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Spiritual Awakening; Joy and Depression a Unified Pathway;
“Two Sides of the Same Coin”

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Spiritual Awakening; Joy and Depression a Unified Pathway;
“Two Sides of the Same Coin”

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Abstract

Spiritual awakening is inherent to development, whether through trials and challenges, or through natural developmental transitions or individuation. Spiritual awakening potentiates joy, as it brings awareness of the sacred presence in and through our daily life.

That spiritual awakening can come of suffering is reflected not only in millennia of religious faith traditions and indigenous culture but also in recent genetic-twin studies, studies of biological markers and epidemiological studies.

Developmentally concomitant with spiritual awakening is depression. Over the past fifteen years, spirituality—a lived relationship with a Higher Power—has been found to be the most robust protective factor against depression known to medical and social sciences. The magnitude of the protective effect and its timing in adolescence raises the question of a singular process or shared biological substrate underlying spiritual awakening and onset of depression. Evidence for such a shared physiology comes from a recent magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) study and a related electroencephalography (EEG) study suggesting that depression and spirituality reveal two sides of the same coin.

Karen was a 19 year-old woman at Dartmouth College, a major in Philosophy, a quite intense thinker, who and had been a rather garrulous positive person Freshman year. She enjoyed the big questions, addressing the inquiry with academic excitement. To her own surprise, however, suddenly in the autumn of her sophomore year, the philosophical questions about meaning and purpose became more nagging, her quest to know the answers imperative, to the point of feeling consuming. Not knowing about her “purpose on earth,” the “point of it all in the world,” and whether or not she could perceive an Ultimate Divine presence, drove her into a dark and brooding frame of mind. The questioning devolved into a sense of emptiness, what her classmates called philosophical “ennui,” but which manifest throughout her very body: not rising from bed for morning class, breaking up with her boyfriend of over a year, and a general sense of edgy frustration. Karen realized that for the first time in her life, she was depressed and sought treatment from a psychotherapist within walking distance of campus.

The psychotherapist in Hanover assessed that Karen met criteria for Major Depressive Disorder, was in considerable pain, and likely would need to take a semester off from College if she were not in treatment. Karen started psychotherapy. After four months of spring semester, Karen was functional but still felt empty and unsure of the “purpose of it all.” Upon going home for summer break to live with her mother in the Gulf region, Karen felt surrounded by love and encouragement and warmth--yet still struggled. Then one afternoon, Karen shared, “I was walking along the Gulf, headed out along the dock, and saw the light sparkling on the water. Suddenly it all became clear to me,” she shares with a great burst of joy. “Of course there is the Creator, and the world is bright and full of love--there is spirituality in everything!”

That moment was the turning point; Karen started to feel reconnected in her direct relationship with the Creator. Although she continued to heal in stages, the watershed event was the moment on the dock feeling divine presence.

Karen’s story is not atypical of late adolescents; in fact in many respects it is the norm. The successful outcome of depression may not be mere functionality or recovery, it may be joy. Joy becomes possible when we again see the bright and ultimate spiritual presence in our world, present in the blessing of daily life. Yet depression has not been

understood as a gateway to spiritual awakening. Depression has not been understood to potentiate joy.

The most prevalent form of suffering in youth in post-industrial cultures (to include North America, Europe, Israel, Japan and Korea) is depression, sometimes accompanied by substance abuse and risk taking. Between the ages of 12-20, at any given moment, about 8-15% of youth are depressed, with a rate of sub-clinical, still painful, depression sometime during adolescence of 40%-60%. These rates reoccur at meaningful life passages, advent of mid-life, and around life-changing events, loss of a loved one or major unpredicted or unwanted transition. For sake of clarity and offering some focus, in this paper I will tend to focus on adolescence, although the reoccurring nature of developmental depression is essential to our understanding of spiritual awakening and deepening across the life-course.

