



## **Making the unbearable bearable through existential spirituality**

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# Multiculturalism and the Convergence of Faith and Practical Wisdom in Modern Society

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## Chapter 4

# Making the Unbearable Bearable through Existential Spirituality

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter the case is made that spirituality can indeed have a significant impact upon practical life. Existential spirituality refers to the way one gives meaning and purpose to one's life. The value of spirituality is best appreciated when one's life undergoes an existential crisis, particularly when a worldview, which was assumed to give sense to one's life, no longer has the legitimacy it once had. When a religious, traditional or customary doctrine or worldview loses its authority through an existential crisis, the individual often experiences nihilism. This can often make an experience of hardship quite unbearable because one's suffering is unable to reference any grand narrative or framework of meaning to give sense to one's situation. Using Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, it is argued that making one's spirituality more authentic by taking personal responsibility on an individual level, might be able to make unbearable experiences more bearable.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Spirituality is found in the very core of our being and because it is so deep its impact upon everyday living is not often recognised. However, it usually receives our attention especially when it is 'weak' or absent typically perhaps when we are being deeply reflective or during a difficult time in our lives such as when suffering or confronting an existential crisis. This is echoed by Debats (2000, p. 102) who explains that "[w]e are reminded of Frankl (1973), who stated that, in general, the issue of the meaning of one's personal life has no relevance until some personal or professional crisis occurs." Often this can occur when one's worldview, usually established in traditions, doctrine and 'authoritative' representations for life, fail the individual in particular contexts. When one lacks an adequate spirituality – i.e. when one can be understood as 'spiritless' – the impact can be quite obvious through feelings of ennui, boredom, anxiety, sorrow, uncertainty, angst, depression, emptiness, meaninglessness, or even as an unbearable grief in which one is unable to navigate purposely through a particular situation. The need

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to become spiritual, in an authentic manner in such a situation, is understood to potentially have a huge impact. This is because an authentic spirituality can enable one to come to terms with and work through one's present condition by finding meaning and purpose beyond the immediate situation. Such an impact can therefore make a difficult or even a seemingly unbearable experience to become bearable. In this chapter, it is argued that making our spirituality more authentic in an existentialist sense, can possibly enable lives to become more meaningful – even in some apparently meaningless or unbearable situations.

## **SPIRIT, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE RELIGIOUS**

It can sometimes be difficult to take spirituality seriously, especially regarding its potential role or impact upon 'real' practical life in the 'here and now'. One of the problems that has contributed to this is a tendency to reify what we understand by 'spirit'. Doing so, leads to questions such as what is the 'stuff' which spirit consists of? Is it partly divine? Is it immortal? From the Greek term *pneuma* and the Latin term *spīritus* we understand that spirit refers to a life-giving breath of vigour and as such it is not a 'thing' but rather is more like a life-giving 'force'. Consequently, spirituality can be understood to refer to the desires, interests and purposes which energise us, and also give inspiration to our existence. Consequently, spirituality is not a commodity that we can obtain, but it refers to our very being where, for example, being either full of spirit or being spiritless can be aspects of the manner or the way in which we participate in living our lives and facing our challenges.

In addition to avoiding reification in order to take spirituality more seriously, it is also important to recognise that spirituality is not dependent upon religion (Webster, 2009). Spirituality refers to the ultimate meaning and purpose for life and it can often appear religious. However, it is important to recognise that spirituality is not identical with religion because spirituality is pertinent for all persons – both the religious and the non-religious. Religion can tend to represent a particular body of doctrine which an adherent can obtain and so it can be related to epistemology. Smith (1978, p. 20) usefully recognised that the Latin *religio*, being the root for 'religion', has a much "more stable history" as an adjective rather than as a noun substantive concept. Hence other derivatives such as *relegare* and *religare* refer to the manner in which activities – such as worship – are undertaken.

In a similar sense, Caputo (2001, p. 43) has identified that in the Middle Ages the term *religio* was understood to be a virtue and hence it is more ontological in nature because it refers to the attributes of people rather than statements of knowledge or beliefs located beyond people usually in sacred texts. This understanding has led him to state elsewhere that "to be 'religious' in its deepest sense is to be a searcher, living in search of something" and he contrasts this with those who "are satisfied with the reality that sits under our noses" (Caputo, 2007, p. 38) who are not questioning, doubting or grappling.

Being religious refers to a way-of-life or a way of living, while having a religion can refer to a particular set of doctrine, which can be obtained. In this context spirituality is associated with being religious because it represents a life of continual searching and meaning-making, of living the questions. This is in contrast to one who has 'found' answers and is no longer doubting, searching or questioning and has succumbed to what Dewey (1929) refers to as the quest for certainty. The spirituality of religious persons pertains to how they relate to and live out their religion and this often occurs at an individual and very personal level. Being able to live a good life and being able to die a good death necessarily requires persons to have a rigorously developed spirituality, which may or may not make reference to any religion.

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This is not to say, however, that people who have a religion cannot also be spiritual. Spirituality for those who are religious therefore refers to the manner that they relate to their religion. So, while one may be an adherent to a particular religion, one may still be questioning and searching for important meanings to gain ‘deeper’ insights and more nuanced meanings regarding certain aspects of one’s life. Spiritual people can be identified by their openness to new meanings and the possibilities associated with re-considering current beliefs and values, rather than stubbornly hanging on to particular meanings in a closed-minded fashion, being unwilling to re-evaluate one’s beliefs.

