



Spiritual Struggles in Film, Part 1: The Struggles with Ultimate Meaning in Akira Kurosawa's "Ikiru"

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Agenda

- Spiritual Struggles
 - Divine Struggles
 - Moral Struggles
 - Ultimate Meaning Struggles
 - Doubt Struggles
 - Interpersonal Religious Struggles
 - Demonic Struggles
- Ultimate Meaning Struggles



Agenda

- Akira Kurosawa, the director of *Ikiru*
- Donald Richie on Japanese film
- Schemas to help understand the structure of *Ikiru*
- Preview of 5 film clips in context
- Mindful viewing of films
- 5 *Ikiru* film clips (20 minutes)
- Post-viewing processing of the film experience

July 26, 2022 presentation on Spiritual Struggles by Ken Pargament

- <https://spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/index.php/education/seminars/>



Access to Francis Lu's article on *Ikiru*

- Google three separate words:
 - “Lu Ikiru ATP”

A Definition of Spiritual Struggles

(Pargament & Exline, 2021, 2022)

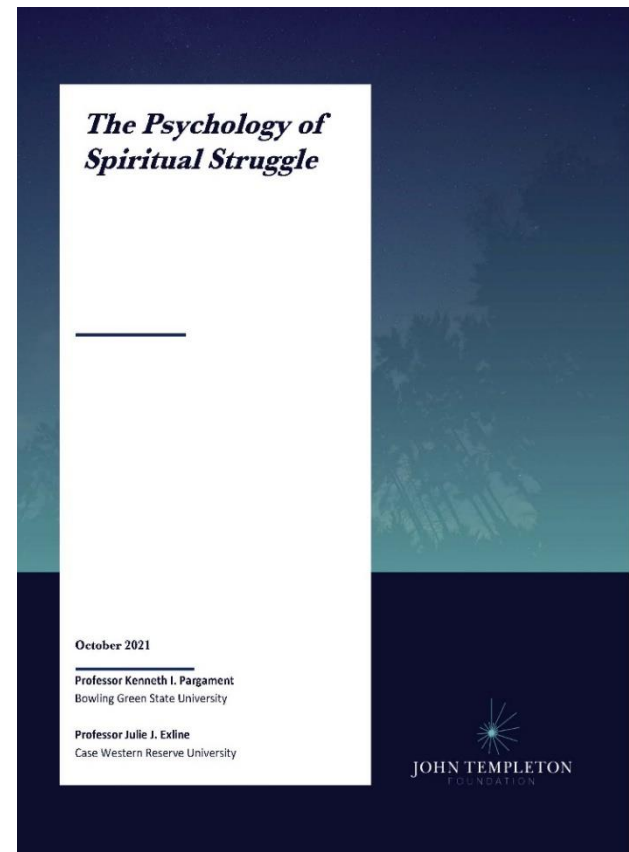
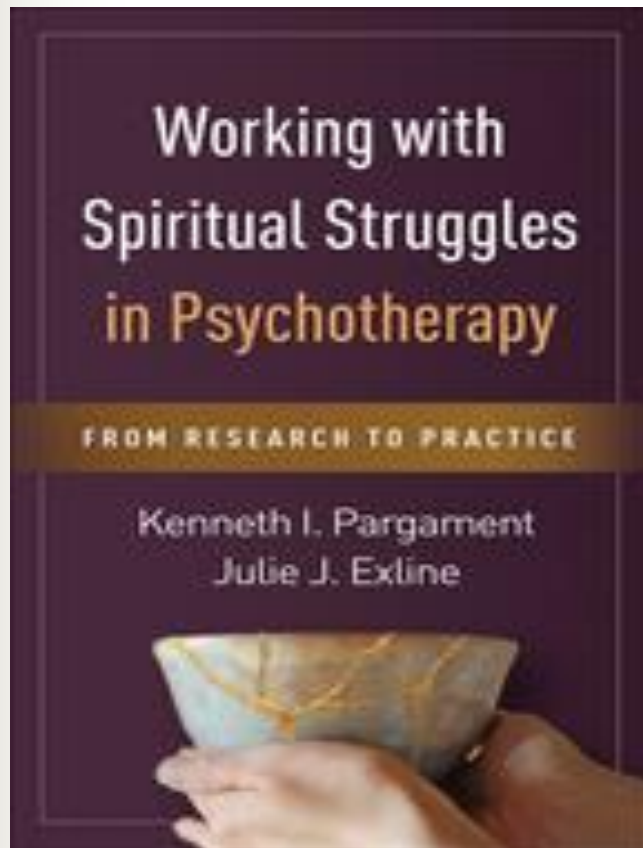
- Spiritual struggles refer to experiences of **tension**, **strain**, and **conflict** about sacred matters.
- They can focus on the supernatural, the self, or other people.



