Exploring the Essence of Spirituality: A Phenomenological Study of Eight Students with Eight Different Worldviews

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Throughout most facets of American life, there has been a renewed interest in and expression of spirituality. Religiosity and spirituality have been at the center of recent international events (e.g., September 11th) and political discussions (e.g., continuing debates about school prayer and the role of religion in the political process). As a consequence, campus communities are striving to make sense of spirituality and religious tolerance as well as their roles in helping American students understand themselves as part of a diverse democracy. This phenomenological study addresses these issues by asking eight students representing eight different worldviews (i.e., Agnosticism, Atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism) about what spirituality means to them. Photo elicitation and semistructured interviewing are used as the primary means for collecting data. Results show that common to all eight perspectives is the idea that spirituality is the human attempt to make meaning of the self in connection to and with the external world. Implications for student development practice and future research are discussed.

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There is a renewed commitment among higher education scholars and practitioners to understand the role of spirituality in higher education (Astin, 2002; Allen & Kellom, 2001; Chambers & Chambers, 2001; Chavez, 2001; Clark, 2001; Dalton, 2001; Gutierrez-Zamano & Yasuno, 2002; Hodges, 1999; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2002; Koth, 2003; Love, 2001, 2002; Love & Talbot, 1999; Manning, 2001; Strange, 2001; Williams, 2001; Zabriskie, 2003). A handful of information-gathering efforts have been initiated to address the place of spirituality in higher education (Chambers & Chambers, 2001; Gutierrez-Zamano & Yasuno, 2002; Hodges, 1999; Laurence, 1999). For example, in order to promote religious expressions for students with diverse spiritual orientations, the University of Minnesota-Morris initiated a series of forums entitled Spiritual Pathways, a programming effort committed to "bring[ing] together students, student affairs administrators, and faculty to discuss and understand diverse spiritual practices and perspectives" (Hodges, 1999, p. 25). Similarly, a national gathering of individuals deeply concerned with issues of spirituality and religious diversity convened at Wellesley College, where multiconstituency teams made up of administrators, alumni, faculty, religious life advisors, students, and trustees considered (a) if institutions should articulate a spiritual component to education programs; and (b) how spirituality might serve as the web that interconnects educational initiatives concerning student values, moral and ethical development, experiential education, health and wellness, and community service (Laurence, 1999). Moreover, current initiatives concerning "spirituality and wholeness in higher education" (Chambers & Chambers, 2001) have been launched by scholars within the higher education community in hopes of trying to formalize strategies for addressing issues of student spirituality within higher education. These forums and information-gathering initiatives demonstrate an interest within the community of higher education that there is a need for understanding what role spirituality plays in shaping the American college student; however, few empirical studies have been documented that reflect this interest.

A number of reasons for the dearth of studies in this area have been offered (Astin, 2002; Dalton, 1991; Laurence, 1999; Love & Talbot, 1999; Zabriskie, 2003); however, one stands out as particularly germane for this study: "while the concepts of faith and spirituality as important but missing elements in academe can be lamented, the larg-

er issue cannot be addressed until a common language and definition can be developed to allow for constructive dialogue and fruitful practice" (Zabriskie, 2003, p. 5). The perceived familial relationship between spirituality, religion, and faith renders empirical investigation into the nature of one or all of these constructs problematic; while some may perceive spirituality as synonymous with faith and religion, others may understand these constructs as conceptually distinct, each with their own definitional properties and subsequent behavioral expressions. As a result of these competing definitions, many researchers feel as though spirituality is too subjective to be of value in the objective world (Griffin, 1996; Laurence, 1999; Slater, Hall, & Edwards, 2001; Franklin, 1999; Hill & Hood, 1999).

Research that has attempted to empirically investigate the spirituality of college students has deployed sampling strategies that do not contribute to robust understandings of spirituality from a diversity of perspectives or worldviews. Most studies that investigate the spirituality of students use predominantly Christian or homogeneous samples (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1980; Cook, Borman, Moore, & Kunkel, 2000; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Cole, 1997), samples from faith-based institutions (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2002), or samples with little information detailing the worldviews of the sampled students (Cherry, De Berg, & Porterfield, 2001). For example, the nonrandom sample used to derive Fowler's model for faith development consisted of 359 individuals; 97.8% of these individuals were Caucasian. Of the 329 individuals whose faith origins were known, 81.5% were Christian. Similarly, Sharon Daloz-Parks (1980, p. 291), in her theory of spiritual development, interviewed 20 students, with only two of these students identified as demographically different from the rest of her sample: "the group includes one foreign student and one non-Caucasian American." While these studies are useful for understanding how certain students make meaning of spirituality, they fail to give equal voices to students who represent nontraditional worldviews; this is especially problematic given many institutions' increasing commitment to diversifying the student body.

