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Spiritual Maturation: A Developmental Resource for Resilience, Well-Being, and Peace¹

Jared D. Kass

*There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree...*

*Come to me,
Here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside the River.*

—Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning”

In his novel *Ulysses*, James Joyce described history as a nightmare from which we are trying to awake (Joyce, 1914, 1961). Each of us knows what he meant. Human culture is ensnared in a vast, traumatic, trans-generational chain of pain (Kass, 2008). This nightmare is so pervasive, and so profound, that we often doubt the goodness and sanctity of human nature. How can it be—during every historical period, in every major culture—that corrupt elites, patriarchy, racism, greed, and the will to dominate through violence, have played such a chilling role in human civilization...unless humanity—and perhaps life, itself—are marred by vast imperfections that call into question the existence of a transcendent God? What justification do we have, during such troubled times, to speak about a subject as seemingly naïve and abstract as spirituality?

These critiques are age-old, and the spiritual traditions speak to them. They do not avert their eyes from humanity’s chain of pain. Across the centuries, many of their teachers have suffered with us—as victims of human cruelty, fear, and ignorance. These traditions have been a constant witness to humanity’s historical nightmare. And yet, the message they have taught balances clear-headed realism with the conviction that a just and peaceful society can be achieved.

From their perspective, the chain of pain can be broken. Rather than being ruled by our traumatized emotional responses to humankind’s trans-generational tragedy, we can learn to engage in a process of spiritual maturation through which we regulate our

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destructive reactivity; refine our perceptions of self, others, and life; and heal the traumatic psychological wounds which perpetuate this terrible nightmare (Kass, 2008).

From this point of view, spiritual maturation is a socially-relevant learning process whose potential significance has been misunderstood by many scholars in the fields of human development, peace psychology, and behavioral health-risk prevention. As a resource for thoughtful, resilient, and pro-social responses to the chain of pain, and the inherent crises of worldly existence, spiritual maturation can play a positive role in the lives of individuals and communities.

I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to conduct research on this vital process since 1975. In this paper, I will provide a brief overview of what I have learned.

It is necessary to begin with a clarification. Spiritual maturation and participation in an organized religion are best understood as overlapping domains. For some people, they go hand-in-hand. For others, they do not. Since Theodor Adorno's post-Holocaust research on the authoritarian personality, it has been clear that participation in organized religion can be a source of racial prejudice, a style of thinking that is dogmatic and rigid, and blind submission to group norms, even when these norms shatter the ethical codes fundamental to the spiritual traditions (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, & Levinson, 1950). However, Gordon Allport's equally monumental research modified Adorno's findings.

Allport distinguished between two modes of participation in religion. An extrinsic religious orientation provides meaning primarily through social affiliation. An intrinsic religious orientation provides meaning primarily through the effort to live ethically and personal experiences of the Divine. Research by Allport and many subsequent teams have associated extrinsic religious orientation with the negative aspects of religion (Allport, 1966). Intrinsic religious orientation, on the other hand, has been associated with lack of racial prejudice, a style of thinking that is tolerant and flexible, as well as the capacity for behavior that is self-regulated, health-promoting, and pro-social (Bergin, Masters, & Richards, 1987; Kass, 2008). Thus, the positive or negative impact of religion depends on how it is taught and how it is applied (Kass, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to further explore the process of spiritual maturation. While Allport's concept of intrinsic religiosity articulated a profound insight, it was a first step in understanding the components and methods of spiritual development. I will begin with two diagrams that summarize what I have learned through my own research, and through the research of many others in the psychology and sociology of religion.

[Figure 1](#) describes the critical role of an individual's psychospiritual worldview as a formative template for behavior. It contrasts the effects of two opposing worldviews: *insecure existential attachment* vs. *secure existential attachment*. We live in an inherently stressful world: constant change, our inevitable mortality, and the ferocious chain of pain are sources of persistent stress. But, as we know from research in cognitive therapy, the

cognitive schema through which we respond to this stress has a telling effect on our well-being and the well-being of others. Insecure existential attachment tends to amplify destructive behavior toward self and others. Seeing the world through a lens of chaos, individuals develop an agitated mind and a destructive behavioral response style. They tend to soothe themselves in harmful ways with alcohol, drugs, and dangerous behavior. They typically pass the chain of pain on to others, thus perpetuating and amplifying its effects. Secure existential attachment, however, enables an individual to respond to stress through more constructive action. Seeing the world through a lens of coherence, such individuals tend to soothe themselves by moving more deeply into their sense of attachment and connection, rather than retreating into deeper layers of isolation, fear, or despair (Kass, 2008). Secure existential attachment does not preclude self-empowering action. However, following the Talmudic precept of the sage Hillel, such action must not harm others (If I am not for myself, then who am I? If I am only for myself, than what am I?) (Kravitz & Olitzky, 1993). Through a positive self-concept that links the individual to other people and the universe, secure existential attachment promotes behavioral health and peace through resilient responses to stress and constructive responses to interpersonal conflict.

