

Spirituality and Psychotherapy with Russell Siler Jones

Today on IFS Talks we have the pleasure of speaking with Russell Jones. Dr. Russell Siler Jones is director of the residency, psychotherapy and spirituality at CareNet in North Carolina. He's also the developer for the spiritually integrated psychotherapy program for the ACPE. And he's a psychotherapist in private practice in North Carolina in Asheville. Russell is the author of *Spirit in Session: Working with your Client's Spirituality and your Own in Psychotherapy*.

Tisha Shull: Russell, thank you for joining us today on IFS Talks.

Russell Jones: Thank you, Tisha, and thank you Aníbal. I'm happy to be here.

Aníbal Henriques: Welcome Russell, and many congratulations on your book and work on spirituality and psychotherapy. What parts come up for you listening to your bio?

Russell: When I listened to what Tisha said, what comes up for me is a feeling of gratitude. So, a grateful part. I think about so many mentors who have sewn themselves into me, you know, through the years of my development and who continue to. And so, the opportunities to do the things I get to do to, to write, to teach and to do therapy really feel like gifts that I have received in some way through the lives of lots of wonderful other people. I'm also grateful for...Hmm. I think also just about my clients and their patience with me through the years. I'm thinking of them collectively, you know? And so, their patience with me through the years and just the ways that they've touched my heart and taught me how to talk with people in ways that ended up being helpful.

Aníbal: Russell, Russia's war on Ukraine and all the unspeakable horror and the war crimes we are witnessing are retraumatizing us collectively again and again. Is there something you'd like to say on this sad situation?

Russell: Well, it's tragic, it's sad, it's painful, it's complicated. I've thought a few things as all this has unfolded. One is I just, I thought about a 75 or 80-year-old adult in the Ukraine now who experienced this when they were children, you know, as part of the second world war. And so, to have your life book-ended by this kind of trauma, I don't even know how to put words to that, but that has hit me a lot. Just that thought.

Aníbal: Yeah.

Russell: One of my brothers has traveled and worked in the Ukraine through the years and has many friends there. And I hear through him from some of them, just the hardship, the way families are separating to survive and deal with what's happening there. And the great courage that that is. That's just a part of everyday life there now.

Aníbal: Thank you Russell.

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Russell: Yeah. Thank you for asking me.

Anibal: Russell, you have published this book *Spirit in Session: Working with your Clients, Spirituality and your Own in Psychotherapy* from Templeton press in 2019. Why this topic and book on spirituality in your life?

Russell: Spirituality it's sort of, I would say, it's the most important part of my life. It's not separate from other parts of my life. You know, I'm married, I have children, I have work, I have friends, I have extended family. All of that is meaningful to me, but I see my life through a spiritual lens and on good days I live my life from some kind of spiritual sensibility. And I do this in the practice of therapy too. And I think the conversations I have in therapy, I think of them as spiritual conversations. Spirituality is not just when we are using explicitly spiritual words or talking about explicitly spiritual topics. It's integrated with every part of our lives. And it is the way I think about doing therapy. I think of it as a spiritual exchange among other things, but definitely a spiritual exchange.

Tisha: When did you first become aware that spirituality or that connection to something higher was a part of the fabric of your life?

Russell: I have a memory of being, I don't know, four or five, six years old in bed, you know, at night the lights are at...it's all dark, I'm alone in my bed and just feeling the presence of some vastness, some large energy that was around me and within me. And of course, I'm five years old, I don't know what this is. I did grow up in a religious home, a Christian home. And so that was part of my life, has been part of my life from as far back as I can remember, but in terms of my own experience of it, that's where I would date it. And then, of course, there are all these years of amnesia, you know, where an experience like that becomes lost, forgotten. But, as the years passed, I reconnected with it, but I think it goes back to very, very young for me and I would imagine it's part of my unconscious memory as well, and that I'm just telling you my conscious memory.

Anibal: Russell, in your book, you wrote a chapter you called *Working with Spiritual Resources*. So, what are those spiritual resources we can work with?