There is a need to understand what spirituality means to students from a diversity of perspectives. This phenomenological study seeks to address this need by developing a description of spirituality based on the experiences of eight students that represent eight different world-

views (i.e., Agnosticism, Atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism) at two comprehensive research universities. This description is not intended to provide the definitive answer on what spirituality is; rather it serves as a venue for understanding how students, from a variety of different perspectives, make sense of it. My hope is that the results of this study will not only contribute to the emergent literature on the spirituality of students, but also that they will be of some value to researchers and practitioners interested in curricular and cocurricular planning and management as institutions strive to create educational contexts that promote dialogues concerning spirituality and religious tolerance.

The purpose of this study is to describe the essence of spirituality as experienced by and using the voices of eight students representing eight different worldviews. It seeks to answer the question, How do these students make meaning of spirituality? In the process of answering the aforementioned question, this study also considers the following auxiliary questions: What language do students use to describe spirituality? What are the underlying themes that capture the essence of spirituality as experienced by these students? What are the invariant conceptual themes and categories that facilitate a description of spirituality as experienced by these students?

Procedures

Philosophical Foundation

In an attempt to answer these questions, I chose phenomenology as the qualitative methodological tradition for exploring the essence of spirituality. Phenomenology is "the first method of knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994) because it "involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (p. 13).

With its emphasis on experience, phenomenology welcomes an empirical exploration into the construct of spirituality. Evidence for the existence of spirituality is derived from first-person reports of life experiences by both the researcher and the student (Moustakas, 1994). By grounding the exploration of the essence of spirituality in the phenomenological tradition, the lived experiences of the

researcher and the student combine to answer the central research question, What is spirituality?

Epoche

I was raised as an evangelical Christian. I spent much of my childhood and adolescence in church where I learned about the Christian view of the nature of spirituality, faith, and religion. To me, these terms were synonymous; they were used interchangeably to describe the Christian community and the religious expressions of that community. This view was rarely ever challenged because I had limited exposure to interactions with religiously diverse peers, teachers, or mentors. It was not until my first year in college when I began thinking more seriously about issues of spirituality as they pertained to people outside of the Christian faith.

I attended a Jesuit college during my freshman year. This college was over two thousand miles from my hometown. Few evangelical Christians attended this institution. I made many friends who exposed me to different ideas concerning the nature and subsequent expression of spirituality. This was the first time I had encountered peers who exercised their spirituality in any way different than my own. At first, I resisted these expressions because they seemed so different and almost foreign. I wrestled with trying to reconcile my own expression of spirituality with those of my college friends. I struggled with trying to maintain my own spiritual identity while accepting the different expressions of spirituality exercised by my friends. After trying and trying, I could not reconcile these differences. As a result, after my first year in college, I transferred to an evangelical liberal arts institution.

I attended this institution for the rest of my undergraduate career. Here, in the "solidarity of like-mindedness," I thought I would not have to wrestle with expressions of spirituality different than my own. I was wrong. At this institution, I befriended many individuals that expressed their spirituality in many different ways. Some expressed spirituality through prayer, others listened to music, others canoed, and still others seemed not to express it outwardly at all. From these friendships, I learned that acceptance of difference did not equal sacrifice of self. I did not have to sacrifice my own spiritual identity and subsequent expressions to accept the spiritual identities and expres-

sions of others. As time passed, I developed sensibilities that turned into affinities for differences of spiritual expression. By graduation, I found myself gravitating toward people who did not express their spirituality in the same way I did.

After graduating, I intentionally decided to attend graduate school at a predominantly Jewish institution, where I proceeded to earn my master's degree in psychology. Here, I had the opportunity to dialogue with a number of different individuals representing a variety of different worldviews. We routinely discussed issues about the nature of religion and the role of spirituality in our lives. I learned that, in many ways, our understandings of spirituality were similar; we all spoke of our families, of our thirst for knowledge, and of our experiences with pain and joy. I also learned how different we were and how these differences usually expressed themselves through our respective religious traditions and practices within our faith-based communities. In this learning, I became passionate about understanding spirituality and the role of higher education in facilitating this understanding.

These stories attempt to provide some information concerning my lived experiences wrestling with issues relating to spirituality. From these experiences, I have developed my own understanding of spirituality as a sort of pervasive energy that links human beings with what can be known: what can be known about myself as a unique personality; what can be known about ourselves as a "species" community; what can be known about our world; what can be known about what is known (e.g., truth, ideas); and what can be known about what isn't known (e.g., there's something bigger out there that escapes human ability to understand). I capture the essence of spirituality by describing my love relationships, nature, knowledge, and my place in the universe. I understand it as the substance of my meaning-making system: a web of cognitive and emotion-based mechanics that I use to make sense of myself and of my place in the world around me.

