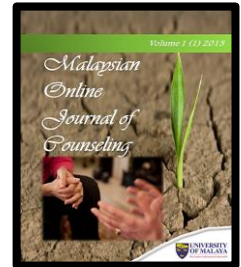


AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE COUNSELING PROCESS THAT INVOLVES SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Wong Ching Ching



ABSTRACT

This study involves the conceptualization of spirituality in the counseling process. The spiritual experiences that emerged in the counseling process are providing the support and strength to heal the client and subsequently empower the client to the self transcendent growth process. The Satir Model, the existential therapy and logo therapy, the hypnotherapy and the expressive arts therapy are among the suggested counseling tools that generate the spirituality of the client to connect with the self. The results of the study indicated that all the participants were able to engage with their spiritual self in the counseling process. The spiritual experiences were manifested in the form of energy movement and visions that carried messages, the out of space sensation, the chirping sounds of the birds and the sense of stability at the core of the being. Each participant has finally illustrated the individual self with the unique self-depiction.

Keywords: Spirituality, Counseling Process, The Spiritual Self

Corresponding Author:
Department of Educational
Psychology and Counseling,
Faculty of Education,
University of Malaya,
Malaysia
sfabeth@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The study of spirituality in the area of counseling process is to acknowledge the individual as a whole person and that spiritual experience is intimately connected with inner reality and outer behavior. It is inevitable as there are an increasing number of cases in the counseling relationship which involve spirituality and transcendence experiences.

One needs to acknowledge that the spiritual dimension has an important role in restoration, maintenance and promotion of health, well-being and life satisfaction. Barbour (1990), Griffin (2000) and Jones (1994) have revealed that spiritual dimensions are needed to enrich scientific understandings of human beings, of the origins and operations of the universe, and of health and human welfare (Barbour, 1990; Griffin, 2000; Jones, 1994 as cited in Sperry & Shafranske, 2009).

This study is believed to provide a ground for a more cultural, spiritual and theistic value framework to construct empirically in counseling approaches and interventions, as there is much counseling potential in this area that is yet to explore.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary research question of this study is:

What are the participants' spiritual experiences in the counseling process?

The conceptualizations of spirituality in the counseling process allow both theistic and non-theistic perspectives to play their role. Spirituality provides a large framework whereby it can be found in humanistic and transpersonal psychotherapy. Hiles (2002) defines counseling and psychotherapy practice as an authentic participatory practice; it involves tacit knowing and heuristic dwelling in discovering the essence of spirituality, therefore all therapeutic counseling activity is transpersonal and grounded in spirituality.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology of heuristic inquiry was employed in this study. In relation to the subject matter, this study explored the spiritual experiences in the counseling process. Moustakas (1990) described heuristic research as a method of personal experience that plays an essential role in depth psychological research and theory. There are six phases in the heuristic inquiry posited by Clark Moustakas (1990): (a) initial engagement; (b) immersion; (c) incubation; (d) illumination; (e) explication; and (f) creative synthesis. Hiles (2001) also emphasizes the appropriateness of heuristic approach in transpersonal research, as it is focusing on the importance of working with the heuristic process of others (the co-researchers). Since all transpersonal research involves the exploration and study of human experiences, it is depth psychology, the

personal experience led to the psyche and collective unconscious. Therefore, the heuristic approach has a core role to play in the research into transpersonal and spiritual issues.

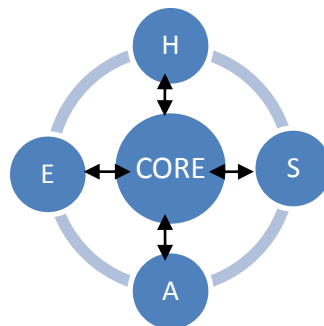
There were seven participants that involved in this study. All of them are Chinese women of Malaysian origin. Their age-range were from 35 years or older. The seven participants were arranged in an alphabetical order from participant A to participant G. Data were collected through counseling sessions with the participants. In every session, the counselor audio-taped the session and took pictures of each participant's artwork to ensure all spiritual information were complete and available as data for the research findings. Each counseling session was transcribed. The participants' personal documents, journals and artwork that offered additional meaning and depth of the spiritual experiences were collected.

