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Gregory S. Sparrow^a

^a University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, USA

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Informed love as a curative factor

GREGORY S. SPARROW

University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, USA

Abstract

Research concerning the curative factors in psychotherapy has thus far overlooked reports of religious experiences as a potential source of hypotheses. The author examines a variety of anecdotal encounters with personifications of higher power for the presence of therapeutic factors. He finds that the attitude expressed by the being, as perceived by the recipients, reflects unconditional positive regard (UCR) in the context of a thorough and intimate knowledge of the person. He thus hypothesizes that the curative factor operating in such experiences is “informed love”, defined as the twofold experience of feeling completely loved and completely known. The author discusses the differences between informed love and UCR, and the implications of informed love in modern psychotherapy practice.

Introduction

The field of psychotherapy shows a growing emphasis on ascertaining the common curative factors in the helping relationship. The research and scholarship of Frank (1961), Rogers (1951, 1961, 1965), and Strupp (Strupp, Hadley, & Gomes-Schwartz, 1977; Strupp, Wallach, & Wogan, 1962) were instrumental in establishing the field of common factors research. Later studies have shown that some factors are relational and supportive—that is, an outgrowth of the therapeutic relationship—while some curative factors derive from the provision for experimenting with new skills and learning new behaviors (Lambert, 1992; Lambert & Bergin, 1994).

It is understandable that the search for common factors has been restricted to the conventional therapeutic relationship, but powerful interpersonal experiences occur in other life contexts from which one might derive hypotheses concerning therapeutic processes. In specific, visionary religious experiences often involve

Correspondence: Gregory S. Sparrow, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Texas-Pan American, 1201 W. University Dr., Edinburg, TX 78541, USA.
E-mail: gssparrow@utpa.edu

highly impactful exchanges between recipients of such experiences and various personifications of higher power. Thus, it seems reasonable to examine the interpersonal dynamics in such phenomenological data for the presence of curative processes. Through such analyses, one might determine if such processes resemble or differ from recognized therapeutic factors in modern psychotherapy.

In two studies of visions and dreams with personifications of higher power, I solicited anecdotal accounts of encountering Jesus (Sparrow, 1995, 2002) or Mary the mother of Jesus (Sparrow, 1997, 2003). Each of these studies was inaugurated through magazine articles (Grant, 1995; Sparrow, 1990) that introduced an array of examples of such presumed encounters. At the end of each article, readers were invited to submit their own accounts. The respondents were told that, with their signed consent, the experiences might be included in book-length presentations, but that their identities would be withheld from the readers. By preserving the respondents' anonymity, I conjectured that they would (1) feel free to disclose the kinds of experiences that many people are afraid to share openly and (2) refrain from embellishing or fabricating their experiences in order to gain notoriety.

Following the initial presentations of these experiences (Sparrow, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2003) in the popular literature, I have analyzed these accounts for the presence of common curative factors. For the purposes of this ad-hoc analysis, I raised the question, "What curative factor(s) are evident in the interpersonal exchanges between the recipients and the personifications of higher power?" While a thorough analysis of these accounts exceeds the scope of this paper, several features have become apparent from this initial inquiry. First, none of the accounts contain lengthy messages or teachings: In all of the encounters, the being either says nothing or speaks very few words. Second, in none of the experiences does the being convey a punitive or judgmental attitude, even though in a few of the encounters with Jesus, he initially assumes a confrontational stance while pointing out some aspect of the recipient's life. And third, in virtually all of the experiences, the being communicates unambiguous love in nonverbal gestures and/or in actual words.

