The Fifth Province and Spirituality: Co-Creating a Sacred Space of Love in 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 ‘space’ wherein different and often opposing realities might meet and engage. As such, it also stands as a metaphor for an approach wherein the realities of individuals are voiced, heard, accepted and respected in a disposition 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 conversational milieu that the sacred can be sensed in the emergent collective wisdom of conversational partners. 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. Froma Walsh, (1999, p 6) following the Griffiths’, states that spirituality is that which connects us to all there is. (Griffith and Griffith, 1999)

**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. (Herderman & 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 together conflicts, oppositions and contradictions in a non-dualistic, both/and formulation. Thus the space of the fifth province was 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-constructed in relationship.

**The Fifth Province as a Portal to the Spiritual?**

Working with the processes of co-construction, I became aware that we were tapping into a greater field of consciousness. This occurred when we became part of a collective wisdom, Bateson’s systemic mind? 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 dilemma. 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 and be present with each other. 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, Nollaig and myself 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 re-membered 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” (Shotter & Katz 1999) 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 chapter will concentrate on three of the major hallmarks of the fifth province approach which integrate a spiritual orientation, (i) a dis-position of love, (ii) co-created emergences and goal-less intention and, (iii) client feedback.

**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. (1985) 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 fundament. 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. Even Wittgenstein has said that speaking is only part of a much larger activity. (1953, no 23) 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 (our
selves)! 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)

**Co-Created Emergences and Goalless Intention.**

So, what does co-creating a spiritually oriented therapy conversation mean? Generally, when we think of constructing something we are thinking about how we make distinctions in our minds. However, when we can feel a sort of unity in whatever we are doing with others then, we are going beyond the mind. When this happens we are in the domain of co-construction. (Sri Vasudeva & McCarthy, 2002)

When we feel this unity, this ‘communion’ as Nollaig Byrne calls it; we are in a domain where we also meet in spirit. If we are in this domain then there is the possibility to co-construct wonderful images, thoughts and ideas that can help us to communicate together in very powerful way. When we co-create with others in spirit, mind becomes an instrument in the expression of the emergent wisdom. The mind of the individual is no longer in the lead in such processes. We might even say that the mind in these instances is at the service of this co-creation. When we experience these ‘consumatory moments’, as John Dewey (1934) calls them, we as individuals often have a strong sense of empowerment. We are also no longer defended from the other person or persons yet we can also sense our ‘response abilities’ in relation to the emerging co-creation. (Sri Vasudeva & McCarthy, 2002). Lynn Hoffman refers to this process as being difficult to describe and calls it
‘the thing in the bushes”. (Hoffman, 2000) In these moments there is often a silence, a ‘space’ within which an unexpected creativity emerges. Profound feelings of “fit” emerge where previously disparate pieces of a story or stories are brought together harmoniously and creatively. Reflecting within this process also necessitates a consideration for what happens next in the joint action. Here, responsibility (response-ability), justice and ethics are emergent in relationships. (McNamee and Gergen, 1999)

*Doing less, accomplishing more*^2^

When we are working from a dis-position of love in a co-constructive, goalless process it frequently feels like no effort is involved. However, inspite of this sense unexpected transformations take place. They appear like gifts from nowhere as it were. But are they from the outside of the process? In my own experience it would seem that they emerge through the pooled resources of those present and the unexpected insights and intuitions of all who are present. When we meet with people we join to create a space that holds us and all that we bring to the encounter. In this meeting a powerful field of communal consciousness can be created. It is within and from this field of consciousness that the creative wisdom and energy seems to arise. One client spoke of increased self-confidence and healing which emerged through these kinds of processes. Referring to the inter-actions, she said:

“Her [the therapist’s] interaction with me gave me confidence. I suppose she also allowed me to see a little of herself and because I
had sort of had people with all the qualifications on paper before, the very fact that she would bring it down to the base level of two women chatting gave me confidence. She believed in me, I believe, and by her believing in me, I believed in myself more and then that became an element in our relationship (making circular movements with her hands). I allow her to believe in me, therefore, she believes in me, therefore, I have got to achieve and therefore it’s kind of circular. I knew that this was the woman that I could heal myself with.”

She was then asked where the notion of healing came from and she answered, “I don’t know where it came from”. Recently, I have come to define healing as a process that occurs through inter-action. The healer, if there is one, is the inter-action between people in their connection to the higher wisdom that unites them.

