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# Spirituality and the Therapeutic Recreation Practitioner: Exploring the Implications for Practice and Research

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## **Spirituality and the Therapeutic Recreation Practitioner: Exploring the Implications for Practice and Research**

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### **Abstract**

There is a growing body of literature that relates to spirituality and leisure. Within this corpus, several scholars continue to address the relationship between spirituality and therapeutic recreation. Much of the available literature chronicles the health and wellness benefits that accrue to the client/participant but little attention has been devoted to understanding the relationship between the personal spirituality of the therapeutic recreation (TR) professional and its influence on service delivery. The purpose of this essay was three-fold: (1) to examine the influence of spirituality in the work lives of TR practitioners; and (2) to chronicle existing literature that relates to spirituality and TR practitioners; and (3) to provide a discussion on the need for additional research to better understand the relationship between spirituality and the manner in which therapeutic recreation services are provided. We concluded that further exploring the relationship between the spirituality of TR professionals and its impact on practice is a viable line of scholarship that should be pursued vigorously.

### **Introduction**

A quick etymological examination of the English word “spirituality” reveals that it is derived from the Latin word *spiritus*, which is commonly translated as “wind” or “breath.” Moreover in Koine’ Greek, the language of the New Testament, the transliteration is commonly noted as “wind; breath; that which is commonly perceived as having no material substance; by extrapolation: spirit, heart, mind, the immaterial segment of the inner person that is able to respond to God” (Kurian, 2005, p. 644). For some, the spiritual dimension of life may be experienced as the drive to excel or the longing to connect. For others, it might be a subtle, inner stirring, summoning, beckoning—even questioning.

In the last decade, Americans have become more concerned about the question of whether we are religious or spiritual. In 2005, *Newsweek* and *Beliefnet* queried 1,004 Americans on what they believe and how they practice their faith. When asked to describe whether they considered themselves religious or spiritual, 24% of the sample indicated that they were “spiritual but not religious”; while 55% indicated they were “religious and spiritual. Additionally, when asked about the importance of spirituality in their daily living, 57% of the sample noted it was “very important” (Newsweek/Beliefnet, 2005). Relatedly, in a 2011 Gallup Poll when 1,018 adults were asked about their religious beliefs, 92% indicated that they believe in God (n=530) and when asked the question “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit 91% of the sample indicated yes (n=488) (PollReporting.com, 2011). In essence, what the pollsters suggest is that people are concerned with their religious beliefs and practices as well as their personal spirituality. More often than not, religious beliefs and personal spirituality carry over into other areas of life including work.

The relevance of individual spirituality to the professional vocation has received a substantial amount of attention in such fields as business management, social work, and health

care. It has been argued that spirituality is important to employees in these fields and that cultivating a spiritually accommodating and supportive environment yields dividends for organizations (Eisler & Montuori, 2003; Paloutzian, Emmons, & Keortge, 2003). Bruce and Novinson (1999) also suggested that: (1) individual spirituality also brings about a call to integrity within public service; (2) helps to facilitate meaningful relationships within and outside of work environments; (3) fosters brotherly love “phileo” and charity “agape”; and (4) empowers the individual to see the “bigger picture” (pp. 163-164). Each of these elements is important to the work of the therapeutic recreation (TR) practitioner. By comparison, spirituality has received little attention from scholars that study some public service occupations such as recreation management or public administration, and only in the context of serving as the foundation for an ethic of public service (Bruce, 2000; Lynch & Lynch, 1999).

The purpose of this essay is three-fold: (1) to examine the influence of spirituality in the work lives of TR practitioners; and (2) to chronicle existing literature that relates to spirituality and TR practitioners; and (3) to provide a discussion on the need for additional research to better understand the relationship between spirituality and the manner in which TR services are provided. This essay is important because it contributes to the growing body of literature related to spirituality and leisure. Moreover, it represents a continuation of the existing scholarship related to spirituality and therapeutic recreation while offering a different focal point—the spirituality of the TR professional. There is a need to further explore spirituality among TR practitioners to potentially understand the diversity of personal beliefs about spirituality; how those beliefs may influence caregiving; and how TR practitioners may use their spirituality to guide their personal and work-related choices.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality is an abstract concept that is much easier to talk about than to operationalize. The term spirituality has a diverse range of meanings assigned to it such as an inner experience; the recognition that there is a Higher Power at work in the universe; or simply being in harmony with nature. Efforts to study spirituality are further complicated by the variety of definitions used in academic research. For example in the area of public service Bruce and Novinson (1999) define spirituality as “A search for meaning and values, which includes some sense of the transcendent” (p.163). Similarly, psychologists Hill and Pargament (2003) define the term as “a search for the sacred, a process through which people seek to discover, hold on to, and, when necessary, transform whatever they hold sacred in their lives” (p. 65). Robert Wuthnow (1998), the renowned sociology of religion scholar defines spirituality in the following manner, “All the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (1998, p. viii). In the recreation and leisure studies literature the definitions of spirituality are equally diverse, beginning with cursory definitions and elevating to the more biblically and theologically complex. Zuefle (1999) suggested that spirituality is “a personal belief in, or a search for a reason for one’s existence; a ‘greater’ or ‘ultimate’ reality, or a sense of connection with God, nature, or other living beings” (p.28). More recently, Heintzman (2010) exerted a call to Christians in the leisure studies field to start

