

Interview with Michele Ritterman, Ph.D.

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SPF: The general question is the relationship between spirituality and psychology. I'd love to hear your thoughts about that.

MR: What I was thinking about today was that the spiritual model of psychotherapy seems to me so much more helpful than the medical model. Not that they have to be mutually exclusive either. It seems to be that spirituality is closer to the issue healing, and less with labeling and tracking people into categories in the society. So, I'm interested in a spiritual orientation toward dealing with people coming to us and asking for help, and also in terms of how I see the therapist herself - the "spiritual healer" versus "the professional". I prefer that model. In the more ancient traditions of healing, the healer is a member of the tribe and member of the community and, as such, is a voice of the whole body of the community. So you don't get into these issues that exist in the field today about such strange boundaries as - you can't hug the client, or you're not supposed to see somebody if you're seeing their friend. I see all the friends of friends of friends, and the cousins, and the family, and the brothers and the sisters, and the ex-wives and the ex-husbands, and...I love that! That's the essence of therapy, to be involved with the whole community.

So, on the other hand, I value education, critical thinking, and the analytic mind. I think the analytic brain has a guiding role to play in the healing process, too; in the analytic mind of the healer. But the professional world doesn't own that analytic mind. That analytic mind can also be guided by the spirit, or help guide the spirit. They work as a team, in tandem. So...when I think of spiritual therapy I don't exclude the analytic brain.

SPF: I'm finding myself wanting to take a step back and ask, just what do you mean by "healing"?

MR: If I think of an individual in a process of healing, I think of that individual as in some way digesting certain experiences that they've been through and arriving at a new opening, with a new mind and a new heart. So healing is a process of coming to see things and experience things differently than you ever have before. Sometimes you can heal through joy, and other routes if you're very lucky. But, often there's this kind of paradox that you have to go through great darkness, pain, and suffering to get to this other side, to cross some kind of road. And I see therapy as a process of helping people go through their unique form of turbulence. So...sometimes it's through love, sometimes it's through death, sometimes it's through loss, sometimes it's through increase. But healing is a process that you go through to get to the other side. It's something fresh and new that comes to you afterward, like a new skin that grows where there once was an injury.

SPF: I was very excited when we were talking before, when you said "creativity is the thing, and all the rest is history"

MR: That's actually a quote from my new book, *Woman's Wisdom*. I had that revelation over the holidays about life. What is life? What is the purpose of life? It is creativity. It's to create. Whether you're creating a feeling, or a work of art, or a connection to someone, whatever it is – as long as you're creating, you're alive. That's what life is, reproducing and multiplying, whether it's a song or a poem or a conversation. And everything else is history. It's your past. It's over already. It's done.

So, I think the thing is to dwell in the past as little as necessary to catapult the world forward into creativity. That applies to political problems too. Certainly, two warring factions, like we see all over the world today, can either dwell on the terrible things they did to each other in the past - and there are always an abundance of those - or they can decide to come together toward a common improved future. And I think that one is the life path, and the other one is the death trip. So that says belaboring history is not useful. The past is only as useful as it enables a person to live in the present for joy of the future. And often for the joy of an imagined future, rather than the one that they've ever seen before, because the future is always going to be different from what has been. The future doesn't repeat itself. Only the past repeats itself.

SPF: So then, as this therapist who wants to come from a genuine healing perspective, versus from a medical model, how do you include or incorporate this creativity in the healing process?

MR: Well, in every single way. Like when I meet a person who wants to come to me for healing, I honestly ask myself "What is this exactly? Who is this person and what are they about? And what matters most to them?" That's the first thing I look at. So I try to get off the superficial end of the issue. What matters most to their life is their most profound motivation for any kind of change or transformation. So, if you find the most meaningful thing for the person, that's where I want to dwell with them. Rather than looking for the normative or the typical, you fall in love with the idiosyncrasies of an individual, a couple, or a family.

