

Numinous Experiences and Reflexive Spirituality in the Formation of Religious Capital Among Feminist Women

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

What are the influences that contribute to individuals' spirituality, and how do these interact with one another and impact spiritual beliefs and behavior? Previous research and theory suggests that greater the spiritual capital, that is some combination of expertise in discerning spiritual aspects of life and a strong commitment to faith development or to a specific faith, the better the motivation of individuals to develop better visions for their lives, work or ministries (Finke 2003). Recent research has suggested that individual spiritual capital may be generated by numinous experiences in a group (e.g. at a religious service), by spiritual insights and feeling when alone (Hunt 2003, Laubach 2004; Mason 2004) by discussing one's beliefs with others who hold similar or different values (Besecke 2001) or through putting one's faith directly into practice (Grant et. al. 2004).

Particular interest in this study was how reflexive spirituality, or the intentional effort to develop spiritually through pluralistic study of other faith stances in relation to one's own in seeking transcendental truths (Besecke 2001), is a core part of their lived religion, or how women with at least nominal spiritual feminist philosophies (Carr 1986, Ecklund 2003, Winter et. al. 1994;) construct their spiritual identities in practicing their faith in different situations and explaining their experiences to themselves and to others (Orsi 2003).

This paper reflects exploratory research in these areas, conducted through survey but mainly through interviews, with women who are alumnae of a yearlong certificate program, the Women's Leadership Institute, at Hartford Seminary.

Studying Influences on Spirituality

Investigating the influences on individuality spiritual formation is complicated by the reality that individuals are unlikely to be fully aware of all that contributes to their spiritual Weltanschauung. Michael Mason (2004) terms such subliminal spiritual insights or knowledge aspects of "primordial spiritual experiences," which possibly can be brought to subjects' conscious reflection through survey and especially depth-interview techniques. Primordial spiritual sensations appear to be triggered (and perhaps in part formed) by individuals' memories of and reactions to what they experienced in listening to music, seeing the marvels of nature, hearing and participating in worship, private prayer or meditations, and personal crises and events (Mason 2004). Mason decided not make a research distinction between individuals' sense of spiritual awareness and

insights evoked by things or events in the real world and those they interpret as from an otherworldly spiritual or divine source. However, in a study based on GSS data, Laubach (2004) defines “psychism,” or spiritual messages and feelings “not originating with the self,” as influences that while increasing an individuals’ spirituality may decrease their commitment to religious groups that are unlikely to affirm validity to their communications from the beyond.

There is much current research interest in the manner in which individuals’ spiritual beliefs and practices are formed, solidified, changed and built on through further interpersonal and group interaction. Building on Robert Wuthnow’s concept of spirituality as lived practice, Grant, O’Neil and Stephens (2004) examine how individuals in their secular work sometimes enact spiritual acts of caring, which in their perceptions can in turn enhance their spiritual understandings. Kelly Besecke (2001), using W.C. Roof’s concept of “reflexive spirituality” or the process through which individuals develop spiritual beliefs through discussions on spirituality with others persons, predicates that members of a spiritually focused group over time develop similar language and approaches to talking about spiritual themes in their lives. When a group becomes important as a normative reference for its members, as Melissa Wilcox’s (2002) research indicates, continued interaction among members assists their developing a more integrated, potentially more conscious, set of self-concepts and worldviews with spiritual dimensions.

The effects of group affiliations and dynamics in developing spiritual beliefs and behaviors have also been investigated using Putnam’s concepts and theories concerning increasing social capital. Welch et al (2004) explore the effects of religious participation on the connections between bonding and/or bridging social capital, or the extent to which potential bonding ties of trust and reciprocity among group members lead to bridging ties of trust and reciprocity to non-members or other groups which are very disparate in socio-cultural characteristics. Roger Finke (2003) in making distinctions between social capital of trust and reciprocity in a group and religious capital of “the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture” raises the possibility that individuals who have a great degree of religious capital in one faith tradition may experience difficulty in developing bridging social capital activities with those of other faith traditions. The question of how best to encourage real dialogue among participants in interfaith groups, while concomitantly strengthening bonding social capital within the group is a perennial dilemma of many educational and interfaith organizations.

