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Issues and Insights

Using Religious Studies Theory to Access the Sacred in Counseling

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This article explores the ideas of Mircea Eliade, the works of other classic religious studies scholarship, and traditional religious practices for insights and strategies that can be used in contemporary counseling settings. The ideas are not intended to be proscriptive or comprehensive, but rather are offered as a way to more explicitly and intentionally access the potential of the sacred (as it is understood in classic religious studies texts) in counseling work. The authors focus on 4 specific areas: sacred space, sacred time, rebirth/return, and initiation/rites of passage.

Keywords: sacred, religion, religious studies, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*

Although many counselors acknowledge and explicitly utilize religious and spiritual concepts in their practice, many may not recognize the extent to which the classic texts in religious studies provide conceptual support for their practices. More important, counselors may not be aware that structuring some of their client practices based on these ideas can deepen and extend the healing and wellness of their clients (Worthington, Hook, Davis, & McDaniel, 2011). To this end, we apply concepts from classic religious studies texts, particularly Mircea Eliade's (1987) *The Sacred and the Profane*, to our contemporary counseling practice settings. This particular text has been cited thousands of times in the literature on comparative religions, and particular observations of Eliade's, such as the *eternal return*, have become a truism in the study of religions. In this article, concepts from classic religious studies, such as sacred space, sacred time, rebirth/return, and initiation/rites of passage, are provided in the context of traditional religious practice, followed by examples of how those ideas naturally integrate into contemporary counseling practice.

Sacred Space

Most people recognize and respond to sacred spaces. Every culture has carved out unique locations and declared them to be holy. Often, such spaces have

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explicit architectural characteristics and liberal use of symbols and images to denote the sacred purpose of the building or area. For example, in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, the Western (Wailing) Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are profound sacred spaces for adherents of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Religious tourists seem to sense or understand that sacred space demands (often with instructions in multiple languages) a specific type of respectful behavior. Generally, a hushed and reverent use of language is expected. It is also not uncommon to have dress codes that reflect modesty. Adherents to the religion may feel a deep sense of connection, meaning, and peace. Others may feel the draw of the architecture—the grand sweep of the cathedral pulling their thoughts and feelings to the transcendent and sublime, or (outside of monotheistic constructs) the mystery of Stonehenge rising above the plains in Wiltshire, England.

People are generally aware of space that has been consecrated as holy. Even the most humble church or mosque is clearly marked and identified (unless there are political or safety reasons for hiding the identity of the building) and generally respected. Damaging a religious building is always viewed as uniquely significant, and often heinous. Defacing or denigrating a religious structure is perceived and felt as deeply painful to those who hold it holy, and in the U.S. legal system, such an act is classified as a hate crime. In addition, most cultures have other "secular" structures and areas that are also identified as sacred. It is not an accident that the words carved above the seated Lincoln in his Washington, DC, memorial begin with "In this temple." The same type of respectful behavior is often seen at sites such as the battlefields of Gettysburg and Normandy or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as in the National Cathedral.

The boundaries of such sacred spaces are often clearly delimited, marked for all observers by signs and symbols. Signs are items or representations that have been given a sacred meaning by cultural tradition (Alp, 2010), such as a gravestone or even the psychoanalyst's couch, places for reverence and retrospection. Alternatively, symbols "translate human situations into cosmological terms" (Eliade, 1959, p. 103). The meaning of symbols exists beyond human attributions, just as a seed is synonymous with life, birth, and potentiality regardless of whether a person actively plants the seed or merely knows that it grows (Rennie, 1996).

Eliade (1987) stated that the sacred opens communication to the transcendent, and people need that opening if they are to have access to the meaning in their lives. However, not everyone responds respectfully, or even deeply, to sacred space. But even when they are disrespected, politicized, or tied to oppression, sacred spaces continue to provide an invitation to the transcendent and the important. The defilement or discussion about creating new sacred spaces forces one to consider that which is greater than oneself (Linenthal, 2011). And, as the recent desecration of sacred spaces has shown (e.g., the Charleston church shooting in 2015, the Holocaust Memorial

in Boston in 2017), the mere knowledge of such a violation (and all that it represents) may trigger psychospiritual turmoil in clients.