Two Recent Overviews of Spiritual Struggles

Pargament & Exline (2022)

Pargament & Exline (2021)





Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) Scale

- 26 items; 6 subscales (4-5 items per subscale)
- Can focus on specific timeframe (e.g., past week, past month) or specific event
- Brief version: RSS-14 (14 items; 2-3 per subscale)
- In progress: 6-item and 1-item screeners

Exline, J. J., Pargament, K. I., Grubbs, J. B., & Yali, A. M. (2014). The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and initial validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 6(3), 208-222.

Exline, J. J., Pargament, K. I., Wilt, J. A., Grubbs, J. G., & Yali, A. M. (2022). The RSS-14: Development and preliminary validation of a 14-item form of the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication.

Divine Struggles



- Negative thoughts or feelings focused on God
- Relevant for some who don't believe in God
- Sample items:
 - Felt angry at God
 - Felt as though God had abandoned me

(from RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)

Moral Struggles

- Struggle to follow moral principles; guilt about moral failures
- Examples:
 - worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong
 - felt guilty for not living up to my moral standards



(from RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)

Ultimate Meaning Struggles



- Questioning whether life has an ultimate purpose
- Sample items:
 - had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence
 - questioned whether life really matters

(from RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)

Doubt Struggles

- doubts/questions about beliefs
- implies distress (confusion, worry)
- sample items:
 - worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct
 - felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs



(from RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)

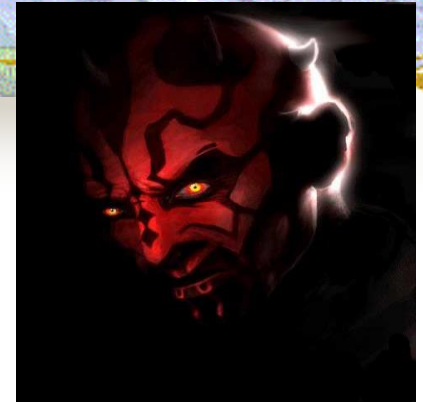
Interpersonal Religious Struggles

- Conflicts with other people or institutions re: religious issues
- Sample items:
 - had conflicts with other people about religious/spiritual matters
 - felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/spiritual people
 - felt angry at organized religion



(RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)

Demonic Struggles



- Belief that devil or evil spirits are attacking us or causing negative events
- Sample items:
 - worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits
 - felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits

(from RSS: Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014)



Spiritual Struggles Are Widespread

(Pargament & Exline, 2022)