The ultimate meanings associated with spirituality can be sourced in two basic ways. Firstly, they can be found in formalised systems such as religions, ideologies or philosophies, and secondly these meanings can be created by individuals. Yalom (1980) refers to the first kind of sources as Cosmological, as they proclaim various worldviews about the meaning of life and are typically associated with mainstream religion, while the second source is found within individuals themselves, which Yalom terms as Terrestrial as this existential kind relates to each individual as the meaning of my life in contrast to the meaning of life. It is important to recognise that these two sources overlap with each other in the form of hermeneutics where individuals make meanings for themselves within the context of their immediate culture in which they reflect upon traditional and ‘authoritative’ narratives which may be partly or completely embraced, adopted or rejected and how one chooses to relate to these. ‘Terrestrial’ or existential meaning is not created *ex nihilo* as if the individual could transcend reality and ‘bracket out’ (as per Husserl’s *epoché*) all the objective realities which have been encountered. Spirituality therefore refers to a dialogical engagement with both the Cosmological and Terrestrial dimensions.

## **EXISTENTIAL SPIRITUALITY**

In order to better appreciate the potential impact that spirituality might have on ‘real’ life, it ought to be understood as being existential in nature (Webster, 2004). Existentialism, unlike other more esoteric philosophies, is one of the most important practical philosophies “to be lived” (Cooper, 1999, p. 21) and therefore it is not a philosophy of purely subjective inwardness but is inescapably integrated with the environment and all others that are encountered. As a philosophy, Existentialism deals with meanings of existence and it is often called upon to engage with any felt meaninglessness of life as per Sartre’s nausea and musings on the absurdity of life, often with references to nihilism. Certainly, existentialism is related to various ‘crises’ of sorts when an individual is confronted with an apparent emptiness, vacuum and meaningless to their existence as has been portrayed through Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*. However, the immediate individuating response to an existential crisis is only one aspect of this philosophy. It is also able to offer some guidance for providing purposefulness for life, and therefore it has an important role to play in making the unbearable bearable, when such purposefulness is lacking, to be able to live well in a very practical sense.

When spirituality is understood to be existential, it becomes clearer to understand that it addresses a role that the individual must actively undertake. Writers, psychotherapists and theologians who draw on Existentialism, all identify that the active role required of individuals to take personal responsibility for giving themselves meanings and purposes to live by, is very difficult. It is much easier for people to surrender their individual freedom in this regard and to conform to what many others believe in, such as external authorities found in traditions, customs and cultural norms. The acknowledgement of this challenge is partly captured in works such as Eric Fromm’s (1942)*Fear of Freedom*, Rollo May’s (1981)

*Man's Search for Himself* and Paul Tillich's (1980) *The Courage to Be*. There are other examples of course and they draw on a broad range of theistic, humanistic and existential preferences. Importantly, their focus is upon enabling humans to live well in a very practical sense.

Existential spirituality provides the 'why' and the foundation for morality and how people understand what it means to be a good person. Without this, individuals would be adopting a passive and obedient way-of-being to accept authoritarian moralities which are external to themselves. Our desires regarding what we want to do, what we want to attain and what we want to become, are very much embedded within our spirituality. Consequently, because it is existential, our moral conduct is not dependent upon passive obedience (in a deontological sense) to external codes of conduct and authorities found in various legal, religious and secular sources. Rather our conduct with others and the way we live our lives through practical activities are expressions for how we understand what it means to live a good and purposeful life. The definition of 'good' must in this context make continual reference to the relations with others and to the environment in which one finds oneself. This is much like Dewey's (1985; 1988) individualism where being moral requires individuals to make constant reference to how their activities are affecting others – hence his reference to morality as consisting of the whole character of individuals. There is therefore a very important link between spirituality and the desires that people have. Existential spirituality which is authentic may even allow people to transcend common codes of ethics (Caputo, 1993) understood as what authorities and/or traditions require of citizens, and instead engage with the 'big picture' concerns regarding ultimate meanings and purposes of a good life. Kierkegaard refers to this as the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' – meaning that an individual doesn't necessarily have to be bound to universal ethical rules if there is a higher purpose that is able to transcend such rules. This can be difficult to understand and accept but it has great importance for enhancing personal responsibility and potential in an existential sense, which is a central key for living a personally meaningful life. Due to the potential impact of this, it is considered important to explore some of Kierkegaard's works on this matter.

## **KIERKEGAARD'S THREE STAGES OF EXISTENCE AND SUBJECTIVE TRUTH**

Although Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) was a Christian philosopher, much of his insights have been adopted by humanists and secular psychotherapists. Before him, Hegel (1983) employed the concept of spirit (i.e. Geist) in three different ways – the Subjective; Objective; and the Absolute, which transcends differences to achieve a unified system or theory of understanding. Kierkegaard (1992, p. 112) rejected this emphasis upon 'systematizing' and 'objectifying' existence arguing emphatically "that there can be no system of existence and that a logical system must not boast of an absolute..." and instead argued for the predominance of the contextual and uniqueness of individuals which comes to the fore through reflection. He argued that by being educated "spiritual existence [is] intensified by reflection" of a dialectical sort in a continuous manner, but without reaching a 'final' conclusion as is often presented via 'objective' knowledge. There are similarities which Kierkegaard shares with Dewey (1929, p. 88) who also promoted a rigorously reflective attitude that one ought to have "toward the material of direct sense-perception" including 'facts' of religious beliefs.

It is important to recognise that this existential perspective of Kierkegaard's is not solipsistic. It might be argued by those with more 'objective' leanings such as Rieff (1966) that through Freudian psychotherapy persons become lost in self-interest and isolated from others in society, including being isolated

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from moral authorities. Dworkin (2015) and O'Hara (2009) however, position Rieff and his perspective as failing to appreciate the relational nature of persons from an existential perspective. Clearly individuals are embedded in a multitude of I-Thou relations for which s/he is inescapably morally responsible. So, in contrast to the isolated and self-interested characteristics associated with solipsism, existentialists understand the individual to be primarily a relational being.

