

The Pursuit of False Gods: Addressing the Spiritual Dimension of Addictions in Counselling

Kenneth I. Pargament

I first saw Tom in counselling about 10 years ago. A 40-year-old slight, passive man, he had been experiencing depression related to a difficult marriage. His wife had been diagnosed several years earlier with bipolar disorder, but she had refused treatment. Tom described his efforts to cope with her verbal abuse, spending binges, and the lack of a sex life. In spite of this mistreatment, Tom said he still loved his wife. He was also sustained by his work as an engineer in a water purification company. I learned that Tom's passivity with his wife was a re-enactment of a longer history of trying to please a very critical mother. He wasn't successful with his mother and he wasn't successful with his wife.

I tried to help Tom understand his passivity, and encouraged him to consider more assertive alternatives. Nevertheless, he remained stuck in an abusive marriage. What led to the break-up of the marriage was his wife's affair. She wanted out to be with her lover. The pattern of mistreatment continued during the divorce. Despite my efforts to help Tom stand up for himself, he agreed to a very disadvantageous settlement. He ended up losing his house, his savings, and began to live on a cot in his company's warehouse located in an economically and socially blighted urban center.

Now that he was free of his wife, I hoped that Tom's situation would improve. But soon after his divorce, he learned that his company would be downsizing. Tom was given the unenviable job of gradually letting his fellow employees go. He was literally the "last one out, turn off the lights" guy. His depression worsened.

One day I asked Tom how he was handling the growing isolation of living in the large warehouse 24 – 7. Tom hesitated, and then said he had been spending a lot of time on-line looking at pornography. He felt a great deal of shame about that, not for religious reasons but because he realized that the women in the pictures and videos were being used and mistreated. Even though it caused him tremendous guilt, he had been unable to stop himself despite repeated attempts.

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Edited by

Thomas St. James O'Connor
Kristine Lund
Patricia Berendsen

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I asked Tom what kind of pictures and videos he found arousing. He said he wasn't particularly discriminating; he looked at all kinds of heterosexual pornography. But regardless of the type he said, it was all about the eyes. He was aroused by women in sexual situations who looked their partners in the eye. This was a sign of deep intimacy to Tom, something he had always wanted from his wife, yet had never experienced.

In subsequent treatment I spent a great deal of time trying to help Tom with what I would call a pornography addiction. The thought of addictions often brings up associations of unscrupulous characters: the hopeless drunk, the depraved crack addict, the cheating gambler, and the dirty old man in a trench coat. These associations are very unfortunate, for they obscure the essential humanness and fundamental decency of people like Tom who struggle with addictions.

In this paper, I would like to suggest that there is a spiritual dimension to addictions, that addictive behavior signals a deeper, albeit misdirected, effort to form a relationship with something sacred. I will suggest that addiction can be understood, in part, as an attempt to fill a spiritual vacuum through the pursuit of false gods. This is, I believe, an ultimately hopeful perspective because it suggests that people suffering from addictions are not lost causes; rather they have legitimate spiritual yearnings that can be identified and encouraged. In this sense, spirituality can be understood as both a part of the problem and a part of the solution for people dealing with addictions. I begin by offering a definition of spirituality as a lifelong process, one involving the search for the sacred. I then apply this perspective to the problem of addictions. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this spiritual point of view for the ways we might address addictions in counselling. To illustrate many of these points, I return to the case of Tom.

The Meaning of Spirituality

My definition of spirituality rests on a basic assumption about human nature that should be made explicit. We live in an age in which people are often viewed as reactive in nature, their fates determined by some combination of genetics and biology, early developmental experience, and the larger social environment. Undoubtedly, there is truth to this perspective, yet I argue it is an incomplete way of describing human nature, for it overlooks our capacity to envision a future. In fact, our plans and our goals are even stronger predictors of human behavior than our genetics, our early experience, or the larger social environment (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). People are, in short, proactive beings; we strive. Yet it is important what people strive toward. People can strive toward any number of destinations in life: loving relationships, personal happiness, good health, a satisfying career, social justice, and the list goes on. How we configure our goals and strivings is one of the ways in which we define ourselves as unique individuals.