Russell: Let me back up and get a running start at that. So, I think spirituality is a hot topic in the world of psychotherapy at this point, because of the groundwork laid by the positive psychology movement and the positive psychology movement really taught us to pay attention, not just to symptoms and struggles and stresses, but also to strengths and resources. And so, we've learned, in the world of spiritually integrated psychotherapy, we've learned to talk about maybe two sides of people's spirituality there, the resource side and the struggle side. So a spiritual resource, a resource is anything that helps us survive or thrive and a spiritual resource it's an internal or an external capacity, or what's a synonym for a resource that helps us stabilize

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when our world is rocking or it helps us over some threshold of growth whenever we've come to a blocked place or a stuck place. So, a spiritual resource could be something external to me, like a community of faith.

Anibal: Okay.

Russell: It can be something internal to me, like a sense of peace or a sense of joy or courage.

Anibal: Beautiful.

Tisha: If you were to illuminate that resource through a parts lens, what does that look like?

Russell: So, I am an IFS therapist too. Let me get that on the record.

Tisha: Noted.

Russell: I did a level one training, I think in 2007 or 2008, and then a level two. And then I've never done a level three. I did Toni Herbine-Blank's Intimacy from the Inside Out training, IFIO training. I was on her training staff for two or three years, I don't know, maybe 10 years ago, 12 years ago. And so, I do think in an IFS, you know, in an IFS way as well. So, to your question, if I were to talk of spiritual resources from a parts... You know, in an IFS way, I'm thinking more, you know, internal resources at that point. So, I can think of parts of me that carry spiritual energies like hope or love or joy. But, when I think spiritual resources in an IFS way, I'm mostly thinking of Self-energy, you know, I'm thinking of the 8 C's and the gazillion other words we could give to that energy, which is really deeper than words, but it's a source of compassion and wisdom, curiosity, and things of that nature. So, when I'm thinking spiritual resource from an IFS way, I'm tending to think of Self-energy. And of course, parts can absorb and be empowered by the resource of Self.

Tisha: One of the things I heard you say in one of your other podcasts was that compassion is a spiritual response? And I loved hearing that because it implies a way of being in a spiritual place in the therapy office just by accessing that feeling and that connection. And I wonder if you could just say more about acknowledging that there is a spiritual element to what we do or how people can kind of find that and grow that.

Russell: Yeah. I think people who are listening to this podcast have some experience of this, or they wouldn't even be listening. You know, if people are interested enough, if they're practitioners, IFS practitioners or clients, or they just heard enough about IFS that they're curious and interested in it, then experientially, they know what this is like, you can't be anywhere close to this work without having your heart open in a compassionate way. I think therapists who've been with people, when you've been with a client and you feel the shift in them when Self-energy gets released, when a part that they have been afraid or a part that

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they've been hating, when something turns in them and they began to bear witness and really understand deeply the story of this part and their whole attitude towards the part just changes. It's not a cognitive shift, it's a whole person energetic shift. And once you know, once you hear someone's story, a part's story or another human story, it's hard not to love them. So, the energy of compassion, not everyone thinks of that as a spiritual energy. But, you know, I think you can think of it in a non-spiritual way as just a psychological... Some kind of intra-psychic energy. And I won't argue with you about that, but for me, and I think for many others, there is a sense that there's something really big and trustworthy and deeper than just me that's present when that kind of energy shift happens. And this sense of compassion for a part begins to radiate within. And then of course, if you're the therapist, maybe you're feeling that for this person as well. And, I don't know if this is a phrase that gets used a lot in IFS circles anymore, but in my training, I heard a phrase that said Self begets Self, and it references the contagious energy, the contagious nature of Self-energy. And so, when either one of us, the therapist or the client, when Self-energy begins radiating, I think we all get swept up in it.

Anibal: Russell, you say compassion is spiritual, but you say also fear is spiritual. How is that?

Russell: Well, spiritual to me is like, let's take this... It's a word, like the word health. I can use the word health to speak of being in good health or in bad health. And, you know, I might say I'm feeling healthy and I'm suggesting that my health is good, but health exists across a spectrum from wellness to illness and spirituality and spiritual energy also exists across a spectrum from energies at one end of the spectrum, like generosity and kindness and energies at the other end of the spectrum, like greed or hatred. So, fear, I think all energies have a spiritual quality to them. And so, when I say spiritual, I don't think just of things at the, you know, the light and radiant inner end of things. But I also think of things at the dark and contracted end of things, into the spectrum as well.