After collecting data from the counseling sessions, the counselor started analyzing the data from the heuristic inquiry perspective. The counselor reviewed the transcripts several times with the detailed depiction of each participant. After the review of the participants' significant statements from their personal documents, the transcript, the detailed depiction of each participant and personal artwork, units of meaning were being identified and categorized into themes and patterns. Finally, the counselor prepared a table to show the consolidated categories of themes and patterns of the participants (refer to Appendix A). This was a way to help ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the research study. In the final stage, the counselor validated the findings by checking the original data; she also asked the participants to read the depiction and elaborate on whether the depiction accurately expressed their spiritual experiences. Besides, each participant was asked to construct an individual depiction to express her authentic self.

THE COUNSELING TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

There are several counseling tools which can be used to enhance the spiritual experiences of the participants. For this subject matter, it is shown as the following diagram.

The counseling tools that enhance the spiritual experiences of the participants



A: The Jungian based expressive arts therapy

E: Existential therapy and logo therapy

H: Hypnotherapy

S: The Satir systemic family therapy

CORE: The core of the being – the self

Between the first session and the final session, the counselor could facilitate the treatment plan based on the techniques and tools of the counseling process which are being mentioned. The counselor could initiate the self understanding process with the tools in the Satir model, for instance: the map of the family of origin and the wheel of influence. Hypnotherapy and expressive arts therapy are applied as an adjunct to the healing and learning process, incorporating existential therapy to reinforce the self.

The ultimate aim for the counseling process is to help the participants to touch the “self” and to establish a new way of being. Throughout the span of counseling, many experiences were being manifested in terms of feelings, thoughts, and various expressions. Some significant encountering also happened during this time, some of the expected experiences were: (a) discovering some psychological disturbances, (b) recognizing ambivalence about change, (c) acknowledging the resistance and the mismatch conflict, (d) struggling through the troubling mood, (e) accepting the real condition within, this includes the strengths and the weaknesses of oneself, and realizing the existential needs, (f) gaining awareness to do reframing and redefining on some disturbing notions, (g) adjusting to reconnect with the inner self, and (h) accommodating to make changes and gaining motivation for a better living (Blom, 2006; Van Deurzen, 2002).

All of these would happen back to forth, forth to back, sometimes it happened con-currently, and at times it was overwhelming. The mantra of “No pain, No gain” perhaps was useful to encourage the participants to encounter the struggling situations meaningfully as the participants were travelling along the journey to further growth (Kinnier, Dixon, Scheidegger, & Lindberg, 2009). In between the process, the participants would get familiar with the ways the being works (Moody & Carroll, 1998; Patterson et al., 2009). As the desire to get better was strong, the participants would have the tendency to strive and make a change toward becoming less demanding, more freedom and independence with which the participants would achieve a greater degree of inner comfort, self understanding and self acceptance, and self responsibility (Rogers, 1995).

Along the process of breaking through the wall of conflicts and fragmentations, unification and integration of the fragmented parts would come together in peace. Sometimes, the process of becoming happens in the “here and now” when the counselor and the participants were engaged with the interaction of the counseling relationship. The counseling process was invariably energized whenever the counselor and the participants focus on the “here and now” (Krug, 2009; Yalom, 2009). Therefore, the therapeutic counseling session was considered a time of authenticity when the participants were given the opportunity to encounter and to come to terms with oneself in life (Van Deurzen, 2002). The opportunity to meet with one-self is quite similar to what Rumi has stated, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I will meet you there” (West, 2007, p. 2).

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Various expressions of spiritual experiences emerged in this study. The sensation of spiritual experiences was divided into two categories, namely the explicit and the implicit. The explicit spiritual experiences were those expressed in the overt and clear manner, whereas the

implicit expressions were subtle in their own way. Among the spiritual experiences, there were theistic and non-theistic experiences.

