

Episode 55 - Dr. Elizabeth Robinson: I Should've Could've Died: Spiritual Change in Recovery from Alcoholism

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof. A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University of Buffalo School of Social Work is making a difference every day through the generation and transmission of knowledge promotion of social justice and service to humanity. We offer MSW and PHD programs continuing education programs and credits online courses licensure exam preparation professional seminars and certificates and much much more. To learn more about the UB School of Social Work please visit www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. New Spiritist contrasts Spittler tome. These are the words of Karl Gustav Young to build Wu founder of Alcoholics Anonymous alcohol and Latin is Spiritus and young reason that because we use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most approving poison the thirst for alcohol should be battled with a thirst for God. As recovery from alcoholism related to spirituality today's guest is finding out. Dr Elizabeth Robinson is a research assistant professor at the University of Michigan. Addiction Research Center where she carries out research on spiritual and religious change associated with recovery from alcohol problems. She has more than 20 years of social science research experience on such topics as substance abuse treatment seekers family stress and coping with mental illness gender and schizophrenia and supportive health education.

[00:02:06] Her current work includes a study of long term changes in spirituality after individuals enter treatment for alcohol dependence as well as a study of experiences of spiritual transformation and early recovery. Dr. Robinson also works with treatment centers on ways to incorporate meditation into depression and substance abuse treatment and the role of spirituality and recovery from substance abuse and dependence. Peter Sobota clinical assistant professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Dr. Robinson by telephone. Hi Libby thank you for agreeing to do one of our podcasts and I'm going to start with kind of an odd question if I may. This is the honest truth last night I had dinner with a physician from the West Coast who works in an addiction center and he's an addiction specialist so I actually told him that I was going to be interviewing another professional for you know research and treatment in alcoholism and he responded very quickly by telling me that alcoholism is a brain disease and that it has biological and psychological and social consequences. So given that and our listeners can't see my face as I smile when I say this given that why do people need to find God to recover from alcoholism. Well that's a really good question. I don't know that everybody who is in recovery. And that's one of the questions that I like to be like to reach. There are some people who recover without spiritual religious change. We know that AA is effective in helping people. It's very definitely a spiritual program. And we know that most treatment professionals often think it's important that Carl Young it was important. You know there are a lot of people who think it's important that because they see it as a spiritual crisis if you want to think of it that way.

[00:04:19] I think it's more that spirituality religion can provide people in recovery with support for what you're trying to do to try to turn their lives around and really recover literally from some kind of a rather deep hole that they've gotten themselves into. And it requires a lot of strength and persistence. And I think a spiritual or religious life can provide some of that. I noticed that you used spiritual and religious assuming they're not the same thing and I'm going to ask you to talk about that in a little bit. But before I ask you to do that. How did you get interested in this topic or at least Aspect of chemical dependency. Well I've always been interested in issues of spirituality and religiousness. My dad was a minister developing a meditation practice has been a very important part of my my life and I've always been intrigued by this but I've also been very very aware that you

know one man's spirituality is another man's atheism kind of you know. And there's a lot of disagreement about just exactly what is spirituality. And so when I found out that the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism was sponsoring a conference in 1999 and studying spirituality and alcohol that was the title of the conference I talked my way into the conference and learned a lot about what was going on and got the sense that they were going to try to fund some studies around them and was very intrigued by that.

[00:06:03] And at that point I was a postdoc a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Michigan Addiction Research Center and had access to clients to people with addictions who were injured who were in treatment I had access to staff and so it was in a good position to to study that actually before we go any further it sounds like we probably should not make any assumptions and probably make sure that we're on the same page so would you give us your take on for example maybe even the difference between spirituality and religion. Well I think that anybody who ventures into your research in any area needs to be prepared to define their terms and how how do you what do you mean by that you know. And that was one of the first things that we did when we started this work. And I see this spirituality as a person's feelings thoughts experiences behaviours that arise from their desire to find the sacredness in life that is ultimate reality a divine being transcendent truth whereas I think of religion more as the social context of that search and connection to those kinds of sacred issues. So it's much more institutions much more ritual than prescribed behaviour sometimes tied to a particular cultural context for the belief that it's important to distinguish this is because it turns out to be important when you're studying people with alcohol problems because for them there's a big difference. You need to have a mindset that people may be down on religion but they may still want to nurture their spirituality. Yeah I think that's very much my limited experience in the practice world but also even in academia.

