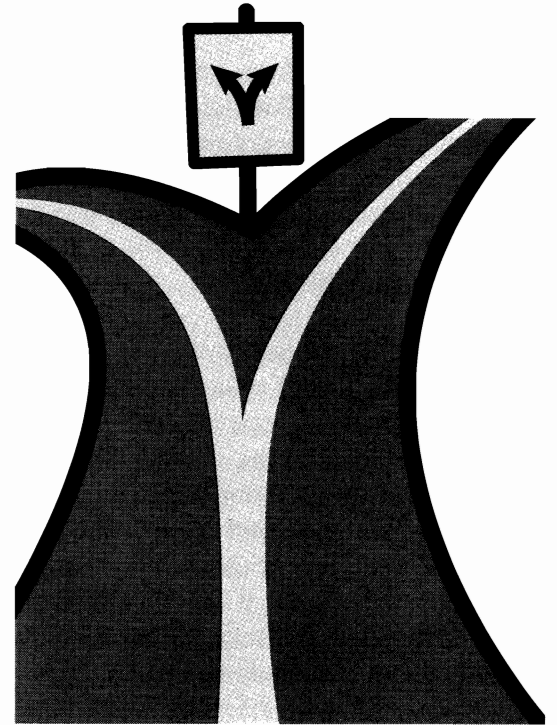


# SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

## A Fork in the Road to Healthy Living

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### INTRODUCTION

For many years, psychologists have tended either to shy away from the topic of spirituality or approach it with bias and stereotype. At times, I have to admit, I have found it embarrassing to read what psychologists have written about religious and spiritual life. Fortunately, there are signs of change. What I can offer here is a psychological perspective that grows out of research, theory, and my own clinical experience in working with spiritual issues in psychotherapy over the past 30 years.

In this article I would like to focus on one element of spirituality, spiritual struggles, make two points, and then raise one question. The first point is that spiritual struggles are a natural part of spirituality. The second point is that spiritual struggles represent a critical fork in the road, one that can lead to spiritual disengagement and decline and one that can lead to spiritual growth and transformation. This line of study leads to a terribly important question: What determines which direction people will take at these critical junctions in life? I

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will discuss some of these potentially pivotal factors and then conclude by talking about some of the practical implications of this theory and research for work in spiritual formation. Let me preface my remarks by presenting my own definition of spirituality.

#### A DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality, the eminent psychologist of religion, Bernard Spilka, once wrote, is a “fuzzy construct.” In some ways, it represents a modern day Rorschach card onto which people can project their own visions, dreams, ideals, and aspirations. Perhaps then it should not be surprising to find sharp discrepancies in the meanings of this term. Some say it is equivalent to religiousness. Others say it stands apart from or even opposed to religiousness. Some say it has everything to do with the divine, while others says it has little to do with God, but instead refers to the best that is human, be it a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of connectedness to others, or authenticity in living. Some say it has to do with a way of experiencing the world, others say it has to do with a particular set of practices, beliefs, or relationships.

I am not going to resolve these differences here. But I would like to offer my own definition of spirituality as a basis for this paper. I define spirituality as a search for the sacred. There are two key terms here: sacred and search. The sacred refers not only to concepts of God, higher powers, and transcendent beings, but also to other aspects of life that take on divine character and significance through their association with or representation of the holy. Virtually any dimension can be perceived as holy, worthy of veneration or reverence. As stated by Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called Gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring,

a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred.”

The second key term in my definition of spirituality is “search.” People search for the sacred. Although this notion may not seem particularly striking to people who are a part of religious communities, it is a radical idea to psychologists who have tried to explain religious and spiritual phenomena in terms of ostensibly more fundamental psychological, social or spiritual processes. My definition of spirituality rests on the premise that spirituality is a significant and distinctive motivation in and of itself.

The concept of search also suggests that spirituality is not static. It does not refer to a fixed set of beliefs, practices, or experiences. It is, instead, a process, one made up of three critical elements: discovery, conservation, and transformation. People discover the sacred through personal encounter and revelation or through socialization within family, church, and the larger culture as a whole. Once discovered, the sacred becomes a “place to be.” People try to foster, hold on to, and sustain their relationship with whatever they may hold sacred in life. Toward this end, they can pursue many spiritual pathways that are designed for the purpose of spiritual conservation. These include the pathways of spiritual study, spiritual practice, spiritual experience, spiritual relationships, and spiritual coping. At times, however, internal changes or external life stressors insist on change, and we enter a period of spiritual transformation in which we re-define the way we understand and approach the sacred. Once transformed, we again attempt to conserve our newly defined understanding of the sacred. And the process continues. Each individual’s search for the sacred is in some ways distinctive. Over the course of the lifespan, many of us may experience the sacred journey as relatively smooth and steady. Most of us, however, encounter some surprising twists and turns in this process.

#### SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES AS A NATURAL PART OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

Where do spiritual struggles fit into the search for the sacred? At times, life events throw us out of kilter. They may shake us spiritually as well as psychologically, socially, and physically. The result is spiritual struggle. Struggles are defined as expressions of tension and conflict over sacred matters. We can distinguish between three types of spiritual struggles: intrapsychic spiritual struggles that reflect tensions and conflicts within the

individual; interpersonal spiritual struggles which take place between the individual and his/her religious/spiritual community, and divine struggles which involve conflicts between the individual and God.

These are not new concepts. People have been encountering spiritual struggles for thousands of years. We can find illustrations of all three types of spiritual struggles in the sacred texts of the great religions of the world: the internal struggle of Siddhartha Gautama as he confronted a series of temptations beneath the Bo tree on the evening before he became the Buddha, the interpersonal struggle of Moses who shattered the tablets containing the Ten Commandments after witnessing the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf, and the struggle of Jesus Christ on the cross, crying out to the Lord, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Spiritual struggles are not a thing of the past. Stories of modern day spiritual struggles are plentiful. Listen to the intrapsychic struggle of one adolescent: "Is Christianity a big sham, a cult? If an organization were to evolve in society, it would have to excite people emotionally, it would have to be self-perpetuating, it would need to be a source of income, etc. Christianity fits all of these. How do I know that I haven't been sucked into a giant perpetual motion machine?" (from an unpublished dissertation by W. P. Kooistra, 1990, p. 95). Or consider the work of Neal Krause and his colleagues (2000) who identified a variety of interpersonal spiritual struggles elderly church members experienced in their relationships with fellow members. Gossiping, cliquishness, and hypocrisy were sources of consternation to these longstanding members. One member put it this way: "They get off in a corner and talk about you and you're the one that's there on Saturday working with their children and ironing the priest's vestments and doing all that kind of thing and washing the dishes on Sunday afternoon after church. But they don't have the Christian spirit" (p. 519). Finally, listen to Tony Hendra's moving account of the night in which he felt he had been abandoned by God, taken from the wonderful biography of his priest, *Father Joe*.

"I was falling, in an elevator with its cables severed, accelerating down into the blackness of the shaft. I opened my eyes and was still falling—faster now—plunging into a chasm with no bottom, its dark sides rushing by me, and I knew even as I fell that my faith was being torn

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from me by the slipstream of my descent, as if I'd been flung from the battlements of my certainty. . . I was utterly alone. I had never felt such loneliness, to be existentially alone, alone in my existence; so nightmarish was the feeling that I wasn't even sure I did exist. Which threw me into an even greater panic" (pp. 88-89).

As painful as they may be, spiritual struggles are a natural and normal part of spiritual development. They are signs of a spirituality in transition—launching pads for change and transformation. Without struggle, we would remain frozen in the religions of our childhood, crystalline structures ill-equipped to deal with the changes we experience within ourselves over time and the changes we encounter in a complex, fast-paced world.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that many people report spiritual struggles. In one survey of adults in the United States, 65% reported some sort of religious conflict in their lives, most of which were interpersonal in nature [Nielsen, M. E. (1998). "An Assessment of Religious Conflicts and Their Resolutions." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37, 181-190]. According to a national survey of Presbyterians taken by N. Krause and his colleagues in 1999, only 35% indicated that they had never had any religious doubts (reported in *The Gerontologist*, 39, 525-533). Other survey studies have shown that divine struggles are not altogether rare; approximately 10% to 50% of various samples express negative emotions to God, including, feelings of abandonment, anger, anxiety, and fear.

These statistics might suggest to some that religious faith in the United States is declining, but I believe this would be inaccurate. Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith. Consider the following example. "I am told that God lives in me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.... I want God with all the power of my soul—and yet between us there is terrible separation....

## People who undergo spiritual struggles are more likely to report personal growth and positive spiritual transformation.