Spirituality can be understood as another striving, an irreducible motive that draws us to something larger than ourselves. More formally, I have defined spirituality as "a search for the sacred" (Pargament, 2007). There are two key terms in this definition: *sacred* and *search*.

By sacred I am referring not only to traditional concepts of God or divinity but also to

other aspects of life that take on spiritual character and meaning by virtue of their association with the divine. Many parts of life can be imbued or sanctified with sacred qualities, such as transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. Indeed, virtually any part of life can be sanctified, from marriage and family, to nature, to art, to one's work. The term *sacred* underscores the dynamic, ever-evolving character of spirituality. Spirituality is a process that unfolds over the lifespan; it involves the process of discovering something sacred in life, developing and conserving a relationship with whatever is held sacred and, at times, transforming that relationship. This definition encompasses traditional religious understandings and approaches to the sacred. But it also opens the door to people with diverse non-traditional spiritualities, including those who see themselves as agnostics or atheists.

Empirical studies have shown that the search for the sacred has a number of important implications for how we live our lives (Pargament, 2013): (1) People invest more of themselves in those things they hold sacred; (2) perceptions of the sacred act like an emotional generator, stimulating feelings of awe, elevation, love, hope, and gratitude; (3) people derive support, strength, and satisfaction from those parts of life they perceive as sacred; (4) sacred objects become organizing forces, guiding lights that lend coherence to other lower-level goals and emotions; and (5) people go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they hold sacred.

What is the relationship of spirituality to religion? I maintain that spirituality is the primary goal of religious life. Of course, people can and do seek the sacred outside of traditional religious institutions, but it is important to stress that no other institution has as its fundamental purpose the effort to help individuals discover, build, conserve, and transform a relationship with the sacred. Unfortunately, social scientists from Freud to Durkheim have often lost sight of this basic religious function, focusing exclusively on the various psychological and social purposes that religion serves (Pargament, 2013). Nevertheless, as psychologist of religion Paul Johnson (1959) once said, "It is the ultimate that the religious person seeks most of all" (p. 70).

Defined in this manner, spirituality is a natural and normal part of life. It is perhaps the human yearning for the sacred that makes us most distinctively human. But spirituality is not invariably healthy. It can be tied to problems as well as solutions.

The Spiritual Dimension of Addictions

The Sanctification of Destructive Strivings

As I noted, qualities of sacredness can be attached to virtually any aspect of life. This includes destructive visions or strivings. One of the early examples of this kind of misdirected attachment comes from the Biblical story of the Golden Calf in which the idolization of a material form of wealth and riches by the Hebrew people led Moses to smash the first of the stone tablets containing God's commandments. But idolatry was

destructive or inappropriate ends. Relevant to this point, Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mystic, described the “triple abyss” of ego-centered lusts: (1) lust for power over others and nature (*libido dominandi*); (2) lust for intense sensation (*libido sentiendi*); and (3) lust for manipulative knowledge to master the world (*libido sciendi*) (cited in Kurtz & Ketchum, 1992).

There is no shortage of examples of idolatry in the modern age. For instance, in his study of the last wills and testaments of suicide bombers, Mohammed Hafez (2007) reaches this conclusion: “Suicide bombers insist that ‘martyrdom operations’ are necessary to fulfill one’s commitment to God and the Prophet Muhammad. . . . Suicide bombings are portrayed not as a strategic tool or innovative tactic. . . . Instead their comments are almost exclusively focused on the religious imperative to engage in jihad. . . .” (p. 175). Thus, violence becomes imbued with sacred meaning and power.