These experiences and assumptions also underpin the design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis strategies deployed for this study. For example, in terms of study design, I assumed that "spirituality" would be very difficult to describe. Part of this difficulty lay in the construct of spirituality itself. Unlike many other studies that investigate the essence of a given phenomenon, my own experiences

with and understanding of spirituality led me to believe that spirituality, by nature, is a phenomenon that is not easy to reference or articulate. As a result, the design of this study allows students to "capture" the essence of spirituality using a combination of different approaches (i.e., images, captions, and interviews). I assume that by using a variety of different mediums to access spirituality, the study participants will have an easier time capturing its essence.

In addition, my experiences and my own understanding of spirituality may have biased me toward looking for certain themes that reflect views of spirituality similar to my own. For example, my personal experiences with spirituality and my academic background in developmental psychology may have influenced my sensitivities toward and interpretations of students' uses of developmental language when describing spirituality. Other researchers may not have used similar frameworks in generating themes and categories from the raw data. Despite this and other potential biases, I made every effort (described later in the verification section of this paper) to ensure that the themes developed from this study best reflected the intended meaning of the student participants selected for this study.

Purposeful Sampling

Students were solicited based on purposeful sampling strategies adapted for this phenomenological study. This strategy mixes two sampling strategies characteristic of qualitative research: criterion sampling (guarantees that students have experienced the phenomenon of spirituality) and maximum variation sampling (involves the intentional selection of students whose experiences, when analyzed in the aggregate, provides the fullest description of the experienced phenomenon) (Creswell, 1998).

I solicited students for participation in this study in two ways. First, I contacted student organizations (e.g., Muslim student organization and Catholic student organization) and asked if any students who were members of these organizations would be willing to participate in the study. I selected the first student from each organization who expressed interest in the study and who had experienced a phenomenon that he or she referred to as "spiritual." For other students, I solicited referrals from faculty and fellow students.

Each of the eight students selected for this study experienced a phenomenon that he or she referred to as "spiritual." (Students were solicited for participation in this study based on this criterion.) Some students use the terms "spirituality" and "faith" interchangeably; others do not. In addition, even though each student considered him or herself to have experienced a phenomenon that he or she would call "spiritual," some are more willing to describe themselves as "spiritual" than others. For this reason, out of respect for each student, I chose to use the word "worldview" without descriptors such as "faith-based" or "theological" to represent the eight perspectives of the students participating in this study.

The students represent the following worldviews (listed alphabetically): Agnosticism, Atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. They also represent a number of different academic disciplines: English literature, education, political science, biomedical engineering, and psychology. Six of the students were female; four of the students were undergraduates and four were graduate students.

Data Collection

I used a sequential two-part data collection strategy: photo elicitation and in-depth interviews. Each student was given a digital/disposable camera and was asked to take ten pictures of images that reflect his or her working meanings of "spirituality." Upon completion of this task, students were asked to provide full-sentence captions for each picture with the reasons behind why they chose to include any given picture within their set of ten. Then, each student's "mini-album" (images with captions) was used to guide a 30–45 minute semistructured interview. See Appendix for the protocol used in this study.

Treatment of Data

The mini-albums and transcribed semistructured interviews served as the primary information sources from which themes were extracted and analyzed. The Colaizzi model (1978) for interpreting phenomenological data was used as the general analytical structure for this study. However, given the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, modifications to the Colaizzi method were developed to meet the

study's design criteria. These modifications resulted in an adaptation of the Colaizzi model (1978) that includes an eight-step procedure that I will describe now in more detail.

First, in order to familiarize myself with the data provided by each student, I read through each mini-album and transcribed interview. Second, I extracted significant statements from each student's mini-album and interview. Statements were considered significant if they pertained directly to the phenomenon under investigation. After extraction of all significant statements was completed, I eliminated all overlapping, repetitive, or vague statements. The remaining significant statements served as the basis for developing meaning units, clustering these units into groups, labeling these units with a common theme, and reorganizing these themes into overarching categories.

Third, I formulated meaning units from these significant statements. Two criteria for ascribing meaning to significant statements were used for this study: significant statements needed to be supported by their surrounding contexts in order to fully understand each statement's intended meaning, and significant statements needed to maintain definitional properties that readily enabled abstraction for the next step of the procedure, namely thematic labeling.

