WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?
WOMEN’S SPIRITUALITY AT THE END OF THE LIFE SPAN*

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ABSTRACT
Spiritual exploration often occurs after the loss of a significant other or with the impending death of oneself. Twenty-six older women were intensively interviewed; none had experienced a recent loss or terminal illness. Many wanted to understand their place in the order of things and were not looking to organized religion for answers. Dominant themes that emerged from the interviews included: a need to feel connected; spiritual questioning; existential angst; thoughts about death and dying; and, to a lesser degree, reliance on organized religion. Some older women—African Americans, Latinas, and women of lower socioeconomic status—turned to the Bible, prayer, and Church for answers to their questions, but most did not. These data suggest that spiritual questioning—independent of organized religion, significant loss, or impending death—is a natural part of the aging process as one approaches the end of the life span.

INTRODUCTION
Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? What is our place in the order of things? What will happen to us when we die? Is there a higher power in the universe? How do we fit into the bigger picture? Philosophers and theologians

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have grappled with these questions since the beginning of recorded history; gerontologists and thanatologists have weighed in only more recently. Scholars in the latter two disciplines contend that spiritual exploration most often occurs in response to loss (for example, loss of a significant other such as a parent, child, sibling, spouse, or partner) or the impending death of oneself (Balk, 1999; Doka, 1993; Marrone, 1999). And many assert that answers to spiritual questions fall within the realm of organized religion (see, for example, Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Marrone, 1999; Noppe and Noppe, 1999).

Life-changing events—such as loss or impending death—often trigger a search for meaning that might otherwise be repressed in order to conduct the business of living (Balk, 1999; Becker, 1973; Doka, 1993; Marrone, 1999). The construction of meaning, including meaningful narratives of the self and the world in the face of loss (Neimeyer, 2002; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002), and relearning meaningful living in physical, social, and interpersonal surroundings (Attig, 2004) are common responses to grieving. This meaning-making helps individuals to establish their place in the universe as they face and integrate the certainty of death (Attig, 2004). Some believe that organized religion provides a set of beliefs and practices that, if followed, obviate the need to question meanings and calm the anxious animal within us (Becker, 1973). Religion may help reorient individuals whose triggering events push them closer to their death anxieties. But what of those who eschew formalized religion, are not close to death, or who have not experienced an indelible loss? Do they wrestle with life’s most basic questions as well? Is it possible that spiritual quests and searches for meaning are part of the normal aging process and do not require life-changing events as triggers? These issues were explored with a sample of 26 older women in San Francisco; they were otherwise healthy and were not grieving a recent loss. Their responses emerged from in-depth interviews that were conducted in the spring and summer of 2000. What follows is a review of the literature, the methodology of the study, the responses of the women themselves, a discussion of the concepts that grew out of their spoken words, and implications for future research.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The first body of literature considers the conceptual differences between spirituality and religion; the second describes the importance of spiritual exploration in the face of loss and/or impending death; and the third speaks of spiritual issues from a cross-cultural perspective.

**Spirituality and Religion**

Angell, Dennis, and Dumain (1998) believed spirituality referred to an innate human need to find meaning and purpose in life and to have a relationship with something outside of, and larger than, oneself. They compared this with faith,
which was the ability to sustain hope about that which was unknowable, and
religion, which was the living out of faith and spirituality through institutionally
patterned belief systems. Spirituality had to do with the bigger picture while
religion was tied to institutional structures. Others expanded upon these themes.
Noppe and Noppe (1999) insisted that spirituality was something separate from
organized religion. They concluded that spirituality involved the non-material
aspects of life, the soul, the meaning of life and suffering, the role of God, and the
need for community and connection with others. They argued that when people
faced death, they had similar questions and similar needs to remain connected
to others. Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) adopted a definition of spirituality that
focused on questions related to the meaning of life. Religion, on the other hand,
was a belief system and a set of rituals that expressed a relationship between
the individual and some higher force, being, power, or God. Richards, Acree, and
Folkman (1999) defined spirituality as that aspect of self that created meaning and
purpose in life, including transcendence beyond the self and a force or higher order
beyond the self of which the self was a part. Religiosity was a system of codes
and traditions that shaped practices, beliefs, and attitudes.

Mahoney and Graci (1999) suggested that spirituality was a more inclusive
and abstract concept than religiosity. They surveyed 22 experts in death studies
members of the editorial boards of Death Studies and Omega) and 13 experts
in spiritual studies (participants drawn from two conferences on spiritual intel-
ligence), and found that spirituality was associated with charity, community,
compassion, forgiveness, hope, meaning, and morality. Less than 30% of the death
studies specialists were willing to include a belief in God in their understanding
of spirituality and this dropped to almost 18% for the spiritual studies experts
(Mahoney & Graci, 1999).

