phase of a groups' development are rooted in our earliest learning's of what it is like to be in relationship. It is very easy to mistake the bliss of a regressed merger with an idealized teacher or community onto which one has projected an image of an ideal parent for a true spiritual awakening. The wish for a return to the unconditional love of our early bonding with our parents is a primal urge which is difficult to resist. This impulse is all too easily used by charismatic teachers who may be unaware or unresolved in regards to these early dynamics. As any experienced psychotherapist can attest, even with knowledge and experience, it is extremely easy to get caught in the current of these powerful forces.

The Systems Centered perspective is that these dynamics are larger than any individual group member. From this point of view, it is vital that we do not scapegoat or demonize a teacher or student who acts out under the influence of these dynamics. Restraining the impulse to go on a 'witch hunt' when the facts of a teachers' or senior students' abuses of power come to light can be a monumental task as the forces which are unleashed at this moment are often quite virulent and laced with feelings that

originate in the early childhood experiences of group members. If the acting out can be contained, the community as a whole has a tremendous opportunity to deepen their understanding of the dynamics that have been at work behind the scenes. This is not to condone the actions of teachers or students that have acted out. Depending on the situation, sanctions and reparations may be necessary to reestablish a sense of safety in the community. However, once a sense of safety has been restored and clear norms of acceptable and unacceptable behavior established, the community must explore the feelings that have been acted out or they may simply be recycled and return to haunt the community in another form. From the Systems Centered perspective, these feelings belong to the group-as-a-whole, not to any individual member. If the group can 'unstuff' the scapegoat, each member has the opportunity to take back the disowned parts of themselves that they have projected into the person who has acted out. It is one of the most extraordinary and important lessons of the Systems Centered approach to group process that when group members take back the feelings that they have projected into the scapegoat in an authentic way, the group member who has acted out has much less pressure to continue acting out. Systems Centered theory and practice asks us to test the hypothesis that a group member who gets scapegoated is always the messenger of some aspect of the human experience that the group or the group leader has not yet contained, explored and integrated (Agazarian, 1997).

The Phase of Love, Work and Play in Systems Centered Training and Therapy

The third stage of development concerns the ongoing work of an individual or a group to continually increase their capacity to understand reality both through verbal comprehension and intuition. This involves moment to moment reality testing, a common sense approach to their goals and the obstacles that must be overcome to

reach these goals, a keen sense of existential humor and ongoing disciplined work with all of the defenses which have been explored in the earlier phases of development (Agazarian, 1997). One might say that at this stage, the inner witness is firmly established and is observing the drama of life with great compassion, an awareness of the good of the whole, and the capacity to disidentify from any particular position when it is no longer useful in helping the group or the individual reach his or its' goals.

The Stage of Love, Work and Play in Spiritual Life

In Individuals

Once someone has contained and integrated the conflicts around authority and intimacy, spiritual work takes on a very different flavor. If a spiritual seeker can stop using spirituality as a container for his psychological 'stuff', spirituality may become a truly profound dialogue with the mysteries of the Unknown. A person at this stage of development has developed a mature capacity for self-knowledge and the ability to hold many paradoxical positions simultaneously. They can be both soft and hard, disciplined and playful, close and individuated.

An example of someone who had reached this stage of psychological and spiritual development is a client of mine who worked with me for a period of ten years. When she first began to work with me she was in a marriage with a rather abusive and alcoholic man. For the most part, she was living her life inside the role of a caretaker and an enabler. As she disidentified with these roles, her marriage dissolved. Through her psychological and spiritual work, she confronted and transformed her pull towards an unrealistic love addiction that denied the reality of her partner's alcoholism and verbal abuse. This part of her work was a real dark night in which she learned how to be fiercely compassionate with herself and not act out her compulsions. Rather than act

out her uncomfortable feelings she slowly fought with her stubborn, defiant refusal to take responsibility for her life and to bear the anxiety of shifting her sense of identity away from her old roles.

In the last two years of her work with me the quality of her sessions changed quite remarkably. She began to express and feel a deep rootedness in her own authority and center. She became increasingly fluid and free without being inconsistent or labile. It became significantly easier for her to let go of any psychological position and to struggle creatively with her reality as it was rather than how she would like it to be. She began to hold the many paradoxes of life simultaneously and her body became progressively more alive and filled with the dynamic presence of the life force. She also developed a relationship with a man that was firmly rooted in reality, a mutual respect for their differences, and a deep resonance around a set of common values.

Her relationships with her spiritual teachers changed as well. Rather than omniscient authorities with some special window on the truth, she began to see her spiritual mentors as elder brothers and sisters engaged in a similar quest, who could share resources and wisdom with her towards the goal of her spiritual development.

SCT Application

When someone has reached this stage of development, the Systems Centered approach is to help the person continually deepen their experience of what they know, both non verbally as a felt sense in their bodies and comprehensively in words, and to continually test the reality of what they know in the moment to moment context of their lives. At this stage, all of the defenses that have been worked with previously will still come up, however the person will have a greatly increased capacity to dissolve them and to regain their center in the middle of life's existential paradoxes. One might say

that the role of the SCT practitioner becomes more like a coach with an elite athlete who is helping them to play the game of life with greater skillfulness.

In Groups

A group that has arrived at the phase of love, work and play has contained and explored group members' conflicts around authority and intimacy. The group is not defended against the conflicting feelings involved in these issues and has the skills to check experience against reality and to live in the frustrating and gratifying experience of group members' real feelings for each other, for themselves and for their leader. The group has the skill to call a spade a spade and does not deny the reality of an inner or outer experience. The group also has the capacity to contain many contradictions and paradoxical truths simultaneously. The defenses that have been worked with in the earlier stages of development still come up, however the group now has the skills to work them through with great facility.