On the basis of examining the attitude expressed by the personification of higher power—alongside the recipient's subjective response to the encounter—I have observed that the curative impact of these exchanges appears to derive from the experience of a vast, unconditional regard. But it is also clear that the recipients experience more than love: They feel completely *known* as well—which is, of course, to be expected from a presumed embodiment of God. Whether this "complete knowledge" is a fact or merely imputed by the recipient is moot, for, in either case, the recipient experiences the being as possessing such knowledge. Consequently, the curative impact of many, if not most of the encounters seems to derive principally from an experience of *informed* love, defined as a love that 'encompasses a complete knowledge of the person's history—including strengths, weaknesses, and otherwise "unredeemable" characteristics and behaviors' (Sparrow, 2002, p. 34). Thus, informed love from the

perspective of the recipient can be defined as feeling *completely loved and accepted* and *completely known*.

Informed love and unconditional positive regard

The hypothesis that informed love may be the principal curative factor in encounters with higher power parallels the theory concerning the “core” therapeutic conditions articulated by Rogers (1951, 1961, 1965) and investigated by Rogers and his followers (Wyatt, 2001). In his conceptualization of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change in psychotherapy, Rogers (1951) initially focused on three conditions of the therapist that he believed brought about positive change in a client: self-congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (UCR). Self-congruence—considered a function of unconditional self-regard—and empathy were considered by Rogers to provide the context for making UCR credible and effective, although there has been considerable disagreement since Rogers’ initial conceptualization over which of the three factors is the most important variable. While some writers consider empathy (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997) or self-congruence (Lietaer, 1984) as the most important therapist condition, Wilkins (2000) concurs with Bozarth in asserting that UCR is “the curative factor in client-centred theory” (Bozarth, 1998) and can exert a positive effect even in the relative absence of congruence and empathy.

The therapist conditions described by Rogers emphasize the importance of the therapist’s capacity to catalyze change independent of the client, but Rogers (1961, 1965) subsequently supplemented his original list with three client conditions that were also important to the process—client incongruence, contact, and perception. Thus, to simplify the Rogerian view, therapeutic change occurs when an incongruent person comes into contact with, and perceives, UCR expressed by an empathic and congruent helper.

Informed love in encounters with higher power

In most of the experiences collected in my two studies, the being’s UCR is clearly evident, if not also stated. In contrast, the being’s *knowledge* of the person is *implied* by what the being says or does, or it is simply assumed by the recipient. For instance, in one of the stories that I investigated, a young woman reported seeing Jesus appear in the midst of a prayer meeting.

I was in Tulsa, Oklahoma at a prayer meeting (’73 or 74), in the living room of a teacher. There were three rows of people in the living room.

Jesus would first appear to me on the fireplace wall. He was very etheric looking, and I could see right through him. On one particular night, we asked for a blessing. I saw him look up and raise his left hand. Then, moving from left to right, he passed his hand over the group. As his hand passed a tongue of flame appeared on top of everyone’s head. The flame appeared in the crown area on the right side of the head. I even felt the flame. Then we started praying for people.

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Jesus came down into the center of the group and became as solid and as clear as everyone else that was there. I even saw clearly how his sandals were laced.

He held his arms to welcome everyone. The look on his face was like a mother looking at her newborn child . . .

I asked him “Why me? I’m not worthy to be shown You. There are others in this group more worthy than me.”

He said, “Why not you?”

I ended the prayer meeting with tears running down my face. (Sparrow, 2003, p. 183)

In this account, the being’s terse response implies that there is nothing about the recipient that can disqualify her from his love. As such, the being expresses love but subtly indicates a thorough knowledge of the recipient upon which the rhetorical question is based. The being’s response to her query thus evidences an “informed” regard by implying a thorough knowledge of her past.

In the following account, a woman who was a client of mine at the time of her experience believes that she is awake when a beautiful woman appears to her.

I am pulled awake—drawn out of a deep sleep. I see a little star through my bedroom window. I am aware that the star seems to be growing—getting wider. I reach for my glasses to make sure that I am really seeing this. I realize that I am seeing the moon, not a star, and that it is a new moon, like a rocking chair . . . The moon moves and seems to break up. It becomes two moons, with a second one to the right and below the first one. I shake my head to be sure, once again, that I am really seeing this. Then the moon on the right pulsates and expands into an orb—a brilliant, beautiful golden-white and silvery orb that becomes brighter and brighter. But it does not hurt my eyes even though it is more brilliant than a noontime sun.