This existential perspective offers some differences to psychotherapy that have been espoused by Freud. For example, Rollo May (1983, pp.14-15) indicated what makes Kierkegaard's writings an attractive addition to traditional psychotherapy sources is that "Kierkegaard was writing about exactly what my fellow patients and I were going through. Freud was not ... Freud ... knew about anxiety. Kierkegaard ... he knew anxiety". As such, it can be appreciated that psychotherapists who draw upon Existentialism do not consider themselves as the sorts of 'priests' that Rieff (1966) feared, because they are focussed on sharing their human-ness phenomenologically with their clients (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Shapiro, 2016). It would appear that in order to offer others profound insights regarding the meaning and purposes of human life, one first has to undergo some direct existential confrontations oneself in order to gain an authentic understanding (Shapiro, 2016). Kierkegaard himself experienced some critical existential crises in order to communicate to his readers that he really knew anxiety and existential suffering almost to the point of it being unbearable to himself.

In order to appreciate Kierkegaard's (1988) insights regarding existential spirituality, it is helpful to review his three 'stages' of existence or rather 'existence-spheres'. The first is the aesthetic stage and represents the pursuit of happiness. However, this stage is much like irresponsible hedonism, where one pursues temporary pleasures one after the other and attempts to avoid all kinds of unpleasantness, pain and suffering. Being motivated by these two main principles of pleasure and pain is actually enslavement to one's caprice and base appetites or alternatively enslavement to external authorities who determine how 'good' is to be understood and experienced. Consequently, this stage of existence invites people to choose between taking on certain roles assigned to them in life to perform what is expected of them. Even being 'ethical' is reduced to a form of obedience such as Bauman (1991) observes of 'good' Nazis. Kierkegaard refers to these roles as masks which hide the real 'self' of individuals. If a person living in this first sphere of existence was to undergo suffering, such a person would be very limited for dealing with it. This is because her mindset understands that all suffering is wrong and ought to be avoided. Pain and suffering are understood to be unwanted inconveniences to the pursuit of pleasures and if such suffering is severe or prolonged, they can be considered to be unbearable.

The second stage of existence for Kierkegaard is termed the ethical and it focusses upon personal responsibility. In contrast to playing various 'roles' as per the previous aesthetic stage, this ethical stage unites the person as a responsible self who is committed to a particular moral code of conduct and uses it to constantly measure or judge himself or herself against. Such codes, be they religious, legal or cultural, have authority over one's life. They determine the meanings of present and future situations – including the occasions of suffering. All that is required is the commitment and obedience of the individual. If there is to be an experience of suffering, then this is given 'sense' through the code to which one is attached. As long as one accepts that such a code has authority over one's life, then suffering can be made bearable by giving it meaning in the overall doctrine. Suffering can be accepted stoically because it is understood to be one's lot in life. However, if the legitimacy of the code itself is doubted and an individual is unable to reconcile their own suffering as having a purposeful role within the doctrine, then such suffering (and indeed perhaps life itself) might become meaningless as the moral code is no longer believed to be legitimate or 'true'.

The third stage of Kierkegaard's is the religious stage, which he argued can in some (extreme) situations actually take one beyond – or 'suspend' – ethical codes. His best-known example is found in his (1983) book *Fear and Trembling*, which refers to when the patriarch Abraham who, when spoken to by God, agreed to sacrifice his son Isaac. Kierkegaard explained that this event can only be understood religiously because if we only consider it from an ethical perspective, then we must condemn Abraham as guilty of the intention to murder. Clearly Kierkegaard's religious perspective is specifically Christian as some Jewish authors (e.g. Levinas, 1998 and Rieff, 1966) interpret this event differently to Kierkegaard. From Kierkegaard's Christian perspective Abraham is not guilty of criminal intent but rather he can be understood as the father of the faithful. Importantly through this story Kierkegaard identifies that faith is necessarily a very individual affair for which the universal realm (of ethical codes) does not have authority. In this sense the individual is alone and separated from the certainty and comfort that is often promised by doctrines, which can give sense and purposes to existence. Walking by individual faith is therefore a risk-filled existence that can simultaneously involve anxiety and angst as well as a sense of empowering freedom.

Due to its very nature, the foundations and justification for one's faith cannot be clearly communicated in an intelligible way to another person because it transcends the rationality of meanings which are intrinsic to language itself, and so Kierkegaard often describes Christian faith as a paradox. It is also not something that is developed by an inwardness but is dependent upon a relationship with the divine, which takes one outside of oneself and even beyond rationality. Faith is not obtained simply by reading books or listening to sermons, but rather it is cultivated "by immersing oneself in existing" because Christianity itself "is an existence-communication" that an individual has alone with God (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 560). While this is important for Christianity as understood by Kierkegaard, there are some practical implications that can be gleaned for spirituality in general, which refers to Kierkegaard's notion of subjective truth about being alone in relations.

For Kierkegaard's (1992, p. 33) pseudonym Climacus, "Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion...". This indicates that this third 'stage' or sphere of existence for Kierkegaard – the religious state of being – is quite different to the second stage of the ethical, which relies upon certain rules and codes having authority over the individual. Climacus is clear that Christianity is not a doctrine (ibid., p. 383) but instead is the intense and single-minded ultimate interest (passion) that an individual can have for the whole of her existence. This is essentially subjective in the sense that the meaningfulness of one's life is not 'objective' as if it could be obtained through an impersonal statement of doctrine. Rather it is only possible through the way that one personally relates to the divine in a dialogical relationship. Kierkegaard's subjectivity is not solipsistic because it is the relationships that are engaged with and that give it grounding in 'reality'. This is echoed by others such as John Macmurray (1961, p. 28) who explains that "Now we have recognised that our change of attitude takes us from the isolated self to the self in relation to the Other ...I exist as an individual only in a personal relation to other individuals." This is very similar to the I-Thou relation of Buber, which he argued represented a shift from communication to communion. For Kierkegaard (1998, pp. 109 & 115) this notion is based on his understanding that "Christ ...would not have anything to do with the crowd" and instead only wanted to relate "to the single individual" in a meaningful relationship – which simultaneously includes everyone in relation with him/her-self and with each other.

