Chapter 28
The Pandemic Within the Pandemic of 2020: A Spiritual Perspective

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Introduction

The colliding impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the recent highlighting of police brutality through nationwide protests has changed the fabric of the United States, forcing the country to grapple with the two crises’ traumatic effects. In the wake of these two seismic events, individuals are looking to make sense out of the changes in the world around them. They are more likely to ask themselves big questions about their place in the world or the meaning of life. Both the virus and the protests, including the violence connected to protests, have disproportionately affected communities of color.

Frantz Fanon, a twentieth-century psychiatrist from the island of Martinique and author of The Wretched of the Earth, articulated and struggled with the question of whether violence is “warranted in overturning colonial oppression” (Fanon 1963). His work drew on his personal experience, and his writings influenced anti-colonialism movements across the globe. Fanon argued that colonialism destroyed the soul. In 2020, the convergence of COVID-19 and a large-scale reckoning with police brutality and racism have led people to question their faith, values, and spiritual journey in new ways, and Fanon’s examination of oppression and its damage to the soul seems freshly relevant. With society-wide events engendering unprecedented responses from individuals, groups, and organizations worldwide, across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, mental health professionals everywhere are engaged with clients trying to answer existential questions.

Historically, people of color have faced unrelenting racial disparities in employment, education, law enforcement, policing, and health. However, COVID-19 and
the worldwide demonstrations for justice, which have brought so many disparities to light, have affected everyone in one way or another. In my clinical practice, I have found that, while the impact of events may differ by race and socioeconomic status, my clients across the board have experienced disruption and difficulties that have the potential to cause distress. Many people, including the clinicians in my practice, have reported feeling confused and displaced and questioning the world they live in. Where does one go for therapeutic assistance when even the most skilled clinicians are personally impacted by current events?

The answer to Fanon’s question of whether violence is the remedy to the violence inflicted on people of color is, from a spiritual perspective, an emphatic no. The life of John Lewis, the former civil rights leader since the times of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which Americans have reflected on during this period as his death coincided with Black Lives Matter protests, spoke loudly to nonviolent change as a better alternative. Change through nonviolence is rooted in spiritual consciousness.

In this chapter, I summarize two key points from a paper currently under review in which I offer an introduction on how to balance one’s mind and spirit in the face of current events and to contemplate these events in such a way as to derive meaning and purpose from them.

**COVID-19 Pandemic**

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the constant threat of a rising infection curve have disrupted any sense of normalcy. With nearly 229,000 confirmed cases and over 23,000 deaths in New York City to date (CDC 2020), this virus has shocked the city. Mental health professionals were not immune to its impact. Those who lost loved ones faced an especially heavy burden, and all faced normal human worry about their health and the health of family and friends.

The global emotional impact of COVID-19 has yet to be determined. However, in my clinical practice, I have witnessed the prevalence of anxiety, stress, insomnia, anger, and the effects of social distancing as a result of COVID-19. These implications include feelings of loneliness, isolation, lack of motivation, and increased cognitive distortions. My clinical practice has also seen an increase in diagnoses of mild to moderate depressive symptoms, increased rates in substance and alcohol abuse, increased incidence of paranoia, and an increase in marital/relationship discord. Lastly my practice has unfortunately experienced the deaths of two clients.

This disease has been traumatic for individuals, causing them pain and chaos in their lives, inducing a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness for many (Calhoun and Tedeschi 1999). These symptoms have been reported by an influx of clients seeking help to manage their emotions and regain a sense of control. Clients have reported years of wealth building being lost and chaos in their lives on different fronts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Decker (1993), events that upset our plans and sense of order can serve as lessons and are a call to reconsider our priorities and what we think the purpose of life is. In the case of the COVID-19
crisis, the disruption points to our oneness at the deepest levels and the reality that we are all in this struggle to survive and thrive. However, before we could even come to terms with the COVID-19 crisis, public outcry over police brutality led us to confront the ongoing pandemic of racism in policing.

**Police Brutality**

At the apex of confirmed COVID-19 cases in New York, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that the general public wear homemade face coverings to mitigate the spread of the disease. However, people from Black and brown communities expressed concern that if members of their communities wore homemade masks, such as bandanas, it could compound racial discriminatory behavior from law enforcement, putting additional lives in danger (Alfonso 2020). This was because colored bandanas are often associated with gang affiliation; therefore, such attire for Black and brown men made them more susceptible to racial profiling.