I sit up to see better, and I am aware that everything in my room is also glowing and brilliant. I think at first that I must be dreaming, but then again I know that I am awake . . . Then a huge shaft of light streams down from the orb and right into my chest! I’m surprised and so happy, and I’m afraid to move, thinking that if I move I’ll lose it. And, whatever it is, I want it to stay. My eyes must be wide as saucers, and I’m saying, prayerfully, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” . . . Then the shaft of light says, “You used to wear white.”

I say, “Yes.”

Then the light says, “Wear white again. It is all the colors: Wear white a lot.”

The voice is very beautiful, very familiar and so gentle and loving. I am crying with tears streaming down my face, but it doesn’t seem to matter . . . Then the orb above me becomes larger; and a girl comes floating down on a shaft of light.

I think it must be Mary, yet she is so young, maybe 15 or 16. As I reach out to her, I notice that my hands are young again. The girl and I are the same age, growing into womanhood. Yet we are still children who, it seems, have had to grow up quickly.

I hear her say clearly, as if it is the most natural thing in the world for us to talk together: “This is what you have been searching for . . .” (Sparrow, 2003, p. 15–18)

The feminine figure in this encounter reveals an intimate knowledge of, and deep love for, the recipient, who had been raped 2 years before, and had been abused for years by her alcoholic husband. She had taken to wearing white to affirm her purity, but had fallen into self-doubt and depression, and had stopped that practice. This experience contains so much of what the woman needed

therapeutically: a renewed sense of her own youthfulness, purity, and worth. Hence, the succinct statement, “This is what you have been searching for . . .” expresses a thoroughly informed love.

In some of the accounts, the embodiment of higher power asks direct questions to awaken the recipient to some fact that has been overlooked or forgotten. For instance, while meditating in the middle of the night, a young man feels a person’s breath on his face and an intense physical energy, and concludes that the invisible presence is Christ.

I was meditating on the sofa beside the bed. I thought that perhaps I could slide down into the sofa just a little bit more, and still remain awake enough to continue praying and meditating. As I started to fall asleep, I suddenly heard a sound I’d heard many times before—a sound like a rushing wind. Then I felt Jesus’ presence even though, with my eyes remaining closed, I saw nothing but darkness. I experienced the intense energy as his breath upon my face. I felt deeply comforted and loved. Then I heard him ask, “What were you in Rome?” I was puzzled at first, having never been to Rome, but then a realization came from somewhere within me. I said, “I was two things!” I felt this was a confession of some kind of hypocrisy or deceit. (I had no idea then, or later, what it referred to.) But as soon as I mentally answered him, the energy and sound raised to a new level of intensity. It was hard to bear the intensity of the love emanating from him and coursing through me. I felt the intensification was his way of lovingly confirming the rightness of my response. (Sparrow, 2003, p. 127)

In this encounter, the experience seems to require something from the recipient before it can culminate. Only after admitting his hypocrisy does the recipient experience the full measure of the being’s love. The love is already evident to the recipient, but the added awareness of having committed an error—paired with the realization that the being already knows about it—effectively transforms the being’s unconditional regard to informed love.

In another account, a woman who is experiencing marital turmoil, comes face to face with Jesus in her kitchen.

It was the early 1980s and my life was in turmoil. I had two healthy children, a nice home, and a husband whom I loved, but who was a tormented Viet Nam veteran who turned to alcohol to deal with the war’s insanity. He refused to admit that he was alcoholic and would not seek treatment . . .

In the context of my misery, a man from my church approached me to have an affair . . . He was charming and made me laugh. I told him that I would think about the situation and let him know of my decision in a few days.