Fourth, I organized the formulated meaning units into ten clusters that were each then labeled with a theme. These clusters represented meaning units common to each student's description of spirituality.

Fifth, I then returned to the original data sources for each student to validate these clusters. By checking the significant statements, meaning units, and their accompanying themes against the complete record of each student, I was able to assess the consistency with which each student referenced a given theme throughout his or her photo elicitation exercise and in-depth interview.

Sixth, in order to represent all worldviews for every developed theme or category, I integrated a procedural step into the analytical model proposed by Colaizzi (1978). After clustering and labeling significant statements and meaning units under a common theme, I cross-checked the significant statements and meaning units of each student against the significant statements and meaning units of all of the other

students. If a significant statement or meaning unit of one student was not compatible with the significant statement or meaning unit of all of the other students, the incompatible significant statements, meaning units, and theme under investigation were eliminated from the study. This process guarantees that description of the essence of spirituality reported in this study represents the worldviews of all students.

Seventh, I reorganized these ten clusters into two overarching categories. Categories were developed from reading and rereading developed themes. Categories were verified by returning to students' verbatim descriptions of the essence of spirituality.

Finally, using the relevant, validated, and cross-validated significant statements, meanings, themes, and categories, I constructed a description of the phenomena of spirituality as experienced by these eight students.

Verification

I used three methods of verification to ensure the accuracy of the data reported in this study. First, in an earlier section of this study, I "bracketed" my biases and assumptions concerning the study of spirituality. I did this to give the reader a sense of any prejudice or orientation that may have shaped my interpretation or approach to the study. Next, I verified the data by cross-checking information gathered via images, captions, and interviews; this verification strategy is formally known as "triangulation," the process of corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 1998). Finally, I member-checked findings and interpretations of this study with three of the study's students.

Student Contexts

This study explores how these eight students made meaning of spirituality. The students selected for this study were from two large, public, highly selective, research universities—one in the Midwest and the other in the West Coast. The influence of these highly intellectual environments on students' understandings of spirituality took two major forms throughout this study: (1) all students were able to capture the essence of a seemingly ineffable construct such as spirituality

through the use of metaphors, similes, and allegories; and (2) all students indicated that knowledge and the pursuit of meaning-making was the core essence of spirituality. I suspect that students at other types of institutions may not be as committed to knowledge and its pursuit as elements critical for inclusion in their descriptions of the essence of spirituality.

Each student described or captured the phenomenon of spirituality differently. The variability between each student's descriptions of spirituality may be largely due to the variety of different experiences that have shaped how each has come to make meaning of spirituality and, subsequently, how each has chosen to express it. In the section that follows, I describe the contexts of the students who participated in this study. In most cases, I tried to use the students' voices to describe their own experiences and histories. I turn now to these experiences and histories.

The students representing the Agnostic and Atheist worldview tended to capture spirituality using images and captions representing cerebral responses to spirituality. They took pictures of bookstores, art museums, libraries, and the spot where the idea that would become the Peace Corp was announced. They described spirituality by using terms like "contemplative and mental exercise" and "product of mind." They did not attribute their understandings of spirituality to any specific context, event, or experience; for them, experiencing the phenomenon of spirituality involved experiencing that which cannot be readily explained. The Agnostic student commented,

> This was difficult because I don't really think about spirituality. I don't consider myself a spiritual person, as I wrote in one of my captions, but I have had experiences that I think are spiritual in nature. When people talk about spirituality, I think that it can be really reassuring and make all sorts of connections but, at the same time, I think that it is a product of the mind. I don't want to say it's not based in reality because it's very real, but at the same time, it's not a part of my life and it's not something that rationally makes sense to me and I think that it is a creation of mind as many things that we do and believe in are.

The evangelical Christian, Roman Catholic, and Muslim students described their experiences with spirituality in terms of their respective relationships with a named higher power and with significant individuals who helped them come to an understanding of their faith traditions. They took pictures of passages from holy writings and specific places of worship. All three of these students described an experience of having felt the presence of and communion with their respective named higher power; this particular experience was transforming. For example, the evangelical Christian noted,

> I might not have even thought that there was an essence of spirituality—that there was anything spiritual about the world. I began to be very unsettled in my mind thinking about the meaning of life and the purpose of my life and if it's possible to know God. Over a three- to four-year period, I explored the claims of Christ in the Bible and eventually made a decision to acknowledge that Jesus was Lord and I was able to see a massive transformation in my life.