STUDY SETTING AND DESIGN

The women in this study are graduates of the Women’s Leadership Institute, a one year certificate program at Hartford Seminary, that had graduates from eight years at the time of this study. In registering for this program, potential students read a description starting out as follows:

The Women's Leadership Institute (WLI) is an experience based certificate program that enables participants to develop and strengthen leadership skills while exploring a feminist perspective in religion and society. WLI invites women of all ages and from diverse cultures to come together to create a community committed to liberation and transformation.

Survey Sample:

In the summer-fall of 2004, all alumnae of this Institute were sent surveys to evaluate the program based on their reflections and find what they were doing now with what they had learned and more generally. The alumnae, based on 145 mailed survey responses (about a 60% return rate), range in age from under 30 to 70 and over (the modal group between 40- 54 years of age); about four-fifths (78%) are Christian (primarily members of mainline Protestant denominations, although 30% are Catholic), and overwhelmingly lay persons (only 9% ordained) with at least four-year college degrees (88%).

A great majority of the alumnae assess the certificate program as at least of some value in all seven of its stated learning objectives. In four of these objectives, fully three-fifths or more found the program of “great value.” In descending order, these are:

1. “Participating in a learning community with other women involved”
2. Providing “a mix of theology, history, rituals, prayer and practical application”
3. Deepening spirituality
4. “Getting comfortable with/confirming a feminist perspective on religion and society.”

The value of “cross-cultural learning” was only stated learning objective that showed significantly improved ratings with each yearly graduating class: its value rose from 35% of the graduating class of 1997 saying “of great value” to 60% of the class of 2004 giving this high a rating. This reflects intentional recruiting efforts of the director and staff of WLI to increase religious and ethnic diversity among students enrolled.

Interview Sample

In this exploratory research, eight women of the ten alumnae contacted in the spring of 2005 agreed to talk about their spirituality with me. Those interviewed were given the basic question areas before hand to reflect on prior to talking with me. I used information from their completed surveys to probe on specific areas in the interviews.

The eight women interviewed ranged in age from under forty (1) to over fifty-five year of age (4), with the remainder in their mid-forties (3). Five were employed full-time, and three about half time in occupations ranging from business administrators to counselors, teachers, and clerks. In terms of religious identification, two are Catholic (although one of these considered herself Catholic and Buddhist), two are United Church of Christ, one Episcopalian, one Lutheran, and two Muslims.

The interviews, approximately an hour, taped and conducted mostly face-to-face, explored how these women believed their spirituality has been affected by their life experiences, both the more mundane as well as clearly numinous ones. Interviews included general questions and probes on the effects of:

- Prior and present religious and familial backgrounds;
- Interactions with others encountered in social groups, courses, volunteer or employment activities, who are similar or diverse in current religious affiliations, ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics;
- Spiritual sensations while listening to music, praying, being in nature, or other activity;

- Otherworldly insights obtained through dreams as well as through psychic experiences while awake.

A Feminist Perspective

An area that was not directly probed in interviews is whether these women consider themselves “feminist” or whether they have a “feminist spirituality.” Given the seminar description, students know that a portion of their monthly seminars over the year will include “fundamentals of a feminist perspective.” A learning outcome goal was “Getting comfortable with/confirming a feminist perspective on religion and society.” However, “a feminist perspective” does not invariably mean just affirming one feminist perspective on church and society. The director of WLI, Professor M.T. Winter (Winter, et al 1994), is fully aware that there are different varieties of feminism, each with some elements that may not fit or even contradict elements of another variety of feminism. Even spiritual feminism, although it typically includes some notion of the feminine face of God and the centrality of women’s experience and leadership in worship (Lummis and Stokes, 1994), also has diverse foci among adherents, possibly in part because it is still evolving (Carr 1986). Even within one congregation, women can have different notions of what “feminism” connotes, and used various definitions of “feminist” values and practices that best fit with their religious orientations and personal preferences (Eckland 2003).

One basis of faculty and students avoiding imposing a particular definition of feminism or spiritual feminism within the class is the great importance placed within this program of learning from and dialoguing with those whose life experiences, race/ethnicity and faith is diverse. In doing the interviews, the decision was made to focus on these women’s spirituality, and see what kinds of images emerged that might indicate a spiritual feminist perspective.

INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS

A. Spiritual Growth Through Interpersonal Sharing

1. In WLI as a Safe Group

In WLI, there is much attention given to providing opportunities for students to share with the whole group and in small groups. The leaders of each weekend ensure that students feel safe to talk about their experiences and observations, without recrimination from others present. Graduates interviewed indicated that their spirituality was enhanced in WLI both through sharing their experiences and hearing/seeing the reactions of others present.

Listening to others in this setting could provide the cues to elicit recovery of past experiences and “primordial’ spiritual feelings. In illustration:

- For me, it was more listening... When this person talks it sews a few stitches. Then this person, and another stitch by that person put in another stitch – and it all knits together! ... When I listened to each woman share there was always something with which I could identify. In that identification with their experiences, insights would come and would connect for me, help me remember something. It would help me reframe something in my

own mind, in my own life experiences. It would bring something to consciousness in a new way.

Several others noted their gain from listening to other WLI students came not as much in making connections with similar themes mentioned, as with learning how others' beliefs, practices and spiritual paths differed from theirs - thus broadening their own spirituality as they experienced talking about religious differences in a supportive and safe group.

- When you come to the WLI group, you find people from different denominations who have different perspectives - and that leads to personal growth in my experience. As a Muslim, you know the concept of Islam is an integrated concept within the whole life of an individual. So you do not look at your religion as being something you practice at a specific time, but through your whole day. Especially for others and me coming from other countries, meeting with women from different backgrounds here in WLI, helped us work harder on our spirituality.
- Just hearing their experiences ...helped in broadening my attitude about spirituality... hearing different interpretation of scripture from people put me on a path to examine why I believe what I believe, and how to expand my vision and to include all of these other attitudes of spirituality, and understanding of the spirit. I was pretty rigid about observing Catholic holy days, and believing the Catholic Church way was the only way for salvation, that we had a corner on the truth. ...It just did not stand up to the tests of their experiences and the things that they shared. I remember thinking, "Oh wait a minute. God is a much bigger God than all of than, bigger than I had been brought up to believe. "

Several women interviewed said at the beginning of WLI they felt very different from or believed they had little in common with others there. Their sense of belonging to the group developed in part through listening, but perhaps even more from finding that when they shared their beliefs and experiences, other students reacted with interest, acceptance or empathy. In illustration, two other women comment:

- I learned from listening to people.... In the same way, it was eye opening to share things with people and hear their reactions because there would be such differences! Things that surprised them were often normal to me. . During WLI there were times that I wanted to put aside what I knew of my religion and just learn from other people. There were also many times that ...my perspectives were reaffirmed and strengthened just from hearing from other people sharing.
- (From sharing difficult recent experience in class) I learned I did not have to go through all of that alone. That was an important piece of spirituality – learning that spirituality is formed in community, sometimes out of joy and sometimes, as this was, out of a terrific sense of loss.

For these predominantly Christian women having the experience of sharing their beliefs and faith journeys with representatives from other religions in WLI particularly Muslim, but also those whose spiritual beliefs were Buddhist, Jewish, Native American and Pagan, was noted by several as important in better understanding or expanding their own spiritual conceptions. Socioeconomic

differences among WLI students were minimal; however, WLI students have the experience of worshipping with women inmates at Niantic prison, valuable for many:

- Our visit to Niantic prison – I will never forget that! ... Going to their worship service, which was wildly different from ours, which in my former life would have really turned me off. It was very emotional, lots of singing, clapping, and loud responses. But I was very receptive to it then after being in WLI.

2. Kinds of Individual Spiritual Capital Acquired through WLI

As suggested by the foregoing illustrative quotes, about half of the women interviewed said in effect that they were far more open after WLI to sharing with those of other denominations and faith traditions, and far less rigid and prejudicial in their judgments of people. Three indicated they saw themselves becoming more open to others' religious beliefs and practices at the same time as they were growing in confidence to pursue their own spiritual paths and affirm what they believed. To quote another woman's experience in illustration:

- I did not want anything to do with women... I just realized that you had to act and behave like a white male. Even though corporate America where I was an executive was full of females, the behavior was male. I am a minister's daughter ...and German to boot. Those parameters are very, very defined and rigid. I was never encouraged to explore ...on my own: "This is what is right." "This is what you should believe." So I basically dismissed everything that did not fit in that parameter, and anything that was feminine or female. In WLI I was hearing women's voices, their accomplishments, who they were, where they were going, their perspectives - were just so new to me.. I go to church, I sing in the choir because it is important to my husband, and I am singing "Glory to the Mother" when they are singing "Glory to the Father," and some people will smile. I am finally free to figure out: Who am I? What do I really believe? ... I have the intelligence and the spirituality now to determine what is real for me. It is pretty awesome...God just speaks to me generally through other people. I am grateful to say I am nowhere near as arrogant and narrow and absolute as I used to be.