Heaven from every side is closed.” Many people would be surprised to learn that these were the words of Mother Teresa who experienced profound feelings of divine abandonment as she began her work with homeless children and dying people in the slums of Calcutta. Yet Mother Teresa’s example is not unusual. From Moses to Jesus to Buddha, the heroic figures of the world’s great religious traditions also faced spiritual turmoil of their own, only to be strengthened and steeled through the process. Though spiritual struggles led to growth and transformation for these remarkable individuals, spiritual struggles are not without risk. Positive outcomes of spiritual struggles are not inevitable.

### SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES AS A FORK IN THE ROAD

Change is never easy. Jean Piaget, the father of child psychology, observed that even children resist change. Confronted with new situations, the child’s first tendency is to apply existing, tried-and-true modes of thought and practice. Parents know that they have to be careful about placing small objects in the hands of their young children because they make the assumption that small objects are to be eaten. Repeatedly they may try to ingest bouncing balls, toy figures, and colorful books and find that they are not particularly tasty. Piaget found that, only after many failed efforts to assimilate (i.e., apply existing modes of thought and practice to new situations) do children accommodate (i.e., begin to think about these objects in a new and different way). Aha! Toys are not to be eaten, they are to be played with. Change, Piaget concluded, is not easy, but it is essential to growth and maturation.

Piaget’s conclusions apply to adults as well as children. Like children, adults resist change. This point holds true for the spiritual domain. People try to protect and preserve their spiritual beliefs and practices as long as possible. Nevertheless, internal and external

forces have a way of insisting on change at times and, when they do, the individual may be thrown into spiritual struggle.

These struggles are pivotal times of life. On the one hand, empirical studies have linked spiritual struggles to a variety of negative outcomes (see Pargament et al., 2005 for review). For instance, questions and doubts about religious dogma have been tied to more depression and anxiety, as well as less happiness and life satisfaction. Feelings of anger toward or alienation from God have been associated with poorer recovery following a medical illness, depression, anxiety, more symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and thoughts of suicide. Spiritual struggles have even been predictive of a greater risk of mortality. In a two-year longitudinal study of over 500 medically ill, elderly, hospitalized patients, my colleagues and I found that divine struggles were associated with a 22% to 33% greater risk of dying over the two-year period, even after controlling for confounding variables. Spiritual struggles are not without risk, these studies seem to say.

These findings might come as a surprise to spiritually-minded people. After all, spiritual struggles have been depicted by many religious figures as pathways to growth. Saint John of the Cross, for example, described spiritual struggles as a “dark night of the soul” that were brought forth by God as a natural part of spiritual development. He spoke of the “dark night of the soul” this way: “the Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine.... As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death.... For in this sepulcher of dark death it must abide until the spiritual resurrection which it hopes for.”

In fact, empirical studies offer some support for the point of view of Saint John of the Cross. Several researchers have found that people who undergo spiritual struggles are more likely to report personal growth and positive spiritual transformation (see Pargament et al., 2005 for a review). For example, college students who reported that they had experienced a sacred violation (i.e., desecration) in a romantic relationship also reported more growth following the trauma (e.g., new priorities in life, greater self-reliance) and spiritual growth (e.g., more closeness to God, enhanced spirituality). In a study of members of churches that were close to the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, higher levels of spiritual struggle were also linked with greater stress-related growth. And medically ill, elderly

patients who voiced more spiritual struggles also reported greater spiritual growth.

Taken as a whole, empirical studies suggest that spiritual struggles represent a fork in the road, one that can lead to distress, pain, and decline in one direction or to growth and positive spiritual transformation in the other. A critical question follows.

#### SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES LEAD TO GROWTH OR DECLINE

Spirituality is a rich, multidimensional process. People can take diverse spiritual pathways to any number of spiritual destinations, and both pathways and destinations can change over the course of an individual's life. Not all searches for the sacred are equal, however. I believe it is useful to distinguish between well-integrated and poorly integrated spirituality. By spiritual integration, I am referring to the degree to which spiritual beliefs, practices, experiences, relationships, and goals are organized into a coherent whole. Whether spiritual struggles lead to growth or decline, I believe, depends on whether the individual has a well-integrated or poorly integrated spirituality. Let's consider four elements of spiritual integration: broad and deep vs. thin and narrow spiritual pathways; large gods vs. small gods; flexible vs. inflexible spirituality; and religious support vs. religious stigma.