The next morning I was at home alone as my children were in school and my husband was working. I was in the kitchen washing my hair at the sink; my head was under the running water. Suddenly, I knew that someone was in the kitchen with me. I came up from under the faucet, water still pouring from the faucet, and water from my hair running down my clothes and on to the kitchen floor.

I turned around and, there, standing in my kitchen, was Jesus! Precious Jesus! I immediately fell to my knees and started crying uncontrollably. I said his name over and over, “Jesus, Jesus” with my head bowed. His power raised my head up, and I saw his two outstretched hands. He said to me, “You are not where I want you to be.”

I have never felt such love . . . Then I became aware that He was fading—that He was moving away from me. I cried, “Please don’t go . . . I do not know how long the water had been pouring

from the faucet or how much time had passed. I do know that the sound of the running water brought me back to the present. Water was all over the floor and my clothes were soaked . . .

At that time I interpreted Jesus' words to be a message not to engage in the affair, and so I did not. I came to learn, however, that his words had an even deeper meaning. I began to face the reality that I could not live with the alcoholism anymore. I began counseling with my minister and started attending Al-Anon . . . I got the courage to divorce my husband and got my kids and myself into counseling with a great therapist who was just the person we needed . . . I know without a doubt that Jesus' words totally changed my life, and are still changing my life. (Sparrow, 2002, pp. 94–96)

Again, the being clearly knows the recipient, and makes a statement that calls for corrective action without specifying the direction she needs to take. Again, the recipient experiences an informed love, and makes decisions on the basis of a profound sense of support.

In another experience, a woman—who had been convinced by members of her church to break off her friendship with two gay men—has a dream that confronts her for the absence of love in her decision.

I was “transported” to the shore of a sea of quicksand. There were all these people in the quicksand crying out for help. I wanted to go in and rescue them, but every time I would start to, these voices behind me would yell out, “Don”t go—it’s a trick of Satan—they will pull you under with them.’

As I hesitated, a white-robed figure came walking past me. His stride was grand and purposeful. It was Jesus. What he looked like isn’t important; I knew it was him because he was the way I had always imagined him. He walked right into the quicksand and extended his hand to one of the people that was trying desperately to keep from sinking. And, then, he turned and looked at me. I shall never forget that look. I still have the same emotional reaction whenever I remember this part. The way he looked at me said many things at once. It was a look that conveyed disappointment, compassion, and love. It was a look that said, “Gayle, Gayle, Gayle—when will you ever trust me?” The look also conveyed sadness that I had allowed the voices to keep me from helping the people who were crying out to me. And, also, there was gentle admonishment. Then, he motioned with his free hand for me to come in and join him . . . (Sparrow, 2002, pp. 65–71)

The Jesus figure confronts the dreamer about her choice, but his love for her is never in doubt. On the basis of this corrective experience, the recipient subsequently resumed her friendships with her gay friends after asking for, and receiving, their forgiveness.

A man who was considering divorcing his ailing wife experiences the presence of a being he identified as Mary the mother of Jesus, who does not address his decision, but simply invites him to kiss the cross of her rosary.

It was March, and a stormy March at that, when my wife and I began having sexual problems due to her illness. We were on the verge of breaking up, when I was practically forced to accept an out-of-town job.

One stormy night, I had gone to bed when an area-wide power failure occurred. Not knowing this, I awoke to find my room flooded with light. I looked around and I saw our Blessed Mother, half seated on the low dresser beside my bed. She was dangling a long rosary from her right hand, with the Crucifix lying on the backs of her fingers.

Not really believing my eyes, I propped myself up on one elbow, but the vision was still there. She never spoke a word. She merely extended her hand. I was somehow directed to kiss the

cross, and I did. Then she smiled—a benediction—and disappeared. The light was gone, too. Needless to say, I found sleep very difficult. I lay awake and thought about what had happened.