with foundational definitions of the term but subsequently "... include the notion of the divine and the notion of transcendence in any writing and research on the topic" (p. 23). Regardless of how the term spirituality is defined and operationalized in the lives of people, the fact remains that we carry our spirituality into the workplace (Bruce & Novinson, 1999). It is in the various environments of work where we begin to see how spirituality shapes practice.

### **Spirituality in the Workplace**

The relevance of spirituality to the workplace has received a substantial amount of attention in such fields as business management, social work, and health care. For example, spirituality has been linked to higher levels of effort, performance, ethics, and job satisfaction in business organizations (Lee et al., 2003). Spirituality is also seen as an important foundation for effective business leadership (Dent, 2005; Reave, 2005). For social workers, spirituality is an important motivator for entering the profession and a source of support for caregivers (Canda & Furman, 1999; Faver, 2004). Even more attention has been paid to spirituality in the field of health care. Spirituality is commonly recognized as an important component of effective care, especially care of the terminally ill and the elderly (Phillips, 2003). For palliative care workers, spiritual care training has been found to be correlated with satisfaction with work, reduction in work-related stress, and positive attitudes toward colleagues (Wasner, Longaker, Fegg, & Borasio, 2005).

Furthermore, the very nature of the public servant is imbued with spiritual qualities. Public service is typically portrayed as a calling that attracts a special type of individual (Holzer 1999; Pattakos, 2004). Frederickson (1997) refers to the "calling of the public service," which is based on benevolence at the heart of the "spirit of public administration." Similarly, for Gawthrop (1998), public service is based on "duty as a love or an intense inner commitment to a cause that extends beyond the exigencies of the moment" (p. 74).

Houston and Cartwright (2007) examined the influence of spirituality on work attitudes of public sector employees (N=1445) and further light was cast on the relationship between spirituality and public service. Significant findings of the study included: (1) public employees are likely to possess stronger beliefs in the existence of a transcendent being, even after controlling for background characteristics; (2) Individuals in public service occupations are more likely than others to indicate that they "work together with God as partners" to understand and deal with difficult times; and (3) whether it is belief in a transcendent being, love and compassion for others, a sense of interconnectedness with others, or life meaning, those in government possess more spiritual attitudes than those who are not employed in public service industries. Moreover, Houston and Cartwright (2007) further concluded:

Driven by apposite qualities of empathy, moral conviction, and pro-social desires, people who pursue careers in public service are spiritual. Understanding the nature of spirituality and its component qualities allows researchers to better comprehend the reasons people chose to perform jobs in public service. By identifying such ideas as transcendence — or belief in a higher power, love or

compassion, interconnectedness with others, and a desire to grow through meaningful work that is inspired — we can operationalize the spirituality construct (pp. 98-99).

### **Spirituality and the Therapeutic Recreation Profession**

Since the genesis of the new millennium increased consideration has been given to the spirituality-leisure relationship in the variety of scope of study and situations (e.g., Heintzman & Mannell, 2003; Schmidt & Little, 2005, 2007, Heintzman, 2007; Heintzman, 2009; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2009). Early research such as Hawks, Hull, Thalman, & Richins (1995) demonstrated that programs infused with elements of spirituality yield valuable outcomes to its participants and that spirituality is integral in a person's overall wellbeing, health, and quality of life (as cited in Van Anandel, 1998). Therefore, "recreation practitioners need to be aware that leisure experience involves more than physical and mental dimensions; there is a spiritual dimension as well" (Heintzman & Van Anandel, 1995, p. 30). Consequently, emphasis has been directed toward therapeutic recreation specialist regarding the importance of the spiritual aspect in the programs offered (Heintzman, 1997; Van Anandel, 1998).