George et al. (2000) noted that spirituality and religiosity were not studied as
separate concepts and the two terms were typically, and quite often erroneously,
conflated. They noted a need for separate terms due to growing secularism and
disillusionment with religious institutions, particularly among baby boomers and
their descendants. While spirituality and religion both focused on the sacred,
spirituality was not dependent upon a collective or institutional context in the
same way as religion. The authors were part of a panel that derived separate
definitions for the two terms: “spirituality is ‘the feelings, thoughts, experiences,
and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred’...while the “distinctive
character of religion is its collective reinforcement and identity” (p. 104).

Thus, there is a growing belief that religion and spirituality are not one and
the same. Religion typically refers to spiritual beliefs within the context of
institutional structures, whereas institutional borders do not bound spirituality.
Instead, as defined above, spirituality refers to the self searching for meaning in
the larger order of things, often with a focus on a power greater than the self.
As such, a person may be highly spiritual, but not at all religious, although one
would assume that religiosity implies a certain degree of spirituality.
Spiritual Exploration, Loss, and Impending Death

Marrone (1999) examined the cognitive basis for spiritual exploration when an individual was faced with the death of a loved one or the death of oneself. He said that spiritual experiences had two basic components: first, the person became one with something larger than the self; and second, the person became aware of a higher power, intelligence, order, purpose, or structure in the universe that was outside the control of the self. The death of a loved one (or impending death of the self) led to profound questioning about the goodness and justness of the world, which resulted in a search for meaning (see also Noppe & Noppe [1999] on this point). This search for meaning was or was not religious in nature; belief in an afterlife was the most common religious-based assimilation practice in the face of death or loss. Doka (1993) identified three principal spiritual tasks for those who were dying: 1) finding meaning in the final moments of life; 2) dying a death consistent with their identity; and 3) finding hope that transcends their death, even if only in the memory of others. In a case study of a woman whose mother died, Angell, Dennis, and Dumain (1998) suggested that narratives focused on resilience and renewed spirituality assisted in the grieving process. Balk (1999) argued that bereavement triggered spiritual change by challenging the very assumptions of human existence because, according to Fowler (1981), all humans pursued a quest for meaning. Spirituality was the realm that was concerned with vital questions of existence (Balk, 1999). Balk (1999) maintained that spiritual change was most likely to result from crises that allowed time for reflection, that were indelible, and that resulted in significant psychological imbalance. Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) suggested that organized religion provided structure and meaning that aided in support and coping following the death of a significant other, like a sibling. They looked at spiritual transformation in four adolescents following the sudden death of a sibling, and noted changes in perceptions of self, others, siblings, a higher power, and life and/or death. More recently, Neimeyer (2002) stressed that grief counselors should assist bereaved individuals in reconstructing meaningful narratives of themselves and their worlds at psychological, social, and spiritual levels, and Attig (2004) asserted that grieving was a meaning-making venture where individuals must relearn their physical and social surroundings, themselves, and their relationship with the deceased.

Dunbar et al. (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of 34 HIV-positive women and determined that spiritual growth was one of several positive outcomes of living with HIV/AIDS. In order for many of these women to live with the prospect of death, they found new meaning in life. This was not so much a philosophical quest as a practical focus on day-to-day experiences. For example, the affirmation to live required them to examine and work through past issues. Many of these women were victims of significant trauma and abuse in their lives; for them, finding new meaning in life meant reframing their past by focusing on the strength needed to survive adversity. Others spoke of their
purpose for living in terms of learning patience, virtue, and kindness (Dunbar, Mueller, Medina, & Wolf, 1998).

Richards, Acree, and Folkman (1999) looked at spiritual transformation in a follow-up study of gay men whose partners died of AIDS. They made a distinction between spirituality and religiosity: although religion was the traditional vehicle for expressing spirituality, other avenues of spiritual expression included art, music, poetry, and nature. Three to four years after bereavement, they found an increase in spirituality in the partners of gay men who died of AIDS. Whereas many found spirituality helpful as a coping strategy immediately following bereavement, there was a shift to spirituality becoming a source of personal growth and realization three to four years later; it was a source of expanded identity, deepened relationships, and a sense of their place in the world.

Accordingly, the loss of a significant other or the impending death of oneself often triggered a spiritual examination related to the meaning of life, the place of oneself in the universe, the relationship of oneself to a higher power, and the relationship between oneself and others. According to this literature, spiritual awareness and questioning occurred within the context of significant loss, and were not explored as part of the normal aging process. Undoubtedly loss and impending death triggered spiritual exploration; however, perhaps these are not the only sources of spiritual growth.

**Cross-Cultural Perspectives**

Women, African Americans, and the elderly experienced more religious commitment and satisfaction, and reported more positive outcomes from their religious affiliations than did men, members of other racial and ethnic groups, and those in younger and middle age groups (Arcury, Quandt, McDonald, & Bell, 2000; Atchley, 1997; Barusch, 1999; Bergan & McConatha, 2000; Blasi, Husaini, & Drumwright, 1998; Broyles & Drenovsky, 1992; Courtenay, Poon, Martin, Clayton, & Johnson, 1992; Drevenstedt, 1998; Ellison, 1991; Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2000; Ferraro & Koch, 1994; Levin & Chatters, 1998; McAuley, Pecchioni, & Grant, 2000; McRae, Carey, & Anderson-Scott, 1998; Mirola, 1999; Mitchell & Weatherly, 2000). From these studies, it appeared that institutionalized religious beliefs and practices were more beneficial to some groups of individuals than others; however, it should be noted that the findings on religious commitment and satisfaction were based on Western Christian practices, and did not address the spiritual practices of non-Western and native peoples. We may infer from this body of work that elderly women—and in particular elderly black women—turned to the church for spiritual guidance. But did this hold true for other women of color and elderly white women? What about women from different socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds?