It happened that the job finished in a few days, so I returned home—without any notion of separation. For almost 30 years I nursed my wife until her death. (Sparrow, 2003, pp. 118–119)

In this account, the recipient experiences a silent regard emanating from a loving presence who clearly understands the dilemma and the ordeal that he faces. Without telling him what to do, the silent Mary invites him to honor the quintessential symbol of sacrifice in the Christian tradition. Clearly, informed love overshadows this silent exchange.

Differences between informed love and UCR

Informed love, as experienced in the aforementioned encounters, seems predicated on a fairly complete knowledge of the recipient's history. In contrast, for Rogers, UCR is something that a therapist expresses by virtue of their own self-congruence and unconditional self-regard, which then provides an a priori basis for empathizing with and accepting any person, including the client. Speaking of the counselor's unconditional regard, Rogers says, "He feels this client to be a person of self-worth; of value no matter what his condition, his behavior or his feelings. He respects him for what he is, and accepts him as he is, with his potentialities" (Rogers, 1965, p. 22). Clearly, Rogers indicates that UCR is based on a faith in the intrinsic goodness of all people, rather than on interpersonal knowledge.

Similarly, Mearnes and Thorne (1988) offer a definition that supports UCR as a function of the therapist's worldview, which presumably functions independent of their knowledge of the client:

Unconditional positive regard is the label given to the fundamental attitude of the person-centred counsellor towards her client. The counsellor who holds this attitude deeply values the humanity of her client and is not deflected in that valuing by any particular client behaviours. The attitude manifests itself in the counsellor's consistent acceptance of and enduring warmth towards her client. (p. 59)

While UCR may fluctuate in any real relationship (Wilkins, 2000), UCR as it is defined in the client-centered tradition is principally a condition of the therapist that precedes the relationship. In contrast, it seems accurate to say that informed love, as evidenced in the aforementioned encounters with higher power, differs from UCR by including an intimate knowledge of the person before it can exert its full effect. Thus, whereas UCR can be "blind" to the details of a person's life, informed love is, by definition, fully cognizant of the strengths and weaknesses of the person in question.

A curative factor in all traditions?

While the anecdotal examples of informed love that I have considered have been derived from Christian religious experiences, the concept of informed love can be

found in other traditions. For instance, the concept is expressed in the Sanskrit word *darshan*, which literally translated means “seeing or being in the presence of a saint, a deity, or a sacred place” (“Siddhayoga Glossary,” Syda Foundation Website 2007), but also expresses “the Hindu premise that a devotional image is a channel of the transcendent through which the deity may be ‘seen’ by the devotee, who is in turn ‘seen’ by the deity” (Hoare 2007). Thus, the experience of *darshan* involves *being seen* by the deity, as well as seeing.

A colleague told me a story that illustrates the power of *darshan* in the Hindu tradition. She was visiting her guru’s ashram in India. The guru was known to celebrate her devotees’ birthdays, so on the day of her birthday the woman reminded her guru of the fact, fully expecting the teacher to be generous in her affection. However, the guru turned away in apparent disinterest. The woman was stricken with disappointment, believing that she must have done something wrong. She spent the rest of the day struggling with her feelings until finally she felt herself letting go of the hurt. Later, as she walked down a path, she saw her guru approaching and lifted her eyes to greet the teacher. As their eyes met, the woman saw the guru smile. In a split second, the woman felt the full force of her guru’s appraising love, and she collapsed in tears. The woman told me that she felt that the teacher had sensed her expectations and had effectively thwarted them. Consequently, the devotee felt thoroughly revealed and loved as she experienced her teacher’s gaze.

Another friend, who was a professor of counseling at The College of William and Mary, experienced the impact of *darshan* as a skeptic. When he learned that his two children had become devotees of a Hindu teacher, he was alarmed, so he traveled to the guru’s ashram to investigate the teacher. When it came time for him to stand in the “*darshan* line,” he opted to participate, even though he was still somewhat skeptical. As his turn came to meet the teacher, the guru gazed into the man’s eyes and tapped him lightly with a peacock feather. He immediately fell into a state of ecstasy and deep emotionality, and spent several hours under the care of the guru’s assistants, for whom the breakdown was a common and honored occurrence. The man told me later that when he looked into the guru’s eyes, he understood that the guru knew everything about him and loved him beyond description.

