

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**Restless Hearts: The Search for an Experience of Spiritual Authenticity in the Lives of  
Five Seekers**

by

**James Stephen Pender**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A phenomenological hermeneutics research format was used to understand the experience, the process, and the themes related to seekers who were ultimately successful in their spiritual search. People who can be called seekers tend to question the norms suggested by traditional religious institutions, yet they comprise a significant segment of church populations.

This thesis examines the journey taken by seekers who currently find themselves in a state of spiritual contentment. Their respective journeys ultimately led them to an experience of spiritual authenticity. The work of Ken Wilber and James Fowler provides a means to understand and develop our conceptualization of the spiritual journey. Particular attention is paid to the concept of authenticity in spiritual experience.

A phenomenological hermeneutics research approach was used because this methodology credits the actual lived experience of the spiritual journey in the lives of the seekers who participated in the study. In all, five people were selected to be co-researchers in this study. Each of the five had fulfilled the requirements of the proposal: they all had examined a range of spiritual possibilities and had selected a particular path. The result was an experience of spiritual authenticity that, in essence, ended their respective searches.

Three women and two men comprised the co-researcher group. Each of the five was selected on the basis of a purposeful sampling technique. An in-depth, semi-structured, interview format was used to gain information from the co-researchers regarding their respective spiritual journeys.

Seven dichotomous themes emerged which were common to the experiences of all five co-researchers. The themes were suffering and peace; iconoclastic disengagement and the need for structure; doubt and meaning; homeostasis and creativity; isolation and community; floundering and finding; crisis and clarity.



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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my life-mate, the person who has known me all my life, whose support and love sustains me above else. This thesis is dedicated to my touchstone, Muffy.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

... *changed, changed utterly:*  
*A terrible beauty is born.*  
- W. B. Yeats, *Easter 1916* (p.820)

This thesis is about the spiritual journey. Specifically, it concerns itself with the journey taken by those who can be called seekers. Those people who are looking for an experience of authenticity in their spiritual lives and who have had the courage to keep searching until they found the answer to their heart's longing. At the dawn of the third millenium, there is a renewed interest in spirituality. A quick perusal of most any bookstore will reveal not only numerous titles dealing with spiritual subject matter but, also, whole sections devoted to this topic.

In addition, interest in spirituality is reflected in the popular media through a number of primetime television programs as well as in feature length motion pictures. The presence and popularity of so-called seeker-oriented churches, too, attest to a tangible and burgeoning interest in the area of spirituality. Today there is a broad array of spiritual possibilities that include eastern religions, evangelical and fundamentalist teachings, mysticism, so-called New Age beliefs, Goddess worship and the revival of other ancient religious rituals, twelve step groups dealing with a wide range of issues, environmental concerns, and holistic health (Roof, 1993, p.5). The past decade has also seen a growing dialogue and literature pertaining to the link between work and spirituality.

All this speaks to the reality of the spiritual life being both broadly based and impacting virtually all of us on many levels. This quest, which ultimately speaks to nothing less than existential meaning is nothing new - it is, in fact, as old as humanity itself. The spiritual journey has been variously referred to as the Long Search (Smart, 1981), the Holy Longing (Rolheiser, 1999), and the Great Search (Wilber, 1999). These references to the spiritual journey are attempts to articulate a process that engages and affects us in the most intimate, and personal, of ways. It is an experience of the heart that is compelling - even irresistible - it is a journey that is often filled with pain but, too, holds that great promise of a peaceful heart. This quest for meaning, and an accompanying spirituality that facilitates an experience of authenticity, is an issue of universal concern. It is an acknowledgement that, as Morton Kelsey puts it, “we are immersed in the spiritual world” (1982, p.33).

I should tell you, I have always been something of a spiritual junkie. My interest in this subject, then, is a personal one. As a consequence, this thesis is unavoidably confessional in nature – my own story and experience is inextricably woven throughout this study. This forms something of a two-edged sword: it provides a passionate basis for the study but, too, contributes to its limitations.

I was born into one of those large and loud Irish-Catholic families – the sort of collection of souls where our familial imperative was “wherever two or more Penders are gathered, there shall be a party!” My family was this stew of boisterous love, seasoned with large doses of teasing. Like many families, we cycled through times of deep personal



challenges, some of which were painfully tragic, and times of wonderful, abiding joy.

The unusual closeness which my seven siblings and I enjoy to this day is a testament to my parents' own native ability to provide a model of family life that was flexible enough to include and encourage both the individuality and the uniqueness of eight children.

I first came to wonder about the big questions, like 'the meaning of life', at a young age. Six, in fact. In my childlike way, I recall wondering what life was all about and how it all hung together. The guide, known as the **Catechism** (1940), was life's instruction book and it was taught to all the pupils at Blessed Sacrament School and indeed in all Catholic parochial schools in the late nineteen fifties. The blue and white paper cover of my catechism marked an early delving into the essential mysteries of life. There, the kernel of my deepest questions were beginning to be answered:

*Q: Who are you?*

A: I am a child of God.

*Q: Who is God?*

A: God is our Father in Heaven

*Q: Who made you?*

A: God made me and lives in me.

*Q: Why did God make you?*

A: God made me:

to know Him

to love Him

and to serve Him in this world ... (Gasparri, p.7).

These questions and answers sounded wonderfully simple and yet, somehow, profoundly complete to my young psyche. They resonated with a truth that pointed to an ineffable

mystery that lay beyond itself. The **Catechism**, combining with the religious observance of my family, formed the rich basis of my own spiritual journey. The potent symbols of my church - the red, flickering flames of votive candles and the sanctuary lamp; the crucifix which hung prominently above the altar; the wonderfully and intricately carved stations of the cross; the dark, hushed, beauty of the confessional box; the sonorous tone of the Latin mass; and the slow, solemn shuffle of the communion line – all these combined to form powerful images and experiences of my early Catholic childhood. To this day, the smell of incense continues to trigger memories from my childhood religion. At home, pictures of the Last Supper and of Christ's Agony in the Garden hung in our dining room along with crucifixes in our bedrooms with a drying palm branch woven in behind the corpus. I am grateful for the fertile imagination and the spiritual landscape sown by my religion. The meaning I was moving toward, in terms of understanding my world, was being unconsciously formed from those earliest of days.

I said I was something of a spiritual junkie. That's true. I developed, what was for my father, a somewhat unnerving attraction to Judaism. A theological struggle emerged for me in my late adolescence around the Christological nature of Jesus; it led me to the foot of Rabbi Kirchenbaum, at the Orthodox Jewish synagogue in my hometown of London Ontario. Rabbi Kirchenbaum was one of those gentle, wise, holy men who got an enormous kick out of life. His eyes sparkled as he smiled broadly behind his long and graying beard. He listened with respect to my musings and concerns. Finally, he said, "Jimmy, what a wonderful thing you are doing, wanting to know God better! It would be our great honor to have you as a Jew. However, before we do that, I want you to do one

thing – I want you to return to your own faith and see if there is neither truth nor beauty there for you. If there is not, then come back here; I will welcome you as my brother”.

Smart guy, that Rabbi; his encouraging words confirmed for me at a young age that the spiritual search was an important and valid pursuit; a pursuit that would be taken seriously, at least by some.

The late nineteen sixties and early seventies were a time that supported a questing and questioning orientation. It was a time when many young people rebelled against established norms. There was, beginning with this period, an explosion of spiritual possibilities as eastern traditions which were heretofore somewhat remote and inaccessible, became more available (Cox, 1977). Even drugs were purported, by the likes of Timothy Leary, to be a possible gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. Books by Hermann Hesse (**Siddhartha**, **Narcissus and Goldmund**, **The Journey to the East**), Carlos Castaneda (**The Journey to Ixlan**), and Malcolm Muggeridge (**Jesus Rediscovered**) all pointed to the mystic and spiritual possibilities that were available to us all. This was an exciting time to come of age. Zen meditation groups were springing up; devotees of Krishna consciousness could be seen singing and dancing on the corner of Dundas and Richmond Streets – in London Ontario no less! Ecumenism became a serious focus of study; centers investigating the common links between religious traditions were in evidence in many cities. There was recognition that we were moving into an increasingly complex and spiritually pluralistic world.

The Vietnam War was at its peak, and it had a significant impact on the social and cultural development of a whole generation including those of us in Canada.

Conventional understandings of morality and duty were deeply examined. In fact, it was a time when questioning was elevated to the point of a moral imperative. Bumper stickers advised us to “Question Authority”. The so-called “generation gap” identified by sociologists, and made popular in the media, pointed to widening divisions of values and traditions, leading to an escalation of conflict between many parents and their children.

To some extent, then, the ethos of the times supported and encouraged seeking different, and even non-conventional, answers to questions. The late nineteen sixties, and early seventies, offered a firm container for spiritual exploration. To question one’s spiritual roots was not only possible but, to some degree, expected. Like psychoanalysis some forty years previously (Fine, 1990), Transcendental Meditation was promising nothing less than enlightenment itself and the transformation of society – the Beatles, identified as adherents of TM, contributed to its popularization in the West. Universities, long the bastion of traditional learning, were offering courses on mysticism and understanding the nature of religious experience.

For the first time there was access to the practice of a plethora of spiritual and religious experiences ranging from Christian fundamentalism (found in the Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church), to Zen, to Krishna Consciousness, Transcendental Meditation, to Sufi dancing, and Hindi chanting. It was much like being the proverbial kid in a spiritual candy shop and, like most kids in candy

shops, I wanted to sample liberally from all that was being offered. I was on a road that would take me a long way from Blessed Sacrament School.

My own inclination, then, combined with the times to seek, in a broad sense, the meaning of spiritual experience. My first degree, from the University of Western Ontario, was in English Language and Literature with a minor in Religious Studies and Philosophy. I am indebted to the great benefits that flow from a liberal arts education – primarily in terms of opening me to a sense of wonder. In my literature classes I was struck with how the great themes of literature are the great themes of life itself – namely to better understand one’s self and one’s place in the world. The themes of identity, self-knowledge, birth, betrayal, death, and the meaning of adversity are all, ultimately, spiritual in nature.

A watershed experience occurred in my undergraduate education. It was a course entitled “Religious Experience and Celebration” taught by Jim Schmieser. The course was modeled on a similar one taught by Harvey Cox at Harvard. This course was my introduction to the thoughts and works of Sam Keen, Harvey Cox, Carl Jung, and the Christian mystics. I owe a debt of thanks to Jim for his perceptive and sensitive tutelage. A major focus of this course was in understanding the meaning of our own spiritual experiences. This focus has continued to run like a stream throughout my life.

I also completed two degrees in Social Work. I was attracted to the practice of social work because it emphasizes the notion of relatedness and it takes seriously this idea that all things are somehow connected. The social work perspective is, in fact, one of understanding people in the context of their environment. The basic domain and function,

then, is intrinsically holistic and inclusive. The individual is understood as shaping, as well as being shaped by, his or her environment. There is, at least potentially, a dynamic exchange inherent within this perspective. However, in the counseling professions generally, including social work, there is a sad trend to become more scientific in the hopes of garnering the approval of the hard-core empiricists - as if this were ever a good thing.

So, I have been actively involved in working as a psychotherapist these past thirteen, or so, years. My bias is to view people as striving to seek balance and integration between their physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. I agree with Jung in that most neurosis experienced by people over thirty-five is as a consequence of living their lives "confined within too narrow a spiritual horizon. Their life has not sufficient content, sufficient meaning" (1965, p.140). Usually in my first session, I will ask the person if he or she could articulate the meaning and purpose of their lives. Some have obviously thought long and hard about such things for they answer the question with insight and real depth. Others, on the other hand, will look at me with abject terror in their eyes or, worse yet, with that dull gaze that reflects a near absence of understanding. I have a hypothesis: those who can provide a good enough answer to that all-important question will have an easier time in therapy and will be more likely to arrive at a successful therapeutic outcome. This is, I believe, because therapy when done best is itself a journey into self-exploration. The link between our own self-awareness and our ability to synthesize and incorporate even painful experiences into a meaningful tapestry is, I think, self-evident. My job, then, is a real privilege and a pleasure.

For me, at the end, there is only the spiritual journey. The stuff that surrounds us and the circumstances in which we find ourselves are only manifestations of the presence, or the absence of, the Spirit. There can be no larger question and, therefore, no greater pursuit, than this understanding of our lives' spiritual meaning and purpose. Erwin Goodenough (1965) speculated that the spiritual pursuit was ultimately so compelling for the reason, that at the end of it all, we could never be truly content to allow our ignorance to govern us. We require good enough answers to assist us in understanding both where we came from and where we are headed. The sorts of answers we seek are especially critical in assisting us with our sense of helplessness in the face of existential uncertainty (p.7).

Apprehending the sacred can occur on many levels and through various approaches. Our private, and communal devotions, can form and facilitate our access to the sacred. Also, certain places are widely regarded as being, literally, sacred ground. There is a burgeoning literature on sacred geography (Gallagher, 1993; Norris, 1995, 1998; Shrady, 1999). Some sites, both natural and manmade, evoke a deep sense of wonder from within us. I once visited a medicine wheel southwest of Majorville, Alberta that sits high upon a hill overlooking the Old Man River. The stones, radiating out from the center like giant spokes, have been carbon-dated at more than 3,000 years old. This is an ancient and holy place. There are mountains like Sinai, rivers like the Jordan and the Ganges, and rocks like Ayres, places like Lourdes and Stonehenge, and cathedrals like Notre Dame and Chartres, that point to the presence of the Holy and the sacred within our midst. For me, another such a place is the Benedictine monastery of Mount Savior located in the rolling hills of southwest New York State. I have, since that first visit, a love of the Benedictine

way. Their gracious hospitality, their industriousness and self-sufficiency, their gathering together throughout the day to sing and chant the hours of the *Divine Office*, and their motto: *labora et ora* - to work and to pray.

Unlike many of the sacred places mentioned previously, Mount Savior is neither an old nor an ancient place. Its beginnings go back only about sixty years. In truth, I perceive some of the buildings to be a little on the tacky side. The primary building houses the church - a somewhat modern structure with a remarkable skylight over the altar. The monks reside in a building attached to the sanctuary, accessing it through a long corridor. Male visitors were housed in a dormitory-like building on the other side of the church while female guests slept in a guest house a short distance away. There is simplicity and comprehensiveness both, in the buildings of the monastery, and in the Benedictine way. Mount Savior is my spiritual home. It is a place that nurtures my spirit and challenges me to always go beyond my conventional understanding of things.

I first visited Mount Savior some twenty-four years ago when, in fact, I was twenty-three years old. My first visit was a retreat that began with Holy Week, as a part of the “Religious Experience and Celebration” course. During my first visit there, I was struck by the familiar objects of my childhood piety; the blood-red glow of the sanctuary lamp, the crucifixes, the pews, and the lovely dusky scent of incense that permeated the chapel. The monastery has a grotto located in the basement that holds a sixteenth century statue of the Blessed Virgin. The community would gather there, candles in hand, for night prayer. Mount Savior also had a meditation room.



The meditation room was a simple affair; straw matting carpeted the floor and round, black cushions were scattered about the room for sitting upon. The room, enclosed by rice paper screens, was an attempt on the part of this community to examine and better understand east–west approaches to spirituality. Down the hall from the meditation room was a wall lined with numerous photographs of Allan Watts, Ram Dass, Thomas Merton and others in the forefront of the meditation movement. The meditation room itself, like so much of the monastery, was serene and complete in its austerity. So, in the heart of this monastery, just down the hall from the chapel, lay this seemingly incongruous space. Yet, in all senses of the word, it too was a sacred space. This was the real beginning of my return to the church of my childhood but in a new, inclusive, and integrative way.

My own spiritual journey, then, took me from the Catholicism of my childhood, to an exploration, albeit an incomplete one, of Judaism. From there, to Zen meditation, and then on to Transcendental Meditation. From TM, to Tai Chi, then on to singing and dancing with a bunch of Sufis, then chanting from a variety of religious faiths (Buddhist, Hindi, Christian, and Muslim). I am now at home again in the Catholic Church. When I began this spiritual journey, I was not certain why it was important, only that it was. It has been, at various times, a preoccupation, an adventure, a hindrance, and a vocation. I am reminded of Dag Hammarskjöld who wrote

I don't know Who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and therefore, my life ... had a goal. (1983, p.180).

Answering “yes” to the spiritual journey necessarily invites an openness to be shaped and moved in surprising directions. However, such restless hearts tend to kick up a lot of questions. But, for myself, it also has brought about a confirmation that speaks to the validity of the spiritual experience itself and to the common thread that underlies all spiritual experience.

### **Statement of the Research Question**

Wade Clark Roof has made a study of the spiritual practices of the so-called “baby-boomer” generation (1993, 1999). Some of his research indicates that “people will move into and out of organized religion with remarkable ease ... [and they will] explore new faiths – often in ways that are fairly invisible, such as reading books, attending lectures, listening to audiocassettes, or subscribing to a newsletter” (Roof, 1993, p.155). Roof has found that up to a third of those who “drop out” of organized religion will explore the teachings and philosophies of other religious traditions. Of this group, approximately one third will return to their faith-of-origin, another third will end up in a different spiritual home and the last third will discontinue their search altogether and remain outside of any formal faith context (1993, p.156). This group, then, that can be called seekers, constitute a considerable proportion of the population. What the spiritual search means, then, has potential impact not only for churches, but also for psychology, social work, and education.

This thesis concerns itself with uncovering and better understanding the themes common to seekers – those who have earnestly sought an experience of spiritual authenticity. The question emerges, then, “For those who have been seekers, what are the features and themes that define their experience of spiritual authenticity?”

### **Format of the thesis**

This thesis will draw from the works of many thinkers in the area of spirituality with a focus primarily upon two - Ken Wilber and James Fowler. The format of the chapters relating to the literature review and the chapter addressing the methodology will follow an imaginary dialogue between five characters - Ken Wilber, James Fowler along with three other “voices”; our conversation takes place on the grounds of Mount Saviour Monastery. Additional perspectives, then, will be introduced and discussed by way of the other three characters: myself; Brother Gerald who is a scholarly Benedictine monk who also acts as the guestmaster for the monastery; and Sophia, another guest at the monastery. The words given to James Fowler and to Ken Wilber are in most instances their own statements, or a close paraphrasing of them. I hope I have done justice to their work in this process. Where I have succeeded, the credit is truly theirs; where I have failed, I accept totally as a reflection of my own limitations.

The remainder of this thesis, then, is divided into four chapters. The second chapter, divided into five parts, is a review of the literature as it relates to authenticity in spiritual experience. The first part of the literature review begins with a dialogue between Brother

Gerald and me, introducing concepts and concerns regarding the general nature of the spiritual journey. Understanding the Great Search as a search for clarity is the essence of this section. The second part brings in Ken Wilber and James Fowler and discusses the difference between “religion” and “spirituality” and, most importantly, what constitutes an experience of authentic spiritual or religious conviction. The next, third, part continues to build our understanding through a discussion regarding how we develop spiritually; various theories of psychological development are mentioned with an emphasis on Fowler’s model of faith development. The fourth section moves on to Wilber’s concept of spiritual evolution. Sophia, the fifth character in this narrative, is introduced and provides some commentary on the potentiality of women’s experience in regard to spiritual development. The fifth part of the literature review concludes with a discussion around the mechanics of an experience of spiritual authenticity – in other words, how do we go about having such an experience?

The narrative format continues in the third chapter with a discussion on the methodology used for this study – a phenomenological hermeneutics research format. The chapter contains information regarding the selection of the co-researchers and the interview process. This chapter also includes a discussion concerning the use of the term “co-researcher”. Issues of validity and the danger of sliding into an extreme relativism are also covered.

The fourth chapter, the heart and substance of this study, includes summaries from the interviews with the five co-researchers. Following each summary, there are comments

made regarding their respective spiritual journeys. Afterwards, themes, common to all five co-researchers, are identified. Through a content analysis of the interviews, the research question is answered: seven dichotomous themes provide the basis for our understanding better the features that contribute toward the experience of spiritual authenticity for seekers.

The fifth, and final chapter, includes a discussion on the limitations of this study. These limitations were identified as researcher bias, the characteristics pertaining to this particular group of co-researchers, the lack of in-depth treatment of gender variables as they pertain to the spiritual journey, and the absence of including interviews with people for whom the spiritual journey is unimportant. This chapter also includes suggestions for future research as well as a discussion regarding some of the implications for counsellors and educators. The chapter concludes with a brief review of Ken Wilber and James Fowler, specifically their contribution to our understanding in this area of spiritual authenticity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### PART ONE

#### **A Search for the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful: Understanding the Spiritual Journey**

*... that for all its forced epistemological bravado,  
and for all its historically conditioned ambiguity,  
human reason still desires to know something of  
God; and desires that its knowledge of God be  
trustworthy and true.*

- Carr, 1996, p.170

[It is evening, just after dinner. I am out walking about on the grounds that surround Mount Savior monastery. It is the beginning of Holy Week.]

**Jim Pender:** Brother Gerald, hello. What a beautiful evening! I love this time of year; one can almost smell the spring that lies just beneath the surface.

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, it is a beautiful evening, Jim. [We walk along for a brief time in silence. Then Brother Gerald speaks again] You've met most of the members of our community earlier. Would you like to meet the others?

**Jim Pender:** Of course.

[Brother Gerald and I walk along a lane shadowed by bare towering trees. A warm, moist wind is blowing and the snow beneath our feet is almost slushy. We walk toward a large cedar hedge. As we get closer, the hedge can be seen to be circular and quite large. There is an opening just ahead of us and we enter through.]

**Brother Gerald:** Meet the other members of our community, Jim!

[What lay in front of us was a tidy graveyard, enclosed, almost womb-like, by the tall cedar hedge. I was somewhat taken aback by this meeting of the “other members”; startled by this confrontation with mortality. At the same time, Brother Gerald’s obvious care for, and his connection to, his other brothers also touched me. It was a connection, like many others in this place - it transcended any real meaning of time or space. I am reminded of the wonderful beginning to T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1971)

Time present and time past  
Are both present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past,  
If all time is eternally present (p.117).

We live; we die. If fortunate, we may have someone to remember us in recent times. Maybe even someone to visit our grave and mourn our passing. But there will inevitably come a time when there will be few, if any, who would be able to recall our face, the sound of our voice, or the passions that formed our preoccupations. What does it all mean, I wondered?]

**Jim Pender:** Brother, it is a pleasure to see you again. But standing here, in this place, facing the graves of those who have passed on, the whole question of life's meaning and, in particular, the experience of a spiritual reality, is all the more poignant. You are a man who has devoted yourself to the pursuit of the spiritual life...

**Brother Gerald:** Not so much the 'pursuit' part now, Jim, as the living it.

**Jim:** Okay, point taken – the search is over for you. But the question I have is how can you know that this is it? That the choices you have made and the paths you have walked are the right ones?

[We settle onto a stone bench. Although the air is beginning to cool we are protected in this present moment by the hedge. We notice Sophia, another retreatant, sitting some distance away in this large, womb-like, space]

**Brother Gerald:** For me, it is less a question of right choices or wrong choices as it is about choices that reflect a sense of honesty and integrity in my spiritual vocation. It is about decisions based on a lot of thought, study and, for sure, prayer. I am a brother in a religious order; I have chosen what is a very traditional path adhering to certain expectations and observances, which may appear to some as being highly prescribed and even ritualistic. In essence, it is a way of life defined and experienced through devotion and discipline. I found "our fast-food, fast-paced, fast-fix culture offers little support for the contemplative way. This hectic pace affects us all. We live in the thick of things, and



too often the thick turns into a thicket” (Zaleski & Kaufman, 1997, p.9). For me, to experience authenticity in my spiritual life, I needed a way that would facilitate time for both contemplation and action. I have made a choice to be obedient and to serve. What I can tell you, Jim, is that this way provides me with great satisfaction and fulfillment. It’s not the only way, and may not be your way, but is a valid and purposeful way nonetheless (Richardson, 1996, p. 71).

**Jim Pender:** Sorting through the myriad of spiritual options can be a daunting task. So many perspectives appear to compete with one another, each claiming to have *the* answer. At times, I sometimes find myself deeply doubting the real worth of the spiritual journey. It strikes me that this pursuit to find an experience of spiritual authenticity can appear, at times, to be a somewhat narcissistic endeavor. However, most of the time, this pursuit remains for me as the only ultimately purposeful and legitimate concern. In balancing these views, I question whether “transpersonal experiences really solve all the problems they purport to?” (Wright, 1995, p.9). Which leads me to wonder what, then, is the real value and substance of pursuing the spiritual path in terms of tangible, meaningful, outcomes. What difference does all this really make?