There's a sense of the excitement of that, and curiosity and wonder about life. Now you have a different climate. And it's a climate of true hopefulness and curiosity. Curiosity is probably the best, most reliable force to have operating, as a sense of wonder. I think Borges said "People would rather be astonished than know the truth." So, it's not about necessarily imparting "the truth" to someone, or improving their communication skill, or any of that kind of thing. It's more helping people find their sense of wonder, and then helping them see how to put that to work in some kind of creative way. And to believe that what has been is not what has to be, but that what has been is only what has been. And that's where the analytic mind can get in the way. The analytic mind doggedly sticks to the past. It's the "know it all" brain. It's been there. It did that. It knows these are "the facts." You want, at times, to allow that aspect of mind to step into the background, so the unconscious mind can come forth.

It is the unconscious mind that knows that it's never the same, and everything is always being created. So you want to bring that out to have a chance. Without the analytic mind,

the unconscious is too receptive, and too susceptible to the suggestions of others. So you need the analytic brain to come in every so often and say “Watch out for this” and “Don’t do that.” It has its role. It’s the watchdog, but it shouldn’t impede a creative process, and it usually can’t trigger change. You know like, “You really ought to stop smoking. It’s bad for your health.” You’re like “Yeah, right, it’s true.” It doesn’t catalyze the change. What catalyzes the change is some sense of possibility of something being different, and longing for the air, and... That lives in the unconscious mind.

SPF: So is it only the role of the analytic mind to just keep an eye on things so the unconscious mind doesn’t get into trouble or does it in some way also serve that more creative process?

MR: The analytic mind certainly helps organize the raw materials. I mean, it plays a role. It’s a vehicle.

SPF: Like a servant.

MR: The analytic brain is very easily misled and very often leads the unconscious to feel hopeless, because it can be so negative, based on experience. And the unconscious mind is so burdened in the world today. You know in Hebrew the root is the same for healing and dreaming, Chet Lamed Mem. That tells you that at an ancient taproot, to dream is to heal. Healing is “to be made whole.” I’m sure that originally we were designed to dream of the solutions to things.. Instead, in our hectic stressful society, our dreams are cluttered with the trashed hurts, and disappointments, and the meanness, and the things of the day in a culture that is moving faster than love can move. Love is out of time. Love doesn’t run by a clock.

So, in therapy, one of the things we do is create a space for the unconscious mind to have some freedom of expression, and to let go and discharge the unhelpful things that have gotten into it and poisoned it, so it can rejuvenate and come up with a sense of “Wow.” And then the analytic mind can doggedly follow behind it saying “Watch out for this, and don’t do that. You need to call this one and set this appointment up....” It’s the secretary. It shouldn’t be the CEO. The CEO should be intuition and instinct.

I’m borrowing from Erickson. I said to him “You know, I’ve been studying with Jay Haley and Salvador Minuchin for all these years. And I know how to develop a strategy, and I know technique, but I feel like you’re telling me to forget all that and trust my instincts.” He said, “I certainly hope so.” And he said, “You need to trust your intuitions.” Intuition is a bridge here between animal instinct and the creative unconscious mind. So, he was saying to me “Trust your intuitions, because they are a science of observation you’ve made your whole life.” But it’s not analytically made, it’s viscerally made. It is embodied observation, and that’s where the healing really comes from.

SPF: That definition of intuition is beautiful, by the way. What I’m hearing developing here is a kind of model that has some structure to it. You’ve got the “unconscious mind”, and you’ve got “intuition”, and “instinct” on the table, and they’re not all exactly the same, but they’re clearly related.

MR: Instinct is on the animal level of “fight or flight” – go to something or go away from something. And intuition has much more dimension to it - and detail, texture. Intuition about “how to go, where to go, what it could be.” And then the unconscious mind is the one that pulls it all together. It’s the dreaming, overall brain. The unconscious mind takes in everything, including the analytic material. I see it as the “chief honcho” that way. It pulls together what your analytic mind said, what your instinct told you to do, your intuition about how it could go, and it comes up with some kind of a creative suggestion. It’s the mystery.

