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Spirituality and Older Women: The Journey Home to Self

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Abstract

The self unfolds through a life long journey of becoming and making meaning. This chapter elucidates the role of spirituality in older women's lives. First it sets the context for the role of religion, addressing demographics and research on gender and faith. The distinction between spirituality and religion is discussed. Spiritual struggle and suffering are identified as normative experiences. In a section on theory and models, feminism, gerotranscendence, and narrative are described as they relate to spirituality. Three modern writers and one research participant provide examples of the variation that may occur on a spiritual path. Discussion provides further elaboration and guidance to mental health professionals who want to address and support the spiritual lives of women. Aging invites women to come alive in new ways as they honor the journey home to their authentic self, a self that is always larger than what they can dream.

Spirituality and Older Women: The Journey Home to Self

[In older ages] one has ample time to face everything one has had, been, done: gather them all in: the things that come from outside, and those from inside. . . . When you truly possess all you have been and done, you are fierce with reality --Florida Scott-Maxwell [1, p41-42]

Spirituality of women at older ages is concerned with understanding past events and future possibilities in light of the eternal now. This search for understanding welcomes the difficult experiences of life as much as time spent in gentle merriment with friends and family. Finding home, or the place where one is at a place of deep peace, is an archetype for returning to soul. Home is an essential space of safety, nurture, and creativity. However, in the turbulence of family life, vulnerabilities are also exploited and grave injury sometimes ensues. Ultimately the challenges become essential points of learning, kindling for growth. Spirituality is a lens that sees connection, value in relationships, and a persistent search for meaning and identity through the changing social, emotional, and physical landscape of older years.

As women age, they limit their social networks to contacts that are more satisfying and emotionally fulfilling [2]. They select social partners for their environment who are not peripheral but instead are highly engaged in their lives at multiple levels. They develop emotional resilience. Older women increase their ability to manage ambiguity and uncertainty through change in their emotional stance toward difficult situations [3], especially if they are unable to alter the situation itself. Aging women may experience chronic illnesses but universally express their desire to age in place with supports instead of moving into assisted living or nursing care facilities [4-5].

Florida Scott-Maxwell, a female pioneer in psychoanalysis, herself embodied a resilient path through life, living in an enriched way. As a young woman, born in 1883, she was educated mostly at home with only brief periods spent in public classrooms. At age 15 she left home to

build a life on the New York City stage, but she exited that life at age 20 to write short stories. In 1910 she married and moved with her partner to his native Scotland, tending to women's suffrage, plays, and children. In 1933, she became a psychoanalyst, studying under Jung and practicing in clinics in the UK. In some ways her life, viewed from a distance, seems to be made of distinctive threads, yet in the end she fashioned them together in a whole cloth that revealed her as an intense observer of aging. "Life does not accommodate you, it shatters you. It is meant to, and it couldn't do it better" [1, p65]. While women may hope for an easy, tranquil life, that is not what most collect. As Scott-Maxwell suggests, they are better for the struggle.

This chapter elucidates the role of spirituality in women's lives. First it sets the context for the role of religion in the lives of older adults. Then it addresses demographics and research on gender and faith. The distinction between spirituality and religion is discussed. Spiritual struggle and suffering are identified as normative experiences. In a section on theory and models, feminism, gerotranscendence, and narrative theory are described as they relate to spirituality. Three modern writers and one research participant provide examples of the variation that may occur on a spiritual path. The Discussion section provides further elaboration and finally guidance to mental health professionals who want to address and support the spiritual lives of women.

Older People and Religion

In the US, 80 to 90% of adults over age 65 rate religion as important; that is higher than any other age across surveys [6]. However, from 1998 to 2008, the importance of religion has slipped seven percentage points among all adults [7]. Christian religions currently predominate in America: 84% of adults ages 60-69 and 88% over age 70 express an affiliation with a faith

under this category [8]. Still, with increasing immigration, the numbers of older adults proclaiming affiliation with world religions will grow. On a global context, religious expressions and levels of faith adherence vary considerably. The term *world religions* refers to faith traditions that predominate in other countries, such as Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Japan. The UK has long hosted a more diverse population than the US. In the UK, only 72% of the populace reports holding Christian affiliation and 15% endorses atheism or agnosticism [2]. This diversity and complexity has probably made it even more difficult to address religion and spirituality in the public sphere in the UK than in the US.

