

Spirituality at Work: Usefulness of Analogy and Questions

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Abstract—Work, like all tasks of social living, is the movement connecting the individual longing and laboring to oneself, others, and the community. Interestingly, the work place is often dominated by the perceptions of necessity and productivity. The emotional and spiritual needs of our work are, for the most part, ignored. Career professionals, therefore, are challenged to seek creative ways to consciously facilitate the spiritual connection for individuals who are engaged in transformative processes of career development and decision making. In this article, the authors, reflecting on the premises of career construction theory and Adlerian psychology, present the use of analogy and Socratic questions with career transitioners in private practice and counselor training settings.

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Philosophers have taught valuable lessons about purpose and meaning in our live(s)/work for centuries. Work, often seen as a secular space, is in fact a spiritual pathway through life in which we find expression of our self and our love for life and the commonweal (Yang and Waller, 2005). Work, like all tasks of social living, is the movement connecting the individual longing and laboring to oneself, others, and the community. Interestingly, the work place is often dominated by the perceptions of necessity and productivity. The emotional and spiritual needs of our work are, for the most part, ignored. Career professionals, therefore, are challenged to seek creative ways to consciously facilitate the spiritual connection for individuals who are engaged in transformative processes of career development and decision making. In this article, the authors, reflecting on the premises of career construction theory and Adlerian psychology, present the use of analogy and Socratic questions with career transitioners in private practice and counselor training settings.

Work Spirituality: What Is It

Spiritual worldviews (i.e. theism, atheism, and agnosticism) are embedded in various traditions of psychology and counseling. A literature

review suggests that spirituality is not only discussed in the classic writings of various theoretical orientations (e.g. Freud, Jung, Adler, James, and Maslow) but also recognized in contemporary theoretical frameworks of faith development, systems' theory, cognitive theory, social learning theory, narrative theory, and the positive psychology (Chua, 2003; Kane, 2003; Kern & Curlette, 2004; Miovic, 2004; Moss, 2002; Poll & Smith, 2003; Powers, 2003). Furthermore, Miller (2002) stated that eastern spiritual traditions like Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Zen also have influences on Western psychology, medicine and counseling practices.

Although there seems to be a long history and recent resurgence of interest in work spirituality (Goodman in Capuzzi, 2006), there is little agreement on definitional expressions of what spirituality is as related to work. Spirituality is a unique and subjective experience and therefore, very difficult to define. It is often regarded as a journey of finding meaning, the breath that brings us to life and a space for sacred connections (Leibrich, 2002). Spirituality, as defined as by Bloch and Richmond (1998), is "the ability to find communion with that which is the deepest within ourselves and the greatest outside ourselves" (p.18). A trans-theoretical pattern is noticeable in literature recognizing spiritual fulfillment as present when the individuals experience a sense of harmony or unity internally and externally. Dimensions from which harmony evolves are centeredness, connectedness, being, believing, belonging, becoming, and transcendence. The challenge remains as to how career counselors facilitate their clients' attainment and/or restoration of such space for harmony in the face of tenuous nature of work life where they are sometimes being required to recover from sudden change or even crisis?

Accessing Individual Spiritual Perspectives and Stories

In preparation for writing this article, the first author qualitatively examined her data base of clients seen within roughly the last 7 to 10 years of her 19 years in practice. To determine which client issues were of a spiritual nature, the career concerns they outlined on their intake forms were reviewed. Seventeen percent of the clients' stated concerns contained

subjective words like; *enjoy, like, satisfaction, happy* and an additional 16% used words like *purpose, meaning, make a difference, love*. All these words implied that the clients were seeking something more than additional money, better hours, less traveling and the like. They were seeking something not so easily measured quantitatively, represented by what they do, but rather something connected to the intangible essence

of what makes them who they are. It is equally interesting that despite the fact that where over 65% of the clients included in this data did not choose to declare any such subjective concerns for their coming to career counseling, my best guess, necessary for not having gleaned this data from the information in each and every client's file, is that perhaps 95% of them ultimately declared themselves to be spiritual individuals.