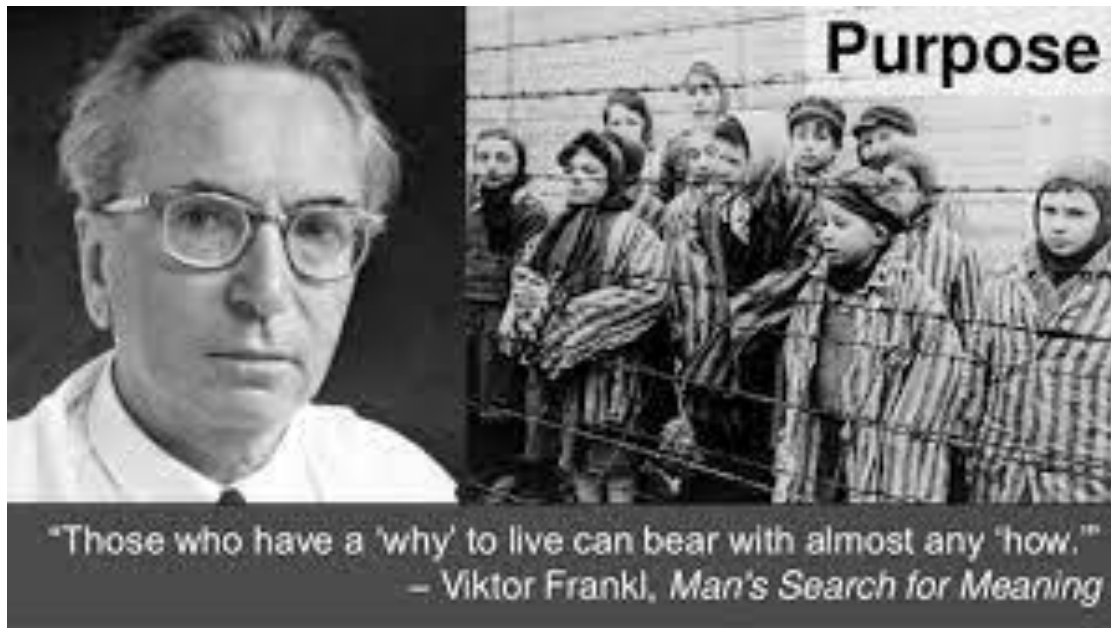
- 70% of adults in large U.S. sample reported spiritual struggles at some point in their lives
- 1/3 to 1/2 reported spiritual struggles in last few weeks
- Across faiths: Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists
- Across demographic groups

Spiritual Struggles and Distress

- Spiritual struggles correlate with difficulties in:
 - Mental health (more depression, anxiety, stress, anger; lower life satisfaction and meaning in life)
 - **MANY STUDIES show these connections!**



The Power of Purpose





The Importance of Meaning

- Among elderly adults, having stronger purpose in life reduces risk of heart attacks, strokes, and all-cause mortality (Cohen et al., 2016)
- In study of young adults, having a sense of mission or calling in life was tied to greater psychological well-being, better self-care, and less depression over time (Chen et al., 2019)

Noogenic Neuroses

- Despair
- Suicidality
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Addictiveness



Shaken to the Core

- Struggles of ultimate meaning are a place of question, tension, and doubt about the deeper purpose of life and, more specifically, one's own ultimate purpose.





Ultimate Meaning Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Questioned whether life really matters
Felt as though my life had no deeper meaning
Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world
Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence



Prevalence of Struggles of Ultimate Meaning

- Study of large sample of adults in U. S. (Exline et al., 2014)
 - 52% report some degree of ultimate meaning struggle over the past few weeks
 - Reported by people from diverse age, gender, religious, and ethnic groups



Struggles of Ultimate Meaning as Strong Predictors of Decline

- Depression and anxiety among parents with an infant in a neonatal intensive care unit (Brelsford & Doheny, 2020).
- Suicidal behavior among soldiers returning from combat in the Middle East (Currier et al., 2018).
- Manic-depressive symptoms among patients in an inpatient psychiatric treatment facility (Currier et al., 2019).

Ultimate Meaning Struggles: Can They Lead to Growth?

- Point to the emptiness of certain values (e.g., financial gain; social climbing; power)
- Lead to a deeper purpose in life





The Dalai Lama

- “Awareness of death is the very bedrock of the path. Until you have developed this awareness, all other practices are obstructed.”

Akira Kurosawa 1910-1998





Akira Kurosawa

- Born in a suburb of Tokyo
- Directed 29 films from 1943 to 1993
- Admired directors such as John Ford, Satyajit Ray, Sergei Eisenstein, Kenji Mizoguchi
- Western aesthetics: Dostoevsky, Goethe, Tolstoy, Shakespeare
- Eastern aesthetics: Japanese Buddhism, Noh drama



Akira Kurosawa

- George Lucas and Steven Spielberg presented him a 1989 Academy Awards Honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement.
- At the start of the video montage of his films was Kurosawa's words:
“To be an artist is never to avert one's eyes.”



Akira Kurosawa

- “Sometimes I think of my death. I think of ceasing to be...and it is from these thoughts that *Ikiru* came.”
- “Ikiru” means “to live” in Japanese.
- A 1952 film set in post-World War II Japan
- Brings together East and West.



