

Supervising Spiritual Care Practitioners: A Personal Narrative Inquiry

Lynette Dungan

What characterises good supervision? What is it like to experience good supervision? How can the lived experience of supervision be described? These questions have implications for how supervision is understood and how it should be practised personally and communally. Focusing on the characteristics of good supervision offers supervisors a positive approach to examining their supervision practice. While there are many ways to address these questions, in this article I will explore my own experience of good supervision through a narrative inquiry.

A personal narrative inquiry is an appropriate method for exploring the lived experience of good supervision through the articulation of a testimony—"a constructed . . . articulated self-understanding."¹ This testimony is not isolated from the social contexts of the supervision practice from which it has emerged. Focusing on lived experience, this exploration

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shares with other qualitative research approaches the commitment of the researcher to be both a participant and an “instrument of the study.”² More specifically, my approach adapts Poling and Miller’s schema, which is outlined in their 1985 work *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry*. Poling and Miller recommend the following phases in the exploration of a lived experience:

1. Description of the lived experience,
2. Critical awareness of perspectives and interests,
3. Correlation of perspectives from culture and tradition,
4. Interpretation of meaning and value,
5. Critique of interpretation, and
6. Recommendations for a particular community.³

This is the methodology that I will follow in this essay. First, I will present my experience of good supervision through a poetic representation, and then I will identify emergent themes utilising Gilligan’s *Listening Guide*.⁴ I will then correlate these themes with the literature review, highlighting the wider social contexts of supervision. Finally, I will offer recommendations to those supervising spiritual care practitioners⁵ with a view to enhancing good supervision practice. Throughout this inquiry, I focus on individual supervision, on the one-to-one partnering between a supervisor and a supervisee,⁶ which might also offer insights into the connections between the individual and the collective⁷ in relation to the human experience of supervision practice.

In exploring my lived experience of supervision, Poling and Miller’s research method⁸ enables a critical dialogue between the experience and contemporary understandings and traditions from the ‘community’⁹ and concludes by suggesting a strategic way forward—in this case, offering recommendations back to the ‘community.’ So, a hermeneutic circle is offered to critically engage the particular lived experience of good supervision with contextual considerations and communal practice.

To locate myself within broader supervision fields of practice, I disclose that I am a qualified spiritual director and a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia, and I supervise in both contexts.¹⁰ Through supervising spiritual care practitioners, I recognise that such supervision exists within the wider context of the ‘helping professions.’ I agree with Hawkins and Shohet, who write from their supervision experience within “counselling and psychotherapy, and in counselling and therapeutic

approaches within many of the helping and people professions."¹¹ They support fostering "the habit of receiving good supervision"¹² because, in their words, "Supervision can be very important, it can give us the chance to stand back and reflect . . . and it can give us a chance to engage in the search for new options, to discover the learning that often emerges in the most difficult of situations and to get support."¹³

To describe my lived experience of good personal supervision, I employ a narrative inquiry that seeks to elucidate lived experience not so much as facts but as a woven, authenticated testimony. Bruner, an educational psychologist,¹⁴ pioneered a narrative research approach, claiming that the narrative "leads . . . to good stories, believable (though not necessarily 'true') historical accounts."¹⁵ My good supervision story can "tap into realms of meaning, subjectivity, imagination and emotion."¹⁶ To fully understand the experience of good supervision, this inquiry acknowledges multiple ways of knowing. Drawing from experiential knowing, "realised in face to face encounter,"¹⁷ and described in [re]presentational knowing; "a hunch about . . . a significant pattern,"¹⁸ statements are affirmed as propositional knowing; "a belief that something is the case,"¹⁹ with the understanding that these influence practical knowing and "the exercise of skill."²⁰

A POETIC NARRATIVE

I created the following poem to express my experience of good supervision, based on my perspective as a supervisor of spiritual care practitioners.

Supervision with a Contemplative Stance

The waiting:
 Listening and slowing
 The inner voice quickens
 The softness, the anticipation
 The room becomes a sanctuary

The welcome:
 Arrival
 A threshold is crossed
 Greetings and kind thoughts
 Are exchanged in comfy seats,
 A haven of hospitality

The prompt:

You wanted to bring, this gift, this struggle, yourself
We bring work, life, relationships, and the world;
Into the swirling spaciousness of this time
An hour, a decade; there is more than this room holds.