DATA ON SPIRITUALITY AND RATES OF DEPRESSION

Spirituality in *magnitude* is more helpful in protecting against depression than any of the most severe risk factors are for posing risk for depression. Clinical science has shown a personal spirituality to be the most protective factor known to medical or social sciences.

Adolescence presents window of onset for depression and substance abuse, with unique risk and protective factors. Fifteen years of research by my lab and fellow labs shows that in teens, as compared with adults, a personal spirituality offers a 50% greater magnitude of protective effect (Miller et al, 2000; Miller & Gur, 2002). That this extra protective quality of spirituality is found in adolescence calls mental health professionals to consider the role of spirituality in the etiological formation of lifetime mental illness or health.

Yet, the research does not suggest that people with spirituality have not suffered. Rather, the data suggests that depth of spirituality often does not come easy. It appears to come for many people through the suffering of depression. In a longitudinal study conducted in collaboration with Myrna Weissman at Columbia University, our lab found that young adults with a strong personal spirituality were 2.5 times more likely to have suffered a Major Depression over the past ten years (from ages 16-26 years) during the window of risk for onset of depression (Miller et al, 2012)- concomitant with the window

of “spiritual awakening” and related ritual throughout religious traditions! Once a strong personal spirituality is established in late adolescence and young adulthood, prospectively it is 75% protective against recurrence, and even more helpful, 90% protective against recurrence in people at genetic high risk.

Depression appears often to be not an illness, but a sensitivity or perceptual capacity. Depression is a “knock at the door” for the opportunity of spiritual awakening.

DEVELOPMENTAL DEPRESSION & SPIRITUAL AWAKENING THE CASE OF ADOLESCENCE

Is it possible that challenges or obstructions in the development of spirituality, or even its emergence, are etiologically significant? The case of Karen is in fact so typical, that it has a cultural name of its own: Sophomore Slump. Psychotherapists often view Sophomore Slump as marking the late adolescent individuation process, rife with emotional struggle--sometimes devolving into depression. Sophomore Slump also has a clinical name, Adult Adjustment Disorder; more commonly diagnosed than major depression in late teens. Adult Adjustment Disorder is formulated by psychology as the hard work of knowing thyself, becoming who we are. Yet, given this general view in the field, why is the slide from Adult Adjustment to MDD so prevalent? Why is the suffering so pronounced and unresolved for many late adolescents and young adults?

The notion of “spiritual awakening” in adolescence is embraced by religious traditions around the world to include ceremonies of leading the congregation in prayer such as Bar and Bat Mitzvah, to knowledge and mastery of religious text in Confirmation. In rich indigenous traditions from the Pacific Islands, in Africa and here in North America with the Sundance and puberty fertility rites for girls, puberty is viewed as awakening capacity for spiritual connection and readiness to receive generational knowledge. What is somewhat new to our thinking in clinical research is the investigation of spiritual awakening as integral to our understanding of psychopathology in youth. The second decade marks the time of onset--the window of greatest risk--for lifetime course of disorder of depression and substance use and abuse.

Clinical research finds that spirituality is the most protective factor against depression and substance use and abuse during adolescence known to medical science. Nothing known to research is as profoundly and pervasively protective against onset of

lifetime course of mental disorders as personal spirituality. When I share this finding with family and friends, invariably someone waves a hand with confusion, asking “what more precisely is meant in the scientific literature by personal spirituality?” A number of spirituality or religion variables bear significance on health and wellness, from spiritual community to long-standing faith tradition to personal quest. Yet, consistently in the literature, the greatest protective benefit among adolescents is a personal relationship with the Creator: a close and direct two-way relationship with a loving and guiding Creator. Whether the Creator might be called Allah, Hashem, Higher Power, all depending on your language, there is a universal awareness of presence far greater that holds and directs us. Life then becomes an ongoing relationship, talking and living side-by-side the Ultimate Presence.

There are several terms or constructs in psychology and psychiatry that revolve around this concept: Kenneth Pargament’s notion of Positive Spiritual Coping that reaches across religious denominations (Pargament et al, 2000), and Kenneth Kendler’s (1997) empirically derived factor of Personal Devotion. All who share these constructs hold the notion that there is an intimate, daily-lived relationship of love and guidance, from the sacred Higher Power.