Due to the understanding that Christianity is fundamentally a relation of dialectical communication – or communion –, Kierkegaard did not spend effort arguing for the objective reality and existence of his Christian God and divine Son. Instead, he claimed that "objectivity is believed to be superior to subjec-

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tivity, but it is just the opposite” (ibid., p. 185) and throughout his works he argued for the importance of subjective reflection being understood as subjective truth. He focussed upon how we as individuals relate to God – even as a possibility. This priority of the ‘how’ of our relating over and above the verification of any ‘what’ of an object’s existence, led him to claim that subjective truth is the most valuable sort of truth we can be a part of (Kierkegaard, 1992). The issue for our reflection is not to verify whether objects such as God actually exist, but rather to reflect upon how we make sense of our relating to God and the meaningfulness that we understand our lives to have. Here Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity can be appreciated to be a central component to phenomenology and hermeneutics – especially through Heidegger and Gadamer.

This notion of subjective truth might be explained more clearly using a couple of examples. The first of these involves Kierkegaard’s story of a flower growing up on a pile of dung in an obscure part of a back garden. In this situation, the flower might reflect “I myself have not been able to determine the situation and the circumstances, and so it is not in the remotest way my affair; that I stand where I stand is God’s will.” (Kierkegaard, 1971, p. 339). The unfortunate location where the flower finds itself represents the ‘thrownness’ – as per Heidegger’s (1996) ‘facticity’ – that we often find ourselves in life, being in situations that we would prefer not to experience because they are either uncomfortable, unpleasant, or involve suffering. Nevertheless, no matter what our current situation, we might be able to find or create some meaning that gives sense and purpose to our existence.

The second example for explaining subjective truth is with reference to the story of the Good Samaritan who came upon a victim of crime while travelling along a road. Kierkegaard uses this metaphor to argue that what matters is not the actual road upon which our lives are travelling along, but how we are travelling on the road. He observed that the same ‘objectively real’ road in the story was walked upon by five different people – the victim, robber, priest, Levite and the Good Samaritan. He comments that “spiritually speaking, we have to say that each one walked his own road – so the highway, alas, makes no difference, it is the spiritual that makes the difference and distinguishes the road” (Kierkegaard, 1993, p. 290). Interestingly, he argues that ‘worldly wisdom’ is deceptive when it focusses solely upon the question ‘where is the road?’ as exemplified by such questions as ‘where might I find truth?’ – as if this were a commodity to be located and obtained. This is problematic because it reduces one to pursuing an external source to have authority over how one ought to live. He claimed that “spiritually understood the road is: *how* it is walked” [original emphasis] (Kierkegaard, 1993, p. 291) and importantly that this is more difficult to live well rather than simply ‘finding’ an objective road as promoted through Rieff – even although it might be a true one, such as true religion or philosophy.

Kierkegaard’s notion of subjective truth indicates that our personal identity is a task activity achieved through exercising one’s interest, will and purpose. Similarly Dewey (1985, pp. 361-2) argues that “In fact, self and interest are two names for the same fact ... interest means the active or moving identity of the self with a certain object...” Rather than essentialise ourselves with an identification which is formed through our ‘thrownness’ in the world, for example, a flower on a dung heap, or our gender, ethnicity, social status, death of a loved one or a disability -, our identity is formed through how we give sense and purpose to the conditions with which we live. This involves evaluating the way that we relate to all the elements in our environment. This is where the role of suffering may actually enhance one’s capacity for living a more purposeful life when it is understood that while the crisis can be unique to the individual, each of us is nevertheless a unique person with an identity that is uniquely our own. No one else can experience the exact hardships we experience. No one else can die our death. Only we as individuals can experience the uniqueness of these events. Our experiencing of these encounters can

contribute to our own uniqueness and help us to be the individuals we are. However, this is not always easy to appreciate when feelings of anxiety and suffering appear overwhelming and even senseless as in the case of nihilism.

## **UNBEARABLE DISPAIR AS NIHILISM**

Nihilism is an orientation to nothingness and meaninglessness and when one is confronted with a crisis which might be considered as being unbearable, there is also a nihilistic sense of meaninglessness associated with the encounter. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1967, p. 9) described nihilism as a condition where an “aim is lacking” and the question “‘why?’ finds no answer.” It often emerges when individuals come to recognise that their taken-for-granted cultural traditions, including religious and moral norms, have lost their significance and/or legitimacy for giving meaning to their lives. Nihilism is similar to being spiritless because it understands life to have no point or purpose to it. A person who is nihilistic acknowledges an absence of a ‘grand narrative’ that might give meaning to an immediate situation or even to one’s existence in general and has not (yet) generated a purpose of their own to replace the traditional one.

Nietzsche (1967, p. 23) offers some valuable insights into nihilism, describing it as the absence of any “ultimate meaning”. He lamented that the dominant culture of his time promoted a ‘herd mentality’ and a ‘slave morality’ which lost sense of people as being unique individuals and focussed instead upon the expectation of all to passively comply and obey for the purpose of ‘fitting into’ their assigned roles and to perform what was expected of them to ensure the public ‘good’. He observed that the traditional norms of a culture offer individuals their meaning and purposes for living ‘a good life’ in an authoritative manner, but this subsequently makes them into ‘good’ slaves.