The issues:

Present and latent,
Are worn like clothing.
The patterns of dialogue and spirit appear and shift
Such warp and weft revealing stitches,
Examined and felt,
Interpreted and coloured with meaning
Fullness is present

The characters:

Appear and disappear;
The plot is dynamic.
Perpetual dramas and ephemeral moments,
All are given voice
Evoked care-fully
In word and symbol

The content:

Everything belongs
The means and the ends
Understanding and growing
We respond to work, life, relationships, the world . . .
And trust that such sharing will evoke capacities
Stretch awareness and lead to life-giving actions

The finale:

Reverent gratitude for what has unfolded
Parting gestures and the ritual of recording dates
An agreed time to reconnect²¹

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCE

I now draw on Gilligan's *The Listening Guide*²² to explore the 'inner world'²³ of supervision by connecting with the larger world of spiritual care supervision. *The Listening Guide* presents a 'voice-centered relational method'²⁴ that seeks to express the diversity of voices within the self. Gilligan's method has been used in arts-based enquiries into the experience of community.²⁵ Several research phases are suggested to identify and engage with these multi-layered voices, including:

- listening to the representation, responding to the story being told,
- creating an 'I/you/we' poem,
- listening for contrapuntal voices,
- listening for what has emerged and engaging findings with research questions to elicit further insights and/or questions.²⁶

The process of listening to this poem with the critical awareness required by practical theology involves the steps Gilligan suggests. For example, I created an I/you/we poem based on the original poem describing the experience because this method of analysis communicates the essence of the experience:

I Poems

I wait		
I listen		
I slow		
I greet		
I exchange		You exchange
		You wanted to bring
	We bring	
	We dialogue	
I examine		You examine
I feel		You feel
I interpret		
I evoke care-fully		
		You are given voice
	We belong	
	We share	
I understand		

I grow

You understand

You grow

We respond

We trust

We stretch awarenesses

We evoke capacities

We act

We gesture and part

We agree to reconnect.

CRITICAL AWARENESS OF PERSPECTIVES AND INTERESTS

I note that my location and experience of good supervision is connected to, yet not governed by, my religious vocation. I supervise people in pastoral and spiritual care fields, which might suggest identification and transference issues. Further, questions may be raised concerning how and whether particular supervision approaches are transferable across the helping professions. I also note that I am female and that the majority of those I supervise are also female. This consideration is not explored here, yet it raises questions of how gender and vocation might influence good supervision. I live in Victoria, Australia, and practise as a supervisor in urban settings that are accessible by car. This fact raises questions of whether and how supervision might be available for those without such access, which is a significant issue locally due to large travel distances. I also supervise via computer when distance limits access, yet I note that my described good supervision experience was a live face-to-face encounter. This observation raises the question of whether proximity is a significant factor in good supervision.

The above poetic narrative describes supervision as a ritual of exchange. A 'threshold' was crossed; there was a beginning, a middle, and an ending, connection and reconnection. Good supervision has a familiar rhythm with known processes, such as 'parting gestures,' 'a ritual of recording dates,' and a designated 'time to reconnect.' There is exchange of content; language in 'word and symbol' and issues that 'are given voice.' This new awareness of the reciprocal 'exchange' aspect of good supervision sparks a question of how one might explore the supervisee's experience in parallel with the supervisor's.

My poem also highlights the way the supervisor is present and portrays the supervisor's actions, attitudes, and emotive postures, including 'listening and slowing,' 'the softness and the anticipation,' and 'examined and felt.' The phrase 'examined and felt' recognizes that good supervision involves reflective examination and attending to feelings. A person-centred supervision approach encompassing empathy is inferred.

Good supervision is described as a dynamic process of 'perpetual dramas and ephemeral moments' with all being 'given voice.' There are unnamed characters 'present and absent,' and the 'I' at times becomes a 'we.' I acknowledge that relationships are pivotal in good supervision and include supervisor and supervisee relating to each other and that relationships are described in the constructed narratives.