And spiritual people say that our individual consciousness, here described as the unconscious mind in the Western world, taps into the universal mystery. So that starts to get to soul. However, the unconscious mind can be very misled too, so I prefer to keep it separate from soul and spirit. So I would say that the unconscious mind can also get cluttered with junk, and it can be misled. You can lay down early rules in your unconscious mind based on your childhood. “Whenever I said this to my mother, she rejected me, therefore I’ve learned to be afraid to express a certain thing”, for example. The unconscious mind can automatically hold onto a rule that was once useful, but is no longer useful. Whereas the spirit of a person might be able to be watching and say “You don’t need to feel like that anymore. You don’t need to do that.” It can guide the unconscious. “You’re more than that. You’re more than everything that’s been put into you.” The unconscious mind can be misled, but I don’t think the spirit can be misled. So there is something else, there is another mystery, besides the unconscious.

SPF: So it sounds like, on the one hand, unconscious is very inclusive of the whole person, including even some of the ostensibly conscious parts, like the analytic mind, but also includes many more mysterious and very receptive parts. It’s receptive outwardly to suggestions, but it’s also receptive to guidance from spirit?

MR: Erickson was not a religious man, for example, but I don’t think for a second he ever wasn’t engaged with what I would call his spirit. There was the spirit of the man. And, then he understood unconscious processes particularly through pain and pain management (his own), but clearly when he talked to people about “You’re unique as your fingerprints. There never has been and there never will be anyone exactly like you, and you have the right to be that fully”, that’s the spirit he was talking about. But he might not have used that word. And then the unconscious mind is partially at least in this world. I don’t see it as pure. I don’t totally trust the unconscious mind – not mine or theirs - to solve problems with clients. I try to work also with the spirit, and with their analytic brain too, because I think the unconscious mind can be cluttered.

SPF: How then can we make the unconscious mind be more receptive to the influence of spirit, and less available to suggestions from the outside, especially those that are unhelpful?

MR: That is truly a great question. I talk about immunizing. Particularly if you’re working with unconscious processes in a couple, well, they’ve done or do things to each other that trigger some of their unconscious problems, so one of the things you need be careful to do

is “immunize” them against the inadvertently (or intentionally, but mostly it’s inadvertent) destructive suggestions of the other person. The other person will do something that inadvertently triggers something in them. Part of the way you can do that is working with them in the more unconscious state, and when they start to get triggered by the other person, at exactly that moment, you come in as an alternative force and intervene, giving them suggestions of another state of mind they might wish to shift to. When effective, there is a changing of brain patterning, because people experience their shifts in behavior as having occurred spontaneously. So, by intervening directly into the moment at which a suggestion for a no longer useful pattern occurs, YOU can help the person viscerally and physiologically learn to enter into an alternative mental state.

And when they shift there, they’re in terra firma, and now they begin to know how to do that. “Oh, OK, I can’t be here when my partner says this. Oh, from here I can see that it’s about them.” It’s a lot of helping the person to see what’s not them, and to make a distinction between ‘me’ and the environment outside. And that starts to be the spirit.

SPF: So, it’s about teaching people how to be in less suggestible states?

MR: Yes, less suggestible to suggestions that they notice are followed by a shift in their mental state that is destructive to them, that closes down their heart, makes them frightened, evokes anger and rage, makes them reactive - that they start to track those and ward them off before they come, like a tai chi master, you know? Energetically being in a state of readiness to ward those off.

SPF: It’s developing a skillful stance really.

MR: A skillful stance in life, yes...except stance sounds stationary. A sequence of stances might be better, like tai chi.

SPF: So, developing that skill also then makes you somehow more available to recognizing spirit?

MR: Right. The cleaner your lens is, the better you can see. And so, the less negativity you take in, the more you’re able to be open to positivity. The thing is I don’t want to romanticize that. And again, it’s not easy in a world of so much inhumanity and coldness. So, this idea of purifying oneself, as if one can be perfectly pure in an impure world, is something I have trouble with, because I feel like it makes us have an unrealistic standard that then backfires. “Real” is very important.

SPF: If “real” were to lead to some kind of enlightenment that would be palatable to you, what would that look like to you?

MR: Maybe caring about everything. I’ve had moments where I have been in love with everything in life, the good and the bad – where my heart got so big I could love everything, and make peace with it, in some way, with all its flaws, but I haven’t been able to dwell there.