Most of the participants were expressing their spiritual experiences explicitly. Participant A saw a vision of a red beating heart with dark smoky back ground during the healing white light therapy. She could identify herself with the beating heart as her position in life. She recognized the beating heart as herself, she was surrounded with dark smoke which represented the influence of friends. When she was pondering upon the vision, she was enlightened by the insight that she was anxious of interpersonal relationships. Her shadow desired friendship very much and she was struggling between firmness and compromising. The message from the self was informing her to be firm in making decisions. She could catch hold of the message and deliberately make peace with herself. She will keep reminding herself to handle life situations in a firm and prompt way. It was by the spiritual experience with the vision in her mind that she was able to reinforce the self and unify the opposite tendencies of her personality. Meanwhile, participant A's flu and headaches were healed by the white light which she has signified as the Holy Spirit. She has also experienced the spiritual element implicitly when the white light was powerful enough to overturn the dark spot; she associated the white light as divine intervention.

Participant B has been associating spirituality in the sand tray that she has built. It was an image of harmony and communion in the realm of the universe. This will be her vision throughout her life. She revealed the integration of her resources as the inner grace that was going to sustain her with the practice of prayer and contemplation. She felt the out of space sensation in the process of resource integration. She described the spiritual experience as something solid whereby she could utilize it in maintaining her inner mood of stability. She described the parts integration within was assuring her that her heart must transform in order for her to take action to do something good and beneficial. The realization was synchronized with her goal to get close to the divine.

As for participant C, she was associating the chirping sound of the birds as the prompting of the divine and perceived it as the Holy Spirit. She has often heard it in the healing white light therapy. She felt the divine was calling her to reconcile with those who have hurt her. She has also experienced brightness in front of her eyes. She identified the bright light as the higher power. It was strengthening her with faith, hope and charity. Her heart felt contented and firm. Both the chirping sound of the birds and the bright light had helped to enhance her relationship with the divine.

In the case of participant D, she has experienced spirituality but did not recognize the spiritual experiences. She expressed her spiritual sensation in an implicit manner. Participant D saw a vision of a swan swimming on a lake, which gave her the feeling of being free and liberated from fear. She was not certain whether it was the power of hypnosis that helped to heal her or the spirituality was part of the process of healing. In another occasion, participant D felt the momentum of stability in the centre of her being, she did not recognize it as her inner life force. She was a little confused with the sensation until the counselor resonated with her. She began to acknowledge the integrated self.

Participant E was associating the bird with the divine who granted wisdom, calmness, comfort and happiness. She often had visions during trance. One of her visions was connected to her preparation for the change in her life. She saw a plant that was waiting for the flower to

blossom, it seemed going to burst which has brought the message that asked her to take up the risk. In another occasion, Participant E saw a purple circle within the light above her head; she defined it as the wisdom. She was going to dwell with it as her mind told her to follow her intuition because it was part of her wisdom. The integration of the inner energy and the universal life force was helping Participant E to recognize the association between the spiritual experiences with the self. The self was restoring her life force through the wisdom she has gained. Furthermore, there was the white light beaming on her left shoulder, participant E described it as the divine presence and she felt comfort in her heart.

In the case of participant F, she was struggling between her ego and her desired ideal home. Jung (1959, as cited in Singer, 1994) revealed that the ego's confrontation with figures of the unconscious is a counterpart in the inner experience of the ego's confrontation with people and situations in the environment. The process of the confrontation is directed towards achieving harmony with the totality of the being (p. 216). Her ego was aware that the intimate relationship with her boyfriend was unhealthy. By looking at her artwork, she realized her life with her daughter was simple and practical. For this reason, the bubbles of an ideal home have diminished. She was coming to terms with her 'self'. She did eventually break things off with her boyfriend after she gained courage from the power of the divine in conjunction with her determination. She has recognized the changes within when she felt the higher power strengthen her during therapy. Participant F also encountered a spiritual experience implicitly when she was touched by the suggestion "the father is embracing you like a child" during the healing white light therapy, she felt like crying. She acknowledged the "Father" as God the father in her faith. She started to have the feeling of surrendering to God. The concept of 'letting go and letting God' has started to imprint in her mind. She was feeling peace and she believed the higher power would heal her completely. Furthermore, in the ninth session, participant F was stimulated by a series of soothing music, she could hear people singing a hymnal to the Blessed Virgin Mary and when the image of Jesus emerged, she could hear the lyric 'wherever you are, wherever you go, Jesus is here'. These spiritual experiences have helped her to ease her fear of losing her daughter.