Having said this, I remind myself that some 90 percent of the population purports some belief in God (Shermer, 2000, p.79). The practice and devotion of that belief varies greatly. However, it does raise the likelihood that the spiritual search is a truly compelling and important concern for many. What, then, does belief in God mean in

terms of our lived experience and how do we know if we are on a path that is credible and will lead to an experience of authenticity?

**Brother Gerald:** I understand the confusion you are experiencing, Jim. The “inward journey has been motivated by a profoundly felt need for clarity; for a new perspective from which to view the whole” (Carr, 1996, p.184). There is little doubt that this journey is often a confusing one as we sort through the range of spiritual options that are available - even the number of choices available within one single tradition such as Catholicism. There are times in the search that can only be described as discouraging. This is partly true because you have not satisfied the longing of your heart – that holy longing that keeps you searching (Rolheiser, 1999). The search for God, the Holy, the Ultimate, however it is we wish to term the Divine, can take on many forms. A tradition within western philosophy suggests that “human beings know and seek God as the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful” (Groeschel, 1998, pp.6-10). We can, therefore, conceptualize that we are drawn to understand the Ultimate through a pursuit of one, or perhaps a combination, of these four ways.

**Jim Pender:** So, the spiritual search can be contained, or understood, as seeking God in one, or more, of these four ways.

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, I think so. The first way, understanding the Ultimate as the One, is the way that synthesizes, integrates, and brings order to all things. This is the way that serves as an antidote to fragmentation. This path will lead one to see God as the

source of all unity; the Hindi saying ‘that the names may be many but the Godhead is One’ exemplifies this path.

The second way, seeing God as the True, is the way of methodically and rationally pursuing explanations that see the Ultimate as the irrefutable and eternally immutable force that stands behind and infuses all reality. This way is the one that attracts theologians, philosophers, and those for whom apologetics is a meaningful pursuit. This is the path chosen by those who have to know the reasons why.

The third path sees the Ultimate as both the source as well as the repository of all that is right and just. Seeing God as the Good, here, suggests that God represents our ultimate standard of moral and ethical behavior. This is the way that provides us, as a society, with a sense of right and wrong; it is the communal “we”. God as the Good, is the God of righteousness; followers of this path will be people who understand and resonate with the notion of service.

The last way, the way of perceiving God as the Beautiful, is the way of the artist. It is a perception that views the Ultimate as the apex of aesthetic achievement. This is the way of the creative impulse, the kind of expression of God that results in a Sistine Chapel or the writing of **The Divine Comedy**. It is the way wherein artists attempt to depict the Divine reality, albeit always imperfectly and incompletely.

Ken Wilber, who happens to be visiting with us at the present, wrote “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful ... are simply the faces of Spirit as it shines in this world”(1998, p.201).

I think that is a nice summation.

**Jim Pender:** That is helpful, Brother. It provides one with a little structure and offers a definition as to how we can conceive of the spiritual journey. I like the fact that there is a variety of approaches – that no one way is necessarily better than another - various individuals will be attracted to different paths for any of a number of reasons.

As you were speaking, I was attempting to understand which of those paths relate to my own experience. I can see where all four ways are legitimate paths to understanding, knowing, and relating to God. For myself, I believe that the most compelling of these is to seek God as being the One; the place from which all things come and, ultimately, the place in which all things rest. I like Paul Tillich’s language when he speaks of the Divine as being the *Ultimate Concern* or, the *Ground of Being* (Tillich, 1957; Brown, 1970).

The path of understanding God as the One, however, has a real kind of philosophical orientation. Not that this does not connect to the so-called “real” world. But often explanations regarding the spiritual life can appear to be too pie-in-the-sky, too vague. The spiritual journey, ultimately, must make sense of our reality in some practical manner, don’t you think?



**Jim Pender:** There is a concern which I think many share, it relates to spirituality and religion operating as some kind of psychic buffer in order to reduce the sheer terror of living a life that potentially has no meaning; a life that is devoid of any real Ultimate Concern. This is what Becker (1973) was getting at - that we attempt to deny our own mortality in a multitude of ways and that spirituality and religion can be one of those ways.

**Brother Gerald:** There is a Zen saying that goes something like this: “Human desire is infinite but human need is finite”. In the traditional Buddhist way, life is essentially suffering, and all suffering is caused by desire. The remedy, then, is to attempt to detach from our desires and, therefore, from being drawn into countless cycles comprised of insatiable wants. Our challenge, all along, has been to be in the world as opposed to being of the world. I acknowledge that this has never been an easy task and now with our incredibly consumer-oriented culture it appears to be an even greater challenge than ever before. My life here in this monastery assists me in achieving that delicate balance between being in the world but not of it; it allows me the fullness to be who I am, free of all the trappings and distractions that exist in the outside world. Our call to prayer and devotion is the way we achieve this. For myself personally, I would find it very difficult to be spiritual in the way I need to be, if I was living “out there”. This isn’t avoidance or denial; rather, it is a willingness to live my life consciously and with intent. I agree with you that all too often religious observance can, I believe, function in a way that can deny our mortality. It is what Freud (1927) referred to as “an illusion” – a method we use to escape our own existential responsibility. In this way it really can operate as a so-called

defense mechanism – it protects, or defends us, from the “real” world. All I can say, Jim, is that if one enters into the religious life as an escape or a way to avoid the world, it cannot be an ultimately satisfying experience.

**Jim Pender:** So this, this life which may appear to many as an archaic throw back to the middle ages, is a reflection of true authentic spirituality?

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, for me it is.

**Jim Pender:** Brother, as you know, I have been involved with a number of religious and spiritual systems ranging from an exploration of Judaism, Buddhism, Sufism, and some which can only be politely termed as neo-pagan. Each of these ways had something to offer. However, at the end of the day, none was completely satisfying for me, or so I supposed, because I continued to look beyond them to yet another way of understanding God. The result has been that I have searched the spiritual landscape in a fairly detailed manner. There is something to what Lifton terms as being a ‘protean’ person – an individual who is “restlessly moving on to yet another experience or system in search of cohesion and purpose” (1986, p.11).

My own pursuit of God as the One, has led me to an exploration of many different ways of being religious or spiritual. I could not, early in my life, decide that one particular way of understanding God was *the* right way, in any sort of exclusive sense. Ironically, for me, understanding God as the One, has led me to an exploration of God the many.

Nevertheless, I do envy those who have been able to find a spiritual home early on in their lives and are able to rest there. In Bunyan's **Pilgrim's Progress** (1678/1972) the protagonist, Christian, goes about in search of the truth. He is instructed to

Look before thee. Dost thou see this narrow way? THAT is the way  
Thou must go ... and it is as straight as a rule can make it. This is the  
Way thou must go ... thou mayest distinguish the right from the wrong,  
the right being straight and narrow ( p. 27).

The “straight and narrow” has always struck me as being too confining, or maybe even restrictive. Perhaps, for me, it was mere inquisitiveness on my part, or immaturity and rebelliousness, or perhaps even it was a search for certitude and an experience of authenticity. Most likely all these explanations factor into the reasons that lay at the heart of my own journey. But, whatever the reason, this much is clear: I've had this urge to go off the road and see what lies to its side.

**Brother Gerald:** The spiritual journey is the essential quest for ultimacy, for authenticity. People have been seeking meaning and a way to understand themselves and their lives since the beginning of human history. In listening to you this evening, I am reminded of that wonderful line from Saint Augustine's **Confessions**, “Our hearts are restless, Lord, until it rests in you” (397/1960, p.3). Inevitably our journeys will continue until we find answers that are good enough. In fact, “all of us, like Augustine, can thank God for giving us restless hearts. Our restlessness is the source of all our energies”



(Rolheiser, 1999, p.207). This restless heart of yours, Jim, is what forms the very core and substance of the spiritual journey – it propels you forward.

As people, our potential concerning the spiritual journey consists of “powers that drive [us] toward actualization. [We are all] driven toward faith by [our] awareness of the infinite to which [we] belong, but which [we don’t] own like a possession (Tillich, 1957, p.9). It is very much like responding to a call – it cannot be put off very easily; it is something that functions in such a way as to form a significant subtext to our very lives. It’s just that important! It is that sense of being “grasped” by an urgency not of our own making (Tillich cited in Brown, 1970, p.9). What you are experiencing, then, Jim is normative for the seeker. Remember, by definition, a seeker is someone who is searching and has yet to find that experience of authenticity that places his or her heart at rest.

Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth century scientist, wrote an intensely intimate account of his pursuit of God. In his *Pensées*, Pascal mused upon the thought that we are all born with a God-sized hole in our hearts (1947, p.224). According to Pascal, the only thing that could fill this “hole” was an experience of almighty God. Many of us will attempt to fill that void in many different ways – some very negatively like addictions – but ultimately, only a relationship with the Ultimate will do the trick. There are three kinds of persons for Pascal:

Those who serve God, having found Him; others who are occupied in seeking Him, not having found Him; while the remainder live without seeking Him, and without having found Him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy; those between are unhappy and reasonable (1947, p.224).

The search for God, then, according to Pascal, is a very significant and credible journey. To Pascal's way of thinking, and mine as well, it is a reasonable and important pursuit. Everything you have encountered is what brought you to this point. Your search for good enough answers is your own unconscious longing to experience God – this is a very good thing. For Pascal, the seeker is one who is unhappy because he has not found the answer to the longing of his heart. But the Search, in his eyes, is both justified and defensible. St. Anselm said that our “faith seeks understanding” – we just naturally wish to know God better and will keep searching until we arrive at an answer that fits (CCCB, 1994, p.45).

Maslow, too, said something very similar to Augustine: “the human needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life, a religion or religion-surrogate to live by and understand by, in about the same sense as he needs sunlight, calcium, or love ... what man needs but doesn't have, he seeks for unceasingly” (cited in Lownsdale, 1997, p. 206). So, for me, all that a search means is that a good enough answer has eluded the individual. For some the search may be a short one, while for others, like you Jim, it can take you a long way away from where you started.

When any of us begin this search, it starts out in uncertainty and doubt. As the author of **The Cloud of Unknowing** (translated by Wolters, 1978, p.61) wrote,

When you first begin, you find only darkness, as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what this means except that in your will you will feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God.

It always begins with a question. The way, initially at least, is murky and unclear. But we respond to an impulse, a call. This “steadfast intention” that the author mentioned is something I see in you, Jim. It seems a bit hazy, perhaps, but I have little doubt that the shore that you are moving toward will become clearer with time. That is, in essence, the heart of the spiritual journey: to arrive at a place of knowing.

In our desire to arrive at that place of knowing, we can expend a lot of energy in how we conceptualize God. In particular we have a desire to know that God is ‘real’. There is nothing wrong with this; in fact it is an essential part of our spiritual journey.

Kierkegaard, however, offered us an important insight in terms of our desire to prove God’s existence. He suggested that the more we attempt to rationally construct such proofs, the less convincing the arguments become (Loder, 1981, p. 25). I might propose, Jim, then that we talk about the spiritual journey and what contributes to an experience of authenticity versus one of fraudulence.

**Jim Pender:** I would like that, Brother.

**Brother Gerald:** And, Jim, in our discussion, let us remember Kierkegaard’s caution and ensure that we leave room for intuition, wonder and mystery.

[Behind us we hear the voices of two men engaged in a quiet conversation. One is tall, bald and muscular, in his late forties wearing a rather severe-looking pair of black rimmed glasses. The other man is shorter and older and bearded. Ken Wilber, the

renowned philosopher and writer in the area of consciousness and James Fowler, a pioneer in the study of faith development have joined us.]

**Jim Pender:** Ken and James, welcome. Brother Gerald and I were just talking about the spiritual quest and aspects that speak for, or in some cases against, its authenticity. I noticed the two of you at dinner and was hoping that we might have an opportunity to chat a bit about this subject.

## PART TWO

### Spirituality and Religiosity: Understanding Authenticity

*We moderns are faced with the necessity of rediscovering the life of the spirit; we must experience it anew for ourselves. It is the only way in which we can break the spell that binds us to the cycle of biological events*

- C.G.Jung, **Modern Man in Search of a Soul**, 1933, p.122.

**Jim Pender:** Ken, I am reminded that you recently wrote, “academic religion is the killing jar of Spirit” (1999, p.312). That sounds a little harsh; what did you mean by saying that?

**Ken Wilber:** The killing jar is a reference to my childhood when I would go out into a field and capture moths or butterflies and place them in a jar with a cotton swab soaked in ether. This would kill them so that they could later be mounted. What I mean, Jim, in referring to academic religion as the killing jar is that too often a mere intellectual exploration results in something passionless, lifeless and stilted. The spiritual life speaks of a great vibrancy, beauty and purpose. Being overly analytical about spirituality can lead us away from the obvious point - spirituality is essentially about experience, and it is about understanding and living our lives differently as a direct consequence of that experience.

**James Fowler:** That is a good thing for us all to bear in mind as we proceed. Let's remember that we speaking of things that touch up against the very mystery and essence of our lives. It serves us poorly to become overly clinical. Nonetheless, having said that, there is some requirement upon us to articulate some of the concepts of this important area.

**Brother Gerald:** Defining what we mean when we speak of a spiritual experience as being "authentic" is an important starting point. I know that much of our discussion will revolve, at least indirectly, around this point. But authenticity is closely related to our belief; more than that, it speaks to an integrated set of beliefs that connect in a reasonable manner for us. In other words, it assists us in understanding our world, the Holy, and our relationship to the Divine. Authentic spirituality makes a difference in how we live our lives – it is demonstrable in a positive way. It affects how we approach others and the decisions we make; our behaviour, then, is based upon principles related to our belief. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, an experience of spiritual authenticity will be associated with a way, with a means to express our belief.

**James Fowler:** That is well said, Brother. Authenticity, as you describe it, is a characteristic of one's belief. It is respectful of the fact that spiritual viability may exist in a number of forms. Perhaps we can further our discussion along by defining what we mean when we use words such as "religion", "faith", "belief", and "spirituality".

**Jim Pender:** That's fair. If I could begin, in the past there has been a challenge in describing what religion is in that most attempts have suffered by appearing to be either too vague, or too narrow. There is, also, a natural tendency to want to segregate religion in such a way that we cannot see how it might relate to other important dimensions. This pulling it apart from the context of our lives allows for detachment but fails at providing an integrative understanding. At other times in our attempts to describe religion, we can be guilty of obvious biases and prejudices in how we position our own belief. We can even dismiss the beliefs of others (Hall cited in Cox, 1992, p.9).

The way I see it, religion is the 'outside' part of spirituality – it is what we can see, or observe. It is the structure, or the framework, one can follow to achieve whatever spiritual experience accompanies that particular way. Religion, as such, would usually present itself as a set of observances, practices, and beliefs that, having been followed, the individual could claim membership.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, as far as you have spoken, Jim, I would agree with you. The "outside" part, the observable part of spiritual experience as you mentioned, is what differentiates one tradition from another. Many of these traditions and denominations may even feel that their way is the best, and in some cases, the *only* true way. They then, in their struggle to distinguish themselves, serve only to separate and divide. This is how so many religious traditions, born of an impulse that is truly holy, end up purporting a view that is essentially a "flatland" (1996, p. 152).

**Brother Gerald:** “Flatland”, Ken? Please explain what you mean.

**Ken Wilber:** Glad to. Spirituality is, as you said, Jim, the interior. It is the force that is universal and is, at base, harmonizing and unifying. Every time we speak about “religion” instead of “spirituality” we are talking about a set of beliefs or dogmas, or the “outside” of religion. Flatlands are those places where the depth of a tradition has been squashed, or flattened; their rich interiors, therefore, are not well understood or followed. Here, in the flatlands of religion, we see a spiritual experience reduced to a set of observable practices, dogmas and beliefs which, as valid as they may be, reveal very little of the experience of the Holy to which they point.

This flatland conception of the universe has its roots in the Enlightenment, the so-called age of reason. This was really the birth of modernity – the birth of giving credence only to that which we could see, measure, or explain in scientific terms. It is a perspective that directs our understanding of the universe as being comprised basically of matter; it is the *weltanschauung* of scientific materialism (1998, p.10). In many ways, modernity marked the death of God, it ushered in the replacement of quality with quantity; it was the loss of value and meaning through the fragmentation of the lifeworld (1998, p.11). Flatland, as such, because it is concerned only with the observable, and therefore external, has no conception of consciousness, no interiors, no values, no meaning, no depth, and no Divinity (1998, p.56).



**Brother Gerald:** So modernity led to dissolution of the religious, theo-centric worldview – the perspective that supported the notion that God, and the Church, formed the center about which everything else revolved. As a result of this shift, we came to acknowledge a world comprised only of observable contours and dismissing the deeper spiritual import. As a consequence “consciousness itself, and the mind and heart and soul of humankind, could not be seen with a microscope, a telescope, a cloud chamber, a photographic plate, and so all were pronounced epiphenomenal at best, illusory at worst” (Wilber, 1998, p.56).

**Ken Wilber:** It’s a kick to have me quoted back to me! Yes, exactly. This led to the replacement of religion with science as the dominant worldview – and although there was a lot of good that came from that, it went way too far. What we actually experienced was fragmentation and dissociation – never were these two spheres to meet again. Religion denied science any validity, and science forevermore viewed religion as a bundle of quaint beliefs which were, ultimately, lacking proof and were, therefore, unsustainable (1998, p.17). So, things have pretty much drifted over the past two hundred years giving science increasing prominence and credence and relegating religion and spirituality to a hinterland comprised of fables and myths.

**Jim Pender:** The emergence of modernity really led to and supported the fragmentation of the various spheres of knowing – namely religion and science. I knew that science and religion were strained, if not out and out estranged, bedfellows. I always felt like I had to justify my interest in religious ideas – that somehow this was suspect and regarded as

being outside the area of true, scholarly inquiry. So the reason for this is primarily because this interest lay outside the dominant scientific paradigm – a paradigm that places little value on the area of religious study. Freud, whose influence can be felt to this day, placed no value on religion. He felt strongly that science and the material world were sufficient to explain all things. In fact he ends his book, **The Future of an Illusion**, stating that, “No, science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere” (1927, p.56). I think we all agree, that science is inadequate to explain all things and that that “elsewhere”, namely religion, has a very important role to play. What would all of you say, then, is the reason religions exist at all?

### **The function of religion**

**Brother Gerald:** Mircea Eliade is a scholar for whom I have a lot of respect. He would say that religion serves us in such a manner as to explain ourselves in the overall context of the world. Its purpose, therefore, is to explain and to make sense of existence and, in so doing, make us feel more comfortable in the world (Eliade, 1978, p.xiii).

This view moves beyond understanding religion as existing only to assuage our experience of existential dread. Rather, it is an attempt to create meaning for ourselves. I think it was you, Ken, who in one of your books said that we “human beings are condemned to meaning” (1993, p.40). In essence, we are condemned to pursue good enough answers about the meaning of existence. Religion is one place that has always

been concerned with providing answers to these deep questions. Yet, as you mentioned, so often religions themselves can take on this flatland perspective and lose sight of the validity that runs through most traditions. John Dewey once wrote, “there is no such thing as religion in the singular. There is only a multitude of religions” (1934/1967, p.7). It is critical to our understanding that we acknowledge there are innumerable traditions and denominations and they exist to speak of that mystery which surrounds us. Too often, it can become an idiotic debate over who has God, or the right understanding of God.

So religion, then, if it is to serve as an authentic spiritual aid, must not become dualistic itself.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, I would agree with that. Ultimately, the goal of any religion is to facilitate and validate transformation. That means, then, that a given religion would provide a way for its followers to actually experience some form of meaningful, spiritual change (1983, p.63). Authenticity, then, must be about more than dogma.

I think we can say that all religions are, in essence, transrational. That is, they are about things that cannot be understood strictly from the position of rational scientific inquiry. Where this becomes a problem, and speaks to the whole issue of authentic spiritual experience, is a reasoning that goes something like this: Science is the realm of rational, empirical, factual data. Religion, and spirituality in general, speak to experiences beyond the grasp of the scientific realm – spiritual experience is truly transrational. Therefore, if

spirituality is beyond rational understanding, then I can pretty much believe in anything that catches my fancy as one belief is about as valid as another (1995, p.206).

**James Fowler:** Absolutely so! We can see how this line of thinking leaves the door open for all manner of so-called New Age spirituality. Because all spiritual experience lies outside of scientific scrutiny, it can be extrapolated that any given spiritual experience is roughly the same and has about as much credibility as another.

**Ken Wilber:** That's right. This is what I refer to as the pre/trans fallacy. In my estimation, only about 20 percent of the sects and beliefs in the New Age movement are truly transpersonal and the remaining 80 percent are actually pre-rational. Spirit is transrational. This means that in order to understand it, we must move away from a rational, scientific way, of explaining it. It is transrational, not antirational (1993, p.268).

**Jim Pender:** So the continuum, if that is what we would call it, goes from pre-rational to rational to transrational. And because the pre and the trans are both non-rational, then, many confuse the two to be the same. I think that the pre/trans fallacy is an important concept for us to keep in mind, especially in assisting our understanding of authentic religious experience.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes it is. Maybe now is a good time to further define what we mean by "religion" in terms of how it functions and the purpose it serves. Brother Gerald mentioned Mircea Eliade a short time ago. Eliade, like Joseph Campbell, Ninian Smart,

and others, has attempted to chronicle the important stories, myths, and beliefs that have provided humankind with a spiritual roadmap, as it were.

Religion is a term applied to everything from dogmatic beliefs to mystical experience, from mythology to fundamentalism (1998, p.162). There are lots of ways to understand and to define religion. One way, is to view religion as “an engagement involving the individual in a non-rational way – things that exist outside of our ability to explain. The aspects of religion that relate to things like grace, faith, transcendence, and satori fall into this category. They are experiences that go well beyond our ability to explain them. They are the essence of spiritual experience; they are deeply meaningful, but our understanding of them rest outside real cognition” (1983, p.56).

Another important function of religion is to see it as a meaningful or integrative process – as a legitimate activity that serves to establish meaning, truth, integrity and stability. The view of God as One – the creator and the giver of harmony. In this capacity, religion explains and makes sense out our existence. This way of understanding religion is critical to the seekers’ path as it provides the means by which we may to come to belief (1983, p.56).

A third way in which we can understand religion is to understand its connection to eternal time – a kind of immortality project that pushes back the terror that this life may indeed be all that there is. This way can be a kind of wishful, defensive, compensatory belief that is created to assist us in dealing with that existential dread and terror of a death without hope of an afterlife. This is what Freud talked about when he referred to religion as an

“illusion”; it keeps us from facing the facts of our life head-on. Freud wrote that, religious ideas “are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind” (1927, p.30). Religion was, for Freud, about the ultimate need to be cared for, and to be looked after, by a caring and always loving father. Religion is essentially about the Oedipus complex and as such “would be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” (1927, p.43). Religion here functions to hoodwink people.

Becker (1973) as well discussed the function religion can play in terms of making sense of our lives in the certainty of our eventual, inevitable death. The belief that most religions offer is that our time here on earth is only a part of the story. This expanded, eternal perspective, that most religions claim, serves in such a manner as to assist us in getting up day after day and moving forward through our lives (Wilber, 1983, p.57). Without believing that there was something after our death, we would find it existentially excruciating to keep going.

Becker does, unlike Freud, acknowledge that religion can, and does, play a very important and credible function – it is not merely a deception, or a way to make us comfortable with our existential situation. In very concrete terms, religion can function so as to solve

the problem of death, which no living individuals can solve ... religion, then, gives the possibility of heroic victory in freedom and solves the problem of human dignity at its highest level ... religion, alone gives hope, because it holds open the dimension of the unknown and unknowable, the fantastic mystery of creation that the human mind cannot even begin to approach (pp.203-204).

This element of “holding open the dimension of the unknown and unknowable”, as Becker puts it, is the portal through which an authentic experience of spirituality may be accessed. It resists the notion that all of human life is explainable and measurable. It leaves us open to the reality of mystery and the importance of wonder.

Another feature of religion is viewing it as part and parcel of an all-encompassing evolutionary impulse. Thinkers like Hegel saw all evolution and history as a process of ever-increasing self-realization. Religion and spiritual ideas are understood within their historical contexts. As our thinking and our level of achievement progresses, so too does our understanding of the Holy. The way in which primitive civilizations understood God differs significantly from our understanding today. Another way to understand the function of religion is...

**Jim Pender:** Hang on, Ken! Just how many more ways are there!

**Ken Wilber:** Just a few more. But I think it’s important to understand that there are several facets to our understanding of religion and the purpose or function they serve. And I should also mention that all these functions are perfectly valid, as far as they go. As we will discuss later, most religions just do not go far enough.

So, like I was saying, a fifth way is to see religion as a fixation or regressive feature in the growth of the person. This is closely related to Freud’s view, and it is overall a negative assessment of the value of religion. People who adhere to religious beliefs

would be perceived as being significantly, psychologically, deficient. It reduces the meaning of sacred myth to the level of fairy tales. God becomes a projection of our neuroses. This view operates from a mindset that dismisses the idea of the Holy. It would conclude that we confuse myth with reality in order to sublimate anxiety.