Japanese Film (Richie, 2011)

- “In Japan things as they are, are the way things should be. Unhappy natural events are to be accepted because they exist.”
- Nature as “complementary to human individuals, something with which one should live in harmony.”



Japanese Film (Richie, 2011)

- “In their art, including cinema, the Japanese traditionally accept things as they naturally are... In many Western films, however, since things as they are is not often an acceptable idea, story, plot, and action are more important...”



Japanese Film (Richie, 2011)

- “Japanese films... traditionally tend to be contemplative and fairly slow. Western films are more tightly plotted, utilitarian, like the Western home or the American skyscraper.”
- “In a way Kurosawa, shows us less but his film implies more. When this occurs the spectators, presented with less than perhaps expected, must bring more of themselves to the film, must think more, feel more. The spectator is like the camera lens – the less light there is, the more it must open up.”



Schemas to help understand the structure of *Ikiru*

- Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 1980: 4 issues
- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1948: The hero's journey
- Ken Wilber, *No Boundary*, 1979: 3 transformations of consciousness



Schemas to help understand the structure of *Ikiru*

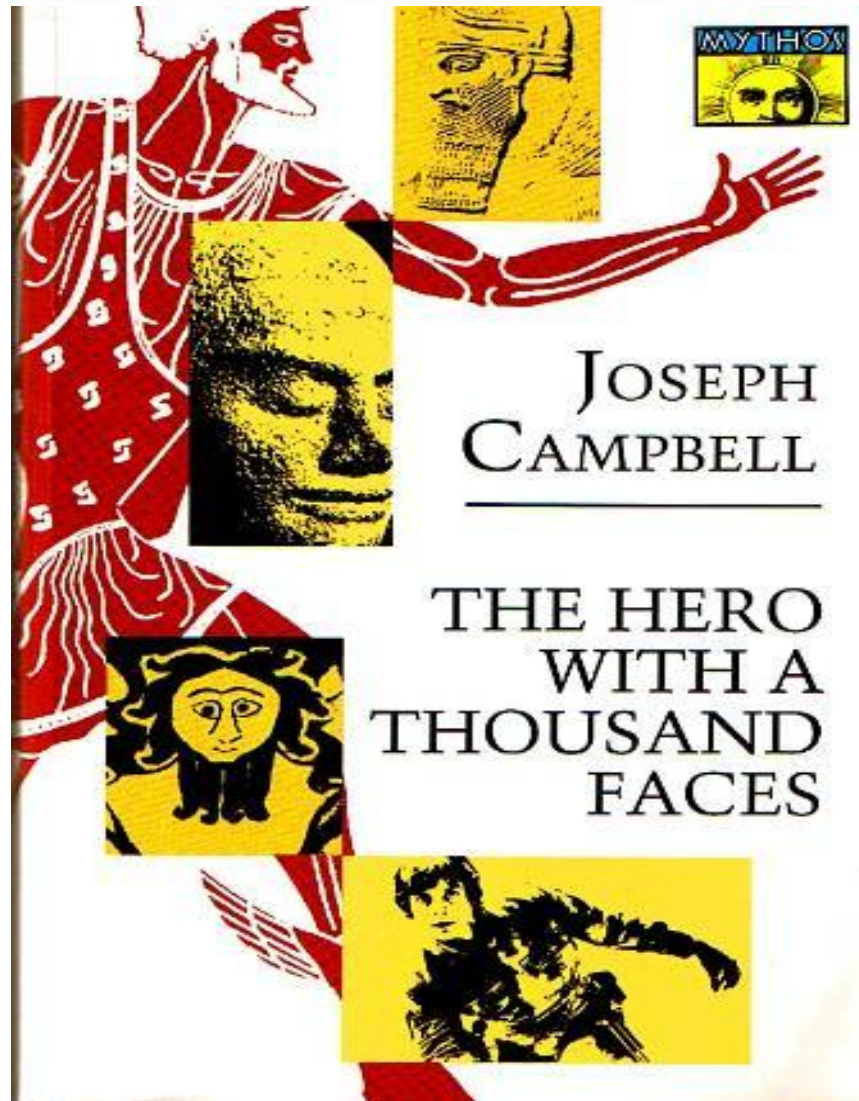
- Abraham Maslow
- Japanese Buddhism: Noh

