

Spirituality as a natural part of transmaterial worlding. A reflexive approach in systemic practice

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Abstract

Many suggest that we are part of something larger. There is something more within and between us than we can see and measure, and sometimes, cannot put into words. Spirituality, “the power of life”, is a complex phenomenon expressed through culture, tradition, discourse, and experience, and can be linked to religion, faith, and soul. Spiritual practices become relational and material, not merely an inner belief. Spirituality is a dimension of systemic, contextual, and ecological meaning-making processes that can enrich systemic practice by opening up and closing off experiences in clients' lives. As such, it is part of transmaterial worlding, which invites us to examine how assumptions, values, and beliefs shape relationships and identity.

We argue that spirituality has long been undervalued in systemic therapy and deserves a clearer place. We recognise that spirituality can be both life-giving and divisive, yet it may also offer a solid foundation for compassion, love, and connection with humans and the natural world. We explore how systemic practitioners can develop spiritual literacy and integrate spirituality through reflectivity, contextual reflectivity, and reflexivity. By deepening our practices with these concepts, we expand our understanding of identity, relationship, responsibility, and interaction in a more-than-material world.

Introduction

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" is a famous quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet (2009, p. 166). Many would probably agree that they experience being part of something bigger; there is something more within us and between us than we can see and measure, and sometimes, not put into words. This is what we call spirituality, a complex concept with many different definitions and meanings. It can encompass concepts such as the soul, religion, faith, a philosophy of life, the supernatural or transcendent, and the sacred (Holmberg and Jensen, 2024).

We think that there is a risk that (systemic) practice and psychotherapy can mainly focus on human connection and interaction, while other matters that matter can easily be neglected. We agree with Simon and Salter's (2019, 2020) ideas to not only pay attention to human life and voices as mattering, which they coined as *transmaterial worlding*. The concept invites us to view nature, animals, earth, water, air, buildings, sacred objects, icons, texts, sound, music and bodily practices as active participants in the 'system' (Simon and Salter, 2019). The authors propose a dynamic, relational and ethical process in which humans and non-humanity in all its forms can, in togetherness, co-create meaning. Transmaterial worlding seeks to connect, both theoretically and within practice, systemic practice, social constructionism, decolonisation and new materialism (Salter et al., 2026). In our opinion, spirituality also belongs to this domain.

For many, spirituality is an integral part of life (Coyle, 2017; Errington, 2017; Holmberg, 2018), serving as a source of peace, hope, and resilience, but also be experienced as restrictive and limiting. Spirituality can be about nature, religion, places, and other wisdom we bring with us from our ancestors. However, as Holmberg and colleagues (2021) and Telfener (2017) state, it is seldom part of therapeutic practice, which is somewhat strange, as therapy should ideally be a space where practitioners and clients co-create an environment in which all aspects of life that matter can be included. That is why it is important for therapists to deliberately open the door and be inviting on this topic, to be sensitive and listen deeply to their clients' lives and experiences, and if and how spirituality plays a role for them.

In this article, we will argue that spirituality is a dimension of systemic, contextual, ecological, and transmaterialist meaning-making processes that can enrich systemic practice by opening and closing off experiences in clients' lives. Therefore, therapy should be a place where the meaning and place of spirituality and its contexts and discourses can be explored as a natural topic, providing a valuable resource for therapists and clients. We think that practitioners should actively invite these perspectives into sessions, making it clear that spirituality belongs to the conversation.

We will start with our personal experiences of spirituality. Thereafter, we will go into the concept of spirituality, how we see it related to transmaterialism and examine how they fit within systemic thinking and practice. After sharing some client reflections, we will see how reflectivity, contextual reflectivity, and reflexivity, captured in the Reflect/xivity pendulum (Deij, 2025), a structured model for reflectivity, can be of help to integrate spirituality into the practice.

Our spiritual journeys so far

Åse's story

I grew up in a small town in Norway with my parents and younger sister. My parents were active members of a Protestant folk church, and I was brought up in the faith. I have always been a critical thinker, so I started going my own way early on. However, I have always had a strong faith in God, and I still do today. I grew up with a God who was both strict and judgemental yet also loving. I have since rejected that duality; for me, God is only love. As I see it, God is present in all of creation, making creation sacred and interconnected. God is also greater than the sum of all things — that's why I feel safe resting in God. God is present, I can see Christ in everyone and everything, including those who are suffering and in nature. The universe is our home, and adopting this universal perspective can foster a deeper connection to the planet and to each other (Rohr, 2020).

I have always felt a strong connection with people, animals and nature. When I lost my eldest son a few years ago, it was as if my senses had been heightened. Perhaps that's what happens when people find themselves at life's extremes?

At our son's memorial service, several had a powerful experience. As we sat together on a porch and prepared to sing a song, a bird came and perched in a nearby tree. It sang at the top of its voice along with us. When we had finished singing, the bird flew away. After a while, when we wanted to sing another song, the bird came back and sang with us again. It was as if it wanted to tell us that our son had found peace.