In the words of the client above, we have an example of co-construction in which healing emerges spontaneously through the connection, the ‘don’t know where’, the ‘no where’, the now-here! This woman eloquently spelled out the interactive nature of the event in which neither could be said to have brought it about solely by their own efforts. There was no singular doer, no single healer. In this process we witness what it is like to do less and accomplish more.

At such times, there is a sense of flow, where therapist and client are in synch. These are those special moments of synchrony when participants are in the present together. There is a sense of timelessness, where the many
become as one and yet do not lose the wonderful richness of their diversity. Because these moments are often thought of as intuitive and non-rational, as mystical and non-scientific they are often unfortunately dismissed. However, as Ken Gergen (1998) has mentioned, “practices which are nourished by discourses of spirit, love and God” need to begin to find legitimacy. The route to legitimacy is perhaps paved with the stepping-stones which move the subject from silence to voice and from a reliance on happenstance to a pro-activity on the part of therapists to facilitate the possibility of such moments. In my own conversations with therapists, they often say that they cannot be brought forth deliberately. However, while there is some truth in that statement in my own experience it is not necessarily so. Co-construction does not imply passivity. It speaks to an intense engagement which is pro-active and mutual. The dispositions we have been speaking about here and which exist throughout what we might call the collaborative therapies can, in my own experience, increase the opportunities for their emergence.

When talking about such synchronous moments, therapists will often relate how they know they have occurred not only because they themselves have experienced them but, because of the kind of feedback they receive from clients. The client will also have experienced the same synchronous moment and have remembered it as a significant moment or turning point. To know whether we are doing and being as we say we are feedback is essential.
Some Client Feedback

Here are some examples of clients speaking about synchronous emergences in therapy – these ‘doing less accomplishing more’ emergences. One exchange at the end of a session exemplifies this ‘ease of doing’. The husband in a couple’s session had been looking intensly at the therapist for some time before saying:

Client: I’m ... I’m amazed.
Therapist: Yeh?
C: Yeh.
T: At?
C: At how fast you caught on.
T: Ahh.
C: Yeh, it took you no time at all.
T: Thank you, you made it very easy.

In a second example, a woman client refers to the emergence of key and transforming metaphors which just seemed to come in the to and fro of interaction. One metaphor for her was of ‘weeding the garden’. When asked where the metaphor came from, as she was not a gardener, she replied, ‘I have no idea” but she was sure that it had not come from the therapist. In another instance, the process of ‘mothering’ was offered as a metaphor for the therapy. However, the client went on to say that it was a feature of the relationship and not deliberate on the part of the therapist. As she saw it, it was part of the empathy that she felt in the relationship. She said:
C: 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.

In these two little examples the metaphors where seen to be emergent. In fact this same woman 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 inter-viewing, 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, goalless process budding from what I call, conversational emergences. 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 as Bateson might say. 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.

2. The phrase, ‘do less, accomplish more’ is taken from the work of Dr Ed Verhoeff of Agnim Consulting, Loenen, Holland.
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THE FIFTH PROVINCE

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THE FIFTH PROVINCE AS A PORTAL TO THE SPIRITUAL?

The Fifth Province becomes a portal to the spiritual in the following practices:

* A non-imposing therapeutic dis-position of love
A resonant mood

A belief in pre-existing abilities

A both/and process in the transcendence of dualisms

A dis-position of openness, acceptance, curiosity and enquiry. The co-creation of a still-point, a ‘space’ where reflection, witnessing, presence and collective wisdom could emerge.

A goalless process.

MAJOR HALLMARKS OF THE FIFTH PROVINCE APPROACH FOCUSED OF CHAPTER

a dis-position of love,

co-created emergences and goal-less intention.

clients re-membering their therapy.

(i) A Dis-Position of Love: Listening with the Heart

Every time we open space for another we share our love.

A language of the heart takes us to a place that is beyond spoken language.

Listening with the heart facilitates others to speak and to share.

Being present in the present as presence.
(ii) Co-Created Emergences and Goalless Intention.

In moments of co-creation there is often a silence and a spontaneous integration of the stories. Profound feelings of “fit” emerge and previously disparate pieces of a story or stories are brought together harmoniously.

Seems like we are doing less and accomplishing more: A field of communal consciousness can be created where wisdom seems to arise spontaneously out of ‘nowhere’ (the now here)

Clients re-membering their therapy

Conversational emergences:
* metaphors from nowhere,
* ‘it took you no time at all’,
* “Being in hands”,
* “weeding the garden”,
* “mothering”
* “Healing”