As cohorts age, spirituality will likely become a more universally endorsed term than religion for new generations of older adults across the globe [9]. Even though religious affiliation remains high, frequency of attendance tends to diminish with age due to increasing frailty and transportation hurdles. While there is a general view in society that older adults may become more religious as they age, this has not been supported by empirical evidence [10]. In fact, for those who acknowledge a spiritual journey, it is often marked by steps forward and backward, and is recursive in many aspects.

Gender, Spirituality, and Religion

Demographics

Changing demographic patterns in society suggest that it is especially important to pay attention to specific needs of older women. The 2010 Census showed that women age 65 and over account for 14.6% of the population while men in the same category are 11.4% [11]. Forty percent of older women were widows in 2010, and almost half of women over age 75 (47%) lived alone [12]. Widowhood is more common among older women than older men as men are

more likely to die at younger ages, leaving women to live out their remaining years as singles. Thus it is helpful to explore the resources available to older women, many of whom are unattached to a partner, that can help them achieve a satisfying life.

Research on Gender, Spirituality, and Religion

Data from research on religion show that women express stronger religious beliefs and are more deeply involved in religion than men [13-14]. Some theories suggest that this association is due to the marginalization and vulnerability of women, which encouraged dependence on a theistic power as well as a greater sociological need for social relationship, often found in faith communities. In most western Christian religions, women outnumber men by a ratio of three to two [15]. Of those active in spirituality, women were found to make up 80% of participants and leaders [16].

A number of studies have investigated gender and faith. In a US nationally representative sample of 1141 older African Americans and Black Caribbeans, women reported higher levels of religious and spiritual involvement than men in both groups [17]. Women who rated their faith as highly important in a study of 271 older adults were more likely to have better emotional functioning than women with lower faith importance [18]. Further women with higher levels of pain were more likely to use religious coping [18]. A small nonrandom study of older women found that most saw their health as a gift from God [19]. A study of 210 older women residing in a rural high-rise facility found that all identified spirituality as a coping mechanism for health and aging [20]. Others acknowledge that differences between men and women's views of spirituality vary according to what is measured, but overall there is support for gender difference in the larger role of spirituality and religion in women's lives [21-23].

Spirituality and Religion

Many older adults consider the terms spirituality and religion to be largely interchangeable [24]. However, some see spirituality as multifaceted and quite separate from religion or religious expression. For instance some individuals who identify as being culturally Jewish claim a spiritual self while eschewing any credence in a supreme being, partly due to a sense of abandonment during the Holocaust [25]. Yet others who are primarily grounded in a faith tradition read spirituality as a subset of religious life.

Spirituality is the quest to find ultimate truth about meaning and one's relationship with the sacred or transcendent. It is often viewed as subjective and individual, and may have theistic or nontheistic elements. Spirituality refers to a "search for significance" in ways one considers as sacred [26]. Spirituality reflects one's deepest sense of value, meaning, connections with ultimate reality, or the ground of all being [27-28]. One's spiritual life develops through relationships with self, others, a Transcendent Power, and all living beings. Spiritual expression may include experiences of a transpersonal nature and behaviors such as prayer or meditation in which one finds support and meaning [29]. Mystical experiences may occur. For example, in bereavement, some clients report experiencing dreams of deceased loved ones or a feeling of their presence. Spirituality and religion generally are seen to encompass different concepts, though for some older women the terms may be merged [24, 30-33].

Religion is usually perceived as a meaning system that includes rituals, beliefs, and ethical values accepted by a community and communicated across time [32, 34]. There is usually an institutional aspect to religious life that involves outer associations while spirituality may or may not be expressed in organized religion. From a holistic perspective, spirituality can be

viewed as essential or core nature; one domain among the psychological, biological, emotional, and social aspects of a person; or the overarching content surrounding one's being [34, 35].

Some Jewish holocaust survivors and others identify spiritual expression in their relationship to the natural world. "What I see out my window gives me a sense of eternity and my place in it" explained one older Jewish woman who could glimpse a small corner of Lake Michigan [24, p95]. Finally, at the end of life, liminal experiences of dreams, visions of deceased loved ones, or a felt sense of abiding connection with preceding and following generations may be common expressions of spirituality.