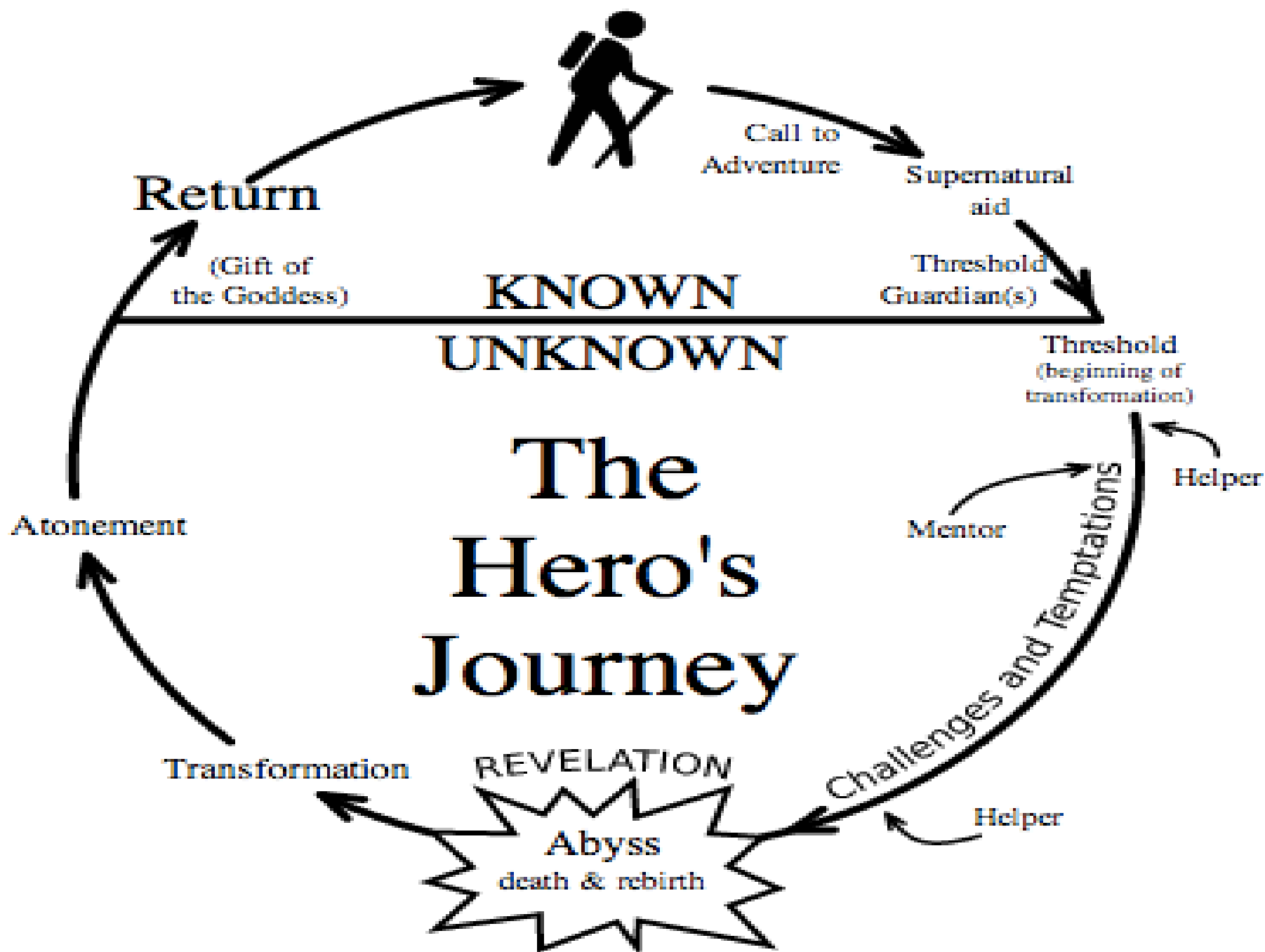


Irvin Yalom

- 4 existential issues
 - Death
 - Meaninglessness
 - Isolation [vs. Connection]
 - Freedom

1948







Joseph Campbell on Myth

- “The images of myth are reflections of the spiritual potentialities of everyone of us. Through contemplating those, we invoke their powers in our own lives to operate through ourselves.”
- “Myths tell us how to confront and bear and interpret suffering, but they do not say that in life there can or should be no suffering.”