Anibal: Russell, do guides as conceptualized in IFS matter for you as a spiritual path? How do you see them, guides?

Russell: I have personally experienced guides. I have sometimes recognized them as ancestors, my ancestors, and I've now had some sense of who they were and as sometimes not. Other people have never had this sense, had an awareness of a guide being present with them. Different people are aware of different things spiritually, but I think of guides as benevolent beings who want to help us and who are... We don't create them by believing them. And we don't annihilate them by not believing in them. I think they're just present in a realm that is not visible to us, but there are times when different people will be aware that there's an energy here helping me, that's more than just me. And boy, that's an amazing experience. And it's amazing even just to hear someone talk about it and to hear how they were affected when a guide showed up or when they became aware that a guide had been there.

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Tisha: Do you feel that there's some things that happen inside that need the additional support of guides for healing? I can give you an example of what that question asks if you want.

Russell: I would love to hear the example and I, yeah.

Tisha: Oh, well, I was working with a client this week who was in touch with a level of their depression, that felt as though it was bigger than them. And we didn't get to the answer of whether it was cultural or whether it was like maternal lineage, but it felt for this person's protectors, that it was really and truly to them more than this person could heal on their own. And so, there was a light that kind of came on and I don't remember if I suggested it or if the client did, but well, maybe this needs the support of a guide or another presence beyond Tisha and client.

Russell: And had this person talked of guides, is the word guide a word that was new to her? Or was this something you had talked about before?

Tisha: I don't think so. I think it's within their vocabulary, within their realm of understanding, but for these protectors, it felt like a huge relief. Like they didn't know that there was anything beyond them and there was a lot of emotion, but we didn't do a full unburdening or anything. And I was left sitting with the question, well, do parts, really need the additional support for healing or Self is enough or...

Russell: Yeah, I don't really know the actual answer to that question. The real truth about that is beyond what I know, you know, but I think there are parts that somewhere along the way have come to believe it's all up to me and I've got to do this myself. And I think when clients have an experience of Self, it begins to shift for them like, "oh, there's something more than just the..." It begins to shift for the part, "oh, there's something more here that I can count on than just me." But I also think for parts just to call out for help, you know, and see what shows up... There're parts, there are people and parts that really learned there's no help coming. What's the point of asking? And so, for a part to be at a place where it could even ask for help or be receptive to help, that's a powerful experience. And I love that you or she, somebody in that exchange just had this intuition that maybe something beyond us would help. I'll also say, you know, this is a staple of the 12-step tradition. You know, that whole, the healing arc in the 12-step tradition is that at some point you get to the edge of yourself, you get to the edge of what you can do for yourself and the limit of your own power. And you're going to need some... You need something more and they've done a beautiful job of not giving it a name that everybody has to bow before and say and subscribe to a certain dogma that we've got to call it this or that. But yeah, this notion that I need help, you know, I Russell do, and I, my critical part does, or I, my frightened part does, I could use a little help here. And so, for a part to get to the place where it can ask for help, that's an amazing moment. That's a transformational moment. How does that land with you? How does that speak to the experience you had?

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Tisha: Oh, for me that, yeah, it brings me back to the energy of the session when that ask and the emotion about it happened and the possibility of receiving help.

Russell: What was your sense of the emotion itself? Like what was, I mean, you may not know, but do you have some sense of what the emotion was saying in that moment for her?

Tisha: Yeah. It felt like a huge relief. Like we've been doing this work of keeping the depression at bay for so long that, and it has felt bigger than us. And then with that suggestion or that insight of, well, if it does feel bigger than you, maybe there's something else that can come in. Yes. It was relief, release, sadness, acknowledgement of how hard it had been.

Russell: Yeah. You know, some of my clients that I work with are Christian and in moments like that have called in Jesus, you know, the presence of Jesus to be with them sometimes for help, but I also have had clients who've called in Jesus to come to express anger or disappointment, you know, like, "where were you when I needed you?" So, yeah. I think the entry of other beings, you know, spiritual beings that they may have a name for it, from their spiritual tradition or beings that may not have any name for, or a sense of who or what it is, but that's a spiritual - back to an earlier question - that's a spiritual resource.

Tisha: So, the system knows the guides to call in, or do the guides show up in your experience?

