

# The Search For Spiritual Authenticity

Daryl S. Paulson

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**Abstract** The purpose of this article is to help counselors understand the importance of empowering their clients to discover their own insights, meaning, values, and agency.

**Keywords** Counselor · Empower · Meaning · Authenticity · Spiritual

“Whither is God?” cried the Madman. “I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave diggers burying God? Do we not smell anything of God’s decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 181).

Over a century ago, Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, and humans promptly made a new one, that of science and technology. Yet, this new god, controlled by humans, has not alleviated human suffering; in fact, some argue the suffering has worsened (Schneider & May, 1995). For example, the threat of nuclear conflict looms over humanity like the sword of Damocles (Walsh, 1999). Human compassion for and fairness to one another are, many times, lacking, while greed and power not only seem to rule the day but are promoted as positive traits (Monroe, 2002). The schism between those who have material wealth and those who do not seems to widen with each passing year. Finally, global warming, a real threat to all earthlings, not just humans, is actively ignored by politicians, merchants, and even religions (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004).

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D. S. Paulson (✉)  
605 Park Place, Bozeman, Montana 59715  
e-mail: daryl@mcn.net

Science and technology have provided humans with that which they have always sought—control—ever more control over nature (Nietzsche, 1974; Vaughan, 1995). This was Nietzsche's basic argument of the "will to power." Not only politicians, but philosophers, scientists, and even clergy, strive for ever more power—power over the environment, power over nature, and power over others. Diseases and congenital birth defects that killed millions of humans throughout most of history are of little current threat, at least in industrial and post-industrial societies (Patterson et al., 2002). Transportation of goods is rapid, and communication around the world is at light speed (Paulson, 2003). Detailed information on virtually any subject is available to anyone logged onto the internet. Humans of past eras would be stunned by the degree to which humans have developed their technologies. Humans, as gods, have made ever more goods and services available to consumers, but a growing number of individuals ask "is there meaning in life beyond merely working and consuming?" (Seligman, 2002; Vaughan, 1995; Walsh, 1999).

Science and technology can tell us what something does or what it is, but not what it means. While premodern religions continue to provide meaning for literally billions of humans on this planet, the more educated find it increasingly difficult to relate premodern religion to their postmodern condition. We, who live in postmodernity, view ultimate meaning as relative and dependent upon linguistic structure, that is, signifiers (Best & Kellner, 1991). Yet, this signified meaning is not stable and, upon critical scrutiny, can be continually reduced to less and less precise meaning, until, in the final analysis, all tangible meaning has been deconstructed or obliterated. This is because most, if not all, human linguistic meaning is based on assumptions that ultimately cannot be proven true. To counteract this ultimate lack of meaning, some repress their intellectual discernment to embrace emotionally-charged revivalist religious views; others develop a hedonistic attitude of seeking to increase their immediate pleasure and avoiding pain at all costs. It is my opinion that both of these solutions ultimately are fruitless, so I offer a third way. It is the way of psychospiritual authenticity, a blending of both intellectual discernment and mystical faith, grounded in one's own insights.

Submerging oneself in religious fervor is a popular endeavor for many, and fanatical views of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism continue to become more widespread (Walsh, 1999). These true believers often view themselves as being in the midst of an absolute cosmic struggle against evil. Edinger (1999) interprets this situation as a collective expression of the "Apocalypse Archetype." Under the power of this archetype, religious groups perceive those outside their group not only as the enemy, but as object evil. They view themselves as heroic agents, carrying out divine justice. According to Edinger, this phenomenon has nothing to do with divine justice but is instead archetypal inflation of demonic proportions. The willingness, and even the ultimate goal, of these groups to kill non-group members is a real threat to humanity (Alexander, 2003). It is a situation where premodern religious dogma attempts to rule with postmodern weapons.

Depth and existential psychologists long ago identified ways that both religious and secular groups attract and hold these true believers. Erich Fromm (1941), over sixty years ago, termed this phenomenon the "escape from freedom." That is, it is an escape from choosing for oneself "what is," by adopting a "ready-made" closed belief system. To "be a light unto oneself" produces gut-wrenching anxiety and a paralyzing dread that stabs to one's very marrow, for one *knows* one does not know "what is" (Angyal, 1965; Bugental, 1981). This awareness often causes one to feel untethered, falling ever further and deeper into chaos (Trungpa, 2003).