Or, to put it in Putnam's terms, it might be said that such women acquired both a measure of bonding and bridging social capital through WLI year that they have continued to use and expand through subsequent life experiences.

3. Using and Expanding Spiritual Capital Gained in WLI

A third (33%) of the total sample of alumnae are presently in a woman's support, study, book or other feminist spirituality group. Half of the eight women interviewed are currently in support groups where they feel free to discuss their spirituality and lives, groups that they typically started themselves after graduating from WLI. One group is made up of several women students that wanted to continue meeting after their program ended and have. Another alumna formed spiritual support groups of other women in her congregation.. Another graduate attends several spiritual support groups on a regular basis, – including a small Christian community group in her parish, a yearly retreat with her siblings, and Buddhist meetings. Another graduate with a couple of other women of the same faith, regularly pray and discusses texts in relation to their lives together, but particularly on holy days. Another WLI graduate and six women friends get together every summer

for a week in a rented beach cottage where they spend part of most days sharing their faith. These women indicated that their desire for this kind of spiritual sharing in a safe group was acquired during WLI.

3. Potential Spurs to or Restraints on the Use of WLI acquired Spiritual Capital in Social Situations

a. In Work Settings.

Not all groups and contexts are safe spaces in which to talk about one's faith or spiritual journey. In employment and volunteer outreach situations there are often formal rules or common expectations as to whether and when staff should discuss their faith with clients. As one put it: "We are trained not to impose or talk about our spirituality – until you know or are comfortable with them." However, even in secular organizations, it is possible for administrative and professional staff to indicate (at least to coworkers) their interest in hearing and talking about spiritual matters. In illustration:

- I have always been reluctant to do any kind of discussion of that nature in the office. I did not want it to be mistaken for pressure to do anything. But people began asking me, "How is it that you have this way of listening to us that nobody else seems to have?" I wasn't aware that was the case. Now, I just say, "Well, I have this faith and it has to do with this creative God who is present in every transaction, including the ones in which we are involved right now, and I think that is where I get this – not from anything I do, but because I am supported by that and nurtured by that creative force. It is like an electrical plug into which I plug in." People – well some resonated with it, some of them shrugged it off, and I never cared. ... Very unusual in corporate life to have that kind of informality with people you don't know that well. They would sit down and eventually share what was on their minds, and I would listen... It was just the act of valuing them through active listening and not trying to solve problems for them; just hearing them. I would have to trace this back to that course that I took in connection with WLI. Just understanding that there is way of hearing and a community of possibilities, and being open to that.

Several graduates are currently employed or are volunteering as counselors for non-profit organizations, which involves their active listening to clients. Their work is primarily geared to helping their clients, but through this counseling they see they have gained spiritually as well, e.g.:

- People share their stories very readily because the first thing I say to anybody, either informally or in a formal interview is: "Tell me a little bit about you. What brought you to this place?" This is pretty much going to get into everything quickly. I have just gotten so much more comfortable about talking about spiritual paths. I think I just claimed that part of myself much more deeply.
- I am a bereavement counselor in a non-profit hospital. I listen all day long, and I am good at that...I have just been in a daylong seminar for the nurses at the hospital where I work on spirituality and dying. Some of the points I made there are: What is spirituality? How to connect with our patients' spirituality? How to find out what gives their life meaning? A whole section on grief, and how we can connect through that with our patients? How to take care of ourselves as nurses -- because I am a nurse too. How to feel really connected, but

not too impacted, by patients who have died? ... By listening to someone's spiritual journey, I bring a lot of that spiritual awareness into (my support) group and the questions I ask (and discuss with)... my soul sisters in that group.