In times of crisis, I have found solace in nature, for me, the greatest cathedral there is. I have gone on long walks with my dog and found peace at our cabin in the countryside. I feel that I am part of something greater than myself. To me, creation is sacred. The entire ecosystem fits together and complements each other, and it is amazing. Nature is filled with spirit and must be treated with humility, reverence and love. It transcends our individual selves and gives us a glimpse of the vast, interconnected network of living beings with which humans are in relation (Steinauer-Scudder, 2025). How can we learn from nature and all the creatures that inhabit the world we call home?

In my professional work, I began incorporating spirituality in the mid-1990s. In the systemic field, this topic was largely absent, and when the term 'holistic' was used, it did not include spirituality or religion. Over the years, however, there has been significant progress, and today, there is greater openness among clients, students, and other professionals. Spirituality is there, waiting to find its natural place.

Petra's story

I am in Navajo-land, *Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaili* (Monument Valley), Arizona/Utah (USA).

I sit in a small boat at the Pacific, seeing only a small part of its endlessness.

I stand at a Norwegian fjord, with its majestic view, deep water, and massive waterfalls.

I stand in the Atlantic Ocean, feeling its strong and majestic current.

I hike through mountains and valleys in the Lake District and Northumberland (UK), the Auvergne (France), and drive towards the Alps in Slovenia.

The tremendous and breathtaking grandness of the environment and the force of nature bring tears in my body.

At moments like these, I feel so tiny, so insignificant, so overwhelmed.

It is so clearly *there*, though words lack to describe it.

It is peaceful, it completes me.

It is good to accept the humility and surrender to it.

Although I do not identify as religious, it was important to both my husband and me to pay gratitude to a divine reality at our wedding. While travelling, we had both been struck by the atmosphere in temples, mosques and churches; they seemed to breathe sacredness, faith, hope and devotion. We were fortunate enough to know a priest who was willing to step away from his own religion and help us find a way to make this possible. It was important to us that the ceremony was not just about us; we wanted to invite something bigger than ourselves.

This gave us a sense of holding and comfort.

Experiences like these are of great significance to many people. Sometimes they are linked to a particular religion; sometimes they are not. Some might call it spirituality; others might not. It is described as a strong experience of knowing, sensing, that there is more than is visible, measurable, or for grabs: it is “just there”.

I often daydream about what it would mean to integrate spirituality more naturally into systemic work, with openness and curiosity, despite the uncertainty that many of us as (systemic) therapists may feel about spirituality's place and role within our conversations. As Errington (2017) describes, this uncertainty can create discomfort. By embracing that discomfort and asking oneself curious, critical questions, the door to exploring if and how spirituality might meaningfully enrich our professional conversations might be opened.

About spirituality

The word "spirituality" derives from the Latin *spirare*, meaning "to breathe" and *spiritus*, meaning "soul" or "power of life", this life force is what makes many feel alive and it shapes the sense of meaning-making. There are moments when people feel especially alive, when their souls are nourished and filled with something difficult to put into words. This could be standing on a hilltop and seeing an old tree, feeling the sea breeze caress your cheek or entering a chapel in a completely foreign place and yet feeling a sense of belonging. Such experiences can give a sense of sacredness. It could be a little moment in a small bit of the cosmos, where you have placed your feet and where one's soul is deeply felt, as Steinauer-Scudder (2025) describes it.

Human spirituality encompasses a variety of concepts and draws on sources within and beyond different kinds of religions. We see this broad kind of spirituality as part of the dimensions and realities beyond and between traditional, physical materialities, like trees, buildings and the cosmos at large, acknowledging that life extends beyond human societies and cultures. These almost ungraspable parts of life, the territories of meaning, purpose, and existence, often hold the keys to transformation and are only too frequently overlooked in our fast-paced, materially focused world. Yet, it is precisely in these spaces of the unknown that we often find the most profound opportunities for growth and healing.

In this article, we focus on and embrace a posthumanistic spirituality that transcends religion and involves acknowledging, respecting, and loving oneself, others, and the world around us as key drivers. We recognise that our constructions of spirituality and religion are often limited by the era, locality, traditions, culture and experiences in which they are formed. While these can be beneficial and enriching, they can also be detrimental, creating distance from life (Holmberg and Karlsson, 2023). Spiritual wisdom far exceeds what humans can comprehend, and our ancestors have left behind sources from all corners of the world. Embarking on an ongoing spiritual journey often shapes the longing to belong to something deeper and greater. This longing can become more important at certain points in life, for example, during times of crisis or uncertainty, or simply as we grow older.

This approach aligns with David Benner's (2011) ideas about spirituality. He distinguishes between two kinds of spirituality: toxic and soulful. The first, toxic spirituality is insensitive to humans' needs and realities, which can thrive in narrow, dogmatic environments, whether religious or spiritual cults, where rigid beliefs can alienate rather than connect individuals to life. Toxic spirituality can disconnect

people from their bodies, emotions, and innermost longings. It rather hinders than supports growth and development and may foster insensitivity, inhumanity, and ego-driven grandiosity (Benner, 2011). Soulful spirituality is quite the opposite: it helps us become deeply authentic humans. It is about being present with ourselves, with others, in and through the encounter with our surroundings. It is about living beyond the self and about the things that make life worth living and make us feel alive. Soulful spirituality is about trying to be fully present with oneself and others; it involves a profound sense of connection to life beyond the self and touches on what makes life truly meaningful. Soulful spirituality is often guided by longings and deep desires that can lead to greater authenticity and integrity, propelling one forward in growth and motion; it helps to become, in an ongoing movement through life.