[00:07:58] The other thing that came to my mind when you were talking about the difference or the impact really of spirituality versus as opposed to religion I was thinking about some of this research that I've read in terms of that if clients have faith when they come to the change process their outcomes are significantly better people for example who don't and then it's a kind of the flipside of that is clinicians who have faith in their client's ability to change. They also do better as well in terms of prognosis so I was wondering if you thought that even fit in with the concept especially of spirituality and faith being I guess in my mind that the Beetham things unseen. It's a hard thing to measure and so we really didn't look at that specifically but I think that that is one of the things that some kind of a spiritual life give the people of hope a sense of connection a sense of support you know that I'm not alone which is of course also one of the things that AA gives to people because it's is a social process to be involved in a it is not just me with God or me by the side of the river you know communing with nature but me and a bunch of other people a very different social aspect to it. We get hints that there are people who struggle a great deal around being sober or very often people who have had a loss of faith are people who feel that you don't have hope and who don't believe that they're that they're the way out of the morass in which they're stuck. And so that that is really important and I'm one of the most important things that nothing does.

[00:09:42] I think that we need to convey to people early on in treatment for addictions is you know you can get better you can get on top of this because people are very often extremely discouraged and they've tried before and now they failed again or whatever. You know I mean it's a relapsing disorder and it's very easy for people to get to be very judgmental themselves about that. And they lose faith with God or with you know the possibility of change. So yes I definitely think hope is an issue. Is there a body of empirical evidence that supports including spirituality in our thinking about treating alcoholism. There's a bunch of interesting stuff that's been known for a while. One is that there are lower levels of alcohol and drug use amongst people with religious and spiritual involvement. Nation that's been known for quite a while. There is some evidence that alcoholics and drug addicts are religiously and spiritually alienated. Evidence for that is has been a little sketchy

and a more subtle question really it's a religiously elite I think but not spiritual and not necessarily spiritual. And this is of course significant effort evidence that AA works. And then of course you know you only have to go to a couple of AA meetings and hear people talk to see that you know it has been very important and other people the more it gets good is out in California found that people who reported having had spiritual awakening did better than people who didn't. But even before our work there is some of this kind of thing. And there's also a fairly persistent finding that as people get sober their sense of meaning and purpose in life increases from the beginning of treatment to after treatment.

[00:11:39] Yet this is tricky in terms of pure system because you know how do you quantify you know existential understanding. So many of us lean on a measure which has been criticized but I think that's good at some of these kinds of ideas. You know since the of that my life does matter but it is like measuring any difficult construct whether it's spirituality measuring sense of meaning and purpose in life is also subject to it's hard to do. You know we were taking a stab at it. This is how we've made it. You know it's not the most perfect major around but we think it's good enough to give us the sense that this is important. You've mentioned a couple of times already that you've mentioned AA and it's clear that you believe that AA fits into this kind of conversation. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that. Well a rest for a lot of you know you just look at the 12 steps and I forget it. I think it's step two is about God as I as I understand him bless her and and the whole program revolves around helping people to develop a relationship with something larger than themselves. You know whether it's very outside your window or someone else in the AA meeting or or or God as you understand them. And so a very much fosters spirit that really does change and it is the most common route to recovery for many people. More common than formal treatment programs and the evidence that it works is it is pretty strong at this point. So we need to.

[00:13:29] Well let's look at this then let's find out what's going on here and why. What is it that that a further that's important to spiritual was changed into drinking outcome. Yeah and I guess I'm going to be I'm not going to be honoring the social work tradition here of strength based but I'm sure you've had the experience of talking to folks who go to AA and who walk out of there thinking oh my goodness this is some kind of religious club. What do you think kind of a odd question goes wrong there. Well sometimes I think it's I mean there are some people who are so alienated from religion and spirituality that they may find it uncomfortably cult like. And I think there are you know there is some evidence that there may be some aid groups that are a little rigid out there and then that get into a kind of a cult like mentality where this is the only way to go and if you drop out of a you're going to you're going to fail in your own recovery and neck and neck and that's not helpful. Very unhelpful strategy for aid groups to espouse but it's fairly common in that. But that kind of thinking is very cultlike and I think lead to that perception that a is very much like a religious cult. I don't think it is. You know I think there's a lot of for one thing different age groups are so different. You go around to a lot of age groups and you'll find you know here's an age group that always quote the Lord's Prayer and here's another one that barely mentions God at all.

