

WINDING ROAD

WALKING THE PATH WITH SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES



FACILITATOR MANUAL

General Notes to Facilitators

The current manual was written and implemented at Bowling Green State University in 2007-2008. Some revisions were made to the manual based on the pilot of the intervention, and those are reflected in the current document. In addition, based on our experience with the pilot implementation, we have some general suggestions as well as recommendations for changes for future implementation of the program. General suggestions will be listed below, and session-specific suggestions are included in the body of the manual, typically in the form of a session note.

General suggestions for facilitators:

- Winding Road (WR) is a psycho-educational program. As such, it lives in the gray area that exists between psychotherapeutic interventions and educational interventions. Therefore, the program touches upon personal, potentially psychologically-loaded topics, such as forgiveness, but it does not take exploration of this topic to great depths. In other words, the program is not intended to “treat” disorders, though participation in the program might trigger clinical issues for some individuals. When this happens, it is sometimes appropriate to refer distressed participants to mental health services, but each case must be considered individually (and facilitators must operate within their area of competence). Furthermore, the program provides information in the form of didactics. Facilitators present factual information that is pertinent to the experience of spiritual struggles that will hopefully be helpful to participants. As it is written, then, this program dances the line between these two types of interventions. However, if desired, this program could be adapted to be more psychological in nature or more educational in nature, depending on the context and the profession of the facilitators. To make the program more psychologically-driven, for example, facilitators might focus more on personal exploring and sharing of experience. Or to make it more education-driven, facilitators might focus on didactics and allow participants to keep their experiences more to themselves. Making such adaptation is up to the discretion of the facilitators, but as the program’s authors, we feel that such adaptations could be appropriate.
- We suggest that co-facilitators thoroughly read and study each session prior to implementation. There is a great deal of material included in each session, making it especially important that facilitators are adequately prepared. In our experience, it was helpful for co-facilitators to meet prior to each session to review and discuss the logistics of implementation.
- It is also important that you are clear with yourselves and with each other regarding the extent to which you will be sharing personal information with group participants. We were comfortable sharing very little about ourselves with these exceptions: providing some background at the introduction of session 1 (outlined in manual); sharing our gratitude during the fire ceremony in session 9 (outlined in manual). Otherwise, we did not find it necessary to talk about ourselves; rather we focused on the experiences of our participants.
- The time and space that is created for Winding Road was experienced as special and set apart for our participants. As such, disruptions to the group were sometimes troublesome. Such

disruptions included lateness, absence of participants, and substitute facilitators. To the extent that you are able, we recommend that you minimize these disruptions. Some specific ideas:

- Switching and substitution of facilitators seems to be disruptive. We feel that it would be better for a facilitator to run a group solo than to introduce an unfamiliar facilitator for one session.
 - It will be helpful if you develop a protocol regarding how to handle participant absences. Furthermore, it will be helpful for you to email absent participants to tell them about their SEE activity for the following week (which will be located in their workbooks).
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- Since individuals sometimes have strong reactions related to religious holidays, you should be cognizant of those that arise as you conduct WR, and the extent to which they affect your participants, especially as related to their spiritual struggles. You might choose to weave your awareness of the holidays into sessions as seems relevant.
 - It is likely that you will conduct the group with participants who use different language to refer to God or the Sacred. In the first session, you will have a dialogue with participants about the language they are comfortable with. It is important to continue to use the language of the participants throughout the life of the program. This might mean that you use several words interchangeably each week when you refer to God, the Sacred, or the Divine.
 - Timing provided for the sessions should be considered guidelines. You should be cognizant of time and make adjustments based on the amount of sharing and/or interest present in your group. If necessary, you might cut some portions or summarize key points to stay on track with time. Furthermore, aspects of the program might be more relevant for some groups than others and/or for some participants than others. You should use the content of the program as seems appropriate to your specific group.
 - In our pilot program, we conducted pre- and post-test surveys to evaluate the program. These are available for your use, if you have not received them already (contact Dr. Ken Pargament at kpargam@bgnet.bgsu.edu). In addition to the general pre/post evaluation, we also think it would be helpful to conduct weekly, session-by-session evaluations (perhaps using an online survey that they could complete each week). Such evaluations would 1) elicit feedback from participants about that week's session and session activities, and 2) evaluate the extent to which they "got" the take home points from the session. Such evaluations of process and content could be used to gain insight into participants' experience of WR and to help improve the program in the future.

The Winding Road

Therapeutic Posture Statement

We have tried to design flexibility within each weekly teaching module for The Winding Road. However, there are some general assumptions we have used as a foundation for developing this program. As facilitators, we ask you to keep these therapeutic assumptions/ orientation in mind.

I. General assumptions

- Fundamental openness to diverse expressions of what people hold sacred. *One of the most exciting parts of this program is the ability to allow and accept diverse sacred language and spiritual expression. We believe it is important to respect each person's gift of connecting with the sacred and know that each individual is wired differently. For example if a student expresses finding the sacred only when doing yoga, we will support and explore how they can build upon that gift, not assume that they need to experience the sacred in a church or traditional "holy place."*
- Connecting with the sacred. *In understanding how and when one is connected to the sacred, we might ask: what brings him a sense of well-being and confidence even in the midst of vulnerability and struggle? We are looking to understand what brings a person peace and allows for one to feel most like his "true self."*
- Recognizing the diversity of struggles. *We believe in the importance of withholding assumptions about the manifestation of a person's struggle. For instance if a person's beliefs fall outside of the "norm" we would not assume that she is experiencing and intrapersonal spiritual struggle where there is conflict about personal beliefs. However, we want to recognize that the struggle may actually be interpersonal in nature because others do not understand her beliefs. If we don't recognize this, we might be contributing to the interpersonal difficulties!*

II. Positive Building Blocks

- Recognizing strengths. *This point emphasizes the importance of understanding the positive coping strategies (spiritual or non-spiritual in nature) that each group member has already developed before starting this intervention. We believe it is extremely valuable to not only learn about the history of struggles, but understand what works for the participant. Information shared can be weaved into all sessions, particularly Session 4: Your Spiritual Self.*
- Spirituality as a resource. *Although this group is fundamentally devoted to the struggles of spirituality and religion, we believe that it is important to recognize that spirituality can also be a resource. One goal is to try to learn how and when it is used as a resource, and aim to build upon that throughout the duration of the intervention.*

III. "Helper" pitfalls

- Allowing room for the struggle. *As facilitators we believe it is important to have faith in the process of spiritual struggles. We believe it is important to ask ourselves, "Am I okay with the discomfort of struggle?" We must remember that*

struggle is not bad – it can lead to growth and self-understanding. We must resist the temptation to eliminate it!

- *Professional helpers. As helping professionals, we all have the inner desire for our clients to be fully functional, happy, and healthy in mind, body and spirit. However, we believe that this program will inherently challenge our desire to rescue our participants. We must ask ourselves if we are able to stand back and let the participant experience the pain that might accompany his or her own path to discovery.*
- *The chrysalis metaphor is actually true. We feel that the design of this group may deeply challenge our beliefs in the chrysalis metaphor. Do we truly believe that the person will only learn to fly if they struggle and find their way through their cocoon? And are we okay with the fact that some people will not break out of the chrysalis during our intervention?*
- *Individual psychotherapy versus “struggler therapy.” The goal for individual psychotherapy is often to decrease symptom severity or to resolve the conflict or problem. We must continue to be aware that our goals for this experiential group are to foster an environment for exploration of spiritual struggle and to provide information to help participants along their struggle. As facilitators, our job is to support and encourage participants to engage in the process – not to remove them from the process! We may find it helpful to instead focus our therapeutic efforts on discussing ways to reduce stigma, isolation, and guilt – not decrease tension intrinsic in the struggle.*

Session 1: The Journey Begins: An Introduction to the Winding Road

SUPPLIES:

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Small river rocks (for ice-breaker)

SESSION GOALS:

- Clarifying roles, responsibilities, and purpose of group and group members.
- Creating a comfortable, safe, and respectful environment that supports and facilitates participant's disclosure of personal difficulties, especially spiritual struggles.
- Learn about group members' notable spiritual life experiences.

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

I. Getting to know group:

Facilitators obtain informed consent

Facilitators hand out nametags and ask people to write theirs out

1. Facilitators introduce selves:

“We want to take a moment to tell you a little bit about the development of Winding Road and about ourselves. Winding Road was developed by an ecumenical group. Those involved in developing the sessions represent a variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds: some traditional, some not; some devout, some not. Some of us are spiritual strugglers ourselves. We value sensitivity and openness to all religious and spiritual backgrounds.”

Facilitators share a bit about background e.g., “Personally, I am/identify as”.

“We are not interested in telling you what you should or shouldn't believe. We are interested in supporting you on your own path in a manner that is sensitive to your unique beliefs, views, and questions.”

2. Group members introduce selves (name and year in school)

II. Setting the Stage

“Each week our time together will center on a specific theme – we will introduce activities and discussion consistent with that theme.”

“Underneath your seat is a binder. This will be your travel guide on The Winding Road. There is a section devoted to each week, including worksheets for the session, a recap of our time together, and resources related to our topic for the week. There is also a Travel Log at the back that you can use to jot notes or thoughts that occur to you throughout. This is your to keep – please remember to bring it with you each time we meet.”

“To help make the time that we spend in the group distinct from everything else that is going on in your lives, we will begin with a ritual and will conclude with a closing ritual. These opening and closing rituals will help us mark our coming together in this safe space.”

Play music: Watershed by Indigo Girls [time just to listen]

Introduce as our ‘theme song’; lyrics are included in participant travel guide

III. Opening ritual (5 min) *this is introduced in a conversational manner by facilitator*

“Underneath your chair, you will find a stone with your name on it as well as several other small stones. The small stones represent the everyday cares and concerns that are a part of your life, a part of everyone’s life. The stone with your name on it represents the aspects of your spirituality or religious beliefs that you are struggling with and that we will spend our time talking about. Please reach down and pick up the stone with your name on it. Before today, your spiritual struggles may have been private, your own personal battle, a burden that you have carried alone, just as you now are holding your own stone. In this group, we will share these spiritual struggles and questions and work to encourage each other during this time in which our journeys will overlap. To symbolize this shared journey, we have a tray in the middle of our circle. By placing our stones in this tray, we will be creating a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Notice that the other stones are still beneath your chair. The everyday concerns represented by these stones can sometimes distract us from focusing on our spiritual and religious struggles. By leaving them under the chair, we remind ourselves that, while they are still there, they are not the focus of our time together. Each week we will start out by placing our name stones in the center and reciting a blessing for our time together. Please place your stone in the center.”

After everyone has placed their stones in the tray, facilitator offers the following in a conversational manner

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let’s begin.”

IV. Confidentiality/ Ground Rules (5 minutes)

“The purpose of this group is to foster your development by helping you share, experience, and process your spiritual struggles. We have a really unique opportunity here to work together both on the things that you struggle with and those things that are important and valuable to you, such as, your spirituality. One important way that we can create a space that makes this possible is to support one another with some common ground rules...”

Facilitators make the following points:

1. Privacy:

- a. We are committed to keeping these meetings private; do not disclose anything you learn about each other to anyone outside of the group. It is fine to share about

experiences that you have here if you wish, but please do not share information about others.

2. **Safe Space:**

- a. **Privacy:** again, supports safe space for everyone to share their experience comfortably
- b. **Acceptance:** respect one another's feelings and opinions, even if they are different than your own; you can support one another even when beliefs and opinions differ sharply

3. **Openness:**

- a. **Openness:** This group is NOT aimed at finding "the truth" or coming to an agreement on the rightness or wrongness of any beliefs. Instead, we are here to listen and support one another's experiences.
- b. **Language:** Individuals may have different ways to talk about their beliefs and the divine or sacred. As facilitators, we will use words such as "transcendent", "God", "divine", "sacred" "true self" etc. interchangeably.

Opportunity to explore language:

"We'd like to take a moment to learn a little bit more, as a group, in terms of preferences for certain kinds of phrases or words used to talk about the divine or sacred. We recognize that, for some of us, it may be especially challenging to find language that we feel accurately reflects our personal experience of the sacred or divine. This is just fine. So we'd like to know this too.....Wherever you are with this is fine."

Facilitator supports open use of language with following summary after the discussion time above:

"Understanding personal preferences, and acknowledging that we have differences among us in this group, will help us all, as a group, appreciate the ways in which we can be open and accepting of one another.

4. **Vulnerability:**

- a. Part of this group is to experience and share things that may be difficult; in doing so, you may **feel** vulnerable. This is a natural part of being invested and involved in the group.
- b. While we **value** this kind of sharing, we also value your personal understanding of what you need. So, it is up to each member to decide what you are willing to share.

5. **Attendance:**

- a. In making this journey together, we ask that you do your best to be here **consistently**. While we don't "require attendance", your regular presence and participation help to create the supportive safe space that we just talked about.
- b. Also, regular attendance will help you get the most benefit from this group.

- c. If something comes up and you have to miss a session, please call us to let us know so we don't wait for you before beginning the session. We can meet with you to discuss what you missed, when you return the following week.

If you see participants that begin to miss sessions and/or appear to be uncomfortable in the group, follow up with them after session or by phone.

6. Not rescuing:

- a. It is hard to listen to people share things that are painful or that they are struggling with. Often we try to comfort people because we feel uncomfortable with pain.
- b. So, in this group, we want to encourage listening to people's experiences. If someone is struggling or having difficult feelings, we will allow space for this.

7. Facilitators' role

- a. It is our role as the facilitators to maintain this safe space. If you have any concerns about these ground rules or if you feel that the ground rules are not being maintained, please feel free to contact either one of us.

Are there any ground rules you would like to add?

V. ICE-BREAKER ACTIVITY: (15 minutes):

Facilitators participate in this activity

Set-up: Have 152 (larger) stones in a bowl in the middle of the room.

1. Introduction

Didactics/Goal of the activity: Illustrate that people have diverse sets of experiences. The stones will be a visual reminder that the group members have things in common, but also have some differences. In addition, the stones represent experiences that the group members are bringing into the group

“For this activity, facilitators will make a statement, and any one who has experienced that statement will go to the middle of the circle, take a stone, and then return to their seat with the stone. We ask that everyone remain silent to allow you to pay attention to any thoughts and feelings that may arise within you.

Facilitator statements:

- All 18 year olds or older pick up a stone.
- All people born in Ohio pick up a stone.
- If you have a sibling, pick up a stone.
- If you have ever been worried about your future, pick up a stone.
- If your parents are divorced, pick up a stone.
- If you have experienced the death of someone close to you, pick up a stone.
- If you or someone else you know have experienced verbal, physical, or sexual abuse pick up a stone.
- If you have a secret that you are afraid for other people to know, pick up a stone.
- If you have experienced something that is unfair or unjust, pick up a stone.
- If you or someone you know has a disability, pick up a stone.
- If you have ever experienced racism or sexism, pick up a stone.

- If you have done something that has made you feel guilty or ashamed, pick up a stone.
- If your current views about life are different now than they were when you were younger, pick up a stone.
- If you've been judged for religious beliefs and attitudes about religious and spiritual matters, pick up a stone.

2. PROCESS the ice breaker:

- What was this exercise like for you?
- What was it like when you picked up a stone?
- What is it like to look around the room and see the different stacks of stones?
- Did you feel self-conscious at any point?
- What surprised you about this activity?