These experiences of *darshan* parallel the encounters with Jesus and Mary that I collected in my two studies, and further support the hypothesis that when people believe that someone knows them and loves them completely, the impact of this informed love can be profoundly therapeutic. These experiences also suggest that the experience of informed love transcends religious and cultural boundaries.

Implications for contemporary therapists

The anecdotal evidence that informed love may have a profoundly positive impact raises the question of whether psychotherapists should try to work toward expressing informed love for the benefit of their clients. As stated, UCR—as it is defined by Rogers—operates independently of interpersonal knowledge, and thus

serves to insulate a client from the discomfort of feeling weighed and possibly judged in the light of their perceived failings. Of course, informed love is experienced to some extent spontaneously whenever a therapist develops an increasing knowledge of a client, and expresses this knowledge in a spirit of unconditional regard. But for those therapists who wish to enhance the likelihood that their clients will experience informed love, it is conceivable that a supplementation of the traditional client-centered stance of expressing UCR can effectively tap profound curative processes evidenced by anecdotal encounters with higher power.

In order to emulate the ideal of informed love, a therapist might endeavor to combine an attitude of UCR with a willingness to inquire respectfully into sensitive areas of a client's life—a process that may reveal, in particular, real or perceived shortcomings. A client may assist in this regard, by venturing into sufficient self-disclosure to the point where the therapist's positive regard becomes "potentiated" by adequate knowledge of the client's struggles. Both of these efforts can, presumably, accelerate the establishment of informed love in the relationship.

In an ordinary therapeutic relationship, the informing process takes time and depends on the willingness of the client to risk exposing themselves in the relationship. Indeed, some therapeutic relationships probably falter on the basis of insufficient disclosure on the part of the client and/or insufficient knowledge on the part of the therapist. While the counselor may believe that the client has shared enough for good work to commence and for healing to occur, some clients may withhold so much from the therapist that the benefits of a caring relationship are compromised. For instance, I once worked with a woman who admitted that she had something abhorrent that she had withheld from me. It took weeks for her finally to "confess" that she smoked cigarettes. While her admission may seem relatively trivial, her secret clearly stood in the way of her perceiving my regard for her as sufficiently informed to exert a positive impact on her. On another occasion, I counseled a Hispanic woman for almost two years before she told me a secret—that her husband had cheated on her. Most clients in my experience would have shared this fact during the initial sessions. But the woman was a victim of childhood molestation, and the residual shame attached to that early trauma carried over to her husband's betrayal of her. Indeed, she perceived his betrayal as an indictment of her as a woman. Once she shared this information, her therapy quickly proceeded to successful termination; but until then, she knew that my regard for her—and more importantly her regard for herself—was seriously undermined by her inability to reveal the truth to me, and to accept herself around this significant life event.

Holding clients accountable to their own values

In most of the accounts that I have collected and studied, the personification of higher power communicates simple reassurances, or helpful facts. In the Jesus encounters, the being says such things as "I love you", "I will always be with

you,” and “You have me”. In the encounters with Mary, she is usually silent, but may say things like, “It will not be easy”, “I lost someone, too”, or “You are just like me”, thus communicating deep empathy and love from the perspective of one who has also struggled and suffered. The informed love in these reassuring accounts serves “merely” as a backdrop which amplifies the effect of whatever is communicated. But in a few of the accounts—some of which I have included herein—the being uses the knowledge of the recipient to point out errors in thinking or confront weaknesses of character or behavior. While taking a moral inventory does not seem *necessary* from the standpoint of informed love, one might ask, “How does one avoid confronting such weighty issues when possessed with such thorough knowledge and deep regard?” Fortunately, these questions are being raised today in the field of psychotherapy.