Under some definitional stances of spirituality, agnostics and atheists may find a place. According to qualitative data from 18 countries [36], agnostics and atheists experience spirituality and its connections to quality of life in a way that helps them manage adversity. Agnostics doubt the existence of a sacred power, but they may invest belief in something beyond the material world. Similarly, atheists decline belief in any higher source but may have a personal philosophy that leads them to invest in causes like environmentalism or feminism. This form of investment may be viewed by some as fitting within a broadly inclusive definition of spirituality.

Spiritual Struggle and Suffering

Spiritual struggle and suffering form part of life's experiences. At older ages women may adapt to life limiting chronic illness, diminishing network of friends and peer cohorts, and often loss of a life partner. Every life stage seems to offer its own challenge. Jung [37] suggests, "We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening

have become a lie” [para 783]. Jung speculated that tasks of the first half of life include ego development and relating to the outer world, while the second half of life involves the difficult work of developing the true or inner self. Through struggle, the self moves into a cohesive state where the shadow sides and inchoate or immature bits of personality are owned. Another way of stating this is that the good parts and the bad parts of identity are both recognized.

A key aspect of spiritual struggle includes suffering. Questions of theodicy emerge, or why a God who is good allows bad things to happen in people’s lives. Depending on life philosophy, people find many different kinds of responses: evil may merely be a deprivation of the good not caused by a just God but simply allowed to occur, evil is punishment, suffering has a role in helping people appreciate beauty around them, God chooses not to intervene in a created world, or life is mystery but God is present within it [38]. For women with no theistic belief, bad things may be thought to occur randomly. Women search for answers that will provide them with the meaning they seek. Although suffering is never sought, there is often something new that is gained when the old way of life must be discarded. Scott-Maxwell observes that barriers are lowered, “and I knew what I had not known before” [1, p7]. There is a painting by Monet, *The Seine at Vetheuil, Effect of Sun after the Rain*, that evidences effects of glistening light shining on village and river, after what the viewer imagines was a rumbling thunderstorm. This after-the-rain effect of changed understanding and clarity is one that can come into life after struggle. However, not every woman who moves through her life course is positively changed by it. Some do remain submerged in the water of their fear, doubt, and pain. Though spiritual struggle is usually about personal inner perceptions of the outer world, successful resolution may lead to more positive outer relationships. Shea denotes, “A fully

human and fully embodied spirituality is always about integrity and respect, loving care, and justice for the other” [39].

Theory and Models

There are several theoretical perspectives and models that apply well to older women’s spirituality. Feminism offers a particular sensitivity to and vision for the ways that society has been socially constructed. It seeks to have female voices included in accepted historical, political, and cultural compendiums of knowledge. Gerotranscendence [40] is a concept that centers on older adult spirituality as it unfolds through aging. Narrative therapy is one clinical model that supports inclusion of the spiritual domain as women reflect back on their life meaning.

Feminist Theory

Feminism considers some of the inherent societal structures that feature domination of major systems of thought and action by men [41]. This form of critique seeks to identify and name attitudes, language, and behavior that have marginalized the realities of women. This action is not intended to reverse roles of domination but rather to equalize processes and open space for gender neutral stances.

In many faith traditions, patriarchal issues predominate. In Judaism and Christianity, most key religious figures were male such as the prophet Moses and Paul, an apostle. Many other major world religions that have survived to this day have male founders such as Mohammed or the Buddha. In the Genesis creation story, woman was created second, emerging out of the side of Adam, the first man. It seems clear that most of the stories about women have been submerged, though some key figures, such as the role of Esther, who saved the Jewish people

from destruction, and Mary, who was the mother of Jesus, remain important as teaching stories and as objects of devotion. However, what may give women a familiar place in religious faith is the emphasis on feminine values such as compassion, humility, authenticity, building unique selfhood, and self-sacrifice [14, 42]. In Buddhism, Kuan Yin is the goddess of Compassion; she is the one who hears the cries of the world and becomes one with its inhabitants in their plight. In the modern turn towards spirituality, the search for well-being involves attention to body-mind-spirit domains which may or may not include faith-based models [43].