Counseling clinics and offices can also be conceptualized and designed as sacred space. Morgan (2007) came to this conclusion when he wrote: "I regard the work of counseling as a sacred privilege, and I see both the place where I work and the counseling relationship itself as a sacred space" (p. 31). Freud (1927/1961) explicitly rejected religion and the sacred, yet his famous office contained many examples of archeological artifacts and religious art. Obsessed with these signs and symbols, he may have intended their presence as merely metaphorical, with the uncovering of psychoanalysis likened to the digging of archeology, but their placement may have been intentional as they could serve to link his patients' contemporary problems to the broad sweep of human experience (Scully, 1997). Perhaps (unconsciously) Freud understood that, along with making the unconscious conscious, healing occurred when his patients felt the connection between their private, individual pain and misery and larger, more universal, and transcendent meaning systems. Indeed, Freud's late work indicates a deep interest in understanding his clients' symptoms and conflicts through the perspective of history, myth, and religious traditions (Phillips, 2014).

From the "Safe Space" stickers on the door of a school counselor's office to pictures of the sunrise across calm oceans on the agency walls, most counselors recognize the importance of the messages they communicate in their offices and clinics. Counselors are often trying to signal acceptance, respect, healing, and calm. Counselors may have particular toys (i.e., miniatures, sand tray, puppets) to welcome children and facilitate healing through play therapy (Landreth, 2012). Furniture is often chosen and arranged for both practical and symbolic communication purposes. Two chairs seem to say, "Sit here, across from me so that we can meet face to face." Or counselors might suggest, "Sit anywhere you feel comfortable" to family members so that they can physically express their alliances and tensions (Minuchin, 1974).

Most counselors have sensitivity to the importance of their therapeutic space and the messages of openness and healing they hope to convey. In a qualitative analysis of psychologists' intended spatial messaging, Antony and Watkins (2007) elaborated on how those therapeutic (and functional) needs are commonly addressed through furniture, lighting, curios, and imagery. Classic religious studies literature suggests that the potential of an office space to facilitate healing could benefit even more by moving beyond natural or intuitive aesthetic sense; counselors can intentionally design, organize, and furnish offices and clinics to accentuate their sacred potential. As clients pass through the threshold between the waiting area and the office, counselors have the opportunity to create a therapeutic space that will assist in transporting clients from the painful conflict and chaos of the regular world to a place of healing, wholeness, and fullness. Creating a sacred atmosphere is obviously a function of the behavior and tone of the counselor. In addition to facilitative skills, much of counselor training focuses on how to develop such a helpful and healing style. Just as is seen

in churches, mosques, or synagogues, attention to the physical environment of the counseling space can also be a healing resource.

Eliade (1987) asserted that sacred space provides a fixed point, an orientation to the transcendent, and a place where communication to the transcendent could occur. People have a strong tendency to choose and retain fixed points. Consider how students almost always find and stay in "their" seats in the classroom. People also tend to have favorite seats around the kitchen table, in the family room, at staff meetings, in movie theaters, and in places of worship. One needs to respect and try to attend to this human need for fixed places.

Counselors should work to ensure that "the view" from that one fixed spot signals wholeness. In religious space, the central focus is often directed toward key signs, such as a cross in Christianity or the Holy Ark in Judaism. Counseling offices could have signs and symbols easily seen from the client's perspective that communicate healing and optimism. The focus of counseling is on the needs and experiences of the client; counselors need to ensure that the view they create for the client reflects that value. The gaze of clients should fall on signs that signal an interest in (and encourage) his or her struggle for meaning and health, rather than ones that seem to say that the space is about and for the counselor. Counselors need to look closely at what they are communicating to clients about the purpose of counseling and the goals for growth and wellness through the scenery they have created for clients to view and experience from that fixed spot.