Native people made it clear that all creation was sacred, all life was interconnected, and the Creator was everywhere, in all living things (Clark, 1997;
Pazola, 1994). Likewise, space was spherical and time was a recurring cycle of events and years. All things were born, lived, and died so that they might live again in the next world with the Creator. Life was to be kept in balance and harmony, and every living thing was to be respected as a gift from the Creator. Loss, pain, hardship, death, and sorrow were normal parts of the cycle of life. Native people had no word for religion because the entire world was a sacred place filled with wonder and awe (Pazola, 1994). Spirituality was sought through communion with the natural world (Pazola, 1994). Thus, it was incomprehensible for native people to think of spirituality, health, life, and death as separate entities; they were all part of a singular unity.

Likewise, in Buddhist tradition, bonds with ancestors and sacred dead (e.g., saints, bodhisattvas, etc.) helped construct the meaning of life, death, illness, and grieving (Klass & Goss, 1999). In Western Christianity, bonds with ancestors were private and asymmetrical, helping us to be better selves, but they gave nothing back to the deceased. In Buddhism, bonds were public as well as private, and symmetrical; the dead cared for the living by providing comfort and guidance in times of trouble; the living cared for the dead by including them in the family, remembering them, and acting in ways of which ancestors would approve. Thus, relationships with ancestors provided a source of comfort and coping in the face of stress, illness, dying, and grief.

Another such concept in Eastern culture was animism or the belief in spirits and their ability to affect the living (Shimabukuro, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 1999). In Eastern culture, spirituality was a way for people to integrate transcendental, extraordinary reality into their world view and identity, including concepts about the afterlife, the interconnectedness of all living things, concepts about God, enlightenment, and grace (Shimabukuro et al., 1999). These were forms of spirituality related to the lived experiences of some individuals who did not follow Western Christian beliefs and practices.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study of women’s spirituality at the end of the life span was part of a larger project on women’s friendships and health. In fact, women’s spiritual exploration emerged from the data as a salient category for older women and was not predicted, expected, nor hypothesized a priori.

The study of women’s friendships and health involved three phases. The initial phase focused on older women (age 55+) and was conducted in the spring and summer of 2000. Older women were the starting point for several reasons. First, to a medical sociologist, gerontologist, and feminist, they were a population of great interest. Second, older women had the benefit of a lifetime of friendships and health for a researcher to explore. Third, friends appeared to be particularly salient for older women (Lubben, 1988; see also, Greenwood, 1983; Lee & Shehan, 1989; Seeman & Berkman, 1988). Older women outnumbered older...
men two to one, and were more likely than older men to be single (i.e., widowed, divorced, never married) (American Association of Retired Persons, 1993); therefore, friends served a vital social support function for older women.

The sample was gathered in San Francisco. In all, San Francisco’s demographic patterns reflected the multiculturalism that will manifest itself across America into the next century (American Association of Retired Persons, 1993). Purposive, non-probability “snowball” sampling was used for this project (Kidder & Judd, 1986), beginning with informants solicited through fliers, newsletters, and community bulletins and expanding outward from there. Contacts at the Institute for Health and Aging in San Francisco also were valuable. Since the purpose of this study was explanation, not prediction, each woman’s contribution added a unique and informative layer to our understanding of the relationship between friendship and health.