Gerotranscendence

Gerotranscendence is a term applied by Tornstam [40, 44] to signal a shift in perspective as one ages, moving from a materialistic reality to a more universal and all-encompassing one. In interviews with older Swedish participants, he uncovered changes in three areas: the self, social exchanges, and sense of the cosmos. Related to self was a decreasing concern about the self, less focus on physical appearance, and an increased interest in introspection and meditation. Social exchanges were pared to the ones that were most functional and satisfying, similar to Carstensen's approach mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter. Related to sense of the cosmos was an increased felt connection to past and future generations and a unity of time and space. Relationship to death and dying also began to alter as people gained more comfort with facing their own eventual dying.

Erikson [45], in his epigenetic view of life course development, suggested that the last stage of life involved a challenge between achieving ego integrity versus despair. Erikson suggests that the quest for meaning, containing multiple levels of awareness and creativity, may be part of the developmental process for many individuals in the final stages of life when they achieve gerotranscendence, subsumed under the idea of ego integrity [45]. Joan Erikson finished

revision of her husband's original manuscript after his death, though he had begun work on it. In this text, she refers to Tornstam's work as *gerotranscendence*, signifying the joyful aspects of the aging process as one begins to relinquish some of aging's expectations of limits, including a leap over fear of dying. At the end of life, with less time remaining than past, many older people come to a place where they do not fear death itself, though they may be afraid of suffering [46].

Narrative Theory

Narrative therapy offers a clinical theoretical perspective that includes consideration of the spiritual aspects of older women [47]. It emphasizes the need to place the source of problems outside the person so that one can explore contributory factors, such as the dominant discourses in society that suggest particular ways of viewing a situation. In this storytelling approach, older women can reflect on their lives in a way that enables them to see strengths and appreciate parts of their character that went under-recognized. Social workers and counselors can listen for the sparkling moments that were sustaining and help reframe client stories into stories of empowerment. Spiritual stories are often subjugated stories. This partly occurs because spiritual experience often transpires beyond the power of language to adequately capture the feelings and heightened cognitions that result. Narrative theory, in its regard for internal sources of support and unique understandings, encourages women to author their own stories rather than co-author them according to societal standards.

Spiritual Models

Spirituality has been conceptualized variously. In social work it has been seen as one key dimension having equal weight among the biopsychosocial spiritual dimensions of an individual [35]. Further, it may be the inner core or central dimension of a person or by contrast the all-

encompassing sphere that surrounds all other aspects [34]. A systems perspective is suggested by Lee et al. [43] who consider a system to be in balance or out of balance. Balance is maintained through an integrative component that consists of internal and external states as well as the self-other dimension. Treatment is enhanced through rebalancing, transforming, and becoming more who one is. Carr [48] suggests a process model of spiritual care in nursing that includes receptivity, positivity, humanity, and competency. There are many authors who developed or applied spiritual models of care [49] and this is an area that is likely to see further discussion and expansion.

Modern Women on Spirituality

A number of writers have penned personal tales of unusual aspects of their spiritual journeys. Because of their ability to be reflective about their life journey and to commit to authoring stories of their personal lives, they have opened avenues for understanding significant changes that women undergo developmentally as they face challenges in their lives. What follows is discussion from the writing of Sue Monk Kidd, Joan Chittister, and Mary Pipher. We have also included responses from a research participant in a study of religious and spiritual coping at older ages. These women position themselves in various places on the spirituality and religion continua and so offer different views of changes in their lives.

Sue's Story

Some may know Kidd through her more popular books such as *The Secret Life of Bees* and the *Mermaid's Chair*. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's workshop, she wrote for Christian publications and was raised in the Southern Baptist church [50]. She attended an Episcopal church and spent retreats at Catholic monasteries, gradually expanding her sense of the spiritual

through meditation practice and reading mystical writers such as Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Merton.