SPF: What a beautiful aspiration.

MR: Yeah. I have definitely had moments of that. If you go out with this totally open heart, with your light on, radiating love, you've got to watch out because some people are going to want to smash that. Isn't that why Jesus was killed, and Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, because their light was on and everybody saw it. And people want to destroy that. There's like a force that wishes to destroy that.

So, when we think of spiritually developing ourselves or helping a client open their heart, I feel the need to offer some protection too. "Well, wait a minute. Slow down. You know. Don't open up or change so fast because, when you do, there'll be things that want to throw you off, and that will...even your own spouse may not like it." So, maybe slower is better, so other people around you have time to adjust. Maybe "light-lite" is better than full-force light, at times.

So healing people, going back to your first question, and helping people find the light inside of them, the thing that makes their heart open, the things that make them curious about the future, the thing that makes them wish to create and love, maybe it's not about a quick fix. You want to help a person start a process of which they can handle the situational consequences. If you make a change, everything around you has to change, and if you move too fast it can freak people out.

So there's a timing to things in healing that's really important and, certainly I would love to be in reality and feel all this love, but I'm not willing to feel all the love by denying the reality. I mean, it's going as it's going, and you have to accept that and face that, but you can still tilt toward goodness, as Michael Lerner calls it. You know, you can tilt toward goodness, and that requires some kind of activism, and not just going "Oh, I love what is, you know, and everything is fine the way it is." There's something about that notion of being spiritual that bothers me.

The task that I assigned myself is "How can I be loving, given these realities, that life itself existentially is not fair?". And then man is inhumane to man. That struggle is somehow related to the possibility of healing someone else. I meet them at that place where they're in that struggle too. Whatever we're talking about, we're always talking about that.

SPF: Can you drill down into that?

MR: What matters most to us, really? I go right to that with people. Why bother with this whole thing here? And there's something about the dignity of that, that we come together in the dignity of the aspiration to tilt things toward goodness. That we could see and face reality exactly as it is, but not say "Oh, it's all so great", but I say "Oh, this is what it is. How hard it is for us humans to be in this."

I was in Costa Rica. I took my son to the rainforest, and we had a tour guide who showed us three mountains. And he said, "Look at these three mountains. You know the toucan is the farthest flying bird. The toucan is a bird that inhabits three environments at different times of the year. One environment is this mountain. The other environment is on this mountain.

And the other environment is on that.” He said, “Now look at the middle environment.” And I said, “Well there are no trees on the middle environment.” He said, “That’s right. It’s been completely deforested.” So the toucan can’t dwell there anymore. And it made me so sad. And I realized, the toucan can’t be what it is. The toucan can’t. It ends up in a cage looking like a toucan, but not being a toucan.

And I realized, it’s the same with humans. We are not living in work or social environments designed for our health. Symptom bearers are the people who are seeking help, and seeking to do good, in my experience. They’re seeking to better themselves, and when we negatively judge them for being less than they could be because of their circumstances, we’re not doing anything useful at all. What we need to do is to say to people in pain who seek our counsel is this, “Good for you, how well you’re doing without your middle environment. And you need that middle mountain love. And you need that middle mountain of community. And you need that deforested range connection.

And you need all these things to be fully human. You’re probably not going to get all of what you need for your human. So, what can we do that’s the best we can do with this situation?” Most people will just feel so comforted just to know it’s not their fault. To understand that gives us a chance. Can we bring back the human? What is human being? Is there any way to salvage this thing?

I did my dissertation on hyperactivity in 1978, comparing placebo, hyperactivity, and family therapy to try to stem this tide. Of course I didn’t succeed at stemming the tide, and it’s become epidemic, massive, and what’s that about? You don’t take little boys full of testosterone and make them sit in large classes. That’s not the way they learn. If they’re having an attention problem, teach them to concentrate. They’re going to need it their whole life. No drug is going to teach them to concentrate. You have to learn to concentrate. You can be trained to concentrate. And certainly putting them in a situation that’s interesting would help. You know? These boys are missing the middle mountain range, and then helping professionals end up blaming the boys’ brains for their adaptation to that distracting loss.

