Ten reasons

Sandra Ortiz Villarreal, an Islamic psychotherapist, relationship and psychosexual therapist and tutor, describes how Tasawwuf, mystical Islam, acts as a lens for her therapeutic work

1 Tasawwuf helps the heart to remember

The light within the teachings of Tasawwuf* guides my heart in the therapeutic space. It tells me to listen to this sacred longing, not always in words, but in the quiet ache beneath symptoms: the restlessness that has no clear cause, the sadness that feels larger than a loss, a hunger for something unnamed, or an empty space within the chest that aches.

From a Tasawwuf perspective, every client's story is the story of the soul longing to remember its divine origin. When I enter into the sacred land of the client, with the guidance of the Prophet Mohammed's gentle steps, *Ya Lateef***, my presence is intended to not only reduce their heart distress, but also reflect to the client the sacredness that has never left them.

Viktor Frankl speaks of the 'will to meaning', and existential psychology recognises the centrality of purpose in mental health.[1] Yet, Tasawwuf goes even deeper: healing is not just about finding meaning, it is about remembering (*dhikr*) our eternal belonging to the divine.

2 Therapy becomes a form of prophetic listening

According to Islam, the human being was created with divine care, perfected in form, breathed into with the Spirit of Allah. In Tasawwuf, healing is not about becoming someone new, it is about returning to what we always were underneath the veils: pure, whole, luminous. The *fitrah*, our original, pure nature, is never destroyed by trauma, loss or pain. It may be covered over, like a treasure buried beneath the sand, but it remains untouched at its core. This can only be done by sacred listening, or *sama* as we would say in Tasawwuf. Here we listen, not only with our ears but with our heart, and even through the soul's subtle body to the perception of vibration, resonance and rhythm.

> There is no spiritual, nor religious talk in our conversation, but my words reflect the inner witnessing of spiritual processes

Modern trauma research speaks of post-traumatic growth, the idea that through suffering, individuals can develop greater compassion, strength and wisdom. Tasawwuf offers a deeper frame: healing is not just psychological growth, but spiritual remembrance (*dhikr*). Sometimes, the broken parts of us are for the child who wasn't heard, seen or understood. This was a time when we were more in touch with the primordial essence that reflects the imprint of the divine in us. Our longing then reflects the integration of the child-like *fitrah* that was not honoured in its time.

3 Tasawwuf teaches that presence is not something we 'create'

In the therapeutic space, it is not that the client speaks and I listen, there is instead a shared presence, an invisible field, where both hearts meet. This space is held under the gaze *of Ya Raqib* (loving attention) and illuminated by the manifest light of *Ya Zahir* (visible presence). Intersubjectivity teaches us that healing arises not from techniques alone, but from the authentic, attuned meeting between two subjectivities: a dance of vulnerability, empathy and mutual presence. Similarly, in Tasawwuf, healing arises through *sohbet*, a meeting of hearts, a shared listening, a remembering of the divine reality that holds both beings. Thus, in therapy, the true healer is not the therapist, nor the client, it is the divine truth present (*Al-Haqq*) moving silently between them. This has helped me to humble my heart. Alongside my *niyyat* (intention), to bring the best of myself into the space, I am also trusting something beyond what I bring.

4 Working with faith supports the descent

Tasawwuf has given me the opportunity to experience me and my client's journey toward wholeness, not as a flight upwards, but a sacred descent inward, into the forgotten chambers of the self – the unlit places where the seeds of the heart's true longing are buried. This process is called *'hubut li-sabab al-'uruuj'*, meaning 'a descent for the sake of ascending'. The soul must pass through the valleys of the Self, recognise them and explore them. It must cross these valleys not with violence, but with gentle, conscious breathing, honouring every shadow as part of the return to love. In ancient mythologies, the feminine soul descends into the underworld. Goddesses like Inanna, Persephone and Isis, are stripped of their worldly garments, in order to be reborn closer to the source of love. Thus, the descent into the heart's shadows is not a fall, it is a sacred rite of passage. At this stage, it is important to mention that we are not talking about spiritual bypassing, but a kind therapeutic gaze and therapeutic presence that is deeply rooted in divine realities, while witnessing psychological processes. There is no spiritual, nor religious talk in our conversation, but my words reflect the inner witnessing of spiritual processes.

5 It supports the therapeutic principle that things may feel worse before they feel better

I have learnt that in every true journey of healing and transformation, there is a moment when descent is complete, but ascent has not yet begun. A moment when the soul must simply be present inside the contraction, trusting what it cannot yet see. In natural birth, the body teaches what the spirit often forgets: the contractions are not against life, they are in favour of life.

The pain is not punishment, it is preparation and activation. The body releases its own inner medicine when it surrenders to the divine rhythm. Thus, I have learnt to witness that the contraction, the tightening, the fire, are not punishments. They are the alchemical forge where the soul is transformed into something luminous. This is what, in Islam, is called the *Jihad al Akbar*, the great struggle that is meant to be against the enemies of our own self. In therapy, there are times when a client feels 'worse' before they feel better, as old wounds surface and forgotten griefs are touched. This is not failure. This is the sacred contraction before expansion. With stillness in my heart, I hold the space gently, embodying the trust in Allah (*swa*) that pain is not the end of the story, it is the beginning of new life.