And, yes, as we mentioned previously, religion might be defined as a belief system that is used to invoke or support faith. This is accomplished through sacred writings, canons, commandments, practices and so forth. This is exoteric religion – religion from the “outside”. The opposite, is seeing it from the “inside” – esoteric religion and their experiential bases. It is what you said, Jim, is spirituality. It is “the higher, inward or advanced aspects of religious practice” (1982, p.59).

**Jim Pender:** Religion is important for many of the reasons you mentioned, Ken. It primarily provides us with a way to understand and to give shape and expression to our faith. It supports and transmits belief to a community of people in its effort to articulate the Holy and what our response to the Divine might be. Religion provides us with a code, a standard of behaviour, in response to the Divine. These are some of the characteristics that are common to authentic religions everywhere (McBrien, 1989, p.278).

**Ken Wilber:** Authentic religions, Jim, all, in some way, point to, or attempt to answer a longing of our hearts. It is just as I mentioned that many do not provide a way to access the deeper features of religious experience. We confuse the belief, the surface if you will, with the experience and, ultimately, that may not prove to be very satisfying (1983, p.72).



## **Belief and Faith**

**James Fowler:** I would agree with everything you said, Ken. Religion, as such, functions in many different ways and people's experience of it, then, can appear to be somewhat various. Religion, it should be remembered, is fueled by faith. Faith, can be understood as providing the backdrop to formal religious approaches, and it functions in such a manner as "to screen off the abyss of the mystery that surrounds us" (1981, p. xiii). In other words, it assists us in bringing a sense of order to things. Our faith, and I think all of us here have a deep faith, allows us to place our lives into a much larger context.

In many ways, it is faith, rather than belief or religion, that is the most fundamental category in our search for relation to the Holy. Belief, by and large, relates to knowledge whereas faith, is relational in nature – faith is about connection (1981, p.294). Further, I see faith as an orientation of the whole person; an aligning of our will, a resting of our hearts, or however you wish to frame it, that is in accordance with one's ultimate concern (1981, p.14). The faith dimension, then, can be seen as a common, almost universal, impulse.

**Ken Wilber:** The words, "faith" and "belief", are extremely important concepts. James, you tend to use the word "faith" in a very broad and inclusive manner suggesting that

faith is common and natural. Faith can also mean the giving of our assent to something without being able to really prove its claim. The way I see it, faith “soldiers on when belief becomes unbelievable, for faith hears the faint but direct call of a higher reality – of Spirit, of God – a higher reality that, being beyond the mind, is beyond belief. Faith stands on the threshold of direct supramental, transrational experience” (1999, p.314). Faith, when all is said and done, is hope – a deep, trusting, sense that all will be well.

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, well said, Ken. It is impossible for me not to recall the words of Saint Paul when he wrote that faith “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews, 11:1). Faith accepts something as true even if it cannot be proved. My tradition would see faith as a personal act – it is the free response of the human person to the initiative of God. It is as you said, James, our faith that propels us forward seeking understanding. It is this faith, a response to a divine impulse, that keeps us connected to realities that our mind cannot totally grasp.

**James Fowler:** I’m sure that we have all said, from time to time, that we’ll take a given claim “on faith”. In other words, we don’t know, or perhaps cannot know, for certain the truth of a given claim, but it seems to connect, or make sense to us, on some level. Belief, Kant identified, as “the holding of a thing to be true” (Kant cited in Niebhur, 1989, p.31). Paul Tillich, too, said that faith is “a total and centered act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite and ultimate concern (Tillich, 1957, p.4). Faith, then, is no passive or arbitrary matter. It is a dynamic process that engages us with the very core of our being. Our faith is the dynamic upon which our belief is built. Belief, then, follows faith. We come to believe based on where our faith has led us.

**Jim Pender:** So, in terms of understanding this concept of authenticity concerning the spiritual experience it is critical to understand that religion is the organized, observable shell that surrounds spirituality. Religions, when removed from their vibrant, living source, are at risk of becoming reductionistic and illustrative of what Ken refers to as a spiritual flatland. Understanding the various ways in which religion can function assists us in our understanding of what constitutes an experience of spiritual authenticity. The concepts of faith and belief are essential to our understanding of the religious experience. The fact is faith, and belief, are both essential and dynamic parts of the spiritual journey.

## PART THREE

### Circles inside of spirals: Understanding Fowler's Theory of Spiritual Development

*Human potentialities are powers that drive toward actualization. Man is driven toward faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs ... This in abstract terms is what concretely appears as the "restlessness of the heart" within the flux of life.*

- Paul Tillich, **Dynamics of Faith**, 1957, p.9.

**Jim Pender:** In this age of religious pluralism, there are, of course, any of a number of responses that one may make to the spiritual call. It seems that some people are very content in maintaining an almost unexamined existence in adhering to the faith of their fathers, so to speak. Others will wrestle with and, potentially, reject their family's religious practices feeling compelled to look beyond them. This is the difference between what William James (1902) identified as the "once born" and the "twice born" person (1982, p.80). There is also a group of individuals, who having rejected their families' belief are not inclined to search for better answers – a sort of a spiritual moratorium takes place. Others, in our present day and age, are raised with virtually no introduction to the spiritual life – a fact that has serious social implications (Harpur, 1996, p.191). When I see clients in my practice and I ask them about their spiritual and religious beliefs, many will often say that around adolescence they simply rejected religion and, as middle-aged individuals, they still do not perceive this as any sort of a deficit. I don't know about you guys, but it seems to me that there are few, if any, decisions I made as an adolescent that I would be content to live with today – particularly so important a one. This choice that

many make, in terms of not pursuing a spiritual dimension to their lives, does not strike me as being particularly credible.

**James Fowler:** Well, Jim, you're touching on an important area here regarding how people develop and grow spiritually. There are many variables impacting one's religious development: how people were socialized around religious issues as children; parent-child relations and experiences around their upbringing; life-cycle issues; the influence of our life partners; and the level of education we attain (Roof, 1993, pp.161-171). Each of these elements is potentially significant in their own right. These variables are, then, important to bear in mind.

Many of us appear to have different perceptions and are captivated by faith differently – even within the same religious tradition or denomination. A shared faith does not necessarily result in shared experience. I believe that there are, in the spiritual journey, certain stages through which people may pass. But faith development, in my opinion, is not a linear process but, rather, a recognition that we possess the potential to develop and grow throughout our lives. As a model, my theory of faith development would look like spirals overlapping and leading to other levels of understanding. This is a theory that suggests that there are various stages of faith. It should be remembered that a “transition from one faith stage to another does not necessarily mean a change in the *content* or the *direction* of one's faith. It does mean, however, changes in the ways one holds, understand, and takes responsibility for living one's faith” (1996, p.68). Our grasp of, and

the way in which we contextualize, our faith can change as we move through these different stages.

**Jim Pender:** That sounds similar to the teaching from developmental psychologists who believe that we all have tasks or challenges that we must successfully complete in each stage before we can go on to the next stage in a more or less unencumbered manner. Some of these theorists suggest that a poorly completed stage would have some important consequences as we move into other stages; that there would remain a weakness, or a vulnerability, relating back to that stage as a consequence (Santrock, 1988, pp. 168-173).

There are a number of thinkers who have contributed much to our understanding in this area of developmental psychology. Jean Piaget identified stages of childhood development particularly as they relate to the development of cognition. Lawrence Kohlberg completed some pioneering thinking in how we develop a sense of moral reasoning, and Daniel Levinson (1978) researched the area of adult male development.

Of all the developmental theorists, Erik Erickson (1950) developed an eight-stage model that attempts to capture the span of one's life - right from infancy through to late adulthood. As such, Erickson's model has a sense of inclusiveness, and a depth, that I feel attempts to capture the magnitude and scope of life.

**James Fowler:** I agree. The theorists you mention have all contributed significantly to developmental theory and they have shaped my thinking to a substantial

degree regarding my theory of spiritual development (Creamer, 1996, p.136). As the name itself suggests, we ‘develop’ or move on from one stage to another depending on a number of factors including our environment, our physical and intellectual capacities, and our age. This also suggests that growth can be continuous.

**Jim Pender:** Erikson’s last stage, one he calls *Integrity versus Despair*, is conceptually an important stage in terms of the spiritual journey. Essentially, it calls for the individual to find a way to look back and integrate the experiences of their life in such a manner that a sense of purpose and meaning may be discerned. Erikson wrote that “only in him who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being, the originator of others or the generator of products and ideas – only in him may gradually ripen the fruits of these seven [previous] stages” (1950/1963, p.268). Life experience, the tenacity to stay the course, and the ability to imbue meaning into the totality of the events of one’s life are essential to spiritual and psychological growth.

**James Fowler:** And the failure to do so will cause the person to become embittered and at a loss in terms of how to understand their life. Such a situation creates a sense of despair – despair that one’s life has failed in some important way to provide one with that connection to one’s ultimate concern. I am reminded of Goethe, who at the end of his life stated that it “has been nothing but a pain and a burden” – this is exactly the sort of statement made by a person who has not successfully reconciled his life. It is

shocking that Goethe, with all that he had accomplished, would be in such a space of spiritual poverty.

**Ken Wilber:** James, you and I both have some ideas on how ‘development’ occurs. Mine can be a pretty long and broad perspective that is somewhat in philosophical nature. As I see it, James, you place a good deal of emphasis on the psychological model. As Jim mentioned earlier, the works of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson have a special place in your model. Why don’t you tell us little bit about your stages.

**James Fowler:** I’d be pleased to, but I give you all permission not to let me drone on. The model I am proposing consists of seven stages – or, really, six stages and a beginning. My conception of people’s spiritual growth is that there are some common characteristics that can cluster in such a way as to suggest a “stage”. The distinctions between the various stages may lack clarity; we are speaking of human experience, after all. So, it would be a mistake for us to think of these “stages” as being separate, or finite, expressions. There is overlap between them – the spiral image can be helpful in terms of conceptualizing their relationship to one another. All of us experience, to a lesser or greater degree, some aspects of the first few stages. Some of us may even grow in such a way as to attain the last stage; however, it is my belief that very few attain that level of development. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let’s start at the beginning.

The first stage, or the beginning of all our journeys, is what I will call an *Undifferentiated Faith* – it is the stage that accompanies infancy – a time when we are totally dependent



upon our caregivers. Here, we see the seeds of trust, courage, hope, and love being placed squarely against the possibility of abandonment and any of a number of inconsistencies that can mitigate in our achieving a sense of reliable mutuality. Think of an infant and that child's total dependence upon his or her caregivers. If the child receives adequate attention and appropriate responses from his or her caregivers, then, the child will have an adequate foundation upon which faith may be developed. Getting our needs met consistently and adequately sets the foundation for much of what follows in our lives – psychologically as well as spiritually. The failure of these basic needs being met can result in serious consequences such as the child developing a potentially serious personality disorder, like narcissism (Fowler, 1981, p.121).

**Jim Pender:** This stage would correspond with Erikson's first stage of *Trust versus Mistrust*. If the child gets enough of what he needs, then he or she will then have enough to go on to develop that necessary sense of trust – in both their environment, as well as in other people – that their needs will, more or less, be met. Such “consistency, continuity, and sameness of experience provide a rudimentary sense of ego identity” (Erikson, 1950/1963, p.246). The importance of achieving a satisfactory resolution to this stage is obvious.

**James Fowler:** That's right, Jim. This first stage is a critical one for it sets the tone and the direction that can be taken in terms of the future. Trust “born of care is, in fact, the touchstone of the actuality of a given religion (Erikson, 1950/1963, p.250). Typically, a failure to get enough of what one needs at this stage results in people growing up and

deeply doubting that anything like a good and benevolent God does, or even could, exist. They can become too preoccupied with their own needs in the present because these basic needs were inadequately met in this crucial first stage of life.

The second stage is one I called *Intuitive-Projective Faith* and concerns children from about age three to age seven. Important skills are acquired during this period – children gain the tools of speech and are able to begin to understand symbols. However, the relationship between cause and effect is something that is not well understood at this time. It's a time that sees the birth of the imagination – it is a fantasy-filled period and one where imitation is predominant. It is my conviction, that virtually no child would reach school age, with or without a religious upbringing, without forming some image of God.

**Ken Wilber:** That's an interesting statement, James. What you say suggests that we all have this innate ability and urge to connect with the Godhead in some way that stems from our earliest of days – almost like it was some inevitable impulse inherent in life.

**James Fowler:** Yes, I like how you phrase that, Ken. It is a natural and inevitable impulse. The third stage in this model is what I call *Mythic-Literal Faith*. It is the faith experience of the child who struggles to separate reality from fantasy – but it is a time when children “are far clearer and more logical about their faith experience” (Creamer, 1996, p.143). This is the age when issues of right and wrong take precedence and

children respond to stories of justice. It is also the time when we develop an anthropomorphic image of God.

**Brother Gerald:** So God becomes a man in a white robe, sitting on a throne, with a long white beard?

**James Fowler:** That's exactly right, Brother. It is a time in which we take on the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize our sense of belonging to whatever community in which we happen to be involved (1981, p. 149).

The next stage has the rather cumbersome name of *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*. Here the child has the ability to take on the perspective of others. God is re-imaged as having inexhaustible depths and is capable of knowing personally those mysterious depths of self. This is the time of adolescence – a time when the potential for conversion, as William James pointed out, is particularly potent (James, 1902/1982, p.29). It is the adolescent's hunger for a God who knows, accepts, and confirms our sense of who we are at a very deep level (Fowler, 1981, p.153).

The adolescent is involved with his or her world in an increasingly more complex way. The attempt to individuate, to become one's own person, is counterbalanced with the need to belong. This, understandably, poses considerable stress. There is an attempt to gain some control over their environment to some extent. Their involvement has linked them to the world of friends, school, and learning. As such, they have now grown beyond

their family as they continue to participate in these increasing spheres of complexity. The challenge is for the individual's faith to provide a coherent orientation in the midst of this complexity. The real task of adolescence can be understood as the search for identity – the question of “who am I, really?” becomes a primary focus. This can also be a time that is characterized by intolerance for ambiguity and a need for concrete answers.

**Ken Wilber:** This sounds like the place where a real need exists to know with absolute certainty what and who God is – a kind of orientation associated with evangelicals.

**James Fowler:** Yes. This is a time of conforming, of fitting in and belonging. Also, because there is so much upheaval and confusion, there is a desire to state, with some certainty, the important things in life, like God, and what do I really believe. Understandably, this need to belong is a compelling one for most of us. One can really understand why one would not be inclined to move too far away from the group. Usually such a move brings with it severe social sanctions, like ostracism and alienation. Little wonder many of us remain happily within this level and do not move on to further stages.

The next stage, in fact, is one that calls for a critical reviewing and thereby an ‘owning’ of one's beliefs. This stage I call *Individuative–Reflective Faith*; it is a time when we leave home, at least emotionally, and spiritually. The “faith of our fathers” as you put it earlier, Jim, is carefully scrutinized to see if we can really believe and support it. It is a stage filled with critical questions and a time of broken symbols. We find ourselves taking seriously the responsibility of our beliefs and commitments. Ideally, this stage

would take place in early adulthood, but for many of us it may not occur until our thirties or even our forties (1981, p.182).

**Brother Gerald:** It seems that this stage would relate to Jung's notion of individuation. The name you have given the stage seems to reflect this (Jung, 1965, p.296).

**James Fowler:** Yes, individuation is the name of the game here. Jung would say that for all of us, it is critically important that we become our own persons. If we adhere to our family-of- origin's beliefs, it is only possible because we have carefully examined them. This can be a time of real pain and disillusionment, though. There can be a tendency for people to throw the baby out with the proverbial bath water, so to speak.

**Brother Gerald:** What do you mean?

**James Fowler:** Well, what can happen is that people may examine their family's belief system and conclude that they cannot support it. This can be a tremendously disillusioning experience and may lead the person to forfeit any further search for answers that are good enough. This can be a real spiritual crisis – a kind of dark night of the soul lacking in any positive outcome. To just reject, however, is not what Jung would term individuation. There has to be a satisfying resolution to this dilemma.

This is what you were discussing earlier, Jim. You mentioned that from time to time you see in your clients where they reject their family's beliefs but fail to embrace a more meaningful understanding. As you indicated, this may not be a credible position for one to hold, but it is important for us to see where this comes from. The disillusionment that comes with not being able to believe any longer, or not able to understand your beliefs, can be a real crisis of heartbreaking proportions. Hopefully, individuals will wrestle with this sense of disillusionment and, instead of not looking any further, will actually be compelled to continue the search.

**Brother Gerald:** Like Pascal said – a seeker may be unhappy because her search has, so far, not met the longing of her heart, but to search is reasonable and, to some extent common.

**James Fowler:** That's correct, Brother. A successful resolution to this stage would see the person continue the search until they have found a spirituality that has meaning for them. The next, fifth, stage offers that possibility. My *Conjunctive Faith* stage sees "truth as being more multidimensional and there exists a radical openness to the truth. Here the person develops a second naivete – a reclaiming and reworking of one's past in such a way that we remain open to paradox and able to bridge the tensions between opposing truths. In this stage we may find that we are ready for some significant encounters with other religious traditions" (1981, p.186). This stage supports the seekers' path – it invites investigation and examination. This is the stage, Jim, which understands the need, at least intellectually, to go off the "straight and narrow" path to see what lay

beyond. In fact it can only fully occur as a consequence of having gone off the straight and narrow.

**Jim Pender:** You mean that I'm not some kind of a spiritual flake? This is a relief! I'm just kidding, For me, I could return to the Catholicism of my childhood only if I really knew what else existed. I always knew, intuitively anyway, that the Search was a worthy pursuit, but one certainly does not receive a lot of support for this kind of thing.

**James Fowler:** No, probably not. It would be difficult, for instance, for anybody to really get into this stage before midlife. We simply lack the skills, the experience, and the wisdom to accomplish what this stage requires of us any earlier in our lives. Midlife is a rich and potent time, it is the period in our lives that Levinson identifies as offering us the possibility of "becoming our own person" (1978, p.141). It is at this time that we feel we can go our own way and feel less constrained by the opinion of others. When you think of it, the ability to navigate around in waters that hold disparate perspectives without losing yourself, or by denying others' perspectives, is no small task. It is what the mystics call detachment; I don't have to make you wrong in order for me to be right.

**Brother Gerald:** It has been suggested, James, that your model of faith development is a reflection of the pluralism that has emerged as such a pervasive feature in our culture. In your description of the various stages, you have successfully avoided becoming prescriptive in the sense of endorsing one belief over another. You have provided, it seems to me, a valuable container to hold the issues and challenges inherent within

spiritual growth. In so doing, you have found a way of “speaking of faith, and holding traditional religious (and secular) symbols, stories, and practice that does not foreclose the conversation about ultimate values and commitments” (Parks, 1991, p.102).

**Ken Wilber:** James, I agree with what Brother Gerald has just said. Your model of faith development has contributed significantly to our understanding of the characteristics inherent in religious faith. I can see where this fits into how I see things as well. As a comment, though, your model doesn’t seem to go far enough. The strength of your model is that it does provide us with a framework from which we can better understand the dynamics of faith development. Where I see your work being particularly strong is, paradoxically, also its weakness. Your success in avoiding the trap of being overly prescriptive is great, but ultimately you fail in assisting us to identify a way, or point to a stage where one actually achieves a union with Spirit (1995, p. 596).

**James Fowler**        I think you are correct, Ken, I don’t! It was never my intent to enter into a how-to-achieve-union-with-God model. My model attempts to provide insight into the various perspectives people hold in each of these stages. Each stage can be conceived as a circle, a complete and homogenous whole in and of itself. Each of these wholes has the potential of spiraling, of leading us into other stages, but not necessarily. Movement “from one of these stages to the next is not an automatic function of biological maturation, psychological development, or mental age” (Lownsdale, 1986, p.27). Most people do not move through all the stages I have identified. Does that mean that they lack a spiritually meaningful perspective? No!



There is, however, a final stage, which I haven't mentioned yet – it is called *Universalizing Faith* – it is very rare and is best exemplified by people such as Mother Theresa, Ghandi, Dag Hammarskjold, and Martin Luther King Jr. It is the kind of faith that crosses over any boundary or denomination and is capable of bringing people from multiple backgrounds together. I think “the most revealing aspect of any theory of human development is the character of the last stages” (1984, p.20). I should mention that the lack of articulation I am able to bring regarding stage is a criticism many have of my theory. It is a stage that points to the broad and sweeping impact that a person of immense charisma and integrity can have.

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, the last stages show the full potential. But I agree with you, there are people for whom a stage three or four attainment will be a meaningful and complete experience. While you were speaking I was jotting down a few things, James, just to get a clearer understanding of your stages of faith development and how they correspond with Erikson's psychosocial stages of development. What I have is

#### **ERIKSON'S STAGES**

Trust v/s Mistrust  
Autonomy v/s Shame & Doubt  
Initiative v/s Inferiority  
Identity v/s Role Confusion

#### **FIRST ADULT ERA**

Intimacy v/s Isolation

#### **MIDDLE ADULT ERA**

Generativity v/s Stagnation

#### **LATE ADULT ERA**

Integrity v/s Despair

#### **FOWLER'S FAITH STAGES**

Undifferentiated Faith (infancy)  
1. Intuitive-Projective Faith  
2. Mythic Literal Faith (school years)  
3. Synthetic – Conventional Faith (adolescence)

4. Individuative – Reflective Faith

5. Conjunctive Faith (mid-life)

6. Universalizing Faith

(Fowler, 1981, p.113).

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, okay, it is helpful to see it written out like that. This model of yours is great in describing our experience of faith from inside. However, what I'm getting at is that your model stops short of facilitating actual spiritual experience (1983, p.67). Where I would like to go is to provide the climber, the individual, with a model that acknowledges access to God, the Holy, Spirit, or whatever you wish to call the Divine (1995, p.596).

**James Fowler:** Sure. That is one of the purposes of religion that you've covered earlier – the fact that religion should allow for some sort of transforming experience. My model is not a “how to”. Rather, it is a discussion of “what is”. I do not see our perspectives as competing, but complementary. Perhaps, Ken it would be helpful if you talked with us a little bit about how you see things.

## PART FOUR

### The Ladder and the Climber: Ken Wilber and the Kosmos

*So although the only thing a person fundamentally wants is unity consciousness, the only thing he is ever doing is resisting it. We are always looking for unity consciousness, but in a way that always prevents the discovery: we look for unity consciousness by moving away from the present.*

-Wilber, **No Boundary**, 1979, p.153

**Ken Wilber:** Let me preface my comments by saying that I certainly take the long view when it comes to spiritual development. For me development, if that is what we wish to term it, is essentially evolutionary in nature. In fact, I would say that evolution is itself Spirit-in-action (1997, p.79).

This long view, as I mentioned goes right back to the beginning, or what we can discern as the beginning of things. The so-called Big Bang – first of all, I find it astonishing that scientists today would support a theory that in essence says “first there was nothing then bang! Now there’s something!” That kind of reasoning defies both logic as well as the laws of physics as we understand them. The universe is not an “oops”, it is not a mistake; there is a deeply patterned structure and a meaning in things that go all the way back (1995, p.xiii).

The general progression of the Kosmos ...

**Jim Pender:** Cosmos, like Carl Sagan?

**Ken Wilber:** No, not quite, Jim. This is Kosmos with a “k”. It is a term first used by ancient Greeks to speak of the whole of existence. The “cosmos” is contained within the “Kosmos”.

So, as I was saying, the general progression of the Kosmos is to move from the simpler to the more and more complex. The development that has occurred, then, is a movement from the most elemental and basic, which happens to be matter, to the next level of complexity, which is the biological (body). The next development in the process is the mind. The last two stages would be the soul and the spirit (1983, p.35). It is a move from physiology to biology to psychology to theology (1988, p.10). The lower levels are necessary and support the higher levels. The higher levels emerge by way of the lower levels, so to speak, not from them (1983, p.38).

**Jim Pender:** Wait a minute, Ken. You’re losing me a bit. I see that you are a big picture kind of guy in the truest sense of that term. However, I confess, that I see more science here than philosophy.

**Ken Wilber:** Okay, Jim. Let me explain in a little bit of detail. Yes, I do sound somewhat science-based in some of my thinking. I would support a view that sees science and religion as basically compatible, sharing some important tenets in common. As we will discuss, science and religion have become so separated from one another that

these links are no longer very apparent. The reality is, science concerns itself with the material, or physical world, and has little patience for matters of the spirit. But science on the whole “cannot reject a mode of knowing merely because it is interior” (1998, p. 149).