How is this relationship measured by science? Through self-report, people with a strong two-way sacred relationship might say: “I turn to the Lord in difficulty for direction.” “When I have a decision to make, I ask what really the Creator wants me to do.” “Each day when I am pressed or challenged, I ask G-d for guidance and clarity.” In other words, common to all: I speak to the Higher Power, and the Higher Power answers. The communication may be through prayer; the sacred response may be the words of the Higher Power through another person, or the surprising arrival of opportunity or an event, or even foreclosure of the so-called opportunity that actually was a downward slide. The notion that the Universe is alive and guiding, made of love, is a view foundational to this two-way relationship.

Note that the scientifically shown potent experience of personal spirituality cannot be characterized as a belief. A belief is held by one person, inside herself or himself. This spirituality is not a belief, per se, because it is not hermetic. It is a living interactive stance with a guiding Universe. I talk--and I do not believe that the Higher Power talks

back--I receive that the Higher Power responds, and I act accordingly and life unfolds often in surprising ways. When we interview participants, their experiences often are not subject to secular materialist reinterpretation. These are not delusions or illusions or any cognitive rubric, because the experience relies on attention and keen attunement with the daily unfolding of the world around us. The experiences entail hearing direction and witnessing the sacredness in and through daily living. In *Spiritual Awareness Psychotherapy* (APA Video), I propose one model that encourages the development of this sacred attunement with our clients. However, there are many excellent models for interaction with the loving Creator, including religiously informed practices.

Research findings indicate that the two-way transcendent relationship basically conquers all. It is not only accessible to people with good parents, or those raised in strong faith tradition. The two-way relationship is available to any of us through focus, love, and attention, then to be met as the Universe will have it. This relationship is where human psychology and spirituality truly meet. For any of us, the two-way transcendent relationship can be fostered. Through reflection, attention, heartfelt seeking, reading of journeys of spiritual seekers and finders, and prayer, to name a few methods. The two-way relationship is available and immanent for any person, but it is gained through direct lived experience, sometimes called spiritual individuation. What does the sacred relationship have to do with adolescence? It is the chief developmental opportunity that can undergird health and wellness for the rest of our lives.

Personal Spirituality Burgeoning in Adolescence

In 1997, Kendler and colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University showed in a genetic-epidemiologic twin study of adults (women with mean age 30 years), that about 29% of the difference between people in a sense of two-way personal devotion is attributed to broad heritability. This finding might be interpreted to suggest that our genes contribute to the “wiring” or “antennae” that is the physiology through which personal spirituality is experienced.

It is during adolescence that this physiology related to spirituality emerges. The genetic contribution to personal spirituality increases to this level of 30% from a relatively low level. A researcher at the University of Minnesota, Laura Koenig and her

colleagues (2008) used a twin study design of teens, similar to that of Kendler in Virginia, to examine the heritable contribution to personal spirituality specifically in adolescence. She and her team asked questions to adolescents about spirituality at around age 14-15 years and then reexamined them at around 18-19 years. When Koenig examined the relationship between these answers to spirituality and the genetic contribution, she found nearly a 50% increase in the heritable contribution towards spirituality across the course of adolescence. This window of expression, the “coming up on line” of personal spirituality, is the scientific parallel to the “spiritual awakening” known through religious traditions. There appears to be a surge of genetic expression that underlies the awakening described in myriad religious traditions.

What is the experience of this surge? Adolescents through time and faith tradition quest and hunger to know at the deepest level; they seek to feel the truth and encounter spirituality. Adolescence is a precious formative window of development that can prosper from a deep spiritual emersion that is guided and supported by community. Around the world and through time the adolescents in faith traditions are asked to directly and personally “step up” to more personally and directly know spiritual life. In other words, the findings of Koenig can be seen to show the rise of our innate spiritual capacity concomitant with traditional views of spiritual awakening.

