

the Whole Person

Other fields have tackled the question of what spirituality is and what it is not

By Patrick Williams, Ed.D., MCC

The spiritual dimension of the human experience is attracting much interest in coaching and in psychotherapy today. Many wonder how the two approaches can work together. I draw upon my own experience in psychology and philosophy to provide some context for the practicing life coach and executive coach.

In 1977, I received my doctoral degree in transpersonal psychology, which was then a new field of study focusing on the whole person, including the spiritual dimension of human experience. Transpersonal psychology, considered the fourth force of psychology (preceded by Freudianism, behaviorism, and humanistic psychology), originated with Abraham Maslow, the father of humanistic psychology. Maslow predicted the growth of transpersonal psychology in his book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York, Viking, 1971).

In addition to Maslow, two other notable theorists in the field of psychology helped to pave the way for the development of transpersonal psychology. These two men, Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli, were contemporaries of Freud who broke away from his circle because of their interest in exploring the spiritual nature of humankind. Jung is noted for his study of tribal and ethnic cultures around the world to learn about their rituals, mythology, and spiritual practice and application. He expanded the concept of mental health into



the realm of spiritual health and the development of our spiritual nature (*Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* by C. G. Jung; New York, Vintage Books, 1965).

Assagioli, a colleague of Jung, developed the system of psychosynthesis in 1911, exploring different levels of consciousness, including the collective unconscious, a term coined by Jung (*Psychosynthesis* by R. Assagioli; New York, Viking, 1965).

Both of these men influenced the views of Maslow. In his later years, Maslow understood that the study of psychology and human development was incomplete if it did not encompass our spiritual nature. As philosopher Teilhard de Chardin said in *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York, Harper Books, 1955), "We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience. Rather, we are spiritual beings having a physical experience."

Coaching and the spiritual journey

Life coaching, I believe, has evolved out of a desire on the part of people to feel a greater sense of connection

to purpose and meaning in their life. Clients may initially seek a coach to work on job-related or other goals, but the lingering conversation is about living more purposefully. In the process of exploring that dimension, spiritual and existential questions arise.

Coaching the spiritual development of clients is one of the highest callings a coach can follow. Many coaches and clients, however, do not know how to engage in conversations about spirituality without confusing the topic with religion. Spirituality is often the elephant in the living room—everyone knows it is present but pretends not to see it. As a coach, your willingness to engage in conversations about spiritual beliefs, values, and practices may be of great service to your clients.

It is much easier to describe what spiritual is not than it is to define spirit and spirituality in direct terms. For example, spirituality is often confused with morality. Morality is concerned with issues of right and wrong. Morality, which has its roots in socially defined behavior, reflects social tradition and consensus. Morality varies from culture to culture, and is often used as a basis for judgments that separate one group from another. Spirituality, in contrast, is “profoundly non-judgmental and non-separative,” to quote Rachel Naomi Remen from her article, “Spirit: Resource for Healin” (*Noetic Sciences Review*, Autumn 1988).

Relating to a higher power

Spirituality is not synonymous with ethics, either. Ethics is a particular set of values and a code for translating socially defined morality into daily activity. Ethics usually addresses the right way to conduct ourselves in

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social settings and relationships. Spirituality is much more concerned with the nature of one’s personal relationship with an external force or power—whether that force is identified as God, Life Force, Love, Higher Power, Collective Unconscious, Life Energy, or something else—and how that relationship contributes to

interpersonal relationships. Spirituality is not concerned with discovering or defining a right way to act.

Another common confusion is equating spirituality with being psychic or having paranormal abilities. All people have the ability to be psychic. Being psychic is akin to having direct knowledge of matters of human consciousness and awareness. It can be a means of experiencing the spiritual realm or transpersonal consciousness, but it is not synonymous with spirituality. Rather, psychic ability is simply another means by which humans gain information from the internal and external environments. Remen writes that psychic ability can be used “...to impress others, to accumulate personal power, to dominate or manipulate—in short to assert (our) separateness and (our) personal power. The spiritual, however, is not separative. A deep sense of the spiritual leads one to trust not one’s own lonely power, but the great flow or pattern manifested in all life, including our own. We become not manipulator, but witness.”