The word 'soulful' invites to think about the soul, and for that we depart from the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr's (2009) concept of the soul. He describes the soul as the blueprint inside every living thing, including humans, animals, plants and nature at large, which needs to be respected, protected and loved. Soulful spirituality then, is a conscious, transformative journey to live, beyond the ego, where deep listening to the inner and outer world is placed central. Connection the soul can give feeling of belonging to the world. How we live, and take care of each other, matters. However, the soul is neither a physical thing nor an essence, it is transcendent and logically incomprehensible, reminding us that humans are more than just biological machines. It can bind together and provide an unshakeable foundation for compassion, connection and love (Robinson, 2018); not only with other humans but also with the natural world around us, similar to the human world, is imbued with soul.

Bridging transmaterial worlding and spirituality

The concept of transmaterial worlding, coined by Simon and Salter (2019), invites us to understand the world not merely as a domain of human materiality, but as an ecology of places, objects and entities with which we engage in reciprocal relationships. Instead of focusing solely on the human voice, the authors suggest that we recognise other participants in our systems, such as nature, animals, water, air, buildings, ancestors, and landscapes. These entities can then act as co-therapists or co-researchers in worlding practices, contributing to the co-creation and meaning-making of life and mattering relationships (Salter et al., 2026; Simon and Salter, 2020).

We suggest considering spirituality as one of these non-human entities. This includes sacred sites, rituals, symbols and beliefs that have been part of human life since ancestral times and which must be recognised as meaningful parts of life. Spiritual ancestors and deities are not merely symbols, but can be ontological agents in the worlds of clients and therapists, and our spiritual experiences can be seen as part of the process of creating reality in collaboration with forces beyond the human realm. This applies not only to Western, secular and colonised spiritualities, but also to all spiritual experiences which have too often been discredited, pathologised, marginalised or dismissed as superstition or paganism.

When acknowledged as valid, spirituality becomes a form of inclusive knowledge alongside alternative epistemologies and practices. All spiritual practices thereby become relational and transmaterial rather than merely inner beliefs. Spiritual practices become a means of creating the world and relationships, and can be recognised as active methods of reorganising them and fostering a sense of belonging.

Spirituality and systemic thinking

Spirituality aligns beautifully with systemic thinking and practice. For instance, Von Bertalanffy's (1950) general systems theory encompassed not only human or social systems, but all systems. He aimed to connect natural, mechanical and biological systems, developing general systems theory as a transdisciplinary concept (Chard, 2014; McNamee, 2004; Ramage and Shipp, 2020). Furthermore, Gregory Bateson (1979, 2000), one of the founding fathers of systemic thinking, encouraged us to look beyond the self and contemplate the patterns that connect. He encouraged humans to learn from nature with humility and curiosity, referring to a sacred and ecological world in which relationships are the smallest unit. Adopting a systemic approach to thinking and acting requires a particular attitude and way of seeing and acting. It involves the ability to reflect on the whole and appreciate complexity respectfully. What is not fully understood, the mysterious, can easily be overlooked or overruled by logic, and it can be a challenge to look closer and listen deeper to find what is *there*. It involves a desire to explore the mysteries of life and the meaning of being human, and an ability to open oneself to unconditional love for all things and, thus, for existence itself (Telfener, 2017).

Postmodernist social constructionist systemic thinking invites practitioners to take a closer look at how relationships are constructed with assumptions, beliefs and values, and how these are experienced as part of identities (Gergen, 2009). According to social constructionism, experiences, thoughts and feelings, as well as stories about ourselves and others, help us in the ongoing and never-ending process of co-creating who we are throughout life (Anderson, 2022; Flaskas, 1999). In this landscape, nourishment for the soul can be found through literature, poetry, music and spiritual ancestors, as well as through the teachings of different religions. However, alongside this, there may be an extension based on territory larger than everyday experiences. This is the longing to reach for an innermost life force, beyond defences and a daily sense of self, where one can connect with their soul (Flood, 2020). Without such soul recognition and mirroring, it is easy to become alienated from nature and ultimately from oneself. In a soulful ecology, everything and everyone belongs and is connected (Rohr, 2009).

.... in practice?

As systemic family therapists, supervisors and trainers, we value practising in a collaborative and dialogic way (Anderson, 2022). This means engaging with and being curious about topics important to our conversational partners, including their beliefs and values, which may relate to spirituality. The dynamic within professional relationships is usually structured in a way that distinguishes roles and responsibilities, often placing the practitioner in a position of authority or guidance and the client in a more receptive or responsive role. Recognising the constituted power dynamics within therapeutic relationships (Anderson, 2022; Day, 2010; McNamee, 2015), we believe practitioners should proactively invite clients' spirituality into sessions. Acknowledging this framework is fundamental to our ethics-led practice (Simon, 2014; Telfener, 2017) as it acknowledges the inherent power imbalances and emphasises the importance of navigating them with sensitivity and respect. Within this context, it is customary for the practitioner to initiate dialogue by asking questions such as what spirituality means to the client, or if this topic is something they would like to incorporate into the sessions, as clients are often unaware of this possibility (Holmberg et al., 2017).