Van Anandel and Heintzman (1996) address the importance of infusing therapeutic recreation services with the element of spirituality through the lens of the Christian faith; however, much is applicable in the boarder sense of spirituality. In the clinical setting, Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS) strive to be acknowledged and respected as an equal and important member of a treatment team and in doing so have focused their efforts on functional preservation or improvement. Nevertheless, the question has been raised whether there should be an increased effort on the behalf of CTRSs to enhance a client's life holistically? CTRSs "... must continue to address the total needs of the person, especially those psycho-spiritual needs that find fulfillment through leisure experiences" (Van Anandel & Heintzman, p. 82). In clinical settings, when leisure experiences that enable clients to utilize their individual spirituality are programmed by CTRSs the restoration of improved functioning may occur (Poloma & Pendleton, 1991; Wallis, 1996).

The importance placed on holistic health care and spirituality has personal implications on the CTRS in that it forces these professionals to broaden their viewpoints to include those in which one may not be familiar nor practice. Van Anandel and Heintzman (1996) surmised that CTRSs that are skilled in their profession of helping others:

are able to understand and relate to the total person because they recognize, value, and practice an integrated lifestyle that is rooted in a holistic belief system. Without such a belief system, it is impossible to bring hope and healing to the terminally ill person (p. 82).

The inclusion of the element of spirituality in therapeutic recreation services also has its implications on practice strategies. In the therapeutic recreation profession, delivery of service relies heavily on the philosophical framework regarding the rationale of the profession which is depicted through several practice and outcome models (Carter, Van Anandel & Robb, 2003). As part of the holistic approach to practice, CTRSs strive to treat the entire person and view spirituality as an influential component to one's well-being and health (Van Anandel, 1998).

As a reflection of this importance, Van Andel (1998) has included spiritual functioning in his outcome model as a contributor to reaching a client's goal of "the highest possible level of health and wellbeing through leisure and non-leisure experiences" (p.187). For example, according to Heintzman (2008), TR programs that assist clients in achieving spiritual health encourage coping, adapting, overcoming obstacles in life, and increasing mental health functioning. Additionally, Groff, Battaglini, O'Keefe, Edwards & Peppercorn (2009) investigated the responsibility of TR services in generating the occasion for spiritual growth. According to Groff et al., TR programs can assist in developing one's spirituality and well-being after treatment for breast cancer; however, more research is required to ascertain the specific service strategies to foster results such as spiritual growth. The authors addressed the predicament that CTRSs are not specifically taught how to tackle spirituality in practice and as a result, concerns exist on how to instruct professionals to address this domain. Biofeedback has been noted as one possible option to ensure the proficient capability of CTRSs in the spirituality domain and guarantee that a client's spirituality objective has been met. Biofeedback is a technique that uses instruments to observe and measure physiological functions in a person such as heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension etc. Through biofeedback training, a person can acquire insight and mastery over their physiological functions (Austin, 2009).

Intervention approaches are also purposely modified to embrace the spirituality component. As part of the planning phase of the TR process, fostering the occasion for the client to achieve spiritual expression and awareness is a critical responsibility of a CTRS. Ways to accomplish this task include but are not limited to the allocation of specific times for pondering spirituality on a personal and group level through journaling, solitary time, mediation, and motivating literature. Also, meaningful and focused group discussions along with activities that promote the discovery of one's connection to their surroundings and others are thought to promote spirituality. A key role of the CTRS in enhancing a person's spirituality is to create an environment that is comfortable enough for expression in a spiritual sense without the threat of critique from others (Heintzman & Van Andel, 1995). Inherently, accomplishing this task may require training in the area of spirituality and/or require the CTRS to become more aware of their own personal spirituality. In the future, CTRSs in the clinical environment will be moving towards integrating the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) into practice and 'spirituality and religion' have been noted as area to specifically address (Porter & Burlingame, 2006).

### **A Snapshot of the Spirituality of Recreation Therapy Professionals**

To further understand how TR professionals think about spirituality, participants attending a spirituality related educational session held at the Southeast Therapeutic Recreation Symposium (STRS) were queried about the integration of spirituality into practice. Over a four year period (2007-10), 148 TR professional took part in the sessions. To encourage participant interaction, attendees were asked to write down a short definition of the term spirituality prior to

the start of the presentation and then again at the conclusion of the educational session. During the sessions the presenters provided an overview of: 1) the role spirituality plays in daily living; 2) the difference between religiosity and spirituality; 3) research related to spirituality, leisure, and therapeutic recreation; 4) barriers and solutions to utilizing spirituality in leisure settings; and 5) potential resources for assisting with the integration of spirituality into leisure experiences. Prior to writing the second definition of spirituality, participants also took part in an exercise conducted by a master tai chi instructor that illustrated the use of breathing, harmonics and meditation as a means to enhancing individual spirituality. Finally, participants were asked whether they felt their sense of spirituality impacted the way that they performed their jobs. In the future, a more detailed query that moves beyond a simple “yes” or “no” may provide additional insights.