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

First, let’s begin with an understanding that there is a pattern to existence. When we remove all the stuff that lies about the periphery, we will find that there are certain basic truths.

**Brother Gerald:** This sounds like really important stuff here.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, I think it is critical to our understanding. So, the first thing for us to understand is that reality, as such, is not composed of things or processes, but of holons.

**Jim Pender:** Holons?

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, holons. That is a term first coined by Koestler. A holon refers to that which, being a whole in one context, is part of a wider whole in another (1997, p.40). A standard mistake in most scientific approaches is that they tend to mistake a part for being the whole. It is typical of reductionistic thinking. But holons go all the way back and all the way forward, they are the elemental building block of reality.

**Jim Pender:** I think I've heard you say, Ken, that "holons turtle all the way down and all the way up" (1995, p.39). Like you were saying, things tend to take on greater complexity the higher they go and, in the end, all things are connected.

**Brother Gerald:** So far, so good. As things increase in complexity, then the capacity for consciousness emerges. This has implications for our discussion on spirituality.

**Ken Wilber:** It sure does. It is here that one can perhaps begin to see that a spiritual dimension is built into the very fabric, the very depth, of the Kosmos (1995, p.57).

If you destroy any of the holons at lower levels, then the holons that exist above it will also be destroyed. As an example, if we pollute our world to the point that it can no longer sustain human life, then that holarchy, the one that relates to human biology, will cease. The lower holons, those related to base physical properties, like earth and rocks, will remain.

But holons coevolve – they don't do this alone for the simple reason that there are no alone holons. So the micro is constantly in relational exchange with the macro at all levels of its depth. The further up we go we see that holons include all previous levels, transcending to the next. Include and transcend. This is the thread that turtles all the way up, and all the way down (1998, p.7).

**Jim Pender:** Okay, so the more we ‘evolve’, then the more accessible we are to the Spirit. So how does all this really fit into a framework of spiritual development?

**Ken Wilber:** Well, I do have a theory of sorts – it really is my idea of how the basic structures of consciousness develop. Unfortunately, the names I have given to the various stages are no more readily understandable than labels James has given to his stages. Let me just list them to get them out of the way:

Sensorimotor structures  
 Phantasmic- emotional  
 Representational mind  
 Rule/role mind  
 Formal-reflexive  
 Existential or vision-logic  
 Psychic  
 Subtle  
 Causal  
 Nondual

The “stages”, ten in all, move from lower, primary dimensions starting with matter (*sensorimotor*) to body (*phantasmic-emotional*). The increasing complexity comes with three stages related to the mind (*representational mind*, *rule/role mind*, and *formal-reflexive*). The next, sixth stage, the *existential or vision-logic stage*, is really a combination of the body and the mind. The last four stages, *the psychic*, *subtle*, *causal*, and *nondual* are all spirit-related. Remember we discussed the increasing complexity inherent in the order of things? Things emerge from matter to body to mind to Spirit. This is exactly what we can see in this model of consciousness development.

To a great extent, I would agree with James’ model. His and mine are quite similar.

Where things become really interesting for me is the stage I call *Existential or Vision-*

*Logic*. Here, the person is able to move beyond seeing opposites and able to integrate them into a new, more meaningful whole. Like your *Conjunctive Faith Stage*, James. This is the place where the individual can penetrate the diversity of beliefs and find that they are able to pull them together in a purposeful fashion.

This point of development is the one that I also refer to as *Centauroic*. It is the integration of the mind and the body, the noosphere and the biosphere. It is the self free of self-centered striving, and linked by disciplined intuition to the principle of being. It is the place of the mystic (1993, pp.185-187).

**Brother Gerald:** Okay, here's what I have jotted down

#### **FOWLER'S STAGES**

- 0 Preverbal/undifferentiated
- 1 Projective Faith
- 2 Mythic-Literal Faith
- 3 Conventional Faith
- 4 Individuative-Reflexive
- 5 Conjunctive Faith
- 6 Universalizing Faith

#### **WILBER'S STRUCTURES**

- Sensorimotor structures
- "
- Representational Mind
- Rule/Role Mind
- Formal Reflexive
- Existential/Vision-Logic (Centauroic)

**Ken Wilber:** Brother that looks pretty good. My general conception of things is that evolution is God-in-action, God-in-making, where Spirit unfolds itself at every stage of development, manifesting ever more of itself, at every unfolding (1988, p.10). The basic



structures of consciousness outlined are reflective of that principle of increasing complexity – an impulse embedded within the Kosmos itself to include and transcend.

Fowler's understanding of faith development is heavily reliant upon psychological theory. As I said earlier, as far as it goes, James' theory is just fine, I have no problem with it. The real thing that is missing for me is James' silence on the matter of the perennial philosophy.

**Jim Pender:** What would you say that is?

**Ken Wilber:** Well, the perennial philosophy is the worldview that has been embraced by the vast majority of the world's greatest spiritual teachers, philosophers, thinkers, and even scientists. It's "called "perennial" or "universal" because it shows up in virtually all cultures across the globe and across the ages" (1993, p.77).

**Brother Gerald:** I think I know where you're going with this, but please continue.

**Ken Wilber:** Well, as I see it, the human spirit universally grows intuitions of the Divine, we can't help that. And these intuitions and insights form the core of the world's great spiritual or wisdom traditions (1993, 79).

**Jim Pender:** What would you say are the basic features common to these wisdom traditions?

**Ken Wilber:** First, there is an acknowledgement that Spirit exists. This is accepted as a matter of a factual reality. Secondly, Spirit is found within. Remember when we discussed the disaster of modernity – that it was predicated on the denial of interiority? That was when reason became the sole means for understanding the universe, it was a complete discounting of the spiritual. Spirit, because it is within, cannot be found externally (the domain of science) in any tangible manner.

The third thing that wisdom traditions share is some sense that most of us do not realize this spirit within because we are living in a state of sin, separation, duality – however we wish to term it. The fourth tenet of the perennial philosophy is there is a way out of this fallen state. If we follow the path to its conclusion, the result is a rebirth or an experience of enlightenment - a direct experience of Spirit within. The final outcome is, as a result of these tenets, a changed response from us; a response that sees us approach all others in actions of mercy and compassion (1993, p.79). The perennial philosophy, then, provides us with the structure required for spiritual transformation.

All the great religious traditions have those tenets at their core. When we were discussing earlier the features of an authentic religion or spirituality these tenets, then, could provide us with some real guidance.

**James Fowler:** Yes, I agree with you. These principles are apparent in all religious traditions, including Christianity, the one with which I am most familiar. But I am curious; you mentioned earlier, Ken, that you did not think my model provided much direction to the potential seeker. Your basic structures do not appear to go much further.

**Ken Wilber:** You're right, James. I think whenever we talk about theory as opposed to experience we are missing the boat. It is important that we talk about the "how to". However, before we do that, there are four final stages in my conception of the basic structures of consciousness – and they all relate to Spirit, and are experiential in nature. It is these higher contemplative stages that I do not feel were well investigated in your model, James, partly, perhaps, given their rarity. But up to this point the fit between our two models is quite close (1995, p.596).

I call them *the Psychic*, *the Subtle*, *the Causal*, and *the Nondual*. *The Psychic* is the first of these structures in what I would call true spiritual development. Here we have a hint of what it means to be engaged in a process that is truly transpersonal or contemplative in nature. The next phase, *the Subtle*, is the intermediate stage of spiritual development. It is the home of a personal God whereas *the Causal* is where that personal God dissolves into a formless Godhead, leaving only union and oneness. *Nondual* is that state where any sense of separateness or difference ceases. It is the mystical union (1983, p.187).

**James Fowler:** So, if I understand you, Ken, there are higher levels of development and these levels are essentially spiritual in nature.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes.

[A voice comes from behind and the four men turn in surprise to see Sophia. They had become so engrossed with their discussion that they had forgotten that Sophia was sitting a little distance away from them]

**Sophia:** Good evening, gentlemen. Please forgive me for interrupting your conversation, but I couldn't help but find myself drawn into your conversation. I work as an educator, and having been on my own spiritual path, so to speak, I was stimulated by your discussion on development.

[The four men talk almost in unison inviting Sophia to enter the discussion]

**Sophia:** When we talk about development, and spiritual development in particular, it is difficult not to confuse words like "higher", in reference to the attainment of these so-called latter stages, as not somehow meaning "better". This is, I believe, to some extent, the nature of using language that is hierarchical (Wright, 1995, p.9). I struggle with your conceptualization that achieving the higher structures, as you refer to them, Ken, or the final stage in your vision, James, that somehow we are not being exclusive in our thinking. The result could be that we undermine or dismiss the experience people would have at the so-called "lower levels". It would not be too difficult to extrapolate

from this thinking that there is really only one “true” goal and that anything less is deficient and missing the mark.

This sort of reasoning is what inevitably happens when we speak the words of developmental theorists. There can be something just a little too neat with this way of thinking – the underlying suggestion is that we inevitably move in one direction only. I feel that it is important to point out that theories on “development”, at the end of the day, are somewhat male-centered, and they have not gone unchallenged within the counselling professions generally, or in theories of education, either.

Nonetheless, these theories have emerged over the past hundred years as having a tremendous influence in terms of how we conceptualize important life events. What has happened is that developmental theories became so dominant that after a while, all this becomes accepted as “normal”. As a consequence, it becomes increasingly difficult to step aside and to view it from another perspective.

**Brother Gerald:** Sophia, I am curious about your comment that these theories tend to be male-centered. Could you explain this to us?

**Sophia:** I apologize if I appear to be coming on a little strong. But I do feel strongly about this issue. In response to your question, Brother, developmental theories, generally, support the notion that separation is the ideal and that separation is essential to what would be termed as psychological health. The emphasis on these models supports

the notion that mature, healthy, psychological development happens through “separation from the mother, and [this leads to] subsequent growth into an autonomous, independent individual” (Peay, 1994, p.25). This notion is somewhat removed from, and even opposite to, women’s experience.

**Jim Pender:** I don’t think I quite follow you here, Sophia. Could you say a little more?

**Sophia:** Sure. Traditionally, women’s growth, including spiritual growth, moves forward through a myriad relationships and connections. This is the essence of woman’s nature and this sounds a little different from what is suggested by most developmental psychologists. It is through a deeper experience of her own nature that a woman finds a stronger relation to spirituality (Harding, 1970, p.25).

**James Fowler:** You are correct, of course, Sophia, in identifying that our language may appear to be exclusive. Like all theories, developmental psychology should be understood as providing us with a conceptual framework to understand complex human phenomena. We should all avoid becoming overly dogmatic and confusing what is essentially a concept with reality. There is, as you pointed out to us, an unavoidable “higher” and “lower” mentality that accompanies our thinking about the stages (1984, p.57). In my view, each and every one of these stages is complete and whole within itself. Each stage offers an experience that is truly authentic and vital.

**Ken Wilber:** If that is so that each and every stage is whole and complete, James, why would people move on to another “stage”?

**James Fowler:** A very good question. To begin, life is not static. Change is forever and constantly in movement and influencing us. Change in level of maturity, our society, and in our perceptions of things. Change is unavoidable (1996). To my way of thinking, there would be something of a paradigm shift that would occur in people’s thinking that in turn would facilitate their move into another stage – into another worldview, really (Lownsdale, 1997, p.49). When our current understanding of the spiritual meaning we have come to hold as true changes to a significant degree, an adaptation of some sort is necessary. Every new experience we encounter, every piece of new information being communicated to us, the impact of the myriad of ever-changing life events, simply maturing - these normative events may contribute to a shift in how we think and feel about spiritual matters.

Our understanding and acceptance of things is a dynamic process – it is shaped by many of the influences I just mentioned. That is why, whenever we shift into another “stage” it is the consequence of experiencing new information, or thinking differently. These shifts are, by the way, not benign or easy changes to incorporate. They are usually accompanied by a lot of soul-searching and turmoil. What this means is that our very life meanings are at stake in faith stage transitions (1984, p.58). I do believe that a successful transition will mean that we are able to maintain our spiritual journeys, despite our experiencing severe disillusion from time to time.

**Sophia:** That is helpful for me to hear that, James. As a concept, stages can be of assistance in identifying different dimensions of spiritual growth but I feel it is a mistake to place it language that suggests directionality and progression. I just wanted to mention these things, gentlemen, because they are important to our discussion. I do, however, understand that we need to have a way to conceptually understand certain principles and to articulate them. So, to that end I am fine with our using terms like “development”, “stages” and so forth. We need to always bear in mind, however, that “any theory can only assist us in seeing *some* things – no theory can see *all* things” (Parks, 1991, p.110).

**Jim Pender:** Okay, I am getting a better idea that we need to be clear that we are speaking conceptually here and not to confuse this with lived experience – it is an attempt to speak to that experience. So with that in mind, let’s return to the notion regarding how we achieve an experience of authenticity in our spirituality.

**Brother Gerald:** Overall, the classic stages in spiritual growth are purgation, illumination, and union (May, 1982, p.173). This, I think, fits well with what you were indicating, James, in terms of the shift people must make to move into a new stage. Purgation of old beliefs that do not, for whatever reason, fit any longer. And, it seems, only when we have questioned and struggled with a concept do we begin to see other possibilities – an illumination, so to speak. This new perception of our world and God lead us to a sense of union – a place where we feel complete and spiritually satisfied.



**Sophia:** Yes, I endorse those classic stages you mention, Brother. They can be understood as comprising the processes underlying spiritual growth. But I am still somewhat confused, Ken, in what you were getting at in speaking about valid, authentic, spiritual experience. You are concerned that we are left struggling with a whole area that is pretty fuzzy in terms of proof; and perhaps proof, as such, misses the mark anyway. “O, ye of little faith. Why do you need science to prove God? You do not” (Shermer, 2000, p.123). I am quite comfortable with the notion that spiritual experience is outside of scientific inquiry. I do not feel a strong need to “prove” this.

You also mentioned, Ken, these so-called higher features of spiritual development. However, at the end of the day, we are still left with the challenge of authenticating them according to accepted laws of proof. There still remains this schism between religion and, for want of a better word, science. It seems like we are in this place where we must accept that each of these two areas are wholly involved in their own sphere with little, if any, chance of meaningful overlap.

**Ken Wilber:** I understand your concern, Sophia. My thinking in this matter relates to the fact that these two spheres of knowing, that is religion and science, did not always function as two solitudes. This is as a consequence of a general drift since the birth of modernity - a drift that has seen an increasing secularism, individualism, and rationalism (1983, p.75). These are trends that are, in general, opposed to a religious worldview. At one time, both science and religion shared the same worldview - they were not polarized. The emergence of the scientific worldview has all but squashed the Great Chain of Being

and, thereby, the essence that runs through and underlies the wisdom traditions of the world's great religions. It has sadly resulted with leaving us with only the exteriors of religions.

In my studies, I was seeking to find a way that would honor both religion and science as bona fide processes in their own right. I think it is essential that we are able to authenticate our spiritual experience. At the end of the day, I see that there is only Spirit – all this squabbling between science and religion is reflective of this fragmented, postmodern worldview in which we find ourselves. But there is unity, in the most important and crucial ways; there is Spirit at “every level of organization, including religion and science, [each having] a higher level that enveloped it, right up to the level of the cosmos” (Vardey, 1995, p.801). In acknowledging this, we cannot simply reject either science or religion out of hand. Both have a real and valid place in the Kosmos.

**Jim Pender:** How, then, can we hold the tension between these two solitudes in such a way as not to diminish either.

**Ken Wilber:** Well, Jim, that ability comes only with the practice, or the Tao, of spiritual experience.

## PART FIVE

### Satori and the Sacramental Life: The Tao of Spirit

*When I rest as the timeless Witness, the Great Search is undone. The Great Search is the enemy of the ever-present Spirit, a brutal lie in the fact of a gentle infinity. The Great Search is the search for an ultimate experience, a fabulous vision, a paradise of pleasure, an unendingly good time, a powerful insight – a search for God ... a search for Spirit – but Spirit is not an object. Spirit cannot be grasped or reached or sought or seen.*

-Ken Wilber, **Eye of Spirit**, 1997, p.294.

**Jim Pender:** How does one ever really know for certain which path to choose; there are a multitude of spiritual possibilities, many asserting that they have *the* answer and that their counterparts are lacking in essential and important ways. I find this especially perplexing with traditions that lay outside the realm of my own experience – how does one truly evaluate these things. It is important, I think, to ensure that we “do not judge what we do not understand, or misunderstand” (Smart, 1998, p.590). That is why, for me, it was so important to know and experience many different forms of religious and spiritual experiences. It really is true that we don’t know what we don’t know.

**Brother Gerald:** I see what you mean, Jim. Our experience will always be, and can only be, limited. We simply cannot apprehend the full range of religious and spiritual experiences. However, I think the trap to avoid is “a certain intellectual and cultural

snobbery [that] mandates that virtually any religion, from Shamanism to Zoroastrianism, is better than the homegrown kind available down the street” (Gallagher, 1999, p.35). It is the disdain we can have for the familiar and the mystique that other, and lesser known religions, have for us. It is something Lovejoy termed as *esoteric pathos*: “how exciting and how welcome is the sense of initiation into hidden mysteries!” (1936/1982, p.11).

**Ken Wilber:** I understand this conundrum. Some of us will attempt to solve this by looking into various traditions. Others will plumb the depths of their own tradition and check it out for consistency – can this, whatever “this” is, be trusted. There must be a fit between what any tradition says in its holy books, for instance, and how one achieves a transpersonal experience. An essential element to my way of belief is to say that if you want to know ‘y’ then you must do ‘x’ (1998, p.156). Experience, ultimately, is the key to understanding the validity of spiritual claims. It is, Jim, about using the forms of religion, like prayer, contemplation and meditation, to go deeper into our experience of God.

**Brother Gerald:** Some of the most moving accounts of the spiritual quest are those that speak to an actual encounter with the Divine. Most religious traditions, as we just discussed, have a mystical core to them. In Christianity, the spokespersons for that core are numerous and range from Julian of Norwich, to Meister Eckhart, Hildegard, Teresa of Avila, to St. John of the Cross, and many others. Thomas Merton, a monk who lived in recent times, and even was a guest this monastery, wrote eloquently of this type of experience:

A Door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; All eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact.

God touches us with a touch that is emptiness, and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. All variety, all complexity, all multiplicity cease. Our mind swims in the air of an understanding, a reality that is dark and serene and includes in itself everything. Nothing more is desired. Nothing more is wanting (Merton, 1961, p.227).

The words written by mystics everywhere are beautiful and profound. They point to a reality which, for many of us, we only dimly understand. There is a danger, however, to say that the only authentic expression of Christianity is through a mystical connection. Mystics, by nature, are somewhat removed from ordinary experience. On the whole, mystical union is very hard to achieve, sustain, pass on to others and lacks community and a sense of belonging (Roof, 1993, pp.86 – 87). Jim and I were discussing earlier this evening, that there are different paths over which we may travel to arrive at an experience of authenticity. The fact of the matter is, that “in any religion, mysticism is for the minority” (Gallagher, 1999, p.165).

**Sophia:** The words of Merton, and other mystics who have had this type of experience leave us with a powerful impression. I agree with Brother Gerald, it would be a mistake to say that mysticism is the only route to an authentic spiritual experience. For instance women’s spirituality functions from significantly different starting points. It is precisely that sense of emptying one’s self that many women find difficult (Adams, 1996, p.30). It may be that the path for many women is to stay more in touch, literally, then letting go. The road of the mystic, or the contemplative, is a path that calls for

detachment, self-abnegation, and to some degree, isolation. One of the ways in which women connect, spiritually and otherwise, to their world is through a path that is opposite to this one - through relationships (Gilligan, 1982, p.154; Wright, 1995, p.4). You mentioned earlier, James, that faith is relational in essence – I agree with that. For most women, this is something we know almost innately. Whether this gender difference is based on cultural expectation, or otherwise, misses the point. Much of a woman's experience may already be based on self-abnegation – a life of service and devotion towards others. For a woman, when she hears Christ's call to "leave and follow me" she "does not feel it as a directive to turn from a self-centered existence toward a more universal connection, but rather a movement toward selfishness"(Alter, 1993, p.42)."

**Jim Pender:** That is an interesting thought, Sophia. There are significant gender differences in how we approach the whole area of spiritual experience. For men to "leave and follow me" would mean a move toward a more selfless devotion. The achievement of this type of spiritual connection, the path of the mystic, presents different obstacles for women than for men. If I follow you correctly, the main difference may be that for men, part of our way is naturally more detached relationally, and for women, connectedness and relationships are a salient component of their self-definition.

**Sophia:** Yes. For women, it may be that we will have to remove ourselves from the "responsibility to always please and be available to others rather than to be responsible to a higher purpose" (Alter, 1993, p.44). This, I suggest, is not small thing.

**Brother Gerald:** I hear what you are saying, Sophia. To devote one's self to the spiritual life is a difficult and, in today's terms, an unpopular choice for any of us. For women, however, there exists an additional barrier because of the reasons you cited.

**Sophia:** Thank you for hearing me on this. This, however, does not mean that the contemplative way is, in any way, invalid or inauthentic. Nor is this a path from which women are excluded. I am aware, as are all of you, that many of the great mystics were, in fact, women.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, you are correct in reminding us, Sophia, that many of the great mystics have been women and their contribution goes far beyond providing insight into the spiritual alone. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, made significant contributions to the areas of music, medicine, poetry, art, and through her very able management of two monasteries she provides us with a great model of capable administration (Fox, 1986, p.308). The mystics, in general, may not be the path available to all. But contemplation is a way that provides us with access to these deeper features, which in turn can provide us with the real possibility of transformation.

When I read the mystics, they speak to an experience that exists, by and large, to our inability to give it adequate articulation. The common thread that underlies all wisdom traditions is they all provide their adherents with a way to access the Holy. Ninian Smart, a chronicler of world religions, states that "mysticism is the inner or contemplative quest for what lies within – variously thought of as the Divine Being within, or the eternal soul,

or the Cloud of Unknowing, emptiness, a dazzling darkness ... [these] insight-giving mystical experiences lies at the heart of all the major religions”(Smart, 1989, p.14). I hear what you have all been saying that mysticism is not available to all of us, for various reasons. But I do want to assert that the esoteric tradition is one that is common to most of the great religious traditions. I think this fact is extremely important and is of real significance to our discussion. I would challenge, then, any claim that this way is too hard, or requires too much discipline. We need better reasons than that for not wishing to seriously follow this path.

**Brother Gerald:** Yes, it is important that we take this path as a serious and authentic approach. It is in that state of formless transcendence that accompanies contemplation, or meditation, that the differences between religions cease and we recognize that there is only One. Joseph Campbell once said an interesting thing: “We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness, only we don’t know it” (1988, p.57). The differences that exist in dogma and in creeds become less apparent in actual experience of the Holy. The experience of God, then, is greater than any one’s religious interpretation of that experience.

**Jim Pender:** You mean to tell me, Brother, that God isn’t Roman Catholic? Fine time to impart this piece of information now! Really, I’m kidding, of course. But I can see where some traditions would make a claim like that.



**Ken Wilber:** Of course, and that is the source of so much religious strife. It is a rigid holding on to believing that the only true manifestation of the Holy is my conception of it and an adamant rejection of the beliefs of others. When we think about it, we can see that it is patently absurd, but there are millions who would have a problem with this.

**James Fowler:** But there is a special dilemma for those who adhere to a religious system whose origins are revelatory in nature. What I mean here is that for many traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam included, the belief is that God has revealed Himself in a real and direct manner. The implication is that if this knowledge comes directly from God, then we really do have the goods, so to speak. Richard Niebuhr cautioned us that “confessional theology must approach the problem to restrain its desire to prove the superiority of Christianity to other religions ... [and that] the revelation of God is not a possession but an event” (Niebuhr, 1941/1960, p.269). This is no easy dance!

**Jim Pender:** Yes, this is quite a conundrum. This is a place where lines can really get drawn in the sand. It is important to strive to see things from the larger perspective – that none of us may have all the answers. Roman Catholicism itself has modified its position that there is no salvation outside the Church (McBrien, 1981, p.724). Here is a basis for acknowledging that God is present to all for all time. There is an acknowledgment of the truth and validity that exists in other traditions, that God is revealed in multiple ways.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, I think that is so. Again, if we return to the perennial philosophy, and follow its principles, we will avoid the trap of us-against-them, or who has the “real”

God. Each religion, then can look to the Great Chain in its own traditions, and temporarily set aside its specific, exclusive, proprietary, dogmatic, beliefs (1998, p.204). As people become more interested in spirituality as opposed to religiosity – interested in experience as opposed to dogmas and rules, they will become naturally “drawn more to the faith of the mystics” (Gallagher, 1999, p.61).

**James Fowler:** I’m all for avoiding such an obvious pitfall, Ken. But earlier you mentioned that my model did not go far enough – it did a good job of identifying stages of faith but there was an expectation, I think, you had that it should have been more prescriptive.