The Jewish, Hindi, and Muslim students tended to attribute their understandings of spirituality to their family; they spoke of their family experiences of spirituality and how these experiences shaped their current understanding of spirituality. For example, the Jewish student commented,

> I have felt kind of disempowered from dealing with it [spirituality] because I think that there are a lot of people whom I identify as "spiritual people." I was actually kind of frightened at the concept as a child—which, I think had something to do with the way my parents taught me about the Holocaust, which was a very important part of my upbringing.

The Buddhist student represented spirituality by taking many pictures of nature. He was raised in a Christian environment but made no personal connection to the named higher power within that environment. He reacted against the idea of a monolithic understanding of spirituality. He described his experience,

> I kind of grew up in a Congregationalist Christian church and it was meaningful but it was more or less very ritualistic and everything was very dogmatic. I really didn't connect with it on a personal level and so I never really had this image of spirituality

or faith or religion or any supernatural forces being something that was actually moving and alive in my life. What spirituality means for me is this sort of life energy, this sort of constant movement. A lot of different religions call it different things— Christianity calls it the Holy Spirit; Buddhism calls it the living Buddha; you know Chinese medicine calls it Chi; all sort of different things. I think of it as being something as universal as life energy. When you're in different sorts of relationships, there's kind of a constant ebb and flow of this sort of psychic energy—this spiritual energy that I think is really kind of meaning of life. That's what life is all about.

These brief descriptions of the students' personal experiences of and histories with spirituality help provide a context for the findings of this study. Now I turn to these findings.

Findings

I have chosen to organize the findings of this paper around the modified analytical rubric originally designed by Colaizzi (1978). First, I discuss the ten major themes that emerged from the data collection effort. Next, I group these ten themes into overarching categories. Finally, I provide a description of the essence of spirituality. In each section, I use student quotations as evidence for the construction of themes and categories. I also provide my interpretation of these themes and categories in an effort to synthesize findings from all students. Again, it is important to note that every student mentioned some aspect of the themes and categories discussed in this section.

Theme: Continuity

Students in this study understand spirituality as a familiar time-related phenomenon. They make meaning of spirituality by describing familiar cyclical processes and patterns of life. For example, one student took a picture of swans to represent migration patterns: "Spirituality is a sense of continuity of life. The picture of the swans show that they mate for life, migrate south for the winter and then return to the same pond every spring." Another student took pictures of natural settings in an attempt to reflect a sense of rebirth and renewal that occurs each year: "Flowers are included to represent the spiri-

tual aspects of nature and the renewal/rebirth that occurs each year. This renewal is part of a larger pattern of life cycles." In addition, one student took a picture of a flower in her garden and commented on how this flower represented the impermanence and inescapability of reality and time:

> This is a picture of a moonflower in bloom in my garden. Moonflowers bloom once at night. They are immensely beautiful, dramatic, and fragrant. In the photo there are several buds that will be blooming in subsequent evenings, but there are no wilted blooms because each bloom dies and falls off the morning immediately after it blooms. These flowers move me. They are not only incredibly beautiful; they demonstrate the impermanence and inescapability of reality and time.

For these students, making meaning of spirituality involves some understanding of time as continuous, repeating, and familiar.

Theme: Local Moment

For students in this study, spirituality is meaningful during specific episodes in an individual's life that warrants reflection. In this way, spirituality is understood as the human's explicit engagement with bounded time. Students attempted to capture scenes that reflect engagement in a particular moment:

> This picture was taken because it reminded me of both solitude and serenity. Both of these notions are basic elements to spirituality. When one is alone with God, a feeling of serenity and calmness often overwhelms the person. The duck, in a way, seemed to be calmly sitting upon the peaceful and serene waters. It is these sorts of moments—moments of solitude, serenity and peacefulness—that capture the essence of spirituality.

> You really need to really focus your attention and learn how to really engage in the present moment. I think that's really meaningful on a really pragmatic level. I think you get a real sense when you talk with people, who's really engaged in that conversation and who is not and I think that really living life and engaging in the present moment is such a powerful idea.

From these quotations, it is clear that for these students, spirituality is meaningful as the human's ability to engage in the present moment.

Theme: Pervasiveness

Students in this study make meaning of spirituality as a phenomenon that connects them with unbounded and infinite environments. These environments are experienced as pervasive: "it's in everything around you." Students attempted to capture this idea of a pervasive environment by taking pictures of space or the sky: "In some way, the sky connects all of us. The infinity of it, as well as the recognition that there is more there than can be seen, and in this way, it represents spirituality." Another student took a picture of a blade of grass. She explained,

> I guess I took this picture because it might not have mattered what I took a picture of. The essence of spirituality is that the Spiritual can be seen in all things. When I smell this grass, I thank God for making it. Whitman saw truth in every blade. If our eyes are opened spiritually, we might perceive the hand of God in everything.