Work is an individual's expression of his/her inner and outer landscapes where he/she finds creativity, identity, memories, calling, significance, and meaning (Yang, 2003). Conditions of work are capable of generating the individual feelings that are indicative of happenstances hindering or facilitating the individual's career development. Internal and/or external barriers exist at the work place to produce feelings of emptiness, loss of values, hopelessness, longing for psychological or spiritual fulfillment. Emotions often seen at the work place are passion, pride, contentment, curiosity, frustration, jealousy, anxiety, anger, hurts, and hostility. For some individuals, some of these emotional tendencies are rooted in personality styles, for others, responses to contextual stressors. Diagnosis and treatment models with a medical mindset or traditional vocational choice theories are often inadequate to address the needs of the individuals who are faced with the external impediments caused by the vast changing work structure, natural disasters, and the injustices and oppression rooted in institutions and value loaded cultural contexts. Career and mental health professionals alike are in need of seeking alternative approaches while assisting client who are making the adjustment in response to voluntary or involuntary career transitions.

Career construction theorist, Savickas (2005) provides a framework of "Career as Story". From the career construction perspective, the individuals impose their life themes on their vocational behavior and "use their vocational personality to adapt to a sequence of job changes while remaining faithful to oneself and recognizable by others" (p.1). The authors believe that use of analogy can facilitate the telling and gathering of stories and provide the individual a space for discovery and re-connection within oneself and restoration of one's feeling of significance. The focus on life theme in career construction theory echoes the life style construct in Adlerian psychology. The individual life style is the subjective view of the self and the world that enables one's thinking, acting, and when the individual is confronted with problems and challenges that require the use of one's total and mental emotional capacities. Life style can be best assessed using open ended questions. According to Yang and Waller (2005), the individual's insight uncovered by seeking answer to work related Socratic questions can modify ones attitude that allows

encouragement and restoration of his/her faith in our potential to cope with and overcome most of work life problems.

In the following the authors share their experiences and career transitioners' insights in career counseling and counselor education settings. The first author worked in a private practice capacity serving mostly mid-life professionals who were mostly white Caucasians. The second author was a counselor educator working with mostly non-traditional African American adult students. Personal permissions were obtained from the individuals who owned the original statements with the understanding that their identity was carefully disguised. The purpose is to demonstrate via story telling and self reflections, how using analogy and open-ended questions may enable counselors to be active participants in their journey of searching for meaning for work and the resulted career transitions.

The Lamp Analogy

Where it is the first author's belief that individuals are all intended to feel/have the experience of being *lit up*, the lamp analogy is offered to provide her clients with an illustration of that feeling to which they might aspire in seeking new life and/or work opportunities. The analogy is also helpful for determining whether or not scenarios from a client's work history are appropriate examples to use when completing career assessments. That is, how do they know that the experience they are recalling is one in which they were being the best they could be, one in which they were having a *lamp lit* experience.

Before explaining the lamp analogy to any client a simple question can be helpful in understanding their belief system. The question is: Do you, in any way, consider yourself to be a spiritual individual? They can answer that they are spiritual and religious, spiritual and not necessarily religious or not spiritual at all. In fact, if the client does not consider himself/herself to be at all spiritual more scientific terms can be used to discuss the *energy needed to light the lamp* that would be, for others, representative of *spirit*. This leads to a discussion of the most important component required to light the lamp. Isn't it true that if/when an electrical appliance or electronic device isn't working, that we first check to make sure that we have a source of power/energy. That is, "is the 'thing' we are trying to operate/work with plugged in?", or "Are the batteries working?" That's where this analogy began.

It was over ten years ago when working on an exercise identifying transferable skills with a female client whom we'll refer to as K that this author asked the client to identify the skills she not only performed well

but enjoyed using. What were the skills she used to perform certain tasks that would motivate her, generate energy for her, and cause her to lose track of time? Her response to me was, “Do you mean like when you feel ‘plugged in?’” And, this author of course said, “That’s it! Can I use that?” The following client stories reflect the use of a “lit up” analogy.