### *Definitions of Spirituality*

Upon reviewing the responses from participants, they were analyzed and coded to form the categories shown in Table 1. When the “first” and “second” definitions of spirituality were analyzed, the majority of respondents defined the term as “communicating/communing with God/Higher Power” (66.7%-first and 63.2% second-, respectively). Respondents also operationlized spirituality as “being able to choose without external influences” (12.6%-first and 17.9%-second, respectively). The data also revealed one definition that appeared in the scheme of first definitions but was absent in the listing of second definitions. In this instance spirituality was defined as “making choices that are guided by my morals, religious beliefs and a sense of right” and 22.4% of the responses fell into this category. The diversity of definitions is consistent with what has been reported in the literature across disciplines (Bruce & Novinson, 1999; Heintzman, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Zuefle, 1999).

Table 1.

### *Summary of Definitions of Spirituality by Response Category*

Response Category	First Definition	Second Definition
Communicating/communing with God/Higher Power	116 (66.7)	110 (63.2)
Being able to choose without external influences	22 (12.6)	17(9.8)
Having the capacity/ability to make choices	19 (10.9)	8(4.6)
Making choices that are guided by my morals, religious beliefs and a sense of “right”	0(0.0)	39(22.4)

To further illustrate the diversity of definitions, the following examples of the first and second definitions are provided below:

*First Definition*

- The relationship and rituals with a Higher Being that provides a person with a sense of existence, peace, and purpose.
- The over-riding sense of doing the right thing—connection to the Higher Power. Understanding that I can make a difference.
- A sense of personal closeness to a Being or belief in something bigger than your-self, harnessing inspiration and power from the closeness/belief.

*Second Definition*

- The inner-relationship with God and how we perceive Christ and the world around us.
- An individual's inter-personal relationships and connection to God, nature and other human beings that creates inner harmony and peace.
- Great sense of self and change that can be made in oneself and others—the appreciation of what is good and an anticipation of what is to come.

Some of the variance in the responses between the first and second writings of the definitions might be attributed to the exposure to definitions of religiosity and spirituality given in the presentation. Additionally, some participants verbally shared their own definitions of spirituality and the problems that occur with operationalizing the term. Invariably, some participants changed their definitions in the second writing.

*Spirituality and Work*

The final question that participants were asked to respond to was whether they felt their sense of spirituality impacted the way that they performed their jobs. Over seventy percent (73.6%) of participants indicated “yes” while the remaining 26.4% responded “no.” On the whole, the majority of participants perceived that their personal spirituality played a role in the successful performance of their jobs. This finding is consistent with results of studies conducted by Houston and Cartwright (2007) and Wasner et al. (2005).

Despite the fact that the data generated from this question is helpful in addressing the base query, the question of ‘how’ spirituality helps the TR practitioner perform their job better remains unanswered. In subsequent research, follow up questions will be used to probe deeper toward gaining additional insights into what the TR practitioner does to strengthen their individual spirituality and utilize it in the workplace.

**Pathways for Practice and Future Research**

*Spirituality and Its Relevance to Practice*

McKee and Chappel (1992) discuss the similarity of the roles of the physician and the CTRS in the medical setting. It would seem that the professional care giver in a medical setting



regardless of the specialty must display certain behavioral characteristics. According to the above authors, the care givers must be able to be trustworthy, maintain a positive attitude, treat the patient as a person and assist the patient in maintaining an appreciation for life. The American Psychiatric Association provides guidelines for the professional giver's interaction with patients. The guidelines include, respect the patient's beliefs, maintain empathy for the patient's sensibilities and particular beliefs, and not impose their own religious, antireligious, or ideological systems of belief on the patient.

Considering the fact that spirituality is a major factor in the lives of many people and it is even more important to some when they are under medical care it is important that the CTRS has some idea of how they can contribute to patient care using spirituality. The CTRS must be aware of, and work within the parameters of the facility, however the following suggestions will be of help to the CTRS wishing to incorporate spirituality in the TR program. The CTRS should encourage patient compliance with medical procedures, help the patient cope with problems encountered in daily life, be aware of patient/doctor relationship and treatment plan and provide activities based on patient's religious beliefs.