My description of good supervision promotes 'understanding and growth' where 'such sharing' may lead to life-giving actions. In good supervision there is a sense that life, the world, and wider relationships are present as part of the 'more than this room holds.' Good supervision includes spatial qualities represented by phrases such as 'swirling spaciousness' and 'the room becomes a sanctuary.'

THEMES

As I listened further to this poetic narrative, the following themes emerged.

Theme 1: The Way the Supervisor Is Present Is Significant

How the supervisor is present is significant and appears to be a component of good supervision. My poem embodies postures and attitudes such as 'listening and slowing,' 'softness,' and 'anticipation' that highlight a meditative attitude. This attitude may be coupled with other reflective practices such as stilling the body and utilising centering prayer²⁷ to help focus. Such practices correlate with my faith perspective, which acknowledges various prayer and meditation practices as helpful.

Reflective practices in supervision may be experienced in embodied ways and are often more intuitive and kinaesthetic than formulaic. The phrase 'the inner voice quickens' conjures up an intuitive form of knowing which, though hard to express, means being less distracted by external foci, more consciously present and aware of the supervisee and his or her story.

Good supervisors allow silences and seek to intervene little, seeing these verbal breaks as helpful moments.

My poetic narrative says there is dialogue where ‘patterns of dialogue and spirit appear and shift’ and are ‘interpreted and coloured with meaning,’ suggesting that matters of spirit significantly influence people’s lives. Though often hard to capture fully in words, these are present in good supervision. Poling and Miller argue that “language is less a mirror of reality than a series of metaphors about reality, and no particular linguistic expression corresponds exactly with any experience.”²⁸ Though I concur with this lack of exact correspondence, I would also argue that metaphors are helpful to express spirituality and elicit meaning and values in good supervision practice. The phrase ‘reverent gratitude’ reveals my personal view of supervision as a sacred experience and an assumed symbiotic relationship between spirituality and supervision.

‘The World’ Is Present in a Supervision Session

My experience of good supervision acknowledges the presence of wider world. ‘The world’ that is present includes the life-worlds of the supervisor and supervisee and the world of others who are absent yet implied, for example, clients, colleagues, and other related persons. Clearly, I view supervision practice holistically, acknowledging that participants are situated within larger interconnected life-worlds. The mutual ‘understanding and growing’ expressed in the I/you/we poem reveals that good supervision can evoke capacities and contribute to lifelong learning of healthy work/life practices.

Supervision Can Be Hospitable and Offer Sanctuary

My poem describes supervision as welcoming and hospitable, with ‘comfy seats’ and ‘greetings and kind thoughts’ portraying ‘a haven of hospitality.’ The concept of sanctuary surfaces in the phrase ‘the room becomes a sanctuary’ and is, I suggest, a rich metaphor for good supervision. The medieval notion of sanctuary suggested a sacred place where one was protected from threats in the world one had left. Historically, sanctuary has also implied a confessional and a place where a vulnerable person is welcome, accepted with an ethic of care and returned dignity. As I reflect, I am aware that the image of the sanctuary has probably arisen from my pastoral and spiritual values. Within good supervision, the supervisor

might display elements of this rich metaphor by offering psychological safety, being a supportive presence, and sanctioning reflective space.

DICUSSION IN LIGHT OF THE LITERATURE

Since supervision practice encompasses various professional disciplines, the following supervision literature is drawn from a representative range of disciplines that include social work, psychology,²⁹ psychotherapy,³⁰ pastoral care,³¹ spiritual direction,³² and cross-professional approaches.³³

Supervision and Spirituality

The literature on supervision increasingly identifies spirituality as significant. The way spirituality is expressed may include both secular and religious frames of reference.³⁴ Cobb, Rumbold, and Puchalski identify the need for wider perspectives:

In order to make sense of ourselves we need, in addition to whatever abstract or propositional knowledge offers, perspectives of location, culture, history, and understandings of the particular ways people have come to apprehend the world and their place in it, and what they name as sacred and holy.³⁵

These authors present an overview of spiritual care and health perspectives and work from the perspective that “spirituality, in general, is a lived dimension of the person expressed in beliefs, values, actions, and commitments and experienced through engagement with the world and those around us.”³⁶ This lived dimension of spirituality is supported in my experience of good supervision and described in my poem as ‘patterns of dialogue and spirit [that] appear and shift.’

