

Advance Praise for Spirit in Session

“A real gem! Remarkably accessible, this book makes the spiritual dimension of therapy come alive. Jones is a masterful educator and clinician who skillfully leads the reader through the meanings and methods of spiritually integrated psychotherapy. His wisdom, warmth, humor, openness, faithfulness, and humanity fairly radiate from each page. This book will be savored by newcomers and seasoned mental health providers alike regardless of their own religious and spiritual orientations.”

—**Kenneth I. Pargament**, PhD, professor of psychology,
Bowling Green State University, author of *Spiritually Integrated
Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*

“Spirituality is one of the most important topics for most psychotherapy clients and yet it is one of the most awkward topics for therapists to bring up and discuss. In this beautifully written book, Russell Siler Jones offers practical advice to therapists on virtually every aspect of bringing spiritual discussions into their offices.”

—**Richard C. Schwartz**, PhD, founding developer
of the Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy

“This eminently readable, compelling, and inspiring book takes readers—heart, mind, and soul—into what actually happens in spiritually oriented therapy conversations. Russell Jones is a compassionate, committed, and elegantly simple mentor for therapists who want to help clients draw upon their spirituality in life-giving ways. *Spirit in Session* deserves to be a required textbook in every ‘Intro to Therapy’ course.”

—**Carrie Doehring**, PhD, professor of pastoral care
and counseling, Iliff School of Theology, author of
The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach

“*Spirit in Session* is an outstanding handbook for teaching. Russell Jones’s exceptional mastery of both psychotherapy and spiritual inquiry guides therapists and their clients to discover spiritual encounters within the everydayness of routine psychotherapy sessions. Therapists may be surprised to learn that they need only their accustomed repertoire of interview skills, not a degree in theology or special techniques or religious-talk, in order to help clients find fresh meaning and new directions through spiritual inquiry.”

—**James L. Griffith**, MD, Leon M. Yochelson Professor
and Chair, GWU School of Medicine and Health Sciences,
author *Religion that Heals, Religion that Harms*

“I had no time for another book endorsement so intended to say no, but then I opened the first page of Russell Siler Jones’s book and couldn’t stop reading. *Spirit in Session* is a creative, warm, clinically-relevant look at how spirituality can inform the life and work of a psychotherapist.”

—Mark R McMinn PhD, professor and director of faith integration,
Graduate School of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University,
past president of APA’s Society for the Psychology of Religion
and Spirituality, author of *The Science of Virtue:
Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church*

“What makes *Spirit in Session* so distinctive and laudable is Jones’s consideration of the therapist’s own spirituality and spiritual countertransference, and how these can be ethically and effectively utilized in therapy. He does this in a conversational, relational, and humorous style that beginning and seasoned therapists alike will relish. This book also manages to be spiritually evocative without feeling prescriptive or heavy-handed. Reading it was like taking a psychospiritual retreat.”

—Rev. Jill L. Snodgrass, PhD, associate professor,
Department of Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Care,
Loyola College of Arts and Sciences,
coeditor of *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*

“I loved reading Russell Jones’ wonderful book, *Spirit in Session*. . . . I felt like I was having a conversation with a kind and wise friend who was sharing his experiences and wisdom in a warm and generous way. . . . I recommend the book for all psychotherapists, but especially those who wish to gain more insight into how to honor in sensitive and competent ways the resources of their clients’ spirituality.”

—P. Scott Richards, PhD, past president of APA’s Society
for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, coauthor of
A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy

“If you’ve been yearning for some clues on how to ethically, responsibly, and effectively weave spirituality into your psychotherapeutic practice, consider this a trail guide and Russell Siler Jones as your traveling companion. Written in his erudite but down-to-earth voice, this book will help you feel more confident treading around this hot-button subject matter. . . . Furthermore, for anyone whose professional work involves addressing the spiritual needs of clients or patients—from board certified chaplains to other healthcare providers who wish to feel more confident in their conversations about meaning, purpose, and quality of life (in a word, spirituality)—this book is a great resource.”