This perspective suggests that counselors must take seriously the complete sensory experience of clients. The counseling offices and clinics need to avoid a feeling of chaos, clutter, or disorganization. Counselors need to be client centered. Most of us have experienced professional offices in which we felt objectified and peripheral—as a mere body or number. Although counselors' training focuses explicitly on verbal and nonverbal communication to clients, counselors should also consider the messages that their physical space is sending. Even if one's office is as humble as a *sajada* (Muslim prayer rug), it should explicitly signal the sacredness of the work in which one is engaged.

Just as traditional sacred spaces use signs—the cross, the star and crescent, the menorah—so do counseling offices. We are not recommending that the signs and symbols displayed in offices be explicitly sectarian, because particularistic religious signs may be perceived as unwelcoming by some clients. But there are many universal or common tropes that clearly convey respect and acceptance. Symbols such as running water or live plants could emphasize elements of the sacred in a less overt but nonetheless accessible manner. Pictures and art can also reflect sacred values. An image of the moon, for instance, has cross-cultural associations with the feminine, death and resurrection, and transition (Eliade, 1987). Common office artifacts will also have symbolic values that counselors should consider intentionally (see Pressly & Heesacker, 2001, for a review of research on counseling office designs). Books may signal knowledge and introspection, whereas toys can suggest play and activity. Diplomas and licenses could assure clients of a counselor's competence or could project that

one is proud of one's professional accomplishments. Family pictures could be seen as self-focused or represent the centrality of relationships. In sum, a counselor's office should be client and not counselor centered.

Most people have felt the power of sacred space, be it in religious buildings or out in nature. Eliade (1987) stated, "Our world is holy ground *because it is the place nearest to heaven*, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven" (p. 39). The challenge is to try to make the counseling space similarly "near to heaven" (a place of peace, meaning, and health). According to Remen (1996), "The places in which we are seen and heard are holy places, they remind us of our value as human beings . . . they give us the strength to go on" (p. 244). Although counselors can try to foster a space of understanding for clients, counselors also have much to learn about enhancing the complete sensory experience of clients as they traverse, and hopefully transcend, their pain and challenges.

Sacred Time

All religions have sacred time. Sacred times generally include daily and weekly events, such as morning prayers or Sunday services, as well as yearly cycles such as Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, or Rosh Hashanah. Eliade (1987) asserted that sacred time is an eruption of the sacred into the world and helps a person move from Chaos to Cosmos. According to Eliade, secular/regular time (what he called *profane* time) lacks meaning and value and—if profane time is all there is—results in a life of chaos. However, creating the space for sacred time, with its connection to meaning and the deep archetypical structures, allows a person to live within the cosmos in an orderly and harmonious world.

Counseling also engages in sacred time just as it does with sacred space. The counseling "hour" is carved out of the flow of regular (profane) time. Just as there are many ways in which people relate to sacred time within their traditional religious organizations, so it is with counseling. Some religious people are scrupulous about attendance at weekly or daily services, whereas others might attend intermittently or only for particular occasions, such as Easter or a bar mitzvah. For some people, religious time is the center of their life and the axis around which other obligations must yield, whereas for others, sacred time is only ever mildly engaging. Regardless of a client's commitment, counselors must always differentiate the counseling hour from regular (profane) time because they have committed to provide a specific intentional service under an ethical code, bringing to bear both official training and personal experiences. From the counselors' perspective, time in session is spent in service to something greater, to healing, to hope, and to the needs of another rather than themselves.

Every time a client enters the counseling office (sacred space) and a session (sacred time) begins, the opportunity to transcend the pain and struggles of the moment is opened. The client (or counselor) may not always be able to enter that opening, but the opportunity has, in our language, "erupted" or "broken through," and, according to Jung (1933, 1938), Otto (1958), and

others, the power of the holy or numinous can be activated to help clients heal. As a sacred place governed by the passage of sacred time, the counseling office then may be seen as holy ground. The office becomes a location used for a transcendent purpose, not unlike a cathedral or mosque, a temple that is "innately infused with a sanctifying power to re-create and regenerate" (Hauglid, 1994, p. 640).