This concern foreshadowed the death of George Floyd, an unarmed man of color who died at the hands of police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on Memorial Day. One officer was charged with second-degree murder and three others with aiding and abetting murder in the days that followed, as demonstrations took place in towns and cities across the country and even across the world. The intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic with widespread awakening to the “pandemic” of police brutality and sustained racism is complex. In the United States, people of color have been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of economic disparities, disparities in access to health care and health outcomes, and related factors (CDC 2020; Brooks and Roy 2020; Gupta 2020). This unequal burden likely intensified the anger over racial profiling and police brutality that contributed to mass protests around the world. That anger arose from the unjust killings of Tanisha Anderson, 37, who was diagnosed with a bipolar disorder; Michael Brown, 18, who was walking home with a friend; Tamir Rice, 12, who was playing with a toy gun in the park; Eric Garner, 43, who was allegedly selling loose cigarettes; Freddie Gray, 25, who was killed in a police van while his hands and feet were shackled without a seatbelt; Alton Sterling, 37, who was apprehended for selling CDs and DVDs and later killed; Stephon Clark, 22, who was shot in his grandmother’s backyard; Breonna Taylor, 26, who was killed while she was asleep; and countless others by police officers who are rarely charged and almost never convicted. According to a study conducted by Edwards, Lee, and Esposito (2019), excessive force rendered by police is a leading cause of death among men of color, and Black, Latinx, American Indian, and Alaska Native men and women are all at higher lifetime risk of the same than are white men and women.

Police brutality and racial profiling has been an issue for decades, but the public execution of George Floyd marked an apparent turning point, fueling the most pervasive protests—in terms of countries and protestors involved—in history (Buchanan
et al. 2020). Government officials from all over the country pledged action; in one prominent move, the City Council of Minneapolis voted to dismantle its police department and replace it with a department of community safety and violence prevention. In addition, discussions have re-emerged related to the subpar resources in communities of color, such as medical access and insurance, employment, education, and overall access to essential resources. As Fanon (1963) declared, communities of color were forced into second-class citizenship under colonialism and have been denied these resources as a result.

Shared Trauma

Serving a community of color during these times, when a highlighting of racial injustice is coupled with the pandemic, places a heavy toll on clinicians who come from these same communities. Clients seen in my practice have reported feelings of rage, anger, fear, sadness, and hopelessness. Many ask “What is the world coming to?” and “What is the meaning of all this?”. How do we, as clinicians, bring peace to those we serve in these communities and help them answer these existential questions?

The clinicians in my practice are on the front line during the current crises and have been dually exposed to trauma by living through the crises themselves while striving to help clients make sense of what is happening. Amid the prevalence of COVID-19 in New York City and the constant displays of blatant disrespect for people of color seen from law enforcement officers, in the media, in everyday life, and at the highest levels of the US government, as well as the subpar conditions so many people of color face on a day-to-day basis, clinicians have disclosed their own intrapsychic concerns as they relate to these two phenomena. Collectively, clinicians have experienced degrees of trauma in the current situation, while also increasing their susceptibility to vicarious and secondary trauma (Tosone et al. 2012; Saakvitne 2002) and giving them an important stake, along with their clients, in seeking answers to meaning-making questions (McTighe and Tosone 2015).

A Spirituality Perspective

Human spirituality can be seen as esoteric, delicate, and obscure. It is intertwined with the experience of culture, traditions, and ways of life. If the human spirit’s purpose is to learn lessons and to conceptualize them as consciousness (Calhoun and Tedeschi 1999), then there is much to glean from our experiences.
These tumultuous times have given us plenty of opportunities to reflect on the fragility of life and its purpose. Having been taught to accumulate wealth and to seek external recognition for our efforts with little thought for the highest and greatest good that we can serve, individually and collectively, we may be challenged when times of trauma push us to search for deeper meaning. Things like external recognition are temporary and of less importance viewed through the spiritual lens. They fall short of bringing inner lasting peace, the goal of spiritual practice.

Spirituality suggests that traumatic events are pathways for individuals to learn lessons or make corrections in their lives. Using a spirituality-based approach to work with clients has been beneficial in my practice. In the previously mentioned paper, I outline spiritual tenets across cultures and disciplines which converge on ideas central to the process of facilitating an approach rooted in spirituality to foster posttraumatic growth. I outline steps that can assist clients in answering existential questions. The first involves connecting to feelings on a deeper level, and the other pertains to expanded consciousness.

These two steps involve a spiritually oriented therapist helping to establish a safe environment for a client. Once that space is created, the therapist is able to usher the client into the abyss of their emotions and feelings to forge a relationship with their essence, the spiritual part of them (Johanson 2012; Hegel 2016). In other words, the therapist’s aim is to help the client to get in touch with and identify their true feelings about the crises. The therapist then guides the client to recognize their rationalizing thoughts and beliefs and how these are in place to justify them not dealing with their feelings. The clinician can then explore with clients, what lessons they can glean from their current trauma to advance their consciousness.