The following example occurred for me in a group that was not explicitly spiritual. However, it is easy to observe the insights and values of spiritual practice in the following description. The group has an experience of a transcendent core that is beyond old roles and conditioning, explores the subtle energies that are released when the body/mind is free from armoring, and grapples with immanent existential realities of life in a variety of ways.

The context is the group that manages the Systems Centered Training and Research Institute. This group begins each meeting with two days of experiential work to explore the underlying group dynamics that might impede its capacity to function as an efficient management team. After a particularly moving meeting, I wrote the following description for the newsletter of the organization.

"The meeting began with two days of experiential work led by Yvonne Agazarian to remove any restraining forces that were located in our group dynamics that might hinder us from effectively reaching our goals as a task group. The group started by exploring the paranoid defenses that kept us locked inside of a world that had only to do with ourselves and away from the frustrating experience that reality simply is what it is and how impossible it is to control either reality or other members of the group. As the group worked through its paranoid defenses, a sub group emerged that explored the tremendous energy and potential that opened up when they sat fully centered in their bodies without binding or tightening against the spontaneous flow of experience that welled up both inside of them and from the environment. This led to the metaphor of each member sitting or bobbing in a sea kayak, which the subgroup differentiated from the 'slave ship' of its defenses and old roles. From here the group explored what it is like to bear what seemed like unbearable existential facts without closing down or defending against them, and made room for all of the hatred, grief and pain as well as the awesomeness and beauty of the full spectrum of human life... At one point, there wasn't a dry eye in the house as members brought in deeper and deeper levels of the life experiences and seemingly unbearable realities that they were learning how to bear, were bearing, or had borne, and allowed their hearts to break open (rather then simply break!). As we struggled to live authentically with ourselves as the people that we are, with the lives that we have, rather then the people we wish we were (or the people we wished others were!), we set the stage for each member to discover what tasks and roles inside the organization we had our hearts behind..." (Robbins, 2003)

SCT Application

Similar to working with an individual who has arrived at this stage of development, the SCT group leaders' task is to help the group to deepen its apprehensive and

comprehensive knowledge in the context of the realities that it is currently living in. Defenses are called and the group works in sub groups to explore each side of the conflict that the group is containing. As each side of a split is explored there is a greater degree of integration and development at every level of the groups life.

Conclusion

The unique conditions of spiritual practice in our time make it imperative that we develop as psychologically and spiritually mature individuals who are capable of interdependent relationships which cut across religious, cultural, political and economic boundaries. In order for this project to be successful, we must develop a profound degree of self-knowledge to protect us from acting out our unconscious defenses against difference. True spiritual work demands that we are constantly open to seeing through the false prophets in our psyches and awakening an authentic sense of conscience which is rooted in our inextricable interdependence on each other and with our natural environment.

I would like to propose that spiritual work can be deeply enhanced by the methodology and theoretical framework that Systems Centered Therapy offers. Central to the spiritual path is the journey from the perspective of the individual to an experience and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all of life. Systems Centered group work, or individual work using a Systems Centered approach, offers an ideal opportunity to make this journey without incurring a spiritual bypass of our issues around authority and intimacy. In my experience, Systems Centered group work is one of the most powerful modalities available to make the journey from the perspective of only looking out for what is good for 'I, me and mine' to looking out for the good of the whole. When this approach is skillfully integrated with spiritual practice, the spiritual and psychological growth of both individuals and groups is accelerated.

I think that it is essential that the leaders of spiritual communities as well as the members of spiritual groups begin to educate themselves about group dynamics and the stages of group development. It is important that spiritual teachers develop a more sophisticated understanding of the various psychological motivations that are underlying the spiritual lives of their students. Both a comprehensive and experiential understanding of these dynamics would help to avoid much of the psychological damage that has occurred in spiritual communities. Sometimes, this has occurred through the blatant abuse of the power of the leadership role. More often, it has occurred out of sheer ignorance. An understanding of the psychological dynamics that are at play in both groups and individuals involved in spiritual practice may help prevent teachers and students from unwittingly using spiritual practice to support unworked out issues around authority and intimacy. It is unfortunate that when this occurs, the very tools that are being used to gain liberation from suffering only prolong it.

Both spiritual practice and SCT are disciplines that help us to contain the existential paradoxes that life presents. To live a spiritually mature life we must integrate many contradictory truths about our human experience. We must accept that we are independent individuals who must learn how to be self reliant and simultaneously utterly dependent on each other and on the authorities in our lives. We must accept that in all of our intimate relationships we are both connected and alone. We must also accept that we are simultaneously heirs to great spiritual radiance, wisdom and compassion and cosmic fools capable of endless mischief and self-delusion. The modern history of spiritual groups has taught us that this last truth applies equally to advanced teachers and to beginning meditators. If we can hold this paradoxical truth with great kindness and compassion we can engage in the project of deepening our understanding of both spiritual practice and psychological development with humility and deep existential humor about the many missteps that teachers and students make along the way.

In this chapter, I have been concerned with the spiritual goal of helping spiritual practitioners and groups live both transcendently centered in the formless, pregnant emptiness at the core of Being and immanently involved with the concrete realities of this world. I have looked at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals. I have also examined some ways that spiritual teachers and practitioners may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual dynamics that SCT may be useful in filling in. Theoretical and experiential training in these dynamics may help practitioners and teachers to accurately diagnose and intervene at the level of the underlying motivations that are driving an individual's or a group's spiritual practice. This training could help to unleash the potential for a transcendent dialogue with the Unknown that immanently touched the concrete realities of life. This dialogue is the heart of spiritual practice. I have also applied a Systems Centered understanding of the phases of development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and shown how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases.

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