We believe that these topics should be an integral part of clinical supervision and training. As supervisory and training relationships are hierarchical (De Stefano et al., 2017), trainers and supervisors should actively open the topic, as it is, as Coyle (2017) points out, such a natural part of the lives of many. With this open stance towards spirituality, they serve as role models for (future) practitioners in their therapeutic relationships: asking questions will prevent the theme from being overlooked (Berkel et al., 2007; Pearson, 2017). Alongside contributions to professional development (Coyle, 2017; Gilliam and Armstrong, 2012), facilitating, encouraging, and co-creating a dialogue that fosters reflective learning about the existence and significance of spirituality can also be significant to the well-being of therapists themselves (Errington, 2017).

.... in practice!

According to Walsh (2009), many clients yearn for greater meaning and deeper connections with others in their lives. Could the price of colonialism, neoliberalism and capitalism be that, in many (Western) communities and societies, people have removed themselves from the circle of life? This lost connection, combined with the accelerating pace of life, creates a sense of alienation from the world around us and from meaningful relationships (Hari, 2018; Rosa, 2021). This accelerating pace and its many demands, coupled with the instrumentalisation of relationships, may create spiritual exhaustion.

Therapists can create a space in which to explore this exhaustion; by being present and listening to the whispers of the soul, they can help clients to be present and listening to themselves. This can foster a deeper connection to life itself and serve as a reminder that everything is interconnected (Draper and Green, 2020; Holmberg and Jensen, 2024). This way of being as a therapist, can be called spiritual literacy. While literacy is often defined as the ability to read and write, here we are seeking another understanding of the concept. More metaphorically, connected to client's spiritual life. It is the ability to pick up meaning and intention through tone of voice, facial expression and body language; to search for meaning in shapes, signs and marks; and to ask, check, reflect, and check again. Systemic therapists embrace a multi-contextual, embodied approach, remaining open to the unexpected and unforeseen, being curious about how physical surroundings, relationships and cultures experiences of reality. Spirituality may also be part of this complexity. It is important that therapists develop working with barriers, bridging linguistic uncertainty and increasing personal awareness (Holmberg, 2018; Holmberg et al., 2021). Furthermore, to develop spiritual literacy, it is important for therapists to have a perspective on their own spiritual life and journey. This enables them to accompany their clients on their journey and to tolerate and embrace curiosity, even when their clients' spiritual lives differ from their own (Holmberg, 2018).

This can be achieved by joining clients in a dialogic process and adopting a witness stance rather than an aboutness stance (Shotter, 2005). In togetherness, the mattering of spirituality within this joint therapeutic journey can be explored. Clients can develop critical thinking skills to help them navigate their lives and understand and interpret information from their surroundings. This can help them to gain a greater awareness of the path they wish to take in life. It may help them to explore whether their spirituality feels soulful, uplifting and supportive, or whether they are part of a context that feels dehumanising and frightening (Benner, 2011).

Reflections from clients: soulfulness as peacemaker

Several of our clients tell us that nature can help them deal with difficult situations in life.

Peter, who lived in a turbulent relationship, shared that sometimes, at night, he took the car out to look at the starry sky.

When I look up at the stars and the sky, I feel a deep peace in my head and thoughts. In those moments, there is only them and me. The silence that arises is special, as if the world around me retreats.

Then I begin to wonder about what really exists up there. The universe is enormous, and we really know very little about it. Just that thought puts everything into perspective. Suddenly, stress, worries, and problems seem small and insignificant.

In the hours I sit there under the starry sky, everything else disappears. It is as if my thoughts are allowed to breathe. For me, this is therapy - a reminder of how small I am, but also how lucky I am to experience the silence, the wonder, and the peace.

Amanda, who struggles with her relationship with her mother, says the coast helps her lift her gaze and find peace amid everything.

Nature has always fascinated me. Since I was a little girl, I have had the pleasure of living close to scenic areas. My curiosity and longing to discover nature up close have always been great. Over the years, this has led to many coastal landscapes, forest areas, and mountain ranges being carefully explored in every nook and cranny. Nature experiences give me a sense of freedom!

Traveling in nature gives me space and inspiration to get in touch with my inner landscape cy and creativity. Summer and winter, I can spend hours out on the coast with my camera, searching for beautiful subjects and what nature has to offer. Sitting on a rocky cliff out in the open ocean with a cup of coffee, a packed lunch, a warm spring sun, the smell of salty sea, and the sound of waves crashing against the shore - gives me a deep inner peace and joy. In nature, I experience being part of something far bigger than myself – a place where I can completely relax, feel welcome, wonder, and be inspired.

Only when I find peace can I listen for what resonates deeply in my soul.

Being surrounded by nature's and taking a pause, helped Peter and Amanda, to reconnect and bending back to themselves and, after that, moving forward. Reflective and reflexive moments like these are pivotal for an active, deliberate and ethics-led practice.

Reflectivity, contextual reflectivity and reflexivity as helping hands

As the terms reflectivity and reflexivity are often conflated and interchangeably used (Fook and Askeland, 2006; Neden, 2012), we will first define how we use them in this article. Starting with reflection, which is a human, unintentional activity. It occurs whilst walking the dog, hanging the wash, or doing the dishes; it has no goal and is not about curiosity, ethics, learning, or change (Deij, 2025; Lumsden, 2019; Simon, 2023).