There are many implications for counselors in conceptualizing counseling sessions as sacred time. First, counselors are challenged to prize and protect the counseling hour and separate it from profane time. Adhering to a fixed appointment schedule (and length) is not obsessive or rigid; rather, it reflects a serious commitment to the counseling process. Just as a fixed time for prayer or a religious service provides structure and comfort to adherents, so the counseling appointment has the potential to provide the client continuous hope for access to moments of healing and relief from the pain and challenges of the world. During that time, clients should know that they are not alone in their search for healing and growth; their counselor is tasked to help facilitate, and at the least, will bear witness to the potential of that sacred time.

Second, the transition into the sacred time and space of the counseling session should be clearly marked and respected by the counselor. Counselors should have explicit rituals of beginnings and endings that indicate when the formal work period of the counseling session has started and when it has finished. Just as the muezzin chants the Islamic call to prayer, so should counselors have specific words and rituals that formally begin the session. There are no specific right and wrong words or rituals, they can be something as simple as "So how have you been this week?' or "What is most important for us to talk about today?" The key point is that the words or rituals need to mark the transition out of regular time and topics and into sacred time and concerns.

Just as one enters a place of worship reverently, one also leaves it respectfully and intentionally. Counselors can use rituals and markers to help clients transition back from sacred time into profane time. Through their approach and words, they can emphasize support for the client's commitment to growth, development, and healing. A summary of the session, a reminder of takeaway concepts, or even the issuance of "homework" can all be used to validate the client's effort at carving out the sacred time in session while connecting the client to lasting change beyond it. Counselors may even consider the words of Saint Augustine: "I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was. . . . I can meditate as if they were present" (Augustine, 2006, p. 196). Optimally, counselors will make the lessons of past counseling sessions present for clients in the future. By helping clients later revisit what they discovered or learned during session, counselors can help clients continue to grow and shape their lives.

Third, counselors must do all they can to reduce or eliminate distractions or intrusions of the profane during the counseling session, be they lawnmowers

or ringing phones. Although the digital revolution has changed how and when people access technology, the fact remains that an audible alert to text or notification redirects attention from dialog to device. Even a vibrating cell phone represents a breach in the wall that separates the sacred from the profane—just as it does in a religious service. Yes, there are times when sacred space and time must yield (even church services can be interrupted if there is a fire); however, those times should be rare and based on true emergencies. Counseling sessions that are frequently interrupted communicate a lack of respect for the importance of the counseling process, and the interruptions disrupt and can even close access to the healing energy of the sacred. The manner in which counselors manage the sacred space and time within which they conduct counseling has a significant effect on the messages they are communicating to clients and counselors' access to the healing power of the sacred.

Return, Rebirth, and Renewal

On Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), one can find Jewish communities alongside streams, rivers, or lakes throwing bits of bread into the water. This ritual, known as *tashlich*, represents the symbolic casting away of sins as the new year begins. In traditional Cherokee communities, during the first new moon of spring, there is a ceremony in which the sacred fire is extinguished and then rekindled for the New Year. Both of these rituals represent what Eliade (1954/2005) called the *myth of the eternal return*.

According to Eliade (1954/2005), much of archaic or prehistoric religion (by which he meant the oldest elements embedded in and still practiced by all contemporary religious communities) was focused on renewal and rebirth. He asserted that these religious rituals were a repetition of creation, the preeminent divine act. He provided myriad examples of religious rituals across the globe that all focused on the felt need of people to step outside of history and begin again. Eliade believed that religious communities, in countless ways, reenact creation each year as they extinguish and then rekindle the sacred fire.