Facilitators make the following points:

- Group members have a variety of experiences that they are bringing into the group
- Comment about sharing: that they just shared personal and powerful experiences with people that they do not know; bring out the point that it is OK to feel vulnerable in a group
- Comment on the similarities and differences within the group

3. CONCLUDE the ACTIVITY by saying:

“The stones that you each picked up represent the different experiences that we all bring into the group. Some of these experiences may have been difficult for you. It is likely that picking up some of the pebbles during this activity evoked a sense of vulnerability, and *this is okay*. It is okay to feel vulnerable in this group, especially when you're sharing personal and powerful experiences with people that you're just getting to know. It is important to keep in mind that not every spiritual journey is smooth. A spiritual life may have forks and bumps in its path—we call these our spiritual struggles. They are a natural and normal part of the journey. And it is this part of your spiritual journey that will be the focus of much of our work together.”

VI. Spiritual Autobiography:

1. Introduce Activity

“We would like to take some time now to have you share a little bit more about yourselves, your spiritual life up to this point and the spiritual experiences that are salient in your lives”

- a. Tell us about your spiritual background.
- b. Describe your spiritual journey. How has your belief system changed (strengthened, weakened, transformed, stayed the same, etc) from your childhood until now.
- c. Describe a spiritual experience that has been meaningful for you.

If a participant is struggling to find a meaningful spiritual experience, facilitator may suggest that sharing about a time when the individual felt most at peace, had an experience of awe, others?? etc.

“There are no “right” or “wrong” things to share for this activity; share whatever aspects of your spiritual life that you believe will help group members understand your spiritual journey. Today is our chance to understand the spiritual journey that has led you to this point. We will focus on sharing spiritual struggles specifically next week.”

Prompts that may be helpful if participant has difficulty

- What religious affiliation were you born into (if any)?
- What was the religious/spiritual environment that you grew up in (such as parents, extended family, friends, and school environment).
- What type of role did religion/spirituality have in your life as you grew up?
- Looking back on your life, are there specific events or people that have influenced your spiritual journey (either for positively or negatively).
- Describe a memorable spiritual experience that you have had- one that you felt a inspired/at peace; or in turmoil. How did this impact your spiritual journey.
- Describe a situation
- How did going to high school impact your spiritual journey?
- How did coming to college impact your spiritual journey?

Watch for group members that have difficulty identifying/elaborating the spiritual dimension of life experiences, or are overwhelmed by emotional reactions - facilitators can affirm that it is sometimes difficult to find words to capture the experiences.

2. PROCESS this experience of sharing.

- How difficult was it to think about yourself in these ways?
- What was it like to share this part of yourself?
- What was it like to listen to others’ experiences?
- What things did you learn from listening to others’ experiences?
 - a. What it difficult for you to see someone else hurting?
 - b. How did you handle this?
- Did you learn anything about yourself in this exercise?

Themes that facilitators should draw out:

- i. Spirituality is a unique and personal journey (highlight the journey part to tie into overarching metaphor of the intervention)—that started before the group and will continue after the group
- ii. There are different parts of the spiritual journey- sometimes it is an easy road to follow, other times its more difficult to find the right path (e.g., major life changes, such as coming to college or traumatic events, can challenge an individual’s spirituality)
- iii. Spiritual struggles are a natural and normal part of this journey.
- iv. Although spiritual struggles often are associated with distress and pain, they can also help people grow and gain a different perspective.
- v. It is sometimes difficult to become vulnerable and to listen to painful experiences

3. CONCLUDE by SAYING:

“We’ve seen from this exercise that everyone experiences their spirituality in different ways. For all of us, however, there are spiritual high points and low points, periods of sharing and aloneness, and a range of emotions, from *inspiration, awe, and wonder, to despair and struggle* – this is our spiritual landscape. Struggles are a natural, normal, and relatively common experience. They can be related to distress and pain, but also to growth. Sometimes this spiritual aspect of ourselves is hard to talk about. We will give you the opportunity in this group to fully explore and discuss your spiritual self and struggles.”

VII. SPIRITUAL ENHANCEMENT EXERCISES (SEE activity):

Facilitators should be flexible with the language in introducing SEE activity.

“Often times, we will be asking you to practice at home things that we discussed in session. This will help you integrate the ideas that we explored during our time together and prepare for the next leg of the journey. These will be called “SEE” activities. SEE stands for Spiritual Enhancement Exercises. The purpose of these exercises is to provide you with an opportunity to really SEE through a spiritual lens and SEE the spiritual path that you are on. For the first SEE activity, we would like you to write about your spiritual struggles in more detail. In your travel guide are some questions that can help you while you are writing, but feel free to describe your spiritual struggle in additional ways. Please bring your SEE activity to the next session which will be aimed at sharing and processing your struggles.”

(Note: these prompts are in the participant’s travel guide)

- a. Explain how your spiritual struggle unfolded. What event(s) triggered your spiritual struggle?
- b. Describe the feelings and emotions associated with your spiritual struggle
- c. Describe any conflict or strain that you feel in your personal relationship with the divine. For example, describe times when you feel angry at or abandoned by the divine.
- d. Describe any strains in your relationships with friends and family caused by spirituality.
- e. Describe or draw images, colors, and/or pictures that appear when reflecting on your spiritual struggles

VIII. CLOSING RITUAL

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope

you'll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take home points:

- A spiritual journey has smooth and rough spots. Both of these are natural aspects to any individual's spiritual life.

Resources:

Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Hesse, H. (1951). *Siddhartha*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Gandhi, M. (1952). *Gandhi's autobiography*. Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Trust.

Theresa, Mother (1995). *No greater love*. Novato, California: New World Library.

St. John of the Cross (2003). *Dark Night of the Soul*. Dover Publications.

Session 2: Sharing Spiritual Struggles

SUPPLIES:

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Image of path with boulder, switch backs, dead ends
- DVD player, projector & screen
- Clip from LOST: Session 7 “The Moth”

SESSION GOALS:

- Share spiritual struggles
- Provide background theory about spiritual struggles, highlight that growth and decline are possible outcomes
- Normalize the experience of spiritual struggles

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

I. OPENING RITUAL

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let’s begin.”

II. REVIEW GROUND RULES

1. Privacy

“We are committed to keeping these meetings private; do not disclose anything you learn about each other to anyone outside of the group.”

2. Safe Space

“This is a safe space for everyone to share their experiences comfortably. In this group we respect one another’s feelings and opinions, even if they are different from our own. We are here to listen and support one another’s experiences.”

3. Openness

“We acknowledge that individuals may have different ways to talk about their beliefs and the divine.

4. Vulnerability:

“Feeling vulnerable is a natural part of being invested and involved in the group. We invite each member to decide what you are willing to share.”

5. Attendance

“We have made a commitment to one another to attend these sessions every week, and participate as much as we are able. We agree to contact a facilitator if we cannot make it to a future session.”

6. Not rescuing

“It is hard to listen to people share things that are painful or that they are struggling with. In this group, we agree to listen to people’s experiences and let them experience them as their own.”

7. Facilitators’ role

“It is our role as the facilitators to maintain this safe space. If you have any concerns about these ground rules or if you feel that the ground rules are not being maintained, please feel free to contact either one of us.”

III. PROCESS SEE ACTIVITY

PROCESS the experience of writing about their spiritual struggles

- What was it like writing about your struggle?
- What was it like being honest with yourself about your experiences?
- What was it like seeing your experiences written in black and white?
- What was it like to write your experiences knowing that you would be asked to share your struggles today?

Facilitators should make a mental note of potential barriers for participants

Facilitators should emphasize:

1. Spiritual struggles are a normal and natural aspect to your spiritual journey
2. It takes a lot of courage to write about and now share your spiritual struggles.
3. Praise them for their efforts

Processing this SEE should allow smooth/seamless transition into the experiential exercise detailed below

IV. EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY (45 – 75 mins)

Set-up: Have group members sit in a circle.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Take a moment to sit inside your struggle. Think about your struggle for the next few minutes. [pause for about 30-60 seconds to allow group members to reflect.] We would like you to share your struggle with the group, one at a time...share as much as or little as you are

willing...As you listen, note your experience of listening as others talk and share. Anyone can start.”

Facilitators may need to prompt or assist in helping participants explore and/or remain with the struggle

2. PROCESS the experience of sharing and listening after all have shared

- What was it like sharing your spiritual struggles?
- What was it like listening to the struggles of others?
- What emotions and thoughts did you experience?

Facilitators take note of the emotions, thoughts, and experiences that participants disclose. Facilitators should keep this at hand to assist with the group lament as needed [future session].

V. DIDACTICS

Use group discussion to draw out the following points:

- a. Spiritual struggles are common
- b. Spiritual struggles are associated with a range of emotions and thoughts
- c. Note how powerful the experience of spiritual struggles are and the impact that they can have
- d. Use the examples from the group members’ as examples to highlight and demonstrate these points.

“Spiritual struggles arise when we are faced with situations that challenge our normal way of living, being, and understanding the world. These challenges can come from unexpected and traumatic events (such as...use an example to illustrate this from the previous sharing on spiritual struggles), can be a result of normal life transitions (such as... draw from a group member), and even can come from new experiences conflicting with what you have been taught or previously believed (provide example if group comes up with one—possible example: learning that divorce is wrong and then having someone you care about have a divorce; learning that premarital sex is wrong, but then having someone you care about/or yourself choose to have premarital sex). Spiritual struggles are associated with a range of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. For example, (*draw on participants’ stories to highlight this point*).

1. Categories of struggles:

“Spiritual struggles can be seen as three types, as depicted in your travel guide.”

Draw on or ask participants to provide examples for each of these categories of struggles

1. Interpersonal: struggling with other people in your life because of spirituality
2. Intrapyschic or intrapersonal: wrestling internally about spirituality
3. Divine: struggling with God in some way

2. Coping with struggles:

“There are a variety of ways that people try to deal with their struggles. It is important how you handle your spiritual struggles.”

Give examples about how group members have handled their struggles in the past and the outcomes.

Provide the following examples if needed:

- You can get stuck in your spiritual struggle and it can consume you
- You could turn away from their struggle and abandon your faith
- You could turn to false pursuits to fill the spiritual void
- You may turn to your spirituality to help you deal with your struggle
- You may use your spiritual experience to cultivate a new path for yourself

VI. SHOW CLIP FROM LOST & PROCESS WITH GROUP

In LOST Season One, Episode Seven, Charlie and John Locke discuss Charlie's drug addiction. Within this context, Locke tells Charlie a story about the moth. Essentially the story describes that the struggle of a moth to get out of its cocoon strengthens it, ultimately preparing it for life's challenges. This is an excellent metaphor for the spiritual struggles of the participants. We were able to use a clip posted on Youtube that was a montage of the episode, providing context as well as the moth story itself. However, the clip is no longer available. We suggest that you look for a such a montage yourselves when you present this section. Alternatively, you can show the part of the session when Locke tells the story of the moth.

Discuss reactions to the clip with the participants. To aid discussion if the group has difficulty getting started, consider relating people's struggles to these themes:

- The idea of choice
- Struggles always difficult no matter how you choose to deal with it (i.e., face it, deny it, run from it, numb it)
- We are strengthened by struggle
- There are no easy solutions, even after making healthy choices – dealing with these issues is an ongoing struggle
- Reasons/value of not rescuing (i.e., allowing somebody to experience their struggle & grow through it)

VII. INTRODUCE SESSION SYMBOL:

An illustration of a path strewn with boulders and switchback paths that can get you around them, some of which are dead ends

“In your travel journal is an example of what the spiritual journey can be like. As your spiritual journey unfolds, there will be many opportunities to select different paths. You might be content with the path that you chose and then something happens and there is a big obstacle– like in this picture—that forces you to reconsider your path. You can try to climb the boulder, go around the boulder, or just sit and wait for the boulder to move. Some of the choices may seem easy at first, like sitting at the base of the boulder, but may eventually lead to pain and suffering. Other times, you may choose a path that seems difficult at first, but may lead to growth and spiritual richness. There will be many times you may feel forced to make a choice about which way you want to go. In making these choices, it is important to think about your values and make choices that are consistent

with your values. Sometimes, there are people in your life that try to tell you what your values are or what the right choices are for you and it is not always easy to know how to act. This leads us into your next SEE activity.”

VIII. SEE ACTIVITY: Your spiritual models

“Often times, especially at this time in your life, it can feel as if you are being pulled in different directions spiritually by family, professors and friends. One way to begin thinking about and making sense of your own struggle and your own values is by examining these spiritual influences in your life. For the SEE exercise this week, we are asking you to spend some time and write about four people in your life that have been a spiritual influence. These people can be the ones that you have adopted positive beliefs from – like love and compassion from your family, or they could be people or groups that have influenced you negatively – maybe you had a bad experience with a church or religious person in your life. We would like you to write about two positive influences and two negative influences if you can – or about the four most important spiritual influences in your life. Some important things to write down about each person are their relationship to you (friend, family, teacher, neighbor) and the ways that they influenced you spiritually. You can be as descriptive as you want. We will talk more about these relationships next week.”

It is important that participants pick people that they have a relationship with – family, friends- and not religious figures (i.e. Jesus, Mother Theresa, God). Give examples to help explain the difference. They can write about someone who helped them understand Jesus or who introduced them to other religious beliefs.

IX. SELF-CARE

“Talking about and sharing about spiritual struggles may stir up a variety of emotions and thoughts that may affect you throughout the week. Please be aware of this and take time out to take care of yourself. In your travel guide are some suggestions on how you can take care of yourself. Take a few moments to look at this list.”

- ♥ Let yourself sit with whatever is uncomfortable—reflect and think about the uncomfortable and/or distressing feelings instead of trying to push them away
- ♥ Take a walk
- ♥ Meditate
- ♥ Pray
- ♥ Write in your journal
- ♥ Eat healthy foods
- ♥ Exercise
- ♥ Take a warm bath
- ♥ Talk to a supportive friend
- ♥ Watch a funny movie

“As you can see, there is room for you to write in other ways that you take care of yourself. Feel free to add to this list, with other activities, like.....”

- ♥ Getting plenty of sleep

X. CLOSING RITUAL

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take home points:

- Spiritual struggles are a natural and normal part of life
- There are different types of spiritual struggles and they can be associated with a variety of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- It is very important how you choose to deal with your spiritual struggle. Some choices may be difficult to make, they may be painful, and they may lead you farther away from your spirituality. Other choices may lead you towards growth and spiritual richness.

Resources:

Mindfulness In Plain English by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

This book gives very clear instruction about a style of meditation that is particularly accessible to beginners.

Meditation for Beginners by Jack Kornfield - Audio CD

Four complete meditation exercises teach you how to work with breathing, posture, attention, and difficult emotions - to create tranquility and clarity in your everyday life.

Mindful Awareness Research Center – marc.ucla.edu – Free mp3 guided meditation

http://www.marc.ucla.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=46

Several meditations ranging from 3 – 17 minutes are offered for free on this site.

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times by Pema Chodron

Chodron is a Tibetan Buddhist nun that discusses the sense of groundless we feel in the face of life’s great pains. She offers clear and practical wisdom for facing these difficult situations.

The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving-Kindness by Pema Chodron

This book is about saying yes to life, about making friends with ourselves and our world, and about accepting the delightful and painful situation of “no exit.”