Supervision, when consciously linked with spirituality, can highlight the complex web of inter-communion between how people comprehend the world and their place in it. Bienenfeld and Yager argue for the relevance of spirituality in their field of psychotherapy, suggesting that “spirituality at its broadest is a person’s attempt to make sense of his/her world beyond the temporal or tangible. It strives to connect the individual with the transcendent and transpersonal elements of human existence.”³⁷ Furthermore, Bienenfeld and Yager claim that the supervisor who is able to integrate [religion and spirituality] will add an important dimension to [the supervisees’] comprehension and wisdom.”³⁸ As a supervisor of spiritual

care practitioners, I assume and affirm that spirituality is important to good supervision, particularly as it contributes to meaning-making.

Spiritual Care Supervision and Person-Centred Supervision

When looking at spiritual care supervision, the fields and disciplines making use of spiritual care are diverse. A range of these are described by Benefiel and Holton in their editorial discussion and cross-professional supervision compilation *The Soul of Supervision*, which draws on the various authors' experiences in clinical pastoral education, psychotherapy, spiritual direction, organizational and ministerial leadership, and pastoral counselling.³⁹ Kelcourse, from the field of pastoral supervision, observes that "the soul dimension of supervision is perhaps most apparent to supervisors who have spiritual, religious, or theological training."⁴⁰ While I fit this category and those I supervise are also familiar with the 'soul dimension,' other supervision approaches, such as person-centered supervision, also engage in meaning-making without necessarily using religious language. The person-centered therapeutic approach developed by psychotherapist Carl Rogers promotes a person-centered intentionality where "two persons [are] in psychological contact [and] the communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved."⁴¹ Such empathy and unconditional positive regard are also crucial in spiritual care and spiritual care supervision.

Supervision and Being 'Present,' Correlated with Theme 1

Supervision practice is influenced by the way a supervisor is present. Senge et al., from an organizational development and change management perspective, explore the capacity of 'presence' where presence is "being fully conscious and aware in the present moment" and involves "deep listening [and] being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense."⁴² This 'presencing' seems desirable yet perhaps is idealistic in supervision. Although Senge et al. are in the vanguard of those calling for this way of being, they provide little guidance on how to actually be present except to enhance awareness and let go of old mindsets as a beginning step.

In spiritual care supervision there is often a conscious adoption of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and silence, which can contribute to the way the supervisor is present. References to mindfulness are increasingly appearing in the literature on supervision.⁴³ Contemplative

presence is particularly emphasized in the discipline of spiritual direction.⁴⁴ For example, McDonnell describes a contemplative attitude as “lingering long enough to be drawn into the mystery, to savour the depth and breadth of the present moment. It is to be emptied of what was to be filled with what is. Contemplation invites silence.”⁴⁵ This contemplative attitude is illustrated in my poem where the narrative says that ‘listening and slowing’ fostered an increased attentiveness.

Listening nonjudgmentally is a helpful posture for being present in good supervision. This kind of listening might nurture the kind of wisdom described by Holton, a trainer of psychotherapists and supervisors, who writes, “Wise conversation is not just a spoken dialogue; it involves a listening to the wisdom of the heart, to the voice of wisdom in others and in the world.”⁴⁶ Certainly, my poetic narrative expresses the desire to acknowledge and listen to different voices, including ‘this gift, this struggle, yourself’ and ‘work, life, relationships, and the world’ where ‘all are given voice’ and ‘everything belongs.’

Supervision Is Relational, Correlated with Themes 2 and 3.

