



## SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS for Therapists and Other Healers

### WILL VERSUS WILLPOWER by the Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA

A bi-monthly series of reflections to help therapists and other healers integrate spirituality into their practice by introducing them to foundational spiritual themes and topics that aren't commonly taught in psychotherapy. These are rooted in Graham's 30+ years of advanced spiritual study, teaching, pastoring, and serving as a spiritual director.

#### Reflection

I've lived between two worlds for a long time, and it's not always easy to reconcile the two. The gulf between the two was captured succinctly during my Master of Social Work internship in a drug and alcohol treatment center.

I had been simultaneously working on a Master of Divinity, and was struggling to reconcile the two fields—ministry and social work. Sensing my struggle, my supervisor said to me, "Graham, at some point you're going to have to choose between the two. Either you do ministry or you do social work, but you can't do both."

Her comments were intended to help, but they only intensified my struggles by pointing out that I would receive little help in reconciling the fields. It was part of my deeper struggle of integrating spirituality and counseling. Later, while being trained for spiritual direction, I was taught that I can *either* do spiritual direction *or* therapy, but I can't do both at the same time. Thus, the guidance I kept receiving was that integrating the spiritual with the therapeutic wasn't possible.

Disregarding the advice of both, I stubbornly integrated counseling insights into my ministry and my spiritual direction, and spiritual direction insights into my counseling and ministry. It's been a struggle to do so, often because the two fields use the same terms in different ways.

For instance, a therapist hearing an emotionally-oriented client say, "I was following my heart and got hurt because of it," might respond, "Let's look at how you can perhaps start following your head." For a therapist, the *heart* is a metaphor for *emotion*. In the spiritual world the heart has a much deeper meaning as the *seat of the soul* where wisdom is found. It's the place where thinking, feeling, intuiting, and transcending come together. Thus, a spiritual director telling a client to follow her or his heart is helping him or her discover wisdom coming from a deeper place.

One of the more significant areas where spiritual and therapeutic language conflict has to do with the word "will," as in *willpower* versus *the will*. Increasingly therapy recognizes that willpower alone is not enough to create change in a person. We've developed a number of cognitive behavioral techniques to help people focus on healthy habit formation instead. We've also recognized that the failure to change through willpower alone is often what strengthens self-defeating thinking and behaving. Repeated failures can lead to despair, which leads to a self-defeating surrender to harmful beliefs, behaviors, substance abuse, and addictions.

The word "will" has a very different meaning in the field of spirituality. There, *will* refers simply to the direction we determine for our lives. The great spiritual writer, Catherine Marshall, wrote about will in her book, *Beyond Ourselves*, saying, "the Christian life must be lived in the will, not the emotions.... At birth, as I have pointed out, God gives each human being the gift of freedom of will. Under no circumstances will God ever violate this central citadel of man's being."

In other words, the central spiritual question is, *will we only will our own will, or are we willing to will God's will throughout our lives?* There are three kinds of will that come into play—*willfulness*, *will-lessness*, and *willingness*.

We easily recognize *willfulness*. This is the narcissistic need to impose our will upon others. The extreme is an abusive spouse or parent who must subjugate another who has a weaker will. In an individualistic culture such as ours, willfulness often becomes our shared malaise. Certain people constantly strive to assert their will over others politically, culturally, and relationally.

What's not recognized as much is the condition of *will-lessness*. Many people in our culture live in abject dependency upon others. They have such a defeated, fragile will that they surrender their identity to whatever a willful person tells them they are.

Working with someone who is willful or will-less is difficult. The willful person never believes she or he needs help, nor needs to let go of his or her will. The will-less person has a hard time developing an individuated identity that helps her or him navigate through life as a healthy person. In the case of a willful or a will-less person, spiritually integrated therapy needs to focus on the establishment of a healthy will.

*Willingness* is that healthy will. From a spiritual perspective it means willingly putting aside our overactive will, or cultivating a stronger will, so that we can allow *God's will to work through us*. In many ways, this is what separates the most deeply spiritual people—the mystics—from most of us. They cultivate a life of allowing God's will to flow through their will. They seek a way of living where they can become an active conduit for God's love, grace, peace, and presence in the world. It's a faith that believes God is in the world and trusts that God can act through us. This is what grounds the practices of prayer, discernment, mindfulness, and contemplation.

So what's the impact on therapy and other healing fields? When we help people cultivate *willingness*, we help them tap into a source of healing and living that they may not have been receptive to or even aware of previously. We help people either let go of willfulness or grow out of will-lessness in order to receive a greater source of wisdom and providence as it flows in and through our lives. In spiritual direction or therapy, we can't move people to a place of greater receptivity by proselytizing. It comes only through an invitation to be awake, aware, and alive to it.

The evangelical mystic, Frank Laubach, wrote about these kinds of experiences as he experimented with trying to be intentionally and intensively open to God in each moment: "The sense of being led by an unseen hand which takes mine while another hand reaches ahead and prepares the way, grows upon me daily" (*Letters by a Modern Mystic*).

Our work isn't to turn our clients into modern Frank Laubachs, but it can be to cultivate a deeper connection with Divine that allow its will to flow through our will.

## **Ideas for Intervention**

How do we do help clients become more comfortable with cultivating willingness? Several ideas:

- *Ask clients to reflect on their lives to see if there have been moments when they've sensed a wisdom or a hand working in their lives that helped them get through an experience.*
- *Explore with your clients the idea (and possibly your own personal experiences) of both taking responsibility for making decisions that lead to a better way of living, and also to becoming open to something beyond that can flow through them to cultivate a better choices and ways of living.*

## **Prayer** (take a moment of quite centering, then read the prayer)

*Holy God, there are so many moments when I want your will to be done and to reflect your will in my life. Still, I struggle because I insist on substituting my will for yours. Help me to become a willing person who will willingly lets your will flow through me. Amen.*