Session 3: Understanding Your Spiritual Heritage

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Blank genogram sheet to use in demonstration
- Pens/pencils, colored pencils and/or crayons for genogram exercise
- instrumental music to play during genogram activity

SESSION GOALS

- Explore the ways in which personal relationships impact spirituality & spiritual struggles
- Explore ownership of one's spiritual path

Music: *Watershed by Indigo Girls*

I. Introduction & Memento: (5 minutes)

As we move through our spiritual journeys, we are guided by the values and beliefs that we hold – both the values and beliefs that we can put into words, the ones that we are not aware of and the ones that we are struggling to define.

In many ways, these values and beliefs act as our compass, guiding us through life events. One task that young adults face is identifying and owning their own compass. In other words, you are in the process of deciding what beliefs and values will guide your life. This process can be a source of spiritual struggle.

At times, you might feel that you have your compass defined and that you are headed towards your spiritual goals. However, at other times, it can easily feel as if your compass is pulled off course by family disapproval, peer rejection or cultural influences. One way to better understand the confusion that comes when you feel pulled off course is by intentionally mapping out the spiritual influences – positive and negative – in our lives. One way to do that is through a “genogram.”

II. Opening Ritual

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let's begin.”

III. EXPERIENTIAL: Spiritual GENOGRAM

Facilitator Preparations/Notes for before session

- Be prepared to add another relationship by hand to the second example, using a relationship from a participant as an example.
- Prepare ahead of time to write in additional details on the second genogram for the peer relationships to illustrate the process to participants. Points to discuss should include values demonstrated, conflicts experienced or questions raised when completing genogram. Use your knowledge of the group to create relevant information to add.

Experiential Activity. This is a group discussion of the meaning of each individual's genogram, the relationship to their current spirituality and comments on the process of creating a genogram and noting the historical context of their experiences. Facilitator should provide instrumental background music during the genogram process.

1. Discuss the purpose of a genogram (i.e. to map out significant spiritual relationships in a way that allows a "big picture" perspective) and the information that it contains.
2. Explain the link between the SEE assignment to think about positive and negative spiritual memories and a genogram.
3. Show the two genogram examples noting that they can range in complexity depending on the desire of each participant.
4. Go through the key at the side. After explaining each section of the key, illustrate the point using a relationship outlined on the genogram.
5. Ask for a volunteer to talk about one meaningful relationship in their life and add this person to the more simple genogram to illustrate the process.
6. Note that you expect there to be some confusion as they work through their relationships but that there is no "right" way to do a genogram.
7. Address any other concerns.
8. Provide participants with writing utensils and color crayons to create their own Spiritual Genogram.
9. After everyone has completed the genogram, have participants share different aspects of their genograms if they feel comfortable.
10. Then, move into the didactic (see below)

IV. DIDACTIC:

During this part of the session, the facilitators should work towards facilitating depth of responses and insight rather than just a "detailed story" of their spiritual/religious path

1. Ask group members to comment on the process of creating a genogram. Elicit sharing based on themes in the genogram (e.g., those who identified positive spiritual models, tense relationships, etc) rather than asking group members to each share their entire genogram.
 - Encourage explorations of
 - in depth feelings,
 - difficult aspects of the activity and
 - general insights into family dynamics and spiritual dynamics

2. Move into more specific discussion of how family history affects them currently.
 - What role if any did religion/spirituality play in your life when you were growing up?
 - Family: Where do you stand in relation to your *family's perspective* on religion and spirituality?
 - How has your family a source of **Struggle** in your spiritual and religious path? Where do you differ? Is there tension? How do you navigate this? What has been the most difficult part?

3. Spiritual Struggle: How does your family and/or religious/spiritual tradition respond to Spiritual Struggle? How is struggle addressed?
 - i. Where do you experience the most pressure regarding your spirituality or religion? (Family, Church, Peers? Society?)
 - ii. What makes these pressures difficult to handle?
 - iii. How have you resolved any conflicts or tension between your personal beliefs and those of your family or friends? What would you like to do differently in handling tension in the future?
 - iv. What standards/values do you use to guide how you handle these pressures/people?

4. How has your family a source of **Support** in your personal spiritual and religious path? Is there harmony? Where do you agree? What has been the most rewarding part?
 - Spiritual Support: Are you in harmony with the beliefs of your Family, Church, Peers?
 - i. Where do you experience the most support and agreement regarding your spirituality or religion?
 - ii. Where do you turn for advice or guidance?

5. Religious/ Spiritual Tradition: What kinds of questions do you have about your religious/spiritual tradition? What are the things that bug you about your religious tradition? What are the things that you value in your tradition?

6. Spiritual/ Religious Internalization: What role does your religion and spirituality play in your life now?
 - i. What specific religious/spiritual beliefs, if any, do you consider most important for you now? How are those beliefs a source of connection or conflict between you and other family members?
 - ii. What religious/spiritual rituals did you participate in as a child or adolescent? How important were they in your family of origin? Which ones do you still engage in? Which ones have you let go? Why? What new rituals have you adopted? Do you consider them religious or spiritual in nature? Why?
 - iii. Do you notice any patterns of religious rituals/behavior or spiritual beliefs in your Genogram? Have you been able to gain a “bigger picture” of history of these patterns of behavior or belief in your family? How have these affected the relationships in your family tree? Are you currently maintaining or diverting from those patterns?

Didactic Points

- One developmental task of young adulthood is to move towards personal “ownership” of your values and beliefs through differentiating from others and internalizing one’s own religious/ spiritual beliefs and perspective.
- There are many different ways to react to family history including: rejecting, reacting in a “negative dependent manner” (that is, reacting so strongly against your family that you do the exact opposite of everything they do) passively accepting, and intentionally accepting and internalizing family beliefs.
- It is possible to be implicitly reacting to both positive and negative types of spirituality without realizing it.
- Explore how aspects of relationships mapped in the genogram are linked with family history and current struggles.
- Empathize with difficulties and express that “growing pains” are a normal part of spiritual development and that this process does not occur quickly
- As a young adult, you have a choice of which values and beliefs form your compass.
- **Forming your compass takes place by intentionally exposing yourself to resources (people, readings, experiences) that are consistent with your values. This choice is a reality even if it sometimes feels that you can’t let go of some aspects of your spirituality that you would like to.**
- Encourage movement towards internalized, flexible and growing spirituality as you define it (continuum of options: could be embracing family faith or moving away from family’s faith or a slight shift in familial beliefs).

V. SEE (5 minutes) – Based on work by Pargament and Mahoney

Often times when people are in a place where they are feeling pulled in different directions by their family members, friends or own struggles, it can be hard to think about or put words to the values and beliefs that you do hold.

What we would like you to do for next week is to take some time and write down some of the values that you hold and some of the spiritual goals that you are striving towards. We refer to values, strivings, and goals interchangeably as things you hold sacred and would like to accomplish or achieve. These can be things that you have an emotional investment in and may be qualities or ideas that you think are most important in life.

For example, you could be striving to be a loving, accepting person. Or, you could be striving to live more closely in line with YOUR religious tradition. We realize that it might be hard to come up with specific STRIVINGS so we have included some prompts on the SEE activity in your Travel Log, such as being connected to a Higher Power (theistic) or transcendent qualities (non-theistic), religious goals, altruistic endeavors, family relationships, and existential concerns, to name a few. These prompts represent different areas of life that people VALUE TO DIFFERENT DEGREES.

This activity might take some thought so we encourage you to take some time by yourself to think about these prompts and to write down your values or spiritual goals that you would like to strive towards.

VI. Closing Summary: (10 minutes)

There are many different people in life that influence our spirituality and religious beliefs. One task of college is to try to sort out those influences. We hope that today helped you to consider environmental influences, such as family, friends, and your history, that might alter your compass heading and change your spiritual perspective. We just encourage you to look to your internal compass in finding which direction you naturally point to – and remember those other factors that might pull you in different directions. As a young adult, you have choices over which values/beliefs you want to make your own. Remember, it is important to understand where we have been to know where we are going...

- Increase understanding of the role that family values and beliefs, peer influences and other interpersonal experiences play in participants' current belief systems, spiritual struggles and spiritual resources.
- Facilitate participants' examine possible differentiations from others' perspectives and promote continued personal internalization of individual's spiritual/ religious beliefs/ values by encouraging an active, exploratory perspective towards their beliefs.
- Explore challenges and barriers that are in the way of forming a personal, internal spirituality.

VII. Closing Ritual: (5 minutes)

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take home points:

- There are many different people in life that influence our spirituality and religious beliefs
- One task of young adult hood is to try to sort out those influences
- As a young adult, you have choices over which values/beliefs you want to make your own

Resources:

Hodge, D. R. (2001). Spiritual genograms: A generational approach to assessing spirituality. *Families in Society*, 82(1), 35-48.

Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Cole, B., Jewell, T., Magyar, G. M., Tarakeshwar, N. et al. (2005). A higher purpose: The sanctification of strivings in a community sample. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(3), 239-262.

Session 4: Your Spiritual Self

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Paper, colored pencils/ markers, winds & wings worksheet

SESSION GOALS

- To help participants understand the difference between personal values and spiritual strivings
- To facilitate participants' identification of personal values and long-term spiritual strivings
- To visualize image of spiritual self and how this is a reflection of living in line with personal values and spiritual strivings
- To help participants reflect on where they live in accordance with values & strivings and where they fall short
- Discuss forces that pull participants away from and resources that lead them towards living in accordance with values & strivings.
- To help participants identify ways to strengthen the ability to live in accordance with their personal values and spiritual strivings

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

***Timing Notice:** This session has a lot of material to cover, so please especially notice the time and adjust accordingly.*

I. Opening Ritual (5 minutes)

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center...Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let's begin.”

II. Introduction to session (10 minutes)

“Last week we focused on understanding the influences – positive and negative- that have shaped our current spirituality and religious beliefs. As we talked about, these pressures can make it hard to identify and internalize the personal beliefs and values that make up your

spiritual compass. Today, we will think more about your personal beliefs, values, and where you are in the process of creating your spiritual compass. It is important to recognize that spiritual struggles can often raise questions that are difficult to resolve. At the same time, when we are struggling to make sense of one area of our lives, it can be helpful to examine and put into words the values and spiritual goals that you hold sacred and are striving towards. These can influence and guide you in making daily decisions. Today, we want to talk more about where you are in defining the goals that make up your spiritual compass. These goals will be comprised of a combination of the values you are confident in and the ones that you are still work to define. Let's start by looking through the values and strivings that you wrote down in your SEE from last week."

III. Review SEE activity (10 minutes)

Purpose:

To have group members briefly share their values and spiritual goals they are striving towards; prepare for visualization exercise.

"As you know, last week we asked you to complete a form about your personal values and asked you to identify some of your spiritual goals and strivings. Again, these are the things that you have an emotional investment in and are qualities or ideas that you think are most important in life.

Values and spiritual goals help guide our behavior. Some of these values are deeply ingrained in you and are things that you live in accordance with. However, there are some values that you may think are important, but that you don't live consistent with in your daily life. For example, you may believe that going to church on a weekly basis is important because you feel that it will help you become a more peaceful and loving person. However, since coming to school you haven't gone to church because you don't have the time, haven't found a church that you like, have no one to go with you, or simply sleep through it because you are usually out late the night before. This would be an example of not living in line with your values. There may also be times when you do get to church in the morning; this would be an example of when you are living in line with this value and spiritual goal.

Last week we asked you to spend time identifying some personal values and spiritual goals. Let's take a minute now to share just briefly some of the things you identified."

Facilitator Probes:

- What difficulties did you have in putting words to your values and spiritual goals?
- What values and spiritual goals were easy to come up with?
- How did our discussion last week influence your SEE activity?
- What would or do these spiritual strivings look like, practically speaking?
- How do other people know what you value and are striving towards?

IV. The Spiritual Self: Visualization and Drawing of the Spiritual Self (20 min)

Purpose: To help participants visualize image of spiritual self and how this is a reflection of living in line with personal values and spiritual goals.

“What we are going to do now is a visualization exercise to help us clarify the person that we would be if we fully lived out our personal values and spiritual goals. Find a comfortable position in your chair. Please focus on the sound of my voice and listen to the words that I am saying. We are going to start with deep breathing.... everyone breath in and now out.”... *[taking long pauses as needed, the facilitator is to lead straight into the visualization activity below.]*

1. Visualization:

“Take three slow, deep breaths. Inhale slowly, filling your lungs up ... Now exhale, feeling your weight settling into your chair... Inhale again... and exhale, relaxing every muscle in your body. *[take small pause]* Feel the tension fall away. *[take small pause]* Inhale. Exhale. *[take small pause]* Now, let your body breathe naturally, in a slow and comfortable way. Notice the sensations in your body – the air going in and out. *[take small pause]* Notice how your stomach expands slightly as you breathe in, and notice how easily the air is released when you exhale. Continue to breathe, noticing the weight of your body on your chair, noticing the relaxation in your muscles, noticing your breath go in and out. *[take small pause]*

Now, picture in your head a trail in the woods. This can be any sort of trail. It might be rocky; it might be smooth; there might be trees meeting overhead or you might be able to see a long ways ahead of you. *[take small pause]* Look around you. Notice the smells of the trees and the freshness of the breeze and the sounds of the birds. *[take small pause]* Look at the world around you and take a moment to pause on the path. *[take small pause]* You smell the freshness of the earth below your feet and watch the trees rustle in the breeze. You feel alive. *[take small pause]*

As you continue walking, you come upon a ridge and approach it with curiosity. As you near this ridge, you notice a person sitting on the ground under a tree. As you get closer, you realize that this is **you** in 40 years. You have changed over the years...notice what this person looks like, notice what he or she is wearing. *[take small pause]* This person has lived in a way consistent with his or her values, with YOUR values and spiritual goals. Pause for a moment and talk with this older You. *[take 15 second pause]* Look at every detail of this person– look into his or her eyes, listen to the story that they tell. *[take 15 second pause]* Imagine their family, their relationships, their job, where they live. *[take 15 second pause]* What does it feel like to sit across from this person? *[take 15 second pause]* What impact have the values and spiritual goals that you hold now had on this person’s life? *[take 15 second pause]* You may ask for advice. *[take 15 second pause]* You may ask where they found strength to make it through the struggles you are currently facing. *[take 60 second pause]*

When you are ready, take a snapshot of this ‘future you’ in your mind. **Thank him or her (depending on pts’ genders)**. It is time to continue on the path. Now, take a few moments and focus again on your breath. Allow it to move in and out of your lungs freely. *[take small pause]* Allow your thoughts to again re-enter the room. *[take small pause]* Notice your hands and posture, and how your feet are planted on the floor. *[take small pause]* When you are ready, open your eyes.”

2. Writing Activity

Instruct the group to take a few minutes to jot down images, feelings and emotions that they experienced during the exercise. Ask them to write down the specific physical and emotional traits that their older self had. They may also use colors/drawings to convey the visualization

DIDACTICS

Process the experience with the group. Important points to highlight:

- Developing values and living in line with them are ongoing processes that are never “fulfilled” (i.e. you can always be more loving no matter how loving you are)
- Everyone’s image is unique... everyone’s story is unique.
- If someone is having a VERY difficult time imagining their self in this stage of life, and can only see the “bad,” then process how that made him or her feel – it may be indicative of where they are with viewing themselves/ their struggles
- Use the images that people report to identify strengths and barriers in the next section
- Spirituality may or may not be an important part of this process.

V. Wings and Winds: Forces Pulling you Away from and Resources Guiding You Towards Your Spiritual Self (15 min):

Purpose:

Identifying forces (internal and external) that blow us off course from living in accordance with our values and spiritual strivings. Identifying resources (internal or external) that can help navigate us through these pulls and will lead us to a life that is in line with personal values and long term spiritual strivings.