During therapy, participant G was experiencing the energy of a warming and loving sensation on the left side of her helping to liberate her from the feeling of rejection as a female child. In the following session, she saw a vision of a blossoming lotus and she felt her heart was liberated from her past hurts. She has gained inner freedom and she described her situation from this point of everything being fine once she lets go of the baggage in her life. In the fourth session, participant G revealed about the three chakra energies, namely the crown chakra, the throat chakra and the heart chakra. The connection of the chakra energies will help her to develop her resources. Whereas in the fifth session, participant G was seeing a grey-black energy turning into an orange energy which brought her the message that her spiritual life will be better if she disciplines herself to practice meditation. She described the movement of the energy with the color changing as being a reminder for her to know herself better.

From these sessions, we can see that the spiritual experiences were personal. It was therein lying on the participants to associate their spiritual experiences and interpret them. Spiritual experiences can be expressed explicitly or implicitly as long as it has brought messages that are beneficial to the participants. The spiritual experiences can also be described in the theistic or non-theistic manner in relation to the participant's spiritual affiliation (Briggs & Rayle, 2005).

THE SELF DEPICTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant A has depicted herself as a lighted candle. It has been transforming from a liquid substance to a solid substance. It is lighted and bringing brightness, giving warmth and light, sharing and sacrificing until everything has been accomplished.

Participant B has depicted herself as a sailing ship. With the image of the sailing ship, she has stated that in her journey in life, she has gone through many ups and downs. However, it will still be a movement leading her in the direction of God.

Participant C depicted herself as a little angel whose hand is holding a rosary. She has claimed that when she was in the therapeutic process, she felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. The hand, in the image, signified the happiness in her life. She imaged herself as a little angel; mild and cute. The rosary served to remind her to pray often and relax her mind, body and soul while also spending time in solitude to listen to the word of God.

Participant D depicted herself as a flying balloon at present and a hot air balloon in the future. As she has stated, the flying balloon is a representation of her current self; it is flying freely but it is fragile. However in the future, she will become the hot air balloon; providing expertise to others apart from herself. Participant D feels that she has progressed from the first session right up to the end, and feels pride that she has accomplished something.

Participant E depicted herself in various colors with an integrating blue sea wave line. She gave the depiction the theme of integration:

The sky blue color represents freedom.

The purple color represents wisdom.

The light purple color represents acceptance and meek.

The yellow color represents the power of God.

The red color represents a changing heart.

The orange color represents the life force, resources and energy.

Participant F depicted herself as a white female figurine with the red heart. She has given a theme for her depiction: An ordinary lady with an ordinary wish, creates a new self.

Participant G depicted herself as a blossoming Lotus flower emerging on a lake site. It is a sign of a renewed and enthusiastic life. This participant first approached the yoga philosophy and meditation as a way to simply entertain her friends; however, over time she realized that she has changed and she is getting in touch with herself and becoming mindful of who she is.

The spiritual expressions and experiences of each participant have been different and unique throughout the counseling process. All the seven participants were engaging with their spiritual self. The self depictions of the participants have signified that they were embracing the quality of self-actualization.

DISCUSSION

The expressions of various spiritualities could be described in theistic and non-theistic perspective. In this study, some participants who were with the sense of theism were often associating spiritual experiences with the higher power. The spiritual experiences can be described as the human desire for relationship with a transcendent power (Clinebell, 1995, as cited in Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999, p. 4). It was the higher power that was present in the counseling process and words could not capture the entire meaning of transcendence. In the study, some participants acknowledged the divine presence in the form of birds chirping, the movement of the life force, the feeling of warmth and the presence of the bright light. It was manifested especially in the healing white light therapy.

On some occasions, the participants described their spiritual experiences as something extraordinary happening inside of them. The spiritual experiences are not limited to involvement with the divine but it also includes transpersonal experiences, such as intuition, the out of space sensation, the inner mood of stability at the center of the being, the visions that carried messages and the movement of energy. It also involved other qualities such as faith, love, interconnectedness and non-attachment.