**Ken Wilber:** Perhaps. What I was really getting at is that true spiritual experience should be something that is available to any follower. It shouldn’t be something one just stumbles upon. No wonder science has such disdain for us. Religions, I believe let their people down when they fail to offer a method, a way, or whatever term you wish to use. Intellectual assent is important, but few of us can really think our way into an experience of the Holy.

What I was purporting was really a directive – like I said, if you want to experience ‘y’, then you must do ‘x’ and the wisdom traditions offer us this direction. Essentially, the path is, as Brother Gerald touched upon, through meditation or prayer.

Meditation is simply a way to carry on development. It is how you continue to grow and develop beyond the mind into the levels of soul and spirit. Where this process leads us, ultimately, is to a point where there is only God, one Self, one Witness (1993, p.99).

**Jim Pender:** Ken, with all this talk about meditation, and the examples you use in your writing, it would appear that you would be comfortable in identifying yourself as a Buddhist. Isn't this skating awfully close to being dualistic in our thinking in terms of suggesting that this way is better than another? It seems to come perilously close to the criticism you make of fundamentalists who reject the authenticity of other spiritual approaches.

**Ken Wilber:** I do not think that Buddhism is the best way or the only way. And I would not especially call myself a Buddhist; I have too many affinities with Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism, among many others. But one has to choose a particular path if one is actually to practice, and my path has been Buddhist (1993, p.246).

**Jim Pender:** So it is important to first identify a path, and I assume it is equally important to choose a path that is credible – what I mean is to avoid paths that may be fraudulent like cults - and then follow that path's way to accessing the higher levels?

**Ken Wilber:** Yes, essentially, that is right, Jim. "There must be a yoga, a Tao, a practice, however you wish to term it, that provides a way for its adherents to follow. This path, whatever it happens to be, leads to an experience. Experience is really just

basically another word for awareness. If I experience my body, it means that I am aware of my body. You can indeed be aware of your body, but you can also be aware of your mind - you can right now notice all the thoughts and ideas and images floating in front of the mind's inward eye. You can, in other words, experience your mind, be aware of your mind. And it's very important to be able to experience your mind directly, cleanly, intensely, because only by bringing awareness to the mind can you begin to transcend the mind and be free of its limitations. When that begins to happen, usually in meditation or contemplation, you can begin to access some these higher, spiritual, mystical experiences, - satori, kensho, samadhi, unio mystica, and so on. These experiences, you might say, allow us to be aware of spirit, and to directly experience spirit, in a nondual manner" (1999, p.191).

**Brother Gerald:** I am impressed with the similarity in language when people write of their mystical experiences, regardless of the traditions from which they come (Harpur, 1996, p.35; Gallagher, 1999, p.165). I see that there are strong common links that join together much of what is best in the spiritual journey. Gadamer has said that, "all understanding is self-understanding" (cited in Carr, 1996, p.107). I think that is correct. Our own self-awareness is an inestimable resource in connecting with other traditions and approaches.

**Ken Wilber:** Yes there is a real commonality that runs through these types of experiences because they are speaking of the same reality – a reality without divisions, without dogma – without duality. The sense of "just this", of emptiness, of as Allan Watts

put it, “*this* is it”. These experiences would sound pretty much alike regardless if one was a Buddhist or a Christian mystic.

The whole point of meditation or contemplation is to free ourselves from the ‘optical illusion’ that we are merely separate egos set apart from each other and from the eternal Spirit (1993, p.18). The practice is the Tao; it is the way that anybody can choose to follow, if they wish. This is a really important point. Without leaving ourselves open to some verification of the truth of what we claim, we are at best reduced to an assertion that can neither be proved nor disproved (Martin, 1973, p.95).

**Brother Gerald:** Ken, you practice one type of mediation – a sitting meditation that requires real discipline and devotion. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this – it’s just that we need to acknowledge that there are many other ways. No doubt your particular path is one that is well-worn and tested. But the contemplative paths of the world’s great religions reflect the diversity of their respective wisdom. There is “the Jesus prayer of Christianity, Buddhist walking meditation, the native American vision quest, or the Islamic *dhikr* ... we may enter the contemplative dimension through meditation, mindfulness, ritual, or prayer; or in dance or a sequence of bows and prostrations; with the help of cushions or incense, bells or drums” (Zaleski & Kaufman, 1998, p.5). The full panoply of meditative approaches should to be acknowledged by us.

**Sophia:** There are many avenues to an experience of authenticity when it comes to the spiritual journey. The mystics offer a way that is “simply a profound religious awareness of the transcendent reality that serves as a human experiential basis for

religious institutions and dogmas” (Roof, 1999, p.143). It is the fire and the passion that underlies the beliefs and dogmas.

**Ken Wilber:** Sophia, you and Brother Gerald are, of course, correct. We of all people, given our discussion here this evening need to recognize this. The perennial philosophy that runs through the great traditions will assist us in accessing a way. The Great Search, the seeking orientation that we have been talking about, is itself about looking for God and failing to see that God, Spirit, however we wish to term it, is omnipresent – there is no place that Spirit is not (1977, p.282). To search, to some extent, is to miss the point.

I would like to share a reflection I had following a particularly powerful meditation:

In the stillness of the night, the Goddess whispers. In the brightness of day, dear God roars. Life pulses, mind imagines, emotions wave, thoughts wander. What are all these but the endless movements of One Taste, forever at play with its own gestures, whispering quietly to all who would listen: is this not yourself? When the thunder roars, do you not hear your Self? When the lightening cracks, do you not see your Self? When the clouds float quietly across the sky, is this not your own limitless Being, waving back at you? (1999, p.301)

**Sophia:** Ken, your words are a great reminder for us all of the power, the beauty, and the possibilities for transcendence that exist within the spiritual journey.

[The chapel bell begins to ring its somber and steady tone, calling the faithful to gather as bells have for thousands of years. Temple bells, church bells, monastery bells – the sound evokes an almost instinctive response as the five pilgrims look around themselves and stand up. They move in silence through the evening air toward the chapel to prepare for the Night Prayer.]

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

*The deep ambiguities of life as it is actually lived, the deep difficulties in living our lives ... are often designated, either explicitly or implicitly, as the enemies of discourse and, therefore, as the enemies of true understanding. These difficulties and ambiguities are understood as **problems to be fixed**, things to be "cleared up" through the diligent pursuit of research which takes as its first gesture a fundamental severance with its object of inquiry so that it can heed only its own desire for clarity and distinctness from that object.*

- Jardine, 1998, p.10

### Selection of a qualitative research design

**Sophia:** The attempt to make sense of, or to bring order to, subjective experience involves us in a messy, complex, and a necessarily incomplete business. At best we will arrive at only a partial understanding as there will always be aspects of human phenomena that will remain hidden from us. Attempting to delve into people's spiritual beliefs is, in my opinion, an enormous undertaking that, too, will ultimately prove elusive in many ways. Our reaching into the spiritual experience of people will be conveyed primarily through the use of words, which, ultimately, prove clumsy and inadequate to their task.

To use the word “research” when discussing phenomena such as spirituality is to engage in the language of reductionism. To “investigate”, “examine”, or “critique” spiritual experience is, by definition, to focus upon a part and not the whole. Although there are instruments that measure religiosity and belief, there are none that measure an experience of authenticity when it comes to spirituality. The issue of measurement is part of the whole scientific thrust for proof that forms much of academic discourse. The research design for a study such as this will necessarily be a qualitative, or descriptive, approach as opposed to a quantitative, or empirical, approach.

We use qualitative research designs when we wish “to investigate little-understood phenomena [and] to identify or discover important variables” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.78). As I understand it, Jim, your research design is of this nature. It is interested in people who have had a seeking orientation to their spiritual life; and, specifically, it concerns itself with people who feel that they have found a good enough experience of authenticity that it, in essence, ends their search.

### **Focus of the research**

**Jim Pender:** That’s right. There is support in the literature that suggests that spirituality is an integral part of everyday life (Emmons, 1999, p. 90). It follows, then, that the spiritual journey is an important and significant one. Too, it is obvious that there is a range of spiritual experiences available to us. Some people, as we discussed earlier, place little value on the search, while for others, that is all there is. In narrowing this range



down, the group I am interested in speaking with are those who have, like me, gone off the straight and narrow, as Bunyan would say, and have examined the spiritual landscape that lays around them. They may, or may not have, grown up in a home that followed some sort of religious observance. The people I am interested in interviewing are those who, despite their families' beliefs, persisted in earnestly looking around themselves in a spiritual sense; as a result they became involved in different approaches or systems. The question I want to better understand is, for these seekers, who have looked at different ways of being spiritual or religious, what themes emerge relating to their achieving an experience of spiritual authenticity? In essence, what is it about where they are now, spiritually, that places their hearts at rest?

### **Phenomenological hermeneutics**

**Ken Wilber:** Jim, you mentioned that you would be conducting your research through interviews – a very potent medium. Interestingly, a high percentage, upwards of 90 percent in fact, of research conducted in the social sciences uses interview data (Brigg, 1986, p.1). I agree, that the best way to understand anyone's symbols and meanings is through some sort of "empathetic interpretation – an entering into the hermeneutic circle, as it were, to form some sort of inside understanding" (Wilber, 1989, p.13). You are correct in what you said earlier, Sophia, experience of this sort cannot be apprehended through measurement, as such, but rather through interpretation. Because, Jim, you have developed an awareness and something of an understanding of your own process, this

will facilitate, to some extent, your ability to engage in an interpretation of others' experiences.

As well, it should be pointed out, that there are limitations to this sort of approach. Any approach that involves an interpretation of a person's phenomenological experience is highly subjective and lacks a critical dimension that provides us with a way to judge actual validity. At its extreme, it can result in a "radicalization of situational truth" (1993, p.15). What this amounts to is, essentially, that everything is true; there is little room for empirical analysis to test a given truth claim.

**Sophia:** I hear what you say, Ken. There is an obvious tension between taking an extreme postmodern, deconstructivist, position that says everything is a matter of interpretation and no one reality can take prominence, versus a scientific, empirical approach, that calls for measurement and the need for an experience to be replicated in a predictable manner. Postmodern thought calls for a "disbelief in universal systems of thought ... [there] is a lack of credulity toward meta-narratives of legitimation" (Lyotard quoted Kvale, 1996, p.41). How we, as individuals, construct meaning is both the focus and purpose of a phenomenological hermeneutics approach. The aim of a phenomenological approach "is not to render our experience of the world, but to give a voice to it just as it is" (Jardine, 1998, p.19).

**Brother Gerald:** I agree, the real value in this kind of research is to hear what people who had this sort of experience say about it. It is critical, then, that we suspend

judgement and strive toward placing their experiences into a context that would broaden their experience to areas in which we can all relate.

### **Discussion of the selection of the five co-researchers**

**Jim Pender:** The five people I have interviewed are truly co-researchers and not “subjects”, or “participants”. I felt that it is critical that in interviewing people about a subject so intensely personal, that I do not de-personalize them in the process by reducing them to mere “subjects”. These co-researchers, then, are an intimate and active part of the process. The co-researchers worked with me to “combine investigation, education, and action ... investigating social problems of mutual concern” (Glesne, 1992, p.11). The co-researchers were selected because they fit the criteria of the study – namely they have looked around and examined their spiritual life from at least a couple of perspectives and feel that they have arrived at an experience of spiritual authenticity.

The co-researchers’ interest in participating in the study surfaced from a purposeful sampling approach. Hearing of their journeys, I was convinced that they would provide “information rich” stories which would provide the basis for further examination (Patton, 1986, p.205). In other words, the co-researchers were selected because they were people who were either known by myself to fit the parameters of the study, or they were referred to me by people with whom I had spoken regarding the study. All co-researchers were contacted initially by telephone, or e-mail, to determine their interest. A letter of information (Appendix A) was then sent to each of them. The letter outlined the nature of the study and the parameters of their participation. In compliance with ethical standards,

each co-researcher indicated their understanding by signing a Consent Form (Appendix B).

### **Methodology Process**

The methodology involved a three-stage process consisting first of an in-depth, semi-structured, interview (Appendix C) that was tape-recorded. The tapes were later transcribed and copies were then sent back to all the co-researchers. The co-researchers were encouraged to review the transcript and were invited to provide any correction or elaboration (Appendix D). The co-researchers, then, were encouraged to regard this first phase as a springboard to continue the dialogue; as they reflected on the interview experience, and their transcripts, the co-researchers were invited to provide additional thoughts or commentary on their respective processes.

**Brother Gerald:** So, the three stages that followed the selection of your co-researchers were the interview, the review of the transcripts by the respective co-researchers, and then the opportunity for them to provide any further elaboration or clarification?

**Jim Pender:** Yes, and for your information, all five co-researchers chose to provide additional comments. The final step in this process for me was to enter the hermeneutic circle, as Ken put it. This involved a review of all the transcripts, along with any notes I made during the interview, and complete an analysis of the content looking for common themes as well as for experiences that belonged uniquely to the respective co-researchers.

Their stories, or more specifically their spiritual journeys, are “a way to knowledge and understanding” for us all (Seidman, 1991,p.xi). These journeys, which are described in the next section, provide us with a way to better understand experiences and processes that may otherwise elude us. The real purpose of conducting in-depth interviews is not to merely receive answers to questions, nor is it necessarily to test hypotheses. Rather, the purpose of conducting in-depth interviewing is to assist in “an understanding [of] the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1991, p.3).

### **Issues of Validity**

**Ken Wilber:** I like your process Jim, especially the fact that it is not a one shot interview but allows for continued reflections and input from your co-researchers. The question I have, then, is to ask to what end? Interviewing and learning of people’s experience may be interesting, but at the end of the day what can we really extrapolate from this to say anything of real import that can be generalized to the whole?

**Sophia:** I think, Ken, that your question is a good one. I believe that qualitative approaches can provide an avenue where issues of validity can, in fact, be tested. The matter of validity is enhanced with the kind of interviewing that Jim is proposing by placing the co-researchers’ comments into context. This encourages and challenges the co-researchers to check for the internal consistency of what they say. By engaging with a number of co-researchers Jim can connect their experience with that of others.

Remember, the purpose of using a phenomenological hermeneutics approach is to “understand how respective co-researchers understand and make meaning of *their* experience” (Seidman, 1991, p.17). In using such a methodology we “are not seeking absolute knowledge claims but rather a conception of knowledge claims that is defensible; the communication of knowledge becomes the important feature as it facilitates an understanding the social construction of reality. Lastly, the validity of qualitative designs is supported by a pragmatic proof through action – in other words, that things line up and make sense” (Kavle, 1996, p.240).

**James Fowler:** Empirical research attempts to arrive at conclusions that can be generalized. You are correct, Ken, in questioning the real usefulness of research that concludes such and such experience is only true for the individual co-researcher. As interesting as their respective journeys are, if there can be no further connection made beyond themselves, then we are in danger of moving into a sort of extreme solipsism. However, interpretative research, when done well, can show us that the events and experiences relayed by the co-researchers can “make a claim on us and open up and reveal something to us about our lives together” (Jardine, 1998, p.40). The bottom line is, their journeys will, I suspect, tell us something about ourselves.

So, to use the language of more empirically based research designs, there are some alternatives to generalizability that exist in a qualitative research design. First, Jim will be looking for connections among the experiences of his co-researchers. One would expect that there will be common influences and experiences among this group – this should become evident as Jim analyses the content of his interviews. Secondly, all of us, as

readers, have the possibility of connecting our own stories to those presented in this thesis (Seidman, 1991, 42). Our own personal experience and understanding of this issue will confirm, or otherwise, the conclusions arrived at in the analysis.

**Sophia:** Phenomenological research can be a very creative process. Essentially, it involves us in four primary activities. First, it is natural that we investigate matters that succeed in captivating our interest. Secondly, this type of research examines how an experience is lived - not how it is conceptualized. Thirdly, it provides us with the opportunity to draw out themes that are characteristic of the phenomenon. And, lastly, it encourages us to describe the phenomenon through writing and rewriting (Van Manen, 1984, p.46). It is an approach that allows us to drill down, deep, into the experiences of people.

**Brother Gerald:** That's a nice way, Sophia, of describing why a phenomenological approach would be used and what it will provide for us. After we have completed describing the phenomenon, or subject area, we need to provide some kind of interpretation. Hermeneutics provides a way to enter into the phenomenon to provide an interpretation. Kvale (1996) identified what he termed the "canons" of hermeneutical interpretation. Perhaps, I'll just cite them as they have a direct bearing on the approach used here:

1. hermeneutical interpretation involves the *continuous back and forth process between the parts and the whole*;
2. an interpretation of meaning ends when one has reached a "*good gestalt*", an inner unity of the text free of contradictions;
3. *testing* of part interpretations against the global meaning of the text;
4. *the autonomy of the text* [meaning] that the text should be understood on the basis of its own frame of reference;

5. *knowledge about the theme* should be evident and demonstrated [by Jim];
6. the interpretation of the text is *not presuppositionless* ... the interpretation cannot “jump outside” the tradition of understanding he or she lives in;
7. every understanding is a better understanding – the interpretation goes beyond the immediately given and enriches the understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interpretations of the text (pp. 48-50)

**Ken Wilber:** Through phenomenological hermeneutics, by engaging with the co-researchers in a deep discussion around this topic and by studying the content of their discussions with you, you feel that you will have satisfied the criteria mentioned by Brother Gerald?

**Jim Pender:** Yes. All seven of the steps mentioned will be evident in this analysis. There was a back and forth process that engaged the co-researchers in a process of speaking and thinking at depth regarding their respective spiritual journeys. By studying the transcripts and the session notes I was able to arrive at an understanding of how the journey emerged and how it presented itself to the respective co-researcher. Reading and re-reading the transcripts, I felt that I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of their stories. The journeys described by the co-researchers made sense both on their own, as well as when compared to the experience of others. My own interest in this area is both a contribution to the process, as well as a limitation. On the positive side, my own experience allowed me to enter into an intimate understanding of the nature of the stories they told. So, to that extent, my interpretation cannot be presuppositionless. The stories as told by the co-researchers have undeniably enriched my life and my understanding. Although their stories stand on their own, individual merit, they are, in essence, our collective story as we struggle to encounter an experience of spiritual authenticity.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FIVE SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS**

This section is, in all the really important ways, the heart and substance of this thesis. Here are the summaries of the spiritual journeys as taken by the five co-researchers: Joan, Arthur, Joe, Joanna, and Diana. Their names have been changed as well as any other identifiable characteristics. It should be mentioned, however, that all five co-researchers expressed an interest in “owning” their stories and did not feel that they wanted to use a pseudonym.

Also, all five co-researchers chose to continue the dialogue following the initial interview. Their commitment, and their connection, to their stories are clear. This was, and is, a matter for which they all possess strong, passionate feelings. Three of the co-researchers made additional comments to the transcripts they received following our interview. Two others corresponded extensively by e-mail and subsequent face-to-face meetings.

The co-researchers all reside in western Canada. Interviews took place in their homes, restaurants, coffee shops, and offices spread out from Winnipeg to Vancouver. It is with deep appreciation and the utmost respect that their stories are outlined here. The words in each of these journeys are, for the most part, their own. Following each journey I will provide some comments on their individual stories. At the conclusion of this chapter I will make more general remarks in terms of common themes.

## **Journeys One and Two: The Stories of Joan and Arthur**

I had seen birth and death,  
 But had thought they were different; this Birth  
 was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
 -T.S. Eliot, *Journey of the Magi*, 1934, p. 98

This first interview was conducted in a restaurant in Vancouver, B.C. Two people participated in this interview - Arthur, a former pastor of a fundamentalist church and Joan, a member of Watershed, the intentional community with which both are presently involved. Arthur and Joan were introduced to me through a mutual acquaintance. Our meeting was one of those serendipitous encounters – their community was studying the works of Ken Wilber and they were attempting to integrate some of Wilber's concepts into their community life. As with the other co-researchers, this first interview was audio-taped, however, background noises made a complete and accurate transcription impossible. I did, however, take extensive notes during our time together and, in addition, Arthur and Joan continued the dialogue via e-mail.

In addition, I have had the privilege of meeting with their community as a group. Watershed is a composition of good-hearted, intelligent, and earnest souls taking seriously the notion of living an expression of spiritual authenticity. The community meets regularly in the basement of one of its members. In their community, there is an emphasis on simplicity of lifestyle and an environment characterized by an obvious regard for one another. The stories of Joan and Arthur are the stories of an arduous, but ultimately rewarding, journey. Their stories follow.

### **Joan's Story**

Joan, the eldest of three children, was raised by a mother who was “religious” and a father who uncomfortable speaking about his religious convictions. Her father never formally joined the church attended by the rest of the family. The church in which she was raised “was similar in many ways to [her] father. It often felt more like a community club than a church; people didn’t spontaneously speak about God ... so, I grew up thinking God was a removed concept.” It was the piety expressed by Joan’s mother that impacted her and gave her hope to believe that something like “a relationship was possible with this concept called God.”

“When I was about 12, I was away from home for two weeks ... a spell of loneliness came over me, so I decided to try praying to this God concept ... suddenly I found myself feeling very calm and reassured. This is my first memory of encountering a Presence ... after this, reading the Bible and [doing] devotions started to take on a new meaning for me. Someone was there.”

Joan recalls, around age 16, being positively influenced by a dynamic youth pastor “who spoke convincingly about a personal relationship with Christ, in marked contrast to the other adults in the church”. The youth pastor organized “insightful Bible studies dealing with contemporary issues. I began to see the Bible as a mystery waiting to be discovered”. At age 18, Joan’s growing spirituality and attachment to her church group soon saw her preparing for Baptism. “It was a very big deal for me; it felt very solemn. I remember writing up my testimony, and wanting to share with others this growing sense

of being called to intimacy. After that day, I couldn't get enough books to read. I had joined a young adult Bible study, and was thinking how I could offer my life in service to God".

Things changed a little later. The church decided that the youth pastor was too radical, and "tried to create a conspiracy against him. He eventually left, quite hurt. I stood by him, feeling confused ... I started feeling spiritually restless". Joan was 23 at this time, and moved out of her parents' house, she went on to travel Europe for two months. The trip abroad introduced Joan to "political awareness and to a sense of freedom ... when I got back home, this expanded self exacerbated my spiritual restlessness. My lifestyle changed, I quit our church ... took university courses, moved to a different neighborhood and joined activist groups".

After about a year, Joan began attending Cornerstone, an inner-city outreach where Arthur was a minister. Cornerstone was pushing the "limits regarding what would be theologically acceptable – but [regardless] it was intellectually very stimulating". The church grew to attract many younger people – "people seeking a broader context in which to understand their faith". Cornerstone "felt like home, and I joined". The sorts of things that resonated for Joan was the incorporation of Jungian concepts into the sermons, the opportunity to experiment with liturgical dance, dream interpretation, Progoff Journaling, the Enneagram, and small groups focusing on spiritually-diverse topics and readings.

Life in a small church introduced Joan to the concept of community living. Friendships began, and “I became more aware of my gifts and my shortcomings. Soon after joining Cornerstone, I began a friendship with Ben. We discovered a common desire to serve God, and after two years decided to deepen our partnership in marriage. Both community living and marriage brought another angle into my spiritual life. Intimacy with others, particularly with another person, showed me how in some ways I still deeply mistrusted God”.

Cornerstone was eventually expelled from the main church. Following Arthur’s split from the church, a group of twenty, or so, decided to remain with him. What followed was the slow emergence of a new community. The group attempted several times to achieve reconciliation with the main church, but to no avail. The group generally, and Arthur specifically, were often the subject of wild gossip. As a group, they came to be referred to in ways that were demeaning and dismissive by many in the main church. The group was ostracized and labeled a cult. Rumours circulated about the group saying that they engaged in everything from sexual orgies to demon worship. The pain was particularly acute for Joan as the church was connected to the church of her childhood – it was the place that both nurtured and contextualized her search for God. The result was that Joan was “unsure where to go; [it turned out that] many of us needed to reject [Christianity] in order to come back [to it]”.

The emergence of an intentional community came about slowly as they reviewed where they came from and questioned deeply the faith they had placed in the church. The

severance from the church was humiliating, confusing, and distressing. Over time, the new community came to call itself Watershed. The pain experienced by being severed from the main church saw the members of Watershed retreat into intellectual safety. It was too painful to overtly continue with their Christian beliefs. The community involved itself in a more intellectually oriented focus, involving the examination and discussion of a wide range of spiritual topics. This intellectual focus lasted for several years. Slowly, and at varying rates amongst its membership, Watershed is moving toward becoming a loosely defined Christian community. Certainly for Joan, this move back to their Christian roots feels right.