Spirituality and Suffering: Depression and Substance Abuse

About fifteen years ago, two generous senior investigators shared data from their elegant longstanding studies, namely 1) a nationally representative sample of adolescents from the National Comorbidity Survey by Ronald Kessler (1994) at Harvard, and 2) a three-generation, high-risk sample of offspring of depressed and non-depressed mothers in New Haven, collected by Myrna Weissman (1999). Using these excellent data sets, I first started to explore the potential protective benefits of personal spirituality against psychopathology in the second decade of life.

These relatively early papers in this area of inquiry were a noteworthy contrast to a dominant secular materialist model of depression: personal spirituality was associated with a decrease by 40-80% in likelihood for clinical depression (Miller et al, 2000; Miller et al, 1997). This scale of magnitude was shocking. The largest reduction for risk in

depression was found in offspring of depressives, who were the ones most genetically predisposed for developing depression. This finding raised the possibility that, co-occurring with the genetic risk for depression, is the capacity to derive particular benefit from personal spirituality. While certainly an adolescent may struggle and have sad or hard moments, these passages rarely devolve into clinical depression. The downward spiral from ordinary struggles to major depression was associated with a distance from or no felt sense of a sacred relationship with a Higher Power.

As also revealed in the national sample, adolescents with a strong personal spirituality were about 40% less likely to develop substance dependence or abuse (Miller et al, 2000). This overall finding on personal spirituality as protective against depression and substance use and abuse has been replicated over the past ten years by many other labs, such that it now is a commonly established fact of mental health and wellness. Yet, in the face of this very robust protective factor, as a field *we have yet to conceptualize of depression as a spiritual condition*.

Adding to the protective benefits of spirituality is its timing with the window of onset for psychopathology. Our lab showed in data from the North Carolina Adolescent Health Study show a surge in the protective benefits of spirituality, which increases in magnitude by 30-50% with physical signs of puberty and fertility in girls. Whereas physical maturation previously has been known to pose risk for depression in girls, research now suggests that at the same developmental phase marks opportunity for augmented spiritual resilience (Miller & Gur, 2002).

I propose a new model that accounts for the research data. The fact that spiritual awakening co-occurs with such a robust protective effect during a *biologically timed* window of onset for depression, may suggest that we are looking at a shared underlying process, essentially two sides of the same coin. In other words, prevalent forms of psychopathology might be viewed as foundationally spiritual in nature. We know from Alcoholics Anonymous and spiritually related treatments for substance abuse, as well as from recovery from eating disorders, that the way out of illness can involve spirituality.

When adolescents are not supported in developing a personal spirituality, they are left to dangle in uncertainty and confusion, often not even aware that they are on the cusp of the highest value we can reach as humans: personal devotion. This devotion is the

hunger to transcend, confused and unmet, that can devolve into substance use as the quick trip into transcendence. This devotion is the unmet striving for meaning and purpose, which can devolve into recurrent depression. The adolescent wants to see himself or herself as taking a direction on a road of map of a sacred world.

An epidemic of suffering among healthy people

We must explore the possibility that, foundationally, the epidemic of depression and substance abuse in the second decade, and again at meaningful life junctures, actually may be societally wide spiritual negation, avoidance, or inattention. At the level of a mainstream culture, we have precluded the opportunity for spiritual development in our teens, flying in the face of the world traditions. We are at best silent, to the great peril of our youth.

For Karen, standing on the Gulf, it is clear that spiritual quest was foundational to her longing for meaning and purpose. It simply makes more sense to take her at her word, than to assume the questions were passing symptoms of a biological depression.

Biological Evidence for “two sides of the same coin”

The phrase, “two sides of the same coin” suggests that depression is interwoven with spiritual development. The two experiences are expressions of a common physiology. Recent gains in research technology and generous funding of foundations, such as the Templeton Foundation, as well as several anonymous donors, has provided support for investigation of depression as spiritually oriented, with a potential spiritual resolution. That depression and spirituality are related is clear from the self-report data, but this finding needs investigation at material level of analysis to be more persuasive and illuminating to our current society.