In-depth interviews focused on friendship- and health-history narratives (Armstrong, 1991; Francis, 1990; Walker, 1992). The interviews took from one to three hours to complete, depending on the number of probes and the depth of the responses. The results of these confidential, women-centered conversations were analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with primacy given to allowing the women to speak for themselves. Grounded theory is an inductive method of research that is data-driven; a deeper understanding of social phenomenon grows out of the data themselves (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Permission to tape record the interviews was received and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. Coding proceeded line-by-line and coding categories were aggregated into larger conceptual categories that are the basis for the material that follows (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher employed three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective (Berg, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The open coding phase involved examining transcripts line by line, word by word, for emergent themes, categories, and concepts. In open coding, spiritual exploration emerged as a repetitive and dominant theme. As this theme emerged, the researcher repeatedly checked its content against the responses of future subjects in order to assess its reliability and safeguard against bias. While it was impossible to be completely free of bias, acknowledging its presence and attempting to move beyond it by questioning interpretations of the data and looking for contradictory or opposite cases helped mitigate its effects (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the axial phase, categories were specified more concretely, and the relationships among them explored. Axial coding consisted of intensive coding around one specific category. In axial coding, the concept of spiritual exploration was examined in greater detail and the data were sorted into typologies that better explained the sub-groups within the category. These typologies were checked against the responses of future subjects, again looking for the contradictory or opposite case. Selective coding was a more systematic mapping of relationships to develop explanatory concepts and theoretical frameworks. Here, coding categories were collapsed and
theoretical frameworks were refined in order to articulate more abstract conceptual approaches to the data. In selective coding, the broader theoretical frameworks were refined and are the basis for the material presented below. While these findings were not checked with members in the sample (identifying information was no longer available, thus doing so was impossible), they were checked with known individuals in similar situations and with experts in the field at conferences and scholarly meetings.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the sample (women 55 years of age and older). The median age of the subjects was 64, with a range from 55 to 85. The sample was bimodal; there were more 75- and 78-year-old women than in any other age category. Nearly half of the sample was white and the other half was a mixture of African American, Native American, Latina, and Asian American. The majority of the women were lower to middle SES, divorced or widowed, heterosexual, and non-Christian. Some of the women self-identified as multi-racial and/or multi-ethnic, experienced different sexual orientations throughout their lifetime, and identified with different religions and/or no religion (i.e., atheist) over time. While many suffered from chronic ailments, all were functionally independent and otherwise “healthy.” None was actively grieving the loss of a significant other.

One of the most salient findings from the data was the extent to which these women were undertaking spiritual exploration. Also of note was that spiritual exploration was not necessarily tied to organized religion, significant loss, or impending death. It expressed itself in five ways: a need to feel connected; spiritual questioning; existential angst; thoughts about death and dying; and, to a lesser degree, reliance on organized religion for peace of mind.

A Need to Feel Connected

Many older women expressed the need to feel connected within (with themselves), without (with others), and beyond (with a power greater than themselves). Regarding the connection within, one woman of mixed descent said:

It is most imperative to really know yourself first, to go inside first. . . . What are my gifts and how can I use them? Realizing that I am loved by createdness and I love the createdness. (57-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, middle-class, Native American/African American/white female who identified with native spiritualism)

Exploring the connection within was about trying to accept, make peace with, and believe in themselves, as the following women explained:
People have said that I’m a very spiritual person because I have very strong beliefs and very strong commitments. So if I accept that, I guess . . . I mean the fact that I am so . . . I get involved in things . . . it’s one of the reasons I’m healthy. (85-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white, atheist female)

To me, it’s having peace of mind and peace within your heart. I think that comes from working at it. I don’t think it’s something that everybody has as a matter of fact. There is so much stress in people’s lives in general...
but if you don’t take care of the spiritual, even though it’s not necessarily related to God, it’s your own personal spirit, then I think it’ll be problematic for you in the long run. I mean I haven’t thought of whether you would get a stroke from that, whether you would get cancer from that. I hadn’t thought about how it would ultimately show, but I would say karma and peace of mind and quiet spirit really help the body. (60-year-old, divorced, bisexual/heterosexual/asexual, middle-class, white woman not affiliated with a specific religion but experimenting with Buddhism)

I truly believe that you have to believe in yourself, because I really think that we are our own spiritual guides. Yes! I truly believe that it’s not something actually outside of us that is going to affect us spiritually, it starts somewhere inside. . . . Because to be really low, economically, is not really great for the spirit. As I said before earlier, I try to be at peace with myself. . . . And if we are in tune to our spiritual health, we are tuned into our systems and we will know when we are not feeling well or feeling unwell. (65-year-old, divorced, celibate, lower-class, white/Native American [Cherokee/Chickasaw], atheist female)

Understanding their place in the world also involved connection with others. As one woman put it:

Well, you talk to people that is nice and lets you associate with them. Some do it and some don’t. (75-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-class, African-American, Baptist female).

Another described the need for human contact as the “essence of life”:

Now I know why the 80-year-old woman calls the security office; that’s what happens when you want that human contact. What people don’t understand is that it is really the essence of life in the long run. I . . . I . . . people think that they get Alzheimer’s and dementia and all sorts of things. That’s not true, I mean it’s true but it’s not true. But they say if you take a person and you put them in the woods for a week or two by themselves, they will die because they have no human contact, unless they are survivors and they end up like the unibomber or somebody like that. (62-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Catholic female)

For another, learning to relate to others was a vital component of her health and of understanding her place in the order of things:

So, the social component of health for me has to do with the ability to make and sustain relationships, learning how to trust, learning how you are in relation to other people and how you are in relation to yourself. I consider relationships with the earth, trees, rocks, you know whatever to be just as much of a, oh gosh, what am I, it’s a word that means a back and forth kind of thing. I give to the earth and the earth gives to me, that kind of stuff. I give to my friends; my friends give to me. I think the social component of health also has to do with an attitude of acceptance and just moving through the world and I don’t mean that in a physical sense but just knowing
that you’re part of something that is a big net. (56-year-old, “married,”
lesbian, upper-middle-class, white woman who identified as pagan)