Spirituality versus religion

Finally, spirituality is different from religion. A religion includes a dogma, a set of beliefs about the spiritual and a subsequent set of practices or disciplines that are derived from those beliefs. Throughout history, religious belief has served as justification for exclusion and discrimination because each religion claims to know the exclusive “truth” about spirit. But spirituality is inclusive. It is the deepest sense of belonging, participation, and interconnectedness. It lets the great mystery remain the great mystery.

Remen writes, “Religion is a bridge to the spiritual—but the spiritual lies beyond religion. Unfortunately, in seeking the spiritual we may become attached to the bridge rather than crossing over it.”

There is an aspect of all people that seeks the spiritual. This yearning varies in strength from person to person, but to some degree it is a universal aspect of humanity. The mental health professions are beginning to recognize the need to include a client’s spiritual life in any treatment or therapy he or she receives. Until recently, the term spirit conjured up concepts such as ghosts, mental aberrations, religious beliefs, and cults. Now, however, science is beginning to

Coaching Exercises and Information to Share with Your Clients

Personal Benefits of a Spiritual Practice

Let your clients know that regardless of the religious or mystical paths they choose, the benefits they derive from pursuing a spiritual practice include:

- Developing compassion for self and others.

This is based not on some ideal of perfection, but rather on the capacity to let go and to love.

- Strengthening our virtues. These include kindness, patience, self-awareness, and acceptance.
- The loss of fear. As our spiritual lives evolve, our fears diminish. Almost all common psychological problems are based on fear. Lose your fear and you become spiritually well.

Coaching Spiritual Principles and Practices

Introduce your clients to some of the following principles that can enhance their spiritual life.

1. You attract the people and events for which you are mentally and spiritually ready.
2. The universe is always sending us messages. If we don't hear these messages, they become lessons. If we don't learn the lessons, they become

recurring problems. If we don't resolve the problems, they become crises. If we ignore the crises, they become chaos.

3. We are all connected, yet distinct. We are not separate. On the level of energy, we are unified and are never destroyed, merely transformed.

4. Awareness of your true human nature as a spiritual being makes life more expansive, enriched, and easy.

5. All that you seek in life is also seeking you!

6. Awareness of the truth always sets you free. But first it may also make you miserable.

7. Your spirituality contributes immeasurably to a life of greater ease, simplicity, and fulfillment.

8. You are physically built to be happy and to experience life as pleasurable.

9. The human species and human civilization are developing and evolving. You are a powerful influence on both.

10. We already possess all we need to be happy.

Live by the above principles, and you and your clients will genuinely experience what Joseph Campbell calls "the rapture of being alive."

acknowledge the existence of personal energy fields and the ways in which psychological factors modify these fields.

In his book *Creating Affluence* (New York, Amber-Allen, 1993), Deepak Chopra, M.D., former president of the American College of Physicians and Surgeons, writes, "Even our human body is a field of infinite organizing power. There are six trillion reactions occurring in the human body every second, and every one of them is correlated with every single other reaction; every single other biochemical event knows what other biochemical event is occurring in the body."

Chopra goes on to say, "So, inherent in the field itself is infinite organizing power. To have experiential knowledge of that field as one's own nature is to embody the infinite organizing power of the field."

Almost any spiritual tradition contains certain truths and a set of methods for realizing them. In his

book *How to Know God* (New York, Harmony Books, 2000), Chopra describes four basic paths to learn about spirit. These paths have direct application to the field of coaching, and every life coach needs to be intimately familiar with them. These are (a) the path of love; (b) the path of spiritual discipline; (c) the path of action; and (d) the path of science.

Lawrence LeShan, clinical psychologist and author of *The Medium, The Mystic, and The Physicist* (New York, Allworth Press, 2003), wrote extensively on anecdotal research about all four of these paths. The most deeply spiritual and poetic quotations he included were often from the viewpoint of the physicist. Clearly, even the deep pursuit of science leads to understandings, knowledge, and intuitive beliefs about spirituality. •

Dr. Patrick Williams, MCC, is a ICF board member and CEO of Institute for Life Coach Training.