Martin Buber, in his seminal work regarding the ‘I–Thou’ relationship, formed the guiding premise that “in the beginning was the relation.”⁴⁷ I suggest that the maxim ‘To be is to be in relation’ is an apt description of supervision as a human endeavour. Good supervisors pay attention to the way the supervisory relationship is experienced. Hawkin and Shohet, from their experience as supervisors within the helping professions, posit that “how we personally relate to our supervisors and supervisees is far more important than mere skills, for all techniques need to be embedded in a good relationship.”⁴⁸

The specific relationship between supervisor and supervisee is referred to as the supervisory ‘alliance.’⁴⁹ Good supervision, in my experience, implies a good supervisory alliance where there is a shared intentionality toward positive work/life practices. Kelcourse, a pastoral supervisor, argues for the primacy of fostering this supervisory alliance when she suggests:

Develop a “safe space” or positive working alliance with supervisees—lowering anxiety as needed to be supportive, raising anxiety when additional motivation is required, holding caregivers accountable for the development of professional standards—while recognizing that personal transformation can be an emotionally demanding and “messy” process at times.⁵⁰

Good supervisors pay attention to how power is exercised; this point is emphasized within all of the supervision literature.⁵¹ For example, Wosket and Page argue for a “supervision model [that] should, above all else, help release power in the supervisee to enable the clients—rather than first and foremost empower the supervisor.”⁵² A disempowering supervision experience is described by Rowe, a supervisor of nurses, who as a supervisee working in the field of child protection, shares how “the model of tell the story . . . what you have done and plan to do next, then I will tell you if you are right and what else you should do” became increasingly frustrating for her.⁵³ This is not good supervision as it does not privilege the supervisee’s voice, learning, and decision-making capacities.

Good supervisors pay attention to how care is exercised. Supervisors within the helping professions are encouraged to take seriously a ‘duty of care,’ including spiritual care, for all involved in the web of supervision relationships. For example, Kelcourse argues that “pastoral, spiritually informed supervision requires the care of persons who in turn care for others; body, mind, and soul.”⁵⁴ Such holistic framing and caring reciprocity are pivotal to good supervision experiences.

Correspondingly, appropriate ethical behaviour is beneficial. Ethical considerations go hand in hand with recognition of the complexity of life. Lebacqz and Driskill, from the fields of ethics and spiritual direction respectively, identify interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and structural aspects of ethical considerations⁵⁵ and recommend that we particularly attend to the *structural* in order to provide “a corrective to [a] highly individualistic approach oft described within Christian spirituality that focuses on the arena of God’s activity being primarily in one’s personal life.”⁵⁶

Supervision and Meaning-Making, Correlated with Theme 2

Supervision can provide a process for reflecting critically on meaning and making new meaning and choices. My poetic narrative depicts this meaning-making by means of an image where ‘issues present and latent’ are ‘worn like clothing’ and ‘interpreted and coloured with meaning.’

The meaning-making process can be enhanced by adopting a discovery approach. Conroy, from the field of spiritual direction, argues that “the *process* of supervision is as important as the *product* of supervision. As much power exists in the exploratory process as in the insights that emerge

from the exploration. Therefore, the supervisor needs to adopt a discovery approach.⁵⁷ Carroll, drawing on psychotherapeutic and cross-professional supervision experience, also argues positively for supervision as a way to discover ourselves and enhance our practice, claiming that “[our] practice . . . is incomplete until it is shared with others, and we hear the echoes back of what we have done, or not done. . . . We hear and discover ourselves in the voices of others.”⁵⁸ Supervision can be an effective partnering process for such discovery, where stories and issues are shared and “knowledge is negotiated and meaning is co-constructed.”⁵⁹

Meaning and change are intertwined partners. Speedy from writing from psychotherapy and counselling supervision claims that “supervision is a ‘narrated relationship’ . . . recreated in the retelling [and it] offers a number of possibilities and legitimacies.”⁶⁰ Certainly, in my supervisory experience, I find that if I listen to a supervisee’s current story, even if it has echoes of a similar story previously told, it will be new because the story is nuanced differently each time it is told. Carroll’s description of the supervisor’s role as an observer may facilitate meaning and build resilience: “Invited observers, such as supervisors, attend with empathy and compassion to what we say, to what we don’t say, to what we can’t say, and to what we dare not say. They help us express it, and by doing so we learn to deal with it.”⁶¹ In summary, good supervision co-facilitates meaning-making by effective attending, which can aid expression, spark new discoveries, promote learning, and contribute to human thriving.