Life within an intentional community has required real commitment. During the last few years, this “Spirit has shown itself within myself and others in the community. Both the frustrations of living together as well as the ability to be there for each other, have shown me how others have deepened their own spiritual journey. Their lives reflect how God’s work is present in everything. There has been a growing of different gifts in people, from writing, to teaching, to painting, to creating beauty and more”.

In answering the question, “what features of this experience has enriched your life, and in what ways?” Joan responds: “My experience of the spiritual journey has led me from a vague hope in God to experiences of his presence, to sharing my life with others ... In between moments of clarity and turning, are many times where uncertainty, stupidity, and unfaith, emerge as a part of my life. But, I wouldn’t want to exchange those times any more than I would for the “highlights” ... I feel very enriched to be known by a few

people, both my gifts and my shortcomings ... to be known, to love something bigger than myself, to work together with others towards something worthwhile are very enriching experiences”.

“Where am I headed? I am aware of a thread in my life that has an impetus that is still unfolding. Trusting God in the context of my own experience and in the context of life with others” [is a big part of it].

### **Comments on Joan’s Story**

Joan’s story demonstrates many of Fowler’s stages – the conventional belonging of *stage three* is evident in her teen years as is *stage four* resulting in serious, critical analysis of her faith which eventually led to her leaving her church and, eventually rejecting the beliefs held by the members of her congregation. Joan’s search for an experience of spiritual authenticity, led her to social activism and to a more politically oriented pursuit. Her spiritual restlessness eventually led her to Cornerstone, a place that nurtured the flowering of her mature spiritual growth.

Her desire to make a difference and to give back is evident – it is one of the driving forces of her life. Erikson talks about generativity – a way to give back, and to provide for, the next generation (1950/1963, p.266). Joan’s commitment to her spiritual journey has resulted in the achievement of a broader, more inclusive faith that deepens and, as she says, stretches, her life.

Joan's story, like the others portrayed in this section, is reflective of a person who has achieved Fowler's fifth, *Conjunctive Faith*, stage – the ability to hold disparate beliefs in such a way that her own faith is strengthened without the need to diminish that of others.

Joan's growth, however, came at a cost. The themes that emerged from Joan's story are those that speak about the pain one experiences when one faces tremendous and heartbreaking betrayal. The doubt and the confusion that followed their expulsion from their church led Joan ultimately to a place of certainty. The wounds Joan experienced shook her very understanding of God, faith, and church. What emerges from her story is a sense of the price one can pay in being true to one's self. Her story speaks of courage and integrity.

Joan's spiritual journey is one that offers a perception of God as *The Good* – “being spontaneously involved in a life of generous service” (Groeschel, 1998, p.8). There is clearly a spirit of generativity and service alive within the intentional community of which Joan is a member. They live within a close distance to one another, deliberately choosing to reside in an area of the city in great need of renewal. The community also expresses concern for the coming generation and is exploring ways to pass along their knowledge. They continue to explore what it means to be a part of this particular community. Their faith has become action as they live out these notions of commitment and love. They are church.



## Arthur's Story

Arthur was raised as an only child, his father died a young man, leaving Arthur and his mother behind. His mother was unwell much of the time, and Arthur spent long periods with his grandmother. He recalls, as a very young child playing in a construction site, “pretending that I was Francis of Assisi, building a little church for God. Where a good Baptist boy like me got this idea from I don’t know, but it did evoke a sense of devotion and piety in my young soul – I think I was five years old when I did that”.

One “notable twist was that I had a sort of nervous breakdown in grade one and my parents were advised to send me to a private school. It turned out to be a Catholic school. I think I must have had my first anima projection there with the young nun who taught me catechism. I was inspired enough to win the catechism award, the only Baptist to do so in the history of the school! The aesthetics of the chapel were enrapturing to me – for some reason I recall a lot of burgundy hues – [this] was in contrast to the banality of my Baptist meeting house”.

Another early experience “was when I was in grade four and we received the Gideon Bible at school. I didn’t pay much attention to it at school but while I was on holidays I would awaken early in the morning and row my small boat to the middle of the lake and read [the Bible]. There was a definite sense of communion that took place between me, my dog, the lake, and God”.

Arthur's church experience was rather uneventful "but there were times when [he] felt personally addressed by the sermon or the mentoring of a youth leader". Arthur attended church until the age of 12 when he left "for more esoteric routes". Just before Arthur entered adolescence he had an encounter with a Baptist pastor "that set the tone for me. I started to wonder what happened to those who died outside hearing ... the Gospel [as well as] the faithful people of other religions. This got me into a discussion with the youth pastor whose final evaluation of my theological status was that I was a pantheist ... I didn't understand what that meant at the time but the label helped to set me apart from my roots and I decided that if the narrow path meant narrow-mindedness, I would choose the broader way".

Arthur's father died when he was seventeen. The news of this was a setback for him: "I took a turn for the worse and reverted to substance abuse and political activism a-la-sixties style. While living in a commune taking LSD and listening to the new rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, I felt the need to reflect on my religious roots". Around this time two elderly ladies from a non-denominational, fundamentalist church, came to visit the commune with cookies in hand. "I was struck by their moral character and their courage and started attending their church. After a short period of time I was studying the Bible and went off to Bible College".

While at Bible College, Arthur excelled in academic subjects. He recalls one Good Friday while "alone in my dorm I had the distinct impression of a vocational call. What I intuited while in prayer was that I was to start a church for people who were similar in

inclination and who were alienated from current structures. I decided that whatever path my education was to take ... there must be an element of ministry involved in it. This decision was not taken well by my educational mentor who said it was a clear choice between the soft mindedness of a minister and the hard headedness of an academic. I refused the dichotomy.”

“In 1977 I became involved in the prototype of Watershed. This inner-city ministry later called Cornerstone Christian Fellowship, became a ministry to what we called “up and outer” people, those with psychiatric disorders and lifestyle difficulties who needed a social context and supportive pastoral counsel. Slowly this evolved into a unique inner-city church made up of many young academics who did not fit their church-of-origin. During this time I came to realize that there was a fundamental difference between a covenant community and a church. What many of us wanted was a covenantal intentional community to live out our commitment to spiritual growth within a deeply ecumenical setting”.

“In 1991 I experienced what astrologers call a Saturn return, or in common parlance, a mid-life crisis. I realized that I spent so much time trying to build a ministry that I neglected my own emotional, spiritual and intellectual wellbeing. I had several dreams that foreshadowed the upheavals in my marriage, spiritual life, and vocation. One was an earthquake dream where all was devastated. By the end of ninety-one I had lost my job, became defrocked as a minister, gotten divorced, and yet was freer than I had been in years. Through a romantic, and later to be covenanted relationship to Bev, I realized the

face of God in human form and began a slow period of spiritual reconstruction. At first, I didn't know whether I could maintain integrity and be a Christian but slowly I became aware that my heart was intransigently Christian - however modern and eclectic."

Since 1991, I have become increasingly more at ease with the decisions I had made or that were made for me during my crisis year. I have become grateful to the point of believing that God was present in these peculiar events, the fruit of which has been an intentional Christian educational community that has the very feature I hoped for back in the '70s -- a place for those who can't fit the structure, for whatever reason, to explore spirituality."

When asked where he saw himself moving toward over the next five years, Arthur wrote back: "I have no idea, but I would hope that I become increasingly more Christocentric in my spirituality and that I still maintain a respect and love for deepening my spirit through other traditions. I would also hope that the social shame (being defrocked as a minister) that has plagued me would become less detrimental and that I would learn to forgive myself for my errors in judgement in the past. While I am deeply grateful for all the growth that has been given to our community and me, I have to acknowledge that this has been a cruciform path. What I mean, is that suffering from our own limitation, ignorance, and egocentrism and turning that over to God has been excruciating at times, but worth it. I am amazed at the growth of those I am called to serve as well as the fact that God is still patient with me. And I still see him most clearly in the faces of those I love, especially Susan, my wife.

### **Comments on Arthur's Journey**

Arthur's journey reflects the process of a pilgrim who faced the traversing of wastelands to achieve his spiritual prize. There has always been a religious and spiritual thread that has run throughout Arthur's life. Even during his "drop out, tune in, and turn on" days living as a hippie in a commune, his connection to God was never far away. The emptiness of the drug life was replaced with an on-fire conviction of God's love for him.

Arthur's success in conventional ministry ran its course when he was fired, defrocked, divorced, and living in the basement of Joan's and Ben's home. Arthur's is a life of great passion and an authentic hunger for, and seeking of, God. His passion is best revealed through the play of painful opposites – the despair of being lost coupled with the intense joy of finding something authentic; the success of a vital ministry with the humiliation of being defrocked and discredited; the tremendous questioning followed only by a tremendous faith. The present time sees Arthur as continuing to minister to the remnant that followed him after leaving Cornerstone Church. He is a member of a community developing a new understanding of what it means to be "church". His gifts as a pastor, a teacher, and an academic are all given full expression. His life today is one characterized by a deep fulfillment and reconciliation.

The progression of Arthur's spiritual growth began with the faith of his childhood (Fowler's *stage 3*) reinforced by his grandmother. An unexpected exposure to Catholicism enriched Arthur's spiritual psyche. Eventually, Arthur came to deeply

question and to reject his childhood belief (Fowler's *Stage 4*). An encounter with two elderly Christian women facilitated a re-examination of his life and rekindled his desire to connect with the Holy.

A successful ministry within a fundamentalist church led to a conflict in belief. Arthur resisted the notion that ministerial success would be evaluated upon how many people he had "led to Christ". His concern for the whole person, and his intellectual and spiritual curiosity led him to examine a variety of religious, psychological, and philosophical influences. This could only lead into an inevitable breach with his church.

Arthur is a man of rare integrity. He was unable to deny his own beliefs in the face of increasing scrutiny and opposition from church hierarchy. Arthur's spiritual journey reflects the perception of God as *The True* – mirroring "a passion for truth [that] often subsumes other passions" (Groeschel, 1998, p.8). As painful as it was to be publicly rejected and to made the subject of scorn, this experience did create the possibility for Arthur to achieve the aim of his heart's longing - the founding of an ecumenical Christian community (Fowler's *Stage Five*). Arthur's story is a demonstration of a restless heart who has found its rest.

### Journey Three: Joe's Story

*a billion stars go spinning through the night,  
blazing high above your head.  
But in you is the presence that  
Will be, when all the stars are dead*

-Rainer Maria Rilke, *Buddha in Glory*, 1994, p.232

Joe is an academic working at a university in Manitoba. I met Joe while speaking with his sister-in-law, Helen, about my thesis. Helen immediately said, "You must meet Joe" and arranged for the meeting and the interview that was to be conducted in a coffee shop in Winnipeg.

Joe recounted his childhood, being raised Roman Catholic in a traditional French-Canadian family. Attending mass every Sunday, saying grace before meals, and kneeling every evening in the kitchen to recite the rosary as a family. "As soon as I started grade one I was conscripted to become an altar boy – five boys in the family and all of us were altar boys at one time or another. I think the best thing about being an altar boy was being chosen to do the midnight mass at Christmas because we got to stay up late".

Joe recalls a lot about the church being about "rules and regulations" and a negative relationship with a monsignor who was particularly severe. Joe looked for opportunities to distance himself from the Church. That first opportunity came when he was sixteen years of age and worked in a national park as an assistant to a naturalist. There, Joe experienced the first freedom to choose not to attend mass. He later attended university

and completed his first degree in Botany. Also, around this time (age 23), Joe became very curious about other spiritual practices and took up Transcendental Meditation.

Although one of his brothers had considered the priesthood, this was never anything Joe really contemplated – Joe wanted “to be rocket scientist” when he grew up. The turning point for Joe was when, at university, he experienced the break up of a significant love relationship. The loss of this relationship placed him in a tailspin and he sought counselling through a nun. The nun, Jane, “had a real human side to her, which was really nice, and [she] re-introduced me to the faith in a real good way ... in a really positive way, where I could actually relate to it as a human being. There was no more of this regulation kind of garbage ... [Jane] got me out of my tailspin and kinda gave me more of a sense of myself and also brought me to see that there was more to my faith than just being an alter boy”.

As a consequence of Jane’s contact, Joe “was a lot more mellow when it came to the Catholic church, and Christianity ... I started to see that that, hey, this isn’t so bad”. What Jane did to assist Joe in his faith was to allow him to see the compassion that underlies his religion. The presence of God’s mercy became real for Joe as he came to believe “that there really was love there and that it was unconditional and it didn’t matter what you were like – you could be a jerk ... and there was still love there for you. I think the big thing was that there was no more rules and regulations. The other thing [Jane] explained to me was some of the stuff involving the rituals of the Church and what they meant ... and it made a little more sense”.



After that Joe moved to Ontario to pursue graduate studies. In the interim, he married and he and his wife began to participate in the Catholic community at the University of Western Ontario. The priest who was ministering to the community at that time, Jerry, “was an absolutely marvelous”. Joe’s spouse, who was raised in the United Church, decided to convert to Catholicism. Jerry, too, had the gift to make their faith come alive in practical, everyday terms. “The biggest thing Jerry said is that we are the Church”.

Joe became the proctor at the Catholic college on campus - “I was in charge of 51 young men ... it was a good experience to try to bring some sort of Christian semblance to these suckers when they were mostly interested in drinking gobs and gobs of beer. So we actually lived in that building for a year and a half before moving on to U of T”.

Joe then moved on to Toronto to engage in doctoral studies. The move from the small and intimate environment of Western to a larger school and city was alienating. Joe “found the chaplain [there] not so friendly ... it was much more conservative and we were not getting a whole lot out of it ... So, basically that was Toronto, and after a while it didn’t take long and we basically never bothered to go back [to church].”

Joe today teaches a course on meditation. In recalling the practice of TM in his younger days, Joe was attracted to it because it “offered a methodology. I didn’t really understand prayer then, and I don’t know if I understand it today. But certainly meditation was a big thing – I also did yoga. I was looking for a connection that connected all living beings ...

you know, I kinda thought that there has got to be a belief in something bigger – the web of life, if you will- and the interconnectedness of stuff. So, I was really interested in that, and you never hear about it in the Catholic Church ... I was looking for some meaning”.

Joe’s doctoral studies at U of T did not lead to a faculty appointment as he had hoped and Joe was faced with another crisis. By this time, failing to find a vibrant, supportive community (Joe and his wife had stopped attending the Catholic Church), Joe felt that he was really on his own. When it became clear that his career would not materialize as expected, Joe recalls going through the fall of 1991 “feeling like I was going to do myself in. Deader and deader all the time”. A friend of Joe’s came over one evening and recommended a counsellor. This was “an intuitive counsellor – a new age counsellor – and she did body work on people and readings. It took me a while, but I eventually made an appointment to see this person ”.

Through his contact with this counsellor, Joe arrived at a new way of understanding himself. “I came to understand myself as a spiritual person ... and how I had deviated in the last couple of years [because] I was so entrenched in academic stuff. There was no spirituality left ... I mean it was just there buried in all the other stuff. And I remember that it was really quite an event and I went home and looked at my wife and started to cry and said I could hardly believe it, this counselor pegged me on everything, on absolutely everything. So, I cried literally for two days and then I went back and [did some more work] with the counselor – she is the person who started me back on the path to see that

U of T was not the center of the universe and that [my subject area] was not the center of the universe, [and] that there are other things that are more important”.

“It just shifted for me; it flipped me, literally flipped me, and I realized, oh my God, what have I done? I had lost all sensibility, quite literally, and U of T was just a tailspin. [This counselor] used to teach these meditation classes, so I started taking [the classes]; we moved later that year to accept a posting at the University of Saskatchewan. So we moved, [but] I had a sense of perspective now that was lacking previously. This person in Toronto was a turning point for me because she not only gave me a perspective that was away from the mainstream kind of stuff [but also] a sense of being spiritual that I had started as a teen”.

“So, in Saskatoon I began looking for some forms to work with ... I tried lots of different meditative stuff - I went back to [practicing] TM for a year, but it didn’t do anything. There was nothing to it and then I tried a lot of different stuff like Raja Yoga. I found Raja Yoga interesting, they did a lot of visualization stuff. They also hold to some beliefs that are definitely Hindi ... [but ultimately] I wasn’t interested in their dogma. I got a letter from these guys asking me to tithe 10% of my income and that this was essential to being saved”.

Joe was interested in finding a process, or an approach that would be free of dogma. TM was “too passive” – it was “great in facilitating relaxation, but enlightenment? Never!” After about three years Joe came across a book on Vipassana yoga and “started reading it,

and holy smoke, this is so neat and then I noticed an announcement in a magazine concerning a course to be held ... So I called these people up and got in touch with someone locally, who I actually knew ... Vipassana yoga is the Buddha's original teaching. So, basically you first have to admit that there is suffering and that there is a way out of your suffering and that there is a path that you can use to do it".

"The path? Well, it's a noble path according to the Buddha but it is basically the same stuff in all religions. It is right view, right aspiration, right speech, [right action, right mode of livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness, right concentration (Nikaya, 1982, p.271)] and those kind of things and there is [a method that assists in achieving this]. I took a ten-day retreat at Shawnigin Lake in October 1996 – it was just like going into a monastery. It was a silent retreat, up at 4 in the morning until 9:30 at night, meditating all day".

What appealed to Joe most about Vipassana yoga was the absence of an overt theology or dogma. It provides him with a space wherein he may explore his spiritual nature free of the "rules and regulations" that he perceived to be so much a part of his early Catholicism. Vipassana yoga allows Joe a way to be spiritual that isn't overtly religious; it is, in his words, "non-denominational". It provides Joe with a practice that engages him fully – where he "has to work". It is an approach that integrates concepts of loss and suffering in a meaningful way for Joe. Vipassana yoga allows Joe to focus on life as it really is, and to accept the moment as it really is. This "is the really big lesson and I bring this into my life now. Vipassana is non-denominational, although a religion has

developed around it over the years, just as one has developed around the teaching of Christ. But the basic teachings as presented by Buddha are simple, just as those of Christ are. Vipassana as a way of life is simple, commonsense. No garbage. In Vipassana, one has only oneself as a teacher. There is no one out there to take orders from. One becomes responsible for one's spiritual growth. The Buddha said we all have a path to liberation. To reach the end you start at the beginning, and walk the whole length of it by yourself – no one can do this for you. Just before the Buddha died he said: 'Don't believe anything I have said in the last forty years. Go out and discover for yourself.' So, one takes responsibility for one's actions, one's life, and one's liberation. I like that!"

Faith, for Joe, is "something that runs beneath everything – this notion of God runs beneath all things". Joe is not sure what God is: "quite honestly I haven't a clue; there's definitely something there ... but I'm still working on this whole idea of God. But I am convinced that there is really nothing that is worthwhile in our lives except service to others". Joe had a dream, of a mountain with a deep, hidden stream running beneath it. There is a big black stone slab that prevents access to this stream. Joe sees this slab as his faith, or "rather, my lack of faith. If I can let go and sink into it, I'll be consumed and I'll never be the same". There is the fear and the knowledge that when we utterly surrender we will be, in some essential and significant way, changed.

### **Comments on Joe's Story**

Joe's spiritual journey begins with his family and their following of a conventional religious observance – one that he grew to feel was too constricting and filled with too

many rules. The influence of a religious sister who counselled him in his undergraduate years brought him to place where he began to understand his faith and the traditions of the Catholic church. The importance of community emerges as a crucial factor for Joe. The lack of a supportive community, led Joe to experience a gradual drifting away from all things spiritual, leaving him vulnerable when his academic aspirations were not fulfilled.

For Joe the spiritual life must be, first and foremost, pragmatic – it must make a tangible difference and clearly demonstrate its ability to make a difference. When Joe was looking for assistance the first time, the Church fulfilled that role; the second time he needed assistance it came from a counsellor outside of his faith community. That contact sent him seeking other spiritual alternatives to Catholicism.

The importance of choice in terms of being able to select one's own expression of faith, is paramount to Joe. Dogma, commandments, and other rules must make practical sense, else they emerge as being of little meaning to Joe. There is a strong element of individualism in Joe's story. Vipassana meditation provides Joe with a practical, tangible approach that is assisting him to deepen his spiritual identity. It provides him with a method to burn off impediments to true spiritual growth by deepening his own self-awareness and his connection to the All. It provides him with a way, a Tao.

Joe connects with other practitioners through weekend retreats and reading about Vipassana meditation. He has discovered a way that allows him to access deep

psychological features and, in so doing, deal with them in a positive and constructive manner. His wife has not yet joined Joe in the practice of Vipassana but nor is his practice of it a barrier in their relationship. Joe's renewed interest in meditation has led him to facilitate general, introductory, meditation classes in the community. He clearly sees a link between an experience of spiritual authenticity and service to others.

Joe's Search, then, saw an early questioning of the rituals around his faith. It was not until many years later, when his faith was explained to him, that Joe could give his assent. However, there was always an uneasy relationship between Joe and the Catholic Church. At the bottom of it all, Joe could not get past the hierarchical structure of the Church. As a young child, Joe never considered, as did one of his brothers, a priestly vocation. Joe was always quite certain that he wanted to be a scientist. Joe's *stage three* level of faith development would have been evident in his very early childhood and again in his early university days.

Joe's decision to move on and to explore other spiritual possibilities outside of Catholicism was precipitated by a professional crisis that grew, engulfing his personal life. Joe's examination of meditation, revisiting his former practice of TM, and his investigation of Raja Yoga are all indicative of a *stage four* level of faith development. This methodical examination for the truth which underlies spiritual experience is evident in Joe's story. Like Arthur, Joe's journey reflects the perception of God as *The True* – his is a journey that reveals an intense curiosity and loves to “question and delve” (Groeschel, 1998, p.8). Joe can commit to a way, a belief, only after it makes sense to

him. The “great spiritual danger for those drawn to God as the True is not that they will turn aside. The danger is that they will tarry on the way, getting involved with this side road or that” (Groeschel, 1998, p.8). Although Joe did “tarry”, as do all seekers, he did, nonetheless, find a way.

His commitment to Vipassana yoga deeply meets the need for which he was searching. Joe is clear that Vipassana yoga meets deeply the longing of his heart. The practice of Vipassana yoga provides Joe with a sense of healing and deep connection to all that is.



### **Journey Four: Joanna's Story**

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And at the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

T.S.Eliot, *Little Gidding*, (1930/1971, p.138)

Joanna is a bright, articulate woman of forty-six. She is an accomplished playwright and is recognized as a prominent figure in the arts community both locally and nationally. She is the mother of a teen-aged daughter and the interview was held in her home on a spectacular autumn afternoon.

Joanna is a woman who has known the acute pain that flows from two marriages that ultimately were not successful and, especially, the particular pain reserved only for those who experience the death of a child. Joanna was born into a traditional Roman Catholic home. One of her aunts, a member of a religious order, has recently celebrated her fiftieth anniversary of consecrated life.

Joanna's grandmother, a very special person in her life, was a very devout woman. Her first awareness of God came from being taught how to pray, attending Mass, and preparing for her First Communion. In this period Joanna would attend Mass almost daily with her grandmother, it "was a very special time for her and I". Her memories of the

Latin Mass, the incense, the place that the church took in her life – “it was a very big place, a place where people knew what was right and what was wrong”.

As Joanna grew older she attended a series of Catholic schools (her father was transferred several times when she was younger). In those days she dreamed of doing important work, “like most young girls, [I considered] being a missionary”. Joanna and her family moved around to several different cities while she was growing up. When she entered into adolescence her family moved, for the final time, to Edmonton.

In her late adolescence, Joanna became pregnant outside of wedlock, and married the father of her baby. Ryan was born when Joanna was nineteen years of age. Ryan had severe handicaps – “he was born without the ability to see; he wouldn’t grow to walk, run, or talk. This was very painful, I couldn’t understand why [Ryan] was presented with so many challenges in his young life ... [this] made him constantly dependent on me”.

Ryan taught Joanna “what unconditional love was all about ... he taught me a lot ... the very simple things in life, like sound and the texture of water. I learned a lot of patience, [this] was a very difficult marriage, my husband had problems ... this is where it gets very difficult with my family - my family viewed this as some kind of terrible punishment” [from God]. What Joanna’s family failed to see was that “Ryan was the shining light [in my life] and he depended on me and I depended on him”. Ryan died at four years of age, the “most, and still is, difficult transition of my life. There’s nothing that can compare to losing a child. It’s such a huge experience, the fact that I had this

child who never changed in four years and was completely dependent on me ... it was like having something amputated. It makes me who I am. As soon as I lost my Ryan, I turned away from my faith. I just couldn't get comfort afterwards from this God who had forsaken me. [It signaled] the end of my marriage".

A few years later, Joanna married for the second time, to Stephen. Joanna became involved with Stephen soon after the demise of her first marriage and they were married when she was twenty-seven. They moved to Vancouver and two years later, Stephen and Joanna became parents. Angela's birth "astonished me. She weighed nine pounds and I was in labour for 36 hours ... [this] was a huge triumph, a huge, healthy baby."