#### BROAD AND DEEP VS. THIN AND NARROW SPIRITUAL PATHWAYS

We live in a culture that places paramount value on the individual and the right to choose one's own way in life. This value manifests itself in a general wariness toward institutions of all kinds—marital, political, judicial, educational, and religious. In the spiritual realm, this individuality often expresses itself in a “go-it-alone” or “cafeteria-style” approach in which the person picks and chooses from a smorgasbord of options within a religious tradition or between religious traditions. While this cafeteria-style approach may satisfy the appetites of some people, it may leave others spiritually malnourished. In our culture, we find people who lack spiritual depth and breadth: people who focus on their own personal fulfillment to the exclusion of concerns for the spiritual well-being of others; people who engage in hollow rituals disconnected from feelings of spiritual uplift and awe, and people who have created their own theologies that are disconnected from the wisdom of great spiritual teachers, past and present.

**Spiritual struggles represent a fork in the road, one that can lead to distress, pain, and decline in one direction or to growth and positive spiritual transformation in the other.**

William James described one type of spiritual narrowness. In his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James distinguished healthy-minded from sick-souled religious individuals. The “healthy-minded,” he said, are able to see life in purely positive terms. However, he was not a big fan of healthy-mindedness. In minimizing and even denying the problems of pain and suffering in the world, James argued, the healthy-minded are vulnerable to problems when they encounter the darker side of life. Ultimately, he wrote, healthy-minded religion is incomplete “because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth” (p. 160). The sick-souled, on the other hand, have a broader and deeper spirituality. True, they must grapple with pain and suffering, yet they are better equipped to confront the full range of life's challenges.

#### LARGE GODS VS. SMALL GODS

Unfortunately, religious education often comes to a close just when it should be beginning. For many adolescents, religious confirmation signals the end of formal religious education. And yet, this is just the time when young adults have developed the capacity to replace child-like conceptions of divinity with more sophisticated spiritual understandings that are better suited to the complexities of adult life. This premature closure leaves many people with a “small gods” understanding of the sacred that cannot shed light on the profound problems of life.

J. B. Phillips describes many of these “small gods” in his book, *Your God is Too Small*. He talks about the Grand Old Man “who was a great power in His day, but who could not possibly be expected to keep pace with

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modern progress” (p. 24); the god of Absolute Perfection who insists on complete and total loyalty and flawless performance; the Heavenly Bosom who provides limitless solace and comfort without ever asking for anything in return; and the Resident Policeman who serves as the “nagging internal voice that at worst spoils our pleasure and at best keeps us rather negatively on the path of virtue” (p. 15). These limited representations of the sacred cannot deal with the full spectrum of human potential and the full range of life challenges. For instance, people with an overly strict conscience often view God as a “Resident Policeman” who frowns upon enjoyable experiences in life and spoils moments of pleasure with the threat of ultimate punishment. But small gods are not limited to punitive beings. People who see the sacred as purely loving and protective may also face disappointment and disillusionment, for they may be unable to reconcile their small, albeit positive, representation of the sacred with their experiences of pain, suffering, and evil in the world.

### FLEXIBILITY VS. INFLEXIBILITY

Flexibility involves the ability to change one’s spiritual beliefs, practices, relationships, experiences, and goals in response to changes within oneself and the larger environment. This kind of flexibility is not inconsistent with deep religious commitment. In fact, a few studies by Daniel McIntosh and his colleagues have shown that people who are both highly religiously committed *and* spiritually flexible show fewer physical symptoms, greater well-being, and better life adjustment. Conversely, spiritual inflexibility bodes less well, particularly for people in the midst of spiritual struggles. In our two-year study of medically ill, hospitalized, elderly patients, my colleagues and I were able to compare four groups of survivors in terms of their physical health, mental health, and spiritual well-

being: those who reported no spiritual struggles at baseline or follow-up (non-strugglers), those who reported spiritual struggles at either baseline or follow-up alone (two groups of acute strugglers), and those who reported spiritual struggles at both baseline and follow-up (chronic strugglers). Of the four groups, the chronic spiritual strugglers were at greatest risk for declines in health and well-being over the two years. These were, we believe, the people who “got stuck” in their struggles. They were unable to resolve or work their struggles through and, as a result, they suffered the greatest problems.

### RELIGIOUS SUPPORT VS. RELIGIOUS STIGMA

The experience of spiritual struggles may be accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame. For example, in one study of African American men in homeless shelters, C. Smith and J. J. Exline reported that 46% believed that negative feelings toward God were unacceptable (in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, IL, August, 2002). Some religious groups can exacerbate these feelings of shame and guilt by condemning those who voice spiritual questions and doubts. In this vein, one woman responded to the introduction of evolution into a university’s curriculum with a letter in which she wrote: “If her [daughter’s] faith is shattered or shaken, I’d rather see her dead” (on a PBS program “What About God?” narrated by L. Nesson, WGBH Video, 2001).