[00:15:06] You know you can sniff around and you can find an age group that you're more comfortable with. I think that's really important because I know people make their judgments based on attendance at one meeting without any awareness that are so variable. Just like you spoke to well I did have a chance to look at some of the scholarly work that you've done in terms of the work that you've done. What were you trying to learn. What did you do and what were you hoping to discover by doing it. The question that I am that I had when I wrote these proposals and got funding for them from our National Health was first does spirituality and religious change over time amongst alcoholics are those changes associated with people drinking less and you know how does a contribute to that change. Part of it was I was working in a treatment setting where spiritual religious change was perceived as really critical to recovery. And I wanted to find out if that was indeed true. How critical is it recovery and where are we are finding that it's very common even

amongst the even if you factor out the extent to which people are involved in AA. It changes and it seems to be important in people drinking less than that. So there are more ways to nurture your spirituality and recovery to support your recovery than going to. And that's kind of an interesting finding but that's basically what we wanted to look at. We wanted to document whether or not spirituality and religion has changed and whether or not those changes had any relationship to a involvement in drinking. I guess just to bring it around one more time.

[00:16:58] And you discovered what we discovered that spirituality religion does change over time even amongst those who aren't totally sober. And we find that one of the things that changes quite a bit is people's sense of forgiveness. We talk a lot about this in a but forgiving oneself in particular seems to be really critical for giving other people as well. Day to Day private religious practices prayer and meditation reading sacred texts that kind of thing that seems to be important and seems to change. These are just I'm just giving you what changes in day to day spiritual experiences like the extent to which people feel comfort or strengthened by their spirit religious life the extent to which they feel connected to God or some higher power sense of purpose in life goes up and and the use of negative religious coping strategies goes down and negative really just coping strategies or things like God abandoned me or you know because I'm such a terrible person. God is punishing me. All the things that have happened in my life are because God is angry with me though. Those kinds of ideas seem to decrease over time over the course of six months and 12 months. So all those things seem to change what doesn't seem to change people's perceptions of God and people's beliefs which makes sense I mean those are those are more stable kind of things anyway. People you would expect that those would be the you know possibly the last thing that change. Yeah people are going to just totally discard a fundamental framework whatever that is. It sounds like what you're learning is that that is quite likely to change and morph along the way.

[00:18:52] You know earlier on you mentioned I think the term that year you used was a spiritual awakening. People report having these. And when you said that what that brought to mind is a book by William James a variety of religious experience and I remember this kind of I'm not sure I'm going to get the quote right but there was this kind of comment about self-surrender and that at least in James work that he was finding that this concept of self surrender is kind of a vital turning point in not only for example people's addictive lives but people's lives in general. Does that fit with some of the things that you've studied. You know I didn't get quite that kind of way. We asked the question in a very basic straight up way. Have you ever had a life changing spirit or religious experience. Have you ever had a and faith have you ever had a loss of faith. We asked people these kinds of questions every time we saw them after the first time we asked them Have you had one since we saw you left. But the interesting thing is that more alcoholics reported having had a life changing spiritual experience than did a national sample. Well not exactly the same question which is intriguing. I mean it's a big enough difference of like forty seven percent of the people in our sample have had that experience. Wow. It's a national sample it's more like 39 percent. Eight percent difference. Why don't we have the wealth or what kind of experience was that.

[00:20:31] You know a few people only a few people mentioned the experience of around drinking or drug use for most people. It was they were other kinds of situation. Some of them which might have been related to drinking or drug use. There were Klump around what I called should have could have died. You know the extreme danger some of the people in our study are veterans and for them that were the issue there. But there's also a big clump around deliberate efforts to connect with God and then other people mentioned things like well you know I was talking with someone and it said something about that conversation became life changing or for other people it was being in nature in some people almost all these experiences were positive but there were few people reported that were negative were scary or where the person judged alienated. So you do need to look at well what kind of life changing experience that people are talking about. Yeah and just kind of building on that. It sounds like these awakenings or experiences of spirituality are ways the varied ways that

people make meaning of their lives. I've had a number of people tell me about you know well you know I perceived my my grandmother who had died and she come onto the other side as it were. And my dead grandmother coming back to tell me I need to straighten out my life. And that was a life changing experience for the stranger. The entire thing that you get into some of the mystical things and of course the question always then. Well that's nice.

