

SPIRITUALITY AMONG ADULT SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD VIOLENCE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

What is the impact of childhood violence upon one's adult spirituality? Does the violence destroy all belief in a meaningful universe or a higher power, or do survivors turn to spirituality as the only thing greater than the awful reality of their experience? Or do both of these outcomes occur? Does the child's belief system shatter, with a new one eventually taking its place?

Because spirituality is as much a part of human experience as emotionality or mentality, mental health professionals who desire to be of assistance to survivors, and survivors themselves, need to hear answers to these questions, Melissa Jarrard, a clinical nurse who specializes in working with trauma victims, underscores the need to attend to survivors' spiritual lives when she states, "I've never met anybody who got through a violent event [who] did not use spirituality to cope" (Jarrard, 1997).

There seems to be general agreement that therapists and researchers have tended to neglect the spiritual aspect of mental health in general and of survivors' lives in particular (Adams, 1995; Canda, 1988; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Hall, 1995; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993; King, Speck, & Thomas, 1995; Lindgren & Coursey, 1995; Pargament, 1996; Sargent, 1989; Sinclair, 1993; Vesti & Kastrup, 1995; Weaver, Koenig, & Ochberg, 1996; Wulff, 1996). In fact, religious or spiritual content is sometimes viewed as pathology by the mental health professions (Larson et al., 1993; Post, 1992; Weaver et al., 1996). At the same time, some of the most influential thinkers in the field have included religion or spirituality in their theories, e.g. Freud, James, Erikson, Jung and Maslow (Wulff, 1996). Also, interest in the interaction of spirituality and mental health is currently growing (Adams, 1995; Canda, 1988; Hall & Hall, 1997; Wulff, 1996).

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This paper reviews the mental health literature for research, theoretical observations and interventions related to the spiritual experiences of survivors of childhood violence.

DEFINITIONS

This literature review is based on the following definitions of childhood violence, survivor, spirituality, and normal spiritual development. Childhood violence is physical and/or sexual wounding, even if it is only implied or threatened, perpetrated by another human being upon a child (Culbertson, 1995).¹ Survivors are simply adults who lived through childhood violence. No particular psychological state is implied. Definitions of spirituality in this literature usually include some version of the following words and phrases: feeling connected or belonging in the universe, believing in a power outside of one's self, searching for a sense of meaning or purpose, experiencing transcendence and immanence, seeking one's ultimate and personal truths, experiencing a numinous quality, knowing a unity of the visible and invisible, having an internalized relationship between the individual and the divine, encountering limitless love, and moving toward personal wholeness (Bass & Davis, 1988; Canda, 1995; Decker, 1993b; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Grof & Grof, 1990; Hillman, 1996; King et al., 1995; Merwin & Smith-Kurtz, 1988; Sargent, 1989; Tessier, 1992; Wulff, 1996).

What is normal spiritual development? The literature on childhood violence most frequently cites Fowler's schema. He theorized that *persons* develop spiritually in a manner roughly corresponding to psychological development, as defined by Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson (Fowler, 1981). Erikson submitted that normal crises of life propel us from one stage of psychological development to the next. These crises may be precipitated by external and/or internal changes (Erikson, 1959).

Similarly, Fowler proposed six stages of spiritual development that progress due to internal and/or external changes. From approximately age two to *seven*, a child's spirituality is fantasy based, in which experiences and images received are understood through imagination. In a primarily contemporary Western cultural context, at school age, belief becomes more literal and concrete, tending to see God as anthropomorphic, with laws and punishment. In adolescence, the community aspect of spirituality becomes more paramount, with beliefs tending to follow those of significant others. Then, in the early twenties, individuals tend to relocate authority within themselves, distancing from their previously held value systems and relying mostly on rationality. Once a person reaches mid-life, there is a shift toward a concept of God as a cosmic flow of life or light within, and a drive to reconcile early life beliefs with rationality and the deeper truths of life. Finally, one may enter a stage of universalizing faith with a devotion to a transcendent vision not of one's own making. Few people reach this final stage. In fact, many people stop developing at an early stage, never fully moving to the next (FOWler, 1981).

The mid-life shift has been particularly noted in the American "baby-boomer" generation in recent years (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Keen, 1994; Sinetar, 1986).

"Millions who have become disillusioned with a secular view of life but are unmoved by established religion in any of its institutional forms are setting out on a quest for something-some missing value, some absent purpose, some new meaning, some presence of the sacred" (Keen, 1994, p. xix). Women, in particular, are redefining the sacred to provide them with more personal meaning than traditional patriarchal forms (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Wulff, 1997).