Reflectivity, on the other hand, is a deliberate activity; it is both a process and a skill that can be learned. While it is possible to reflect on situations involving more people or to engage in the reflective process with others, it is an individual exploration. Reflectivity centres one's own perspective and representation of the world (Ravi, 2019). Reflectivity is a matter of thoughtful, cognitive, and intellectual activity combined with lived experiences, feelings, and embodiment (Finlay, 2008; Frake and Dogra, 2006; Vyskocilova and Prasko, 2013). Reflectivity could be seen as looking inward.

Contextual reflectivity builds on reflectivity by opening the window to larger contexts. Deriving from critical social theory, it is concerned with cultural, social and political society (Gursansky et al., 2010), and emphasises the dynamics of power and oppression (Sanders and Moulenbelt, 2011). Critical theorists seek to address power imbalances and colonisation (Reynolds, 2012, 2019). Reflectivity within the domain of contextuality turns around privileges, marginalisation, inclusion and exclusion, and diversity, and conversations may be unsettling or uncomfortable (Hardy and Bobes, 2016). Contextual reflectivity is connecting one's own experiences, beliefs and values with discourses from the outer world and discussing them. Contextual reflectivity could be seen as critically looking around and questioning what is taken for granted.

Reflexivity adds another layer upon reflectivity and contextual reflectivity. It combines inward and outward awareness and adds an extra loop to review the reflective process itself, including one's own perspective and position, and to consider the effect of these on others. Simon (2023) argues that reflexivity in therapy, research and practice is often linked to a Western, academic, individualistic framework that focuses on people's inner mental processes. The focus should instead be more closely linked to power, our colonial legacy, to examine which epistemologies are deemed valid. Reflexivity can be seen as 'reflectivity-on-reflectivity', similar to second-order cybernetics, where the observer is observed (Von Foerster, 2003). Reflexivity is relational (Deij, 2025; Simon, 2023), even when it is carried out alone in relation to a situation in which no one else was directly involved, since the reflexant is aware of direct and indirect connections. Reflexivity is looking and engaging with the external world in a relational and recursive loop.

These processes will start as a retrospective, looking back and learning from it, with the forward intention to change if necessary. However, as one becomes more acquainted with working with one's own reflectivity, contextual reflectivity, and reflexivity, one will slowly but surely move from *on-action* to *in-action* (Schön, 1983). By consciously inviting the reflecting and reflexing process in, one can move from unconscious incapable to unconscious capable; it can become learnt intuition (Kahneman, 2011; Klein, 2015). Simon (2023) adds *as-action* refers to this as *Reflexivity 2*. To achieve this, the questions in the Pendulum are written in the present tense.

Summarising, it could be said that all three processes, reflectivity, contextual reflectivity and reflexivity, require the critical analysis of one's work and the dominant discourses and power dynamics, the evaluation of one's skills and knowledge, and an openness to one's embodied experiences, feelings, emotions, values and beliefs.

To clarify the distinctions among reflectivity, contextual reflectivity, and reflexivity, we provide examples of questions and differences in emphasis.

Three types of questions with the different angels about describing a situation:

- **Reflective questions:**
 - What happens?
 - How would I describe the situation?
- **Contextual reflective questions:**
 - What is the smaller context?
 - Which are the wider contexts?
 - What discourses count? Which discourses may be overseen/forgotten?
 - What power issues are involved?"
- **Reflexive questions:**
 - What is the other's role/position?
 - What was my role?
 - How do our positions influence our connection?
 - How do larger contexts and discourses impact us?
 - Three types of questions regarding beliefs and values:
- **Reflectivity:**
 - How does this situation relate to my beliefs and values?
 - Did I act to the best of my ability?
 - If not: why? / If so: how?
- **Contextual reflectivity:**
 - How do my beliefs and values relate to the wider contexts and dominant discourses?
- **Reflexivity:**
 - What are the beliefs and values of the other?
 - How do our beliefs and values relate to or differ from each other?
 - What do they mean for our connection?
 - How can we relate this all to the larger contexts and discourses?

The need to listen, and listen more closely, can help us in our work as therapists. Opening up to the deeper sounds of reflexivity requires attention, focus, and stillness, and, as it is almost impossible to engage in such a process amid daily chaos, it needs time and space (Deij, 2025).

Stillness – for reflectivity and spirituality

Western society is a hasty and demanding one, with many requirements, obligations, and tasks. Therapists are often juggling with tight schedules as organisations demand effective and productive employees, the necessity to stay registered, which consumes energy, time and money, and, of course, a personal life in which things are going on as life has its own way. Finding time, alone or with colleagues, to really reflect is often difficult. Yes, it is possible to talk about clients and their situations,

but it can be doubted if these are truly reflective moments, or 'only' cognitive and solution-focused thoughts and talk that do not move outside a well-known loop.