—Rev. Amy Greene, DMin, director of spiritual care, Cleveland Clinic

“The book is perfect for professionals and students alike who are interested in being more mindful and embracing of spirituality, broadly defined, in counseling activities with diverse clients. I am grateful for it and will happily encourage others to read it.”

—Thomas G. Plante, PhD, ABPP, Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J. University Professor, Santa Clara University, adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry, Stanford University School of Medicine, author of *Spiritual Practices in Psychotherapy*

“I was hooked on page 1, amazed at how Russell produced a work of creativity, wit, heartspeak, and sophisticated practicality about such a complex and misunderstood topic. Move this book to the top of your ‘to be read’ stack. It will fill you with the courage and confidence to explore spirituality and religion with clients and perhaps even to pursue your own at a deeper level.”

—Bryan E. Robinson, PhD, author of *#CHILL: Turn Off Your Job and Turn On Your Life*

“Jones breathes life into the *how-to* of competent and ethical spiritually integrated therapy. A must read for new and experienced clinicians alike who want to master the art of integrating spirituality into the therapeutic process.”

—Craig S. Cashwell, PhD, chair, Department of Counseling and Educational Development, University of North Carolina Greensboro, coeditor of *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling*

“This is a wonderful book. Russell Siler Jones, master therapist and gifted writer . . . reminds us that the road to sacred conversation is paved with humility, tenderness, respect, and courage.”

—Toni Herbine-Blank, MS, RN, author of *Intimacy from the Inside Out: Compassion and Courage in Couple Therapy*

“[A] clearly written, helpful, open-minded, and respectful approach to working with the spirituality, broadly defined, of clients as well as of the therapist. Both implicit and explicit ways of sensitively and effectively doing this are covered. Highly recommend!”

—Siang-Yang Tan, PhD, professor of psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, author of *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective*

“Russell Siler Jones makes the enterprise of spiritual conversation in psychotherapy accessible. His approach is practical and yet illuminating, offering guidance for experienced clinicians as well as for clinicians who may just be dipping a toe into their clients’ spirituality. And his voice is so warm, inviting, and encouraging that the reader will feel on much more solid ground engaging the spiritual lives of his or her clients.”

—Eileen M. Russell, PhD, senior faculty,
AEDP Institute, author of *Restoring Resilience*

“[A] fresh, unique perspective on the process of ethically integrating clients’ religion/spirituality into clinical practice . . . The rich case examples woven throughout help make this book relatable for mental and behavioral health practitioners at any level—whether you are just starting your journey as a therapist or have been in practice for decades. Similarly, whether you have always integrated clients’ spirituality or are just beginning to explore this area of clients’ lives more intentionally, you will find considerable wisdom within these pages.”

—Holly K. Oxhandler, PhD, LMSW, assistant professor and
associate dean for research & faculty development, Baylor University

“Russell Siler Jones is a skilled clinician whose wisdom and understanding come through in this beautifully written, sensitive, and practical book. . . . This text is dynamic, thoughtful, and case-based in its multiple approaches to working with the spiritual experiences clients’ and therapists have . . . [It] is a must read for all helping professionals.”

—Samuel T. Gladding, PhD, professor of counseling, Wake Forest
University, author of *Counseling: A Comprehensive Profession*

“This book is a widely accessible and adaptable professional resource for understanding spirituality in therapeutic settings. It belongs on the shelves of pastoral care workers and therapists working with clients because, as the author reminds us, all people are spiritual.”

—Jennifer Ripley, PhD, professor of psychology and
Hughes Endowed Chair, Regent University

“[An] excellent resource for clinicians to increase their comfort with—and competence in using—spirituality in clinical practice. Engaging and well-written, this brief book condenses the professional practice of incorporating spirituality in therapy, based on clinical experience, with a little research thrown in for good measure. . . . [C]ompelling and thought-provoking.”