She begins her memoir with a vignette about visiting her daughter in the store where her daughter worked. Her daughter was on the floor, filling shelves, when two men approached and one commented that was how he liked to see a woman, on her knees. Kidd walked up, identified herself as the mother and told them that even though they might like to see women in that pose, “[Women] don’t belong there!” [50, p9]. She perceived that as a pivotal moment for herself in speaking up and out for feminism in general and in particular for her daughter’s self-esteem. Previously she had stayed solidly within the boundaries of her Christian tradition, which espoused a limited role for women who could be head of women’s committees but not much more. Gradually she claimed the power to shed her conditioned life and to listen to the feminine soul which she describes as the “repository of the Divine Feminine, her deep source, her . . . guiding wisdom, and power” [50, p20]. This included forgiveness of self for not being born male and not having access to male sources of power. She identified the feminine wound as bearing unconsciously a culturally-prescribed identity of victimhood.

A conference she attended on Jung led to a joyous beach gathering with other women, celebrating the richness of their lives as women. Her friend was on a similar journey and together they met often and assisted each other to discover and name new levels of spiritual meaning for women. Alongside this, she found herself painting pictures of women without hands without feet, without a mouth, unable to voice the feminine self. In her reading she discovered a tradition in the early Christian church that treated women with equality. She left the Baptist faith and joined the Episcopal church, but that was not enough. She entered a period of struggle working through changes in her marriage relationship and trying to find a place of meaning for herself.

Eventually she reached an understanding of the value of oneness and interconnection, of nature as sacred, and of liberation, or affirmation of the value and dignity for all humans, in what she terms “we-consciousness” [50, p154]. As she grounded herself in myths, symbols, understanding of her dreams, times of retreat, and readings of feminine spiritual experience, she healed from her anger and changed direction. In mid to late life, she entered a different path of creativity by writing fiction and living out the “common acts of life” [50, p222].

Joan’s Story

Sue Monk Kidd comes from the same place I do—from a theological ghetto. The only difference is that hers was Baptist and mine was Roman Catholic. Each of us, every tradition, has to some extent been arrogant, exclusive, and controlling. Now two women like ourselves have found God outside the denominational pale as well as in our own churches. That’s dangerous—both for the denomination and for us. But for me, at least, there is no going back to any totalitarianism that calls itself religion [51, p11].

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine Sister of Erie, Pennsylvania, is a prolific and internationally known lecturer, columnist, and author of over 40 books. Advocating for the poor and working for peace and social justice, Sister Joan is co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a partner organization of the United Nations, and also the executive director of Benetvision, a research and resource center for contemporary spirituality. Sister Joan is past president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), whose 1500 members currently represent 80 per cent of the 57,000 women religious in the US [52]. After the 1965 close of the Second Vatican Council Joan and women religious leaders shifted their focus from transmitting church doctrine to addressing the social injustices of poverty and marginalization of populations

including women. Following years of growing tension, however, the Vatican issued a report in spring, 2012 reprimanding the LCWR for espousing “radical feminist” views and ordering clergy to monitor the organization [53].

Joan’s life-long questioning of Catholic rules revealed itself in early childhood. For example, arriving home from school, six-year-old Joan was troubled even then by the injustice promulgated by her religious teachers, who implied that her Presbyterian step-father would not go to heaven [51]. Joan’s father died when she was three, and her young Catholic mother later had in an interfaith marriage with a good, religious, and hardworking man. From another experience she learned about endurance, balance between what one desires and can do, and the ability to make a wonderful life regardless of circumstances. Barely a month after becoming a Benedictine novitiate, sixteen-year-old Joan contracted polio and faced the possibility of not realizing her religious vocation. After spending months in an iron lung and enduring four years of treatment for the paralysis of her arm and leg, she recovered [54].

Later, as an adult with extensive theological training, Joan experienced a life-changing event. Attending a conference of women religious in Rome, she questioned the edict that daily attendance at Mass and receipt of the Eucharist (the sacrament of communion) was essential for the sisters even though many parishes had no access to them due to the shortage of priests. The cardinal asserted that the sisters must accept the Eucharist of desire. Sister Joan cited that day when she was told that she could “have the Eucharist without having it, but had to go to it, nevertheless, when a priest was there” as the beginning of her conscious journey from religion to spirituality, from dogma to a “personal journey into God” [51, p4].