In summary, a worldview characterized by secure existential attachment provides a template for positive, pro-social behavior. Here, the insights of cognitive and existential psychotherapy have opened a useful window to conceptualize the potential value of spiritual maturation. To respond to life's ever-changing conditions with inner peace and compassion for the other, may require disciplined contemplative practice that transforms our fundamental perceptions of life, others, and self (Kass, 2008).

Most people, of course, are not completely secure or completely insecure in their existential attachment. We stand somewhere in the middle, shuttling between the two poles. It is useful to view these two poles, therefore, as a developmental continuum.

[Figure 2](#) examines *secure existential attachment* from a developmental framework. In Erikson's terminology, secure existential attachment is a developmental potential or challenge. Whether we achieve it depends on many factors. Among them, of course, is our knowledge that such a developmental achievement is possible. Here, Erikson's well-known stages of development are somewhat limiting. He was one of the first psychologists to recognize that religion could help parents instill a sense of basic *trust* in the young infant; and that religion could contribute to a sense *integrity* at the end of life (Erikson, 1950, 1963, 1968). The term *integrity*, however, is less descriptive and concrete than the terms he employed for earlier stages. It does not fully capture the aging person's capacity to experience trust and connection at a profound existential level. Here, it is useful to incorporate Ainsworth's understanding of trust through attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The trusting, resilient child feels *securely attached* to others. In a related vein, Tillich, the existential philosopher and theologian, described *ontological insecurity* as a primary source of anxious, disordered adult behavior (Tillich, 1952). I would suggest that the ontologically insecure adult, who believes

existence to be chaotic and incoherent, lacks *secure existential attachment* (Kass, 2008).

We can look at the human life span as a progression of ever-widening matrices of relationship, each of which has the potential for an increased sense of attachment. We can simplify these matrices into three basic units: The family of origin, however, constructed, is the first matrix. The second unit, which I call community, includes the families and relationships we form as adults—in our homes, worksites, and neighborhoods. The third unit is the largest matrix of all: our relationship with the cosmos. When we learn how to find nourishment in our relationship with *life*, in the thick of its inherent crises, our sense of attachment can assume an existential dimension (Kass, 2008).

This dimension of attachment, Tillich recognized, requires more than an abstract belief in God. It emerges from a growing experiential awareness of personal connection to a spiritual core, a deep coherence in the life process. Tillich called this spiritual core the *ground of being* (Tillich, 1952). In Western secular culture, this existential aspect of attachment has been marginalized through the term *mysticism*. However, in the spiritual traditions that developed in the Middle East and Asia, the centrality of this idea is understood more accurately. Becoming aware of one's intrinsic attachment to life's spiritual core is a natural and necessary developmental stage in the process of spiritual maturation.

In Fowler's terminology, this perception moves us toward *universalizing* spirituality (Fowler, 1981). When we understand that every human being on this planet is related to every other person through our shared connection to life's spiritual core, we recognize why it is necessary to learn to love 'the other' as our self. This profound state of moral and spiritual awareness, central to the teachings in all spiritual traditions, is often missing in North American society, partly because we do not recognize *secure existential attachment* as a developmental possibility. Yet the capacity for *connective awareness* (the perception of intrinsic attachment between self, others, and the universe) is a developmental potential within every human being (Kass, 2001, 2008). When we treat this developmental stage as an idyllic, unrealistic concept, rather than a state of awareness that can be nurtured and achieved, we undermine our efforts to create a society that is peaceful and just.

* *

There have been three distinct stages to my research on spiritual maturation. This review will highlight central findings from each stage. In addition, it will suggest how qualitative and quantitative research methodologies can both play necessary roles in better understanding a developmental process as complex as spiritual maturation.

