

compassion, I cultivate the potential for a sacred moment, starting with myself. These moments often require risk, as I do not know how they will land. However, I often tell my clients that growth comes from the uncomfortable. Therefore, I must also be willing to be uncomfortable. Although the session with Mary and her family was one of

the most uncomfortable I have had, I continue to allow for moments of pause to attend to the wisdom from

my body, and compassion from the heart to guide me into the dense forest with my clients.



*Ann Saffi Biasseti, Ph.D., has been a practicing Psychotherapist for 25 years. Her PhD is in Transpersonal Psychology and she is licensed as a Clinical Social worker. She maintains a private practice in Saratoga Springs, New York where she specializes in embodied psychotherapy and eating disorder recovery. She is also a certified yoga teacher, yoga therapist, mindfulness and self-compassion teacher/trainer.*

## The Felt Sense of the Sacred

KAREN LEE ERLICHMAN, D.MIN, LCSW

**define the sacred as the felt sense of mystery, connection and awe.** Within the context of therapy, sacredness is often, but not always, a shared (i.e. mutual) experience between therapist and client. It is a palpable feeling of “meaningful-ness” internally and in the room. That **felt sense** (to borrow a phrase from psychologist Eugene Gendlin) includes internal sensations, awareness and feelings, as well as the sensory experience of what is said, heard, tasted, seen and touched.

A recent sacred moment occurred during a phone session with Liza, a client in her mid-20s who has multiple chronic disabilities and complex PTSD. She is neither religious nor spiritual and adamantly identifies as atheist. She was overwhelmed with anxiety because she was struggling to make a list of daily tasks/action steps she could actually do. My intention was to help her recognize the regular tasks in which she is already engaged as a parent and a spouse, as well as her own self-care and activities of daily living.

I consciously maintained a light, gentle tone of wonder and ease in my voice, carefully attending to prosody and pace. “Hey, I wonder... [pause] maybe there are some things you already do that we hadn’t even thought of.” I mentioned a few daily tasks such as helping her son with his homework and putting medical appointments in the family calendar. As the conversation

continued, she generated some additional tasks on her own, and there was a shift in the tone and flow of our exchange. Her voice was a little louder and the pace of her speech resumed a more typical pattern. There was mutuality and shared discourse between us.

At one point, she took an audible deep breath, exhaled fully, and said, “You make something scary feel a lot less scary.” Although this brief moment was not overtly spiritual in content, from my clinical perspective and theoretical orientation, I experienced it as a sacred moment. Although this client is very secular and does not use words like ‘sacred,’ she did express a sense of awe about this shift in the conversation and in her own affect and awareness. A process of meaning-making was taking place. In this case, Liza was verbalizing her own internal experience of the shift, the energy. Attuning to the sacred acknowledges the intersubjective

exchange and ripe potential for transformation that exists within the therapeutic relationship. This felt sense of the sacred happens before our conscious minds jump in to interpret or clinically reframe the experience.

A sacred moment is unique in several ways, occurring both within and outside of ourselves. There are spontaneous experiences of sacredness, as well as intentionally evoked sacred moments. Yet there is also a mysterious, ineffable quality of the therapeutic experience. Some sacred moments catch us by surprise. We aren’t even thinking about it and unexpectedly, there is an experience of grace. Other times, sacredness does not just happen spontaneously; we invoke it. We set the stage for it using tools, rituals, intentions and our own presence, just as a priest, rabbi, imam or even a magician sets the table or altar with holy objects and intentions.

Therapists have innumerable rituals as part of our practice, both conscious and unconscious. These can include secular and ordinary rituals such as how we greet clients at the beginning of an appointment, how the session begins and ends, placement of objects in the therapy office, to name a few. For many clients who are secular by birth or by choice, intentional rituals may seem nonexistent or outside their conscious awareness. White Western mainstream society (including psychotherapy) has excised spiritual rituals from many people's daily lives, although non-religious ritual behaviors are quite prevalent. Some minor examples of these include tailgating and dressing up for sporting events, morning coffee rituals, going to the gym, and even coming to weekly therapy appointments.

I keep a small ceramic bowl on my desk with 'kavanah cards,' small business-size, laminated and painted cards containing words such as generosity, loving kindness and equanimity. When I arrive at work each day, I pull a random card from the bowl, reflect on it briefly, and set it out on the card holder. That simple meditative act sets the tone and signifies the beginning of my work day. The last thing I do when I leave at the end of the day, before turning out the lights, is to place the card back in the bowl, signifying the completion of my day. This simple ritual adds a meditative element to my daily work life. My clients don't see these cards; it's a personal ritual practice.

A clinical example related to the use of ritual occurred in my work with Teresa, a woman in her mid-40s who experienced a twin pregnancy loss at 19 weeks gestation. She had been offered a visit with a hospital chaplain, but she declined the offer because the chaplain was an ordained clergy person and she

was not interested in traditional prayer. She also said she was cautious about the risk of having any theological or religious beliefs imposed on her. She was not religious, nor did she belong to a spiritual community, although she did have a regular yoga practice at a studio in her neighborhood. Her OB/GYN provider referred her to me for therapy.

In addition to processing and understanding her grief, Teresa was also wrestling with existential and philosophical questions about the meaning of her loss, and expressed a desire for some kind of ritual to honor her grief. We discussed her feelings and ideas about this, and I was careful not to impose my own beliefs or practices. We explored ideas for possible rituals in a very open, curious way. Ultimately, she created a ritual involving planting two flowers in her garden at home to honor the pregnancy, one for each fetus. She wrote a poem and read it aloud when she brought the flowers to our session on the day she intended to plant them in the garden. She reported that this very personal grief ritual evoked a connection to mystery for her, and engendered feelings of hope and optimism about healing from this profound loss. In particular, she described reconnecting with the earth and with a living object like a plant as "reconnecting with the source of life itself."

Sacred moments are imbued with these qualities of mystery, connection

and awe. There is a dimension of countertransference here, in that, as the therapist, I need to attend to my own feelings, reactions, boundaries, sensations and experiences. As someone who identifies as both religious and spiritual, my personal and professional daily rituals are very meaningful to me. At the same time, I am mindful of not imposing these beliefs or practices on my clients. This awareness is integral to my ethical commitment regarding boundaries in psychotherapy.

Since my website content makes it explicitly clear that I have a transpersonal orientation in my work as a therapist, many of my clients are a self-selected population who are, at minimum, tolerant of spirituality, and in many cases, actively seeking to integrate spirituality and sacredness into psychotherapy. My initial assessment always includes questions about whether clients were raised with a particular religion and if they currently have a spiritual practice.

How will I recognize these sacred moments and mindfully make good use of them therapeutically? In spiritual direction, the word 'savor' is often used to describe the capacity to be fully present to a sacred moment, to linger in the experience and allow it to unfold naturally. There is an experience of flow that occurs with sacred moments. Savoring implies a slower, gentler attunement to this undercurrent, like relishing the sound of the ocean at the beach or the taste of summer fruit.



*Karen Lee Erlichman, D.Min, LCSW, provides psychotherapy, spiritual direction and supervision in San Francisco. A faculty member in the Morei Derekh Jewish Spiritual Direction Training Program as well as at the University of California-San Francisco, Karen is currently engaged in Level II training in Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, a multimodal approach to healing trauma.*