SPF: I’m hearing in your description the environmental/societal piece playing a big role in what disconnects us from our central humanity, and what cages us like toucans. It sounds like there’s an implication that this is an historical development versus “the human condition.”

MR: Oh yeah!

SPF: So, from your perspective, there was a time when people were more alive, more in touch with spirit, more holding their humanity, that there was more place for humanity in society.

MR: Right. When there were less dense populations and urban environments weren't prevailing. When there was more nature than concrete, that ratio was, better for the human. We are also creatures of rhythm. If you wake up by sunlight, you sleep by sunset, and your rhythms match the environmental rhythms, you don't need an alarm clock. You go through your diurnal rhythms during the day and your circadian rhythms, and everyone's going through the same things together. Much research has shown that the hunters and gatherers didn't have cardiovascular diseases and hypertension. They had to deal with scorpions and snakes, and I'm sure they were abusive and there were gender issues, but I think the lack of nature, and the lack of sense that we are animals, and that we operate by the same principles and forces as this earth to which we are perfectly matched, has been lost and, as a result of that, that's enabled us to pathologize people, instead of understanding what we are doing is natural given an unnatural environment. I would agree with Gandhi when they asked him, "What do you think of civilization?" and he said, "I think it would be a good idea."

SPF: It's hard to mistake the resonance in this description of the fall from the Garden of Eden - that there was a time when we as a species, we were actually in harmony with the natural order of things, and therefore with our own essences. Is that also the story of spirituality? Is that what it would mean to be really receptive to spirit? Is there some other developmental process or is it just a return to the more essential state, from your point of view?

MR: I know that when I work with people, to get my spirit and their spirit to mix is the number one goal. I give unconditional love to everybody I can. And if I can't give that, I don't work with a person. Now, in the world there are situations where I can't. But in healing, once a person signs on to work with me, I can give that because there's that openness. If you want to change something, you have to accept it completely first. That's an axiom I've developed. So, by my total ability to accept these people, because I received that from him, then I'm able to channel that myself, because it's a force. I cannot give it to people who are mistreating me or others. But in the healing environment, the holding environment, you can channel these things. And in that sense, there's that piece of paradise that happens, and there's the magic.

I think the idea of a Sabbath embodies some understanding of critical mass and simultaneity in the healing power of collective meditation – the collecting of peace, the leaving behind of the worldly limitations together at the same time. I did want to tell you about one form I developed, that I think is important, in light of what we're saying. Erickson was a storyteller and I'm a poet. I'm actually a published poet. I love poetry, and I developed these things called "poetic inductions." I did one when the hate movements were really strong, "A Poetic Induction in Favor of Human Decency" and I presented it at an Erickson congress. It had never been done before. It was really very powerful and what I said is "You know we all watch television, and we all get all these terrible influences to our unconscious mind. This presentation is for you to sit here and receive suggestions that will make you feel loving and caring. So anybody that doesn't want that should leave the room."

And if you want to be the recipient of suggestions toward being loving and caring, then stay in the room” and I worked on this poetic induction in favor of human decency.

To create the circumstances under which groups of people can collectively, and simultaneously, and synchronously have evoked in them a state of mind that will be positive, in terms of some real issue in the world. So, and it would be a great thing to do before a peace march or something like that, to help everybody get in a certain frame of mind that they find within themselves. Not to brainwash or to program them, but to enable them to find within themselves a certain state of mind collectively, and at the same time, and to mobilize that body toward action in the world to really do something loving or embracing of our intelligent, creative human spirit. I do these poetic inductions in favor of something positive. But not just “You will go to a beach. And you will relax. And you will feel comfortable with yourself” but that, “You will go to a place where your compassion for humanity, including your own, is elicited and you will be able to do something with the collective spirit of compassion to effect something positive in the world around you.” So, that kind of thing. I think that ties together all the stuff we talked about.

SPF: It really does. It brings together healing, spirit, and activism really.

MR: Yeah, because that comes with the “face reality” part.

SPF: It feels like a natural ending point. Thank you so, so much.