Along with my colleagues, Ravi Bansal, Myrna Weissman, Brad Peterson, Craig Tenke, and Priya Wickramaratne at Columbia University (Miller et al, 2013; Tenke et al, 2013), I examined the “two-sides-of-the-same-coin” question through MRI and EEG on Weissman’s sample of depressed and non-depressed women and their second- and third-

generation decedents. Studying offspring at high genetic risk for depression, we examined those specific regions of the brain that have been found to be associated with depression. Previous research revealed regions cortical thinning in the occipital and parietal lobes of offspring, showing an endophenotype of depression. When compared those high-risk participants who reported a strong personal spirituality with those who did not, we found very powerful differences. In those people who had strong personal spirituality, there was greater cortical thickness in precisely those regions otherwise shown to have thinning as an endophenotype of genetic risk for depression. That is, the regions associated with thinning for depression showed thickening for those who were personally spiritual (across faith traditions and even without claiming a faith tradition).

Together the team then looked at the same sample using electroencephalogram (EEG). Adults were invited into the lab and asked to simply relax, eyes closed, with an EEG attached to their head. Those adults who had a strong personal spirituality gave off a wave length from the brain measures as high amplitude alpha (8-12 Hz), a wave length often given off by a meditating monk. This finding was even more pronounced among participants with a strong personal spirituality to have recovered from depression. What makes this even more compelling, is that high amplitude alpha also is given off by people to have recovered from depression a different way, using SSRI's, such as Prozac. It is as if we are medicating people to jump over spiritual awakening, to feel as-if they have had a spiritual awakening. To be in a felt healthy state of joy-ishness. But it is not real joy, because it goes away when we take away the SSRIs.

Alpha has another name to reflect 8-12 Hz, that is used in geo-science, Shuman's constant. This is the wave length given off at the earth's crust. The spiritually engaged brain resonates with the same frequency as the earth's crust- nature, reflecting perhaps our oneness.

These MRI data and EEG data present evidence that depression and spirituality involve the same regions of the brain, but in opposite directions. This research provides tangible evidence that we mental health professionals must listen to the voice of spiritual awakening as real, deserving of our attention; thus we must offer support for spiritual development.

Voices of Spiritual Emergence

We can learn within the field of mental health to hear the cry for spiritual growth. In speaking with hundreds of adolescents over the past fifteen years, I have come to hear a universal voice of spiritual emergence that surges through culture and faith tradition—and certainly through ethnicity, level of social class, and education. We have interviewed youth so that we might share in their voices the experience of spiritual emergence in daily life. Here are the voices of several such adolescents.

Ki-Jung as 14 year-old boy explains in his interview:

Q. Do you feel like you have awakened spiritually? If so, can you tell me about a time where this became clear to you?

A. This became clear a few years ago because that's when I learned that this is not a playground; it's a place where you actually learn to stay close with Buddha. I learned that a couple of years ago.

Q. Can you explain the relationship between your religious faith and your personal spirituality?

A. For me, they're combined together because my personal life goes into Buddhism and Buddhism is the only thing that I believe in and trust, so I think it overlaps with each other.

Of the Jewish faith, Rebecca (age 16 years) shared the emergence of her strong personal relationship with the Creator and the rise of her spirituality:

Actually, starting several years ago, I started praying every night before I go to sleep and I used to maintain it better. Now I would say several times a week if not every single night and it's not any particular prayer it's just my own personal pray. I would say that my spirituality is definitely something I have evolved for myself and it wasn't given to me or instilled in me by any other person, because my parents aren't very spiritual people. I'm probably the most religious person in my household. I maintain it pretty much on my own, I go to synagogue for the high holidays um, and I actually just recently started being more spiritual to some degree which has to do with an experience I had this

summer. Yeah. I find that spirituality infiltrates my day-to-day consciousness, and it has for ever since I could remember, it's been an integral part of my identity.