This condition of slave morality is described by Nietzsche (1998, p. 24) as being nihilistic, who argued that “[w]e see today nothing that wishes to become greater, we sense that things are still going downhill, downhill – into something thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more apathetic...”. He identified that the loss of the individual will to a surrender to the mass, attracted a certain ‘approval’ by authorities as being ‘good’, but he saw this as a ‘levelling’ which enslaved people to the will of others. In response to this, Nietzsche took a position that was against people becoming ‘uniform’, ‘regular’ and ‘predictable’ and instead he argued for a sovereign individual, who, “resembling only himself, [becomes] free again from the morality of custom, autonomous and supermoral” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 36) who is so free that he can create his own values and can choose his own good and evil (Nietzsche, 1966).

Nietzsche has often been misunderstood as an ‘immoralist’ (to use his own term) because of his call to challenge cultural norms by ‘sounding them out with a hammer’ and to live a life of ‘master morality’. Interestingly, he argued that those who give up on religion tend to “cling that much more firmly to the faith in morality” and yet every system of morals without a religious background “necessarily leads to nihilism” in the sense that there lacks an answer to the question ‘why be moral?’. Nietzsche contended that individuals ought to be able to give their own personal reasoning and justifications for choosing to live their lives the way that they do – even although their reasons may take them beyond the realm of pure rationality. He encouraged his readers to become ‘free spirits’ who could be identified by the fact that they could think differently to what is commonly believed and taken for granted by mass society

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(Nietzsche, 1996, p. 139). One of the purposes he had for making such an argument was that he was concerned about the lived experiences of the individual having their meanings being given from outside sources such as legal customs, religious traditions and moral codes, because this tends to marginalise personal responsibility. Consequently this submission to slave morality encourages the will of each individual to be 'unfree' because people become slaves to what is assumed to be necessary.

In contrast to this, Nietzsche argued that individuals ought to break free from their unquestioning dependence on customs and traditions, re-evaluate their values and even 'create' their own. Importantly, he didn't argue that all values should be rejected but rather that their legitimacy might be evaluated. Morals ought to have a 'why' to justify their value and currency. This requires individuals to exercise their own will because not only must they critically examine the customs of society, but they must also be committed to living according to particular purposes. Nietzsche (1990, p. 33) recognised that this was very important and even empowering for each person as he explained that "if we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any how." This is crucial if people are to bear situations of suffering, which can appear unbearable to them.

A sense of nihilism can often accompany situations where one is suffering without apparent 'good reason'. This kind of meaninglessness is in contrast to examples such as 'suffering' the pains and anxiety of childbirth or 'suffering' through the pain barriers of exercise, because these sorts of experiences have readily recognizable meanings which transcend the immediately difficult time by referencing some expected good consequences that the present situation is contributing towards. Being nihilistic or spiritless occurs when one's existence or situation of suffering or emptiness appears to be without sense, that is, 'senseless', and without a connection to any purpose beyond the present moment. As Nietzsche argued, having a purpose or a 'why' helps to face such situations more ably and even to be made more bearable. This understanding has been adopted by Victor Frankl, who through his approach to psychotherapy, has used it to explain why some individuals have been able to cope with some extreme and unbearable sufferings such as those which he witnessed in the concentration camps during the Holocaust.

While Frankl's context of the concentration camps might appear extreme, he has nevertheless argued through his research ever since, that no matter what our circumstances, humankind's spirituality (which he describes as our search for ultimate meaning) is universal and is necessary for living well. His 'Logotherapy' approach to psychotherapy is designed to heal through the formation of meanings. It is clearly secular and Frankl limits how often he references spirituality so as not to confuse it as a therapy that might be construed as religious. He claimed that "[t]he consciousness of one's inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life" and he provokingly asks, "But how many free men [sic], let alone prisoners, possess it?" (Frankl, 1984, p. 83) to indicate that an authentic spirituality is not common. He references several studies, especially of young adults, to conclude that 'developing a meaningful philosophy of life' is a more valued life-goal above others such as making money and improving one's living standards (Frankl, 2000). However, this life-goal is very difficult to achieve. Frankl critiques Maslow's hierarchy of 'needs' claiming that the search for a meaningful life should not be considered the last 'need' to be attained after all the biological and psychological needs have been met. Rather, he contends that spirituality is the most fundamental 'need', especially so when the other needs are not being met – such as in the concentration camps which he experienced. Indeed, it is often when people lack some or even only one of the other 'needs' for a good life in Maslow's list such as food, shelter, health, relationships, self-esteem and love, that spirituality then can be understood as offering significance for practical living. It is able to make an unbearable situation more bearable.

## THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY DURING SUFFERING

Unbearable suffering – be it extreme anxiety, apathy, despair, or physical/emotional grief – can be made more bearable if some sense can be given to the event which gives it a ‘place’ and therefore a purpose in a big picture understanding of life. Failure to give sense to such suffering can lead to a sense of nihilism. Due to Kierkegaard’s intense interest in living as a Christian, he understood that being called by God usually also involves some suffering in order to partake in the sufferings of Christ. Clearly suffering is also experienced by those existing in the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence, but in such cases it is usually understood as being accidental. For Kierkegaard’s religious stage suffering has a more significant role for deepening an understanding for life and for undergoing further repentance and therefore personal transformation. He explained that suffering is “crucial for religious existence” and “the more that is suffered, the more religious existence” (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 288). Kierkegaard was well-aware of the role that suffering has for Christianity in the sense that it often plays an important part in purifying the hearts/motivations of those who are converted. He stated that “in the profoundest sense one may suffer indescribably, also have one’s thorn in the flesh, but despite this ...one can find joy ...to live for an idea” (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 229). Debats (2000, p. 105) notes that it is important to recognise that meanings reside in meanings and are not to be found in the empirical world or with ‘things’. Therefore one must often go beyond immediate experiences in order to attain meaningful insights which might offer some purpose to one’s suffering.

