

Reading 4-6

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THE SPIRITUALITY OF SUPERVISION

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Abstract

It may seem a bit strange to talk about the spirituality of clinical or counselling supervision connecting what, at first glance, seems to be very different procedures. On closer scrutiny, however perhaps they have quite a lot in common. Both are reflective processes, both about learning from doing, both about relating and connecting to and both about going within to look at what is happening internally.

This presentation will offer a model of supervision which has spirituality at its heart and which is not just about 'doing supervision' but about 'being a supervisor' and what that means in terms of values and relationships. It will draw a clear distinction between religion and spirituality and show how the latter, when placed within supervision, becomes an ethical and values base for personal and professional development in the helping professions. It will review the principles of spirituality as they apply to the supervision experience.

Spirituality is becoming a topical subject. Recently it has been connected to the workplace (Thorne, 1998), to secular professions (Thorne, 1997) and to psychotherapy (West, 2000). This chapter will attempt the same process only the focus and relationship here will be between supervision and spirituality.

Spirituality, like supervision, begins with questions and the quest for truth inevitably leads to questions. Since spirituality and supervision are both concerned with aspects of human behaviour then the first questions concern themselves with destructive human behaviour. Why did groups of people travel to France to support a football team during the World Cup and then systematically tear the place apart and beat up rival fans? Why did a group of white men attack a young black man in East London a few years ago and kill him because he was black? Why do we have yearly carnivals at hot spots in Northern Ireland where confrontation between two branches of the same Christian religion (dictates of which religion are about neighbourliness, love and forgiveness) spar up and often kill one another? What is happening that so many people turn to crime, that our prisons are overflowing, that many streets are unsafe to walk and that all sorts of crimes perpetrated against women? American citizens, when asked, "Do you think life will be better for your children than it was for you", have always answered "yes". Until 1988; for the first time a majority said "no" (Keen, 1994). Why do people, myself included, say that they are glad they do not have to start living their lives again and sense that the pressures faced by young people today far exceed what we had to face growing up in the 1960's and 1970's. Why this mistrust of the future?

The answers to the questions above about destructive human behaviour are very complex. It's too easy to say some people are bad, or mad, or deprived, or aggressive or born that way, or emotionally illiterate or whatever. However, might it be possible that all of the people involved in the situations mentioned above (and the examples above could be multiplied and adapted when other countries and societies are reviewed) are *not* in personal supervision. Some of them might be being supervised but not in a chosen, one-to-one or small group supervision where they reflect on life, how they live, what their values are, how they can grow and develop and what is healthy and unhealthy human behaviour. Is it possible that, if they were in supervision, they might not be involved in these kinds of destructive behaviour? Of course, there are people in clinical supervision who have abused their clients - clearly, being in supervision is no guarantee that a person cannot be destructive in respect of others. But leaving aside the simple

run, I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust and everything I do - even using so called good human relations techniques - will be perceived as manipulative. It simply makes no difference how good the rhetoric or even how good the intentions are: there is little or no trust, there is no foundation for permanent success." (Covey 1989:21)

That is quite a statement from a management consultant talking about other managers. Where is there talk like that in the City, in the banks, in industry, in business schools, on MBA course? Where managers gather, is there talk of spirituality, the interior life and getting it right inside yourself before trying to lead or manage others? Emerson's quotation captures the essence of this, "What you are shouts so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say". Covey's insight is that the message is not distinct from me, "You are the message" or "You are the message". We are supervision-in-action (supervisors-in-action) rather than functional supervisors. The best principle of education is that individuals learn from what they see rather than from what they hear. We do more readily what is modelled for us rather than what others tell us to do.

Inside-out supervision is about supervision as a way of life. Supervisors live the supervisory life, not just do something to others. The values of supervision are the values of life, the position and stance taken, the belief system underlying behaviour. Supervisor supervise themselves first of all before being supervisors to and of others. Living the supervisory life precedes being a supervisor of others in much the same way as spiritual directors have lived and been involved in what they are helping others find and discover for themselves.

In the light of this there are six propositions on the spirituality of the supervisory life to consider.