It is easy to see the relationship between agricultural and seasonal cycles of the earth and rituals of renewal and rebirth. Until recently, the existence of most communities depended on rain and sun in their proper season. However, Eliade (1954/2005) suggested that rituals of return and rebirth also had a spiritual, and we might add, psychological dimension. These yearly rituals connect people's lives to the deep patterns and archetypes of the universe and help them avoid what he referred to as the "terror of history" (Eliade, 1954/2005, Chapter 4). Although there is much pain, hardship, and challenge in life, each year the members of the community can obtain a fresh start, a purging of the demons and sins of the past year. These rituals connect the person to the sacred beginning, providing the possibility of opportunity, success, satisfaction, and meaning in the coming year.

Many people in what Taylor (2007, p. 300) called our "disenchanted world" (a world without a frequent sense of the divine or potential for transcendence)

have lost what Eliade understood *as being alive to miracles*, as he wrote, "if miracles have been so rare since the appearance of Christianity, the blame rests not on Christianity but on Christians" (Eliade, 1954/2005, p. 160, note 16). Often people feel trapped in history, caused by their own personal pain, the legacy of oppression, or economic and political trends that seem to grind them down. Traditionally, religions have been used to make meaning through suffering (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013) and are argued to be the most comprehensive meaning-making systems (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Furthermore, among those who face stressors, the relationships between both meaning-making and religious variables (e.g., coping practices) and positive psychological outcomes have been well documented (Shannonhouse et al., in press; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005).

Religious rituals are one form of meaning making, and even our largely disenchanted and "secular" culture contains many rituals of rebirth, including events like graduations and New Year's Eve celebrations. Such rituals often give rise to the hope of change, growth, and renewal. For example, fitness centers often report that they are more crowded in January as people attempt New Year's resolutions. Often, the behavior of most people is so patterned and consistent (even in its inconsistency) that what happened before is almost always the best predictor of what will happen again. In other words, many people today have lost the ability to harness the opportunity of ritual for a sacred new beginning. Without a deep connection to a meaning system (i.e., faith tradition), the change that is possible through ritual often fails to occur. This rule of thumb is a useful statistical prediction, but it is not a law of nature. Historically, in traditional societies, as the sacred fire was extinguished and then rekindled, people deeply felt the cycle of life, the wonder of creation, and their own individual and communal potential for growth and meaning in the coming year.

Hillman (1999) described the eternal return as a turn "toward the Eternal" (p. 128). He said that all depth psychology is a return to the basic source and that counselors "ground senseless symptoms in deeper reasons by leading those symptoms back to meaningful sources in the psyche" (p. 128). The challenge for counselors is to help clients return to a place of origins (with an understanding of how their present has been shaped by their journey) and help them to activate their rebirth, wellness, and renewal. When facilitated in this manner, counseling can deliver the potential for rebirth in every session.

Counselors can help clients understand their *global meaning*, the core beliefs, schemas, and cognitive frameworks (Park, 2010) they have developed over the course of their life (Mischel & Morf, 2003), and *situational meaning* (Wortman & Silver, 2001), or the temporary meaning assigned to a recent stressful life event (e.g., a natural disaster). When one's global and situational meanings are discrepant, distress is often experienced (Park, 2010). Counselors can help clients engage their sacred beliefs through ritual to reduce any discrepancy and restore a meaningful view of the world and a worthwhile concept of life (Park, 2010).

Each visit to that sacred time and place of counseling can be a new beginning where any discrepancy is reset. Perhaps one can even create longer "sacred cycles" of renewal within one's counseling practice. Perhaps every 10 sessions, or 40, counselors can return to the first session, coming back to the original presenting problem and starting anew. This goes beyond just a check-in on symptoms or goals, but an actual return to the beginning. Using notes, tapes, or just memory, counselors can try to recreate that first session. This is similar to a technique a counselor might use with a couple having relationship problems, in which the counselor asks the couple to remember their first date or encounter to help them rediscover the source and spark of their marriage, or when a counselor asks a client who has been transformed to reflect on how far he or she has come.