“Now it is not always easy to see or reach that image of yourself as you would ideally like to be. Most of the time, we may fall short, or feel as if we are “missing the mark” on living in-line with our values and spiritual goals. It may be easier at times to see where we want to go in the long-term, but find it difficult to make decisions in the day-to-day that reflect those strivings. So, we will now take some time to identify forces that pull us away from or aligns us with our day to day values and long-term spiritual goals.

The forces that pull at us are similar to a strong gust of wind. At times, the wind can be too strong and we allow it to move us away from our path or intended direction. Other times, we may realize that we have wings and can choose to propel ourselves in a different direction than the wind may want to take us. We recall that wings are stronger than the wind. However, it can be difficult to realize when we are being pulled off course, or we may not understand how we can get back on course. This can be frustrating and confusing and can be part of our spiritual struggles. We all have things that help lead us towards our spiritual goals and those things that get in the way of them. Our job is to identify and talk about these forces. Through intentionally talking about the behaviors and actions that are consistent with our values and spiritual goals, we can more clearly see the path in front of us, the path that will lead us towards becoming the person we are striving to be.”

1. Forces: Wind that Pull Us Away from our Values and Spiritual Goals

Time will be devoted to identifying internal and external forces that pull us away from making choices that are in harmony with our personal values and spiritual strivings. A worksheet for participants to write down these areas is included in the workbook.

“Each one of us has forces that “pull us away” from living a life in line with our values and can eventually pull us farther from being in touch with our Spiritual Selves and who we strive to become.”

Facilitator Prompts:

- When do you find it hardest to make choices consistent with your values?
- What are the “windy” times of your life? When do you get pulled away?
- What do you find that gets in the way?
- What are sources of confusion in your life?

DIDACTICS

The group leader will facilitate a discussion on what pulls them farther from their strivings? What gets in the way of living a life in line with their values? Some points to keep in mind:

- Forces that pull at us can be actions, thoughts, feelings, or people, etc.
- Barriers can be internal or external
- Some internal barriers could be: Fear, Guilt, Materialism, Lust, Jealousy, Laziness, Judgmentalism, Perfectionism, Hedonism (drinking, drugs, sex), Not acknowledging own feelings honestly, Hostility, Rationalizations.
- Some external barriers could be: Media (TV, movies, music) that reflect competition or non-valued living, Peers or people that act in ways not in line with values (e.g., drunkenness, aggression towards others, cheating, stealing, etc...), Busyness or scheduling self so that you have limited resources to intentionally develop spirituality/values

Ask the group:

“How do these things present forces that pull you away from living a life in accordance with your personal values and spiritual goals?”

2. Resources: Wings that Propel Us Through the Wind Towards our Values and Spiritual Goals

Purpose:

After talking about spiritual struggles as the forces that pull us away from values and spiritual strivings, discuss ways that group members can connect with and build on their strengths as a way to propel them through these forces to live a life that reflects their values and **nourishes** their spiritual identity. Participants should identify internal and external resources that can serve as wings to help propel them through the “windy” times. Some techniques to exercise these muscles will be shared (e.g., meditation, spiritual readings, spiritual mentoring, accountability with like minded peers) and adapted for individuals.

Facilitator Prompts:

- When do you find yourself living in line with your values?
- What resources reflect consistency in your spiritual goals?
- How do you use these resources to counteract the forces that pull you away from your strivings?
- What are some moments of success? When have you lived in line with your values and spiritual goals and how did that feel?
- What can you do to strengthen your spiritual muscles to help you make choices to counteract the forces pulling at you?
- How can you celebrate your successes?

DIDACTICS

The group leader will facilitate a discussion on what propels participants through the “windy” forces and how do they re-align their lives towards their spiritual goals? What behaviors do they already do (or want to do) that would reflect living in line with their values? Some important points:

- Sources of strengths can be internal or external
- Some internal sources could be: Discipline, Patience, Gratitude, Perseverance/ Fortitude, Peace, Humility, Trust, Love, Grace
- Some external sources could be: Role models, Friends that share your same religious/spiritual values, Religious/spiritual community, Religious or spiritual writings, Song/ music that bring peace, Worship/ praise, Prayer, Meditation
- How will these resources strengthen your wings in the hard times and help propel you to live a life in-line with your values and long term spiritual goals? How can you (or do you already) use them in the windy times of your life?

VI. SEE Assignment: Stretching and Strengthening Your Wings (15 mins)

“Just as a muscle grows stronger when exercised, so do our ability to make choices that reflect living in line with our personal values and spiritual goals. The more we make choices that are in-line with our values, the “stronger” those muscles become. At the same time, the more often we allow ourselves to be propelled by forces that pull us from our values, the more power they can gain in our lives. The direction of our journey can be a reflection of how we live our day-to-day lives. A series of small choices/ small steps helps guide us away from or closer to our long-term spiritual goals. So, how do we do this? Well, we each have wings that help us navigate what is pulling at us – but in order to do so, we need to strengthen our wing “muscles.” Therefore, we are going to invite you to spend time daily to Stretch and Strengthen your wings. “

“Pick one of the resources from the list we discussed today that you would like to build into your life. Make a plan on when you plan on using this resource. For this week’s SEE, we would like you to work on this resource as a concrete behavior toward the goal of living in accordance with your own values. We will follow up with each of you next week to see how the process of stretching and strengthening your wings through using this resource has influenced you.”

Facilitator, take the time to write down what each person decides to incorporate. Encourage each participant to create a realistic plan for following through with this

assignment. This SEE assignment should be revisited throughout the remaining sessions to help participants reach their goals.

“We are also asking that, in the coming week, you think about what the sacred means to you and bring in an object that captures this. Next week you’ll have an opportunity to share your object and how it symbolizes the sacred.”

VII. Closing Ritual

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take Home Points:

- Each of us has a spiritual part of our being that we can connect with. We may gain a better sense of direction on our winding road by spending time connecting with our “Spiritual Self.”
- We can use the image of who we spiritually strive to become as a way to make decisions towards – or away from – that person in our every day lives.
- It is important to identify forces that pull at us so that we can be better equipped to make a choice as to if or how they affect us. Remember, these forces can be internal or external, such as actions, thoughts, feelings, or people.
- It is also important to know your strengths so that you can continue to build on them. Strengths can be internal or external, such as peace, forgiveness, loving role models, etc. It will be helpful to use your resources in hard times and as a way to help propel you to live a life in-line with your values and long term spiritual strivings.

Note to Facilitators:

You will have to send an email to all participants this week to remind them to bring in their sacred object.

Resources:

Morgan, M. (1991). *Mutant Message Down Under*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, New York.

Weimer, L. M. (1999). *Extraordinary guidance: How to connect with your spiritual guides.*

Three Rivers Press.

Roman, S. & Packer, D. (1993). *Opening to channel: How to connect with your guide.* HJ

Kramer.

Cornell, A. W. (1996). *The power of focusing: A practical guide to emotional self-healing.*

Oakland: New Harbinger.

Sanford, A. (1983). *The healing light.* Ballantine Books.

Hay, L. (1999). *You can heal your life.* Hay House.

Session 5 Sizing up your Sacred

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Handout of conceptualizations of the Sacred
- Instrumental music
- Slideshow of different images of the Sacred (should include photos of nature, art, children, well-worn faces, laughter, animals; images that capture and evoke the broadening feeling)
- Handout for Loving Kindness meditation (for SEE activity at end of session).

SESSION GOALS

- To help participants explore and articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the Sacred'
- To place the evolution of participants' perception of the Divine within a developmental framework, that has roots in their spiritual heritage (reference to session 4) but which they must define and articulate for themselves
- To facilitate the integration of participants' spiritual struggle and above
- To educate participants about the diversity of experiences of the Sacred

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

I. Opening ritual (5 minutes)

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let's begin.”

II. Discussion of SEE (10 min) – Strengthening Wings (10 min)

Facilitators refer to list made from prior session with the resource-strengthening plan of each participant and follow-up on their experiences using the following prompts:

- How did it go for you?

- How did it change your days/week knowing that you were making this part of your efforts this week?
- If positive: Was this something that was new for you? Is this something you think you might continue?
- If difficult/negative: What were the barriers for you? How do you feel about sharing these barriers with the group. Is this something you want to keep working toward?

III. Session Symbol: North Star

Rationale: When traveling one can always use the North Star for orientation. Although it may not always be visible, it is always there.

IV. Discussion of SEE – Sacred Object

At the end of session 4, participants were asked to think about the sacred and identify an object that captures their idea (or part of their idea) of the sacred. To process the SEE activity, participants should share what they brought in and describe the ways in which it captures their image of the sacred or divine.

As participants are describing their objects, facilitators should write adjectives that capture each of these on a dry erase board or easel. These will be used in the didactics session.

SESSION NOTE: The experiential exercise and didactics sections below were based on the assumption that participants came in to WR with a conceptualization of God/Divine/Sacred that the session would help to clarify. Our experience with the WR in 2008 led us to believe that college-aged participants are at a developmental stage in their conceptualization of God between rejecting ideas of what God is NOT and coming to a comfortable definition for themselves. We recommend that Sections V, VI, and VII below be modified to assist participants clarify:

1. Aspects of their spiritual heritage that they:
 - Accept and want to adopt as their own;
 - Reject outright
 - Want to modify somewhat (and how)
3. Envision who they want to be as spiritual people, including characteristics of a God with whom they desire to be associated

Exercises for this aspect of the session could include participants listing words that evoke in them expansive feelings of love, acceptance, forgiveness and imagining a transcendent that embodies these and other qualities. To build on this, participants could then sketch out what a life built around this conceptualization would look like – what would they do differently than they do now, how might they feel differently, might they associate with different people, etc. The wind & wings exercise could be tied in specifically to these aspects of themselves that they want to strengthen and move toward.

V. Experiential Exercise (20-25 min)

Purpose: To identify distressing thoughts and feelings related to the divine

“We would like you to spend the next several minutes identifying and writing down your most troubling questions relating to the Sacred or your idea of a higher power that have arisen during your spiritual struggle. For example, maybe you’re wondering why a family member or friend got sick or passed away...or maybe you’re questioning why an important relationship had to end...”

Ask group members to share these questions; ask them to discuss what it felt like to have these questions

Facilitator Probes:

- What questions do you have regarding the Sacred (meaning, purpose, divine)?
- What questions do you have about or for a Higher Power?
- What is it like to have these questions?

The second portion of this exercise is to ask participants to think about and write down the different *feelings* that accompany these most troubling questions.

“Now, take a couple minutes to identify and write down your *most troubling feelings* relating to the Sacred *or to God or higher power* that have arisen during your spiritual struggle.”

Again, ask group members to share their feelings towards the Sacred/Higher Power:

Facilitator Probes:

- What feelings do you have towards the Sacred/Higher Power?
- What is it like to have these feelings?

Ask participants to keep these questions and feelings for later in the session.

VI. Didactics: How big is your Sacred? (45 min)

Purposes: To identify different conceptualizations of the Sacred and to discuss ways that these can be beneficial or harmful/limiting; To offer opportunities for members to broaden their conceptualizations of the Sacred

J.B. Phillips (1986), in Your God is Too Small, outlines 13 ways in which people have reactive, immature, or inadequate conceptualizations of God. Below are three conceptualizations that seem the most relevant to college-aged students.

1. What is your Sacred?

Purpose: To identify participants’ notion of the Sacred.

“During this session we’re going to focus on how we think about the divine, the sacred. Some of us refer to this as God – what other words do you use?”

[If not previously discussed, allow participants to talk about their conceptualization of the Divine]

“Along these lines, we would like to share with you an excerpt of a book by Sera Beak regarding the variety of ways people experience the sacred.” [Refer participants to the summary in their workbooks and read the summary below. The workbook includes the entire passage, below is an excerpt consisting of the first two paragraphs. If you want to you could review the entire passage. Also, you could alternatively read this excerpt *after* reviewing the specific examples from *Your God is Too Small*.]

- “I [don’t care] what or who represents the divine to you, but [I do care] very much about how your view of the divine affects your inner and outer life. Does your view of the divine allow you to explore and be creative and remain open to diverse people and beliefs? Does it give you inner strength and peace and promote love and deep belly laughs and the desire to help others? Or does your view of the divine make you feel fearful, guilty, small, narcissistic, or overly critical? You’d be surprised at how other traditions or trendy movements – basically others’ Gods – have influenced or even created your ideas, sometimes to the point of blocking your own personal experience and preventing you from exploring further.

Maybe you choose not to believe in any sort of God or divine force whatsoever, and that’s just fine. But then, what God are you not believing in? A Judeo-Christian God? A New Age God? A Buddhist nothing? Your mother’s God? (Some of the most colorful ideas of what God is or isn’t come from my atheist friends.) What if you just respectfully kissed all of those external notions of divinity good-bye and set out to find out who you really are, and by doing this, lo and behold, you found out who God has always been? In other words, what if you decided to know God from the inside out? What would She (or He) look like? What would She feel like? Who would she actually be?”

“Keep this summary in mind as we move forward. We will have a chance to talk about it later. We all think about the divine in different ways, depending on our background, experiences, education, and other personal factors. Now we have three more specific examples of common conceptualizations of the Sacred that we are going to read. While you are listening to these descriptions, pay attention to the way you think, feel, and experience the divine. Feel free to take notes of thoughts that occur to you while we are reading.”

- **Resident Policeman:** This representation of the Sacred is the small voice that “makes us feel guilty and unhappy before, during, or after wrong-doing”. Certainly there is nothing wrong with having a conscience or with having a moral compass to guide our actions and thoughts. When people see the

Sacred as the resident policeman, however, the Sacred is equated to conscience. There are several ways in which this can be dangerous. Conscience can be so easily perverted or morbidly developed in the sensitive person, and so easily ignored and silenced by the insensitive, that it makes a very unsatisfactory sense of Sacred. For example a person brought up in accordance with stringent dietary practices (e.g. kosher, vegetarianism, days of abstinence) may suffer with a ‘bad conscience’ when as an adolescent or adult s/he eats a previously restricted food. As another example, a sportsman who has been trained that it is wrong to shoot a sitting bird will feel a strong sense of guilt and wrongdoing if he does so, even if accidentally. This same person will not feel this pang of conscience in shooting a bird flying 40 yards away (whereas a vehement animal rights person may). Our sense of conscience can be trained, affected by propaganda and by upbringing, and therefore cannot be equivalent to the Sacred.

- **Absolute Perfection:** This perspective takes the position that if the Sacred is perfection, then the best way to follow/ serve /worship the Sacred is to be a perfectionist in faith. This rigidity of belief can become tyrannical, requiring adherence to only the highest standards, and result in extreme guilt, intolerance for aspects of the self (and others) that do not conform to these “100% standards”. Even if the Sacred is perfect, this is not to say that we are only worthy of interest and support when we are perfect.
 - Note that this view of the sacred does not depend on belief in a God or in following a specific religious or spiritual path. Sometimes we invest so much value in a path that we expect we must follow that path perfectly.
- **Sacred-in-a-Box:** When people have this conceptualization of the Sacred, their religion or spirituality is compartmentalized and separate from the rest of their lives. They may say they go to church on Sundays, or that they think of the Sacred when they are in a church, synagogue or temple, but not very much at other times or in other situations. Being faithful is thought of as being a ‘good churchman/woman’, and living this type of religiosity is following a prescribed set of rules and regulations. Outsiders can easily be identified and are tolerated only with a sense of superiority and separateness. In this view, others’ expectations and approval, and adhering to clear cut principles are important in validating one’s own sense of being ‘of the flock’.
 - This can be true of any belief system, any belief system, not just a theistic belief system, can become compartmentalized and rigid in this way...