It is more than an intellectualised idea that is needed to bring one through an experience of suffering, because the idea must be lived with intense belief and interest. Kierkegaard (1992, p. 313, 387, 397) claims that “the existing person continually has a *τέλος* [ultimate purpose]” which is able to play a significant role in transforming individuals through how they relate to various entities, by appealing to a sense of happiness, fulfilment or meaningfulness. Such a *telos* must be related to with a totally committed subjective truth that one understands that the purposefulness of one’s life literally depends upon it. In his entry titled, *The Gospel of Sufferings*, Kierkegaard (1993, p. 235) argues that for the religious person “the heavy burden is beneficial – that must be believed; it cannot be seen. Later it perhaps can be seen that it has been beneficial, but in the period of suffering it cannot be seen.” Elsewhere he explains that in many instances our lives ‘make sense’ when we look backwards and can see how the consequences of certain events – such as those involving suffering – have all had an impact on how we have developed, changed and become the persons we are today. However, in our day-to-day existence we must live our life forwards. This means that we are unable to know what the long-term future consequences will be from the situations in which we currently find ourselves. This is why Kierkegaard encouraged his religious readers to believe in the good of their current sufferings even although it may not be apparent in the immediate moment how their lives are to be benefitted from the hardship.

Importantly, Kierkegaard warns of an attitude which might work against spiritual growth. When in the midst of a suffering situation, people might hope for relief from an unseen hero such as a god-like king in a Molière play, who almost magically intervenes at the final scene to make everything right. This might be reflected in the wish for an outstanding physician with a guaranteed cure or the return of a loved one. Kierkegaard argued that such an attitude is problematic because the focus of the one suffering becomes focussed on the immediate (temporal) situation and its relief, rather than upon the long-term/eternal life that lies before one. Consequently, there is only a concern being given to the temporary realm and for finding comfort in it rather than in something more substantial and longer lasting. This is in contrast to the one who is focussed upon the long-term/eternal rather than the temporal. Such a person understands

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the importance of what sort of being she is becoming and what sort of virtuous character she has become to be able to take with her into the (eternal) future. Kierkegaard (1993, p. 379) acknowledged this in his statement that “the person who truly wills to suffer everything disdains temporality’s relief and thus is comforted eternally.”

In the previous section reference was made to Kierkegaard’s review of the story of the Good Samaritan and that the key for spirituality in this passage was not so much finding the ‘right’ road in an objective sense, but rather how one walks upon the road that one finds oneself ‘thrown’ upon. It is important to note that the road to which Kierkegaard refers, is the ‘narrow’ and ‘hard’ one, which Christians are called to travel. This is why he titles this section of his work as “*It is not the road that is hard but that hardship is the road*” [original emphasis] (Kierkegaard, 1993, p. 292). Throughout this section of his book he repeatedly uses the phrase “hardship is the road” to emphasise that spiritual life does not necessarily depend upon searching to find a particular road/ultimate meaning/true doctrine in an objective sense, but rather bearing up under the hardship that one might be experiencing in the here and now. He observes that most people have often commenced upon a road of life for living well by willing the good. However, “most people fall away when it is apparent that the road becomes harder instead of easier.” (ibid., p. 297). This seems to be the point that he is making for being spiritual – one “does not so much as a moment ...looking around – no, with all his might and main he is in the hardship, joyful in the hardship, joyful in the thought that hardship is the road.” (ibid, p. 299)

The value of this understanding is not limited to Kierkegaard’s philosophy or to existential Christianity, but it is also taken up by those who intervene in the lives of those who are suffering in order to help them. Psychotherapist and author Scott Peck (1978, p. 13) in his *The Road Less Travelled* commences his first chapter with the sentence “Life is difficult”. In his book, he makes the case that “it is in the whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning.” (ibid., p. 14). This could be understood as the manner of walking the road, rather than the road itself. In his work he makes the case that the spiritual growth of his clients is often due to them taking on personal responsibilities for engaging differently with the situations that they are grappling with, rather than ‘solving’ them through the removal of the actual hardships themselves.

Similarly, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, through his Logotherapy, has aimed to heal his clients through their exercising of their own ‘will to meaning’, rather than providing them with strategies to remove the objective conditions of the hardships. Frankl was familiar with the works of Kierkegaard and his therapeutic approach is reflective of Kierkegaard’s subjective truth. To illustrate this, Frankl shares the following;

*An example of meaningful suffering drawn from my own practice is the story of the old general practitioner who consulted me because of his depression after his wife had died. Using the form of a Socratic dialogue, I asked him what would have happened if he rather than his wife had died first. “How she would have suffered,” he said. I replied, “Don’t you see, Doctor, that great suffering has been spared her, and it is you who have spared her this suffering; but now, you have to pay for it by surviving and mourning her.” Our dialogue induced him to discover a meaning in his suffering... (Frankl, 1988, p. 90)*

Here we can appreciate that the objective conditions relating to the suffering of this man – that is the death of his wife – did not change. However, he came to see the situation differently and therefore the manner of how he related to this unbearable suffering of her death, did change. This is the potential

value that existential spirituality can offer. It can potentially transform an unbearable sense of meaningless suffering into a purposeful activity.

## **MAKING THE UNBEARABLE MORE BEARABLE THROUGH THE AUTHENTICITY OF ONE'S SPIRITUALITY**

Spirituality is able to have a significant impact upon practical life. It is able to transform senseless and nihilistic hardships into purposeful activities. This has been recognised by Rollo May (1983, p. 37), who observed that "...psychotherapists, confronted as they are in clinic and consulting room with the sheer reality of persons in crisis whose anxiety will not be quieted by theoretical formulas", require a spirituality which is very practical. He argues that in these situations the potential value of spirituality is immense, because it can help turn lives around to become more profound and purposeful in the face of apparently unbearable situations.