To discover ultimate meaning for oneself requires self-inquiry, self-awareness, courage, faith, and risk (Bugental, 1965). When escape and avoidance overrule authentic choice, one has essentially committed psychospiritual suicide (Anthony et al., 1987). This situation is

described vibrantly in Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1949) novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*. In the novel, Christ returns to the people, bringing them the freedom and love they have sought for so long. But Christ is arrested by the Church's Grand Inquisitor and is to be burnt at the stake the following day as the worst of heretics. The night before His death, the Grand Inquisitor visits Christ in his dungeon cell. Greatly perplexed, he asks Christ why He came back to the people, because they do not want what He gives. The Inquisitor says to Christ:

“Thou wouldst go into the world, and art going with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their native unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has ever been more insupportable for men and human society than freedom” (p. 191).

The Inquisitor explains that the masses want what the church provides—security—not what Christ provides—love and freedom. The masses, he says, want to be told what makes them feel safe.

The contemplatives of eastern traditions also warn of this problem. Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher (2003), describes the situation of contemporary spiritual pursuits, as fueled by novelty.

... if one decides to leave home and renounce hot- and cold-water baths and forget about home cooking and the luxury of riding in motorcars or public transportation ... before you know where you are, you are in the middle of India ... just as it was for Buddha, so for us the excitement and novelty of being in a strange country would not wear off for several months. One would write letters home as if *possessed* by the country intoxicated with excitement and the strangeness of it all (pp. 294–295).

This experience, the sizzle experience, is not the true meat. Chögyam continues:

For unless one is able to overcome this excitement, one will not be able to learn, because any form of emotional excitement has a blinding effect (p. 294).

Acquiring instant and painless authentic meaning is not going to happen for most of us, clients included. More likely, meaning—deep meaning—is achieved through psychospiritual growth, a process that usually is long and, at times, difficult.

Clients seeking advice from pastoral counselors will undoubtedly ask at some point “what is the meaning of life—particularly my life?” Like Morpheus in *The Matrix*, the counselor can offer the blue pill or the red pill. The blue pill, superficial counseling, relieves symptoms. The red pill is for those who want to discover for themselves “what is” and, as Morpheus states, “to see how far the rabbit hole goes” (*The Matrix*, 1999).

### **Taking the red pill**

Those who open to self-inquiry usually find themselves thrust into hell, not heaven (Washburn, 2003). Repressed psychological issues emerge into consciousness with ominous clarity. For most, this is not “a day or two” sort of problem, but a much longer and deeper one, often requiring remedial counseling before any movement into the pursued spiritual domains is possible (Paulson, 2001).

For example, my own experience after returning from combat in Vietnam was devastating. Having lost my traditional religious values and many friends to bullets, having blood on my hands, and being labeled a “baby killer” by noncombatant peers was too much for me to handle emotionally (Paulson, 1994). Soon after my return from Vietnam, I was haunted

by bloody images of the enemy I had killed. They now were vengeful ghosts tormenting me day and night. I could find relief only through alcohol—lots of alcohol—which led to further suffering. Subsequently, I have worked with many other combat veterans who also tried to avoid the descent into hell through consumption of both drugs and alcohol, but who eventually found, as I did, that they must open themselves to their being.

Interestingly, Michael Washburn (2003) emphasizes that the first step on the spiritual path often begins as dark odyssey. That is,

... a descent into the underworld (classical Greece and Rome), as a descent into hell (Christianity, Dante), as a journey into demonic realms (Hinduism and Buddhism), as a struggle with diabolical phenomena (*maykō*: Zen), as a hero's journey (Jung, Campbell), and as a descent to the Goddess (contemporary Feminism) (p. 28).