Some adolescents seek to find the road map through their faith tradition, in a personal and authentic way. This is an intensely meaningful and deeply personal quest. The words, symbols, and traditions of the culture are vivid and alive to the spiritually surging adolescent. Ella (15 years) explains,

The Jewish rituals, and things, those are very—I find those very beautiful, and I find that their symbolism is a great way to express spirituality. I used to make challah every week for Friday night dinner, and that was always kind of a cathartic and interesting experience because, in essence, it's making bread, but it does have a much greater meaning than that. [hesitates] I think ritual is a lot of the way I relate kind of to my spiritual life. I guess it's not something I'm really that conscious of on a day-to-day basis, it's just something that I feel like is more of an underlying theme with myself. I couldn't really define my spirituality in any real words, but it always feels like it's there. And having that relationship with G-d. My religion is kind of my stage for relating to it. Even when I haven't been to synagogue for a few weeks, it's still there. I don't really know how to explain it!

A Muslim boy Yosef (17 years) shares his view:

Just kind of like the beauty of it all, that it all, that even though the Koran came 1400 something years ago, it's very much applicable like in our everyday lives today, and just kind of the messages that are, that are, you know, put forth in Islam. They're so positive and they're so universal and I don't know, it's just, it has a very nice logic to it and I don't know, I guess that's what I most appreciate about it, that it has that beauty in it.

Discovery of Personal Practice of Spirituality

Central to spiritual individuation is the formation of a felt and personal relationship with the Divine. The two-way sacred relationship can only be owned

through deliberate reflection and direct experience of a sacred transcendent relationship. A surge of authentic spiritual connection comes from within the adolescent, and the connection is derived and honored through deep reflection.

Haden (Christian, 18 years, Illinois Summer Camp), expressed it this way:

Interviewer: "So, you say that pray before your games? Do you pray to win?"

Haden: "Well actually, I pray to serve, with me as a person. Then the way I work is by my calling, which includes sports, football."

Interviewer: "So you pray to be strong for your calling."

Haden: "Kind of, more like I pray to do my best. Not against the other team."

Lamar (Christian, 19 years, Harlem Hip Hop Church) explained:

I love about my moms, no matter what, she always wanted to help me. Wow. She be bustin' her butt, working night shift...come home, and she still take care of me, even though practically I'm a grown man. But I'm still with my moms, and still under her roof, respecting her, and abiding by her rules. But she always wanted to help me. Always. That's great. Always.

Interviewer: And so when you made the transition over into the Christian walk, so to speak, she...?

Lamar: Oh, my goodness, she broke into tears. Yeah, just to see me, it was tears of joy, though. It wasn't like sorrow. It was tears of joy, like Wow, you changed your life around. You're not the same anymore. And I'm not hangin' out there late no more. I'm not disobeying her rules.... 'cause I used to disobey her, and what?...forget that, and walk out. To keep a real with you, I even cursed at her and disrespected her, know what I'm sayin'? I done toussled with her, toussled with my moms. You know what I'm sayin', not hit her, I never hit my moms. But like, as far as like messin' with her, I threw her on the couch, like "What you doin'"? She's try to... She didn't want me to go outside. She tried to stop me. I feel like that was the devil, you know what I mean, makin' me attack my mother like that. But she still love me, and when I made that transition over, she was so proud of me. Wow.

Rebecca (17 years, Jewish) explained:

I find prayer really helpful, and sometimes if I am in synagogue, it's really overwhelming just to hear people singing, and that comes together and sometimes, silent prayer I find really nice to have a moment. Some random things can catch me off guard, I don't know, seeing a weird person on the subway can get me, I think all of these things are essentially the same like having a panic attack or I don't know seeing a great play, I think all these things are essentially connected in a spiritual way. Umm, I don't know how to separate those feelings in the way that they make me feel like seeing something beautiful or...or...I think they're all like sublime like extreme emotions overtake you in a way so that what you feel is made essentialized so you don't realize hunger or tiredness or physical pain and I think all those experiences share that unity, they make you feel the unity.