CRITIQUE OF GOOD SUPERVISION

Good supervision can be constrained when a safe, caring environment is not fostered, belonging and meaning are not nurtured, voices are muted, and personal dignity is not upheld. Good supervision can be limited when people are not viewed as whole people within a holistic framework that acknowledges the spiritual or soul dimension as an important part of a person’s lived experience. In my poetic narrative, the desire that ‘all are given voice’ and ‘everything belongs’ shadows the possibilities of exclusion and marginalization. The phrase ‘to evoke care-fully’ implies an aim to be care-full with supervisees, yet I acknowledge that the supervisee’s experience is not expressed here. Good supervision is limited when people do not have access to good supervisors.

CONCLUSION

In this inquiry, by reflecting upon my lived experience of good supervision and utilizing Poling and Miller's schema, I have identified perspectives and interests that might contribute to best practices for supervisors of spiritual care practitioners. Throughout this inquiry, I have engaged in a heuristic process whereby "the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge."⁶² The poetic narrative was effective to reflect on and added depth my experience of good supervision described in the narrative.

This inquiry prompted several critical questions and facilitated new insights concerning good supervision; including appreciating supervision as 'relational' and as 'a ritual of exchange.' Viewing supervision as 'a relational ritual of exchange' resonates with Poling and Miller's guiding metaphor of "community"⁶³ and their definition of the task of practical theology as "to discover adequate ways of articulating the depth, richness, and possibilities of life as they are found in concrete communities."⁶⁴ The concrete community addressed here is the diverse community of those who supervise spiritual care practitioners, and it is to this community that I offer the following recommendations.

I offer the following questions to the community of supervisors of spiritual care practitioners to reflect upon in order to grow awareness and enhance good supervision practice:

- How am I present in supervision?
- How does supervision interconnect with spirituality?
- How is supervision experienced as hospitable, as offering sanctuary?
- How is supervision relational and meaning-making?
- How is 'the world' present in the supervision encounter?

The way the supervisor is present in supervision is one aspect of my ongoing collaborative research that is exploring what the contemplative stance might offer to supervision practice.

NOTES

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2. Harold G. Koenig, *Spirituality and Health Research: Methods, Measurements, Statistics and Resources* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 117.
3. James N. Poling and Donald E. Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 69.
4. Carol Gilligan et al., "On the Listening Guide: A Voice-Centered Relational Method," in *Emergent Methods in Social Research*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy (London: Sage Books, 2006), 253–71.
5. Spiritual care practitioners could include pastoral care workers, clergy, chaplains, spiritual directors, counselors, healthcare workers, psychologists, and psychotherapists.
6. This focus on the individual does not exclude the possibility that findings might be relevant to group supervision.
7. Koenig, *Spirituality and Health Research*, 3.
8. Poling and Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry*, 69.
9. 'Community' is used here in a broad sense to describe the community of those who supervise spiritual care practitioners.
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13. *Ibid.*
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24. Ibid.
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36. Ibid., 489.
37. Bienenfeld and Yager, "Issues of Spirituality and Religion in Psychotherapy Supervision," 180.
38. Ibid., 185.
39. Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton, eds., *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory* (New York: Morehouse, 2010).
40. Felicity Kelcourse, "Supervision as Soul Care: A Spirituality of Integrity," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 33 (2013): 155.

41. Carl Rogers, "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 21 (1957): 96.
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48. Hawkins and Shohet, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, 220–21.
49. Caroline Schuck and Jane Wood, *Inspiring Creative Supervision* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2011), 15, 17.
50. Kelcourse, "Supervision as Soul Care," 64.
51. Langer, 2005, 39–40; Hawkins and Shohet, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*. Frank Cooper, *Professional Boundaries in Social Work and Social Care: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Managing Your Professional Boundaries*. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2012).
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54. Kelcourse, "Supervision as Soul Care," 163.
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