After describing three of the most common conceptualizations of the Sacred, leaders can refer participants to the workbook which contains a brief sketch of these three types from Phillips (1987). Let participants think about these descriptions as well as their conceptualizations of the Divine. While they are doing this, the facilitators should match the words/adjectives from the SEE activity discussion with Phillip’s categories. Use this information in the next session to illustrate, explain, and concretize these categories in terms of the members’ real life experience of the Sacred.

Discuss participants' reactions and ideas about the divine. The discussion can be flexible.

Possible Facilitator Probes:

- Would anyone be willing to share what in these summaries resonated most with your conceptualization of the Sacred? Do any of the categorizations fit with your own experiences of the sacred?

2. Benefits and limitations of current concepts of the Sacred

Purpose: To identify how current ideas of the Sacred are burdens and/or are beneficial.

“Take a few moments to think about the ways that your conceptualization of the Sacred has helped you along your spiritual journey thus far. For example, maybe the way you see the Sacred gives you peace and assurance in difficult times and provides you with unconditional love. Your view of what is sacred may also serve as a source of strength to you when you are uncertain. Then, think about how your conceptualization may have hindered, restricted, or limited you on your spiritual journey until now. For example, maybe the way you see the Sacred has left you feeling judged or abandoned for something that you did.”

After 2-3 minutes, facilitators ask members to share their thoughts.

Possible Facilitator Probes:

- What ways have your ideas of the Sacred helped you along your journey?
- What ways have they hindered or burdened your journey?

3. Broadening concepts of the Sacred

Purpose: To (attempt to) broaden participants' concept of the Sacred by encompassing attributes such as beauty, acceptance, and love.

Facilitators will suggest that there may be more ways to conceptualize the Sacred. Phillips (1987, pp 121-122) provides a translation of the beatitudes that could be read as an opener for this exercise:

“Now we are going to introduce some additional ways that people think about and experience the Sacred. Take a few moments to get comfortable and reflect on what you are hearing.

[Optional introduction to the beatitudes] The following reading comes out of the Christian tradition. However, its message is one about the different ways people experience the sacred. These messages can be applied to the lives of people who do not come from this faith.

Happy are those who realize their spiritual poverty; they have already entered the kingdom of Reality.

Happy are they who bear their share of the world's pain; in the long run they will know more happiness than those who avoid it.

Happy are those who accept life and their own limitation; they will find more in life than anybody.

Happy are those who long to be truly "good"; they will fully realize their ambition.

Happy are those who are ready to make allowances and to forgive; they will know the love of God.

Happy are those who are real in their thoughts and feelings; in the end they will see the ultimate Reality, God.

Happy are those who will help others to live together; they will be known to be doing God's work."

Start playing gentle instrumental music; dim the lights; project a series/slideshow of images. Ask participants to notice any images, concepts, and experiences of the Divine that come up for them when they are watching the slideshow.

Following the slideshow, ask participants to discuss what these images evoked:

Possible facilitator probes:

- How do these images reflect your beliefs/image of the Sacred?
- Is it possible for you to see the Sacred in these ways?
- If so, which ones, and how?
- If not:
 - What are your thoughts about this?
 - What makes this difficult?
 - What would it feel like to think of the Sacred in these ways?
 - How would your thinking about the Sacred have to change in order to accommodate multiple images of the Sacred? What feelings arise as you contemplate this?

The leaders here should approach this exercise as gently planting seeds of expanded conceptualizations of the Sacred rather than 'telling' participants the 'right' way to think about the Sacred.

VII. Revisiting Part III

Purpose: To explore how thoughts about the Sacred have changed or stayed the same during the session.

"At the beginning of our meeting today, we asked you to write down the questions and feelings that you have towards the Divine. We would like you to re-read what you wrote down."

After a few moments, ask participants how their questions and/or feelings about the Sacred have changed during the session.

Potential Facilitator Probes:

- What do you think of your questions/feelings now? What has changed/stayed the same?
- Have other feelings emerged?

VIII. SEE

The handout for the Loving Kindness meditation is provided in the participant workbook. Please review and explain the exercise. Participants will be asked to try this meditation *at least* one time; if not 2-3 times before the next session.

Also, remind participants to continue to practice their wings exercises.

IX. Closing Ritual

“Before we close today, we would like to revisit the commitments we have all made to sharing this time together each week. As we continue this group, our personal lives also continue and can sometimes complicate our group involvement. Maintaining commitment to the group despite the complications in our personal lives enriches this experience for all of us. Let’s take a moment to recommit ourselves to this journey.” Ask participants to restate their commitment. If there are any concerns about coming to weekly sessions, address them at this time.

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

Facilitator reads the following:

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take-Home Messages:

- We all have different conceptualizations of the Sacred.
- The way(s) we think about the Sacred affects our experience/spiritual struggle.
- It may be helpful in dealing with your spiritual struggle to more closely examine your ideas, beliefs, and feelings about the Sacred.
- It is possible to broaden your conceptualization of the Sacred in ways that facilitate your personal and spiritual growth.

Resources

Beak, S. (2006) *The Red Book: A Deliciously Unorthodox Approach to Igniting your Divine Spark*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Mindfulness In Plain English by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

This book gives very clear instruction about a style of meditation that is particularly accessible to beginners.

Meditation for Beginners by Jack Kornfield - Audio CD

Four complete meditation exercises teach you how to work with breathing, posture, attention, and difficult emotions - to create tranquility and clarity in your everyday life.

Phillips, J.B. (1986). *Your God is Too Small*. Touchstone: New York, NY.

Session 6 Forgiveness: A Bridge to Wholeness

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster

SESSION GOALS

- Educate participants about forgiveness
- Help group members work toward letting go of anger, bitterness, resentment
- Facilitate group members moving toward greater peace in their spiritual lives

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

SESSION NOTE: This session contains a great deal of didactic points (short portions of which can be read aloud to participants). Please be cautious not to allow the session to turn into a *lecture* on forgiveness, which can seem dry and disengaging. Presenting too much information in the form of reading may feel elementary to participants. To avoid lecturing, encourage *group discussion* where appropriate. Remember to use the information you gather from group discussions to gauge the extent to which you review the many didactic points included below. *It is okay not to get through all didactic points.*

I. Opening ritual (5 minutes)

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let’s begin.”

II. Review of SEE

Purpose: Discuss Loving Kindness Meditation

“We assigned the Loving Kindness Meditation in last week’s session. Who was able to try this during the past week?”

Get feedback from participants on their experience of this exercise.

“Did anyone experience a shift or change in their feelings/body while doing this meditation?”

Get feedback from participants.

“Sometimes people feel shifts in the state of their body or mind during or as a result of these meditations. For example, I notice that my breathing is calmer, deeper, and longer as I spend more time with it. Also, I’ve noticed for some people that emotions sometimes break through, and they cry, feel sad, or are especially peaceful and happy. Whether you have these experiences or not is not important. There is no need to force anything in particular. What is important is that you stay with yourself, your body, while you are doing this meditation.”

Check in with participants about their wings exercises.

III. Session Symbol: Bridge

Purpose: Explain rationale for session symbol

“When we are wronged (either by ourselves or someone else) we often experience anger, bitterness and resentment, which are all separated from peace and contentment. Forgiveness of others and of ourselves provides the opportunity to *bridge* this separation, reconnecting us with inner peace and the chance to move beyond our pain.”

IV. Forgiveness: What it is and what it is not

(adapted from Rye’s forgiveness intervention and from The Art of Forgiveness by Lewis B. Smedes, 1996)

“Today we are going to talk about forgiveness. For some people, when they hear the word *forgiveness*, they immediately think of it in religious terms. For instance, some people think about how they might want forgiveness for sins. I want to clarify from the beginning of our meeting today that we’re *not* talking about forgiveness in religious terms—we mean forgiveness in a much *broader sense*. Forgiveness is a very valuable and relevant tool for *all* people, not just those who consider themselves religious or spiritual. So, keep this in mind as we move forward, and feel free to ask questions later in the session if something is unclear about this.

“There is quite a bit of material we will cover, but you don’t have to take notes because this information is summarized on a resource page in your manual. On that page, there is information that we will cover today, such as what forgiveness is and is not.

“For some of you, your spiritual struggle may include some unresolved feelings of shame, bitterness, anger, resentment, or hardness around your heart. These feelings may be a result of something someone did to you. They may also be feelings you have toward yourself because of things you did, or perhaps things that you didn’t do. We would like to take a few minutes now for you to think about how *forgiveness relates to your own spiritual struggle*. Keep in mind that forgiving in and of itself can be a spiritual struggle. If, after some thinking

and reflection, you're still having a hard time identifying how forgiveness relates to your spiritual struggle, it's okay to choose another area of your life that you can currently relate forgiveness to. But, I'd encourage you—if at all possible—to try to relate forgiveness to your spiritual struggle. If you're feeling confused as to how forgiveness relates to your spiritual struggle or another aspect of your life, feel free to ask for some help from me or [co-facilitator]. I invite you, over the next few minutes, to jot down your thoughts in your workbook—this may help clarify for you how forgiveness relates to your struggle.

Allow about 1-3 minutes of silence for participants to think quietly and jot down their thoughts.

If participants are having difficulty relating forgiveness to their struggle, please provide some guidance in the form of the following prompts:

- Think about the parts of your spiritual struggle around which you have experienced pain or hurt. Perhaps this pain relates to people in your life, yourself, or God.
- Consider whether there is any room for forgiveness in these relationships—forgiveness of others, of yourself, or God.
- What role might forgiveness serve in your situation?

****Facilitators should check in with participants to make sure they each were able to identify how forgiveness relates to their personal spiritual struggle (or other aspect of their personal life). Emphasize the importance of relating forgiveness to a “live” issue in their life—not one from when they were a young child, for instance. This is very important! If participants are unable to link forgiveness to their current, personal lives, the session will feel largely irrelevant to them. The more clearly each participant can identify and articulate the spiritual struggle-forgiveness relationship, the more likely they will be able to connect their struggle with the difficult emotional experiences that can be healed through the process of forgiveness. Facilitators should take ample time to make sure participants are making these connections.***

Facilitate a discussion on the following points:

- 1) *Encourage participants to share their **reactions** to writing about forgiveness as it relates to their spiritual struggles.*
 - a. *Suggested prompt for participants:*
 - i. What were your reactions while writing about how forgiveness relates to your spiritual struggle?
- 2) *Invite discussion relating to **thoughts** and **feelings** about how forgiveness fits into their spiritual struggle.*
 - a. *Suggested prompts:*
 - i. How does forgiveness relate to your spiritual struggle?
 - ii. What are your thoughts about forgiveness?
- 3) *Prompt participants to consider where they are on their own **journey to forgiveness**.*
 - a. *Suggested prompts:*
 - i. Where are you on the journey to forgiveness?
 - ii. What scares you about forgiving?
 - iii. What would it feel like for you to forgive right now?

*****Be very flexible during this portion of the session. During this time, your focus as a facilitator should be encouraging group discussion. Please use the information you gather from the above discussion to gauge the extent to which you review the many didactic points that follow. Keep in mind that there is a great deal of information included in this session, and it is okay not to get through all didactic points. This should not feel like a lecture to the group.***

The following didactic points should be incorporated into the above discussion, as appropriate:

- We forgive people (not organizations, governments, institutions) to whom we ascribe blame for wronging us. This can be ourselves or others.
- We forgive people for what they do, not for who they are:
 - We forgive people for things they have done to us, ways in which they have wronged us, trespassed against us, etc. We do not have to forgive people for being bad people – we can like them, accept them, leave them, sometimes weep over them, and can try to help them improve on their characters – but we don’t forgive them for this. (pp 17-18)
- We forgive people who have wounded us seriously.
 - “Forgiving is for the truly serious wounds of life, for the inner pain and boiling resentment brought by the deeper cuts that we cannot ignore when they happen and cannot forget after they have been sliced.” (pp 18-19)
- We forgive people for what they do to wrong us when they wound us.
 - There is a difference between being pained and being wronged. People annoy us, cause us costly inconveniences, but there is a difference between someone who is a pain in the neck versus someone who betrays us.
- Forgiveness and the Divine:
 - “Sometimes we may experience feelings of anger toward the Divine, the idea of forgiving the Divine might occur to us. Depending on your belief system, this may be a completely new thought to you, may sound somewhat absurd, or may not apply. The main point we want to make is that it is *okay* to be angry with the Divine -- because Divinity/the Sacred can handle it.

“I’d like to read something from Lewis Smedes book on forgiveness – it’s in the resource section of your travel guide.

“Forgiving is not meant for every pain people cause us. Never has been, anymore than Prozac was invented to cure the Monday morning blahs. Forgiving is for wounds that stab at our souls, for wrongs that we cannot put up with, ever, from anyone. When we forgive people for things that do not need forgiving we dilute the power, spoil the beauty, and interrupt the healing of forgiveness.

“When we forgive, it may create a sacredness and peacefulness within ourselves. Each time we perform the minor miracle of forgiving, we are acting in a divine/sacred manner.”

“Remember, forgiveness is a process that takes time. There may be moments when negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reappear again. That’s okay. It doesn’t mean that you’ve lost everything you’ve been working toward. A mountain climber might temporarily lose his/her footing and slide down to the ledge below. This is different than falling down the whole mountain. If you undertake the forgiveness process in earnest, you are likely to experience struggles along the path. But if you slip, you will not lose everything you’ve gained. It just means there is more work to be done.”

“As you undertake your journey, remember that you are not alone. Many people before you have undertaken the journey toward forgiveness. Furthermore, there are people facing similar struggles you can draw strength from, such as the members of this group. You may also find it helpful to draw upon your spiritual resources.”

“While the journey may be challenging, the view at the top promises to be spectacular. don’t forget to take time to enjoy the view every step of the way.”

“May your journey be a peaceful one...”

It may (or may not) be helpful for the facilitator to recap the discussion using the following points to close this discussion:

- Forgiveness IS:
 - a response toward an offender that involves letting go of negative feelings, thoughts, and behavior
 - something that happens inside the person who does it (not the transgressor)
 - We need to have borne the wound ourselves;
 - We need to know we have been wronged;
 - We need to have an inner push to forgive.
 -
- Forgiveness is a *PROCESS* in which we
 - Rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us;
 - Surrender our right to get even;
 - Revise our feelings toward the person we forgive.
 -
- Forgiveness is NOT:
 - Forgetting what happened or inviting our transgressor to hurt us again;
 - Condoning or excusing what was done to us;
 - Surrendering the right to justice for our transgressor;
 - Tolerating the wrong that was done to us;
 - Restoring us to where we were prior to the wrong: “A wise judge may let mercy temper justice but may not let mercy undo it”;
 - Reconciling or reunion, which is sometimes:
 - Impossible

- Harmful
- Such a threat that it prevents a wounded person from healing: by turning forgiveness into an obligation to reunite with a transgressor, one can be robbed of a chance to heal the wounds that still scar us;
- Taking the edge off of the evil that was done to us;
- Inviting the person who hurt us to hurt us again.