Russell: I have no idea. Sometimes, you know, when I'm with someone and they are wanting to ask for help from beyond themselves, but they are not religious people and that's not a request that they have any sense of how to make or to whom to address it. I'll just say, well, what if you just kind of leave a little post-it note in the mailbox and put up the flag and just see who comes to pick it up. You don't have to know who's going to come get it. Who's going to come to respond.

Tisha: I love that.

Anibal: Russell, you may be familiar with the concept of *spiritual intelligence*, I guess, coined by Danah Zohar?

Russell: I am not familiar with that. But tell me more.

Anibal: She defined 12 principles underlying *spiritual intelligence*, and I will give you some examples.

Russell: Okay.

Anibal: Self-awareness - knowing what I believe and I value; Spontaneity; Holism - seeing larger patterns, relationships and connections; Compassion; Celebration of diversity. Humility;

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Positive use of adversity - learning and growing from mistakes, setbacks and suffering. And she keeps going for 12 principles like those. And I wonder if you'd like to comment or if you find it useful as a concept.

Russell: The label *spiritual intelligence* is new to me, but the capacities and qualities that you just named, I think those are definitely qualities of spiritual intelligence. I'm assuming that that phrase was coined as a playoff of the emotional intelligence phrase. And so, it's beautiful that someone is trying to articulate this dimension of human experience, this quality or gift. You know, different religious traditions have their ways of saying this. You know, in Buddhism, there's a notion of the *Paramitas*, and, you know, these are like spiritual virtues. And it depends on which tradition you're reading, but they're either six of them or 10 of them, but they include things like generosity and kindness. In the Christian tradition there's a list of what they call gifts of the spirit that include things like love and joy and kindness and gentleness. So that list, what I think is helpful about lists like that, whether it comes from a spiritual intelligence lineage or a Christian lineage or a Buddhist lineage or whatever, if you're a therapist what's helpful about that, to me what's helpful is it helps me to kind of know what I'm looking for in terms of strength or transformational energy.

Anibal: Okay.

Russell: So, a client in a stuck place when I see them exhibiting any of those qualities you just read, or when I hear them telling a story in which one of those qualities is on display, I think to move towards that strength, that capacity that they are exercising, you know, what do they say? Energy follows attention, like when, as a therapist, we give attention to some virtue or gift or strength or quality of spiritual intelligence or emotional intelligence or anything you want to call it. When we give attention to that and move towards it, it's a way of helping it grow stronger in our clients. And, you know, so I think reading a list like that kind of opens, it helps open up the window of awareness for me as a therapist, what are some things I'm looking for? And of course, you don't necessarily need a list. You know, you can just listen to your heart and you can feel when energies like that are moving or stirring in someone. But I know that lists like that can be very helpful.

Anibal: Yeah. Thank you.

Russell: Thank you for introducing me to that term. I'm going to look it up.

Anibal: Thank you for your beautiful reflection on that. Russell, in your book you offer two definitions of spirituality, one quite long and eloquent that you say was written for academics, and then other quite simple and shorter, just one sentence that you say is for the office, for our clients, and then quoting you, "spirituality is all the ways you and God relate to each other."

Russell: Yeah.

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Anibal: And you offer a whole chapter on God and how do you attach or resist to God. So how would you describe the relationship between spirituality and religion?

Russell: Well, religion is the easier thing to talk about. Spirituality is very difficult to talk about. Religion is a social phenomenon. It's an observable phenomenon. Religion is when a group of people get together and they share beliefs and practices and values and rituals. So, it's a group of people that have agreed on what's the nature of reality and how are we to live? And what do we do together to reinforce our connection to the deepest reality? Religion is a social group thing. Spirituality it's so personal. Spirituality is, I would say, first of all, it's an energy. It's an energy, not a concept. And so, I've never read, and I've certainly never written a definition of spirituality that I really like, because every time you try to talk about spirituality or you having to talk about things that are just beyond the reach of language to articulate, you know, in the book, I chose to say, "spirituality is all the ways you and God relate to each other." And you're right. I did write a whole chapter. Like, now when I say God, I'm using this term poetically, not literally, but I would chose to use the word God, because I wanted to make readers who have problems with the word God encounter a word that their clients are likely to use.

Anibal: Beautiful.