It takes time, space, and perhaps practice to become receptive and responsive to inner thoughts, movements, nuances, and resonances. Therefore, (contextual) reflectivity and reflexivity need a slow, or even stop-motion, to allow oneself to listen to the sounds and whisperings within. Stillness and silence can be achieved by wondering, taking a look, and taking a second look; by listening, and listening more closely, perhaps with closed eyes, to let outside noise resonate within and become aware of its meaning. For many, it is not easy at all to be still, to be silent, to focus on just being, to get off the merry-go-round, and to focus on the inner world, its whispers, its images, its movement. Blocking out parts of the outer and inner world allows a space of stillness to emerge in which we can listen on another level.

From this place of stillness, space emerges to listen and see other things that were, until that point, hidden behind noise and commotion; one can connect more easily with the embodied felt senses (Gendlin, 1978) and inner dialogues (Rober, 2005). Providing a sense of presence, of being, can create a space for the unknown and the unspoken, where something new and meaningful can emerge (Sørensen, 2024). This new and meaningful can be an engagement, conversation, involvement and witness (Anderson, 2022; Shotter, 2005), with someone else. Being aware, open, and curious can, according to Rohr (2020), open the door to both our own spirituality and other spiritual perspectives.

However, searching for silence may not be sufficient if a practitioner wants to make clear that spirituality can be part of the conversation, or if a therapeutic team wants to explore the meaning of spirituality further. An awareness of these perspectives is required, and a willingness to integrate them into practice. For this reason, the use of a structured model for reflectivity, contextual reflectivity and reflexivity (as a shortcut for readability: reflect/xivity) may be helpful: the reflect/xivity pendulum (Deij, 2025).

The reflect/xivity pendulum as an assisting tool

The reflect/xivity pendulum is a model that guides the reflective or reflexive person (shortcut: reflect/xant) through ten topics across three perspectives, or 'strolls': reflectivity, contextual reflectivity, and reflexivity (Deij, 2025). The model is not intended to be a stringent Q&A, protocol or technique. Rather, it is designed to facilitate a generative conversation and exploratory trusting of the dialogue itself to make clear how much emphasis a certain topic may need. Initially, it was developed for use in supervision and other training situations; however, it turned out to be useful with clients for case conceptualisations, team formulations, and intervision. The name and form of the Pendulum are deliberately chosen because they depict the ongoing movement of dialogue, slowly but surely shifting from one point to another in a constant move. 'Strolls' is also a conscious choice; it is a way of moving without too much haste, with an openness to the surroundings and a willingness to pick up unexpected things. Strolling is not so much about searching purposefully as it is about stumbling upon things.

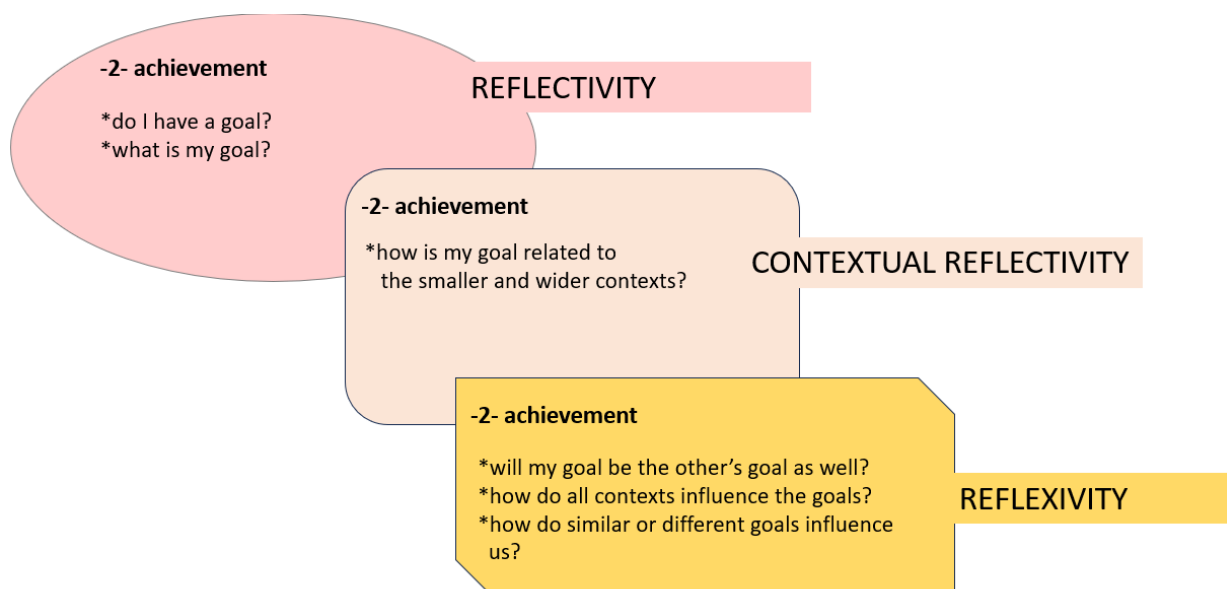
Not all topics (or steps) within the strolls will be equally relevant to a given situation, so some will require more attention than others. It is recommended to carefully discuss which perspective best fits that moment and that particular item, so that the reflect/xant can choose the best one. The ten topics

covered in all strolls are: [1] situation; [2] achievement; [3] experience; [4] felt sense and inner dialogue; [5] beliefs and values; [6] informedness; [7] expertise; [8] looking back; [9] intention; and [10] review (see Figure 1).