For students in this study, making meaning of spirituality involves understanding human beings as existing in environments that are pervasive, unbounded, and infinite.

Theme: Local Environment

Students make meaning of spirituality through nature. Nature reflects an explicit human engagement with the recognizable, encountered environment. Here, spirituality is experienced as a corporeal set of observations. Students captured this idea of the local environment by taking pictures of flowers, a hen's egg, waterfalls, sunsets, and more. One student simply stated how he felt "equanimity and the holy spirit in the outdoors." Another student identified nature as an expression of her idea of God:

> Nature is always a sign of God's existence, mercy, and power. The sunlight highlighting the tips of this tree had to be captured. If one stops for a mere second to ponder the creation and amazement, one would really see how amazing and intricate are all of the fine details in life.

For these students, spirituality is reflected in the local environment.

Theme: Relationship with Humanity

For these students, spirituality connects human beings with each other through what is common to the human experience (e.g., pain, suffering, life, death). In this sense, humanity is understood as an innate set of shared human experiences. One student represented this connection to humanity by taking a picture of a cemetery:

> This is a picture of a cemetery. I believe we all live and die for a reason. Whether our souls go to heaven or are reincarnated into another living being, I don't know. However, I believe that our souls live on in some way even after our bodies die. The physical death often helps us (the living people) understand the meaning of life. Understanding that we are mortals can oftentimes help us live life to the fullest.

Another student expressed her sense of connection with others through her description of eye contact:

> Eye Contact: This is a complex image. I wanted to capture the connection between people which brings them to something outside of themselves—which sings in a way, or is more huge than the sums of its component parts, or is like some other metaphor which attempts to convey something which (again) is pretty ineffable. I have chosen to use Eye Contact to stand in for these connections.

For students in this study, spirituality is the sense of connectedness that human beings experience with each other simply because they are human beings.

Theme: Relationship with Community

Students make meaning of spirituality as a connection to an implied or identified community or group, such as membership of a particular church or ethnic group. For these students, community boundaries are idiosyncratically defined. For example, students represented this connection with community by taking pictures of churches, weddings, festivals, and so on. One student noted:

> Spirituality is intangibility. It is a force/presence within each person. Spirituality is something we, as humans, recognize in each other. Through our friendships and associations, spirituality can

be positively or negatively influenced. The picture depicts a community gathered after a celebration at church. Through friendships and/or church community, you can recognize common traits of spirituality within yourself and others.

Another described his church community: "The Unitarian Universalist church is my spiritual community right now—I feel a strong connection with the values, practices and support of the Unitarian Church." For these students, spirituality is the sense of connectedness that human beings experience with each other because of a set of demographics, histories, passions, or worldviews.

Theme: Relationship with Personal Other

Students in this study understand spirituality as a phenomenon that connects them with identified, personal others (e.g., family, friends, loved ones). One student included a picture of her wedding:

> I think marriage signifies one of the most spiritually fulfilling moments in life. The love, friendship and emotional bonding between the bride and groom are especially intense at this particular moment. The wedding ceremony represents the union of two when both individuals have to be at a high level of spirituality in order to fully embrace marriage.

Another included a picture of the cemetery where her mother was buried,

> Spirituality is sense of connection with loved ones. This is a cemetery where I sometimes go to think of the ones who've died. They say you're not really gone until there's no one to remember you. That always makes me cry, even now as I type this.

These quotations demonstrate how students in this study make meaning of spirituality as the sense of connectedness that human beings experience with explicitly named personal others.

Theme: Internal Process of Making Meaning

For students in this study, spirituality is the mechanism though which human beings make sense of themselves in relationship to the world around them (i.e., time, environment, other people). Expressions of

this internal process of meaning-making includes prayer, meditation, reflection, and exercises that facilitate students' getting "in touch" with themselves. One student took a picture of a set of candles and explains,

> I have a set of candles where I pray (borrowed word) for others in my life, and another where I reflect on my life's work(s). The one shown in the picture is where I kind of pray to be as whole a person myself as I can be.

Another had a friend take a picture of him meditating, "A meditation pose. Meditation is the active vehicle for many Buddhists—it provides me a way of exploring my consciousness." For students in this study, spirituality involves some dimension of the individual making sense of him or herself in the context of the world around him or her.