In this study, all the participants have acknowledged spirituality as something higher than the human self. The experiences of spirituality have served as a resource for the participants' self care system. The spiritual experiences have strengthened the participants to tolerate and cope with their negative emotions and thoughts. The ability to endure the negativities has brought the participants to capture some of their weaknesses. This has the effect of allowing the participants to experience inner freedom and inner peace. The experiences have enhanced the dynamic of the life force to form its equilibrium within. Insofar, the participants have gained more strength and support to take up the responsibilities to make their lives better.

The participants in this study have experienced spirituality in their unique way as a medium to connect with the self. It has involved the resolution in dealing with the shadow, the repressed characteristic of the conscious mind. When the unconscious becomes conscious, there will be a breakthrough in life. Some participants were able to break through the repressive barrier; such as participants A and F. They were able to bring balance between the shadow and the ego, the conscious mind. When they have experienced the breaking through process, the parts that were afflicted turned out to be the resources for healing and growth. This has generated more life force being released into the body and they were able to reach out to more parts of themselves. Eventually, they were able to find their direction and happiness in life.

The spiritual experiences in this research were all playing a positive role in the participants' lives. The participants have opened their hearts and took the courage to look inside their selves. Their spiritual experiences whether explicitly or implicitly expressed were improved qualitatively. This is relational to the participants' experiences of psychological as well as spiritual growth. The results of the research have shown that the participants were well connected and integrated with the spiritual self. Participants were able to express themselves with a self-portrait. The self was symbolized in the form of a lighted candle, a sailing ship, a little angel, a flying balloon, the integrated colors, a renewed ordinary lady and a blossoming lotus. Each symbol has symbolized an alchemical image that has gone through the process of becoming aware of oneself, of one's make-up

and they were on their way to discovering their inner true self (Gomori & Adaskin, 2009). The counseling process was indeed a platform for the participants to move on the path to individuation.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNSELING PRACTICE

The study has shown that the spiritual experiences in the counseling process are universal experiences. It involves the theistic spirituality as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and non-theistic as in Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. It is also involves humanism, as explicated by Abraham Maslow (1968) in his concept of self actualization, Carl Jung (1959, as cited in Singer, 1994, p. 137) in his model of individuation, has set forth the basics of the individuation process and the role of the human psyche, and Virginia Satir (1988) with her model of the iceberg metaphor in which the spiritual self represented the life force of a human person which connects with the universal energy. The results of the study have proven that spirituality can be found everywhere. It can be manifested at every moment in a human person's daily life. Hence, mental health professionals need to be sensitive and responsive to the spiritual diversity of their clients when utilizing spiritual elements as the resource for the clients' betterment. It is also important for the mental health professionals to examine their own personal social background, in order to be cautious of some prejudices, biases and stereotypes in their counseling practice.

In the discussion on the heuristic study, Hiles (2001) has encouraged the counselor to explore her personal spiritual beliefs and values. The counselor's personal philosophy toward spirituality may impact the counseling process. The counselor with a positive view and orientation towards spirituality is most likely to make a positive development for the wellbeing of the client. Thereby, it would be beneficial for the counselor to undergo the spiritual integrated education curricula. This educational training may include the role of spirituality, spiritual awareness, education on the world religions, and experiential training. Spiritual training should also include a personal belief system and experimental training in a laboratory setting. Hence, some efforts and research needs to be carried out to determine the spiritually integrated education curricula.

CONCLUSION

The study has illuminated the significant role and contribution of spiritual experiences in the counseling process. The spiritual experiences are expressed in theistic and non-theistic dimensions. The spiritual expressions in the theistic perspective are described with profound divine intervention, unlike the spiritual expressions in the non-theistic perspective involving the inner energy as well as the universal energy. Both spiritual expressions have signified the momentum of self-transformation and self-integration to a certain extent.

This study has made possible in-depth understanding of the individual's spirituality by utilizing the heuristic inquiry research methodology. The application of the reflexive process has drawn the connection of internal frame of reference that opened the door to tacit knowledge and intuition. The breaking through process has served as the platform for the spiritual self to engage with its own unique expression in the form of various genuine self depictions, this is to reveal that

counseling and psychotherapy have the ability to enhance personal spirituality with various levels of spiritual depth.