Russell: And I wanted people to kind of deal with their countertransference to the word God. So, I chose to use it that way. Spirituality is this capacity we have to connect with some kind of transcendent energy that's greater than we are. And it's all around us. And it's the deepest thing within us. And it's our, it's the degree to which we are, or are not aware of that. And responding to that. And we respond to it in all kinds of different ways. You can respond to it by having a sense of warmth in your chest in relation to that energy, you can respond to that by stopping and helping someone who needs help, and you can respond to that by turning your back on it. You know, you can just respond to it by dissociating from it. At some point in this conversation, this maybe the moment, I just, you know, when I think about spirituality and IFS, I think of spiritual capacity or our spiritual selves as one of the things that can get exiled, I think our spiritual selves can become, I think those can be exiles in the internal system. So, we can talk about that now or later. I want to stay with your question. And if there's a follow-up question, you know, please put it out here.

Anibal: Maybe. Yes. You also present a chapter on working with harmful spirituality. When do you think spirituality can become harmful?

Russell: The spirituality becomes harmful so much and that's one of the reasons it gets exiled, but it can be harmful. I mean, just some common examples that tend to show up in my office are people who have been subjected to spiritual abuse, they grew up in a spiritual tradition in which for spiritually or religiously justified reasons they were bullied or shamed or oppressed in some way. So that's an example of harmful spirituality. Spirituality can be harmful when it is

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used as the rationale to keep one person under someone else's thumb. So, sometimes people will have trouble leaving an abusive relationship because they've been told it's religiously or spiritually wrong to end this marriage or religion can be harmful when someone knows that they are attracted to people of the same gender and their religious tradition has told them that this is wrong. So, another way spirituality can be harmful is what's called spiritual bypass. And this is whenever people, you're saying yes, you know this term. This is when people lean into a spiritual resource to avoid doing some deeper psychological work or relational work that needs to be done, but they go into a spiritual mode and ignore some of the inner work that needs to happen.

Tisha: There's a unique flavor that I'm interested in when someone is wounded in a spiritual context. And I'm thinking of your examples, but also the examples of someone who has a teacher who does something awful, you know, abuses someone sexually or, and it happens time and time again. And then, I think the specific spiritual wound that people can contend with is a loss of trust in your own Self to make the right decisions about who you follow and what you believe. And I wonder if you have any particular insight on ways to work with that or how to bring that into light.

Russell: You know, whenever you said that a particular client comes to mind who not only lost trust in the particular people who betrayed her in her religious community, just as you're saying, she lost trust in her capacity to discern who is trustworthy and what is trustworthy. There was another nuance then in response to that, she developed a protector that said, basically, I'm not listening to anything outside myself. I'm not going to listen to any authority. You know, I do not trust myself to relate well to authority figures that say, I have the handle on truth and goodness. And so, I've got to be very, very guarded. And so, the way I worked with that was just really to validate and support that protector. I wanted her to feel absolutely no pressure for that protector ever to stop protecting her. And so that's one thing I think just validate whatever protection comes up, I think it's important to validate it. You know, that's a helpful protector because in its absence before you got hurt. And then I think also, I remember saying a lot to her, you know, you can trust yourself, you've got a capacity in you that knows what's real, and what's true, and what's good for you and what's not. So I think just also just affirming that this capacity was latent in her and could be strengthened in her and then watching for her to use it, you know, watching for things, even out of a spiritual context, when she kind of had some sense about what was the right thing for her to do. And, again, just supporting that, mirroring that, giving energy to that, helping her notice that. That felt all of those things felt so helpful to her in her process. When you hear me say all those things, how do they hit you and what else comes to mind for you Tisha?

Tisha: Well, I love the idea of really validating the protectors. And yeah, I guess the idea of understanding that spirituality gets exiled is kind of coming up. You know, what you had said earlier and finding the pathway to that arena, I'm curious about.

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Russell: Yeah, well, it was really important that I, as an authority figure, not push any sort of spiritual agenda, you know, like, I could tell that her spirituality had necessarily and understandably been exiled because of this massive injury that she sustained in a spiritual community. But, you know, you don't go drag any exiles out of where they're hiding in IFS. You know, we wait on the protective system to decide it's safe enough for her to have access to her exile again and..