Many counselors undoubtedly try to reset the therapeutic relationship or counseling contract if the client seems stuck. Eliade's (1954/2005) work suggests that healing might be enhanced if one makes these returns more structured, cyclical, and predictable. Religions provide adherents with hope because they know that the Sabbath, or Ramadan, or Easter is ahead. Counselors, too, should provide clients predictable, cyclical opportunities to begin again.

Rebirth also suggests death—to first extinguish and then relight the fire. Just as in *tashlich* when Jews throw away, cast off, and let go of their sins, so too in counseling a client often needs to give up some part of her- or himself to allow the new self to emerge. Sometimes the letting go is the most difficult part of counseling. "Yes, the marriage really is over." "No, I am not going to be a star, or be thin, or be rich." "Yes, I know my mother is now dead so she won't ever hold me or love me uncritically."

Counselors often talk about termination and closure in counseling but have much to learn from religious traditions about casting off, letting go, and forgiveness. To create a new beginning, people must release the pain and disappointment that kept them stuck. Sometimes this might refer to forgiveness (of oneself and/or others; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014), but it might also include acceptance of loss—loss of part of one's story or self that may have been treasured, comforting, or, at a minimum, familiar. Letting go of a past self-conceptualization or dream is often a key component of adjustment to a disability. Jung (1933) was most eloquent in his discussion of how wholeness includes both good and bad, figure and shadow. Rebirth includes acceptance of both the ash of the lost light and the glow of the new.

Rebirth requires ritual and sacrifice. Yes, most people, worn down by the pressures of work and family responsibilities, return to old patterns. Religious traditions wisely recognize that people need more than one birth and more than one chance for renewal. Religions offer adherents multiple, meaningful, and predictable opportunities to start again. Fostering wellness and growth is core to counseling, but consecrating one's practice as dedicated to rebirth and renewal is a great and sacred gift counselors can offer to clients.

At the baptism of one of our students' child, while excited parents were holding their young children around the baptismal font waiting for the priest's blessing, a woman seemed a little lost, frantic, and perhaps a bit desperate. "I asked the priest if I could be baptized again today," she told us in a pressured voice, "but he said no, it was not allowed. I don't understand. . . . I just want to be baptized, why won't he just baptize me?" The woman did not really want an answer to her religious practice question; what she wanted was the powerful ritual, access to the rebirth that it offered and that she was so urgently seeking.

All religions and cultures have rites of passage. These include baptisms, confirmations, bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, and funerals. These rites of passage include rich, multitextured rituals and symbols designed to mark, signal, and assist in the transformation of the person from one state to another. These rituals tend to be tightly choreographed (every movement is planned and symbolic), with evocative sounds (music and sacred words), striking sights (including sacred space and sacred clothes), and highly symbolic touching.

In most cultures, a wedding is one of the most important rites of passage. Each of the components (e.g., choreography, sounds, sights, and touch) is clearly present in a traditional wedding. The movement and placement of participants are tightly composed and structured, with music often accompanying each component of the ceremony. In Western culture, the couple traditionally enter the sacred space separately and stand at the center facing each other in front of the clergy member. Candles might be lit, rings might be exchanged, there may be kneeling or other movements, and there is touching (often a kiss). The center of the ceremony generally consists of sacred words. A deity or the transcendent is generally invoked, sacred texts are quoted, and vows of love and commitment are given, with the ceremony witnessed by family and friends.

The visual component of a wedding is also vital, with the imagery and each step of the ritual meticulously planned. The officiant is often in robes or symbolic vestments, and the couple are often dressed in the most expensive clothes they will ever wear. The beauty of the setting as well as its participants is intended to invite blessings and strength on the new couple. While all aspects of the ritual are purposefully idealized, there is often an explicit awareness that life will inevitably include pain and hardship ("in sickness and in health"). The wedding ritual is designed to provide an additional source of strength and energy—an "over-plus of meaning" (Otto, 1958, p. 5)—to help participants weather those challenges. The couple enter as two but leave as one, recognized and supported in this new station by friends, family, and community.