L, a female, a sole proprietor, entrepreneur was a decorative painter using her gifts and talents when she entered career counseling. She was quite unsettled as to whether or not this was the right career for her. She was, at that time judging herself by a financial measure, the six figure income she’d earned as an account executive of a large group insurance company versus the profit she was yet to make in her two year old business. And yet, somewhere inside there was a disconnection with that measure. L knew she was ready to affirm or not, the direction she had taken. She believed that her previous career was not right for her as she had felt unfulfilled, as though she ‘was a square peg in a round hole’. You see, for nearly six years prior to her leaving her corporate position she’d ‘prayed for some change’. For L., the workaholic, who’d labored 60-80 hours a week for nine years, her prayers were answered. She was diagnosed with colon cancer. To her credit she did a lot of work healing physically, grew stronger in her spiritual beliefs and also did a lot of work on her own to develop a more fulfilling lifestyle including the training necessary to build a new career. However, despite the fact that L. was doing something she loved to do, something wasn’t right. There were short circuits in her lamp and those lapses of energy caused her to sometimes lose the connection to her source of energy as well.

The lamp analogy worked for L. She appreciated being able to address the spiritual part of her in the context of the career counseling process. As we recently looked back at the process she stated, “For somebody who does have a spiritual connection, it is impossible to separate career and spirit. Whether conscious or unconscious, it is what I believe and that connection affects all choices in life. Work is one of the most important choices and is a part of who you are. If I was not able to have a counselor to understand that and be a part of the equation, I would not have been able to continue.”

The analogy opened the door through which spirituality was invited to enter into the career counseling process. As the client and the counselor addressed and moved beyond the fears and self-esteem issues that had short circuited her efforts to successfully grow her business and focused on her natural gifts and talents, she recognized their true source, the source of her energy, and her connection to spirit. With renewed faith in herself, L has now completed a year of business with a profit. L’s spirituality

helped her to move beyond the status identity she had worked so hard to attain in the corporate world that still left her feeling empty. Her spirituality was also important to her working through a period of, in her words, ‘zero self esteem’ while her fledgling business struggled, finally arriving at a place where she viewed herself as being “wired as an artist.”

C, a male client, entered career counseling with the stated concerns “Travel too much. Don’t want to be on the front line anymore. Want to do something fun that can make a difference in other’s lives.” He had been in health care information systems sales for eight years. He wasn’t enjoying it anymore. He felt as though he was ‘hunting for new prospects’. It was “eating at his soul.” Looking back at the process during a recent interview he remembered wondering if “he could ever achieve enough?” and that the answer to that question was, “No.” He now sees that time as a struggle with the question; “What was he after, ‘success or significance?’” This is not unlike the struggle alluded to by Garcia-Zamor (2003), “A tension between rational goals and spiritual fulfillment now haunts some workplaces around the world. It is not enough that workers feel productive and effective (p.360). Results of a management survey affirm that a majority wants to find meaning in their work. Perhaps it was not so incidentally for C. It was helpful to take the time for the counseling process, to allow time away from the normal routine, and to gain distance from the triggers to his “success” perspective. For C, the frenetic nature of his life was generally “fear and greed driven, chaotic and certainly not peaceful.” Leibrich (2000) certainly describes the space from which it seemed C was coming. “People rush around so frenetically and noisily, maybe they are scared to stand still. Scared of silence. Scared of space. Scared of their inner world of what they might find there p.156). It was important for C to enter that space which Leibrich identifies as spirituality, “Spirituality is a space where I find meaning and peace....It is the space I go into when I need to find meaning in my life” (p.146).

By being able to stand in his spiritual space and focusing on the source of his energy, (the author often likes to focus on how the client is fed in more ways than via his or her pay check.) C discovered that he felt plugged in the lamp that he was became “lit up” when he was ‘in relationship’ with others. His gift was one of being a facilitator or liaison between people (e.g. between his company and his clients). As a result he only found it necessary to change his company not his career. His new work environment afforded him the opportunities to establish rapport, and cultivate customer relationships rather than, as he put it, ‘hunting them down’. He felt he was more in a position of giving than taking, which ironically resulted in his ultimately, making more money than in his previous position.

P, a female, came to the process about five years ago stating simply that she was “looking for a change.” She in fact fantasized about quitting her job and reported experiencing a recurring pattern of heavy duty work at a sacrifice. She was employed by a major corporation in a variety of positions of successively more responsibility for over 10 years. Career counseling consisted of several sessions over a span of four years as she transitioned to become a fulltime independent contractor and pursue a graduate degree in Organizational Development. Recalling her career counseling experience, P stated, “When I first came...I was definitely ‘running away’ from what was, at the time, my job.... I had little awareness of how toxic my current work environment was for me”. P was definitely experiencing a disconnection between her doing self and her being. She went on to state how she appreciated the openness of our sessions to her ‘finding and pursuing (her) mission in life.” And that she felt supported in ‘figuring out what I could do that would be truly aligned with who I am, spiritually, emotionally, and technically. By this I mean, a career that is true to my values, and my talents and also frees me to be and do what I want outside of work; my life and work become an unbroken thread of energy.”