Reflecting on his spiritually oriented approach to treating patients suffering from eating disorders, P. Scott Richards (2007) describes how the pursuit of excessive thinness can become a holy quest, one that serves a variety of “higher,” divine-like purposes, such as atonement for past sins, perfecting oneself, and seeking out a sense of control and comfort from pain and suffering.

Most relevant to this paper is the reality that alcohol and other drugs can also take on the character of the sacred. In a letter to Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Carl Jung commented on this connection in recounting his treatment of an alcoholic: “[His] craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level, of the spiritual thirst for our being for wholeness. . . . You see ‘alcohol’ in Latin is ‘spiritus’ and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison” (Wilson/Jung Letters, 1987). On a similar note, listen to one man’s description of how alcohol became his object of worship: “As my alcoholism progressed, my thirst for God increasingly became transmuted into a thirst for the seemingly godlike experiences that alcohol induced. Alcohol gave me a sense of well-being and connectedness, and wasn’t that an experience of God? Alcohol released me from the nagging sense that I was never good or competent enough, and wasn’t that God’s grace? Alcohol dissolved my worries about the future, allowing me to live in the present, and wasn’t that a divine gift? At my core there was a thirst, a thirst for whatever would fill the emptiness” (Nelson, 2004, p. 31). Adding to the poignancy of this example is the fact that the author is himself a pastor.

How Addictive Objects become Sacred

It seems almost incomprehensible that people could attach qualities of sacredness to destructive processes, such as terrorism, eating disorders, and addiction. How is it that people can become devoted to false gods? This is a vitally important question. The answer is far from clear, but I believe that the roots of addiction may lie, at least in part – and ironically – in the human yearning for the sacred.

The search for the sacred is not necessarily simple or straightforward. At times, the quest for the sacred can be blocked, threatened, frustrated, or damaged. These blocks may come

from internal sources, such as insecure attachments to parents that make it difficult to develop secure attachments with other people and the divine. The blocks may also come from external sources, such as crises and traumas that throw the individual’s most basic orienting values, beliefs, and practices into question and doubt. Regardless of its causes, when the search for the sacred is thwarted, people often experience spiritual struggles; that is, tensions, conflicts, and questions around sacred matters within oneself, with others, and with God (Exline, 2013; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Consider the words of a young college student whose battle with bipolar illness has triggered a struggle with the divine: “I’m suffering, really suffering. My illness is tearing me down, and I’m angry at God for not rescuing me, I mean really setting me free from my mental bondage. I have been dealing with these issues for ten years now and I am only 24 years old. I don’t understand why he keeps lifting me up, just to let me come crashing down again” (personal communication, 2003).

This example is not unusual. Empirical studies show that approximately 15 to 60% of people experiencing major life stressors indicate some form of spiritual struggle (Exline, 2013). These struggles are not trivial. They have been consistently tied by researchers to signs of emotional, social, and physical distress, even greater risk of dying. (Exline, 2013; Pargament, 2007). These findings have held true for Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhist s and Muslims. Spiritual struggles may also set the stage for addiction.

Tensions, conflicts, and doubts about one’s most fundamental beliefs, values, and practices may create a spiritual vacuum, a huge empty space in the center of oneself. Harold Kushner (1989) describes this sense of spiritual emptiness. Although he writes in the hypothetical, he is capturing an experience that is unfortunately very real to many people: “A world without God would be a flat, monochromatic world, a world without color or texture, a world in which all days would be the same. Marriage would be a matter of biology, not fidelity. Old age would be seen as a time of weakness, not of wisdom. In a world like that, we would cast about desperately for any sort of diversion, for any distraction from the emptiness of our lives, because we would never have learned the magic of making some days and some hours special” (Kushner, 1989, p. 206).