RESEARCH

Pargament cites five studies that show that religious forms of coping are especially helpful to people in uncontrollable, unmanageable, or otherwise difficult situations (Pargament, 1996). From the results of these studies, one could hypothesize that spiritual experiences would also be an important component of surviving childhood violence and recovering from its aftereffects. In fact, Elliott found that female survivors of childhood sexual abuse who adhered to a religious belief system were less symptomatic than survivors who did not practice any religion (Elliott, 1994). In another study, female survivors of childhood sexual abuse who scored well on an adjustment index indicated that the violence had contributed to several beneficial life changes, including finding meaning in adversity and strengthened religious faith (Himelein & McLirath, 1996). Finally, Valentine and Feinauer reported that female survivors of childhood sexual abuse stated that their religion "was important in assisting them to make meaning of the experience in a manner that served to free them of blame and guilt for the abuse ... [and it] assisted them in making sense of the experience in a manner that gave them the faith to hold onto life and find meaning and purpose in their lives" (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993, p. 220).

Not all of the studies found spirituality in such a positive light, however. In Manlowe's interviews with nine women who were sexually abused as children she found anger at God, a sense of abandonment by God, guilt over being part of a sinful act, and the idea that God's nature was the same as the woman's abusive parent's nature. Yet, the women also expressed a need to believe in God (Manlowe, 1995a; Manlowe, 1995b). In Netherlands Imbens and Jonker concluded from their interviews of nineteen female survivors of incest from religious homes that "the prevailing views on women in our Christian churches have deepened their despair and guilt rather than providing the safe shelter that these people need in their craving for security and acceptance" (Imbens & Jonker, 1992, p. x). These women's feelings toward God included confusion, anger, despair, doubt, guilt, fear, penance, disappointment, loneliness and disbelief, along with security, comfort and longing. And, Ducharme found that incest victims tended to see God more punitively than the comparison groups of "normal" women and depressed women (Ducharme, 1988).

Other studies explore the interaction of childhood violence and spirituality from different angles. Hall found that Christian women in outpatient psychotherapy who had been sexually abused as children scored lower on involvement in organized religion than either outpatients who had no abuse history or non-clinical, non-abused women (HaU, 1995). Russell also found a high rate of defection, i.e. rejecting the religion of their upbringing, among survivors of incest (Russell, 1986). Survivors of

ritualistic abuse told Shaffer and Cozolino that they avoided church as a direct result of their violent experiences (Shaffer & Cozolino, 1992).

The outcomes described in these studies may be more complex: when examined in more detail, however. For example, Elliott found that women who were sexually abused as children and who were raised by conservative Christian parents were more likely to be religious non-practitioners as adults than non-abused women. However, among the women who were raised by parents of other religious orientations, including atheism and agnosticism, a history of sexual abuse increased the likelihood that they were involved in religious practices as adults (Elliott, 1994).

Attitude and gender seem to make a difference, too. Smith et al. studied women religious, Catholic sisters, who had been abused in childhood in some manner. They found that those who displayed an accepting attitude as adults had a higher level of spiritual experience than those with a more controlling attitude (Smith, Reinert, Horne, Greer & Wicks, 1995; Smith, Reinert, Home, Greer & Wicks, 1996). Rossetti found that female survivors of childhood sexual abuse showed a decline in their relationship to God, while male survivors did not show such a decline (Rossetti, 1995).

The type of abuse may also make a difference. Reinert and Smith's study of women's spiritual experiences revealed different patterns depending on the type of abuse the women had experienced in childhood. Physical abuse had *some* negative impact on overall spiritual experience, while in contrast, emotional abuse and sexual abuse both had a positive relationship to spiritual experience (Reinert & Smith, 1997). Also, Finkelhor et al. found that survivors who had experienced childhood abuse involving attempted or actual intercourse reported a greater tendency as adults not to practice any religion than did those for whom intercourse was not involved, or those who had not been abused. This was particularly true for men raised as Protestants and women raised as Catholics (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1989). All of these studies highlight the complexity of the impact of childhood abuse on spirituality.

While traditional religious practice may be reduced among some survivors of childhood violence, other forms of practice and belief may become more prominent. For example, Irwin found that the more incidents of traumatic events an adult had experienced in childhood, the more likely they were to have paranormal beliefs (Irwin, 1994). Also, Sargent states that many adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse related to God more on a non-personified basis, such as nature or energy (Sargent, 1989).