1. Discovering a perceptual capacity for core spiritual experience: From 1975-1980, I was fortunate to work with the psychologist Carl Rogers, a mentor who had a profound impact on my professional development. I worked with Rogers on the staff of the Person-Centered Approach Project, an extension of his work in client-centered psychotherapy

(Rogers, 1963). This project explored the process of community-building. We learned that when community facilitators help create very specific interpersonal conditions—empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard—the community members learn to treat each other with greater respect. In addition, the community becomes an environment in which individuals can become more empowered, self-expressive, and creative. As their locus of evaluation becomes more internal, they experience their own ‘inner self’ as a trustworthy source of guidance and action. In addition, we learned that these communities often develop a spiritual quality, in which many participants begin to experience a deep sense of interconnection, both with each other and with a transpersonal dimension of life (Rogers, 1980; Rogers, Bowen, Justyn, Kass, Miller, Rogers, & Wood, 1978).

As this project developed, I became curious about how participants experienced, and spoke reflexively, about their ‘inner self.’ Informally, I began to speak with participants who met many of the criteria for self-actualizing or fully-functioning people (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1963). Over a five year period, I spoke with approximately 40 such individuals. Analyzing the content of these discussions, I noticed an intriguing pattern. First, paradoxically, self-actualizing individuals often experienced the inner self as ‘greater than the self.’ Second, they found it difficult to describe the characteristics of the self using discursive, analytic language. Almost invariably, they resorted to metaphors. Third, and most important, their metaphors had great internal consistency. I distilled these metaphors into one central image: drawing water from a well connected to a vast underground sea (Kass, 1983, 1991).

In essence, these participants were speaking with conviction about the existence of a form of awareness that was ‘greater than themselves.’ However, they did not experience this dimension of awareness as ‘separate’ from them. It was an internal stratum to which they were intimately connected. The individual inner self was being experienced as linked to a fundamental ground of being within the person, a spiritual core. These self-reflexive perceptions seemed particularly interesting to me because they had emerged in a non-theological, non-directive context. This suggested that these ‘experiences of the spiritual core’ were part of a normal developmental growth process, rather than beliefs imparted through a theological system (Kass, 1995).

Consequently, I began to conceptualize ‘experiences of the spiritual core’ as a naturally occurring, inherent perceptual capacity of individuals. In addition, I began to view them as part of a developmental process in which individuals become increasingly self-empowered in their actions, and increasingly able to affirm the deepest aspects of their identities.

Here, I recognized an important link between spiritual awareness and the politics of personal empowerment. Though internal, spiritual awareness could affect peoples’ actions. This link suggested to me that spirituality was a subject worthy of more focused, intensive investigation, and led to the second stage of my research. Methodologically, this

first phase was qualitative and heuristic. It focused on the generation of hypotheses, rather than their proof. It served the purpose of many exploratory investigations. It provided initial evidence that I had encountered a potentially important phenomenon.

2. Measuring the protective benefits of spiritual development: During the second stage, I developed tools to test these emerging hypotheses using formal, quantitative procedures. I had begun to consider the possibility that core spiritual experiences might contribute to physical health, since it was clear from the work of Benson and Borysenko, among others, that psychological factors played a role in illness and health (Benson, 1975; Borysenko, 1989). In 1985, I began to work with Herb Benson and Joan Borysenko. This led to a formal study from 1987-1990 at Deaconess Hospital's Section on Behavioral Medicine in which I developed and validated two research questionnaires, the Inventory of Positive Psychological Attitudes (IPPA), which measures a resilient worldview, and the Index of Core Spiritual Experience (INSPIRIT), which measures experiences of the spiritual core (Kass, 1998b; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Caudill, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991a; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991b).

The study used a convenience sample of 83 medical outpatients participating in a 10-week behavioral medicine program treating stress-related medical symptoms. Patients were taught a clinically-standardized form of meditation—in Benson's terminology, *the relaxation response*—as part of a structured cognitive-behavioral learning program to reduce stress. Patients were measured at the beginning and end of treatment using three scales: a Medical Symptom Checklist, the Inventory of Positive Psychological Attitudes, and the INSPIRIT (Kass et al., 1991a; Kass et al., 1991b; Leserman, 1983).

There were three major findings. First, 26% of these patients—a surprisingly large proportion—scored high on the INSPIRIT. Thus, many reported a deeply felt connection to their spiritual core. Second, over the course of the 10-week behavioral medicine intervention, patients who scored high on the INSPIRIT scale showed the greatest increases in life purpose and satisfaction. Third, these same patients showed the greatest decreases in the average frequency of their medical symptoms. In other words, their spirituality was a 'resource for resilience.' It had helped them restore life purpose and satisfaction in the midst of a medical illness; and it had helped them gain control over the frequency of their stress-related symptoms (Kass et al., 1991b).