V. Why is it hard to forgive?

Purpose: Discuss barriers to forgiveness

“Forgiveness is certainly easier said than done. Forgiving someone is a difficult thing to do, and takes hard work and a great deal of patience. There are many obstacles that get in the way of forgiving yourself or someone else who has wronged you. When you think of your own spiritual struggle (or another situation where forgiveness is relevant), what are some of things that are holding you back from forgiving? What is making it hard for you to forgive?”

Allow group members to spend several minutes sharing their own obstacles to forgiveness.

Then suggest some other reasons why it is hard to forgive (assuming the follow reasons were not yet mentioned).

Ask how these other reasons relate to their decisions to forgive/not to forgive.

“Other reasons why it might be hard to forgive include:

- Forgiveness = recognizing and facing the pain:
 - Forgiveness involves looking at the pain of being wronged in the face, acknowledging how deeply you’ve been hurt. There is no forgiveness without first recognizing the presence of the hurt, which can be an extremely painful process. Recognizing the degree to which we have been hurt causes us to feel a great deal of shame. You can’t forgive yourself or someone else, meanwhile pretend that the pain isn’t there.
- Forgiveness is more for you, not the transgressor:
 - Forgiving may cause you to wonder if you are letting the person who wronged you “off the hook.” You might be tempted to think that, upon being forgiven, this person no longer has to take responsibility for his/her actions. It’s important to keep in mind that, although it seems that the person benefiting most from forgiveness is the wrong-doer, forgiveness most benefits the person offering the forgiveness. Forgiveness allows you to move past the hurt, making room for peace and wholeness in your life.
- We don’t need to understand the reason before forgiving:
 - We might feel that, in order to forgive, we must understand the reasons why a person has wronged us. But the fact of the matter is that we may never understand why someone acted in a way that was so hurtful toward us. Forgiveness surrenders the need to understand the wrong-doer’s motivation for his/her actions.
- Forgiveness means letting go of desire to get even:

- You and I live in a culture that emphasizes getting even with those who wrong us. It goes against our culture to surrender the need to get revenge. Because of the way our culture has shaped us, it is our first inclination to want to get even. In order to forgive we must actively work against this cultural value of wanting to get even.
- Forgiveness means letting go of getting revenge:
 - When we are wronged, we may feel we are on a moral high ground and that we have the right to take revenge on the person who caused us wrong. Forgiveness involves us stepping off this moral high ground, giving up control of our need to seek revenge.
- Forgiveness is a personal choice:
 - Forgiveness is a choice. We might be tempted to think that forgiveness would be easier if it was an obligation or somehow required of us. But, the reality is that forgiveness is a choice and is offered only when you decide to offer it. Similarly, forgiveness becomes very difficult when you don't feel ready to forgive.
- The transgressor does not have to apologize (or know about) forgiveness
 - We may have an especially difficult time forgiving a person who never says he/she is sorry for what happened. You *can* forgive someone even if they don't apologize for what they did. And the person may not ever find out that you've forgiven him/her. Again, forgiveness is mostly for you—it allows *you* to let go of the hurt and pain and move on with your life. Sometimes the person who benefits the most from forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving (Smedes, 1996).
- Understanding what forgiveness is makes forgiving easier:
 - Forgiveness may be especially difficult for people who have a misconception of what it means to forgive. It is important to have a clear understanding of what forgiveness is and is not. For example, people may not be willing/able to forgive if they believe it means that they must continue having a relationship with the people that wronged them.

VI. Are there advantages to forgiving? (Smedes, 1996)

Purpose: To identify why forgiveness is important

“Although forgiving involves a lot of hard work, the benefits make the process worthwhile. What do you think are the benefits to forgiveness?”

Allow a brief minute for group members to share several advantages to forgiving.

“We came up with several benefits of forgiveness we'd like to share with the group”

- **First, forgiveness opens the door to a better future.**
 - If we chain ourselves to pain from our past, we are denying ourselves the chance of a fuller, more whole life. Forgiveness is the only thing that enables us to move beyond our pain. Forgiveness is the only way that we are able to reconnect with inner peace and move on in life.
- **By forgiving we break the cycle of pain.**

- When we are unfairly wronged, we may want revenge. Many people tend to think that the only way to get life back to the way it was is to cause as much pain to the offender as he/she caused us. But getting even is not in our best interests in the end. Revenge only perpetuates the cycle of inflicting pain on one another. Getting even is impossible because the victim and victimizer never weigh pain on the same scale. One person is always behind in inflicting pain on the other. If we insist on getting revenge, we must be ready to exchange pain for pain forever. This only creates more unfairness than the initial unfairness we experienced when we were first wronged.
- **Forgiving allows us the opportunity to stop the unfairness we may be causing ourselves.**
 - Although what happened when we were wronged is unfair, it is also unfair to stay stuck in our pain. When we choose not to let the pain of the past die, we are allowing ourselves to be trapped in the bondage of anger, bitterness and resentment. Sometimes the person who benefits from forgiveness the most is the person who does the forgiving.
- **It is through forgiving that we express our true and best nature.**
 - Although contrary to what we might initially think, it is natural for humans to forgive. In his book “The Art of Forgiving,” Lewis Smedes writes,

“If it is human to be free for the future, unshackled to pasts we cannot change, then forgiving is natural. If it is human to create new paths out of old ruts, forgiving is natural. If it is human to see beyond what was to what can be, forgiving is natural. If it is human to want to heal our unfair pain and make things fairer than they are, forgiving is natural. Forgiving is contrary to human nature only if it is truly human to follow a blind animal instinct for prolonging unfairness and the pain that goes with it.”

“Smedes suggests that one example of this is Nelson Mandela. It was human nature that Mandela decided that reconciliation, and not vengeance, was the way out of the unfairness of apartheid in South Africa. When he made the choice to surrender his right to get even, he moved out of the old unfairness and into a new and nobler society.”

VII. Loving Kindness Meditation

To close the forgiveness session, lead group members in a meditation on loving-kindness take from “A Path with Heart” by Jack Kornfield (1993; pp. 19-21).

“To close our time together today, I would like for us to practice the loving-kindness meditation again. Although you may have practiced it this past week, we thought it would an appropriate closing to today’s topic of forgiveness—wishing loving-kindness to ourselves and others, including those who may have hurt us.”

“As an introduction to our time of practice, I want to share some of the author’s (Jack Kornfield) thoughts with you. He says that the quality of loving-kindness is the fertile soil out

of which an integrated spiritual life can grow. With a loving heart as the background, all that we attempt, all that we encounter, will open and flow more easily. While loving-kindness can arise naturally in us in many circumstances, it can also be cultivated.”

“This meditation is a 2,500-year-old practice that uses repeated phrases, images, and feelings to evoke loving-kindness and friendliness toward oneself and others. You can experiment with this practice to see if it is useful for you. It is best to begin by repeating it over and over for fifteen or twenty minutes once or twice daily in a quiet place for several months. At first this meditation may feel mechanical or awkward or even bring up its opposite, feelings of irritation and anger. If this happens, it is especially important to be patient and kind to yourself, allowing whatever arises to be received in a spirit of friendliness and kind affection. In its own time, even in the face of inner difficulties, loving-kindness will develop.”

“Sit in a comfortable fashion. Let your body relax and be at rest. As best you can, let your mind be quiet, letting go of plans and preoccupations. Then begin to recite inwardly the following phrases directed to yourself. Begin with yourself because without loving yourself it is almost impossible to love others.

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.

“You may also wish to use this image: picture yourself as a young and beloved child, or sense yourself as you are now, held in a heart of loving-kindness. Let the feelings arise with the words. Adjust the words and images so that you find the exact phrases that best open your heart of kindness. Repeat the phrases again and again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind.”

“When you feel ready, you can gradually expand the focus of your loving-kindness to include others. After yourself, choose a benefactor, someone in your life who has truly cared for you. Picture them and carefully recite the same phrases, *May he/she be filled with loving-kindness*, and so forth. When loving-kindness for your benefactor has developed, begin to include other people you love in the meditation, picturing them and reciting the same phrases, evoking a sense of loving-kindness for them.”

“After this you can gradually begin to include others: friends, community members, neighbors, people everywhere, animals, the whole earth, and all beings. Then you can even experiment with including the most difficult people in your life, wishing that they, too, be filled with loving-kindness and peace.”

Include several minutes of silence for group members to practice the loving-kindness meditation. Suggested time period is ~2 minutes. After allowing this time of silence, close the silence by saying the following:

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

*May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease.
May I be happy.*

“When you are ready, come back to this room and open your eyes.”

“Try practicing this loving-kindness meditation for 15 to 20 minutes at a time this coming week. You’ll notice that you will be able to include many being in your meditation, moving from yourself, to a benefactor and loved ones, to all beings everywhere.”

“And you can learn to practice it anywhere. You can use this meditation in traffic jams, in buses and airplanes, in doctors’ waiting rooms, and in a thousand other circumstances. As you silently practice this loving-kindness meditation among people, you will immediately feel a wonderful connection with them—the power of loving-kindness. It will calm your life and keep you connected to your heart.”

Also, remind participants to continue to practice their wings exercises.

VIII. Closing ritual

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take-Home Messages:

- It is important to understand what forgiveness is and what it isn’t.
- Forgiveness is a gift to ourselves, not to the person who hurt us.
- Forgiveness is not an obligation; it is a choice.
- Forgiveness is a **PROCESS** that takes time, deliberation, and effort. Do not expect yourself to move past the pain of being wronged instantaneously after you make the decision to forgive. Remember to be patient with yourself. If you “slip up” and your

feelings of bitterness and anger return, trust that you have not lost all the progress you have made. This is just a part of the journey toward forgiveness.

- As you work toward forgiveness, remember that **you are not alone**. There are many people who have gone before you on this difficult road. Take courage, knowing that you can draw strength from others who have journeyed (or *are journeying*) on the road to forgiveness.
- Although working toward forgiveness is a very difficult, the pay offs make all the hard work worthwhile. The inner peace that comes with forgiveness is priceless and may not be attainable any other way.

Resources

“A meditation on Loving-Kindness” found in: Kornfield, J. (1993). *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*. Bantam Books: New York. (pp. 19-21)

“Meditation on Forgiveness” found in: Kornfield, J. (1993). *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*. Bantam Books: New York. (pp. 284-286)

McCullough, M., Pargament, K.I., Thoreson, C. (2007) *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, & Practice*, NY: Guilford Press.

McCullough, M., Sandage, S.J., & Worthington, E.L. (1997). *To forgive is human: how to put your past in the past*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Smedes, Lewis, B. (1996). *The Art of Forgiving*. NY: Ballantine Books.

Worthington, E.L. (2001). *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Session 7 Acceptance

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- Calming music (to be played during activity VII- Rite of Release)
- Bowl for activity VII- Rite of Release
- Several small paper circles (approximately 3-5 inches in diameter, cut from construction paper) that participants can write on for the Rite of Surrender exercise

SESSION GOALS

- To help participants distinguish the controllable from the uncontrollable in their spiritual struggles.
- To help group members explore feelings of loss of control
- To have participants practice surrendering the uncontrollable to the Divine to increase acceptance

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

***SESSION NOTE*:** This session contains a great deal of didactic points (short portions of which can be read aloud to participants). Please be cautious not to allow the session to turn into a *lecture* on acceptance, which can seem dry and disengaging. Presenting too much information in the form of reading may feel elementary to participants. To avoid lecturing, encourage *group discussion* where appropriate. Remember to use the information you gather from group discussions to gauge the extent to which you review the many didactic points included below. *It is okay not to get through all didactic points.*

I. Opening ritual

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let’s begin.”

II. Opening discussion

Purpose: Discuss Loving Kindness Meditation

“Last week we closed with the loving-kindness meditation. Did anyone take the opportunity to practice the meditation this past week? What was your experience like? In what ways has it caused you to look at yourself differently? In what ways has it opened a new way of looking at forgiveness and those who may have wronged you?”

Allow several minutes for group members to share their experiences of practicing the loving-kindness meditation during the past week. If no one practiced during the past week, simply share with the group that this is an exercise that they may find helpful in the future.

Check in with participants about their wings exercises.

III. Session Symbol: Backpack

Purpose: Explain rationale for session symbol

“Like a backpack, spiritual struggles can get very heavy to carry around. Many times, we are carrying things that we need mixed in with things that we don’t really need. To help lighten our load, we can take breaks along the journey and discard unnecessary items along the way. We can surrender these things, or let go of them, the things that we leave behind, to the Divine. It is our decision what we want to carry along with us and what we want to let go as we continue on our journey.”

IV. Circles of Control (15 minutes)

(based on an exercise used by Baugh, 1988, and Cole, 1999)

Purpose: Differentiate between problems that we can personally control from those that are out of our control; identify the difficulty trying to solve problems that are out of our control.

“We’re now going to move onto to an exercise called “Circles of Control.”

“For this exercise, we’d like you to think about problems or factors in your life that you would like to change, particularly those related to your spiritual struggle. Next, think about aspects of your spiritual struggle that are within your personal control, and those that are not. Take a minute to list aspects of your spiritual struggle that are under your control in the Controllables circle (in your travel guide), and aspects that are not in your control in the Uncontrollables circle.”

“For example, in your Controllables circle, you might write down “worship”- because it is in your control to decide if and where you worship. Another example would be “prayer/activities” because it is in your control whether you engage in spiritual activities such as prayer or meditation. In your Uncontrollable circle you might write down “sick family member”, because you can’t control whether a loved one recovers from a sickness.”

Allow several minutes for group members to list aspects of their spiritual struggle on the Controllables and Uncontrollables circles. .

“As you feel comfortable, you can share with the group what is in each of your circles.”

Facilitator Prompts:

What is on your Controllable circle?

What is on your Uncontrollable circle?

As appropriate, gently challenge things that may be in the wrong circle.

“Now that we have shared what the controllable and uncontrollable aspects of our spiritual struggles are, let’s take a minute to think about what it’s like when we attempt to control the things we listed in our Uncontrollables circles”

Facilitator Prompts:

- What are the effects of trying to control situations that are out of your control?
- How do you feel when you try to control something on the Uncontrollable circle?
- How do you behave when you try to control something on the Uncontrollable circle?
(prompt as necessary: does attempting to control the uncontrollable result in increased anxiety, stress, muscle tension, increased heart rate, etc.?)

V. Acceptance Vignettes (30 min)

Purpose: Identify and articulate ways in which spiritual struggles have affected participants’ feeling of being in control of their life circumstances, and identify pathways toward acceptance

(introduce and read the story of Joni)

“Now, we will read a story about someone’s experience of a spiritual struggle. While I read this to you, think about what the spiritual struggle is that this person is experiencing. Also, try to pay attention to the controllable and uncontrollable aspects of her situation.”

On My Feet Dancing: The Story of Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni was a teenager who had many dreams for her life. One day she and her sister went out for a swim, and Joni dove off a raft. Her head crashed into a large rock at the bottom of the water, and she was unable to move. Her sister swam her to shore and called an ambulance. Doctors at the hospital who stuck her with pins to see what she could feel found that she could feel only her shoulders.

After awakening from surgery, Joni found herself strapped into a bed with a small opening for her head. She couldn’t move. Nurses and family had to take care of all of her needs. After some weeks passed, another surgery was performed on Joni’s spinal cord, with the hopes that she would be able to regain some movement in her body. The surgery was not successful and Joni learned that she would be a quadriplegic. As the news began to sink in, Joni was devastated. She noted “And suddenly I found myself all alone, just a bare, immobile body between two sheets. My hobbies and possessions were meaningless to me.”