Work with needy people can be very stressful, and reflections on such experiences while alone or shared with supportive others can be helpful in alleviating stress and perhaps advancing one's own spiritual evolution. However, there is also the danger as one mentioned of "retreating" into spiritual reflection, i.e.:

- I am really pleased that I could be a part of helping somebody, especially when they are persons who need it. Other times I come away, really just upset and totally angry at the situation that we found out there. That is the kind of thing where I struggle with retreating into spirituality. I say that because I can go and pray and calm myself – and I then I think: "Am I getting too far away from whatever caused me to be upset, and then not do anything about it to change the situation?"

b. Faith and Fundamentalist Christians

It may be easier for many women with feminist social and spirituality orientations to listen appreciatively to the religious convictions and practices of those of other faiths than it is to the beliefs and opinions of fundamentalist Christians. James Ault (2004:111-112,382) suggests this possibility in book based on a case study of a fundamentalist Baptist Church, and how his feminist colleagues reacted to the stances of the self-defined "anti-feminist" women of this congregation. A probe question in these present interviews asked WLI graduates how they handled talking with people who held very rigid Christian fundamentalist views.

In work situations, these graduates would try to help the client/colleague in an unobtrusive way that is also perceived by the other as a safe place to talk, e.g.

- Well, I work with people who are (fundamentalist). I try to steer our discussion toward things they accept that can help them. For example in a suicide of a son whose mother was upset because he died without being "saved" – he did not say the right words. Actually, I have found working with her so meaningful because she has come so far. We talk about what she believes about God, what is God like, what was your son like, what did he value – showing her that saying the right words might not matter to God. The reason it is so meaningful to work with her is because she is struggling so hard, and she finds my little office a place where she can be really honest. She is a pillar of her church; people come to her for faith, and she could not be honest with anyone at her church because she cannot show that she is wavering. So it feels like such a true privilege to talk with her in a safe place, where she can say what she feels and make connection to what she believes.
- It is ... sometimes difficult to talk with those whose spirituality is more conservative than mine...How I react depends on what situation or what role I am in. As a spiritual director, I know I have to hold their story. The whole idea of being with a person in spiritual direction is to meet them where they are. My own belief is that God who created the diversity in our work...has created many ways to find the Source. So I try to think of that...it is difficult sometimes. ...I have some friends whose spirituality is much more conservative...that is a

huge challenges... I just know them to very good and sincere people...I think that is why I can be with those people. Although in all honesty I do not seek out those situations.

With colleagues, acquaintances, friends and family outside of a work situation, more self-restraint and communicative finesse was often required – if the person with fundamentalist views could not be avoided in conversation around faith issues. In illustration two other women comment:

- I try now to be less didactic and say, “Well, here is another possibility; or here is another translation you might want to consider.” When I am not being defensive, I can be more open and accepting. With fundamentalists who might think as a woman I should not be doing this (being a top lay leader in her congregation), I can say, “If you read the text carefully, it is Paul says I would. It does not say God would. “ I always have problems with people who worship the word and not the God behind the word. More and more I just dismiss it; and most people are afraid to raise those kinds of things with me! ... After 911 my mother was listening to something from one of those fundamentalist way right people, saying that God visited this on us because of our support of homosexuality in the nation. She said, “Is this right?” I said, “Mother, don’t you ever let me hear you say something like that again!” And I went off on a tirade... So I will at times challenge, and then come back with some of the things I have learned. I don’t expect to convert them; but I hope it makes people a little bit more open to other things. I have moved far enough in my journey, praise God, that there is forgiveness. I hope my children will be as forgiving with me!

I would say that is more difficult being with (Christian fundamentalists)... I think the reason is that I do feel a judgment from people who do bear these very fundamentalist, far right beliefs. I hear them judging; and yet, I can step back a bit and see them and their system as “other.” ... To be honest with you, I don’t seek out people like that with those beliefs, and I don’t hang out with them. So, I probably don’t attract people who are fundamentalist, but I do come across them... also in my family. My sister and her husband and others in my family are not so much on my wavelength at all. Again, I used to fuss with them and now I accept them as who they are, and I know I am not going to change them. They have known me a really long time. My brother-in-law calls me his “favorite radical.” They are affirming me, in their way.