This study produced a fourth conclusion that I did not recognize for several years. The INSPIRIT scores in this sample did not increase during the behavioral medicine program. Those who were high on the INSPIRIT had entered this medical crisis with spiritual resources already in place. Rather than looking at spirituality as a treatment intervention, it made more sense to view it as a protective, resilience-building resource (Kass, 1995). This realization shifted my attention from hospital-based treatment programs to the creation of a university-based preventive, resilience-building program for young adults, and led to the third stage in my research.

The questionnaires developed for this study have now been used extensively by research teams and prevention programs that focus on positive psychology. The Inventory of Positive Psychological Attitudes (IPPA) has been used in a college health textbook and university-based health programs to help young adults strengthen psychological resilience and well-being (Hales, 1999). The Index of Core Spiritual Experience (INSPIRIT) has been used by hospital chaplaincy programs to help patients utilize spirituality as a resource for resilience (Easterling, Gamino, Sewell, & Stirman, 2000; VandeCreek, Ayres, & Bassham, 1995). In 2000, Lynn Kass and I developed the Spirituality and Resilience Assessment Packet (SRA) which combines the two questionnaires into a self-scoring format for use in prevention programs led by chaplains at universities and hospitals, community mental health professionals, and developmental educators (Kass & Kass, 2000).

3. Developing a self-inquiry curriculum to promote spiritual maturation: As my focus shifted to university-based, preventive, educational approaches, I began to wonder if I could combine what I had learned from my work with Rogers and Benson. Could I create classroom learning communities with a trustworthy interpersonal atmosphere, and introduce structured contemplative experiences through which students could learn to engage pro-actively in psychological and spiritual growth?

In 1987, I began to conduct an action-research project in which I developed a curriculum that introduces contemplative practice to university students. I chose to gather qualitative data for this study because I knew that the learning process of the students would be complex and multifaceted. It would be more useful to gather rich descriptions of their learning processes, rather than reduce their learning to more simplistic, quantifiable variables. Consequently, to build on my previous quantitative work, I returned to a qualitative methodology, but this time using a more formal mode of data gathering and analysis.

The curriculum revolves around a 'self-inquiry project' in which each student chooses a behavior or attitude that s/he would like to modify (Kass, 1998a, 2001, 2008). The students then begin to learn how their health-risk behavior is an attempt to cope with the anxiety and stress they feel in their lives. The students also identify the psychological worldview that drives these destructive coping behaviors. They pay particular attention to the existential dimensions of their worldview. For example, they contemplate the degree to which they feel connected to the universe and to other people at times of stress. Through this contemplation, they grow more sensitive to spiritual needs that they have not learned (or perhaps dared) to address. During the first segment of the class, they recognize that an important aspect of contemplative practice in every spiritual tradition is critical self-awareness concerning one's behavior toward self and others. Thus, the moral and ethical dimensions of contemplative practice emerge as central maturational goals.

During the second segment of the class, students explore contemplative practice as a means to elevate and refine psychological awareness. Using meditation as a central tool,

they first learn to calm the agitation of their minds and refine cognitive distortions that produce destructive patterns of action and reaction. Later, they explore how meditation and prayer can connect them to a deeply internal, core aspect of self that often proves to be a source of profound guidance and wisdom. Here, they begin to understand that contemplative practice can anchor them in a loving, compassionate, peaceful, self-transcendent dimension of themselves.

Students attending this course have been at many different stages of spiritual and personal development. Many feel completely divorced from a spiritual / religious tradition, and attend the class to learn about the potential value of spiritual development in their lives. They seek a neutral, educational environment where they can learn about these practices without feeling compelled to commit themselves to a particular religious tradition. The students have come from a variety of belief systems, including atheism, and are interested to explore these practices in a genuinely ‘multifaith’ learning community (Kass, 2008; Kass & Lennox, 2005).

As part of the project, students wrote weekly self-inquiry essays. These narratives became the data for my study. For those willing to participate in the research project, I devised an elaborate method for ensuring that their submissions were anonymous. This protected their identities and reduced socially-desirable responses. I gathered data from 120 students, in seven cohorts. The narrative material proved to be wonderfully illuminating, and voluminous. Each student submitted approximately 40 pages of detailed, written narratives.