As suggested earlier, instead of self-inquiry, many individuals attempt to plug themselves into a religious group, because they feel they cannot manage their lives. They want a higher power to do it for them. Many, upon inquiry, can identify a core issue that initially prevented them from dealing with oncoming life experience, and now, many lament, the one issue has become a string of issues too difficult to manage. Core reasons for initial dysfunction include: resenting one's life situation, having married the wrong person, feeling unhappy in one's vocation, becoming a victim to drug or alcohol addictions, or feeling victimized by others (Hoyt, 1995; Paulson, 1994). A rather popular trend with some intelligent and creative individuals is to seek out and work with a spiritual teacher (Wellwood, 2000). Although spiritual teachers can be of great value, some instruct their students to by-pass their problems by transcending their egos. This can be disastrous, for it tends to further remove them from dealing effectively with their psychological issues (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1999; Wellwood, 2000). Some spiritual teachers claim that true healing cannot occur until one realizes that there is no "ego" to hurt, because the ego is an illusion (McLeod, 2002). Although the ego, or self-sense, is not a physical identity, this approach can be problematic, because it denies the value of temporal "here-and-now" reality, even promoting nihilism (Murti, 1956; Ray, 2001). We, as individuals, live and work in a relative world and must work within the reality given us, not ignore it (Aurobindo, 1970).

Some years ago, Anthony, Ecker, & Wilber (1987) extensively discussed problems found in various new age religious/spiritual movements, such as dependency, delusion, and spiritual tyranny. They showed that problematic groups consistently did not empower devotees, but instead, except within the spiritual group, promoted isolation, encouraged group-think, and attempted to "absolutize" the belief system, with the leader of the group generally ruling by some fear-based authority.

Non-problematic groups tended to be open to a plurality of views, and the members were urged to construe meaning from their own authentic understanding. Differentiating the problematic from the non-problematic, however, is often difficult, for many of the former groups publicly encourage students to choose meaning, direction, and beliefs for themselves, while subtly presenting a subliminal ambiance that the group, and only the group, can provide that sought-after meaning. Members who then believe they have achieved authenticity actually have simply conformed to a teacher's or group's perspective (Alexander, 2003; Paulson, 1993).

According to Schneider and May (1995), individuals who have not and are not doing authentic psychospiritual work are particularly prone to submitting to external control. Maslow (1971), many years ago, described the underlying phenomenon as the "Jonah complex," or the fear of one's own ability, which is no less than the evasion of one's destiny. In contemporary western culture, from an early age, one is conditioned to submit to others—specifically

authority figures—an “expert,” a parent, a teacher, a leader, or a superior who will take charge. In a recent book, Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2004) describes how this conditioning can occur:

Student’s sit passively in separate classrooms [different grades]. Everything is coordinated by a predetermined plan, with bells and whistles and rules to keep things moving like one giant assembly line throughout each hour, day, and year. Indeed, it was the assembly line that inspired the industrial age school designs, with the aim of producing a uniform, standardized product as efficiently as possible (p. 7).

Because so many individuals have had little opportunity to experience thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, is it any wonder that this submission occurs? Much of the 60s’ student unrest, beyond protesting the Vietnam War, was the utter rejection of being merely a conforming cog in society’s wheel (Witcover, 1997). A number of rock groups wrote songs to mirror the futility of a submissive, uninvolved life . . . for example, Elton John’s *Rocket Man*, the Rolling Stones’ *Mother’s Little Helper*, Simon and Garfunkel’s *The Sound of Silence*, Sonny and Cher’s *The Beat Goes On*, and the Beatles’ *Eleanor Rigby*, *Penny Lane*, and *Nowhere Man*. *Nowhere Man* states the condition as well as any deep monograph:

He’s a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody. Doesn’t have a point of view, knows not where he’s going to. Isn’t he a bit like you and me?

But then the movement faltered, and the dream ended . . .

### Existential spiritual practices

People want to do the right thing, to be a good citizen, a good family member, and a good person, but they do not see this as requiring personal autonomy and agency—for many, not until they begin counseling. Pastoral counselors have long known that clients who become cognitively, emotionally, and physically present and more centered within themselves can better choose authentic spiritual practices than those who are not (Miller, 1999). This empowerment then becomes a major goal in pastoral counseling—to bring the clients to a level where they can choose for themselves what is.

Daniel Chapelle (2003) recently reinterpreted the meaning of the Delphic Oracle “to know thyself.” He claims it is perhaps the most misinterpreted phrase in Western history. Instead of knowing thyself in terms such as likes, dislikes, talents, values, meaning, or aspirations, Chapelle asserts that knowing thyself is to know one’s place; that is, to know there are things one can know, and things one can only speculate about, and all that is known or unknown is backdropped by the unsolvable Mystery of Spirit. As Chapelle states:

In everything you can and do understand there is also something you do not and cannot understand . . . whatever you say, there is something that remains unsaid and that cannot be said and will never be said. “Know Thyself” means, in short most of all “You are not alone, you are never alone, so learn to know the Other who walks with you at all times” (p. 64).