Following the death of her father, one woman felt her need for connection with
others included resolving conflict with her children to prevent negative energy:

Whenever there is some kind of conflict in our relationship at the time, which
is normal, I try my very hardest to make sure that it doesn’t . . . I clean
it up. Make sure that I talk it out. Make sure that we agree. Make sure that we
connect again so that there is none of this negative energy hanging over
us. (55-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-middle-class, white, spiritual
female with no religious affiliation)

These women also had a profound need to feel connected with something
greater than themselves. This included recognizing and communicating with
something outside/beyond the self, connecting with the unity, and finding
meaning in an earth-based pantheism:

Some sort of reliance on a power outside of yourself, whatever you want
to call that, that sort of keeps, it helps our universe crank along in some sort
of order. (67-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white/Latina,
“profoundly spiritual, non-religious” female)

I think it . . . um . . . it’s . . . it answers a part of you that needs to communi-
cate with something beyond yourself and that feeds into how healthy you
are. I believe that people need to believe in something beyond one’s self
and whether it is the force, or whether it’s God, or whether it’s Allah . . .
whether it’s nature, or whether it’s your higher self. You know, I’m not
judgmental about what it is. That could be science or something. It could
be a passionate feeling. As long as it feeds your energy to relate to the
rest of your life. (56-year-old, single, heterosexual, middle-class, Chinese-
American, Buddhist woman)

We are all related, we are part of the same creation. The most dependable,
sure-fire way to deal with isolation is to go back to our connectedness with all
that is; this is essential to my existence. (57-year-old, divorced, heterosexual,
middle-class, Native American/African American/white female who identi-
ﬁed with native spiritualism)

I was raised Roman Catholic and have sort of been through a lot of different
forms of Christian religion. I would say now that I am probably an earth-
based spiritual person. So, probably a pagan. Not a practicing witch. I have
participated in some Native American stuff. It doesn’t feel, it feels good
but it doesn’t feel connective to my ancestry in a way that other types of
pagan stuff does . . . spiritual for me is in no way religious. You can be
religious and not be spiritual or vice versa. So, spiritual for me is a process
of knowing that there is meaning in life. Not necessarily directly and this
obviously is a change from my youth. It’s not a relationship with a single
being, probably more pantheist than anything. But it is a reflection of my
spirit. The thing that mixes with everything else you need to make me me and
also links me to everything else in the universe. (56-year-old, “married,” lesbian, upper-middle-class, white woman who identified as pagan)

Thus, an important component of spiritual exploration was understanding the connection within, with others, and with something beyond the self. A sense of connection provided order, stability, and meaning in a stressful, challenging, conflictual, and potentially isolating existence. However, a sense of connection did not always provide answers to spiritual questions, nor did it necessarily alleviate existential angst.

**Spiritual Questioning**

Spiritual questioning was asking fundamental questions about the meaning of life and looking in different places for answers. As one woman stated:

This is one of the things I’m doing now, is trying to figure out what is going on. (61-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-class, white, “seeker” female)

Another woman said:

What’s this about? Now, let’s take care of it through meditation, journaling, dream work, or going to the woods. You ask yourself, how do you care to be in the world? What is most important to you? What’s the underlying issue? How does this fit with the nature of reality? (57-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, middle-class, Native American/African American/white female who identified with native spiritualism)

In the search for answers, some older women tried to “know where they were” on a daily basis:

Well, we start living on a daily basis is what we do. That’s what I finally decided. Not one-day-at-a-time crap, but on a daily basis instead of racing through. As you get older, life goes by so quickly that you suddenly realize it’s Monday again. By being real about it, I’m not going off the edge. I realize that when I’m watching a movie, I’m watching a movie, not watching real people. . . . I need to know where I am. (62-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Catholic female)

Others tried “living in the moment,” sharing spiritual exploration with others, or examining dreams:

I’m reading a very interesting book that is called “What’s the Rush?” and I don’t have it with me and I can’t tell you the name of the author. It’s a compilation of things that I have heard of from many different places. He talks about living in the moment. How that can open up your life in very specific ways so that you don’t get on the treadmill of trying to keep up with the day-to-day stuff. It’s stimulating to me because, although there is nothing in it that I haven’t heard before that is really new to me in terms of the concepts, it’s always refreshing to pick up something that puts those ideas together in a different way and kind of shakes up your awareness and says
don’t forget about this. (55-year-old, married, heterosexual, upper-class, white, non-religious female)

Well, if it was a real [spiritual] crisis I would probably try to get in touch with my old pastor, uh, or I would call my friend in Washington. I really think that it is one of spiritual exploration together, sharing spiritual things in a way that my children don’t get. (78-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Christian female)

I’m a seeker. I’m not satisfied with anything I’ve come across . . . I needed some spiritual, ah, practice I guess. I tried a few other things, you know, I had a mantra. I tried yoga. I’m not a real fanatical person, you know . . . I had the most beautiful dreams during that time period which has a part in it. They were very unusual . . . the things that happen to me, how is it that certain things can happen. I know certain things happen and I’m very close to dreaming. I love dreaming, I know what that means when you, I’m not talking about day dreaming. (61-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-class, white, “seeker” female)