In 2003, I received a grant from the Templeton Foundation to analyze and present this data in book form. I recently completed the manuscript for the book, which will be published by the University of Notre Dame Press. The title is *Contemplative Practice in University Life: Developing Meaning, Resilience, and Multifaith Community Through Spiritual and Psychological Growth* (Kass, 2008).

I cannot adequately summarize the results of this project in this brief paper. The narratives show young adults moving through a process of spiritual and psychological development. Many of the narratives are quite poignant—as we see these young adults develop healthier ways to live and cope with the difficult aspects of their lives. Some of their most important learning includes: reduction in health-risk behaviors; more resilient worldviews; the ability to engage in interpersonal conflict with less hostility; the ability to overcome their own chains of pain; an increased ability for empathy, compassion, and forgiveness for others; increased spiritual awareness; a deeper understanding of the contemplative practices and maturational goals taught by the spiritual traditions; and a deeper respect for spiritual traditions other than their own (Kass, 2008).

One of the most satisfying aspects of this project has been creating learning communities with adults from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Participants in the most recent cohort—who were not part of the research project—included a devout Muslim, an

Orthodox Jew questioning her religious upbringing, a Protestant who felt estranged from his restrictive religious upbringing, a devout Irish Catholic, a Protestant who felt strongly nurtured by her religious faith, a gay man who attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation, an American Protestant converting to Islam, and an atheist.

When teaching, I purposefully discuss the development of my Jewish spiritual identity. In addition, I discuss my detailed studies of other spiritual traditions. These discussions emphasize my receptivity to multifaith dialogue. They also clarify that it is possible for an individual to be deeply rooted in his/her own tradition, while developing genuine recognition of other traditions as meaningful paths to spiritual maturation. For me, Maimonides, the Jewish rabbi and philosopher, symbolizes this important and necessary level of understanding (Bokser, 1950; Kass, 2008; Kass & Lennox, 2005).

Each cohort of students has proven to be a rich source of learning for me as a teacher and facilitator of interfaith dialogue. I have developed what I believe to be an innovative framework. Rather than bringing people from diverse religious backgrounds together to air their differences and conflicts, it has been useful to bring them together to study the process of spiritual maturation. This objective provides a shared educational goal, in which each person's tradition can be affirmed. In this inclusive and respectful atmosphere, discussions about differences and conflicts can be approached in a positive, constructive manner. When people do not feel that their religious identities, dignity, and survival are under attack, they show a greater capacity for tolerance and compassion toward others.

In summary, the data generated in this study suggests that the process of spiritual maturation can be approached pro-actively, with a preventive orientation that helps young adults build resources for resilience and well-being. In addition, it helps them respond to stress and interpersonal conflict with less hostility and more constructive, peace-promoting actions. It would not be accurate to claim that these young adults fully experienced *secure existential attachment*. However, by experiencing some degree of this important state of mind, their worldview and behaviors began to change.

The rich multifaceted narratives from this study provide ample proof that young adults can learn to engage in a complex process of spiritual and psychological growth. In addition, the narratives offer hope that spiritual maturation is not beyond our grasp as a society. These results suggest the need for even more extensive curriculum development and research concerning contemplative practice in our educational system.

Conclusions

This paper has served three purposes. First, it has suggested how qualitative and quantitative research methodologies can be used in a complementary fashion to understand the impact and complex dynamics of spiritual maturation. Second, it has suggested a conceptual model for understanding spiritual maturation as a developmental learning process. Third, it has summarized three studies which illustrate

how the process of spiritual maturation can strengthen efforts to build a society of individuals who are psychologically resilient, and whose actions promote health, justice, and peace.