Tisha: I think what's coming up for me is that there's also a lot of grief to huge loss of community and connection and connection to God that gets...

Russell: Yeah. I'm so glad you said that. Because that's true. It's a loss of this spiritual... Is the loss of her beliefs, but it was also a loss of the people that she had were her best friends. It meant loss of connection with some dear members of her family. I mean, she lost her physician. Her physician was a member of this community and stopped seeing her. So, there're other tons of grief.

Anibal: Russell, I have read or heard someone to say that we are spirits with a human experience and not humans wanting a spiritual experience. Would you like to comment on this?

Russell: Who did say that? I've heard that too. Yeah.

Anibal: Maybe Jeff Brown, but I'm not quite sure.

Russell: Yeah. Maybe whoever said it originally, it's been repeated a lot. Yeah. We're not humans having a spiritual experience. We're spirits having a human experience. My comment on that was that they both sound right to me. You know, we're spirits having a human experience and humans having a spiritual experience. I don't think any of this can be separated out. We separated out to talk about it. And the meaning of that phrase we're spirits having a human experience, the value of that phrase to me is it says that our spiritual essence is probably at the center of things. And our humanness kind of is gathered perhaps around that in some way, but as a literal... So, I think it's a poetically true statement, but literally I think it's just as helpful paradoxically to say we're humans having a spiritual experience.

Tisha: Russell, you run training programs in psychotherapy and spirituality.

Russell: Yes.

Anibal: Are there opportunities for therapists to learn more about working with spirituality in psychotherapy?

Russell: Yes, actually, there are lots of them, there are a lot of places right now where you can begin to go deeper in this if it's a point of interest or something you feel ready to do some more

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learning around and I'm connected with two of them. One of them is this program that I direct at CareNet. CareNet is an outpatient counseling network that exists across the state of North Carolina. Is connected with the Wake Forest Baptist Health Network. And there are counseling CareNet counseling centers in North Carolina from the coast, a place called Wilmington all the way to the west, where I live in Asheville. And our training program is for therapists who've completed their master's degrees and are associate licensed and they come to work for CareNet. But then we also teach them how to work in an ethical way with their client's spirituality. So, that's a pretty limited opportunity. Actually, we hire six people a year, so we have, and they're with us for three years typically. So, we have roughly 18 at a time that were part of that program. An opportunity that's not so limited is the one that I've helped develop through ACPE. ACPE is an organization that historically has trained chaplains and people preparing for ministry to provide effective care, to provide spiritual care for people across the spiritual spectrum, to the great diversity of people and people of no spiritual orientation as well. And in recent years, it's also begun training psychotherapists in how to integrate spirituality. So, there's a spiritually integrated psychotherapy training program for therapists offered through ACPE. It's a 30-hour continuing education hour training with optional then consultation and certification past that basic training. And it's really a wonderful program. I think that the sweet thing about the ACPE program is that it's not just a training. There's also a community of people that sticks together beyond the training. So, it's not just a continuing education and then I'm done, but there's, I think we really learn to do this work well almost by osmosis, by rubbing shoulders and spending time with other people who are doing this work. And so, the ACPE program has that opportunity as well. And if people are interested, they can, you know, as acpe.edu, if they're interested in that.

Tisha: Is it available online?

Russell: Yeah. Those trainings happen online, we were doing them all over zoom.

Tisha: What's next for you? What do you have going on?

Russell: I don't know. I'm in an in-between time, I have worked really hard the last five or six years to write this book and to help this ACPE training program launch. And I've stepped back just to let things lie fallow for a bit to see what's going to come up. I know this work helping therapists feel confident about moving towards their client's spirituality, like really feeling okay doing that, that's a very deep calling for me. And so, I know I'm going to continue in that in some capacity. I'm doing, you know, I'll do teaching and speaking and writing about that, but exactly what shape that's going to take, it's still unfolding, you know, but just day to day, I keep doing therapy with people and leading trainings through the ACPE program and at CareNet.

Anibal: Russell, thank you so much for having us and for bringing such a beautiful and important topic in energy spirituality into psychotherapy, such a privilege to be here with you

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and Tisha. And we hope we can keep meeting and sharing this model, our work and our lives. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Russell: Thank you both very much for having me. I've really enjoyed this conversation with you.

Tisha: Me too. Thanks for your time.