Several days later Joni saw her reflection for the first time in a mirror. After looking at herself, she began to scream. The reflection in the mirror was horrifying, with bloodshot sunken eyes, skin that was yellow, and teeth turned black. Her head was shaved with metal clamps on both sides and she had lost nearly 45 pounds. She yelled out, “Oh, God, how can you do this to me!” At this point, Joni wanted to die, but there was nothing that she could even do for herself. She learned that she was even “too helpless to die on her own.”

During her recovery in the hospital, Joni thought of all of the things she wouldn't be able to do in her life. Dreams that were so important to her--being able to play tennis, make love, get married, make her contribution to the world--all gone. Some of Joni's visitors would talk to her about God and read her verses from the bible. At first, she responded very bitterly. She doubted that she would ever be able to live her life to the fullest.

Over three difficult years Joni started to see that it may be possible for her to have a "fullness of life.", her outlook began to change. The first step she took was to accept her condition and its limitations. She began to see that it was pointless to waste energy complaining about her physical condition. She realized that she needed to "accept herself as a quadriplegic and search for new ways of coping."

This process was very painful. Joni had to fight the frequent temptations to close her eyes and fantasize what it might be like if she were well again. Joni found that "normal" people appeared to be uncomfortable around her. Sometimes people would lean over her wheelchair and speak loudly to her in simple words, as if she couldn't understand.

At first, Joni found it impossible to reconcile her condition with her belief in a loving God. It seemed that all God's gifts, the good things she had enjoyed as an active teenager, had been stolen from her. For what reason? What did she have left?

One night, when she was in a tremendous amount of pain, one of Joni's closest friends, Cindy, was beside her bed, searching desperately for some way to encourage her. Finally, she clumsily blurted out, "Joni, you aren't the only one. Jesus knows how you feel—why, he was paralyzed too." Joni glared at her. "What? What are you talking about?" Cindy continued, "It's true. Remember, he was nailed to a cross. His back was raw from beatings, and he must have yearned for a way to move or change positions, or shift his weight. But he couldn't. He was paralyzed by the nails."

The thought intrigued Joni and, for a moment, it took her mind off her own pain. It had never occurred to her that God might have felt the same piercing sensations that now racked her body. The realization was profoundly comforting. Joni noted: "God became incredibly close to me. I felt myself being transformed by the persistent love of my friends and family. And eventually I began to understand that, yes, God too loved me.

Few of us have the luxury—it took me forever to think of it as that—to come to ground zero with God. Before the accident, my questions had always been, "How will God fit into my situation? How will he affect my dating life? My career plans? The things I enjoy?" Many of those options were now gone. I had only a helpless body, and God. Maybe that's the kind of state that mystics strive for. I got mine unwillingly.

I had no other identity but God, and gradually he became enough. I became overwhelmed with the phenomenal possibility of a personal God, the same God who created the universe, living in my life. Perhaps he could make me attractive and worthwhile. I knew I could not do it without him.

The first few months, even years, I was obsessed with the question of what God was trying to teach me. Secretly, I probably hoped that by figuring out God's ideas, I could learn my lesson

and then he'd heal me. "Is that what God wants?" I wondered. My focus changed from demanding an explanation from God to humbly depending on him. Okay, I am paralyzed. It's terrible. I don't like it. But can God still use me, paralyzed? Can I, paralyzed, still worship God and love him? He began to teach me that I could.

Maybe God's gift to me is dependence. I will never reach a place of self-sufficiency that crowds God out. I am aware of his grace every moment. My need for help is obvious every day when I wake up, flat on my back, waiting for someone to come dress me. I can't even comb my hair or blow my nose!

But I do have friends who care. I have the beauty of the scenery I paint. I can even support myself financially—the dream of every disabled person. Peace is internal, and God has lavished me with that peace.

There's one more thing. I have hope for the future now. The Bible speaks of our bodies being "glorified" in heaven. In high school that always seemed a hazy, foreign concept to me. But now I realize that I will be healed. I haven't been cheated out of being a complete person—I'm just going through a forty- or fifty-year delay, and God stays with me even through that. I now know the meaning of "glorified." It's the time, after my death here, when I'll be on my feet dancing."

After a great amount of time reflecting and working to make positive changes, Joni was able to successfully create new dreams for herself. She began to gain some functioning in her arms and learned not only to maneuver her motorized wheelchair, but also to drive a car. She became a public speaker and has written several books. She also began producing artwork by holding a brush in her mouth. She got married and also directs a ministry called "Joni and Friends," where she works on projects to benefit the disabled.

Joni had to learn to accept that she would never be physically healed. Although this may be true, Joni was able to gain spiritual healing. She replaced old dreams with new ones. Doing this was not easy for Joni. She struggled, but was able to succeed. Not only has she developed a sense of hope for herself, but she has also made it her goal to also bring hope to others.

Lead the group in a discussion.

Facilitator Prompts:

- What is your reaction to this vignette?
- What feelings arose as you heard this story?
- Do any of those feelings resonate with your situation?
- What aspects of the vignette could the person control?
- What aspects were uncontrollable?
- How did the person react to controllable vs. uncontrollable aspects of their situation? Did this change as the story went on? What do you imagine that was like for this person? Has anything like this happened to you?
- How did the individual come to terms with her spiritual struggle?
- How are your spiritual struggles similar and different from the vignette?

- Is there anything from this vignette you might be able to apply to your own spiritual struggle?
- What might be helpful for you in the midst of your spiritual struggle?

“Now that we have heard and discussed an example of how someone found acceptance in her spiritual struggle, we would like you to take a few moments to reflect on your situation. In particular, focus on what is within your personal control and what is not. When you are ready, without looking at the circles you completed earlier, complete your Circles of Control once again.”

“How have your circles changed since you heard the vignettes?”

Facilitator Prompts:

How are you feeling about the things that are on either side of your circle?

Did you add anything new in either of the circles?

Did you switch anything over to the other circle?

“Notice that there are still some things in the uncontrollable circle; these things may always remain in that circle. That’s OK—the goal here is to reach a point where you can tolerate some struggle and some ambiguity, these are all parts of our spiritual journeys.”

“We may never reach the point of “spiritual perfection”; maybe there will always be things that we cannot control, maybe we will always experience spiritual doubts, questions, or struggles. However, maybe this is OK.”

“Perhaps encountering spiritual roadblocks, challenges, doubts, and struggles along our spiritual paths are a part of our spiritual lives. It is important to keep in mind that it is okay to settle for less than spiritual perfection.”

VI. Divine Light Exercise (10 minutes)

(adapted from a meditation by Cole, 1999)

Purpose: To help identify aspects of their struggle they need to let go of/surrender; to practice letting go of these aspects through meditation; and to normalize the appearance of spiritual obstacles along their journey

“Now, we want to try a meditation activity that will help you think about letting go of the uncontrollable aspects of your struggle”

“Close your eyes and begin to focus your attention to your breathing. Let your body become more and more relaxed as I count to five—1...2...3...4...5.

“As you continue breathing deeply and slowly, visualize the Divine as a beautiful light surrounding you. With each breath that you take notice that you are breathing in this beautiful Sacred Light. This light fills your lungs and as you exhale you feel the light of the Divine permeating your entire body, and flowing out your fingers and toes. Breathe in...filling your lungs with light, and breath out, feeling the light flowing through your body and out your fingers and toes...Continue focusing on your breathing for a few more moments allowing your

body to relax completely, surrendering to the Divine. Now that you are completely relaxed continue to visualize a Divine presence within you. And when you are ready, ask the Divine “What do I most need to let go of?”

[Pause]

“When you are ready to let go of these aspects into the Divine, visualize this aspect of your struggle becoming lighter and floating out of your hands. As you let go, feel yourself bathed in the circle of light, feeling acceptance, peace, and protection. Remember that the circle symbolizes wholeness, completion, harmony, and oneness with /the Sacred/Divine. Allow yourself to feel the healing power of this light as you breathe it in with each breath. With each inhale, visualize compassion, understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness pouring into your body, your mind, and your spirit. It is this abundance that upholds you in times of trouble, and equips you with the strength you need to take your next step of faith. Allow yourself to accept the sacred gift of extravagant mercy that gives you courage to accept that struggles, questions, and doubts are a part of life’s spiritual journey. Gently remind yourself that encountering spiritual obstacles along the way is okay and that there is no need to be spiritually “perfect.” Through the gift of mercy, you have everything that you need to embrace your doubts, questions and struggles, and continue moving forward with them and through them. You may experience this deep sense of peace whenever you wish, by closing your eyes and visualizing the “sacred light” entering your body. But for now, prepare to bring your attention back to this room as I count backwards from five—5...4...3...2...1. When you are ready open your eyes feeling comfortable and relaxed.”

Allow a minute or so for group members to share their experiences of the Divine Light exercise.

Facilitator Prompts:

- What was that exercise like?
- What was your experience of this exercise?
- What were your thoughts during the meditation?
- How did you feel?

Suggest to participants that they use this as a ‘wing’ during the next week. If they choose, they can journal about their experience of this exercise throughout the week.

VII. The Rite of Release

Music: Play calming instrumental music

Purpose: To visually let go of the uncontrollable aspects of their spiritual struggles.

As a physical representation of the spiritual and emotional act of letting go of spiritual struggles, participants will be given the opportunity to place uncontrollable circles in a box in the middle of the circle in which the group is sitting which the leaders will explain as letting these things go. An alternative to using a box is to have participants place uncontrollable circles in a basin of water in the center of the circle, signifying letting go of their spiritual struggle.

“As a way to close our time together today, we will spend several minutes in silence. During this time, you can select items from your uncontrollable circle that you want to release or let go of. Write as many of your uncontrollables on these smaller circles as you like and then place them in the bowl in the middle of the circle as a physical representation of the spiritual and emotional act of releasing your spiritual struggle.”

Spend a few minutes processing this activity.

Facilitator Prompts:

What was this exercise like?

What feelings and thoughts came up for you as you let go of your circles?

What was difficult about it? What was easy?

VIII. SEE

Over the next week, we ask that you continue doing a ‘wing’ activity, which could include the loving kindness meditation or the divine light meditation that we did today. You can use the space in your travel journal to share any reactions or thoughts about this experience.

IX. Closing Ritual

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

Facilitator reads the following:

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take-home points:

- There are some things in life, including spiritual struggles that we encounter, that we may never have control over.
- However, some spiritual ambiguity and struggle can be tolerated. It is all a part of our spiritual journeys. We may never reach the point of “spiritual perfection,” where we can control everything around us and never again experience spiritual doubts, questions or struggles. And this is okay!

- Remember that, with help from the Divine, you possess all the grace you need to embrace your doubts, questions and struggles, and continue moving forward with them and through them.

Resources:

Gilbert, E. (2006). *Eat, pray, love: one woman's search for everything across Italy, India and Indonesia*. New York: Viking.

Tada, J.E. (2001). *Joni*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI.

Session 8 Meaning Making

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- A cross stitched pattern (for II- Parable of Cross Stitch Exercise)
- Relaxing music (V – 2-way lament)

SESSION GOALS

- Consider that spiritual struggles may have meaning
- Discuss different ways struggles can be understood
- Explore the ways in which spiritual struggles can be sources of spiritual, personal, interpersonal growth
- Provide time and space for participants to think about and express meaning of their struggles

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

***SESSION NOTE*:** This session contains a great deal of didactic points (short portions of which can be read aloud to participants). Please be cautious not to allow the session to turn into a *lecture* on meaning making, which can seem dry and disengaging. Presenting too much information in the form of reading may feel elementary to participants. To avoid lecturing, encourage *group discussion* where appropriate. Remember to use the information you gather from group discussions to gauge the extent to which you review the many didactic points included below. *It is okay not to get through all didactic points.*

I. Opening Ritual

“During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together.”

“As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let’s begin.”

II. Review SEE Activity

“We asked you to continue with your wings activity this past week. How did that go for everybody? What did you choose to do? What reactions did you have to it?”

III. Parable of the Cross-stitch and Discussion of Meaning Making (15 minutes)

Purpose: Explain rationale for session symbol and introduce session goals.

Show the back of a cross-stitch pattern.

“Is anyone familiar with cross-stitching? I brought in a sample of some cross-stitching to show you. Here you can see a piece of material with a bunch of threads in it. The threads are a chaotic mess of colored string and knots that does not look nice.

Then turn the cross-stitch around and show the picture that was stitched.

“The other side this project was confusing and ambiguous. It didn’t seem like there was any rhyme or reason to it and it didn’t look pretty. However, from another angle, from this side of the cross-stitch, there is a clearer picture. There is a reason why the threads were put the way they were. There is meaning to the pattern.

Sometimes the same principle applies to our spiritual struggles. On one hand, the spiritual struggles seem confusing, they don’t make sense, and they’re not pretty. But, it is possible that if you look at it from another angle, you might find that there is a reason for things being the way they are.

Discuss as a group how they can/do find meaning in the midst of their confusing struggle using the following facilitator prompts:

- Do you think that even though the spiritual struggles you are facing seem confusing/nonsensical on one hand, there may also be reasons that you are experiencing them?
- What are ways in which you see your spiritual struggles producing something good in your life?
- What are ways that you find meaning in your spiritual struggles?

IV. Examples of Spiritual Struggles (20 minutes)

Purpose: Identify how other individuals have found meaning in their struggle; open the possibility to finding meaning in personal struggle- as appropriate.

“There are three stories in your travel guide. I’d like three of you to read one of them, I’ll read the last one, and then we’ll talk about these stories.”

After group members have read three stories, a facilitator continues with the following story:

A long time ago an old man lived in a village. He had an extremely beautiful horse. All the people in the villages across the land had heard of this horse. It was a magnificent animal with a long, shining mane. Its muscles rippled with sheen and glory every time it moved. The Great Chief heard of this horse and sent a messenger to the old man asking if he could purchase it. The warrior messenger raced to the old man's teepee and jumped down from his horse. Where his moccasins landed, the dust swirled in all directions. “Old man, I am here on behalf of the Great Chief. He sends his greetings and asks that he may buy your horse.” The old man was

silent. He was a man of gentle dignity and quiet manners. Finally he said, "Please give my regards to the Great Chief, and please thank him for his kind offer to buy my horse. However, this horse is my friend. We are companions. I know his soul as I feel he knows mine. I cannot sell my friend."

The messenger rode away. Two weeks later the old man's horse disappeared. When the villagers heard that the horse was missing they all gathered around the old man. "Oh, old man, this is very bad fortune! You could have sold your horse to the Great Chief. Now you have no horse and no payment for the horse. What bad fortune!" The old man looked at each villager with kind, soft eyes and said, "It is not bad fortune. It is not good fortune. We don't know the whole story. Just say the horse ran away." The villagers went away shaking their heads because they knew that this was very bad fortune.

A month later the old man's horse returned, followed by twenty other magnificent horses. Each one was spirited and bursting with vitality and exuberance. The villagers ran forward to the old man. "Oh, old man. You were right - it was not bad fortune that your horse ran away. It was good fortune.

Now not only do you have your horse back, but you have twenty more beautiful horses. This is good fortune!" The old man slowly shook his head and with utmost compassion said, "It is not good. It is not bad. We don't know the whole story. Just say that the horse returned." The people went away shaking their heads. They knew that it was very, very good fortune to have so many beautiful horses.