[00:22:08] Did the person really change it is not enough to have a conversion experience if it doesn't change how the person operates in the world. So that's always interesting to look at that. But we found that the people who did report having these kinds of experiences did tend to drink glass over time. I know from our previous conversations are brief ones actually you are familiar with some of Young's work. And I think it was young who who kind of spoke about people's pursuit of addictive experiences as almost like a quest or a search or all longing for meaning and greater experience. That's exactly what you're talking about young. Quote with something like VERITAS contour spirit that literally spirit against spirit. You know that he thought the whole issue of alcoholism as a spiritual crisis and that in effect alcoholics have a greater thirst for spirit but it's their search for this spiritedness directed. And instead of finding spirit through God they're finding it in the bottle. Exactly. Fascinating. I'm sure you get some challenges around these kind of spiritual approaches. And is that really necessary is it really meaningful. I think it depends on people's orientation. But if social workers are going to incorporate this into our you know our practice behavior our pursuit of policy maybe even social work education and even research. What do you think are the practical implications of your work for safe. Let's start with practice behavior of social workers. How can social workers use what you're learning. Well I think one the things really clear is that people are they're not interested in religion. So if one come at this from a particular religious standpoint you're going to run into a lot of resistance. It's not going to work.

[00:24:07] You need to take a much broader kind of perspective and see it as a spiritual quest and supporting people's spiritual quest and not trying to push them toward a specific religious tradition not even toward AIDS specifically you know but you know whatever nurture that person's spirituality and what part of what are the things that we don't do very often. So work. I know that there are some who do admit it's great but you know we've we've very rarely even bring up the issue of spirituality and really does not serve our clients even though we know that something like you know 93 percent of the population believe in God in almost 90 percent actually believe that in a personal God that God watches over them about 85 percent have it have a religious preference of some sort of the general population and over 50 percent pray at least once a day. But we kind of ignore this so often I think when we're working with a client no matter what the present problem is. And and I think we we need to figure out how to be open to the topic without dictating in any way what particular perspective persons should have. You know there aren't any shows on here. Well it makes no sense that this kind of meaning making should be a taboo subject. It's true. You know it's too important to be. And yet we've we've created a psychotherapies have no relationship to people's fundamental meaning any issue the meaning of life.

[00:25:49] What do you think the implications of your work are for example for social work research and kind of what does social work uniquely have to offer do you think in terms in this area. Well I think social workers were game to go where the client is and even if we're kind of going oh I don't want to do this you know we're a little bit more willing to follow people and to you know see where were they need to go and what is important to them. So I think there is that tradition and we can often I think we you know speaking of the strengths perspective the work you know looking looking at people spirituality as a potential strength only rarely is spirituality or religiousness a negative that's usually when you run into these kind of situations where there's a perception of God is punishing judgmental God that's definitely associated with poor mental health outcome. However you measure mental health. And so you know maybe that's what we should be keeping our eyes and ears open for. I don't think we can advocate a particular religious perspective we can give people

tools we can teach people that you know different types of meditation. We can assume we can find a form that is compatible with the person or person in their perspective. But you know we're not going to. It's counterproductive to push a particular religious perspective. I can't say that strongly. Yeah. It's interesting to hear you say all this because I'm thinking back to the years that I spent as a practitioner before I got involved in academics and it's it's was always fascinating to me that if I brought it up people would just go on and on and on. They would say things like nobody ever asked me about that before. If they had contact with other clinician's Yeah.

[00:27:50] So it sounds like what we need to do is ask that as you just talk about it. In terms of just beginning this conversation. You know I think the most important thing that we can do is to help people interpret and understand and support them in their spiritual pursuits in interpreting your spiritual experience. Is there more to come for you. Are you going to develop this work even more or are you working on something currently that's related. We're continuing to analyze the data from the two and a half to three year longitudinal survey and alcoholics but we're we're also we've just gotten another federal grant to look at recovery more broadly defined and how how the different characteristics are. But that's not specific to spirituality religion. I think somebody. Not me but somebody needs to do a similar body of alcoholics and other areas of the country. There are some interesting differences across the country and spirituality with Islam. The general population and and also we need to look at these issues with regard to African-American population to Hispanic groups because their spirituality religious is different. You know it has a different role in their lives and then than most Caucasians. And so I think that would be a really useful study for somebody to carry out. Absolutely. Dr. Robinson thank you so much for talking with us today. I think it was really helpful. Good. Thank you for calling me. You've been listening to Dr. Elizabeth Robinson discuss spiritual change in recovery from alcoholism. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research.

[00:29:55] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.