Most of the questioning these women underwent occurred within a positive framework. For the most part, they were engaged in spiritual quests that stretched existing reality, but that did not feel threatening to them. It was as if they were spiritually “ready” and had experienced an awakening where they said, “Now is the time to look beyond the mundane to try to grasp the bigger picture of which I am a part.” Nearly all of them were alone, yet there was little anxiety in the solitary nature of their quests. Indeed, there was a kind of quiet wonder as they began to piece together “meaning” in their lives. This sense of quiet wonder was not universal, however. Other women experienced existential angst that was riddled with loneliness, fear, and isolation.

**Existential Angst**

If spiritual questioning brought them too close to despair, the outcome was less than positive. When some women questioned the meaning of life, they concluded that something was missing; introspection led to loneliness and fear, or an anxious isolation exacerbated by being single:

The age thing is really tough. It like comes with a boom. [It] is a chronological thing. It has nothing to do with. . . I knew the bags weren’t going to go away under the eyes. That was okay. The gray hair I didn’t mind. It just was sort of like saying, “Is that all there is?” You know you’re going to die and that’s it? There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. I try to figure out when I’m feeling lonely as opposed to alone. It’s more alone than it is lonely and often I just go out on the street. Make up things to go to the grocery store for. I mean, I know when I am talking to myself too much. [I talk to myself] all the time because I need to know where I am. You become very frightened sometimes, so you need to try to keep things as square as you possibly can and to know if your fear is real, or
if it is just something that you became very paranoid about. (62-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Catholic female)

I think it really affects women that are single. I’m sure it affects other women too, but I think when you are single you really look at yourself as the individual and like you said, how do you fit in and what is your role and what have you contributed? I mean that was the whole reason that I changed my career because I’ve always felt like I cannot continue to just be a body in some corporation and make money and that nothing means anything. What is the meaning of life? You don’t even try to answer that but what is your role in it? Where do you fit in and where do you feel, at least for me, where do I feel that at least when the end comes that I can at least feel like I did something meaningful. At least I left something behind that has some kind of meaning. I don’t need to be famous. I don’t need to have a lot of money. I just want to have that sense that I did contribute something. (55-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-middle-class, white, spiritual female with no religious affiliation)

Later in the interview, she reiterated her anxiety:

Part of it is because I’m single too. That makes a difference because like you say the introspection leads to isolation. It is very easy to just not make that effort to go out at night or not make the effort to call a friend and just sit at home and mope! (55-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-middle-class, white, spiritual female with no religious affiliation)

Isolation did not always provoke anxiety, however. A native woman’s isolation brought her back to her spiritual center:

The most dependable, sure-fire way to deal with isolation is to go back to our connectedness with all that is; this is essential to my existence . . . what is most important to you? What’s the underlying issue? How does this fit with the nature of reality? (57-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, middle-class, Native American/African American/white female who identified with native spiritualism)

For some women, spiritual questioning brought them face to face with unful-filled aspects of their lives, and the experience was frightening and isolating. Some seemed inertial and enveloped in darkness, while others fought their way back from anxiety and fear to core beliefs that were meaningful. None saw their own deaths as imminent, nevertheless, death was a concept they explored as well.

**Thoughts about Death and Dying**

Quite a few women explored the meaning of death for themselves and attempted to learn lessons from the death and dying of others. Understanding death was part of a larger spiritual quest. This was captured nicely in the words of one woman who said:
I know I’m on track with this, you know, with the closer you get to passing away or dying the more you look at what your personal beliefs are about it. (61-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-class, white, “seeker” female)

Another woman associated illness with thinking about death, but she was not overly concerned because she viewed death as “coming home”:

Well, when you get to be a certain age, when you think of illness, you think of death. So if you can be ill and not think about it, you’re in damn good shape if you can get away from it, because it will still be there. When you are young, well, I don’t dwell on it. But a lot of people in my family have had cancer. I don’t worry; if I get it, I get it, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I just want to say, “Can I please come home now.” (61-year-old, single, lesbian, lower-class, African American, Christian female)

The death of others was also viewed as profoundly spiritual:

Um, and death can leave a big hole in your life and that is where I think spirituality comes in. . . . I see healing from loss as spiritual. (78-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Christian female)

Another woman echoed her sentiments about spiritual lessons learned from the dying:

. . . I’m thinking if I had a friend who was seriously ill, perhaps terminally ill, if you really want to call that sick then, um, they would have lessons for me. Their ability to be honest and tell me what it is like for them would be valuable to me and I would think that what I would have to do for them would be an opportunity to explore those ideas. Now, I’m not afraid to talk about that. (55-year-old, married, heterosexual, upper-middle-class/upper-class, white, non-religious female)

The women who confronted the subject of death head-on seemed less fearful and anxious than those who experienced existential angst in the face of spiritual questioning. Perhaps the latter were attempting to cope with unacknowledged death anxiety whereas the former were “addressing their demons,” so to speak. As well, those who felt inner peace, were connected to others, and felt part of something larger, appeared less fearful and anxious than those who were isolated and alone. As such, it appeared that many of the typologies were inter-related in a complex web of meaning making. Lastly, while the majority of women did not turn to organized religion for comfort, some women sought refuge in religious structure.