Energy for the Bulb

The counselor finds that where most individuals enter the career counseling process in search of the *bulb*, the task, one’s life’s work, they will never feel lit up if they don’t have a source of *energy* to feed them. It is important to provide a space in the counseling process that allows for both components to be addressed. In fact, a career counselor is more than a technician focused on the match of demonstrated competencies to career opportunities in the job search process. It is the career counselor’s responsibility to help the client see that the lamp is “switched on.” One must truly intend to light the lamp, that is, open the channel of energy to the bulb or it will indeed sit dark. “Intention is connected to the soul’s purpose”(Toms & Toms, 1998, p. 115).

Also counselors have the obligation to address any possible *short circuits* we might observe in the lamp that is our client. The short circuits I liken to the adaptive thought patterns or behaviors we develop in response to fears which are certainly in the counselor’s realm to explore. Should they exist, any energy from the source, the client’s sense of spirit, might surely be diverted from the intended target, the bulb, and deny the client the lamp lit experience we are precisely trying to facilitate. A case for helping our clients ensure their continued *flow of energy* is supported by Sinetar (1996), “Your inventive inclination flows from the realization that

your consciousness is the fertile, formless soil in which you sow seeds...of the fruit you desire. Your imagination is your faithful servant. Don’t serve it by letting fear pictures control your emotions or your future” (p.39). In summary, the first author liken the power source to one’s being plugged into their sense of spirit, that which provides them the energy that allows them to feel lit up, the energy which needs to be channeled into the bulb that allows the circuit to be completed and the energy to be shared with/contributed to those who would benefit.

Whereas early on in this “work of my life” the first author experienced the career counseling process as that in-between space in a doorway where our inner and outer worlds come flowing, merging or even crashing together, she forged her practice mission statement as “*Integrating Who We Are With What We Do.*” It then follows for me that spirituality as defined by Bloch and Richmond (1998) is “the ability to find communion with that which is the deepest within ourselves and the greatest outside ourselves”(p.18). She feels strongly that career professionals can do a great service for our clients by inviting spirituality into our client-counselor relationship. As the majority of her clients consider themselves to be spiritual individuals, their exploring and expressing their spirituality though their work unites them in a way that race, politics, economics and religion divide them, and affords them the opportunity to “plug into”, to connect with, the world in which they seek to work through their energizing, mobilizing, animating force, their spirits. Sinetar (1996) stated that “*Animating essence* is the spirit, the spirituality of full personhood” (p.29). Leibrich (2002) stated, “Sometimes, it is too hard and I am lost or locked out from myself. Then maybe someone else can show me the way home through my connecting with them and their spiritual self” (p.149).

Socratic Questions and the Shadowed Imagination

As Wilson observed “in the development of her successful clients...as they moved into their triumph”, so has the first author seen L,, C, and P, the achieved individuals, who worked in the career counseling process as they followed a pattern of spiritual transformation. Basically, these individuals were “plugged deeply into their intuition for guidance.”(Wilson, 2004, p.135-136). To other career transitioners, the spiritual awakening their career journey took very different shapes and forms. Most adult students of the second authors were just beginning to achieve their dreams and have different career stories in which imagination of a lifework was shadowed not only by the inner barriers of self-doubts, fears of loss as well as the external impediments such as oppression rooted in institutions and the biased cultural contexts.