- 1 Becoming reflective
- 2 Learning, and learning how to learn
- 3 Becoming process oriented
- 4 Establishing healthy relationships
- 5 Learning connectedness
- 6 Becoming an interior person

1 Becoming reflective

Is there a direct proportion and relationship between reflecting on life and perpetrating violence? If life and living are pondered on, thought about, contemplated more, would that increase the chances of being more in harmony with people and reduce chances of hurting or destroying others? Reflecting on life pushes people inwards to know their questions and answers and values and queries and the connections between all these. Reflection can, of course, take place alone, or with others, in groups, in crowds. But reflection is a stance, a position vis-à-vis a vis the world. What does it mean?

Without reflection and contemplation the external becomes what is important. Martin Luther is said to have written, summarily, that a person without spirituality becomes his or her own exterior. O'Donoghue (1997) states that reflection and "thinking about" creates an opening in the surface world of things". That is why reflection is so important to life, not a reflection that is driven by the need to have answers but a reflection that sets out to learn the questions, understanding that there are not always answers and rarely set answers. Not to reflect on life is to live by scripts written by other people, being predetermined. It is to live a co-dependent life, depending on others for answers to questions I don't even ask and are not my questions anyway. As the old joke says, "You know you are co-dependent when you're dying and someone else's life passes in front of your eyes". The spiritual journey begins when we turn away from our standard answers and turn towards fresh questions. The religious quest is the opposite of the spiritual quest. Keen (1994) captures it well in the distinctions he makes between religion and spirituality:

first time or in Kierkegaard's words, "You live life forward, you understand it backwards". Knowledge can be accumulated without becoming wise, age is no guarantee against stupidity and being powerful does not necessarily equate with knowing. Learning at the heart of life is a difficult philosophy - it entails being alert for surprises, willing to change, open. So much is missed because the opportunity of being surprised is gone. There is no wonder, amazement, curiosity, and uncertainty. The Edinburgh Institute of Contemporary Art had a notice at its entrance, which read,

"As you come into this centre please bring your gallery bag with you: In your gallery bag you will find:

- a new pair of eyes: a mind's eye because real eyes are not enough
- a new brain
- a special camera
- lots of questions
- a pair of lips (preferably smiling)
- a tape measure"

A learning lifestyle is what spirituality is about. Religion is for those who need to know, who require answers, who want to do the same thing over and over again: spirituality is for those who want to find new paths, do different things. And that is what supervision is about. Good supervisors live with the polarities:

- ◇ a definite way versus keeping it vague and open
- ◇ finding it myself versus inheriting it from others
- ◇ individual versus communal
- ◇ subjective versus objective
- ◇ one way (one truth) versus many ways (many truths)

In *Anam Cara*, the title of a recent book on Celtic spirituality, the author, John O'Donoghue (1997) has a very striking image of the human soul:

"It is helpful to visualise the mind as a tower of windows. Sadly, many people remain trapped at the one window, looking out every day at the same scene in the same way. Real growth is experienced when you draw back from that one window, turn and walk around the inner tower of the soul and see all the different windows that await your gaze. Through these different windows, you can see new vistas of possibility, presence and creativity. Complacency, habit and blindness often prevent you from feeling your life. So much depends on the frame of vision - the window through which we look" (O'Donoghue 1997:163,4).

The spirituality of supervision is about being curious, fresh and ready for surprises. The qualifications for being a supervisor of surprises are:

- ◇ a teller of stories and jokes
- ◇ a giver of little gifts
- ◇ one who smiles and one who cries
- ◇ a dreamer
- ◇ one who surprises and is surprised
- ◇ one who has no avarice

Spiritual people are feedback-people: feedback is received and given because in feedback we learn and grow. We welcome life-giving feedback from others that helps us grow and learn and remain forever young. For spirituality is about being young: there is no old age in spirituality.

Finally, before every supervision session check the batteries on your Supervisor Bullshit Detector to make sure the Detector is in good working order.

Trusting the process is at the heart of spirituality. The process is not to control but it to allow to happen and to celebrate. We do what we can and we allow the process to take over. Then strange things happen: clients we have given up on change, a new trainee works miracles where old timers have failed, the impossible and the unthinkable begin to take place.