The CTRS should also be aware of the many resources that are available to integrate spirituality into the patient's leisure experiences. Most large general hospitals, and others, have an institutional Chaplain and many local clergy are available and willing to assist. Other resources include pastoral counselors, trained spiritual directors and mental health professionals.

Despite the aforementioned issues, what is pivotal to practice is the personal spirituality of the TR practitioner. In order for the practitioner to be effective in the holistic care of his/her client then there must be a basic understanding of the importance of spirituality and its role in personal well-being. As previously noted by Bruce and Novinson (1999) personal spirituality can yield multiple benefits to the CTRS that include: (1) personal and professional integrity; (2) relationships with people; and (3) love that is grounded in genuine caring for others (pp. 163-164). Overall, individual spirituality plays an important role in practice for the CTRS.

#### *Future Research*

One area that is under-explored is the examination of the relationship between spirituality, therapeutic recreation, and vocational choice. What draws people to become a therapeutic recreation professional? Could it be a profound sense of altruism or the innate desire to help others, namely persons with disabilities? Or could it simply be the heeding of the urgings of the Divine that plays a major role in the vocational choice of the individual. Relatedly, very little research has been conducted relative to the concept of "calling" and its bearing on choosing therapeutic recreation as a vocation. Author David Spangler in his book *The Call* underscores the importance of being connected to a charge that plays out in both vocational choice and professional identity with the following statement:

There is a need we all feel to be part of something larger than ourselves. So much of our energy as human beings goes into finding that connection with something larger. We have a deep need for identity. Belonging to something larger is a way of telling ourselves, "This is who I am" (p. 1).

Furthermore, Spangler (1996) argues that people are called to “integrate our individuality back into the community, into communion with humanity. It is the call not to separate but to blend, to contribute, to co-create, and to serve” that matters (pp. 74-75).

A second and very significant pathway for research involves better understanding the relationship between spirituality, personal ethics and caregiving for clients and/or participants. In professions such as nursing and social work, the relationship between the personal spirituality of the caregiver has been well-documented (Theis, Biordi, Coeling, Nalepka, & Miller, 2003; Faver 2004). One other critical and very important dimension of spirituality that has been sparsely documented in the therapeutic recreation literature is *compassion*—the deep awareness of the suffering of others and the willingness to alleviate the suffering. Bisesi and Lidman (2009) in their examination of compassion in public and faith-based organizations argued that the religiosity and spirituality of public administrators greatly influences service delivery, advocacy and governance. Invariably, the compassion of the TR professionals, driven by their spirituality, may similarly influence advocacy, policy, and service delivery for persons with disabilities.

Finally, there is value in examining the biblical and theological underpinnings of the TR professional’s spirituality. Utilizing proven assessment tools that measure religiosity, spirituality, and spiritual health/wellness may prove valuable in helping the TR professional to grow spiritually and further understand the interior motives for their actions with and outside of the workplace. The use of proven assessment tools may be useful in helping the TR practitioner discover their level of spirituality and chart a course for further spiritual development. Moreover, a spiritual assessment may help the individual become aware of and then utilize spiritual disciplines such as prayer, spiritual reading, and service toward spiritual growth.

### **Conclusion**

Great strides have been made in the advancement of scholarship related to spirituality and leisure over the last two decades. The literature across public service disciplines suggests that personal spirituality is an important facet of serving people. In the case of therapeutic recreation there is a need for additional focused scholarship that includes the examination of the role of spirituality in the work life of TR professionals. Heintzman (2010) provides a significant observation that is very relevant to what we argued in this essay,

While the research studies that have been conducted on leisure and spirituality are interesting and suggestive, the general lack of attention to the relationship between leisure and spiritual wellness is surprising since a popular area of current research within leisure studies is the study of the benefits of leisure which includes the connection between leisure and wellness or health (p. 26).

It is possible that TR practitioners with varying levels of spirituality can begin reporting on the connection between leisure and spiritual wellness. This is possible if the practitioner has an interest in the subject matter and there is a familiarity with the benefits as identified in the

scholarly literature. Plausible solutions to accomplish this objective include: 1) providing an in-service training on the benefits of leisure and spiritual wellness; and 2) provide supplemental readings for staff on the topic.

Moreover, a healthy spirituality has everything to do with the health and wellness of public servants (Bruce, 2000; Faver, 2004; Houston, 2007), which includes TR professionals. Further progress in the examination of personal spirituality from a vocational standpoint may greatly influence education, ethics, policy, practice, and moreover the quality of care provided to patients and/or participants that consume therapeutic recreation services.

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