Viewing older adulthood as a precious time of being fully alive and experiencing wisdom, freedom, and enlightenment, Joan authored *The Gift of Years* [55] in which she writes about the purposefulness of aging. She describes the shifts in relationships, meaning, fears, and joys that are possible as the physical dimensions of lives decrease and the spiritual dimensions increase. “Age,” she writes, “is the antidote to personal destruction, the call to spiritual growth, because age finally brings us to the point where there is nowhere else to go but inside for comfort, inside for wealth, inside for the things that really count. It is the damping-down time of life. Our passions and flaws--anger, jealousy, envy, pride—subside to the point that we begin to awaken to another whole level of life. The interior life.” [55, p69].

Mary’s Story

Mary Pipher, a writer as well as a psychologist, is known for her books *Reviving Ophelia* and *Another Country*, the latter about her work with older people and their families. She was living comfortably in her various roles until two of her books became best sellers. As an introvert, the pace of her life gradually became overwhelming and disorienting and she entered a period of depression. She indicates that she now understands that most people experience crisis of some form and while not everyone experiences growth, growth is the only successful treatment for it. If individuals can reflect on the learning that spills over from life, “All experience can be redemptive” [56, p13].

Ms. Pipher was a member of the Unitarian Church which has a history of generating questions about faith and embracing social activism. In order to heal, she sought time with her family backpacking, hiking, and camping. She succinctly wrote that “Books, people, and going outdoors have long been my trinity of coping” [56, p141]. She described herself as having an

inability to disappoint and thus the high demands made on her by a public eager to learn more about views illustrated by her writing became extremely difficult. Unprepared for public life, she felt her foundational identity erode. As a small-town person, when success arrived she didn't own a cell phone or know how to hail a cab. She carried an oversized sense of responsibility for the people who asked her questions, to the bookstores who sold them, and to all those who stocked her books. Her natural anxiety heightened; exhaustion fatigued her body, and her self-criticism engulfed her to the point of crisis. In response, she simplified her life, participated in her own therapy and yoga, and "synchronized her rhythms" [56, p167] with slower ones grounded in the earth.

Later she began to view her state of depression as a spiritual crisis rather than a mental health one [56, p176]. She explored Buddhism and was captivated by the concepts of mindfulness, interconnectedness, and a sense of the world as right in itself. She began to re-inhabit her body and to find greater self-acceptance and self-compassion through meditative practice. She learned to release her anger and self-judgment, to soften towards herself, to listen, and to invite joy. She believes that religion calms us and connects us "to all of the world's sufferers...It is often trauma that turns us toward the sacred, and it is the sacred that saves us" [56, p176].

Arlene's Story

Arlene (name changed) told a story of both deprivation and strength in the context of a life that some people would call ordinary. When she attended school, there were few opportunities for black women. She reported that her daughter-in-law gave her a couple of books

on black women and she was surprised when she learned about their extraordinary lives. In her high school, there were not even 25 black people. “We didn’t at that time consider ourselves to be segregated, but in a way we were. We didn’t participate in school activities. When my sister and I graduated, there were only about nine people who were black who graduated” [unpublished research data].

During the depression she and her husband, together with their children and the families of two of her sisters, lived in a single apartment. Her husband worked at candy store earning six dollars a week. The apartment cost 45 dollars or 15 dollars a month per family, but they decided to strike out on their own to thwart effects of parenting from family who were more strict.

In 1931, Arlene joined a Methodist church, still carrying that membership card at the time of the interview. She called the pastor a remarkable person who influenced her life, though when he was moved to another congregation, she was discouraged from following him. She considered religion to be very important, but not denominations. “Some churches and some people believe you have to be Methodist or Baptist or whatever. I don’t feel that way because I don’t think God sees us in those categories.” As she got older her perspective had changed. A brother-in-law began attending a different faith and she and her sister had discouraged him. “We were the ones who were wrong. We wanted to change him. That wasn’t right. I believe if you learn to treat people right, that’s what God wants you to do.”

She looked to prayer as a source of coping. “Prayer answers many things. My daughter was really put on the spot at a meeting.” Her daughter sat on the couch and talked to God as if he were sitting beside her.