—Kevin A. Harris, PhD, LP, HSP, assistant professor
of psychology, Our Lady of the Lake University

SPIRIT IN SESSION

SPIRIT IN SESSION

Working with Your Client's Spirituality
(and Your Own) in Psychotherapy



Russell Siler Jones



TEMPLETON PRESS

Templeton Press
300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 500
West Conshohocken, PA 19428
www.templetonpress.org

© 2019 by Russell Siler Jones

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Set in Minion by Pro Production Graphic Services

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019936421

ISBN: 978-1-59947-561-5 (pbk)

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(Permanence of Paper).

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

19 20 21 22 23 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

Can you love people and lead them
without imposing your will?

—*Tao Te Ching*

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.
Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

—*Mary Oliver, “Mysteries, Yes”*

Contents



PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

1	About This Book	3
2	God: A Word about a Word	11
3	Spirituality, Spiritually	17
4	Spirituality, Conceptually	29

PART TWO:

WORKING WITH YOUR CLIENT'S SPIRITUALITY

5	How Spiritual Conversation Begins	47
6	Spiritual Assessment: What We Need to Know and How We Come to Know It	65
7	Working with Spiritual Resources: Spiritual Interventions, Part 1	77
8	Working with Spiritual Struggles: Spiritual Interventions, Part 2	107

9	Working with Harmful Spirituality: Spiritual Interventions, Part 3	137
PART THREE: WORKING WITH YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY		
10	Spirituality and Your Overall Approach to Psychotherapy	171
11	Spirituality and Specific Moments in Psychotherapy	183
12	Spiritual Countertransference	205
13	Conclusion	225
	Acknowledgments	231
	Notes	233
	Bibliography	249
	Index	257

PART ONE



Introduction



1

.....

About This Book



I RECENTLY RAN INTO A THERAPIST FRIEND AT A CONFERENCE.

“Oh! Russell!” she said. “I was hoping you would be here. I want to talk with you about a client I’m working with.”

“Let’s hear it!”

“So, this client is in her mid-fifties, and she’s sort of depressed. A lot of her friends have died in the past few years. A few more have terminal illnesses, and all these deaths and illnesses have made her think a lot about death.

“In the first few sessions she’d drop in these little bits of information about her spirituality. She grew up Catholic, but she doesn’t go anymore. She watches a preacher online named Andy Stanley. I don’t know who that is, but anyway.”

“Anyway.”

“Anyway, I didn’t know what to say about all the spiritual stuff she’d drop in, but it didn’t seem like it was the main thing. I’d just nod my head, say ‘Uh-huh,’ and then she’d be on to something else.”

I nodded my head and said, “Uh-huh.”

“Stop it.”

“I’ll try. Can’t promise.”

“Then in the last session, I realize: she’s been dropping these spiritual hints to warm me up for what I now think is the main thing she’s coming to therapy about. She said, ‘Andy Stanley says we’re never going to be really at peace until we’re with God in heaven. But if that’s the case, why not just let go of this life and move on to the next one? What’s the reason for living now?’

“She’s not suicidal. I checked that out. She’s just not sure what the point of living is. And I didn’t know what to say to her. I mean, I know what I think about that. But I didn’t know what to say to her or even what questions to ask that wouldn’t feel like I’m doubting her assumptions and being disrespectful. So I didn’t say much of anything, really, and that didn’t feel right either. You know what I mean?”

“I do. Definitely. The ways you’d respond to most any other topic—with curiosity, respect, ‘Tell me more about that’—it’s like you couldn’t do that because the topic was religion.”

“Right! This spiritual stuff is so personal, so intimate, so . . . core. I was worried that if I asked about it at all, it would sound like I was challenging it or being suspicious of it. So I sort of froze. But I think this is the main thing she’s needing to talk about, and I need to find a way to go there with her.

“How do I do that?”

HOW DO I DO THAT?

“How do I do that?” is what the rest of this book is about.