Returning to the story of Tom, we hear him facing just this kind of emptiness, living alone in his warehouse without wife, children, stable job, or clear vision for his future. This profound spiritual vacuum sets the stage for a particularly virulent form of distraction, addiction. Kurtz and Ketchum (1992), authors of the *Spirituality of Imperfection*, put it this way: “We try to fill the emptiness inside us with something external, but the craving is a bottomless pit for which addiction is the perfect metaphor” (p. 77). Similarly, recall Nelson’s (2004) description of alcohol as a false god – “At my core there was a thirst, a thirst for whatever would fill the emptiness.” I would say that Tom also experienced a vacuum within his spiritual core, and pornography rushed in to fill the void in his own life, to provide him with an illusion of the intimacy and connectedness that had been torn from him.

There is some empirical evidence to support the notion that spiritual struggles trigger addiction. In a longitudinal study of high school students entering college, Johnson, Sheets and Kristeller (2007) found that higher levels of spiritual struggle before college predicted lower spiritual well-being during their freshman year and stronger motivation to turn to alcohol as a coping device in their sophomore year. In another study, college freshman who reported spiritual struggles were more likely to develop 11 of 14 types of addictive behaviors over the next five weeks (Faigan, Pargament, & Abu Raiya, *in press*). These findings are consistent with the idea that spiritual struggles create a spiritual vacuum that can be quickly filled with addictive objects. As other writers have noted, there seems to be a spiritual-like quality to addictions. Perhaps that is why people who experience a spiritual vacuum are particularly drawn to addictions in the hopes of filling the emptiness at their core. Of course, their search for the sacred through the false god of addiction is misdirected and creates many more problems than it solves.

The Problem with False Gods

What is the problem with false gods? After all, as long as people have something to worship isn't that good enough? Surprisingly, some therapists may answer "yes." I have spoken to some who have said that it is our job to help our clients realize their goals; it is not our job to judge our clients' strivings. I disagree with that point of view. Sometimes, the problems of our clients have a great deal to deal with what they are striving for; they are simply heading in a destructive direction. It matters a great deal where we are heading and what we are striving for in our lives. Of course, we have to be careful not to impose on our clients a particular vision for living, or a particular way of understanding god, but we cannot stand idly by when clients are pursuing a destructive destination. False gods are problematic for a few reasons.

First, false gods are problematic because, in the words of psychologist James Jones (1991), they are unable to "bear the full weight" of the sacred (p. 123). The content of what we strive for counts, and the false gods of today – material objects, good looks, self-development, alcohol, drugs, and sexuality – in and of themselves are not capable of generating the spiritual qualities of sacredness, such as transcendence, boundlessness and ultimacy. To put it more colloquially, they cannot satisfy the spiritual hunger. As Paul Tillich (1957) pointed out, troubles ensue when preliminary matters are elevated over ultimate concerns.

Second, false gods are consuming. They take up all of the space in a person's life, leaving little room, if any, for other strivings. As anyone who works with chemical dependency can attest the pursuit of drugs and alcohol becomes a way of life, the first thought in the morning and the last at night. Concerns for one's personal well-being or the well-being of family, friends, and the larger community are diminished or disregarded in their entirety. In fact, other people may become simple tools in service of the ultimate end, addiction. For example, when my client Tom began to view pornography in his warehouse, he still had several of his employees working in the building. His pornography use was placing his

job and his future in jeopardy, but he said that when he was caught up in the craving, it just didn't matter.

Finally, false gods are problematic because they are treated as if they are sacred. When the sacred is attached to destructive, inappropriate ends, it continues to operate in the same way as when it is attached to more constructive, appropriate objects. This means that devotion to a false god has the same implications as devotion to more adequate gods: (1) a false god will act as a magnet, drawing people toward it as "the place to be," even though this place is destructive to oneself and others; (2) a false god can generate powerful emotions of the kind described by James Nelson. But these emotions are generally short-lived, and for every moment of elation and ecstasy there may be hell to pay; (3) a false god becomes a reservoir that people draw on to deal with stress and strain. Thus, paradoxically, the sexual addict copes with the guilt and shame of addiction by turning to sexuality for solace and relief; (4) a false god becomes a guiding light, the organizing force for an individual's life, even though the light leads the individual down a destructive pathway; and (5) a false god becomes a precious object with people going to great lengths to preserve and protect it.