Campbell on Compassion

“The Buddhists speak of the bodhisattva--the one who knows immortality, yet voluntarily enters into the field of the fragmentation of time and participates willingly and joyfully in the sorrows of the world. And this means not only experiencing sorrows oneself but participating with compassion in the sorrows of others. Compassion is the awakening of the heart from bestial self-interest to humanity. The word ‘compassion’ means literally ‘suffering with.’ ”



Campbell on Transformation

- “One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of the transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”



Campbell on the Transcendent

- “The transcendent is unknowable and unknown... The mystery of life is beyond all human conception. We always think in terms of opposites. Mythology suggests that behind that duality there is a singularity, over which this plays like a shadow game...”



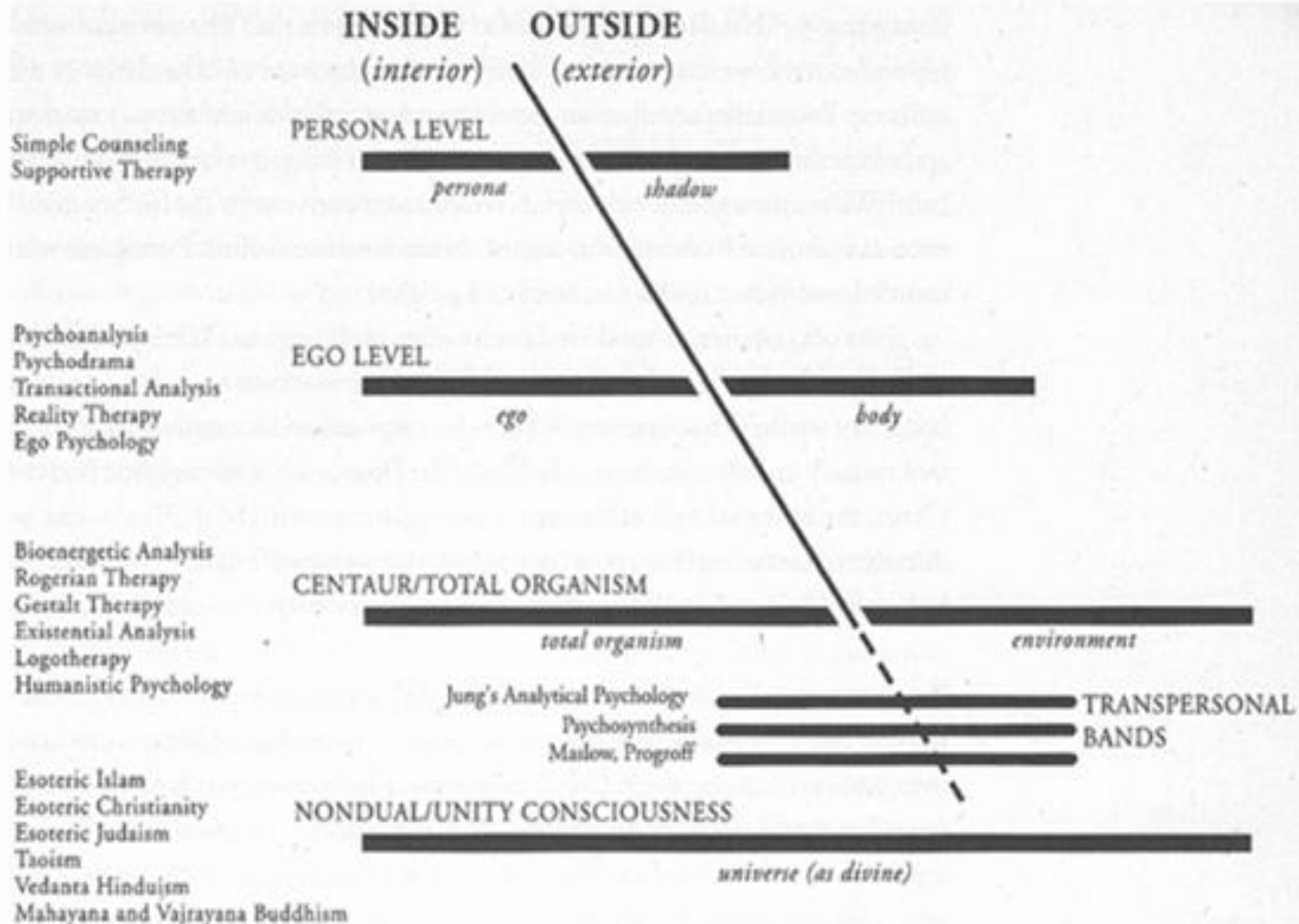
Campbell on Eternity

- “Eternity isn’t some later time. Eternity isn’t even a long time. Eternity has nothing to do with time. Eternity is that dimension of here and now that all thinking in temporal terms cuts off.”
- “ ‘Eternity is in love with the productions of time,’ says the poet Blake... The source of temporal life is eternity. Eternity pours itself into the world.”



Campbell on the Here and Now

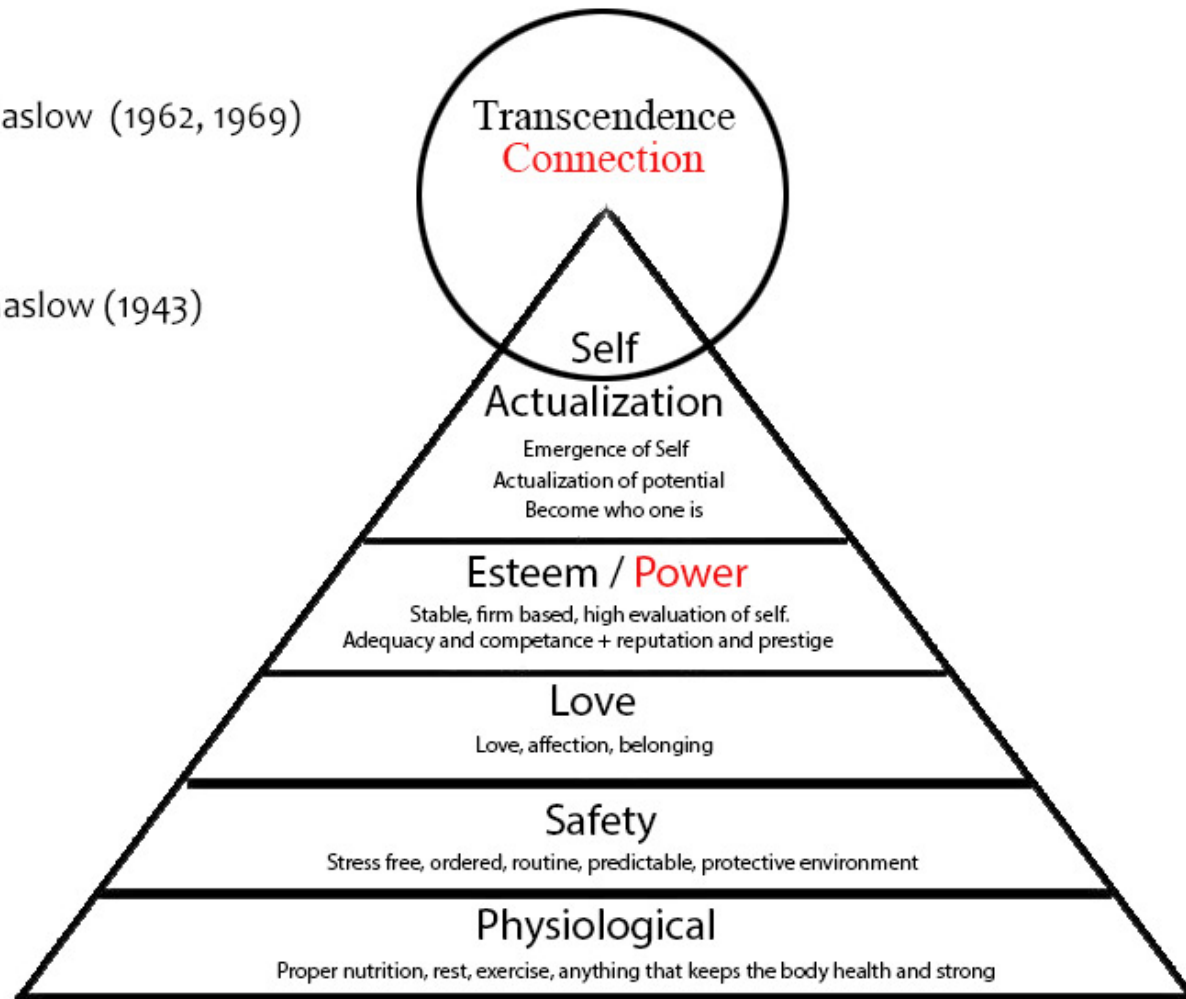
- “And if you don’t get it here, you won’t get it anywhere... The experience of eternity right here and now, in all things, whether thought of as good or as evil, is the function of life.”