On the other hand, spiritual struggles may have a more positive outcome if they are met with empathy, support, and guidance rather than stigma. Let’s return to the story of Tony Hendra. Feeling desperate and desolate following his dream of divine abandonment, Tony seeks out Father Joe, a kindly monk who had served as Tony’s priest and counselor. Father Joe does not challenge or discount Tony’s experience, but counsels him not to confuse his feelings with a larger reality. “You may not feel your love, but God is still your loved one, your other,” Father Joe says (p. 99). He then offers a powerful reframing of Tony’s night of anguish.

God gave you a great gift that terrible night,  
Tony dear. He gave you a vision of Hell. Not  
that silly fire-and-brimstone stuff. True Hell.  
Being alone with your self for all eternity. Only  
your own self to hope in, only your own self to  
love.... As you said, a p-p-prison with no door.  
I don’t think that vision will ever come to you

again. You must never forget it (p. 100).

With the help of Father Joe's reframing, Tony is able to grow from his spiritual struggle, extending and deepening his understanding of God, faith, and the purpose of his life. Tony leaves Father Joe with these thoughts:

My descent into Hell had forced me to consider the deeper nature of what I professed to believe, the life I wished to choose. For a year I'd basked in my faith as if it were no more my responsibility than a fine spell of weather. Now I had to fight for it, dig deeper foundations, prove how much it meant to me.

Thinking I'd been engulfed by darkness, I'd instead found enlightenment and strength of purpose. The way ahead would be a steeper, stonier path that led to grimmer, tougher places, the real world, hard issues, as it was really lived. There would be more tests, more doubts. But doubts were normal, even to be embraced. By questioning where you stood, you moved forward (pp. 100-101).

What determines whether spiritual struggles lead to growth or decline? Hopefully, with further research, we will soon have a clear answer to this question. Here, I have suggested that the answer may depend on whether the individual follows broad and deep rather than thin and narrow spiritual pathways, whether the individual devotes him/herself to a large rather than small god, whether the individual is spiritually flexible rather than inflexible, and whether the individual encounters spiritual support rather than stigma in response to his/her struggles.

Remember that people who "get stuck" in their struggles are at greatest risk for declines in their health and well-being, so it is important to identify people who are struggling before these struggles become chronic. Hospital chaplain George Fitchett advocates actively screening people at "spiritual risk" in healthcare settings. In one study of 200 newly admitted medical and surgery patients, he and his colleagues found that those who were high in need of spiritual intervention were less likely to request spiritual assistance in comparison to those with less need. In an article in 1999 Fitchett recommends brief screening questions about anger at God, fear of punishment by God, disappointments in faith or religious institutions, and lifetime changes in the importance of spiritual or religious faith, to determine whether an in-depth spiritual assessment and spiritually-oriented counseling may be warranted.

God, he says, is big enough to listen to all of an individual's feelings, negative as well as positive.

#### NORMALIZE SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

Remember that spiritual struggles are a source of guilt and shame for many people. And yet, spiritual struggles are a natural part of life. People respond with relief and gratitude when the struggles they voice are met with understanding and acceptance rather than threat and rebuke. George Zornow, a Lutheran pastor, has responded to the need for open talk about spiritual struggles by developing a program called "Crying Out to God," unfortunately unpublished. The program is designed to help people address their feelings of abandonment, anger, and isolation in their relationships with God. Based on the psalms of lament, "Crying Out to God" encourages people to restore their connection with God by voicing all of their emotions to the divine. God, he says, is big enough to listen to all of an individual's feelings, negative as well as positive. Zornow himself models this openness by expressing some of his own spiritual struggles. By normalizing spiritual struggles, providing a spiritual model who describes his own struggles openly and honestly, and creating opportunities for others to talk about their spiritual struggles, Zornow's program may encourage many people to move beyond the guilt, shame, and silence that surrounds their own struggles.

#### SPIRITUAL RESOURCES TO ADDRESS SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

If spirituality can be a problem at times, it can also be a source of solutions. Spiritually-minded psychologists have developed several approaches to helping people resolve spiritual struggles by broadening and deepening their spiritual pathways and understandings of the sacred (see Pargament et al., 2005). Consider three examples.