I've tried to do that with a problem. I can't say that I've been able to do that, but I've noticed a difference in her thinking. I've tried to apply that. One night I put \$400 down someplace and I couldn't find that money. I know I had put it this drawer. The next day I had to go to my closet and I put my hands right on that money. I had to say, 'Thank you Lord.' I find myself saying thank you to Him a great deal because I am very forgetful. I think he has played a big part in my life, in my ability to raise my children.

Arlene revealed that she was able to accept her own aging. She had turned 90 in the year of the interview. "I must have had 50 cards in my mailbox. It made me do a lot of thinking. People were very nice to me, but it seems that every year I begin to have more physical problems." She used to enjoy traveling. Although she couldn't travel at the time of the interview, she said she continued to travel through television. She was thankful for the life she had lived and would be ready to die whenever it was her time. "There are times when I'm down in spirit. I tell my daughter sometimes, 'Oh how I wish I could be here when *you* are 90 and see how you take all these things.' But I'm grateful for my life." She reported that much of the meaning in her life came from her family.

Spiritual Stories

Sue, Joan, and Mary, public figures and authors, and Arlene, a private individual, each has lived an ostensibly spiritual and/or religious path. Sue found over time that her original conservative faith no longer fit her views at all and she embraced a faith that could encompass her growing view of the value of the sacred feminine. Joan, too, felt constrained by certain church edicts that seemed to support authority rather than spiritual intent. As her questions grew, she developed a spirituality that was broader than that of her faith, while still remaining in the

faith. Mary already had a liberal faith leaning when her writing became well-known. However, the resulting crisis led her to re-explore herself and history, and brought her into association with Buddhist teachings. Arlene, who unlike the other three women profiled here was not famous, lived in a large Midwestern city. Over time she had become more aware of how her race mattered in her life and may have obstructed opportunity. Still, she described an expanding experience of reliance on and appreciation for her faith in her old age.

Discussion

It is important to emphasize that holding a sense of the spiritual self does not describe all older women. However, for many women over the age of 65 now, it does matter [14, 24, 30]. Deeply. Attention to a spiritual core that connects with whatever else may be outside the self helps women cope with change in a generally positive direction; change can be absorbed, adaptation is achieved, and meaning remains strong in a resilient response [57]. Although they interact with many people in a lifetime, it is their own experiences that are salient and that they can know best. What a woman has either dealt with, chosen not to deal with, or accepted becomes in part the definition of her life. One finds one's own rhythm in suffering and redemption, failure and accomplishment, loss and gain. A spiritual framework can provide meaning through all the unexplained mysteries, emergent events, and unusual synchronicities in living. But that is not all; women connect across generations through common problems faced and resolved—whether differently or in similar fashion. The stories they live are the stories they share.

Feminist approaches open a lens that makes room for the women's stories that were often marginalized in the past. Just as the barriers of color were often not discussed outwardly in prior

decades as mentioned in Arlene's story, the historical power of women in religions and in archetypal myths was buried or at least unacknowledged. Sue's story spoke of an increasing awareness of feminist symbols and their absence in her faith expression, leading to a denominational move. Joan, who struggled with polio in her youth, had the courage to push the edges of her faith and thus be the voice for many other women who were puzzled by gender limits of Catholicism. Mary found her own faith tradition to offer insufficient assistance in meeting her life challenge, so she began to incorporate Buddhist meditation practice. The stories highlighted here represent just a few of the many stories women carry that relate to either religion, spirituality or both.

Spiritual development is a life long journey that is not linear. In fact, the path is marked by twists, turns and recursive efforts. It is only with age that one can look back and understand points of growth--the patience, courage, and endurance that allowed one to finally reach new ground. Gerotranscendence [40] carries the idea of healing some painful components of the self and becoming something more than one was at the beginning of life. It is awareness of the vitality that remains in older years and the contribution one has both given to and received from external sources. While this theory has yet to be broadly replicated, it does offer a more differentiated perspective of spiritual components beyond Erikson's final stage of ego integrity versus despair. The self comes together or it does not, but perhaps the self is not all that is present towards the end of a life span. Instead, the connections made in a lifetime remain when what is known as the physical self dies.