Theme: External Process of Making Meaning

Students in this study also understand spirituality as the mechanism though which human beings make sense of the world around them (i.e., time, environment, and other people). Expressions of this external process of meaning-making includes reading, learning, acting, and working. One student took a picture of a library and explains, "I feel that the gift of knowledge and the pursuit of wisdom is connected to spirituality." Another expressed this idea by taking a picture of the theatre,

> This is a picture of a theatre and is meant to represent two aspects of human endeavor: art and work, while at the same time referring both to the enshrinement of art and work and to the congregation of people to celebrate and learn from birth the documents of endeavor and from their own participation in the enshrinement.

For students in this study, making meaning of spirituality involves understanding how human beings make sense of the world around them.

Theme: Meaning-making as a Product

For students in this study, spirituality is meaning. It is the human being making sense of his or her experience. This idea of "making

sense" involves understanding the self as it is connected with time, environment, and other people. In one student's words, spirituality "drives the human need to explain the inexplicable or understand the nonunderstandable, and it's hard to articulate." Most of the information for this theme emerged from interviews; two students summarized this theme:

> Everybody questions things in their life that are unexplainable and the way that they explain them is different. People attribute them to science whereas other people attribute them to a higher source, but those things that they are essentially questioning are basic spiritual things.

> I believe that we all have our ways of coping and dealing with a really confusing and messed up place that we find ourselves living in. Spirituality is a way that some people choose to make sense of that.

For students in this study, spirituality is the product of inquiry: it drives and attempts to answer the questions, Who are we as human beings, and why do we exist?

To summarize, the ten themes that emerged from this study included continuity, local moment, pervasiveness, local environment, relationship with humanity, relationship with community, relationship with personal other, internal meaning-making process, external meaning-making process, and meaning-making as a product. Then I organized these themes under two categories—namely, connectedness and explication. Now I turn to a discussion of these categories.

Categories: Connectedness and Explication

Students in this study refer to the ideas of connection and explication to articulate their understandings of spirituality. The idea of connection emerges from many phrases that students used to describe spirituality. For example, students spoke of connection using terms such as "powerful exchange," "spiritual connection," "efforts to connect," "emotional connections," "sense of connectedness," "need for connectedness," and "need for a place for connection." The other overarching category, explication, emerged from students' consistent uses of the phrases "making sense," "know why you exist," "explication,"

"making meaning," and "understanding." For these reasons, the ideas of connectedness and explication serve as the two overarching categories for this study.

Description of the Essence of Spirituality

Spirituality helps human beings make sense of their nature and purpose. Spirituality drives and attempts to answer the questions, Who are we as human beings, and why do we exist? As one student noted,

> The essence of spirituality is the basic things or elements in your life that remind you of a higher source or a higher being—it could be anything bad that you see and you question why—I guess you can say a lot of it has to do with the questioning process; the essence of spirituality comes out in these questions and things.

Spirituality helps human beings make sense of themselves by understanding the self as a self that is "in connection" to and with the external world: connection with time (e.g., seasons, local moments), connection with environment (e.g., universe, nature), and connection with other (i.e., humanity, community, personal).

Spirituality also helps humans explain their purpose: the recognition of the self's need for connectedness with the external world (e.g., time, environment, other), how the self internally (e.g., reflection, prayer) or externally (e.g., reading, working) expresses this need, and how the self meets this need (e.g., love relationship, community relationship, humanity relationship).

In short, spirituality is the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world.

Discussion of the Findings

The phenomenological analysis used in this study resulted in a description of spirituality as the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world. This description supports other studies' conceptualizations of spirituality, both as a phenomena that informs an individual's sense of meaning and purpose (Cervantez & Ramirez, 1992; Chapman, 1987; Cook et al., 2000;

Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Ellison, 1983; Hatcher, 2001; Laurence, 1999) and as a phenomena that connects individuals with others (Bellingham, Cohen, Jones, & Spaniol, 1989; Elkins et al., 1988; Laurence 1999; Palmer, 1999).

In addition, this study supports the idea that spirituality is a construct that is conceptually distinct from religiosity. All of the students interviewed for this study described themselves as having experienced a spiritual phenomenon. However, two of the students in this study made it a point to mention that they did not ascribe to any form of institutionalized faith nor did they identify themselves as religious. This finding echoes assertions from other studies that maintain the conceptual distinction between spirituality and religion (Cook et al., 2000; Love, 2001; Parks, 1986, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). It also is provocative for student affairs professionals who may hesitate supporting initiatives designed to promote spiritual dialogues between students out of fear that such contexts might serve to alienate certain students who do not ascribe to a certain religion or faith tradition. What this study shows is that for the students sampled here, the spiritual experience transcends and subsumes all labels of faith; spirituality carries personal meaning for all students, even those who identify themselves as nonreligious.