Counselors are quite familiar with the varied ways individuals will rationalize, blame, minimize, and deny, all in the effort to defend their addictions from attack. Because false gods are treated as if they are sacred, it is difficult to help people detach from them in counselling. To address the problem of false gods, and addictions in particular, counselors must address the spiritual dimension of addictions.

Addressing the Spiritual Dimension of Addictions

Traditionally, counselors have shied away from the treatment of addictions because these problems are often so deeply entrenched and because of the stigma associated with addiction. Thinking about addiction as, in part, spiritual in nature offers a more hopeful perspective for treatment. I have suggested here that beneath the addiction lies a legitimate spiritual longing, a longing for a transcendent connection that has unfortunately been blocked, twisted and distorted into a craving that serves a spiritual-like function. This is a hopeful point of view because it suggests that the addict is not beyond therapeutic redemption. A positive transformation is possible; the addict can redirect his or her legitimate spiritual striving to a more authentic sacred destination.

Let me return to the case of Tom to illustrate how treatment can be facilitated by addressing the spiritual dimension of addictions. Recall that Tom had become addicted to online pornography following his disastrous divorce, the loss of his home, his last-one-out-turn-off-the-lights position in his company, and his isolation in his company's warehouse.

Creating a Context of Hope and Caring

Perhaps the first issue I had to address with Tom was his tremendous sense of self-loathing and hopelessness. He would come to therapy and shake his head, saying: "I can't

believe I'm doing something so disgusting. . . I can't believe what I've become, but I can't seem to stop myself." I thought there was another message, a question, in his statements to me; he was wondering whether I shared in his view of himself as a despicable perverted man.

I told Tom he was not the only one with this problem, and gave him a book to read on the topic of pornography addiction so that he could hear the stories of other people struggling with the same problem (Maltz & Maltz, 2008). Perhaps more importantly, drawing on the Spiritual Self-Schema Therapy developed by Avants, Beitel, and Margolin (2005), I raised the concepts of higher and lower selves with Tom. Although he was finding himself caught up in expressions of his lower, biological self, his higher self remained intact. This was expressed by his commitments to being a loving father, a loyal hardworking employee, and someone who cared about larger social issues. So yes, Tom has an addiction, but no, it does not fully define him.

Tom, like all of us, has a mixed nature. This was in part a message of caring for Tom, a message that I could see beyond his problem to his underlying humanity. It was also a hopeful message which said that though he may have lost touch with his higher self, it continues to be a part of him. And the message helped to shift counselling to two critical questions. How could Tom develop a different relationship with pornography? And how could Tom get back in touch with his higher core self?

Developing a New Relationship with Pornography

When I asked Tom what kind of relationship he wanted to have with pornography, he was surprised by the question. He hadn't thought of himself in a relationship with pornography, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had established an ongoing tie to porn, and an intimate one at that. After mulling the question over, Tom said he wanted to end his relationship with pornography, and this became our treatment goal.

We talked about a number of ways Tom could control his use of pornography: identifying his triggers, finding a "porn buddy" whom he could talk to if he felt the urge, and learning how to acknowledge, accept, and tolerate pornography cravings without acting on them. Toward this latter end, I taught a mindfulness meditative method to Tom, and we practiced having him experience a craving, describe it, notice it as an observer, and allow it to pass (Kornfield, 2004). Tom now felt he had a third option for dealing with his pornography cravings. He could witness the urge without trying to squash it on the one hand or get lost in it on the other.

As valuable as these new approaches were to Tom, none was sufficient in helping him reach his goal. The fact is that Tom had little in his life to care about other than his pornography. He had lost his marriage (troubled as it was), he rarely saw his adult children, and his job was winding down. No wonder that pornography had so quickly filled the vacuum in his life. With its graphic images of physical connection and passion, it provided Tom with an illusion of interpersonal intimacy. Clearly, Tom needed an alternative.