I’ve been a therapist now for twenty-seven years, and I’ve needed answers to that question every step of the way. The people who’ve come to talk with me have always wanted more than just relief from symptoms of depression, anxiety, and the like. They want that too, but even more, they want help to live

more satisfying and meaningful lives.¹ Sometimes they're asking explicit spiritual questions, such as, "What does God want me to do?" But more often, they're asking questions with an implicit spiritual subtext: "Who am I, really?" "What's going to make me happy?" "Is 'make me happy' even the point?" Again and again, people invite me into the most haunted and hallowed spaces of their lives, and again and again, I am blown away by the magnitude and meaning of what happens when we go there. It is such a privilege—and such a responsibility. "How do I do that?"

For most of these twenty-seven years, I've also been in conversation with other therapists about that question—sometimes by phone, sometimes at conferences, sometimes in supervision. Since 2008 I've been director of the Residency in Psychotherapy and Spirituality for CareNet (a statewide counseling network of Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, in North Carolina), where I teach and supervise associate-licensed therapists in the first two to three years of their careers. I've also helped write a thirty-hour continuing education psychotherapy and spirituality curriculum for therapists.

One thing these teaching and supervising roles have taught me is this: most therapists aren't looking for lots of theory. They're looking for practical help: "What does a spiritual conversation sound like in therapy?" "How do I talk about this stuff in a down-to-earth way?" "How do I show respect for spirituality but not make such a big deal that the client and I end up feeling too nervous to have a decent conversation?" "What do I do when a client says something spiritually that I really disagree with?" "What do I actually say? And when do I say it?"

Spirituality, of course, does not shrink and fold itself tightly into the pages of a how-to manual. Spirituality is about mystery, meaning, and transformation. It occupies a realm of connection and knowing beyond the world of facts, formula, and

efficiency. We can have guides in this realm, but no guide can prepare us for everything we will encounter.

It is the same with psychotherapy that engages spirituality. All therapists must find their own way, with each client, to work with spirituality. No book and no instructor can spare you the necessity of being present, open, and attuned in each moment.

That said, it is easier to be present, open, and attuned when we have some basic level of confidence that we know what we're doing. In spiritually integrated psychotherapy, as in most things, there is no way to prepare ahead for every possible contingency. But there is a framework that is helpful to know, and this framework can be taught.

That is my chief intention in this book: to teach you a framework. Not to tell you everything you'll ever need to know about engaging spirituality in psychotherapy, nor to minimize how important it is to allow your own gifts, sensitivities, and perspectives to affect the way you practice. But to give you the basics, the skeleton, the scaffolding, so that you can do it your own way—the way only you could do it—with confidence that you're working in a trustworthy manner.

WHERE THIS BOOK CAME FROM

This book began in the woods.

I live in the mountains of North Carolina, just outside Asheville, and I spend as much time as possible outside. It's one of my lifelines, to be in the presence of “wild things.”²² I love the deer, the bears, the foxes, and the snakes. I love the peaks, the creeks, and the quiet. I love the birds, their joy, their vulnerability, and the way they fuss when they're annoyed. I love the trees, which are like elders to me. Trees live lives of dignity and service; they've seen it all and survived it; and when it's their time to go, they lie down and begin nourishing the next generation.

I was among the trees, running a favorite trail. It was fall, a sunny afternoon in gold and red late October. It was also a season of grief, four months after a major loss,³ and as is the way of grief, my outer and inner worlds were being roughly and tenderly rearranged.

I came to a gate that separates the woods from a pasture. I opened it, passed through from the huddle of trees to the open blue sky, and there it was.

Write a book about psychotherapy and spirituality. Write in the same plain, down-to-earth language you use when you talk with clients and friends. Make it practical, not theoretical—you're a therapist, not an academic—and pack it with as much clinical dialogue as you can, so people can hear what this work sounds like and feel less intimidated to try it themselves. Make it adaptable for use with almost any psychotherapy model. And write from your heart. Let it be a book that *feels* spiritual, so the tone of the book might be a match for the topic.