Spiritually, Joanna was still alienated from the Catholic Church; Stephen's father was a fundamentalist minister. Both of them desired something spiritual in their lives but were reluctant to go back to the faith of their respective families. They did a "lot of reading in Buddhism ... we liked the precepts, you know right action, right thought, that kind of thing. But it seemed very foreign". While working in British Columbia, Joanna and Stephen came into contact with the Baha'i community. They were attracted to the "sense of community and they would do things with their children. I missed that – I longed for that". But, ultimately the Baha'i faith "never really fit. [We] just couldn't make that leap, the teaching seemed so foreign and [we] never felt comfortable."

Before leaving British Columbia, Joanna and Stephen became involved with the Unitarian Church and continued attending the church when they moved back to

Edmonton. Shortly after their return to Alberta, Joanna's and Stephen's marriage dissolved. Joanna learned to parent on her own and how to "make a career on my own. [I] started to feel comfortable with prayer again ... felt that I needed help but wasn't sure [where to look] .. I started to meditate and would read Christian books that Stephen's parents would send".

Through a neighbour, Joanna became attracted to the practice of Raja Yoga – a Hindi-inspired philosophy that uses the practice of open eye meditation. Joanna would have long conversations with her neighbour, attended orientation sessions for people interested in learning more, and would listen to tapes provided to her. Throughout this process, Joanna "learned stillness and [became aware of her] need to listen". At the end, however, Joanna "admired [Raja Yoga] and I found that it wasn't for me".

As Joanna approached her midlife years, she became aware of trying to find ways to make "my life more authentic. I am profoundly grateful for my life ... gratitude is a big part of it, awe and wonder are a huge part". Next, "I did the Course in Miracles. It was recommended to me some years ago ... it sounds a bit wacky, but I began to feel very connected to Ryan again ... it was like I was hearing his voice when I was journalling". This was a very healing time for Joanna, a time when she was able to reclaim Ryan as a part of her life and integrate the great gift that he was to her. At the same time "my aunt [the nun] became ill. When I visited her, I was touched by this house of nuns ... just loved it ... seeing them, I loved their relationship with one another ... very sweet,

companionable relationship. A house filled with faith and simplicity ... something very moving about that kind of faith – living that kind of faith.”

It was during that visit to her ailing aunt that Joanna became aware of “the terrible sense of exclusion” she felt from the Catholic Church. Over the years she had attended Mass several times, but had always perceived that she was unwelcome due to being twice divorced. The big realization she had was “the arms I thought were crossed were really open in an embrace”. It was the awareness that God is our creator. I think there are reasons why things happen ... there must have been reasons why I was lucky enough to be Ryan’s mother – how did a nineteen year old girl become his mother – I felt in some ways that I was tested, and passed and, in some ways, failed for not seeing God’s hand. All those years I was drawn to the literature of people who have had strong religious experiences – stories of people who have grappled ... I think it is good not to have blind faith but a sighted, earned faith is important”.

Joanna has begun attending Mass regularly again and has found that her journey “has taken me back to a place where I can be a practicing Catholic again – it is a very joyful place for me ... where I feel very much released from the strictures and boundaries that were on me, but [in reality] weren’t. I really value wisdom, I value the sacred, although I’ve struggled with what that means ... [for me] it’s about finding the sacred every single day. The Catholic Church satisfies the longing I have for the deep. My need to rejoice is met there”.

## Comments on Joanna's Story

There is an almost archetypal Marian theme to Joanna's story. A young girl finding herself pregnant and living to see her son die. The life, and the eventual loss, of her son had enriched Joanna's life beyond measure. It was, however, a pain that was too severe, too pervasive, too intense, and too confusing, to understand all at once. To cope, Joanna had to shut Ryan's life, and death, out of her life. She had to split it off - much in the same fashion that she had to shut off her connection to the Church. It was just too painful.

But Joanna's story is the quintessential story of the homecoming. The returning to the faith that she thought had rejected her only to discover that it was patiently awaiting to embrace, enfold, and transform. It is the story of reclamation – Ryan, who had for so many years remained as a distant event, is now integrated into her life again.

The brokenness and despair of a life filled with many disappointments are central to Joanna's story. The search for community and acceptance as an anecdote to pain kept Joanna seeking for a spirituality big enough to hold all of her experiences. The investigation into Buddhism, the Baha'i faith, the Unitarian church, Raja Yoga, the Course in Miracles, all provided her with aspects that contributed to her spiritual growth. Joanna's journey, then, took her from Fowler's *stage three* (her comfort with her family's belief system) to a rejection of Catholicism (*stage four*). Her inquiry into other systems and ways of understanding the spiritual life eventually led her back to Catholicism. It is a choice based on the experience that comes from looking elsewhere. Joanna's perception

of God as *the One* is reflective of a person “whose life is an intellectual and emotional pursuit of integration” (Groeschel, 1998, p.6).

Joanna’s journey was a search where the early seeds of love for the Church ultimately took root and blossomed. Joanna’s face brightens and her language comes vibrantly to life when talks about the surprise of her return to Catholicism, and about the deep joy she experiences in her life as a consequence. This is about the wheel coming around in a full circle, but at a very different level.

Joanna’s story is an Easter story. It is a story that is about integrating the really important things in life – family and faith. It is an Easter story, too, because the son who had been dead is now present and once again acknowledged in her life. Scattered about on Joanna’s sideboards are the pictures of Ryan that before were too painful to display. This is a story about homecoming. It is the story of reclamation.

## **Journey Five: Diana's Story**

*... a sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads  
of a lost life, of responding to a bell that had long been  
ringing, of taking a place at a table that had long been vacant.*  
- Malcolm Muggeridge

Diana works as an academic at a university in eastern Canada. She is a bright, articulate individual with a rare intensity and passion for life. She has won numerous teaching excellence awards and is an expert in the area of education. Diana's story demonstrates a restlessness that resulted in a relentless search for a spiritual home.

Diana was born almost fifty years ago and was baptized in the Anglican Church and raised in the United Church. Diana recalls, as an adolescent, feeling that she had experienced a strong call to the ordained ministry but was discouraged from choosing this path by her parents and her minister on the basis of being a woman. Following that initial discouragement, Diana's church participation was unremarkable until university when she broke her leg and attended a Catholic mass on campus because of its convenient location. Her experience of that was that the mass was "very other". Diana recalled an earlier trip to Montreal and visiting the St. Joseph Oratory and the Cathedral of Notre Dame. She experienced a sensation of reverence and an attraction to the beauty of the setting – the candles, the pictures, the stained glass windows, and the statues. The crutches lining the wall of the chapel at the Oratory – all this was very alien to her Protestant sensibilities.



Diana married and later became involved with “a group of evangelical types” through her local United Church. She noticed that “they talked about Jesus differently – much more intimate and informally ... like they knew him.” A division occurred within the church and Diana left with a dozen or so others who went on to form a home church. The division occurred around a matter of faith – she found herself saying, “do we believe that Jesus is the son of God, or not? He wasn’t denying us, I don’t see why we should be denying him!” This became an important event for Diana. For the first time she found herself speaking with a sense of conviction that startled her. After that declaration, she remembers that things were just different, “it was like the grass was greener, the sky was bluer”. There was a distinct and qualitative difference for her from before and what she came to experience afterwards. The experience was a dramatic one, and left Diana feeling somewhat confused by what she was experiencing. She sought the counsel of a church friend who advised that she was “born again”.

Diana enjoyed the informality and the closeness of the home church. There, they practiced weekly Bible study, prayer, and sometimes partook in a communion service. “It was a kind of name it and claim it Christianity – Word of Faith church – the sort of place where you name what you want in the name of Christ and then just believe that it will be so. I grew increasingly uncomfortable with this group. My husband said he went to bed with me one night and woke up with Billy Graham.”

Diana's husband was transferred and she and her family moved to another province. Through mutual acquaintances in the new city in which she found herself, Diana started attending a Southern Baptist church – “wonderful people”. This church, too, divided because of serious doctrinal differences and Diana found herself following yet another pastor to another home church. Diana later left this home church primarily to allow her children access to a Sunday school setting at another Baptist church. During this time, Diana continued to explore various Christian approaches to worship such as the Vineyard Church – a highly charismatic denomination – as well attending Mennonite and Pentecostal churches.

Diana and her family moved again to Toronto. Soon afterwards her adolescent-aged daughter began what would become a very rocky transition into early adulthood. The fundamentalist churches that Diana was attending suggested that she was not only responsible for her own salvation, but it was her duty to bring her husband and children to accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour as well. Diana was becoming “increasingly unhappy; how could I go [to church] feeling bad and come out feeling worse? Everybody was so happy, what was wrong with me – I was responsible for the eternal welfare of not only myself but my entire family”. This was all becoming too much for Diana to bear.

Shortly afterwards, Diana's daughter disappeared. There had been problems previously, but this created an understandable sense of crisis – she and her husband did not know if their daughter was dead or alive. The pastor of her church suggested to Diana that God

will sometimes punish us through our children for sins we have committed. After this meeting, Diana repaired to the bar and had nothing further to do with any church for a six month period. She was hurt, angry, and felt deeply confused. She angrily questioned any God who would “punish my daughter because he was angry at me!”

Still, Diana experienced a draw to understand this God better, more deeply. She had an altercation with a professor who was demeaning of Christianity in a classroom where she acted as his teaching assistant. Later, she reflected, “why do I care about Jesus ... okay, if I’m still thinking that God’s here, what do I do about it?” Diana continued to explore the possibilities - she returned to the United Church for a period of time, followed by another Baptist Church, then an Anglican Church. A sermon at Pentecost questioned that if Thomas hadn’t been such a doubter, how many more people might have been saved. Diana thought, “here we go again, a God that can’t cope with questions and questioners”. Diana had by this point attended a number of home churches, Southern Baptist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Alliance, Mennonite, Vineyard Fellowship, Anglican, and the United Church. Ultimately, all these churches and experiences failed to provide her with a spiritual crucible large enough to contain all the facets of her life - her pain, her questions, her joy, and her doubts.

Diana was clear that she had surveyed the Christian landscape fairly extensively. She was also clear that, although she had some intense experiences of God’s presence, religious institutions were universally found to be wanting. Diana was prepared to abandon her search for a church and came to question the veracity of her Christian belief. She thought

that before she wrote Christianity off all together, that the “last place in Christianity to check out was the Roman Catholic Church”. Diana attended Mass on Mother’s Day five years ago and “for the first time I left a church service without feeling beat-up and inadequate – so I went back”. Diana enrolled in the OCIA (Order of Christian Initiation of Adults) program at the parish she was attending. She found in this group she could question and give voice to her doubts, “no one told me to be quiet, no one told me to be nice, nobody phoned me during the week to check up on me to see if I still believed – it was an atmosphere of respectful acceptance”. Diana recognized that her previous experiences had left her hostile toward Christianity and here she was “going to press and shove this God to see what he, and this Church, were made of”.

Slowly, Diana came to embrace a God “who enters into our suffering versus inflicting it upon us”. Diana noted the corpus is centrally and prominently displayed on the cross in Catholic churches, a reminder that Christ suffers with us. Protestant theology, Diana believes, “just can’t, wouldn’t allow it”. The focus in her previous church experience had been on “the victory without any meaningful acknowledgement that life is often painful and disappointing”. Catholicism facilitated Diana to access a faith that “allows me to be real ... an earthiness ... the sacraments as tangible, sensory access that Jesus himself makes the ordinary holy, that God is active in ordinary things”.

Diana was formally received into the Church the following year. That Easter Vigil, the time when Diana was formally received into the Roman Catholic Church, was a time of great importance and joy for her. Her family came, and “what they liked best was that at

the reception afterwards, nobody asked them if they were saved or not”. Her first Eucharist was special, it was “a real sense of Jesus showing up and [a confirmation] that he’s always there, [I] don’t have to wonder if he’s going to show up because I’m so horrible”. The experience was “like Jesus picked me up and planted me in this rock”. Diana recalls a time when she was going forward in the communion line, “and I was watching all these other people, old people, young people, firm, infirm, probably the ardent faithful and the lukewarm; it was like I could see the centuries of people going forward and sharing in the body of Christ, and the communion of saints was made real”.

The experience of attending the Roman Catholic Church continues to feed Diana’s hungry heart. Her daughter did return, and Diana went on to complete her doctoral studies. Her master’s thesis was on Saint Teresa of Avila and the substance of her Ph.D. dissertation was largely inspired by her own spiritual search.

### **Comments on Diana’s Story**

Diana’s story differs from the others in that, although she searched broadly, she remained within Christianity. Diana’s journey is clearly one of relentlessly searching - of desiring an experience of authenticity. There is little doubt that many of the places she investigated along the way provided her with at least glimmerings of this sense of authenticity. However, ultimately, she was driven to continue the search because either the church community experienced a split along doctrinal lines, or the guidance she sought was found to be inadequate.

Diana also makes an interesting reference to the place of suffering in the spiritual journey and the difference, theologically, in terms of how that suffering is given expression between Protestantism and Catholicism. Her personal experience was that in Protestantism there was little room for, and validation of, the suffering she experienced. Diana's story emphasizes a search that culminated in the rejection of several religious systems – denominations that proved to be more reflective of Wilber's concept of "flatland" than systems that allowed for meaningful access to the Divine.

Diana had an earnest and strong desire to know God. Her encounter with many of the groups, churches, and para-churches, left her feeling that she could not bring all of herself there – that there were proscribed ways of being and behaving. The Catholic Church allowed Diana to feel fully accepted; here she could authentically be who she was.

Diana was prepared to give up on Christianity. Her extensive search had failed to yield a viable and sustained experience of authenticity. Hers is a spiritual journey reflective of perceiving God as *the One* – seeing God "as bringing unity into experienced chaos" (Groeschel, 1998, p. 7). Feeling that she owed it to herself to investigate the only institution left unexamined – the Roman Catholic Church – Diana was both surprised and delighted by her experience of Catholicism. As with the other co-researchers, Diana's journey led her through Fowler's *stage three* of conventional acceptance and belonging to a rejection of these various systems (*stage four*). Her move into a system she perceives as larger and broader reflects a successful resolution, an integration, of the Search that has so earnestly occupied much of her life.

## **SEVEN DICHOTOMOUS THEMES PRESENT IN THE SEARCH FOR AN EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHENTICITY**

The previous section provided summaries of the spiritual journeys taken by the five co-researchers. The writer concluded their stories with some comments regarding features that were unique to their stories. All five co-researchers ended their respective searches in places very different from where they began – even Joanna who returned to the Catholicism of her youth returned to it in a renewed, more inclusive, way. None could have anticipated the outcomes they experienced when they began their journey. Their spiritual journeys engaged them in a process that led them to examine the deepest questions of their hearts' longing.

As much as their stories are uniquely their own, there are clearly themes that all five share with one another and, in all probability, with ourselves. This section will identify and discuss these common themes. In all, seven themes have been identified through an analysis of the content of the interviews. The themes emerge as dichotomous in nature – that is, they appear as apparent opposites. In fact, they are, as we shall see, experiences along the same continuum. They speak to phenomena that are complex and dynamic. These seven themes reflect experiences that are closely linked to one another. Consequently, they tend to overlap with one another and elements of one can often be

heard echoing throughout others. This business, then, of pulling the threads apart that form the experiences of our lives is not a clean, nor is it a precise, process.

The seven dichotomous themes are: suffering and peace; iconoclastic disengagement and the need for structure; doubt and meaning; homeostasis and creativity; isolation and community; floundering and finding; and, crisis and clarity.

### **Theme 1:      Suffering and Peace**

Suffering is a part of all of our lives. None of us are immune to the innumerable, and largely unpredictable, events that can provide the genus of intense suffering. Most major religions acknowledge the role suffering plays in terms of transformation. The great stories of Judaism are filled with accounts ranging from a people in bondage, to the story of Job, to the experience – both ancient and present – of living in the Diaspora. Buddhism's central tenet is that life is essentially suffering. Christianity, too, has powerful images regarding suffering; most notably, Christ's passion and the martyrdom of early believers. Essentially, all roads lead to Calvary.

This theme of suffering, not unexpectedly, sounds a strong chord throughout the stories of all five co-researchers. Theirs is the spiritual journey as the *via dolorosa*. The existence of suffering has often been cited as proof that God either does not exist, or does not care. Although the co-researchers questioned deeply God's presence in their



suffering, none of them concluded that God did not exist. Suffering, according to most traditions, can be a way to access meaning, a way to deepen and to, paradoxically, experience transformation.

Suffering enters into the spiritual journey via three routes. Firstly, it is almost always precipitated by an external event (e.g., job loss, loss of community, death of a child). Secondly, it places the individual into a context where things are largely outside of his or her control. Lastly, as a consequence, the very beliefs we held are, in some important ways, challenged, and subsequently, changed.

By definition, to seek means that we have not arrived at a place of contentment and, consequently, our restlessness of heart continues. Suffering for the seeker functions on at least two levels – the existential pain that accompanies searching and not finding an answer to the longing of our hearts and, secondly, the experiencing of structures too thin to sustain us through challenging life events. It is the convergence of these two factors that contribute to the intensity of the experience. For example, if a person experiencing a crisis learned through that experience that their faith held them up, that it assisted them in some tangible manner, then the overall impact of the event is somewhat mitigated. The five co-researchers in this study found that when the crisis came, their spiritual perceptions were challenged, and the systems that supported their faith were found wanting.

Suffering, then, when applied to the five co-researchers, can be seen, in some ways, as being opposite to the deep joy that comes through peace. All five co-researchers acknowledged that their spiritual journey was an arduous one. Present in their accountings is the reality of having grappled with significant, even overwhelming, life issues. Staying the course, in terms of the Search, came at a great price. For all, it involved a process where they sank deeply into pain, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. The absence of an experience of spiritual authenticity heightened their experience of suffering. Authentic spirituality, then, can be regarded as being a critical component in moderating, although not eliminating, suffering.

In this notion of suffering we find themes relating to profound alienation. Alienation from family, from church, from their belief, and alienation even from God. Alienation, by definition, creates moments of great uncertainty and these are stories filled with intense psychological pain. For Joan and Arthur, their banishment from their church community included the severance of longtime relationships with friends and even family members. Joe experienced the severe pain of rejection when he had mistakenly placed all his attention and personal worth on receiving an academic appointment that failed to materialize. Joanna had experienced the desolation that comes with the death of a child, and rejecting a religion that she thought had stood in judgement of her. Diana keenly felt the inadequacies of various church groups and denominations to assist her meaningfully in her time of crisis.

To focus, however, only on their experience of suffering, fails to capture the whole story. The experience of suffering could not have foretold the great consolation that awaited them. The five co-researchers all had moments where they did not know where, or to whom, they should turn. The experience of suffering was closely related to an experience of aloneness and isolation - both of which are psychologically as well as spiritually demanding. It is interesting to speculate how their lives may have been different if they had foreshortened their search - if they had settled for less. That, however, was not in the nature of these people; all five demonstrated a conscious need to have an experience of spiritual authenticity in their lives. All five strove diligently to place their faith in an understandable spiritual context. The result is a deep, abiding sense of connection to a spirituality that is valid, credible, and authentic.

## **Theme 2: Iconoclastic Disengagement and the Need for Structure**

Each of the five co-researchers had the provision of some earlier spiritual formation in their childhood. This early exposure to religious ideas provided the basis of a conceptual framework from which they could understand their lives spiritually. All five had connections to institutional religions that, ultimately, they experienced as deficient in important ways. For their respective reasons, then, their connection to their churches became ultimately untenable. The very structure and systems they had come to rely upon spiritually were found wanting, ironically at the very time when they needed them the most.

For Joan and Arthur, this resulted in them, and several other members of their congregation, physically, emotionally, and spiritually leaving their church. It precipitated a review of their Christian roots and thrust them into an examination of other, potentially more viable, ways of being spiritual. The Church for Joe had ultimately failed to provide him with a nurturing and strong community attachment. As a result he drifted away and, when he had experienced an acute need for support, the assistance he sought was from another source. Joanna felt that God had abandoned her, and that the Church had rejected her. Diana, after seeking so diligently found little upon which she could truly rely.

There was a process for all five co-researchers of discovering that their respective existing ecclesiastical structures were insufficient. But this went beyond just a disappointment in church structure and dogma. It led to an experience of active rejection of those institutions, necessitating a review of what they could really trust and believe. This is a critical component in the Search, for if they had found their respective churches adequate, they would have been less inclined to begin looking about them. Although they retained a belief in God, their belief in religion, as such, was shaken to the core.

Today, all five co-researchers have a vibrant and dynamic connection to their ground-of-being. Two of the co-researchers, Joanna and Diana, have happily found themselves at peace within an institutional church. Joan and Arthur are currently moving toward understanding themselves as a Christian community and defining what the word “church” means to them. Joe was the most vocal in asserting his condemnation of the institutional

church. His way has led him to a place where he can practice his faith free from “rules and regulations”. However, for all five co-researchers, there emerged the importance for something else to replace the old, some new structure was needed. The structure that community provides for Joan and Arthur is critical to their personal definition of spirituality. Even for Joe, Vipassana meditation provides a process, a belief, and a context in which he can understand himself.

This iconoclastic disengagement from belief in an institutional church, presented all five co-researchers with opportunities to replace this structure with new systems. It is interesting that the serious disillusionment with so-called “organized religion” did not lead any of the five co-researchers opting, in the long term, for a spiritual expression separate and independent from some form of religious tradition.

### **Theme 3:      Doubt and Meaning**

An “earned” faith, as Joanna expressed it, comes as a direct result of having struggled, of having doubted. Achieving the fifth stage of Fowler’s model, these five co-researchers know the pain that accompanies questioning previously held beliefs. It places us into a tailspin, a descent, the bottom of which cannot be seen. This is a time of extreme disorientation – it is the moving away from one shore without any certainty that another exists. It is the experience of being adrift. The faith journeys of all five co-researchers led

to the proverbial dark night of the soul – a time where the need for meaning was acute and existing structures were inadequate.

Religion specifically, and spirituality in general, are largely about our need to satisfy our hunger for meaning. Eliade (1978), Frankl (1967), Cox (1977), Wilber (1996), May (1979), and numerous others, all agree that humankind cannot withstand very well the prospect of living a life without meaning and purpose. One of the essential functions of the spiritual journey is that it can assist us in understanding both ourselves and our world better. Possessing a spiritual basis in our lives provides us with answers to the big questions about our existence. A way to create meaning and purpose, then, is met adequately through the spiritual journey.

The five co-researchers were all innately inclined, some unconsciously others more consciously, to continue the Search. The nature of the Search is a response to a deeply felt need that may have been only dimly understood at the time. The interview process in which the co-researchers participated, and the subsequent reflection it invited, involved all of them in a deeper, more conscious understanding of their respective journeys.

The sum and substance of the quest that engaged all five co-researchers so deeply, was essentially meaning-seeking in nature. The spiritual journey is primarily about defining our Ultimate Concern and finding a viable way to express that Concern. The fact that all five co-researchers were seekers, emphasizes this notion that, at their deepest of levels, their respective journeys were about a quest for meaning.

At base, their quest for was for meaningful, authentic, spiritual involvement. Their previous answers and former understandings were no longer providing the necessary links. Different, more complete, answers were needed. We saw in the summaries of their journeys, that all five co-researchers moved from a comfortable belief system to a point of actively moving beyond that belief in the search for an experience of spiritual authenticity. This was, in Fowler's model, a moving from *Stage Three* to *Stage Four*. *Stage Four* can be seen as that "dark night of the soul" experience – the time when beliefs are reviewed and re-evaluated, often resulting in a reworking of our understanding of them. This is the experience of doubt. However, none of the co-researchers abandoned the Search. By staying the course they arrived at a new way of understanding the spiritual bases of their lives. All five co-researchers deepened and broadened their faith through this experience. All would say that their search brought them a greater, more sustained, sense of meaning.

#### **Theme 4: Homeostasis and Creativity**

The spiritual search can be seen as being largely creative in nature. By definition, the Search moves us away from the status quo. It connects, in a vital way, our struggle in achieving an experience of spiritual authenticity, with the notion that there is an answer, an explanation. It is through the creative act that we are able to reach beyond our challenges, our limitations, our setbacks, our personal tragedies, and move toward

resolution (May, 1975, p.19). It is the act of a creative mind that sees limitations that can no longer be ignored and reaches beyond itself to achieve satisfying, even surprising, resolutions.

It is a creative impulse that draws us to respond to its call for clarity. It compels us to keep reaching until we have experienced a breakthrough. Old meanings and ways of doing and understanding things are no longer adequate – new ways and new understandings must be forged. Creativity, as such, is an essential part of the psychologically whole person. It involves the “ability to invent, to perceive old patterns in new relationships, or rearrange old patterns in new ways” (Masterson, 1988, p.208).