Identifying Authentic Sacred Strivings

Tom and I talked about his sense of emptiness. Tom recognized that his pornography use ultimately failed to provide him with what he was seeking. But what was Tom really looking for? Counselling began to focus on what I have described as "psychospiritual assessment" (Pargament, 2007). What gave Tom a sense of deep meaning and purpose in his life? What really mattered to him? Why was he on this earth? What made him feel glad to be alive? Where did he find peace? I did not use any explicit religious language with Tom in posing these questions because he did not resonate with that. He did respond to this more "psychospiritual" language, as many people do, even those who are not traditionally religious.

Tom described his love for the outdoors. He had gone into engineering and water purification because he wanted to make the world a better place. His best times were when he was outside in parks and forests, enjoying the scenery and the wildlife. Yet, here, he was sitting in a warehouse in a devastated urban area.

I shared a metaphor with Tom that I had been thinking about for a while. I told him that he described his warehouse as if it were a prison, his office as if it was his cell, and his pornography use as if it was his narcotic. I said the odd thing was that in this prison the cell door was unlocked.

The next week Tom came in and announced with a smile on his face that he had decided to "make a prison break." He had tapped into his limited resources and bought a bike. He didn't feel safe walking or running in the neighborhood. What he could do was bicycle outside the area relatively quickly and explore some of the prettier areas outside the downtown.

Tom began to take lengthy rides that took him all over the corner of the state. When he spoke about these rides, he perked up and showed more enthusiasm than I had ever seen in him. I commented on that and noted that he had found something that really mattered to him. Within six months, Tom had found other riders and joined a riding club and then a racing club. He turned out to be a skilled cyclist, even winning some races for his age group.

Through the club, Tom also met another woman a few years older than him. With some hesitation, he began to see her occasionally. He wasn't crazy about her, he said. When I asked why, he said though she was a nice woman, she wasn't very attractive physically. Now Tom was not so hot in the looks department himself, but I let that go. I did, however, wonder out loud whether he was comparing this woman to the pornographic images he had been viewing. In any case, Tom had begun to get back in touch with his higher self, filling the emptiness in his life with more authentic sacred pursuits.

Developing Discipline

With newfound and more authentic sacred strivings, Tom could now go weeks without using pornography. Not surprisingly, he continued to have his occasional slips. The search for the sacred is a process, with its own occasional bumps in the road. In the effort to replace an addictive object, a false god, with a more authentic sacred goal, the individual is likely to meet with success and failure. As the great spiritual sages have emphasized, it takes discipline – practice, practice, practice – to reach a spiritual goal. That's why they are called spiritual disciplines. Clients then need to be reminded that profound change takes time, patience, and perseverance. As the saying from Alcoholics Anonymous goes, "you have to act yourself into a new way of thinking." Slips along the way are okay; they are part of being human, but get back on the path, keep striving, for good things lie ahead.

With encouragement, Tom continued to pursue his love of the outdoors, bicycling, new social connections, and a new job. Eventually, he found a position in an up-and-coming purification company. This allowed him to move into a small house which he chose to leave unwired from the internet.

Conclusions

Although addictive disorders have traditionally been viewed as among the most difficult to treat, there are good reasons to be more optimistic about our ability to help people struggling with these issues. Understanding addictions as not only a psychological, social, and physical problem but also a spiritual problem, helps shift our perspective to a more hopeful vantage point, one in which the individual becomes a reclaimable human being rather than a "lost cause," beyond the reach of help. Recognizing that addictions call for not only psychological, social, and physical solutions, but also spiritual solutions may inject invaluable new resources into the counselling process.

I conclude with a final word on Tom. It turns out that he is still with the nice but less-than-gorgeous woman he met through his biking club. When I asked him why he was continuing to see her, he said, "Well, she looks me in the eye."