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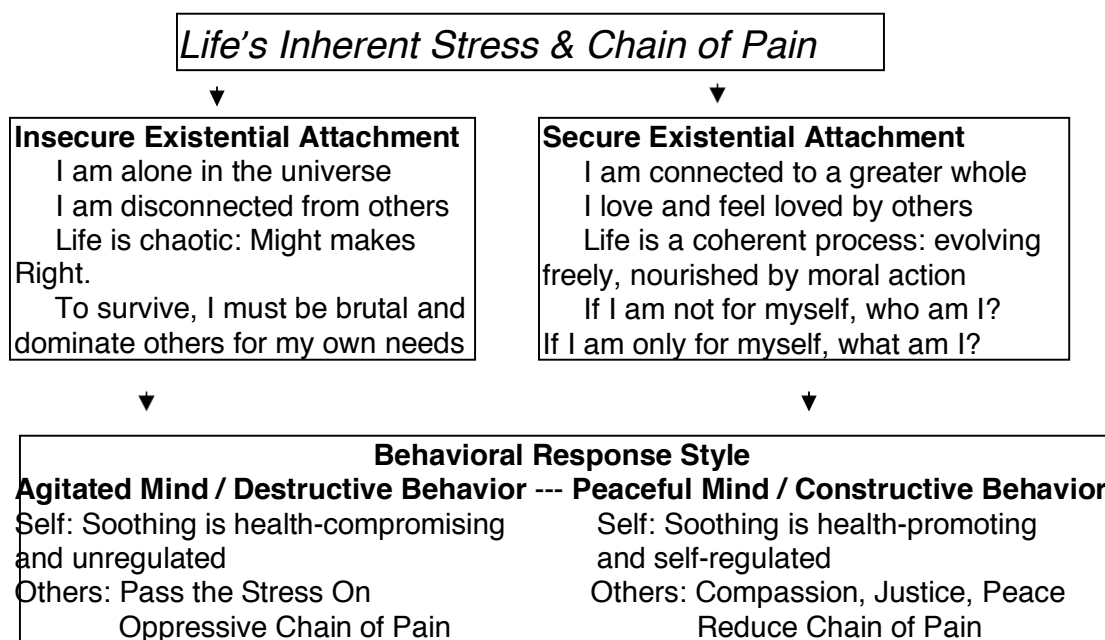


Figure 1: Psychospiritual Worldview as Template for Behavior

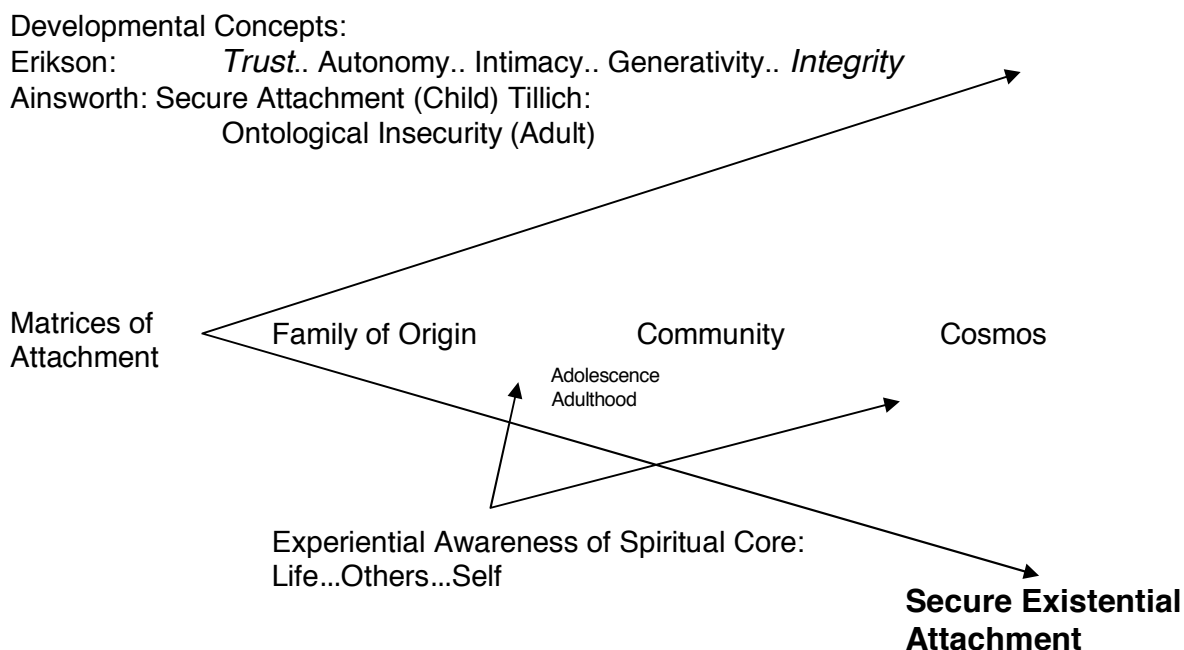


Figure 2: Secure Existential Attachment—A Developmental Potential