The authors believe that spirituality is most beneficial under the most unfavorable life circumstances. The undercurrent of work problems often signals the individual's quest for meaning and spiritual direction. Open ended questions that are Socratic in nature can challenge and encourage the individuals to gain information and unravel insight for work life problems and eventually facilitate life work development (Yang & Waller, 2005). The second author worked with the adult career transitioner who returned for graduate school training in counseling. She often asked the counselors-in-training to develop a personal identity paper in which students were supported to seek answers to the Socratic questions of their own construction. For students who were unable to formulate their own inquiries, she provided them with such generic questions as *"How did aspects of your identity develop as a part of your conscious self? How did people/events/places/ race/gender/ethnicity/class affect you in profound ways, for good or bad? What aspects of your identity might hinder or promote your ability to become a professional counselor? Was there a critical incident in your life that helped you decide to pursue becoming a professional counselor?"*

M is an African American female in her mid 30's, unemployed mainly due to her problems of cerebral palsy. In response to her questions, *"Why me? Is my illness part of a larger design? What is the purpose of my living?"* M found the ultimate insight of her disability, abuses, unemployment, childhood abandonment and challenges of single motherhood. "The most obvious aspect of my life would be my disability known as cerebral palsy. Because I've been assigned this body, my perspective could easily have been *"should I blame for my circumstances?"* But, on the contrary, I have acquired an appreciation for how my life story is unfolding. This is because I realize that having a mind, spirit, and soul that are housed in a body that is uniquely woven together, has taught me and is still teaching that my presence on Earth has to go beyond what most people consider to be the American dream. I have to accept that my creator has plans for my life, which only I can fulfill. Because I have come to understanding and accept this honor I have made a conscious effort to appreciate every day for the gift it brings."

W is a white female who returned to school as her children entered preschool ages. After 7 years and in a state of being overwhelmed with all that she needed to do to complete her master's degree, she reflected: "Sometimes it's a little scary....and I ask myself..."*"Do I know what I'm doing?"* and I find I have not ONLY found my way...but I have found this force inside myself, this driving force, that gives me hope and a sense of purpose and such complete fulfillment. WOW! I'm sitting here with tears

falling down my face and realizing this is where I needed to be....I feel as a part of me that was small and withered has been infused with life saving water and is becoming full and smooth and is beginning to grow and flourish... I'm paying attention and being mindful of the thoughts and feelings inside myself...reflecting on them...giving them space....letting them surface and giving them life. And I am so thankful that I am here right now..."

D was a mother of two young children who had to hold the same job for the past 8 years mainly for financial necessity. She felt as if life had more for her beyond her current position. As D began to get restless and uneasy at work, she began to question the meaning for working, *"Why am I staying in a job that offers no passion or dignity?"* After she started meditation and prayer, D realized that "the problem was not the job but it was me! I needed to change. I needed to change my perspective on life and work". D recognized that it is the discouragement of her work that moved her forward to becoming a school counselor. The skills such as persistence and flexibility she is developing in dealing with her current struggles are exactly the same skills she is required to have in order to work in public schools in the future.

For M, W, & D, the vocational journey is not about spirituality as the answer but about spirituality as the questions. And in this questioning, they noticed the deepening of their own spiritual experience at work. In her 18 years of counselor education, the second author constantly asked herself: *"How will I know whether my efforts helped or hindered the students' learning?"* The use of Socratic questions allowed her to listen to what life stories students are likely to bring with them. The students' stories in turn allowed her to see how she can help the counselors-in-training reconstruct newer stories as they grapple and work through their intellectual, behavioral, and or/emotional challenges ranged from personal health to professional practice.

Conclusion

"Finding one's true career or calling, an enlightening and fulfilling path mocking and haughty to the laboring J-O-B, often means embarking on a journey that is markedly spiritual, introspective, and highly personal" (Agenlian, 2005, p.3). In this article, the authors researched literature and found it encouraging that newer models of integrating spirituality and work include career as story (Savickas, 2005) and the concept of a competent workplace that stresses career decision making approaches such as learned self-efficacy, optimism, planned happenstance, positive uncertainty, and managing changes (Goodman, 2006). The authors attempted to share the

stories that illuminated the benefits of spiritual insight for the individuals who acquired courage, hope, and harmony in times of transitions and adversities at the work place. Creative use of analogy and questions help the individuals in their attainment and restoration of spiritual connection at work. The lamp analogy and Socratic questions brought insight and connected the abovementioned individuals to source of energy, encouraged creativity and communication, affirmed ethical behaviors, promoted the efficiency of problem solving, and unleashed their potentials. The authors are grateful for those they served for their life lessons of how work became the individuals' dialogue mediating between voices from within and the demands from the outer world. The authors are forever more convinced that attending to work spirituality provides, career professionals and career transitioners the like, the infinite inner space for storing and restoring their life work.

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