Abraham Maslow

Maslow (1962, 1969)

Maslow (1943)





Abraham Maslow

- “Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.” — Abraham Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York (1971, p. 26)



Japanese Buddhism: Noh

- “In many noh plays . . . the audience has a strong sense of mental and emotional relief as the play comes to a close. This relief seems to derive from a clear sense that the character on the stage... has in some real way been released from what had seemed sheer tragedy.



Japanese Buddhism: Noh

- That is, the actor or actors have communicated a sense of *profound tranquility* . . . Yugen moves beyond the text to reveal, through the tranquility it captures, the presence of nirvana in the midst of samsara, not as an abstract principle but in the concrete actions of the characters on the stage.” (LaFleur, 1986)



Mindful Viewing of Film

- I invite you to experience all the film clips from a contemplative space starting with your way of silent centering.
- Be present with full attention to what you see, hear, and feel while looking for what moments of the film that move you deeply.
- Let go of premature analyzing, mind chatter, and distracting multi-tasking.



Mindful Viewing of Film

- Post-film viewing process
 - 1': Observe silence and reflect on your experience of the film clips.
 - What scenes or images moved you deeply? What did you see? What did you hear? What did they show you?
 - 3': Journal your viewing experience.



Mindful Viewing of Film

- Post-film viewing process
 - Try to type in the Chat one moving moment so we all can read what others have experienced.
 - Group discussion about the moving moments--
What did we learn from our experience of the film clips?
 - Questions/comments by Chat or live on screen
Please be concise.



Ikiru film clips in context

- 1st image: Objective, MD POV (narrator's voice)
- Watanabe (W) at the office (narrator's voice)
 - Toyo, a young woman who tells a joke, will be seen later.
- Waiting room: a patient speaks to W
- MD office: W meets an elder MD, a younger MD and a nurse
 - MD behavior consistent with Japanese medical ethics at the time
 - MD POV
- On the street: W's POV



Ikiru film clips in context

- **W meets a writer at night in small bar**

- W's POV
- **Writer's POV**

- **Visit to Night town**

- New hat
- Visit to a small bar
- **Visit to a piano bar**



Ikiru film clips in context

■ Piano bar

- “Freedom Boogie-Woogie” 1st played
- W runs after a woman wearing his new hat, who oscillates her arms and knees.
- Pianist asks for a song request, and W gives one.
- Couples begin to dance in the background, with swaying curtain beads in the foreground.
- Couples stop dancing, woman moves away, all look at W.
- W sings the song twice.



Ikiru film clips in context

- W meets Toyo, who needs his stamp so she can resign to take another job.
- They return to W's house.
 - Son and daughter-in-law POV
 - Toyo's POV evolves.
 - W and Toyo develop a father-daughter friendship.
 - **Toyo describes nicknames of co-workers including one for W**



Ikiru film clips in context

- **W and Toyo at the coffee shop**
 - Across the staircase, a birthday party is being set up.
 - Conversation, music changes to “March of the Wooden Soldiers”
 - **Conversation: 4 existential issues come up, “It’s too late,” music changes**
- W returns to his office.



Ikiru film clips in context

- Siren, narrator says “5 months later, our hero is dead,” photograph of W
- Wake of W in his bedroom
- 15 flashback scenes by those in the room
- “How did he feel when he died?”
- **Policeman, who was the last person to see W alive, describes his flashback.**

William Blake (1757-1827)