6 It is a remembering of the roots that hold us

In the teachings of systemic constellation therapy, Bert Hellinger taught that true healing arises when we step back into the sacred order of belonging, acknowledging those who came before us with honour, receiving their gifts, releasing their burdens, allowing life to flow through us again.[2]

So too in the Sufi path: the *silsila*, the spiritual lineage, carries the light of those who preserved and transmitted the remembering of our *fitrah*, or divine origin.

In therapy, when a client feels rootless, isolated or lost, inviting them to reconnect with their ancestral story often awakens a deep inner strength, a knowing that they are not a

disconnected fragment, but part of a living, breathing tapestry. Even when there are painful histories, the deeper current beneath all stories is life, and life flows towards healing.

7 Inner strength emerges from within

The moment a client begins to trust their own resilience and to recognise even a tiny flicker of inner light is often the beginning of profound healing. This inner strength does not come from ego inflation. It comes from the deep realisation: I have survived. I have wisdom. I have love. I have light.

Modern psychology speaks of post-traumatic growth, but Tasawwuf speaks of something even deeper: post-contraction illumination, where the soul shines brighter because it has passed through the valley of shadows leading the heart to the tranquil soul (*Nafs Al Mutma'ina*), where it finds acceptance and surrender.

The soul does not rise by force. It rises by surrender by trusting the pace of divine unfolding, by allowing the light within to find its own morning. And we, the therapists, have the honour to witness this unfoldment.

8 It enables a client to recognise the Self

The path of healing is not only about letting go, it is also about remembering who we are beneath the forgetting. In deep moments of therapy, clients may begin to say things like: 'I feel like I'm meeting myself for the first time', 'I have taken so long to be able to see this part of me' or 'I didn't know I could love myself'.

This is not narcissism. This is homecoming. This is the healing from fragmentation, the moment when the soul begins to feel whole again. And in that recognition, the divine presence becomes visible inside the self. It is not grand or dramatic. It is often a soft, steady glow like sunrise on water.

From the Sufi perspective, this recognition is an unveiling of the *ruh* (spirit/soul) beneath the personality. From a therapeutic perspective, it is the emergence of authentic selfhood no longer ruled by trauma or conditioning, but rooted in dignity, truth and presence. This is where healing becomes transformation.

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9 The sacred embrace of inner opposites plays out therapeutically

Creation is not random. It moves in pairs, in balance, in relation not to compete, but to complete. Night and day. Sun and moon. Male and female. *Jalal* (strength) and *jamal* (beauty).

Within each of us, these opposites live – the inner masculine: clear, focused, protective, discerning, and the inner feminine: intuitive, flowing, receptive, nurturing. When they are in conflict, we feel fragmented. When they come into union, the soul begins to rise with a grace that is both fierce and tender.[3]

In therapy, imbalance between the inner masculine and feminine may look like rigidity, perfectionism and burnout or, on the other side, passivity, overgiving and loss of boundaries. Healing comes when the inner masculine learns to hold, not control and the inner feminine learns to receive, not collapse. Together they form a rhythm like a breath, a pulse, a sacred dance.

Reflecting on universal mystical symbols we find that, in Tasawwuf *jalal* and *jamal* unite in the soul that becomes complete and luminous, or *kamal*. In Hinduism, *Shiva* (reflecting consciousness) and *Shakti* (reflecting universal force/energy) spiral in the cosmic dance of becoming. In alchemy, *sol* (sun) and *luna* (moon) must merge to form the philosopher's gold. And, in Kabbalah, the tree of life grows only when masculine and feminine *sefirot* (divine emanations) are harmonised.

10 The sacred embrace of inner opposites plays out therapeutically

In couples therapy, what often appears as 'conflict' is actually the meeting of mirrors: the conscious meets the unconscious. Light meets shadow. Projection meets soul. The body reflects what the heart cannot yet say.[3]

Sexual issues are not merely 'problems', they are doorways. They reveal the spiritual temperature of the relationship. They invite deeper intimacy, communication and truth. Even relationships that are meant to end carry the seed of transformation because every union is a teacher.

Relational healing is Oneness (*Tawheed*) in motion. Therapy is not only individual work, but also relational alignment because what we heal within echoes outward into every bond we touch. ●

* Tassawwuf and Sufism both refer to aspects of mystical Islam. Tasawwuf is a word used to talk about the sciences of the Self and mysticism, whereas Sufism relates to tradition.

** *Ya Lateef* is a name from Allah that means 'the gentle'. The *Ya* before it means a way of calling gentleness. So when you say *Ya Lateef*, you are calling upon the gentle one as well as gentleness within you.

Biography

Sandra Otila Ortiz Villarreal is a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychosexual therapist and is trained in systemic constellation therapy. She works as a clinical lead at Nour, supporting people who have been affected by domestic violence and abuse, and holds her own private practice. She has also been a tutor in Islamic counselling with Stephen Maynards since 2017. **www.elespiraltherapy.com**

References

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