Often, when we follow our creative impulses, we are led to places that may not be well known, or understood, by us. The very essence of the creative impulse is that it takes us somehow beyond ourselves and directs us to places that are unfamiliar. To follow our creative impulse demands that we remain open; there is a sense of risk and adventure involved in this process. Creativity requires, as Masterson (1988) says,

effort and struggle and the willingness to endure anxiety, since creative efforts usually have the potential of failing, of being critiqued unfavorably, and even of being rejected. Some people are unwilling to make the necessary effort to endure the unavoidable anxiety; as a result, they forego creative endeavors and, it is to be hoped, make their peace with living below their full potential (p.209).

The creativity involved in arriving at an experience of spiritual authenticity leaves us vulnerable in many ways. We can come to doubt ourselves in important and essential ways. We come to doubt the veracity and the value of the spiritual journey itself. There is



often an accompanying lack of support that is present when one investigates possibilities beyond one's faith community – the pressure to remain within the status quo is enormous. All five co-researchers made brave choices in terms of going beyond their respective faith parameters. This reaching beyond the known, and the comfortable, requires a certain strength of character. However, action such as this also carries with it the seeds of destruction. The act of rejecting former systems and beliefs is, in essence, tantamount to engaging in a radical act of re-ordering of those beliefs.

The five co-researchers represent a dizzying array of spiritual possibilities – not only where they arrived, spiritually, but also where they had traversed. Joan moved from conventional church affiliations, to social and political activism, to an ecumenical focus in a broadly based intentional community. Arthur moved from rejection of his church to the 'hippie' lifestyle of the early seventies, to very conventional church affiliations, to shepherding a community currently in search of a theology. Joanna and Joe both came from Roman Catholic backgrounds and both examined eastern systems; Joanna found her way back to Catholicism and Joe found himself at rest in a loosely Buddhist path. Diana looked throughout Protestant church structures to find herself at home in Catholicism. Such movement and investigation is, ultimately, highly creative in nature. These are not people who are content to settle for less. The five co-researchers are people who went far and away from their home beliefs to arrive at a sacred place.

All five co-researchers experienced a breakthrough in terms of how they viewed themselves spiritually before, and how they understand their spirituality now. Rollo May

(1979) writes that “whenever there is a breakthrough of a significant idea ... the new idea will destroy what a lot of people believe is essential to the survival of their intellectual and spiritual world” (p.63). This was borne out by the degree of rejection and alienation experienced by the co-researchers from their respective faith communities. Taking another road, spiritually, is to move beyond what many perceive as normal or acceptable. This, is a movement away from homeostasis; it is movement embracing more creative possibilities.

#### **Theme 5: Isolation and Community**

So much of the spiritual journey necessarily involves us in deeply personal and independent action. Consequently, the Search has strong features that are essentially isolating in nature. There is a tension that takes place between going our own way and acknowledging our need for community. The ‘dark night of the soul’ experience can only be a solitary one in terms of our experience of it. When we struggle with our beliefs, this ultimately places us in conflict with our faith communities. The result is that we find ourselves moving away from what was our spiritual support system to a place where we are on our own – often adrift without roadmaps.

The dichotomy here is that inasmuch as we can only arrive at a place of spiritual authenticity by entering periods of tremendous isolation, we also need a sense of community. All five co-researchers needed and relied upon the guidance, the support, and

the encouragement of others. At the beginning of their moving away from former systems, there were few mentors, or familiar markings, to be found. However, all five co-researchers were ultimately successful in finding a community to support their beliefs. The implication emerges that none of us arrives at a place of spiritual authenticity alone. We need others, and we need that sense of belonging, to experience a context that is viable and big enough to offer answers to all of our questions.

Arthur and Joan are constantly reminded of the gift that is their community. When their former church community expelled them, it was their own sense of becoming community that sustained them through their period of rejection and disbelief. Joe, too, the most individualistic of our co-researchers, would acknowledge the importance of others – for the transmission of knowledge and wisdom, and to act as guides to others. Joanna sought the advice and counsel of many as she questioned and traversed her way back to the Church. Diana's story, too, is essentially a story of connection – seeking meaning through a series of relationships and ultimately deepening her relationship with God.

#### **Theme 6: Floundering and Finding**

Few journeys are simple, linear, experiences. The spiritual journey, in particular, is rarely an experience that is clear, direct, or concise. The spiritual journeys of all five co-researchers led each of them to an experience of a spirituality that is characterized primarily by authenticity. However, they arrived at this experience only through a review

of many other choices. These are people who know much concerning spiritual and religious options. Combined, they include a vast array of experiences and knowledge in this area. Their search, their sorting through the multitudinous ways and experiences of being religious and spiritual, is precisely what brought them to this point. The Search, on the outside, can resemble a floundering, a meandering, almost aimlessly.

Of the five co-researchers, only Joanna has returned to where she began in terms of religious affiliation. However, her understanding and acceptance of her faith has been deeply shaped and transformed by her search. She is now at a point where she can affirm her faith. Her return to Catholicism is not a resignation, or a settling for something less. Rather, it is a active choice that has been based on knowledge and experience.

The co-researchers began their journeys because they looked around and found their spiritual systems lacking, often to a significant degree. The fact that they moved on to new, more expansive, and creative, ways of understanding themselves spiritually is an important theme. The Search, for all five co-researchers had a positive outcome. At the end, they all found their hearts to be at rest. The spiritual journey, then, when combined with a positive outcome can be understood as being a successful avenue in and of itself. This floundering, the grasping for answers, is itself a means to resolution – a means of arriving at the object of the Search. This both validates and confirms the spiritual search as a viable route to access the Holy.

## **Theme 7: Crisis and Clarity**

For all five co-researchers, there was a strong experience of personal crises that led them on. Whether this crisis was precipitated by external events, such as the loss of vocational opportunities, the death of a child, or the lack of responsiveness by one's church community, crisis, by its very nature propels us into unfamiliar territory. The ordinary and the familiar become lost to us and what emerges is something hazy and lacking in definition. The certainty that was there previously is now replaced with only questions – questions for which solid answers are sadly lacking. That lack of certainty is unnerving and disorienting.

Yet crises also have the power to engage us in seeking remedies and arriving at perspectives that we probably would not be inclined to otherwise. A crisis, by definition, takes us out of our comfort zone. Crises, too, place us in situations where we are emotionally, and practically, not able to control the outcome. There is an element of lack of choice around crises – there is usually very little we could do to prevent the events from occurring. However, on the flip side, crises offer us a window of opportunity to effect meaningful and significant changes in our lives.

Crises, then, can leave us off at places that are better, more secure, than where we started. This was the outcome for the co-researchers in this study; it is not, however, the outcome for all of us who experience crises. Sometimes just the opposite occurs – we do not do well, we do not reach that place of new understanding and adjustment – we feel

victimized and the object of capricious forces. The fact that all the co-researchers processed their respective crises well is indicative of their tenacity and their courage - they had what it took to weather the storm.

What is absent for us in times of crises is clarity. We are often engulfed in confusion. Certainty, in terms of what action to follow, or what road to take, often eludes us in these times. Ironically, it is just exactly when we are experiencing a crisis that we most require clarity and guidance. The extremely dislocating experience of a crisis is further exacerbated by this absence of certainty. The Search is a search for certainty, a search for meaning, a search for authenticity. However, the clarity that concludes the Search, can only be as a result of a positive resolution to the crisis.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

A phenomenological hermeneutics research format was used in this study to better understand the experience, the process, and the themes related to seekers who were ultimately successful in their spiritual search. Success, as such, can be understood as arriving at an experience of spiritual authenticity for each of the co-researchers who participated in this study. It is, in fact, arriving at this experience of authenticity that signals the end of the Great Search. This experience of authenticity, however, varies among the co-researcher group, as it does for us all – there is no single, clear way. The thesis on the whole, particularly in the second chapter, concerns itself with various aspects that may contribute to a more complete understanding of the concept of authenticity.

The research format allowed us to hear the voices of people for whom this, the spiritual search, was a meaningful and purposeful pursuit. A phenomenological hermeneutics format provides for both the breadth and the depth for a complex field of inquiry such as this. It is a research design that offers much in terms of scholarship.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and, therefore, to better understand the themes related to seekers who were successful in achieving an experience of spiritual authenticity. There are several limitations to this study. Four primary and important

limitations emerge: the natural bias of the author of the study; the characteristics of the co-researcher group; the incomplete treatment of the area concerning gender differences; and the absence of a voice given to those for whom the spiritual journey is not of particular importance. Most of these limitations contain, themselves, opportunities for future research.

### **The implicated researcher**

This study was born of an intense and personal interest of its author. An interest that has been a part of my life for most of my adult years – perhaps even before. True, scholarly research rightly demands objectivity and distance. My own experiences and perceptions are, admittedly, never far away. Having said that, I selected my co-researchers according to the criteria outlined in the third chapter of this study. No attempt was made to influence or alter their stories in any way. The stories presented in this study are in their own words. I believe, ultimately, that their respective contributions stand for themselves.

### **The Co-researchers**

As a group, the five co-researchers represent a small number. This small sample is in keeping with qualitative approaches where we wish to identify salient themes and variables. However, admittedly, a larger sample would perhaps reveal information, or confirm hypotheses, not possible with a sample of this size. Nevertheless, the information and themes identified do contribute to our overall knowledge of how people who are seekers arrive at an experience of spiritual authenticity.



On the whole, the co-researchers are a bright, articulate, and well-educated group. Most of them have completed at least one university degree and several have graduate degrees. As such they cannot be said to be reflective of the general population. In fact, as a group, they somewhat confirm the finding of Wade Clark Roof (1993) who found that higher levels of education were related positively to people who would drop away from participation in formal religious structures and would investigate other spiritual systems (p.171). A better study in this area would have provided for greater diversity in the sample in terms of education, income, age and race.

### **Gender differences in the spiritual search**

Three of the participants in this study are women. In the literature review, the female perspective was represented through the character Sophia. Although the focus of this study was not to concentrate on gender variables in the spiritual search, I did have an obligation to make some comment on women's experience. This commentary was, however, incomplete. We live in a culture where many of the assumptions we make are based on male perspectives. It bears mentioning that many of the questions we ask and the processes by which we analyze most elements within our culture have a male bias. Social structures like education, religious institutions, and access to vocational possibilities all have systemic implications in this matter. We need to better understand male/female experiences in this area of study (Brereton, 1991, p. 124).

### **Dialogue with people for whom the spiritual journey is not important**

A case was made early on in this dissertation that supported the notion that the spiritual journey was an important and normative human experience. I believe that to be so.

Regardless, there are many who would perceive this initiative to be relatively unimportant. It would be too easy to dismiss their experience as being inadequate, insufficient, or an example of the unexamined life. This study would have been a better one if it had included a dialogue with individuals who would fall into the category of those who are disinterested in the spiritual journey.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING AND EDUCATION**

There is little doubt that the spiritual life, although not perceived and experienced the same way by everyone, is an important dimension for many of the clients seen by professional psychotherapists. There is a tendency, in this postmodern age, not to assert any one given system as being “better” than another. In our zeal to be inclusive and tolerant, our focus has become fuzzy. Few clinicians have received any training whatsoever in how to meaningfully incorporate the spiritual dimensions of their clients’ lives into clinical practice.

If we agree that the spiritual dimension, although experienced differently, is nevertheless an important aspect – one that can be used in a positive manner to assist our clients in achieving their outcomes – there needs to be access to educational resources in this area.

Professional preparation assists psychotherapists (psychologists, nurse practitioners, psychiatrists, addiction and mental health specialists, and social workers) in understanding the role of assessment in the treatment process. Part of any assessment procedure includes information pertaining to physical wellbeing, social development (family-of-origin), life stage tasks, emotional wellbeing, vocational functioning, and the like. Social workers, and others involved in the counselling professions, are generally discouraged from initiating discussions with clients regarding their spiritual history and their related experiences in this area. Professional schools in universities and colleges should be challenged to develop and to incorporate curricula pertaining to spirituality.

Apart from the formal academic preparation for the counselling professions, educators are naturally concerned for the balanced, and well-formed, adjustment of their students. Balance here has far reaching implications, not only for the individual student, but also for families and communities in general. The “greatest danger of all for children and young people is to grow up in a spiritual vacuum. As spiritual beings, this kind of emptiness within is an open invitation for false gods – mindless materialistic consumerism, addictions of various kinds, or wanton destructiveness and violence” (Harpur, 1996, p.191).

The challenge before us is no easy task. Our society is in sad need of an authentic spiritual dimension. The postmodern, post-Christian, consumer-orientated focus of our society does not support well those for whom the spiritual journey is an essential pursuit. The challenge for educators to provide a method for a pluralistic culture is no small task.

A method that would invite, excite, and engage their students in journey that would lead to an understanding of their Ultimate Concern.

### **Suggestions for future research**

There is not enough information regarding the gender differences in spiritual development. The question of whether men and women have the same possibilities for spiritual growth, is an interesting one. Also, do men and women develop differently in their spiritual dimensions?

What would pedagogy for a pluralistic society look like? What are the limits of diversity in terms of a sustainable spirituality? How do the variables of education and financial achievement factor into the spiritual journey and its outcomes?

Wilber's focus on the mystic's path is interesting. What tangible models exist within western religion that offer a clear and viable access to this path?

Is Wilber's assertion valid, that to search misses the point, that God is universally accessible?

Fowler's last stage is difficult to understand in terms of how one actually achieves this. Wilber's final stages also appear hazy and somewhat out of reach for most people. What are the implications of this for those of us who are spiritual in an everyday, ordinary, sense?

What are the important features and themes regarding seekers who ended their search early – in other words, those who consciously settled for less than they had hoped?

### **Fowler and Wilber Revisited**

This study was both inspired, and framed, by the works of James Fowler and Ken Wilber. I am indebted to these men for their respective contributions in this area of spiritual development. Both have shown themselves to be men of great faith and possessing a passion for the spiritual journey.

Ken Wilber emerges as an ardent and tireless philosopher. His numerous, almost yearly, publications speak to the zeal he brings to his work. Wilber's prose shifts quickly into the language of the poet whenever he speaks of Spirit; the limitations of normal language when speaking of such matters is very familiar to Wilber. The strong mystical thread, however, that runs through his thinking is unmistakable. Wilber is not merely attracted to the world of ideas, although to that world he undeniably is well rooted. But, more importantly, Wilber is person who has earnestly and relentlessly searched the spiritual landscape himself. His ideas and scholarship should not be dismissed lightly. Wilber's assertion is that we must have a method, a Tao, which facilitates our access to the Holy. At the end of the day, Wilber wishes to facilitate the spiritual growth of us all. His emphasis on a praxis forms a possible solution, an answer, to that longing which lays at the core of the spiritual journey.

My concern with Wilber's thought rest primarily in two areas: the absence of a personal faith declaration and his tightly held belief that mystical union constitutes the best, and perhaps, really, the only truly authentic spiritual experience. Despite his almost constant use of Buddhist examples, Wilber prefers to avoid making a clear declaration of his beliefs. This would not be important if he was not writing so prolifically in the area of spirituality. I feel that if one is writing on these matters, then, there is an obligation to take a stand. It helps to clarify our perspectives, including our biases, to our readers.

The other concern, the one that speaks to the important position Wilber assigns to mystical experience, has particular import here in our inquiry into an experience of spiritual authenticity. Simply put, I believe that there are many ways to achieve this end apart from a mystical union with the Divine. The way of devotion, the way of service, are but two examples offering alternate, and authentic expressions of authentic spiritual experience.

The writing and research of James Fowler originates from a familiar point of reference. There is little doubt that Fowler's Christian perspective provided me with a more accessible and, therefore, more understandable, grounding. James Fowler's scholarship in the area of faith development has been an invaluable asset to this study. His model provides us with a method to conceptualize the differences we encounter in faith experiences between people without becoming denominational or sectarian. Fowler, then, asserts the importance of a viable spirituality without becoming prescriptive. His works

seek to explain and describe complex phenomena. The influence of psychological theories of development connects for us the whole notion of faith development to the very familiar terrain that is psychology. Faith development, as such, however, suffers from the criticism levied against developmental theories on the whole – that they are too linear and hierarchical in their thinking. Regardless, Fowler’s theory has enriched and enabled our understanding in this important area of human growth.

Fowler distinguishes between orthodox believers, those for whom external features such as scripture and dogma are important factors, and a group whom he refers to as the progressive religionists. This latter group “reserve the right of individual review and personal revision of received traditions, based on experience, reason, and the coming to terms with new circumstances and continually changing conditions” (1996, p.169). The five co-researchers who participated in this study closely resemble these characteristics. All five co-researchers are people who have that unique gift of holding opposing beliefs in what amounts to a creative tension. Their belief is all the stronger as a result.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis discussed aspects relating to the spiritual journey. Specifically, it identified themes common to five seekers in their search for an experience of spiritual authenticity. As the themes revealed, it was a search for peace, as well as a search for meaningful structures. The Search is a way that honours and gives meaning to meandering and places

a high value on the experience of personal crises. The Search is a creative engagement that speaks to our universal need for knowing.

An experience of spiritual authenticity, “produces connections at three levels: internally, providing an integrated set of beliefs, intentions and actions; horizontally between people in a shared identity in a faith community; and, thirdly, vertically from creation to creator”(Emmons, 1999, p.119). The five co-researchers in this study fulfill these criteria. All of them have integrated their beliefs successfully into action. All are connected to a broader community that sustains and nurtures their growth. Their connection to God, the Holy, is a much stronger and deeper connection than when they began this journey.

It is the nature of searching, or seeking, that the answer rests in the last place we look. All co-researchers had looked in a number of places to arrive at that experience of spiritual authenticity. It is, frankly, a testament to their tenacity and strength of character that they chose to actively continue searching until they found answers that were good enough.

All five co-researchers in this study are ardent and sincere inquirers. Their spiritual journeys, however, came at a price. It is interesting to speculate whether the Search operated as a catalyst of personal distress, or as a comfort. The significant emotional distress that all five co-researchers experienced was, at times, attributable to their Search. For others, their distress is clearly associated as a consequence of other life events. Regardless, their respective decision to forge ahead to was not an easy one. Yet, for all of them, there was little option. The search for an experience of spiritual authenticity was a



driving force – there was a need to better understand their spiritual selves and to arrive at that place of knowing.

The co-researchers in this study chose paths that included the search for a structure that could support, broaden, and contain their beliefs. In the case of Joan and Arthur, their journeys took them away from organized religion to a place where they are now trying to understand the dimensions of an intentional community. Joe, raised Roman Catholic, is now on a very different road, practicing Vipassana meditation and able to clearly say how it is making a positive difference in his life. Joanna has come back to the faith of her fathers with the insight and wisdom that can only come from questioning and investigating. Diana has found her heart at rest in the Roman Catholic Church following an exploration that included an extensive examination of Protestant possibilities.

Martin Heidegger once stated that “inauthentic existence tends to make things easy for itself” (cited in Carr, 1996, p.29). If that is so, the stories as told by the five co-researchers, indicate that their respective journeys have been anything but easy. Their search for an experience of authenticity had led them into places of immense sorrow and personal pain. However, the process of the search, led ultimately to a reward: a deep abiding sense of peace and contentment that has placed their hearts at rest. The Great Search ultimately dissolves into a Journey – our life’s journey. The real endpoint can only be in the mists of the future for, in all the really important ways, the journey always continues.

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## APPENDIX “A”

### LETTER OF INFORMATION

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Jim Pender and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Division of Educational Research at the University of Calgary. Through our previous conversations, it is my understanding that you have taken an interest in my research regarding the spiritual development of people who have had a seeking orientation to their lives. The research question is: “given the fact that you have looked at a variety of different religious or spiritual systems, and that you have been spiritually content where you are now for a minimum of two years, how do you know that this is it”?

Your involvement in this project is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw for any reason at any time. The process will involve at least one in-depth interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interviews will be tape-recorded and will be later transcribed.

The interview will focus upon the personal nature of your spiritual journey – where it has taken you and what you have learned. The interview will specifically concern itself with the various beliefs you have endorsed; and where you presently are vis-à-vis these beliefs. A second interview may be scheduled if we mutually agree that it would be necessary to complete our discussion.

A Follow up phone call will be made approximately two weeks after our last interview. The purpose of the this is twofold: one is to see if any other thoughts have come to mind since our last meeting; and, secondly, to present you with the opportunity to review the transcribed notes from our meeting/s.

Following our interview/s, I will analyze the data looking for common themes as well as those features that would be uniquely your own. At any time during this project you may choose to decline to respond to questions or inquiries with which you are uncomfortable. Should you have any questions or concerns at any time during this process, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Below is my phone number. Also listed, on the reverse side of this letter, are the names and phone numbers of my supervisor, Dr. Tad Guzie and the Chair of the Division of Research Ethics Committee, Dr. Veronica Bohac Clarke.

Jim Pender, B.A., B.S.W., M.S.W., R.S.W.  
Ph.D. Candidate, GDER  
PH: (403) 290 –5511

Dr. Tad Guzie, Ph.D.  
Professor, Supervisor  
PH: (403) 220 – 3181

Dr. Veronica Bohac Clarke  
Chair, Division of Research Ethics Committee  
PH: (403) 220 - 3363

**APPENDIX “B”****CONSENT FORM**

Project: Restless Hearts: The Search for Spiritual Authenticity

I agree to participate in the investigation conducted by Jim Pender MSW, RSW (290 – 5511), Ph.D. student in the Graduate Division of Educational Research at the University of Calgary, under the supervision of Dr. Tad Guzie, Ph.D. (220 – 3181), concerning the spiritual development of people who have had a seeking orientation to their lives. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of the spiritual journey for seekers. It is hoped that this study will identify themes common to seekers who have found their hearts “at rest”.

I understand that audiotaped interviews will be used to develop a detailed description of my own spiritual journey. I understand that the total amount of time required will be between 2-4 hours, and that there will no monetary compensation for my participation. I also understand that there are no foreseeable risks to which I might be exposed.

I further understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. I also understand the corresponding right of the investigator to terminate my involvement at any time.

I understand that my identity as a subject will be kept confidential. A pseudonym selected by me will be used in the transcripts. A follow up phone call will take place to allow me to ask any further questions following the interview/s. If I choose, a copy of the transcribed session in which I participated will be available for my perusal. The interview tapes and the transcribed notes will be destroyed following the completion of the dissertation.

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DATE

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SIGNATURE

## APPENDIX “C”

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

James W. Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (1981) included an appendix regarding the research interview he used with some 400 subjects in his study. The questions remain pertinent to the spiritual journey as conceptualized by this study and will be used, with some amendments.

Personal interviews naturally have to follow the dynamics and rhythms of one-on-one conversations. The interviews held were comprised of the following kinds of questions:

#### Part One: Life Review

Biographical and demographic information  
 Ethnic and religious identifications in childhood  
 Dividing life into major chapters – identifying important turning points  
 Identification of other experiences/people that left a significant impact  
 At present, what gives life meaning and purpose

#### Part Two: Life-Shaping Experiences & Events

What relationships are presently important  
 Relationship with parents / other significant persons  
 Experiences of losses, crises, major transitions  
 Moments of joy, ecstasy, peak experiences  
 Taboos in early life – compliance to them  
 Experiences that affirmed a sense of meaning  
 Experiences that have shaken or disturbed that sense of meaning  
 The role religion played as a child. As an adult  
 Why did you decide to look beyond your family’s belief systems  
 Where did that search take you  
 What did you learn from the various places sought out – which aspects were positive and which failed to meet expectations

#### Part Three: Present Values and Commitment

Description of beliefs and values most important in guiding one’s life  
 Discussion of whether some beliefs or approaches are better, more “right”, than others  
 Symbols / rituals of importance  
 Relationships / groups that support beliefs and values  
 How are beliefs and values expressed in one’s life – what difference do they make

Part Four: Religious Beliefs & Expression

Do have, or have you had, important religious experiences

How do you conceptualize God

Do you consider yourself to be a religious person

How do you distinguish between being a religious and a spiritual person

How does your present spiritual experience differ from previous experiences you may have had

How does “truth” present itself – competing claims for truth

What doubts have you experienced since embracing the faith you presently hold

How do you articulate the meaning that the search for spiritual authenticity has for you

What is your image of a mature faith

**APPENDIX "D"****SAMPLE OF THE FOLLOW- UP LETTER**

DATE

Jim Pender  
ADDRESS

Co-researcher  
ADDRESS

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me last month – it is greatly appreciated.

Enclosed is a copy of the transcript from our meeting. Please review the transcript and I would invite any further elaboration, clarification, or correction that you may wish to make. If you wish to provide additional comments, please let me know by January 05, 2000 by leaving a message for me at 290 – 5511.

Best wishes for the new millenium.

Regards,

Jim