Numerous anecdotal accounts in the literature describe spiritual aspects of survivors' experiences. In *Many Voices*, a newsletter for people with multiple personality or other dissociative disorders, Madge says, "I know that my connection with what I call God is responsible for my being alive today," and Anne says, "My recovery from sexual abuse depends on my development of healthy spirituality" (1993). Similarly, a woman named Charlene felt she got strength from praying to God while she was being abused as a child (Moran, 1990). Both Kerry and Anne described transcendent experiences with Jesus that saved their lives in the midst of terrible childhood abuse. Spirituality is also an essential component for both in their *recovery* as adults (Pike &

Mohline, 1995). Dream Weaver, an internal self helper in a particular multiple personality system, described herself as "essentially spiritual" and played a critical role in calming the system and facilitating healing (Rosik, 1992). And, Linda stated, "I have accepted as a gift the grace of God that allowed me to come through this situation with the determination not only to help myself, but to reach out to others" (Hollies, 1995, p. 324).

Anecdotal reports of survivors' spirituality are not always positive. An incest survivor in *The Courage To Heal* described her anger at and rejection of God, saying "It's been an incredible loss.... I haven't been able to find a God I can believe in" (Bass & Davis, 1988, p. 156). Yet, this woman's statement also demonstrates the importance of the spiritual dimension of a survivor's life. An "incredible loss" indicates there is something significant that should not be overlooked.

THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS³

Enhanced Spirituality

Numerous scholars have advanced various theoretical observations about the effect of pain, torture or trauma on spirituality. Many believe that trauma can facilitate spiritual experiences. For example, family therapist Neil Adams postulated "for most people the worlds of spirit and matter are completely separate ... ; however trauma may punch a hole in the wall that separates the two, opening a window from the material into the spiritual" (Adams, 1995, p. 202). Concentration camp prisoner Jean Amery described the same phenomenon somewhat differently by saying that torture puts a person in intimate contact with death, removing the invisible barrier between this life and the hereafter (Amery, 1980). Transpersonal therapist Carol Bryant put it yet another way. During the shock of trauma, a person may experience a dissolution of normal ego boundaries, becoming aware of something beyond the ordinary confines of time and space (Bryant, 1992).

One might even argue that some people have a mystical experience associated with the violence. According to Hollenback, "mystical experience is a ... trans-sensory metamorphosis of the waking consciousness that usually supervenes only after the individual has achieved recollectedness" (Hollenback, 1996, p. 130). Recollectedness is a strict focusing of the mind, will, imagination and emotions on one object or goal. When a person cannot endure the violent experience, he or she may single-mindedly focus on an object or thought and thereby temporarily transcend waking consciousness. Psychologically speaking, this is called dissociation, but an experience such as Anne described, where she felt the presence of Jesus (Pike & Mohline, 1995), also appears to fit the definition of mysticism. In fact, Saint Teresa of Avila talks about the soul being "cultivated by trials, persecutions, criticism, [and] illnesses", declaring that such hardships are a necessary ingredient to mystical experience (Flinders, 1993, p.179).

Psychologists Ganje-Fling and McCarthy reported that many clients who are adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse describe their abuser as having tried to destroy their soul/spirit, but that this was one area that could not be touched (Ganje-Fling &

McCarthy, 1996). In *The Feminine Face of God* the interviewers observed that many of the female spiritual leaders they interviewed who had "experienced cruelty and deprivation in childhood were like dormant bulbs that survive in a harsh environment and grow stronger and more beautiful in the process" (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p. 44). Like the Chinese thought that crisis and opportunity are two perspectives on the same situation, the potential for a heightened spirituality growing out of traumatic experiences such as childhood violence is recognized in this literature. Perhaps such violence acts as an external trigger for the type of crisis that, according to Fowler, encourages spiritual development.

Many writers talk about a period of emptiness and disconnection from the spiritual realm, a "dark night of the soul" (Cross, 1990), that opens to higher levels of spiritual awakening (Decker, 1993b; Jaffe, 1985; James, 1902; Keen, 1994; Mahedy, 1986; May, 1991). Decker likens this to an alchemical process where one must return to the basest matter, in this case descending into emptiness, before transformation (Decker, 1993b). As Muller put it, "A painful childhood invariably focuses our attention on the inner life." (p. xiii) "[In] despair, we turn inside, in search of our deepest strength" (p. 30) (Muller, 1992). For some survivors of childhood violence, the experience may propel them into a dark night of the soul, from which they may emerge with a heightened spiritual awareness (Decker, 1993a; Mahedy, 1986; Merwin & Smith-Kurtz, 1988).

Psychologist Larry Decker believes that "trauma acts to increase spiritual development if that development is defined as an increase in the search for purpose and meaning" (Decker, 1993b, p. 33). He says that trauma demands that survivors give up ordinary ideas to encompass a new reality and this process can propel them toward the extraordinary realities of a spiritual dimension. Frankl believes that the way a person deals with his or her suffering is a key to adding a deeper meaning to life (Frankl, 1962). The adversity may even become the cornerstone of a new identity, as the person discovers a positive meaning or message in his/her struggle or pain (Jaffe, 1985).