I was surprised that only six of the eight students made statements reflecting affective or developmental dimensions of spirituality. These two themes were not reflected in any statements made or pictures taken by students representing atheistic and agnostic worldviews. Perhaps students who ascribe to a certain religion or faith are more likely to attach emotive value to their understandings of spirituality than nonreligious students. Perhaps religious students are more likely to attend church services or to participate in faith-based practices than nonreligious students; this might provide more opportunities for religious students to develop and use emotion-based vocabularies to describe spiritual experiences.

The exclusion of the theme of spirituality as a developmental phenomenon also raises many interesting questions, especially when juxtaposed next to works by Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986, 2000). Both of these theorists suggest that spirituality is a developmental phenomenon and use the constructs of spirituality and faith interchangeably

(Love, 2001). I think these constructs differ. Perhaps the construct of faith has more of a cognitive-developmental dimension than does the construct of spirituality. Alternatively, spirituality, as the interplay of meaning-making and connectivity, may not be something that, as a whole, can be developed. The meaning-making part of the description of spirituality is the dimension that more closely aligns itself with the developmental thinking of Fowler (1981), Parks (1986, 2000), and Love (2002); the connectivity part of the definition may exist on a plane that cannot be captured using the language of developmental theory.

Implications

Findings from this study may serve as starting points to engage higher education researchers and practitioners in more formal discussions concerning the spirituality of students. Spirituality, with its mutual emphasis on explication and connectivity, should be of compelling interest to both academicians and student affairs professionals. For example, with its emphasis on explication, academics can embrace this description of spirituality as a means for understanding how students receive, contextualize, integrate, and make meaning of new information (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Harlos, 2000; King & Kitchener, 1994). In addition, spirituality, as an agent of connectivity, may help explain how and why different lines of development (i.e., cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal; see Kegan, 1994) interrelate.

Similarly, as they strive to create contexts that promote tolerance, dialogue, and values, student affairs professionals can use this idea of spirituality as a means of connecting different students with different worldviews to each other, as opposed to shying away from more traditional views of spirituality that invoke a sense of divisiveness and polarity. Understanding spirituality as the student's attempt to make meaning of the self in connection with the external world may help to remove some of the taboos that have historically linked religion with spirituality, leaving student affairs professionals free to invest resources into offices specifically designed to meet spiritual needs of students. By positioning these offices as places where students can explore their own spirituality or sense of self in connection with one another, student affairs professionals may be able to create a safe space for dialogues between students from a variety of different backgrounds.

Here, in this space, students may learn to develop a sense of pluralism and tolerance: a development that plays a key role in building a more stable and inclusive civil society (Laurence, 1999). By using the definition of spirituality offered by this study as evidence for supporting students services that cater to the spiritual needs of students, the student affairs professional may actually come one step closer to meeting the needs of the "whole student" (Evans & Reason, 2001).

Limitations

The ineffability of the construct of spirituality posed many design, methodological, and analytical challenges. Although efforts were made to represent as many worldviews as possible, not all worldviews are represented in this study, especially those worldviews that represent Eastern culture and philosophies. In addition, during their picture-taking activity, many students found themselves taking pictures of pictures, pictures of texts, or pictures of images; this exercise may have additively distanced the student from their intended representation of spirituality. Finally, due to the sensitive nature of the data and a priori commitments to the student participants, I did not solicit peer reviewers to aid with the examination of the data. Despite these limitations, this study hopes to emphasize the importance of discussing spirituality within the higher education community.

Conclusion

Spirituality, as a construct of empirical inquiry, remains relatively underdeveloped by the higher education community. The intention of this study was to develop this construct by providing an empirically based description of spirituality using the pictures and words of eight students who represented eight different worldviews. To this end, with its emphasis on subjectivity and experience as sources of knowledge, the qualitative tradition of phenomenology served as the framework for constructing the description of spirituality. A modification of the Colaizzi method (1978) enabled me to represent the voices of all the students in all the themes, categories, and descriptions that emerged from this study. Results from this study show that spirituality is the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world. While this description is not intended to make any conclusive statements about the nature of spirituality, it does provide

higher education researchers and practitioners with an empirical starting point for engaging in more formal discussions concerning the role of spirituality in the life of the American college student.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. How are you feeling today?

2. Please describe for me your experience as a photojournalist? Did you find this study interesting? Why or why not?

3. What does spirituality mean to you?

4. Are there any common themes represented in your set of ten pictures? How do these pictures interrelate?

5. What was your frame of reference when you were taking each picture? What were you thinking about?

6. How did you feel when you were taking each picture?

7. Describe for me a spiritual experience that you have had in your life? What made that experience spiritual for you?

8. In your own words, can you please describe the essence of spirituality for me.

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