Although counselors introduce novel processes, such as vision quests, guided imagery, awareness meditation and prayer techniques for client self-exploration, as well as comprehensive interpretations of the world, they, too, face the backdrop of the unsolvable Mystery of Spirit. That any human actually knows for sure “what is,” or the meaning of it all, or

where it is going, or why is extremely unlikely. Out of necessity, as we perceive glimpses of the Mystery, we construe meaning and project our meaning onto the Mystery. Granted, some humans see farther, wider, and deeper than others, and their insights certainly shed valuable light on comprehending the Mystery; but, in the end, each individual must weigh and measure concepts, myths, allegories, religion, spirituality, and their own experiences, sorting out what fits and what does not fit for him/her, as a person.

The Buddha, himself, during a talk in Deer Park, stated this eloquently (Bodhi, 2000).

Do not believe in what you have heard; do not believe in the traditions because they have been handed down for many generations; do not believe anything because it is rumored and spoken of by many; do not believe merely because the written statement of some old sage is produced; do not believe in conjectures; do not believe merely in the authority of your teachers and elders. After observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and the benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it (p. 336).

Albeit, this is easier said than done. One way to encourage clients to discover meaning is to view the search for meaning as a rite of passage.

### Rites of passage

Joseph Campbell (1968) presented a valuable mythic analogy of finding one's authentic spiritual path, or calling, through a rite of passage. Helping clients reframe their search for personal and spiritual meaning as a rite of passage can be very productive for them (Paulson, 1994). The main reason is that it makes the subjective objective and, therefore, open to one's scrutiny. One cannot operate on or stand aside and watch what is subjective to oneself. This can only be accomplished making the subjective objective (Kegan, 1994).

The rite of passage consists of three major stages: the call, the initiation, and the return. The call is a catalyst event—often pain—in one's life that snatches one from status quo existence and brings him/her to the pastoral counselor (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Most of us, as well as our clients, have suffered through horrible life experiences that we later viewed as important catalysts for our own psychospiritual growth (Levine, 2000; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Although growth processes are often suffering processes, this suffering is for a purpose (Marra, 2005). Psychological pain—suffering—seizes one's attention, holds it, and provides the emotional energy necessary to proceed through one's rite of passage, something that most cannot and will not do unless experiencing pain. Now, the implication that one must go through pain before the spiritual fruits are gained is not a psychospiritual law, but it does appear to be a reality for most.

The initiation stage is the actual lived journey of the client to find authentic meaning. It is also a period of heightened anxiety, because the client-initiate has no way of knowing what the initiatory passage has in store for him/her (Jung, 1939; Prochaska & Norcross, 2002). The client usually does not have any reference experiences on which to draw to determine what to do. This is where the rite of passage concept is most helpful. It provides the framework by which clients can objectify what has been subjective—their lives—and therefore, can go through the growth process, aware of what is happening, and with some concept of what is in store. The pastoral counselor, serving as a guide in this process, protects and empowers the client throughout. When the client has completed the passage, the reward is in having successfully made a life transition into authenticity (Fromm, 1941; Ivey et al., 2002; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Puhakka, 1998). Mythically, the client has acquired the "treasure" for which

he or she journeyed (Paulson, 1994). The treasure, in this case, is personal and spiritual meaning and authenticity. Clients who have found the “treasure” may initially want to hold it for themselves, but after completing the rite of passage and returning to their daily life routines, they usually desire to share their insights (the treasure) with others (Edinger, 1999; Jung, 1939; Schneider & May, 1995). This is of immense value, in itself, for mentoring others and is beneficial both for social well-being, and reinforcing the newly-acquired insights into one’s cognitive behavior, making them more prominent.

In summary, it is important that pastoral counselors empower their clients to discover their own insights, meaning, values, and agency. This process, while valuable for each client, also can help humans collectively to live among one another with openness, authenticity, and genuine care and concern. This is an idealistic goal, it is one so necessary and fundamental that the future of the human condition may very well depend upon achieving it.

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