Well, when I'm by myself I really look at something and I think about it. Say I was sitting here looking at this biology textbook, at this flower on the cover, thinking, this came from somewhere you know, and I'll think about that and maybe I came from the same place, maybe I was made by the same...

Every time I used to sing....before I used to sing for.....people, but now when I sing its more for.....its just for god. At the temple or where I used to sing, I used to always be cautious if I'd made a mistake and what people would say but now I think that it doesn't matter that I made a mistake because I'm singing for god.

Madeline (15 years, Muslim) explained:

I think all religion is finding out who you are, not just in physical terms, like I'm Madeline and I'm a girl and I'm Korean—it's not like that. I think religion states who you are. I think all religion has the same origin like be a good person and have integrity but then Buddhism, it's about guiding to who you are and why you're here and what you're purpose is.

Q. Can you describe the places or community where you feel connected to your faith?

A. I don't think it has to be a certain place that you feel connected to your faith cuz faith is not a temporary thing like if I come to tar then I'm so Buddhist and then when I go to school, it's not like I'm not a Buddhist. So I don't think there's a certain place. I felt like everyone has a path to go to. They go to school and I was like, how do I stand out among them? Everybody in the whole world, just in New Jersey alone, 'cuz most of the people in my school they're like, "I have to get an A on that test so I can prepare myself for high school and I'm like "Why do you wanna go to high school," and they're like "to go to college" and it's like "Why do you wanna go to college—to get money?" That's kind of stupid. I don't think it's like that. I learned that from my friends I learned that the world isn't like that, isn't just about money.

Sometimes, for both religiously observant youth and youth outside of faith traditions, nature is where they hear the voice of Creation. J.K. (16 year-old boy outside of a Faith Tradition) illustrates:

J.K. I get up at 5am to go surfing. Watch the sun rise. I feel of the water and stuff like the power of the waves.

Interviewer: Yeah.

J.K.: And knowing that you're somewhat taming the waves when you're like riding it and it wasn't meant...I don't know if it was....but like it wasn't purposely...it didn't happen so people could ride them, you riding the waves.

Interviewer: Like you're communicating almost with the ocean?

J.K.: Yeah. And just like cause when you like...you have to get in the flow of the wave and it's like fluidity and rhythm and stuff like that, which is fun.

Interviewer: You like that feeling?

J.K.: Yeah. Cause it makes you feel like you're a part of the wave.

Interviewer: Yeah.

J.K.: It's a natural flow.

In the words of Zeeshan (18 year-old Muslim):

Interviewer: Are there any activities that bring you closer to your faith, like music.....?

Z: Yeah, like reading the Koran. Definitely being out in nature, I suppose. I mean back home I used to love to go on drives somewhere and just relax and stuff outside.

Interviewer: What was it about that being outside in nature that made it most spiritual?

Z: I guess it's because you have a lot of time with your thoughts, very undisturbed and peaceful. And seeing how things are just naturally occurring around you.

As Ella (19 year-old Christian) expressed it:

Now that I have developed my faith and now my faith is strong, everything I look at I can see it's from G-d. So, therefore when I look at a pond, when I look at a bird, I see trees—I see it's all from Him and I appreciate it and I see the beauty in it! I'm enlightened, you know.

Clinical Implications

In the most common places where youth reside, as well as in treatment, we mental health professionals must listen for the voice of spiritual awakening. When we hear the emergence of spiritual quest and sacred relationships, we will be able to provide support for each youth to engage the spiritual quest, work through legitimate spiritual struggle and suffering, and then fulfill his or her birthright as a whole person.