The reflect/xing team moves from one topic to the next, trusting the dialogue itself to make clear how much emphasis a given topic may need and what a logical next step could be. The questions belonging to the domain of a certain topic are similar but with a slightly different focus appropriate to the particular stroll: reflectivity, contextual reflectivity or reflexivity.

To show the nuances in differences per stroll, we give two examples, starting with the second topic or step, achievement (see Figure 2). The conversation-initiating questions in the reflectivity-stroll point to the perspective of the reflect/xant: the inward view: did they have a goal, and if so, which was that? Within the contextual-reflectivity-stroll, the questions invite looking outward and relating the situation to a broader perspective, relating the reflect/xants' goal to, for instance, dominant discourses. Then, the reflexivity-stroll includes roles and positions that hold both the discourses as well as the relational recursivity.

Figure 1. The reflect/xivity pendulum.



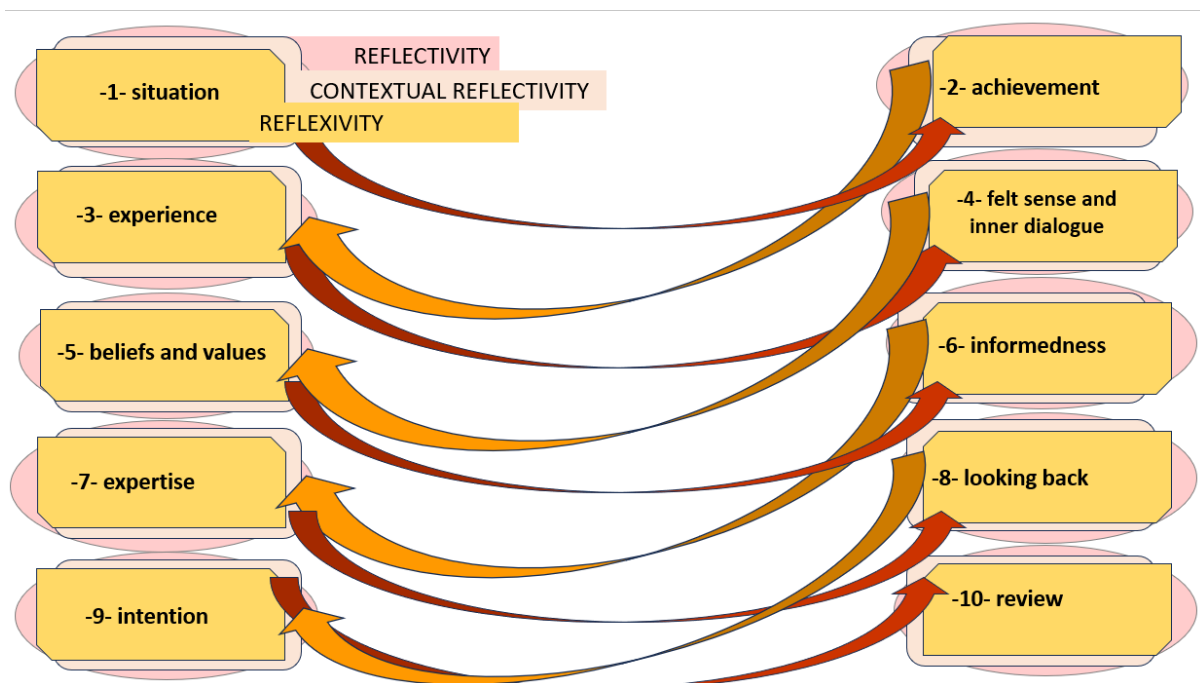
Now we will focus on using the Pendulum within the frame of spirituality. This can involve asking oneself questions about the occurrence of spirituality in conversations (reflectivity), the role of spiritual or religious discourse (contextual reflectivity), and the therapist's role in this, as experienced by clients (reflexivity). Weaving the theme of spirituality into the steps can be done in a similar way as hereunder. Furthermore, we will give two examples of processes involving working with a daughter and her parents, and one involving two sisters. All gave permission to use these stories anonymously.

- Reflectivity:
 - What does spirituality mean to me? How do I relate to it?
 - Is spirituality part of the conversation, of the process?

- Contextual reflectivity :
 - How is spirituality or religion part of the larger contexts?
- Reflexivity:
 - What are the other's experiences and beliefs and spirituality?
 - How do their and my experiences and beliefs concerning spirituality relate to each other?
 - How could we all relate to this within the larger contexts?

How can we let this vulnerable part of all become part of the conversations (for example in words, pictures, music, poem, walks, dreams etcetera)?

Figure 2. Topic 2, achievement, in three strolls



An example from practice:

In several sessions, a young woman explored with her parents how their differing interpretations of religion were driving a wedge between them. They were stuck in a pattern of trying to convince each other. While validating and naming emotions and needs related to feeling heard and taken seriously was important, it wasn't enough to move the process forward. We agreed to see whether the Pendulum could broaden the discussion. The first topic, the situation, helped them become aware of how each viewed their conversation. It slowed down the interaction because they were invited not to debate but to take on a telling/listening stance.