In recent years, the largely values-neutral position of traditional psychotherapy has been challenged by values-centered approaches. In particular, Doherty (1995) has argued for holding the client accountable—not to some external code of ethics, but to the client’s own values. While a willingness to question and confront a client’s values may seem regressive, Doherty’s willingness to let the client’s own values lead the way establishes his values-centered approach within the postmodern tradition. By aligning himself with the client’s own ideals, rather than importing an externally derived code or doctrine into the relationship, Doherty acknowledges and respects the social construction of reality and avoids imposing his own values on the client. In the words of sociologist Alan Wolfe (1989), morality itself becomes a negotiated, socially constructed exercise:

Morality thus understood is neither a fixed set of rules handed down unchanging by powerful structures nor something that is made up on the spot. It is a negotiated process through which individuals, by reflecting what they have done in the past, try to ascertain what they ought to do next . . . Morality viewed as social construction differs from the traditional view of morality as “adherence to rules of conduct shaped by tradition and respect for authority.” (p. 216)

If a moral consideration is paired with unconditional positive regard, it may have the effect of relieving a client of a longstanding burden, much in the way that the sacrament of confession in Catholicism has served individuals for centuries. Therapists who embrace the ideal of informed love may perform a sacred function that is needed in this world without representing themselves as agents of any particular religious tradition or as substitutes for priests and spiritual directors. As Feltham says,

...fragmented and mobile, competitive societies leave many without stable supportive communities and community figures, such as priests, who previously supplied many valued facilities including the confessional; and the breakdown of the concept of selfless duty, altruism or love (Agape) also leaves a large hole in the social and interpersonal fabric. (Feltham, 1999, p. 7)

Limitations

The importance of informed love in religious experience cannot be established from the “evidence” of a few select accounts. The anecdotes cited herein serve to

illustrate the phenomenon without establishing its ubiquity. At this stage, one can only say that the curative impact of encountering someone who is believed to possess a complete knowledge of a person while expressing, at the same time, an unconditional love makes logical sense. While this may not be convincing from the standpoint of empirical research, it does raise a hypothesis that can be tested in more systematic studies of religious experiences.

In the absence of a broad base of evidence, a second case can be made for the expected presence of informed love, in particular, in Christian religious experiences. From the beginning of Christianity—especially since the time of Augustine—orthodoxy has espoused both an “exultant” and “dualistic” view of human nature (Tarnas, 1993, pp. 125–136), in which the individual is alternately viewed as imbued with divinity *and* in need of redemption. The tension between these two positions in the orthodox view would presumably anticipate, and possibly account for, the juxtaposition of moral scrutiny and boundless love in any encounter with a personification of God.

These positions notwithstanding, in the absence of a more thorough analysis of religious experiences—ideally derived from a variety of religious traditions—the extent to which informed love plays a central role in religious experience will remain, for now, a matter of conjecture. Similarly, the significance of informed love as a curative factor in the psychotherapeutic relationship must await further inquiry, as well.

Informed love—a novel concept?

The term “informed love” may be new, but efforts to arrive at the “sublime culmination of the facilitative conditions” (Wilkins, 2000) in therapy are by no means new. Patterson suggests that love, or agape, should be considered the essential distillation of the therapeutic force, while Thorne (1991) subscribes to the concept of “tenderness”. What makes informed love somewhat different as a global concept is the implied tension between interpersonal knowledge and love that seems inherent in any authentic relationship, and the implication that the two can come together in a singular experience of profound confirmation.

Whether one considers informed love a novel construct or a synthesis of previously articulated factors, it may nonetheless serve as an ideal to guide modern therapists in their work. The combination of intimate knowledge and unshakeable regard may serve as a backdrop that can intensify the effect of necessary interventions, and bring healing much in the same way that religious experiences may foster dramatic positive changes in the span of a few precious moments.

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