**Reliance on Organized Religion for Peace of Mind**

The women who relied on organized religion for spiritual guidance were, for the most part, African American, Latina, and lower class. Some sought solace in the literal word of the Bible while others turned to God and the power of prayer. Still others sought help from religious leaders (e.g., the priest) or from the physical...
quietude of sitting in church. These women were not in the numerical majority in the sample, however (they numbered eight).

Two older women who were African American believed in the literal reality of the Bible. One said:

I believe every word that is in the Bible. (78-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, lower-class, African American, Baptist female)

while the other concluded:

You have to have time to read the Bible. The Bible plays a very important part in our lives because this is the beginning of our lives. And if you read—just start with Genesis—you know that the Bible is a very important book to read. If you notice it, after you read the Bible, you notice a lot of things will come up that you read in the Bible, so you know the Bible is for real. (84-year-old, single, heterosexual, lower-class, African American/Cherokee, Baptist female)

This same woman turned to God when she was feeling lonely; he answered her prayers because she “knows how to pray.” Another woman, also African American, would “talk to God” when she had a spiritual crisis:

I’d just go talk to God. I’d go to the ocean and talk to God. (61-year-old, single, lesbian, lower-class, African American, Christian female)

A third woman who was Jewish referred to the power of prayer:

When my husband was very ill in the hospital and they knew he was dying, I had a day of prayer in many churches in the city and he was able to get out of the hospital two days later and live for two and a half months more. Now the New England Journal of Medicine has said that prayer heals, even though the person doesn’t know that he or she has been prayed for. Well, I believe that prayer is extremely important. (78-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, upper-class, white, Jewish female)

In addition to God and the power of prayer, several women put their faith in religious leaders. When asked, “If you were having a spiritual crisis, to whom would you turn?” these responses followed:

Priest. (62-year-old, divorced, heterosexual, lower-middle-class, Latina, Catholic female)

I would go to a priest. I have always trusted [him] all my life. (59-year-old, married, heterosexual, lower-middle-class, Latina/Native American, Catholic female)

The priest. Because he is there for me and he would understand why I’m there and offer spiritual help. (67-year-old, single, heterosexual, lower-class, African American/Cherokee, Catholic female)

Others found solace in the refuge of the church:
I’d probably go sit in St. Patrick’s, but I wouldn’t go see the Priest. Yes, St. Patrick’s, the church here in town; and you can pop in there at lunchtime or something. One day when I was very depressed I just popped in there and there was like ten people sitting there. (62-year-old, widowed, heterosexual, middle-class, white, Catholic female)

My girlfriend and I talk a lot about faith. We both are really of faith. I’ll go down to church and light a light for her and she goes to light one for me. (67-year-old, single, heterosexual, lower-class, African American/Cherokee, Catholic female)

Sometimes, sometimes I go to church and sit there and talk to God. (61-year-old, single, lesbian, lower-class, African American, Christian female)

A minority of older women in the sample looked to organized religion for spiritual guidance. They did not raise the same issues as the women who eschewed organized religion (i.e., a need to feel connected, spiritual questioning, existential angst, or thoughts about death and dying). Their questions appeared to be resolved by the Bible, in prayer, and in the structure of the church, and the sense they conveyed was that there was little need to pursue the matter further. However, had the sample been larger, there may have been some overlap with the other women who were questioning.

**DISCUSSION**

This article has described the spiritual explorations of women at the end of the life span that are not necessarily tied to organized religion, loss of a significant other, or the impending death of themselves. While there are many limitations to this study—including its small sample size, the non-random nature of the sample, its exclusion of men, its lack of comparison with other age groups, etc.—the findings suggest avenues for further exploration.

First, there is a need to differentiate spirituality from religion not only theoretically, but practically. The results presented here indicate that there are women who are profoundly spiritual, but who eschew any connection with formalized religion. Levin (1997) argued that we need to disentangle spirituality from organized religion to account for the experiences of aging baby boomers who claim to be non-religious, but highly spiritual; George et al. (2000) concurred. The women in this study are one generation ahead of the baby boomers and already are evidencing the behaviors to which Levin and George et al. refer.