Damaged Spirituality

Psychologist James Hillman points to the interaction of the individual soul and the traumatic experience combining to determine whether the outcome is primarily strengthening or damaging. He says some life events "swamp the boat. ... Some souls nonetheless seem to 'work with it'; others remain fixated in the tar, struggling to 'work it out.' ... The [event] may never be integrated, but it may strengthen the integrity of the soul's form by adding to it perplexity, sensitivity, vulnerability, and scar tissue" (Hillman, 1996, p. 207).

Some scholars focus more on the spiritually damaging impact of childhood violence. For example, following the theory that a child's image and understanding of God are based on the significant adults in his or her life, several authors observed that someone who was abused in childhood by a significant adult may distrust and fear God and *feel* spiritually abandoned (Brown, 1990; Courtois, 1988; Hall, 1995; Kane et al., 1993;

Lemoncelli & Andrew, 1996; Moran, 1990; Phillips & Frederick, 1995). Others believe that the experience of violence can also shatter a sense of being protected by God, belief in the constancy of God or the goodness of the universe and the ability to feel connection to a higher power beyond the self (Fortune, 1983; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

The survivor's spiritual development may be hindered or arrested, according to several theorists (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Lemoncelli & Andrew, 1996; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Sargent, 1989; Shaffer & Cozolino, 1992). For example, Ganje-Fling and McCarthy list numerous obstacles resulting from childhood sexual abuse that may hinder spiritual development: mistrust, despair, anger, conflicts about responsibility and forgiveness, spiritual worthiness, and conflicts with a religious system. Also, survivors may have a God image that is frozen in time at the point when the violence occurred (Ganje-Fling & McComthy, 1996).

Other theorists suggest that survivors may not be able to resolve the questions of meaning that are raised by being plunged into the shadows of life (Decker, 1993b; Hall, 1995; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Sinclair, 1993) and, therefore, give up hope (Sinclair, 1993), perhaps becoming long-term psychiatric patients (Garbarino, 1996). Without a spiritual perspective, survivors may experience terrible pain and constant rejection as they try to fit themselves into a world where meaning is constructed around logic and reason, in juxtaposition with their own unreasonable experience of violence (Grof & Grof, 1990).

Benefits and Impediments of Spirituality

Included among many claims in the literature about the benefits of spirituality is the ability to transcend a violent experience (Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995). As Frankl put it, spiritual inner life is the only location of freedom or escape from unbearable physical and emotional pain (Frankl, 1962). Tessier cites survivor accounts of constantly praying or repeating the rosary during the abuse in order to block out the pain and fear (Tessier, 1992). James goes further by saying, "[In] its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer to escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice-inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome" (James, 1902, p. 51). Peltzer refers to this function of spirituality as "an ideological form to structure psychological coping mechanisms" (Peltzer, 1997, p. 13).

Another frequently mentioned value of spirituality is providing meaning or significance generally, and specifically regarding the experience of violence (Cheung, 1994; Marcus & Rosenberg, Maton, 1989; Pargament, 1996; Peltzer, 1997). Psychiatrist Elizabeth Bowman, who specializes in therapy and research with survivors of childhood abuse who have dissociative disorders, claims that many of her patients survived their abuse and were able to go through the painful recovery process "precisely because their faith gave them a sense of purpose in their lives and suffering" (Bowman, 1993, p. 6). According to Frankl it is spiritual freedom, which not even violence can take away, that makes life meaningful and purposeful (Frankl,

1962). Moran also believes that survivors may benefit by experiencing God as a refuge and as a reason to have hope (Moran, 1990).

All of these theoretical observations suggest that spirituality may be an important element in the survival of childhood violence. However, Wulff (1997) observes that certain aspects of some spiritual belief systems may also be impediments to healing, particularly for women. He cites elements such as a stern patriarchal image of God and a belief that men, but not women, are called by God. Regarding sexual abuse specifically, Fortune believes that Christian churches have "effectively communicated: speak not about rape, incest, child molestation--especially in church. So the sin of sexual violence ... has remained unmentionable" (Fortune, 1983, p. xi). She also sees the suffering of the survivor exacerbated by a religious belief that God has sent this affliction to her/him personally and then abandoned her/him in the midst of it (Fortune, 1995).