Nichole Murray-Swank, one of my doctoral students at Bowling Green University, developed an eight-

## Picture God as a waterfall within you... pouring down cool, refreshing water...

session spiritually-integrated program, “Solace for the Soul,” to address the spiritual struggles of women who had been sexually abused as children, often by a family member or neighbor. Many of these women, Murray-Swank noted, suffer from harsh, controlling images of God. “Solace for the Soul” encourages these women to see God in a more loving light. In one exercise, she asks these women to imagine God’s love as a waterfall within themselves:

Picture God as a waterfall within you... pouring down cool, refreshing water... the waters of love, healing, restoration throughout your body... a cool, refreshing waterfall washing down over your head, your face, your shoulders, your neck, out through your arms, down your legs, out through your toes, refreshing, bringing life, quenching thirst... renewing, refreshing, restoring.

Murray-Swank also provides her clients with prayers that speak of God and spirituality in ways that are freeing rather than restricting, and hopeful rather than dark. Here is one from a survivor of sexual abuse:

I reach deep inside to find what is the heart of me.  
Giver of Life, I celebrate the life you’ve given me.  
I reject the pictures of destruction that so often  
fill my mind.  
I celebrate the love you’ve given me.  
I reject the pictures of hate that threaten to  
overwhelm all that I am.  
I celebrate the body that you have given me.  
I reject the fear that has paralyzed this body.  
The baby body that I had wasn’t ready for the  
adult that hurt me  
Now I work to let my grown up body know that  
it’s OK; that I  
Can be completely in my body and be me.  
God of all that is physical and all that is spiritual,  
Help me see the connection, and heal, and  
rejoice.

I celebrate your gifts.

Amen.

In a second example, Burke and Cullen developed a group intervention for Christian women struggling with post-abortion guilt, grief, and spiritual isolation. This intervention uses ritual, spiritual imagery, discussion, prayer, and “Living Scripture” to facilitate the spiritual healing of abortion-related spiritual struggles. In Living Scripture participants are asked to imagine themselves as characters in various Biblical stories. For example, in one session, the leader asks participants to visualize that they are the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:4-30): “You are the women carrying the water jug up to the well. You’re feeling burdened. The weight of the earthen jug presses down on your shoulders. Your back and neck ache under the pressure. . . Jesus looks deep into your eyes. He tells you about your life, where you’ve come from, who you’ve been with, what you’re like. Jesus knows everything about you” (pp. 63-64). Another exercise focuses on developing a spiritual relationship with an aborted child through a spiritual imagery exercise whereby the mother encounters Christ with the child and experiences reconciliation.

In a third example, Jack Kornfeld has written a meditation to help people reach greater peace in themselves, not by fighting to eliminate their inner struggles but by accepting them as part of who they are.

Sit comfortably for a few minutes, letting your body be at rest. Let your breathing be easy and natural. Bring your attention into the present, sit quietly, and notice whatever sensations are present in your body....

Then cast your attention over all the battles that still exist in your life. Sense them inside yourself.... If you have been fighting inner wars with your feelings ... sense the struggle you have been waging. Notice the struggles in your thoughts as well. Be aware of how you have carried on the inner battles. Notice the inner armies, the inner dictators, the inner fortifications. Be aware of all that you have fought within yourself....

Gently, with openness, allow each of these experiences to be present. Simply notice each of them in turn with interest and kind attention. In each area of struggle, let your body, heart, and soul be soft. Open to whatever you experience without fighting. Let it be present



just as it is. Let go of the battle. Breathe quietly and let yourself be at rest. Invite all parts of yourself to join you at the peace table in your heart. (p. 30).

#### ANTICIPATE SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES BEFORE THEY OCCUR

Finally, it is important to consider how people might be better equipped to anticipate spiritual struggles and draw on their spiritual resources *before* they encounter serious problems. Religious education may be particularly valuable in this respect. Through improvements in religious education, children and adolescents could be taught how to understand and cope with the spiritual struggles they are likely to face in their lives in ways that are consistent with their religious traditions. Adults too have much to gain from programs that help them anticipate the nature of spiritual doubt, conflicts with the church, and struggles with the divine. Spiritual educators and leaders could provide an important service to their larger community by acknowledging and addressing spiritual struggles, as a normal and potentially valuable dimension of spiritual experience. By strengthening spiritual resources, recognizing the reality of spiritual struggles, and assisting people in the process of resolving these struggles, religious communities may be able to help people grow rather than decline through their own dark nights of the soul.

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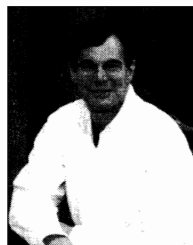
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