The clinical implications of understanding some mental health disorders as spiritual struggle, or the model of “two sides of the same coin,” for adolescents are immense. We now know that adolescence involves spiritual struggle, and that this struggle contributes substantially to our current epidemics of depression, substance abuse and compromises of personality functioning associated with impaired empathy. These developmental adversities might be viewed as a reflection of mass lack of support for spirituality—at worst, leading to eventual occlusion of spiritual development. The spiritual surge in adolescence needs to be supported for successful spiritual development. Conversely, for health, wellness, and overall thriving in adolescence, parents, teachers and youth leaders as well as mentors and friends—all of us—must meet the adolescent where she or he stands on the spiritual question. Questions, experiences, and glimpses of spirituality must be engaged. To help the adolescent engage the sacred quality of

everyday life, spiritual growth must be the highest priority of parents, peers, and the culture.

To conclude: We are born whole. We are born wholly present to spiritual reality. Certainly, we are born Holy. Spirituality is our birthright, and our spiritual nature is supported by science. It is within our genetic code to develop over our lifespan the equipment through which to experience personal spirituality, the sacred two-way relationship.

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APPENDIX: Application of Miller essay to work by Luthar and colleagues (2013) on affluent youth in crisis.

Luthar S, Barkin S, Crossman E (2013) "I can therefore I must": Fragility in the Upper Middle Class, *Developmental Psychopathology*, 35, 1529-1549.

Suniya Luthar and colleagues (2013) synthesize of a decade of research on affluent youth in the suburbs on the United States. In this Appendix to the Miller article on joy and spirituality in youth, I highlight point of relevance to our discussion.

"Affluent parents as a group are neither neglectful nor disparaging. Rather it is living in the cultural context of affluence that connotes risks."

Luthar Finding #1

Affluent suburban youth show rates of substance abuse, anxiety and depression greater than rates found among inner city youth in poverty.

Lens of Spirituality:

Previous research shows that a strong personal spirituality (relationship with the High Power) is protective against depression and substance use and abuse in youth. The Luthar sample showed very low rates of spirituality, less than half the prevalence of personal spirituality found as the national average.

Luthar Finding #2:

Affluent suburban youth reported feeling "contingent love," a sense that they were valued by their parents for success and achievement, but not for simply being. Children also observe this behavior in their parents' spousal relationships; namely, paternal absenteeism and material perfectionism, as well as family overscheduling (i.e. missing family dinner for a travel sports event).

Lens of Spirituality:

Parents play a formative role in the child's own personal spirituality. Research shows that there is an roughly equal contribution of 1) parental bonding style and love and 2) parent's own personal spirituality towards the child's spirituality. Specifically, studies show a strong correlation between child report of parental affection and unconditional love, and a personal sense of spirituality.

Luthar Finding #3:

Mirroring the contingent love of parents, youth form relationship based upon external accomplishments and holdings. Luthar finds among her highschool sample that relational aggression in girls and physical aggression in boys was associated with "star status." Physical attractiveness in girls was associated with a popularity score two and half standard deviations above the mean.

Spiritual Lens:

A body of research on “relational spirituality,” shows a strong association between a personal relationship with the higher power and how we regard other people and conduct relationships based upon spiritual values.

Of note: as a normative process, a body of research by Mahoney and Pargament shows that family relationships are viewed as being “sanctified” whether or not people are personally religious or highly spiritual. An departure from this broad and normative trend represents a rupture in the normative intertwined nature of spirituality and family.

Luthar Finding #4:

Three years post-college, the Luthar sample showed eight times the national rate for sociopaathy, and also showed tendency to exploit and use other people as means, as well as increased likelihood of using cocaine and prescription drugs.

Lens of Spirituality:

As a follow-up study, together with Luthar and Barkin, my lab asked the question- what happened if the family, living within the “culture of affluence,” still held a strong family spirituality?

Working together we found that only 12-15% of families in this affluent suburban sample had a strong family spirituality, usually inter-twined with a family religious commitment. From these families, a sub-set of teens graduated senior year with a strong personal sense of relationship with the higher power, a transcendent relationship. At three years post-college (seven years later) the spiritual personal transcendent relationship was stable in these young adults, and had lead the young adults into: 1) seeking a spiritual, often religious community and 2) building lives of service, with spiritual values.