Suffering and hardships might be tolerated by people who can draw upon external sources to provide meanings for their experiences – including those which are very challenging. For example, a person who is suffering may hold fast that the event is from God and is a just form of punishment to be endured. This understanding of a reward and punishment frame of reference is typical of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere of existence. In such a case this hardship would not constitute an existential crisis with its characteristic anxiety and uncertainty because this suffering 'makes sense' according to a particular doctrine or 'grand narrative.'

However, an episode of doubt, despair or suffering can develop into an existential crisis, which is nihilistic if it leads a person to question the legitimacy of certain doctrines, codes or traditional grand narratives which have been accepted in the past as having authority over her life. But coming to the brink of nihilism through such a crisis can potentially be of great benefit. As a psychotherapist, May (1983, p. 57) considered that "a crisis is exactly what is required to shock people out of unaware dependence upon external dogma and to force them to unravel layers of pretense to reveal naked truth about themselves which, however unpleasant, will at least be solid." Through breaking away from uncritically accepting external sources of authority, one is able to begin acting and behaving out of one's own freedom to choose and be personally responsible for the purposes that one lives by. It is important to recognise that such a sense of personal freedom is simultaneously a sense of great personal responsibility, and therefore this cannot be a retreat to relativism or solipsism, because individuals are inescapably accountable to all others for their activities and consequences – both intended and unintended. Significantly, this authenticity of one's spirituality may enable some unbearable experiences to become bearable.

It is often through an 'existential crisis' that we confront the strength (or weakness) of our spirituality which is needed to bear up and to navigate through what may seem to be an unbearable situation. May (1969, p. 19) even asserts that "[i]t is only in the critical situation of emotional and spiritual suffering ...that people will endure the pain and anxiety of uncovering the profound roots of their problems." Hence such crises may provide the necessary experiences that are required for healing 'deep' problems in people's lives. The process of working through an existential crisis often requires us to uncover the foundations of our values which we often uncritically take for granted, to reflect upon, 'test' and re-evaluate these, and to take on a greater sense of personal responsibility for the way that we relate to and value various purposes and aspirations.

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It was argued by Kierkegaard that those people who were not existing in the religious stage of spiritual maturity, tend to conform unquestioningly to the roles that are assigned to them by their culture. Becoming more authentic requires individuals to recognise and accept that they are 'alone' in the world as 'individuals' and that they are free to exist outside of these roles, which are often imposed on them. This 'free' existence is not as a sovereign or isolated individual, but as a self who is inescapably embedded in relations, who must decide for herself and accept responsibility for her decisions and actions. Being 'alone' in this sense means being aware that the actions and activities which are performed are done so on the basis of her own intentionality and volition and not because she was obediently 'told' to do so by an external authority – even a moral or religious one.

Understanding human beings to be fundamentally intentional beings means that meaningfulness and purposefulness for life do not pertain to acquiring or having some things like a sacred piece of knowledge or 'truth', a skill or technique, or even a cure. This is because all of these depend upon the intervention of external authorities. In contrast, purposefulness and existential meanings come from within the individual in response to her relations with the other entities in her environment. Certainly, individuals can receive things external to themselves, which may provide them with some relief from apathy, despair or 'suffering without meaning', but in order to be able to live a meaningful life as an intentional being, one must prioritize one's being over one's inclination to have and exercise one's own will towards a personal sense of purposefulness.

Eric Fromm (1976, 1989) has written extensively on the two modes for existing – of being and having. He does this to create a contrast for how the mode of being provides the only way for living a meaningful life, which he associates with authentic solidarity, altruism and love. This is in contrast to the other mode of possession-centred having, which he associates with selfishness and egotism. As a mode of existing, being is activity-related and therefore it focuses on verbs rather than nouns – because nouns presume objects and things, which are to be acquired and possessed with little demand upon the receiver to actually change or grow. For example, rather than finding 'love' as a thing or as an 'other' who might provide certain things, or being 'in-love' as a location, the mode of being focuses on the importance of being loving as an aspect of one's intentions and activity. This mode of being draws attention to the interests, desires and will of people, which are central elements of spirituality.

As a person moves away from Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical stages of existence characterised by their having mode, she becomes more in tune or attuned to the being mode of the religious stage. This movement involves a conscious rejection of any assumed authority that external sources might claim to have over the individual. This is not to say that she cannot live her life in accordance with particular cultural norms, moral codes or religious doctrine, but what must occur for living authentically is for the individual to actively choose to make such norms, codes and doctrine her own. This means that she will follow the teachings or requirements of a code because she freely chooses and desires to do so, rather than feeling compelled that she must. This affects all aspects of her life from paying taxes, driving within the speed limit and being polite, which are all performed because she wants and desires to do them rather than feel that she needs to do them out of obedience. Becoming more authentic requires that one exercise this freedom of choice – not just for everyday activities but also with regards to choosing what ultimate meanings and purposes to live by. From a heightened sense of personal freedom and responsibility, a more authentic spirituality produces a greater sense of commitment to personally chosen meanings and purposefulness. The effect of this is to further inspire us to invest ourselves in something much larger than the immediate present in order to transcend nihilistic experiences in our lives resulting in making these unbearable situations bearable.