Okamura believes Buddhist principles that support suffering in silence, persevering against challenges, and accepting fate may also hinder the healing process (Okamura, Hcras & Wong-Kergerg, 1995). In a similar vein, Schmidt points to a White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) more that if anything goes wrong, the sufferer must bear the responsibility for being less than blessed (Schmidt, 1995). And, Taylor and Fontes see several things in the belief system of Seventh Day Adventists that can constrain recovery. They cite, for example, that one's relationship with God depends on forgiving those who have inflicted pain, children are taught that adults want only to protect them, and prayer is supposed to be all that is needed to heal wounds (Taylor & Fontes, 1995).

SPIRITUAL INTERVENTIONS ⁴

Garbarino believes that treating *the* metaphysical and spiritual challenges of violent trauma is essential. "Until we develop and implement strategies to address 'the meaning of life' and offer positively overwhelming cognitions to those who have been plunged into metaphysical and spiritual darkness, our narrowly psychological interventions will fall short of the mark" (Garbarino, 1996, p. 163). Jay believes that successfully treating survivors of violence requires breaking *out* of the mode of standard therapeutic techniques (Jay, 1991).

Some of the alternative techniques being developed do include the spiritual dimension. Brende has developed a 12-step approach specifically for survivors of violence (Brende, 1995). Jacobs claims that healing rituals, using feminine spiritual images, for women who have been victims of male violence, reduced their fear and enhanced their sense of power (Jacobs, 1989). Wilson recommends the sweat lodge as a tool for spiritual cleansing for survivors of violence (Wilson, 1989), while Tan recommends inner healing prayer (Tan, 1996). Featherman describes two Jewish rituals--sitting *shiva* and Mikvah, a bath (Featherman, 1995), and Seamands and Propst both emphasize guided imagery of Jesus (Propst, 1988; Seamands, 1985).

SUMMARY

Although there are limited formal studies of the spiritual experiences of survivors of childhood violence, a review of this research has led to the following conclusions: 1) A significant number of survivors of childhood violence change their original religious practices by denouncing religion altogether, changing faiths, or turning to a more personal form of spiritual practice. Some of them express very negative feelings toward religion and God. 2) A variety of factors, including type of religious background, attitude, gender, and type of abuse, interact complexly with the effects of violence on spirituality. 3) People often use religious forms of coping to deal with difficult situations, in general. 4) Survivors of childhood violence often mention the importance of spirituality in their survival and recovery.

In addition, many scholars' observations have led them to theorize that violence can create the type of crisis of experience and meaning that propels a person to a higher stage of spiritual development with a much more personal and direct relationship with the unseen forces of the universe. On the other hand, literature suggests that some individuals are not able to spiritually reconcile their experience of violence and as a result, lose that dimension of their lives or fixate in an early developmental phase of spirituality. It seems that the effect of violence on spirituality can be either enhancing or damaging, and it is not clear what conditions determine the outcome.

Also, the literature makes claims about the benefits of spirituality for survivors, including transcending the violent experience as it is happening, providing meaning for life and the traumatic experience, feeling less alone in the world, and maintaining hope. At the same time, some scholars see impediments to recovery from the trauma of childhood violence in certain spiritual belief systems. Specific impediments cited include fatalism, patriarchal hierarchies, stoicism, a demand for forgiveness, self-blame, and over-reliance on spiritual systems to the exclusion of other resources. Several articles discuss spiritual interventions that are being developed to help clients who are survivors of violence.

Based on this literature review I have been led to formulate the following questions for future research. 1) Is the spiritual development path any different for survivors of violence than for the general population? 2) Are survivors of violence any more likely than the general population to have mystical or transcendent experiences? 3) Is the apparent tendency of survivors to move away from organized religion or toward a more personal spirituality different than the similarly observed shift among today's American "baby-boomers," particularly women? 4) Are there identifiable conditions—personal, environmental and/or situational—that determine whether a person's spirituality is more enhanced or damaged by experiencing violence? 5) Can damaged spiritual development, i.e. regression or fixation, be healed with appropriate spiritual interventions? 6) What do survivors of violence believe to be most important for helping professionals and other survivors to know about their spiritual experiences as survivors of violence?

NOTES

¹ This definition allows for a wide range of experiences, from singular to continuous, minor to deadly, and familial to foreign. However, there may be limitations in examining this wide a range of experiences as if they are similar.

² Parents were classified as conservative Christians if the subject identified them as Christians and indicated that they believed in personal salvation based on faith in Jesus Christ.

³ Not all of these theoretical observations about trauma are specific to childhood violence. but it would be included as one form of trauma.

⁴ Not all of these ideas about interventions for trauma are specific to childhood violence. but it would be included as one form of trauma.

⁵ Twelve-step groups are spiritually based support groups for individuals in recovery, based on the model of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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