Strong rituals provide support and energy for the transition of the person (or couple) into a new status. The power can come from the sacred and

from the community. For believers, the ritual is a sacrament, because as a witness (whether a true believer or not) they have publicly endorsed the union with their presence and offered, even if only symbolically, their support for its success. Those dual notions of holy and humanistic sanctification of the marriage may have different levels of personal importance (Nelson, Kirk, Ane, & Serres, 2011). Perhaps this is why same-sex marriage has been so passionately fought for—it is responding to the deeply felt need of the couple and their community to provide to same-sex relationships the same access to this vital source of social support and holiness.

Eliade (1987) wrote, "Human existence attains completion through a series of 'passage rites' in short, successive initiation" (p. 181). As counselors, we can intentionally use some of the components and techniques from rite-of-passage rituals to help clients recognize, and hopefully solidify, the gains and changes they make in counseling. Furthermore, there are implications for clients who have not had the opportunity to participate in traditional rite-of-passage rituals as well.

I (first author) am reminded of the ritual some friends developed to acknowledge and commemorate the arrival of their adopted child from overseas. They instituted what they call "Gotcha Day," the day when their son arrived and expanded and enriched their family. They celebrate not just his birthday each year, but also Gotcha Day. They have a set of activities and stories that they enact and tell each year on Gotcha Day that deepens and solidifies the bonds between them and their son. Gotcha Day is both a rebirth and a celebration of the transition of the son, mother, and father into a deeply loving and connected family.

Counselors should not underestimate the importance of such choreography in their rituals and in their work. For one of my (first author's) clients with agoraphobia, the choreography of her travel to the clinic perfectly expressed her transition to health. In the first few sessions, this client's sister drove her to the office and stayed in the waiting room during the session. During the middle sessions, her sister dropped her off at the clinic and returned after the session to take her home. Our sessions always began by my asking her how she had arrived to the clinic that day. She knew the question was coming, and toward the end of our work together, in a soft clear voice she proudly said, "I drove." I knew that this was a significant therapeutic event, but at the time I lacked the conceptual framework to deepen this success by celebrating and marking it as a rite of passage. My client had become a new person. She was now someone who could leave home on her own and travel to a place of her own choosing. In Eliade's language, she had made a step toward completion through this passage rite. This therapeutic gain may have been strengthened and solidified had I also recognized the sacred dimension of that drive to the clinic.

Several researchers have explored specific application of ritual therapy to counseling, with many studies exploring the context of marriage and family counseling (see Crockett & Prosek, 2013). Others have applied ritual approaches

to work with sexual assault survivors (Willey, 1998), and Crockett and Prosek (2013) presented a solution-focused brief counseling approach grounded in ritual. (For more examples of ritual, including case studies, refer to Basham, 2011.)

Counselors might also benefit by using graduation ceremonies. Graduations generally include most of the components found in weddings, including choreography, sights, and sounds. A component of one of our earlier counseling positions was teaching parenting classes. We used a structured, 10-session manual, and parents who completed the entire program were given a certificate during a graduation ceremony. We would call up each person or couple, hand them the certificate, and shake their hand while the others would clap. We also served refreshments. I (first author) was always surprised how significant that certificate was to many of the participants. This rite-of-passage ritual signaled the participants' efforts and commitments to becoming better parents. It certainly did not ensure that they would not make parenting mistakes, but I do not doubt that it provided an extra boost and lift during challenging moments with their children.

Some psychosocial rehabilitation or other structured counseling programs have similar graduation ceremonies that mark the client's successful mastery of a set of skills or goals. It might be useful to explore ways that counselors can incorporate similar rituals into their individual or group counseling. As a discipline, counseling might want to develop strategies to more effectively ritualize final sessions. Undoubtedly, many counselors have developed creative rituals and techniques, and conceptualizing those ideas and techniques as rites of passage may facilitate their dissemination and further research.