Narrative approaches form a good fit in working with women and women's spirituality. Story-telling is what women do when they gather. When they allow others into their story through therapeutic questions, they can begin to shape the story in previously invisible ways,

which bolster women's strengths. Spiritual stories are not always the ones most easy to hear, for though they do take place in physical reality, they often include images, dreams, and thoughts that are hard to understand or that stretch belief. However, in staying with the story and externalizing problems, women can more readily own the story they have created with the particular foundations and raw material they were given.

Guidance for Professionals

There are a number of ways that social workers and other mental health professionals might support the spirituality of older women. These professionals do not themselves need to have a spiritual background to do this well. A key aspect is learning to formulate good questions. Examples of questions that open up spiritual areas for exploration can be found in Nelson-Becker, Nakashima and Canda [25, 58]. However, preliminary to asking questions about spirituality is to discern whether this area matters to an individual and then what terms such as faith, belief, religion, spirituality, or meaning are preferred. Assisting women to articulate their spiritual aspects of self, when that is acknowledged to be of value to them, can be a freeing experience as they will feel heard and known. At times these stories will not have been told at all previously, or told superficially. Exploring them at their depths can produce new understanding and meaning for life's second half.

It is also helpful to recognize that religious intersections of women's spirituality have not always been helpful to women. Women have at times suffered under institutional religions. Further, talking about intimate aspects of spirituality may not have been well-received. Spiritual experience does not always lend itself well to linguistic expression. Professionals thus should do some preliminary explorations of their own biases to begin to know their own limits and where

they may encounter difficulty guiding a client. Referral may sometimes be a good approach, but if a therapeutic relationship is well-established, it is not always the best approach. However, locating another professional who may be well-versed in religious or spiritual issues and is willing to offer consultation can be ideal.

Finally, spirituality is often best experienced through creative and artistic approaches. Time spent in solitude and listening is well rewarded. Journaling, writing poetry, drawing, painting, listening to or making music, and spending time in nature are a few pursuits that can help women heal, awaken, or come to new appreciation of their spiritual self. In all of these activities, there is a creative self-emptying that makes room for new awareness and a broader identity. Professionals can recommend these and other novel approaches to help women see the larger developmental opportunities in the second half of life.

Conclusion

Spiritual development follows a perennial invitation to conquer the heights of the mountains inside the self. This can make available inner wisdom that may not have been previously accessed. The journey inward becomes the journey outward into community when older women in turn mentor others. Through sharing their knowledge and skills mindfully, women come home to the heart of their soul. At that center, they can find a new integration and understanding of self. Aging invites women to come alive in new ways as they honor the journey home to their authentic self, a self that is always larger than what they can dream.

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Flourishing Along The Journey- One Woman's Story of Self-Discovery and Love. February 27, 2014, 9:00 pm. All of Susan Tolle's life she has felt that part of her was missing. Join me and my Buddy/Sister/Friend/ Co- Host Rebecca Norrington of Reality Spirituality Radio Show to find out more about this amazing and inspirational story. It truly does hold true that "We can make our plans, but the final outcome is in God's hands " Proverbs 16:1 ReadWellness Woman 40 and Beyond -a mind,body,spirit e-magazine for Women over 40 Take the 21 Day Challenge to DeStress The Mess - receive daily emails, weekly coaching on how to minimize the impact of stress on your body! Click Here to Sign Up Get Your Free Green Smoothie Receipes Be part of the amazing evolution Thus older people may be encouraged to retain a sense of self, of meaning and of integrity. AGEING, SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH Harriet Mowat Abstract: This paper takes the view that old age is a spiritual journey. It suggests that a primary task for the carer is to support this spiritual journey into old age. 2005 A third discourse: Ageing as a spiritual journey The spiritual journey based theory of ageing is a maturation from the paranoid schizoid position of good versus bad. achieving a sense of integrity means fully accepting oneself and coming to terms with death. 8. Pennell Initiative for Women's Health WOODWARD K (2003) Against Wisdom: the social politics of anger and aging Journal of Aging Studies. No. Start by marking "Suffering, Spirituality and the Inner Journey Home: Walking the Path from Desperation and Fear to the Peace of Lived Awakening" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving| Want to Read. We'd love your help. Let us know what's wrong with this preview of Suffering, Spirituality and the Inner Journey Home by Marianne Broug. Problem: It's the wrong book It's the wrong edition Other.