Other practical issues were addressed as well. For example, institutional borders did not bound the spirituality of the women in the sample; in fact, many shunned organized religion (cf. Angell et al., 1998; George et al., 2000). They were searching for meaning and purpose in their lives and were not focusing on a force or power greater than themselves in all cases (cf. Angell et al., 1998; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Richards et al., 1999). They were interested in looking
within and making connections with others (cf. Noppe & Noppe, 1999). For some, the search for meaning included suffering (cf., Noppe and Noppe, 1999), most specifically isolation, loneliness, and fear. The women asked fundamental questions about the meaning of existence and looked in a multitude of places for answers (e.g., meditation, journaling, knowing and living in the moment, dreaming, being in nature). These forms of spiritual expression were not unlike the non-religious avenues that Richards, Acree, and Folkman (1999) found in their study of the partners of gay men who died of AIDS (i.e., art, music, poetry, and nature). While none of the women were expecting to die and none had experienced a recent loss (cf. Balk, 1999; Doka, 1993; Marrone, 1999; Noppe & Noppe, 1999), they explored the meaning of death for themselves as well as attempted to learn lessons from the death and dying of others. These findings suggest differences between spirituality and religion that should be explored with larger, more representative samples.

A small number of women in the study also looked to institutionalized religion for spiritual guidance. As scholars, we know a fair amount about these women. For the most part they are African American, Latina, and in the lower social classes. The black church has been a source of secular and spiritual sustenance for blacks since slavery (Jackson, 1977; Perry, 1993). It provides structure and meaning in lives marginalized by most other institutions in American society. The centrality of the church generates fierce loyalty among its followers and the women in this sample were no exception. Similarly, the Catholic Church’s presence in Latin America dates back centuries, and thus creates a similar kind of unquestioned loyalty among people of Hispanic decent (Strupp Green, 1995; Younoszai, 1993). With regard to social class, spiritual questioning—as a cognitive process—suggests a level of educational attainment most often associated with higher SES standing. This study’s findings were supportive of that; many of the women who conducted spiritual quests were in middle and upper class brackets. Perhaps the women in the lower social classes were socialized to accept and trust religious authority to a greater extent than their middle and upper class counterparts. Furthermore, because of the association between race and class, many of the lower class women also were African American and Latino, the same individuals who sought refuge in the black and Catholic churches described above.

The women in this sample told us that Christianity may not be the predominant religious influence in a multicultural society. San Francisco was selected as the site for this study because it was ahead of the curve multiculturally, but the results of the 2000 Census seem to indicate that the rest of the country is moving in that direction as well, and more rapidly than originally anticipated. The women who focused on non-western, non-Christian practices spoke of the interconnectedness of all living things, the need for balance and harmony, and communion with the natural world. These findings were similar to those of Pazola (1994), Clark (1997), Klass and Goss (1999), and Shimabukuro, Daniels, and D’Andrea (1999). Still others saw themselves as atheists, seekers, or pagans. It is clear that we
know far more about the religious practices of Christians and “church goers” than we do about some of the alternative beliefs and practices discussed here. Hopefully, this gap will be filled in the not-too-distant future.

Previous work has associated searches for meaning with significant loss and impending death (Balk, 1999; Doka, 1993; Marrone, 1999). This study departs from that body of work in this regard: it notes that some women allow time for reflection without an indelible crisis, impending death, or significant psychological imbalance, but rather, as part of the normal aging process. It is clear that we must test this hypothesis with larger, more representative samples. It may well be that the end of the life span affords more time for reflection because these otherwise-healthy women are less consumed by the distractions of career, homemaking, and child rearing. They have the opportunity to ponder fundamental questions of existence that are thrust upon the rest of us at less opportune times.

The normal aging process may prompt a search for meaning and a need for connection because death is closer than at earlier times in the life span. As described by Becker (1973), these women may be telling us that a certain amount of death anxiety is inevitable even when death is not immediately imminent. They may also be telling us that death anxiety—without triggers—manifests itself in myriad ways. For some, it is overt and reveals itself in classic existential angst that feeds isolation, loneliness, and fear. These feelings may be exacerbated by the demographic reality that women outlive men and often face old age alone (Waldron, 2001). This is illustrated by the woman who asks, “Is that all there is?” and then goes to the grocery store for human contact because she struggles with being lonely versus being alone. For others, death anxiety may be more covert. As life winds down, some women may embark on existential quests that reflect basic core values or new directions in their lives. For example, when feeling isolated, one native woman returns to her connectedness with all that is; a pagan woman finds the meaning of life in an earth-based pantheism after experimenting with Catholicism and Native American rituals. The subjects in this study open windows on the myriad ways older women cope with the unknowable. It would be interesting to learn if women in the beginning and middle of their life spans conduct similar spiritual quests, or are they too consumed with the mundane realities of day-to-day living to consider such mental journeying? Do men across the life span behave in ways similar to women? In addition, to what extent do cohort effects play a role? It may well be that historical factors unique to this generation of women (i.e., expansion of roles for women, growing secularism, greater awareness of cultural diversity, more affluence and leisure opportunities) color the way they experience spirituality in later life. These are all questions that should be explored further, preferably with longitudinal samples.

Due to the limitations described, these findings must be interpreted with caution. However, they suggest the need to explore the practical difference between religion and spirituality, the degree to which spiritual exploration is a
normal function of aging, the relationship between spiritual exploration and death anxiety, and variations on these themes across race, class, and culture.

REFERENCES


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