4. Being the Client

Three of the women interviewed are presently getting assistance in their spiritual growth as clients of a spiritual director or therapist. In the latter case both mentioned therapist as assisting their recall and integration of experiences that led them to further their personal spiritual growth:

- (My psychotherapist’s) office was in her home and when you came in the living room, it was full of art from Judaism...symbols, metaphors, and things like that, and she herself was quite spiritual. The first session that we had I was kind of going on about this horrible situation that I was in. She said, “Where do you think God is in all of this for you?” This was the first time a therapist had asked me that question; it sort of took me back. So we talked about that, and eventually we got to family of origin. We just did all this exploration. I was talking about my dad. And she said, “Well, have you ever talked with your dad’s soul?” And I said, “Well, no I haven’t.” And she said, “Well you could, you know. Why don’t you try it?”

- A massage therapist whom I see every three to five weeks ... does Reiki and she has knowledge of all kinds of Eastern tools. It is a full body massage. ... She works with God in helping to determine what my body needs because a lot of what I have harbored in my body are toxins from stress, anger, whatever which goes back decades. It is an on-going healing process for me. It releases things. Grief is often harbored in your lungs; and she is able to work with the chakra points with massage just to break away all the tensions locked in my lungs or wherever. She always reminds me to drink a lot of water later; because massage therapy breaks those things down and you need to flush them out. ... She has tried to encourage me to consider spirit guides and my animal favorites. She has opened all sorts of doors from a spirituality standpoint.

B. SPIRITUAL GROWTH THROUGH SOLITARY EXPERIENCES

Experiences with others become spiritually meaningful and raised to consciousness, those interviewed would concur, when they take time alone to process what they gained and reflect on it further. Solitary experiences can also evoke spiritual feelings; in part depending on the depth of the experience and in part depending on how these experiences are interpreted by the individual (Jantzen 1995: 333-338 et. passim) or explained by the individual to others (Orsi 2003). Self-interpretations of solitary experience doubtlessly have some social roots, but their perceived primary source may have different consequences for growth of individual spiritual capital.

1. Reading, Journaling and Meditation in Silence or With Music

All interviewed described either solitary reading or writing their reflections in a journal as ways in which they accessed spiritual feelings and enhanced their spirituality. Books mentioned were those written mainly Christian theologians or feminist women writing from a spiritual perspective, several of which were assigned or suggested reading in their seminary program. Several said they meditate alone on biblical passage or essays in the religious publications they own or receive. Writing reflections in a journal on the weekend seminar experiences was part of the WLI requirements that most interviewed said they found very helpful. Time is the major culprit several mentioned for why they have not continued the daily or weekly “journaling” process. Two or three others do continue to meditate on reading and/or do journaling on a regular basis; in illustration:

- One activity I do which is writing every day several pages on what ever comes out... that is the kind of meditations that works for me. I also incorporate into those readings from the “Upper Room” and whatever bible study is suggested in the Upper Room... So those are my two meditation practices that have been helpful for me in giving a lot of energy.

Listening to music, particularly classical music, while reading, meditating, or writing reflections was mentioned by several as well Sunday service music and the whole church service was also mentioned as a time to engage in meditation:

- During that hour in church, even though there is a lot going on, there is a large part of the service when I just have my eyes closed because that is my reflective time. It is about the only time I have some times to be still.

Finding time to meditate in busy daily life is a struggle for most of those interviewed. Driving their car to work or for long trips is a meditative space used by two, and another two women interviewed say they meditate during their daily walks.

2. Personal Crisis and Pain as Means to Acquiring Spiritual Capital

Five of those interviewed gave compelling accounts of how through personal crises and painful situations they deepened their spirituality. Addiction or severe physical illness were physical crises named by three, often followed or precipitated in part by crises in the family or on the job. The crisis itself leads to spiritual insights, which are further brought to awareness and broadened through interaction with others. In illustration:

- I learned that I would be laying off 120 people in my department. So what I had gone to build, I came to realize and have to participate in undoing. They were long-term employees; felt that our company had lied to them... ..The lack of integrity in that decision to first tell people we were building something, and then have to un-tell them – was a collision of values and ethics for me, a kind of wakeup call. So there was a growth point there. I think that the recognition of how much people need to be listened to, no matter what circumstances, but particularly in the stream of losses like that -- that was another touch point of spirituality.
- What I have to call my deepest spiritual transformation... (occurred) when I was ill for a few years and bedridden with a combination of things... and during that time I was absolutely desperate... I had to encounter my own powerlessness and way of suffering...I was divorced after this period of illness. It took me a long time to really be reflective and integrate and see that new life was possible. So it has been a journey with God in this sense. I have met people who have had just incredible experiences because of my own pain, which is nothing compared to theirs. We have supported each other spiritually.