I write an occasional blog, and I've published a few short pieces in religious and literary journals. But I've never felt the tug to write anything "professional." This is partly because the other things I do professionally are plenty satisfying, but mainly because there are already *so many* wonderful books about psychotherapy and spirituality. Here's my personal starting five:

- *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*, by Ken Pargament
- *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy*, by James Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith
- *Spiritual and Religious Competencies in Clinical Practice*, by Cassandra Vieten and Shelley Scammell
- *Grace Unfolding*, by Greg Johanson and Ron Kurtz

- *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*, edited by Elizabeth Maynard and Jill Snodgrass

And it's a deep roster. There are many, many other terrific books on this topic.

But none of them is the book I was being prompted to write, a book that says,

- Here's what spiritual conversation actually sounds like in psychotherapy.
- Here are spiritual themes and spiritual issues you'll commonly encounter.
- Here's the essential clinical architecture.
- Here's the sequence and flow of how it happens.
- And oh, by the way, since your own spirituality is part of the therapy process too—the same way your gender, race, social location, and personality style are—here's how to draw upon that aspect of yourself in ethical and skillful ways.

That book, I decided, was worth writing. And here it is.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is organized into three parts:

1. **An introductory section.** This section includes the present chapter, a couple of chapters about what I mean by “spirituality,” and a chapter about the word “God.” Think of this first part as an orientation and warm-up for the rest of the book.
2. **A section focused on working with your clients' spirituality.** This section covers what spiritual conversations sound like and how they start, how to assess your

clients spiritually, how to make spiritually oriented interventions, and how to work with spiritual struggles and unhealthy spirituality. Think of this as the nuts-and-bolts how-to section that includes lots of illustrations from my clinical practice. You'll read what I said, when I said it, and why. You'll have to adapt what you say and when you say it to fit your own therapeutic style, but you'll at least have something concrete and specific to work from.

3. **A section focused on you, your spirituality, how you stay aware of it, and how you make use of it.** Lots of therapists tell me they detach themselves as much as they can from their own spirituality, so that they don't inadvertently force their spirituality on their clients. It's impossible to do this completely, of course, but even trying to do this robs these therapists of a rich source of understanding and power. In part 3 I talk about drawing upon your own spiritual history and spiritual beliefs in ethically responsible ways, including working with your spiritual countertransference.

A WORD TO THE WARY

I believe something spiritual is happening every moment in psychotherapy. It's not always explicit, as when a client speaks a clear-cut spiritual word like "God" or "prayer." But if there is a spiritual dimension to human experience—and I believe there is—then it is always present, always affecting our clients' mental health and overall well-being (for better or worse), and always a resource that can be drawn upon to help people stabilize, heal, and change.

If you're reading this book, there's a chance you believe this too. That the spiritual doesn't segregate itself from the rest of human experience in some roped-off spirituality section. That

it is integrated and interwoven with all the other dimensions of human experience: mind, body, relationships, and more. And that there are ways of giving attention to the spiritual and working with it that can help people survive the absolute worst life throws at them and change their most intractable habits of thought, feeling, and behavior.

Or maybe you *don't* believe this. Maybe spirituality never made *any* sense to you. Maybe it makes you uncomfortable because it's not part of your background. Or maybe it makes you uncomfortable because it *is* part of your background, and you're still trying to get over it. You'd still like to know what to do when clients introduce spiritual material into their work with you, but you're approaching this book with a bit of wariness.

You might even be wary of the term "spirituality" itself, because in the religious world you're from, "spirituality" is the vague, anything-goes approach of people who aren't really serious about faith, who want to choose the parts they like and ignore the parts they don't. You might be wondering if this book is going to be spiritual enough for you.

However you've come to this book—all aboard and enthusiastic, or uneasy and looking for the first good exit—I'm glad you're here. And if you're among the wary, I'm especially glad. I deeply respect that you're willing to stretch yourself in service of your clients, and I have tried to write this book with respect for you in mind.

By "respect," I do not mean that I have tried to protect you from your uneasiness. I mean more the opposite, that I've tried to give you opportunity here, in this book, to be in the presence of your uneasiness—not to torture you, but to give you strategies for remaining in a conversation that helps another person, even when there's something about that conversation that makes you uneasy, and opportunities to practice those strategies for yourself as you make your way through this book.

Ready? Here we go.