The results of the study have signified an era of development to confirm spirituality can be the healing tool for some clients who seek help. Moreover, counselors or therapists who are able to incorporate traditional and non-traditional approaches to address spirituality may help the clients to utilize their spirituality in their day to day living when spiritual practice is necessary.

APPENDIX A

The Expression of The Spiritual Experiences

| Themes and Patterns | 1. Explicit | 2. Implicit |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Participant A | - a red beating heart with dark smoky Background | - the white light overturning the dark spot - desolate spiritual experiences: the dark spot, feeling fear and cold |
| Participant B | - associating spirituality in the sand tray: image of harmony and communion | - out of space sensation |
| Participant C | - chirping sounds of the birds | - brightness in front of the eyes - feeling contented and firm within |
| Participant D | | - vision of a swan on a lake - momentum of stability |
| Participant E | - visions of a plant that is going to burst, a purple circle, a beaming white light on her left shoulder and top of her head - signified the bird as the divine who granted calmness, comfort and happiness | - feeling peace and freedom within - integration of her inner energy and the universal life force |
| Participant F | - soothing music: hymnal to Mary and the emergence of the image of Jesus, with the lyric 'whenever you are, whenever you go, Jesus is here' - gained courage from the ego state of the divine power | - touched by the divine Father in her faith - gaining insights |
| Participant G | - the connection of the chakra energies - vision of the blossoming lotus - grey black energy turning into an orange energy | - experiencing the energy of warmth and Love |

The Participants' Self Depictions

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Themes and Patterns | Vary from one participant to another participant |
| Participant A | - A lighted candle |
| Participant B | - A sailing ship |
| Participant C | - A little angel |
| Participant D | - A flying balloon |
| Participant E | - Various colours with integrated meanings |
| Participant F | - White female figurine with a red heart |
| Participant G | - A blossoming lotus |

REFERENCES

- Blom, R. (2006). *The handbook of Gestalt play therapy. Practical guidelines for child therapists*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Briggs, M. K., & Rayle, A. D. (2005). Incorporating spirituality into core counseling courses: Ideas for classroom application. *The Journal of Counseling and Values*, 50, 63—73.
- Clinebell, H. (1995). Counseling for spirituality empowered wholeness: A hope-centred approach. In M. A. Fukuyama & T. D. Sevig (Eds.), *Integrating spirituality into multicultural counseling* (p. 4). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gomori, M., & Adaskin, E. (2009). *Personal alchemy: The art of Satir Family Reconstruction*. Taiwan: Living Psychology.
- Hiles, D. (2001, October). *Heuristic inquiry and transpersonal research*. London, UK: Paper presented to CCPE.
- Hiles, D. (2002, October). *Narrative and heuristic approaches to transpersonal research and practice*. London, UK: Paper presented to CCPE.
- Kinnier, R. T., Dixon, A. L., Scheidegger, C., & Lindberg, B. (2009). Deliverance from the "dark night of the soul". *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education And Development*, 48, 110—119.
- Krug, O. T. (2009). James Bugental and Irvin Yalom. Two masters of existential therapy cultivate presence in the therapeutic encounter. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 49(3), 329-354.

Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Towards a psychology of being* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Moody, H. R., & Carroll, D. (1998). *The five stages of the soul*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Patterson, J. E., Williams, L., Edwards, T. M., Chamow, L., & G-Grounds, C. (2009). *Essential skills in family therapy, from the first interview to termination*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Rogers, C. R. (1995). *On becoming a person. A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Satir, V. (1988). *The new people making*. Mountain View, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Singer, J. K. (1994). *Boundaries of the soul: The practice of Jung's psychology*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Sperry, L., & Shafranske, E. P. (2009). *Spiritually oriented psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Van Deurzen, E. (2002). *Existential counseling and psychotherapy in practice* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.

West, W. (2007). *Working with spirituality in counseling*. Retrieved from <http://www.keele.ac.uk/media/keeleuniversity/facnatsci/schpsych/documents/counseling/conference/4thannual/williamwest.pdf>

Yalom, I. D. (2009). *The gift of therapy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.