I am an overcoming alcoholic – for thirteen years...It was an incredibly challenging experience. It was truly spiritual hell. So I was primed in a way for identifying and seeking the spiritual.... It is coming to understand pain spiritually. And that is an entirely different understanding than a psychological understanding, than an emotional understanding, than a medical understanding, than a rational-cognitive understanding

3. The Wonders of Nature as Window on the Divine

Sensing the transcendent through observing Nature is a frequent type of primordial experience reported by subjects in Mason's (2004) study. Five of those interviewed in this present study also mentioned being spiritually expanded through seeing the natural beauties around them. In illustration:

- My walk around the reservoir... is my Eucharist, even on Sunday. I will meditate, and know God is filling me with the beauty of communion through everything I see there; it's a time of quiet and peace. It is very enriching.

- My life just moves at a ridiculous pace. But always there is that awareness...of the presence of God...For me sometimes the cardinals' song will do that. I will get up in the morning and sometimes the cardinals are singing so beautifully, and I just say, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!"

Sometimes nature-experience becomes more than a window through which to see or sense the divine, it becomes the mystical union with the divine, as illustrated in the following:

- I think was about a year and a half ago when I was sitting outside... and it was dusk, almost dark, and the moon was out. It was one of those crisp, light winter moons. I felt just this incredible sense of peace, incredible peace ... I was completely there and completely not there. I felt that my spirit had fused with everything around me and all was well. I have had the same experience ... on the beach ...where I felt I had totally fused with the ocean and air and sand. I felt myself come out of my body; that is what I would call it.

5. Otherworldly Experiences as Evidence of Direct Divine Communication

Transcendent experiences of feeling connected with the divine, as illustrated in the accounts quoted above, may take a more specific communicative form of otherworldly messages. Receiving communications from perceived "higher" spiritual powers, Laubach (2004) predicates, contribute to recipients' autonomy in espousing spiritual beliefs and religious practices. This causative direction seems plausible. However, to the best of my knowledge little or no research has been carried out on whether autonomous, independent types of persons are more likely to receive otherworldly communications than more conformists and dependent types. The women interviewed who enrolled and then graduated from a certificate program described as promoting feminist spirituality and greater self-actualization may have been more autonomous thinkers on the average than most religious-inclined women. At any rate, six of the eight interviewed mentioned having had an otherworldly communication or manifestation, while in a dream state (four) or fully awake (two).

Otherworldly communications received in dreams by those interviewed were typically from deceased intimates (usually mother or father) or from celestial figures (prophets, deities, angels). Such dreams were described as having a numinous or mystical nature, quite unlike other dreams these women have had. Deceased parents were described as seeking or rendering forgiveness and giving loving guidance to the dreamer. Celestial figures gave messages for or visions of the future that the dreamer was to follow herself or communicate to others. Not all who mentioned this kind of transcendent communication had occurred in dreams, wanted to go into detail about the entire content of what they experienced. In part this may have been because the nature of the dream communication was so personal; however, one (or more) had been advised by family to be cautious in relating these otherworldly communications. In illustration:

- We were on the train, and you know how the train sort of lulls you. I sort of dozed... my father's soul was immediately there, and he looked horrible... His face looked like this round ball that was weeping, every pore was exuding these tears. He was talking about how pained he was and how awful he had felt for so many years about his treatment of us, my mother and me; and how much he needed to be forgiven. So I said to him, "Don't you know you are forgiven?" I don't know how long that went on. It was hard to know how much time

passed in that encounter. But eventually his complexion improved and then he faded away. I sort of came to, and realized that I had this - whatever, I really had an encounter with him

- Last year I had this (otherworldly) dream. The next day I had to call my mother and tell her about the dream. She was glad to hear about it, but also said, “Don’t spread it! It is just your own experience.” Recently, I had a dream about some holy people, and when I woke up I felt so at peace. I felt like all my burdens and everything that was dragging me down with weights, had been lifted. The dream was something great spiritually; it was no ordinary dream; it was something special. (Does this kind of dream happen often to you?) Yes. It happens often. (She gives an example of a spiritual message in the form of poetic stanzas.) And it was very mysterious; many people just do not believe this can happen. But it was an honor for this to happen to me.