In his *Upbuilding Discourses*, Kierkegaard represents the importance of being single minded through his notion of a ‘purity of heart’. He explained that a singleness of mind is needed to address the weaker double-mindedness which besets those who operate with ulterior motives as is typical with those who live in the first two of his stages of existence. This is demonstrated in his observation “that the person who wills the good for the sake of reward does not will one thing but is double-minded” (Kierkegaard, 1993, p. 37). This is a significant insight for an authentic spirituality if it is to enable one to see purposefulness in a situation which initially might appear to be unbearable. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard (1992, p. 436) argues that “[e]ssentially, the religious address has [the task] of uplifting through suffering ...so the faith of the religious is in this, that life lies precisely in suffering ...As soon as the religious address casts a side-long glance at fortune, comforts with probability, strengthens temporality, it is a false teaching, is a regression into the aesthetic”. To have ‘purity of heart’ means that one’s spirituality consists of desiring and willing only one thing upon which all other purposes, interests and desires are founded. In short, this is an appeal to the whole character of a person involving all the virtues. This single purposefulness seeks to capture one’s life as an overall project that necessarily transcends the single event of suffering, which may be experienced in the immediate moment towards a virtuous character as a life-project.

Being purposefully single-minded and having a ‘purity of heart’ involves one to be actively intending and willing for something understood to be ‘the good’. This can usually be demonstrated by one’s commitment. A person’s commitment, which stems from their will, is intrinsic to their identity. As Frankl (1988, p. 98) explains, identity is made apparent through our “dedication to some cause”, and if authentic, is something that we have chosen for ourselves and are responsible for enacting. Similarly, Fromm (1976, p. 111) acknowledges how one’s spirituality is intrinsically an aspect of one’s identity as he claims that “we are what we are devoted to, and what we are devoted to is what motivates our conduct.” So having some spiritual purpose to aspire towards, should not be adopted reluctantly, but ought to be something we actually desire and are motivated by. In addition to being purposeful and having a ‘why’ to live by, spiritually authentic people will also be sensitive to the consequences of their actions and shall be open to constantly evaluating the consequences of living their commitments in light of their anticipated goodness.

Creating one’s own meaning and purpose out of one’s freedom can appear rather daunting, especially if a person is currently experiencing some sense of anxiety and feels unable to create an ultimate purpose and meaning to give sense to her existence. However, an important insight on this matter can be gleaned from Kierkegaard. He claims that human existence is a risky business because it must be lived forwards while knowing full-well that we are only able to understand meanings for our lives after certain events are completed, and we can reflect upon the consequences and impacts that they had for us. It is possible therefore, to understand that through such crises of hardships, our very identity of who we are can actually change for the better. We can actually become better people through exercising our spirituality in an authentic sense in the face of suffering and even unbearable situations, even although our physical situation and conditions remain unchanged. This transformation of our being is made possible through our spirituality. According to Kenyon (2000, p. 12), growing through such encounters with existential crises “is less a matter of having a new story and more a matter of being a new story”. This indicates that there is the potential for ‘good’ to emerge from situations that are difficult to bear, whose physical conditions seem to be unchangeable. To demonstrate this, Frankl (1988, p. 57) recounts an incident where a young boy who grew up in a Nazi concentration camp, eventually confessed quite a number of years later that “I really understood the meaning of suffering. It can have a meaning if it changes you

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for the better.” This can be very empowering in situations where the individual feels quite powerless to change the actual oppressive physical conditions.

Kierkegaard argues that a certain degree of anxiety is inescapable because anxiety itself is intrinsic to authentic spirituality and freedom (Kierkegaard, 1980). Consequently, Anz (2000, pp. 47-8) suggests that Kierkegaard’s notion of “[a]nxiety is our teacher” and it can even transform dying because it provides an opportunity for us to have access to relating in unique ways to it through Kierkegaard’s subjective truth. Anz (*ibid.*, p. 47) argues that “If we allow ourselves to be educated by anxiety, then we will come to understand that dying is not a process that happens to us from outside; rather it is our own-most being, which as a not-yet-grasped possibility ‘concerns’ us in anxiety.”

Again, another example offered by Frankl is helpful on this point. He explains that there was a woman who was experiencing great anxiety as she was dying from an incurable disease. Through an encounter with a spiritual teacher – a Rabbi – she then was able to reflect on her situation and accept that while she couldn’t change the physical condition that she was in, she could become stronger as a person through the experience and could choose a new way of relating to her inevitable death. This led her to state that “[p]erhaps my single act of immortality might be in the way I face this adversity. Even though my pain at times is unbearable – I have achieved an inner peace and contentment that I have never known before” (cited by Frankl, 1988, p. 50). Attaining this insight through her spirituality enabled her to die with dignity and to be remembered for her courage.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been argued here that spirituality can undoubtedly have a significant impact upon lives and especially so in times of anxiety and suffering. Particular attention has been given to existential spirituality which is ontological in nature. It refers to the way that individuals relate to their relationships and also to the meanings by which they give sense and purpose for their lives. It therefore clearly pertains to all people – both the religious and the non-religious. By being able to create a greater sense of meaningfulness and purpose for lives, engaging with one’s existential spirituality is not just useful in order to survive crises but such an engagement can also provide people with the capacity to grow and become stronger as persons with virtuous character. This is made possible through grappling with the unique opportunities which are provided by confronting even apparently unbearable situations and crises.

The crises which are considered more likely to be unbearable have been identified as initially appearing to be nihilistic because people experience hardship and suffering without such difficulties having any sense or meaning in a grand scheme. On occasion the demise or de-legitimation of a doctrine, worldview or framework for guiding life, such as found typically in religions, customs and traditions, can provide a sense of nihilism. However, by drawing upon Kierkegaard’s third existence sphere we can appreciate that one might be able to authentically choose, how one is going to relate to and give meaning to one’s life. Nihilism is not to be feared, but existential crises can be accepted as providing opportunities to plumb the depths of one’s being to engage with one’s life world and to allow some contentment for living for a purpose to be experienced. Such a spiritual way of living can make possible some hope for good to emerge even if there appears to be little possibility of any good in the current physical environment.

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