Identifying with our emotions, thoughts, and feelings is the gateway to discovering the answers to the existential questions (Frankl 1959). The acknowledgment of one’s feeling is the first step to creating that bridge between mind and spirit necessary for attaining a higher consciousness. In this way, the therapist engages the client in a meaningful discussion to enrich their insights about their experiences. This involves the use of universal principles such as the second law of thermodynamics, which proposes that all things tend towards equilibrium and for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

These concepts can be used not only to help clients but also to help clinicians begin to connect to higher meaning. The aim of this spiritual approach to this crisis is to guide individuals toward reconsidering their humanity and the place where we are one. It asks us to see others as part of a common struggle that we all face to make our lives individually, and our world collectively, better. It can be argued that we are spiritual beings in a physical body having physical experience (Frissell 2001). A spiritual approach to revisiting that experience could be impactful in moments of crisis, since the spiritual level is where our commonality lies, and recognizing our oneness also makes us aware that our struggles are common to all and therefore a part of the process of conscious evolution.
Discussion

Built into the experience of this pandemic is a spiritual lesson, as reluctant as we may be to receive it. For weeks, much of the world stopped, outside of activities considered essential. The quiet that followed gave us an opportunity to reflect on the condition of the planet and the damage humans have imposed on it. Our busy lifestyles and drive to attain wealth and status have caused many of us to miss the kind of purpose that gives us spiritual sustenance in life. It has forced too many to live their lives in concert with the expectations of their societies. We have become too busy with external responsibilities and goals to give adequate time to our internal issues. We have learned to suppress these internal conflicts, using work and external commitments as a means of avoiding internal issues, that is, avoidance of self. Human commonality lies in spirituality, whereas divergence is realized through our cultures, religions, beliefs, and values. Human feelings and emotions connect individuals directly to the human spirit (Audate 2020). The worldwide response to COVID-19 and the death of a man of color—part of a long, wide pattern of injustice—has prompted strong emotions, causing large swaths of humanity to reflect on our common ground. This can be seen as a spiritual perspective. We could view this moment as the spirit realm, the realm of origination seeking to manifest a different world (Dyer 2001).

In my clinical practice, I have had many individuals seek therapy to address their emotional turmoil at this time. As a clinician, I have a chance to help them look inward and face unresolved conflicts that external engagements have caused them to avoid, just as I have the chance to do in my own life. It is an opportunity that we should grab with both hands.

Based on my experience of working with clients, this pandemic forces us to reconsider what is most critical in life and what our priorities should be. As we work on ourselves individually, and bring resolution to our personal difficulties, we will ultimately grow our awareness and thus become emotionally better humans. Our contributions to our families, friend groups, and communities will improve. We each have a responsibility to create a better world for ourselves and for those that come after us, and this time of reflection is ideal to stop the slide in our personal lives, our families, our communities, and our world (Dyer 2001). Continued worldwide demonstrations about racial inequities in our societies call on us to reconsider our past relationships with, and attitudes towards, each other. Coming on the heels of a worldwide pandemic, this movement highlights the need for personal and collective change in our planet. A spiritually based therapeutic approach draws attention to how we are all the same at the deepest level and that we all desire things and struggle with the same issues that challenge our very humanity. It, therefore, provides a unique hope for our personal contribution to the conscious evolution of humanity.
Conclusion

The dual crises of COVID-19 and a widespread reckoning with racial inequity have given humans worldwide a chance to pause and reconsider our way of life and our individual and collective responsibilities to one another. History shows our failures, but crises are typically pregnant with new opportunities. This current crisis provides us with the best opportunity that we have been given in a long time to redress the ills in our societies and to make the world better. George Floyd’s death has galvanized the world to respond to these ills in ways never seen before. Spiritually speaking, we may speak of a divine energy at work, beyond human thought, and this perspective suggests a tidal shift that will bring about lasting change for a more equitable world. Clinicians are among the change agents in our communities who can usher in the transformations we wish to see.

The stress that we individually struggle with in these daunting times can be viewed as a challenge to each of us, individually. It is there to remind us that each of us has a role to play in producing a better world. That role starts with a change within us. Our clinicians have a double duty: helping others to address their personal responsibilities to the greater good and addressing their own contribution to the process. A spiritual and metaphysical approach could be of great assistance, providing a sense of connection, shared experience, and mutual duty in this time of need.

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