4 Establishing healthy relationships

The spirituality of supervision is about healthy and healing relationships. Carl Rogers was right - healthy relationships create healthy people. But healthy relationships need to be established and sustained and nurtured. Trying to care for our relationships and ourselves too often results in unbalance. Kottler (1986) writes of this imbalance:

"I have always found it ironic that clients who pay for my time, people whom I would rarely chose as friends, nevertheless receive 95 per cent of my attention, my focused concentration. Yet, the people I truly love the most get me in diluted form, distracted and self-involved. As I am writing these words my son calls my name. I put him off, 'Be with you in a minute. Let me finish what I am doing'. Now I would never do that with a client whose ramblings were interrupting an important thought. I give my best away to people who pay for my time. Must my son make an appointment to get my undivided attention"

The spirituality of supervision says: Look after your loved ones as you look after your clients, look after yourself as well as you look after your clients.

Good supervisors patrol the boundary walls of relationships to ensure that they remain healthy. They know how easy it is to become abusive, punitive, game-playing, hurtful etc (Page, 2000). They know and practice the skill of how to be an individual and still not be ego-centred.

James Fowler and Sam Keen (1978) take a different stance towards developmental theory that might be more applicable to supervision and its values. They talk of five stages within this development:

Child:	characterised by being with others but being dependent
Rebel:	against others (how can you be a saint if you have never been a sinner)
Adult:	co-operating with others
Outlaw:	on being alone and being shocking
Lover/fool:	nevertheless.... I trust

Understanding these stages, through which both supervisor and supervisee travel, alone and together, in one-to-one relationships and groups, allows supervisors and supervisees to stay with each other and their processes. This is the spiritual journey as well as the supervisory one.

5 Learning connectedness

Both spirituality and supervision look for connections. A few years ago a book entitled "The In-between God" was written by a theologian in which he argued that god existed between people, he was at the in-between places. God, he surmised, connected people to people, culture to culture, people to environment and earth. Spirituality, like counselling and supervision, is about seeing, maintaining and holding connections. Martin Buber suggests we move to the "sphere of the between", from which vantage point we can question the healthiness of any religion, any spirituality and any supervision that does not purport to be a "bridge" to others.

Principles are like lighthouses: they give us bearings. What are the principles of both spirituality and supervision:

- fairness (equity and justice): no social or psychological exclusions
- integrity and honesty which create trust
- human dignity for all people
- service (making a contribution)
- excellence (without perfectionism)
- potential (we have enormous powers of growth)
- apologies, if and when needed

Spirituality is about realism, it is about letting go in order to live. There is an old saying from medieval times that can still be a contemporary guide about living life, "The monk", it says, "begins to live the morning he wakes up and realises he'll never be a saint or never be abbot". Prather (1972) puts it well too:

"If I had only....

forgotten future greatness
and looked at the green things and the buildings
and reached out to those around me
and smelled the air
and ignored the forms and the self-styled obligations
and heard the rain on the roof
and put my arms around my wife
.....and it is not too late"

Supervision is a form of retreat: leaving our professional world, leaving our work for a while, we come to "stop and listen" as Thomas Merton once replied when asked to define spirituality. Stopping and listening is the greatest spiritual act of all: listening to me, to my clients, to my supervisees, to my supervisors, to the organisation. We retreat in order to return different and, of course, when we are different so are others. Changes in me herald changes in others, changes in others herald changes in me. We are on a constant intermingling and interconnected pilgrimage, a journey to sacred places, not because the place of itself may be necessarily important but because pilgrimages are always about finding oneself, not inevitably getting to the destination.

The message and lesson at the heart of spirituality, and of supervision, is simple, in the last analysis you cannot be someone else, you only live and are and relate with the fullness of your humanity, not by conforming, but by becoming you. Go rummage around within.

Conclusion

In summary, the spirituality of supervision is about having a cat asleep in your arms. "I'm holding this cat in my arms so it can sleep, and what more is there" (Prather, 1972). At that moment you can do nothing else, you are absolved from doing anything else. It should be declared unprofessional, unethical and probably illegal to do anything that might disturb the cat. How can you do anything else - when there is a cat asleep in your lap that is the end of the story. Cat-lovers know this. Others, unfortunately, don't and disturb what should not be disturbed.