The second topic, achievement, was particularly helpful. They explored what they truly wanted to achieve, which, somewhat to their surprise, was simply to have their own perspectives fully acknowledged. This realisation was new to all of them, as they had assumed the other's goal was to convince or "win" the debate, which opened the way for them to tell each other how they experience their spirituality and religion in a soulful way. It was a privilege for me to be present for a beautiful, delicate, and engaged conversation.

The third topic, experience, provided space for each to share their thoughts, feelings, and embodied reactions when stuck in the discussion. The fourth, felt sense and inner dialogues, added another layer. The mother's inner dialogue about feeling like a 'bad mum' if she couldn't raise her children as 'good Christians' was especially powerful. Through her story, both the father and daughter could 'hear' the voices of the mother's parents and family, which created a sense of unity.

The fifth topic, beliefs and values, revealed shared ground. Finally, the sixth topic, informedness, proved to be a key turning point: it became clear that the parents relied solely on their religion as their source of information, while the daughter, during her studies, had learned to draw on many sources and critically analysing them. This led to a deep, engaged conversation about informedness and learning, opening a new kind of dialogue where both parents and daughter could relate to each other's perspectives on learning and its meaning.

Another example:

Two sisters, who had suffered a violent childhood, worked with the Pendulum to share their experiences of abuse, how it had influenced them, and the ways in which their experiences were similar and different. The first topic in the reflectivity stroll made it clear that the situation back home was ruled by a restrictive religious framework and that this framework was used to explain the violence. To explore this in more depth, we crossed over to the contextual reflectivity stroll, where experiences turned out to be helpful as they could relate their current feelings, emotions, thoughts and bodily reactions to their former and current experience of spirituality. Furthermore it was important to relate this to how the religious explanation and experience of their father had framed the abusive domestic situation. Conversations about beliefs and values acknowledged how healing and helpful their faith was to them, and they reconnected with it.

The Pendulum can also be used in supervision, case-conceptualisations, team formulations, and intervention when professionals wish to reflect on their practice. In supervision, it is helpful to consider spirituality and religion more broadly: do supervisees ever ask their clients about these topics? Might these conversations change if therapists were more open to religion and spirituality (Errington, 2017)? The Pendulum can also explore situations concerning their own professional development process, considering the importance of spirituality and religion within it (Coyle, 2017; Gilliam and Armstrong, 2012).

Petra remembers working with a supervisee, Christina, who was in training to become a family therapist. She told Christina about travelling to Norway, where she had been part of a conference on spirituality and systemic work. She disclosed about the feeling of being small and irrelevant in a, for her, good way when overlooking a fjord, seeing the rough and impressive nature. This opened a conversation about spirituality, which was new to Christina. Her religious spirituality is important to her, but until then, she was used to silencing this part of herself in her professional life.

I do not identify with colleagues who explicitly proclaim themselves as Christian professionals; I don't feel comfortable with that. By not choosing that "side", I feel that I cannot talk about my faith during training, supervision or with my team. When people swear, it hurts, but I don't speak up. When Christians are depicted by single stories, often ridiculed, I keep quiet. I keep my religion and faith somewhat separate, as if they are not part of my professional development, as if I am not allowed to have faith as a therapist.

We used the Pendulum's second stroll, contextual reflectivity to explore her experiences as she described above, with an emphasis on situation [1], experience [3], and beliefs and values [5], as they stood out for her. After this, she said:

Having the opportunity to explore my spirituality as a significant and meaningful part of myself, without it defining me entirely, was wonderful. I no longer need to avoid the subject. It does not have to be in the foreground, but it does not have to be hidden.

One day, after our supervision had ended, she sent me a note:

Recently, I met a Muslim family for the first time. I asked them about their spirituality and religion, just like that, almost without thinking. It was such a beautiful conversation! I think the reason I asked was that I was not afraid of the subject, because I did not need to hide my own faith.

Closing reflections

Drawing on Simon (2023), we might ask ourselves: which spiritual ways of knowing are present in our practice, yet rendered invisible? Which spiritual traditions have been accorded the status of being respectable, and which have been pathologised or exoticised? Being reflective is about challenging colonial hierarchies regarding what constitutes valid knowledge. As a professional, how do I approach my clients' beliefs? Are they a resource, a problem, or merely a 'cultural background'? What is lost if I try to translate everything into a secular psychological language? How can I allow my clients' spiritual understanding to take the lead? Not just coping, but also knowledge?

We are all interwoven in historical, political, colonial, ecological and spiritual relationships. As therapists, it is important that we explore our own spiritual/religious upbringing, and also how we consciously or unconsciously rank different forms of faith and spirituality. What opens, and what might close in our therapeutic work?

The theory of transmaterial worlding invites us to adopt a reflective stance towards faith and spirituality, in which we are open to learning from what is important to each individual client. We can approach spiritual/religious references as knowledge and explore how these shape their reality, relationships and ethics, and what gives meaning on a deeper level. Through this, we can also observe how nature, places, objects or rituals feature in their narratives. We may also be open to including practices such as prayer, songs or rituals in a co-creative therapeutic process. Reflexivity can be made decolonising by avoiding secular neutrality, and by allowing for non-human, spiritual, material and place-based presences as part of the system.

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