Along with recognizing and celebrating the "natural" moments of client transitions, counselors can also intentionally attempt to use some of the strategies religions have developed. As indicated at the beginning of this section, baptism is a very powerful ritual that has the capacity to help the person feel reborn. Before bringing their offerings to the priest in the historic Temple in Jerusalem, Jews would immerse themselves in a mikvah (a whole-body baptismal font) to make themselves ritually pure. The mikvah is still used today by observant Jews in many situations and is part of the traditional process for conversion to Judaism. A friend of the first author said that when she immersed herself in the mikvah at her conversion, she felt like she had received a "second skin." She stated that she felt like she had uncovered a new authentic self and that it had opened up a sacred world to her. This physical act, with its attendant sights and sounds, is very powerful. The practice of counseling could try to capture some of the therapeutic power of ritual.

One possible counseling ritual is use of a hand-washing basin in the counseling office. Counselors might have a special cup designed and designated only for use in cleansing and washing away. At the end of a session in which a client works on letting go or had felt a need to rid her- or himself of pain, shame, or "filth," the client could pour the water from the cup over her or his hand into a bowl. The water in the bowl could then be thrown out and

away, or alternatively be used to nourish a plant—symbolically cultivating life and growth from pain. In some cases, the counselor may want to pour the water over the client's hands. The client and counselor could develop a personalized and culturally appropriate phrase to say during such a ritual. Chaplains and pastoral counselors perform this ritual washing as a "blessing of the hands" for hospital staff. One of our colleagues (a hospital chaplain) was asked by the nursing staff to make this a biweekly ritual, complete with a dedicated, beautiful glass pitcher and blessings personalized to the needs of the patients currently under the nurses' care.

Some clients may not have had the opportunity to participate in many of our culture's rites of passage rituals; they may not have married, graduated, or been baptized. We often tell our students that they must attend graduation because they need to have the pictures. But we are also trying to convince them to invest and engage in the rites of passage that culture offers. As social animals, people need rituals. Counselors need to support clients' participation in rituals and rites of passage, and if access to traditional rituals has been blocked, counselors should help clients design and engage in rituals that help them "gain completion."

The graduation-type ceremonies we discussed earlier are one possible way to fill this need, but there are certainly others. Many clients are working toward more independent and functional living. Meeting a key independent living goal needs to be marked and celebrated. Some clients are striving for more loving and supportive relationships. Counselors can assist clients to develop "commitment" and perhaps "recommitment" ceremonies. These types of ceremonies do not need to be elaborate or expensive, but they need to be textured, rich, and beautiful. And they need to be conducted in the presence of loving supporters. In short, we as counselors need to be on the lookout for opportunities to support and supplement therapeutic gains with rituals that mark transitions and provide an "overplus" of meaning and sacred energy.

Conclusion

Tweed (2006) stated that religion has a transforming function to an "idealized personal condition: for example insight, purity, or health" (p. 153). As with religions, counselors try to connect clients to a deeper meaning in life and try to strive for the ideal. Also as with religions, counselors believe in the dignity and value of clients and are committed to the relief of suffering. Secular counselors may be uncomfortable with words such as *sin, purity,* and *penance*, but all counselors acknowledge their clients' desire for wholeness, fullness, and peace. Familiarity and comfort with the terminology and potential centrality of religion for clients can be vital in the development of a strong working therapeutic alliance (Belaire & Young, 2002). After all, is not individual (and/or organized) connection to the sacred an important aspect of diversity, which multiculturally competent counselors should consider and address?

Many counselors have probably already intuitively or intentionally incorporated rituals such as those discussed in this article into their practice. A "religious" counselor may even conceptualize some of her or his rituals and actions as having a sacred dimension. Regardless of how counselors implement ritual in session or personally conceptualize the Sacred, they can facilitate a deeper healing when they allow their work to welcome a sacred aspect. As counselors conceptualize their space and time as sacred and envision the process of counseling as one of rebirth and renewal, with the opportunity for ritual, they can more fully be who they need to be for their clients. We believe that the counseling discipline could benefit by explicitly sharing these techniques as counselors try to position their practice, in Eliade's words, nearer to heaven.

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