Three women had numinous experiences while awake. One felt temporary transcendent fusions with surrounding nature on more than one occasion (as described earlier.) A second had the disturbing-thrilling experience of seeing lights or auras surrounding participants involved in a group ritual. A third woman as she was wrestling with life decisions became suddenly aware of the preternatural significance of a billboard as manifestation of divine guidance:

- It was a large group, probably fifty people sitting in a circle at the time. I was at some distance from the other side of the room. When I was observing people across the room, I was thinking “There must be something very weird about the light in this room because all those people have these big orbs around their heads. I don’t understand what that is.” I am looking, and I kept seeing these beautiful orbs of light that moved with them. At the break I said to (leader) “This is a little off the wall, but I was looking at you all over there, and you all have these halos around your heads, very large orbs of light.” And she said, “Yes, aren’t they beautiful.” And I went “Oooh. You see them too?” I decided to try this out. So I sat ... in different parts of the room looking at people across the room; the same thing. No matter where I was sitting, I could see this light. So I decided I was seeing some essence of people, the divine in them. Another time we were standing in the circle and had clasped arms, like a bracelet. There was this light running around through our hands. By this time, I thought, “Well, I am seeing this golden light. That is what it is. This is a very connective kind of place.”
- I was sitting outside...just asking God, should I leave ... or should I stay? I happened to look up at a billboard. There was this whisky ad, with this beautiful woman in a black dress (with the slogan) “Just say ‘yes’.” It was so weird. And I ...thought: “Oh my gosh! You can even use something so secular as that billboard to talk to me. I think I should leave and know that I can be in the world and still be able to communicate to Your people and to You.” I did not have to be a religious.

POSTSCRIPT DISCUSSION

The foregoing depiction indicates an intertwining of women’s experiences in groups and while alone in the development and expression of spirituality in their lives.

Yet, are they Spiritual Feminists? If, as some argue, envisioning God as of female gender (at least

partly) is an essential criterion of spiritual feminism, with a couple of exceptions, this did not emerge as a core aspect of their spirituality. Yet, neither do these women see God fundamentally as of male gender. Rather, their view of God is more inclusive, broader and less defined by their previous parameters now; they affirm their right to seek their own spiritual truths while listening and trying to understand others' views. In following this spiritual path, these women clearly fit under the umbrella of a broader definition of feminist spirituality:

A specifically feminist spirituality...would encourage the autonomy, self-actualization, and self-transcendence of all women (and men). It would recognize the uniqueness of each individual...(there is no universal women's experience) and affirm each one as she strives to make her own choices. As critical, it would recognize the cultural and religious limitations placed on women in the past and present: and as self-critical, the temptation of the feminist group to impose another ideology as oppressive as the old obedience to the fathers. (Carr 1986:34)

Women surveyed and interviewed for this study expanded their spiritual conceptions through interaction with other women exploring spiritual feminism. Through the reflexive and reflective interaction with others there, they gained varying degrees of bonding and bridging trust than they have carried over into their present lives. In this process, they have learned self-trust in seeking to interpret spirituality what is going on in their lives, and how to use this understanding to better comprehend religious tenets and practices of others whose spiritual worldviews differ from theirs, and appreciate where their faiths intersect. In final illustration, women interviewed of different religious affiliations speak:

- Spirituality should be an integrated part of life... We need to bring the body and soul together, either alone or in groups, or through readings, or interacting with others. We have to work hard to integrate our spirituality into our daily lives. This is especially now with all that is going on in the world, the violence.
- Spiritual growth is a transcendent experience; and it goes in all kinds of directions. To me, it can go from the mundane to the sublime, a whole continuum of experiences you can have. Living daily life can be a spiritual practice.
- You know what is so incredible? All of this is about the same! It all comes down to just realizing there is one source, whatever you want to call it – God, One, Energy, or Prime Mover – it is just all one.
- Spirituality isn't just about me and my relationship with God, though that is a life-long journey and unfolding relationship -- it is also about identifying and claiming my unique God-given gifts... and putting these to work in the wider world, to benefit others. There are infinite ways of doing this, but each of us is responsible for doing it in the way that is authentic for us.

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