The old man had one son who started to break in the horses. Every day the son would wake early to continue his work. One morning the old man came to watch his son. The young man had a natural grace as he swung on to the bare back of a wild Pinto. The horse bucked violently to the left and twisted to the right. Suddenly with a ferocious kick of his hind legs the horse tossed the son high in the air. The old man's son landed in a crumpled heap in the dust. Both of his legs were broken. All the inhabitants of the village gathered with great moaning and commiserating. "Oh, no! Oh, no! Old man, you are right. Your horse returning to you was very bad fortune. Now your only son has both legs broken and is crippled. Who is going to take care of you in your old age? This is very bad fortune." The old man pulled himself upright and with respect said, "It is not bad fortune. It is not good fortune. Just say my son broke his legs. We don't know the whole story." The villagers walked away, shaking their heads. They knew it was very bad fortune for the old man.

A great war broke out across the land and the Great Chief called all the young men of the villages to battle. It was a bad war and the villagers knew they would never see their sons again. Once more they gathered around the old man. "Old man, you are right. It is not bad fortune that your son broke his legs because, even though he is crippled, you have your son. We will never see our sons again. It was good fortune for you." And once again the old man said, "It is not good fortune. It is not bad fortune. We don't know the whole story."

"For each hardship or struggle, a person can ask whether it is helpful or harmful. It is not always clear or obvious whether an event or experience is helpful or harmful. And it is possible that an experience may be both."

Refer back to the excerpts that were read out loud and explore as a group how the spiritual struggles expressed by the religious exemplars may have had meaning (e.g., leading towards growth, strengthening, life lessons, develop certain attributes, conserving/transforming/deepening/broadening spirituality).

Facilitator Prompts:

- What were your initial thoughts and feelings when you read these examples of spiritual struggles?
- Were you surprised by any of these readings?
- Based on these readings and what you know or think about these religious individuals,
 - What are different ways in which these individuals did or could have made meaning based on these spiritual struggles?
 - In what ways, if any, could these struggles of the religious exemplars have been of benefit to them?
 - How may these struggles have changed them?
 - How could these individuals have been different if they had not experienced these spiritual struggles?
 - Does acknowledging these spiritual struggles make you think differently of these religious individuals?

V. Group Lament (15 min)

Purpose: To capture common themes from individual spiritual struggles and to express them in a novel way.

“A lament is an expression of grief, sorrow, or other hard emotions. Often, laments are written to express grief, sorrow, regret, disappointment, frustration, etc. to God, but there are also laments that are not aimed at God. There are many examples of laments from the Bible and other sources. For example, Psalms (a book in the bible) includes many laments in which the psalmist, or author, cries out to God in his time of need. These laments often start by the author crying out, sometimes to God, and then describing his or her distress. We also hear many examples of lament in the lyrics of popular songs. In your resource book you will find some examples of laments.”

“Here is an Example of a Lament from Psalm 13” (*read aloud*)

Psalm 13

(For the director of music. A psalm of David.)

1 How long, O LORD ? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

3 Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

4 my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
5 But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
6 I will sing to the LORD,

“Last week we read the story of Joni who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident. Here is an example of a lament from her autobiography” [by J.Tada (2001) (pp. 80-82)]

“She weeps bitterly at night,
the tears flow always on her cheeks;
no one of all her lovers now seeks to bring her comfort.”

Oh, God, how true.

And I can't even wipe my own tears away!

“For the Lord has afflicted her
because of the greatness of her transgressions.”

Yes! I broke His moral commandments.

Now punishment.

“Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
which is being dealt out to me,
which the Lord has inflicted
in the day of His fiery anger.”

No one else is being punished like this.

Why did God do this to me?

“From on high he sent fire into my bones,
and it has subdued them.”

Diving accident...

Paralysis...

“He has given me over to frustration
and faintness all day long.”

Rage...

Weakness and fear.

“He has made my strength to fail.
The Lord has delivered me into hands
which I am unable to withstand.”

In bed for a year,

completely dependent

on orderlies and nurses.

“My eyes are exhausted with weeping;
my emotions are deeply disturbed;
my grief is poured out on the earth.”

How much more can I take?

I'm at the end of my rope!

“Surely He has turned away from me;
He has turned His hand against me all the day.”

Why, God...

why?

why?

“He has made my skin and my flesh turn old:

He has crushed my bones.”

*The bedsores, stitches...
bone surgery...*

“He has piled up against me, and surrounded me
with bitterness and distress.”

*And I’m still surrounded by canvas,
catheter tubes,
and urine bags.*

“He has caused me to dwell in dark places,
as the dead of former times.”

*I’m trapped in this gloomy hospital
Where we sit like zombies waiting to die.*

“He has built a wall around me, I cannot go forth;
He has weighted me down with chains.”

*I’m trapped!
Stryker, straps,
and Crutchfield tongs...*

“Even when I cry aloud and call for help,
He shuts out my prayer.”

and God doesn’t care.

“I have forgotten what enjoyment is.”

He doesn’t even care.

“We would like to write a lament together, as a group. This lament is supposed to capture the range of emotions and thoughts that were expressed by everyone here. The individual lines of the lament do not have to agree, or be written to address God. The goal is that when we are finished, everyone in the group will be able to find themselves in the group lament...What are some of the feelings and thoughts that you would like to express? What are some of your questions for God?”

Facilitators should allow the group to come up with a summary of emotions and thoughts. As they are doing this, write these on the white board – allow group members to write it in their travel log (adjusting it for themselves if they want).

If the group gets stuck, then the facilitators should share what emotions and thoughts they have heard over the course of the group.

When the lament has been completed, the facilitator reads it out loud to the group.

VI. Two-way Lament (15 minutes)

Purpose: write a response to their lament from God’s perspective or if this is difficult, from the perspective of their future selves.

For this next exercise I would like you to turn to the two-way lament page in your travel guide and place a pen in this spot – then put the travel guide aside. One way to gain a different perspective about struggles is to think about how God would respond to your lament. You may have difficulty imagining an interaction with God. If so, another perspective is to think about how your future self would respond to your lament. In session

4 you imagined having a conversation with your future self on a trail in the woods. If that was helpful to you, then you can again imagine talking to yourself who is 40 years older. Take a few moments to think about this as I guide your thoughts with some questions.

Start by getting comfortable in your chair. You can close your eyes if you would like. Take three slow, deep breaths. Inhale slowly, filling your lungs up ... Now exhale, feeling your weight settling into your chair... Inhale again... and exhale, relaxing every muscle in your body. Feel the tension fall away. Inhale; Exhale. Now, let your body breathe naturally, in a slow and comfortable way. Imagine that you are in a space filled with light. It is a pleasant experience – you feel safe and comfortable. Slowly you become aware that there is a presence before you. As you approach it, you know in your heart that this is God, or your future self...Imagine whichever image comes most easily to your mind. Whatever you picture is okay. Even if you can't see clearly, just continue with this image. Continue walking closer to the presence of God or your future self. When you get nearby you pause. You are filled with peace as you face this presence. As you stand there, you feel that there is something in your pocket. You reach for it and pull it out, seeing that it is a piece of paper that has your lament written on it. As you look at the lament, you are filled again with the difficult questions and deep emotions that it expresses. You look up from the lament to the presence and know that God or your future self has a complete understanding of what is written in your lament. The presence has a full grasp of what is written in your lament. He or she knows and understands...

How would the presence see you as you poured out your heart in this lament? [pause for 30 sec.]

How would the presence feel towards you as he heard and saw you cry out about your spiritual struggle? [pause for 30 sec.]

How would the presence react to hearing your lament? [pause for 30 sec.]

The response of God or your future self may take on different forms: this may be words, sentences, images etc.

How would the presence respond to you about your spiritual struggle? [pause for 1 min.]

What might the presence want you to know about your spiritual struggle? [pause for 1 min.]

What might the presence want you to take from this struggle? [pause for 1 min.]

Now, take a few moments and focus again on your breath. Allow it to move in and out of your lungs freely. Allow your thoughts to again re-enter the room. When you are ready, open your eyes. Pick up your travel guide and write down what you learned from your encounter with God or your future self. What were the messages that they communicated to you? What words, images, feelings were there?

Allow participants to share what this experience was like. Facilitators lead a discussion about what participants wrote during this exercise, incorporating the following points:

VII. DIDACTICS:

- Meaning making in response to spiritual struggles can take various forms, including:
 - Changing our experiences to fit into our conceptualization of what we believe about the sacred. This may involve changes in:
 - The way we view negative life events, e.g. reframing them as being the source of a spiritual good
 - Our expectations for life
 - How we define ourselves (e.g., development of attributes, personal growth, life lessons, etc.)
 - The goals we wish to pursue
 - The ways we try to reach our goals
 - How we interact in our relationships (e.g. more compassion, more patience)
 - Changing our understanding of the sacred in response to our experiences. This may involve changes in:
 - our assumptions about the world (e.g. the assumption that “life is fair” or “everything always works out for the best”)
 - How we see God or our spirituality (e.g. our spirituality becomes less rigid and is in harmony with realities that used to challenge it; our God becomes “bigger”)
 - Our relationship with God (e.g., more intimate, more honest, deeper, stronger, etc.)
- Other important points about meaning making:
 - Meaning making doesn't occur immediately. Sometimes it takes TIME for the meaning making process to take shape.
 - Participants should not be discouraged about feeling a lack of meaning in the midst of their struggle, e.g. Mother Teresa experienced period of many years in which she felt disconnected from God, but even though she did not experience the meaning in this struggle, she decided to move forward with her service activities
 - Meaning making doesn't occur automatically.
 - Sometimes it takes a different PERSPECTIVE to get meaning, just as the cross-stitch pattern makes sense from one side but not the other. For example, Christ feeling abandoned on the cross can, from a different perspective, be seen as God bringing about salvation for mankind
- Meaning making doesn't take away the pain of a spiritual struggle.
 - Both sides of the cross-stitch are there at the same time – finding meaning doesn't negate the difficult emotions or confusion: spiritual struggle and meaning can exist simultaneously
 - It is important to acknowledge that loss can be a part of meaning making. For example, individuals may have to give up hopes/philosophies (e.g., in the realization that life isn't fair, some dreams might not be realized, will have to experience pain in life, etc.)
 - It is important to acknowledge and experience both the negative and positive sides of meaning making

- For some spiritual struggles, we may never find answers or meaning

VIII. SEE: Writing about Current Experience of Spiritual Struggle (3 Mins):

“Your first SEE assignment was to write about your spiritual struggles. Now, we would like to ask you to do that again from your current perspective. Please DO NOT look back on what you wrote for the first SEE assignment. Rather, take a fresh opportunity to write about your current experience of your spiritual struggle. Reflect on the following topics:

- Describe your spiritual struggle in as much detail as possible
- Explain how your spiritual struggle has been unfolding
- Describe the feelings and emotions associated with your spiritual struggle
- Describe any conflict or tension that you are experiencing within your personal religious beliefs.
- Describe any conflict or strain that you feel in your personal relationship with the divine. For example, describe times when you feel angry at or abandoned by the divine.
- Describe any strains in your relationships with friends and family caused by spirituality.
- Describe or draw the images, colors, and/or pictures that appear when reflecting on your spiritual struggles

While we don't want you to look back at what you wrote for the first homework assignment, we would like you to bring it with you next time.

Also, remind participants to continue to practice their wings exercises.

IX. Closing Thought

“As we close today, I want to share a quote with you that summarize what we have talked about together:

"Suppose you are taking a hike in the mountains. You know how mountain trails are constructed, especially if the slopes are steep. They wind back and forth; often they have "switchbacks," which make you literally walk back and forth, and sometimes a trail will even drop back to below a level you had reached earlier. If we asked you at a number of points on such a trail to evaluate how well you are accomplishing your goal of reaching the mountaintop, we would hear a different story every time. If you were in switchback mode, you would probably tell me that things weren't going well, that you were never going to reach the top. If you were in a stretch of open territory where you could see the mountaintop and the path leading up to it, you would probably tell me things were going very well. Now imagine that we are across the valley with binoculars, looking at people hiking on this trail. If we were asked how they were doing, we would have a positive progress report every time. We would be able to see that the overall direction of the trail, not what it looks like at a given moment, is the key to progress. We would see that following this ... winding trail is exactly what leads to the top."

(taken from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) by Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson,

2003)

X. Closing Ritual (5 min)

“We’ve come to the end of our time today. We’d like each of us to take the stone back from the center and hold it in your hands. I’m going to read a concluding thought and then you will be free to go. To begin, sit back in your chair and just focus on the feeling of the stone in your hand.”

Facilitators and group members pick up stone from center

“As our time comes to a close today, take a moment to reflect on the experiences of our time together. Allow the feelings of today to fill you. See if you can allow yourself to trust in this process and be grateful for the time that you have devoted to this journey today. We hope you’ll be open to awareness, peace, and hope as you enter back into your lives. As you go through the coming week, see if you can allow yourself to continue to take time to slow down and be open to the forks and switchbacks in your paths. Now, gently and with intention, place your stone under your chair. You will leave your stones under your chair in this room, and with it, we ask you to leave the heaviness of your spiritual struggle, knowing it will be here next week to be picked back up within the safety of our circle.”

Take home points:

- Sometimes meaning can be found in spiritual struggles
 - spiritual struggles can lead to personal and spiritual growth
 - spiritual struggles can create positive changes in the way you think about and treat yourself, others, and God.
- Often:
 - it may take TIME to get meaning
 - it may take a different PERSPECTIVE to get meaning
- However,
 - sometimes you may never see any meaning in your spiritual struggles
 - Understanding the meaning in your spiritual struggles does not take away all of the confusion and unpleasant feelings of the struggles

Session 9 Conclusion

SUPPLIES

- Materials for opening & closing rituals (rocks with names, rocks for under chairs, tray/bowl, CD player, Watershed song)
- Ground Rule Poster
- A physical item that represents each session's memento (IV- Review of Sessions)
- A "sacred circle" e.g. a small table in the center of the room where the mementos from each session can be placed (IV- Review of Sessions)
- A candelabra (VI- Fire Ceremony)
- Candles - one per group member (VI- Fire Ceremony)
- Matches or lighter (VI- Fire Ceremony)

SESSION GOALS

- Reflect on changes that have occurred over the past 8 weeks
- Reflect on what group members have gained/learned from the experience
- Prepare group members to continue their journey with the new tools they have gained
- Say good-bye

Music: Watershed by Indigo Girls

I. Opening Ritual (5 minutes)

"During the past week, you have spent some time focusing on an aspect of your spiritual struggle. The stone you have picked up symbolizes your own personal struggle. As part of our time here, each of you have agreed to share your struggle and encourage others in the group to do the same. By placing our stones in the center of our circle, we create a visible reminder that we are in this struggle together, for this time. Please place your stone in the center... Together, we open our sacred circle by sharing our intentions for our time together."

"As we each come to this circle, may we find the courage to share openly the burdens we carry. May we find the grace to explore our struggles and the strength to expand our understanding of the sacred. Let our words encourage, uplift and challenge each other in ways that move us towards deeper wisdom and insight into our struggles, our journeys and ourselves. Let's begin."

II. Reviewing the Journey (15 minutes)

Purpose: Reflect on personal journey through the group.

Have participants turn to their SEE from session 2 (description of their SS). Ask participants to read their original writing. Then, give participants the opportunity to reflect on the changes that they have seen in their SS from that first writing assignment to the current SEE.

Facilitating probes:

- How has your perception of the struggle changed?
- What have you gained/lost from your struggle?
- How has your spirituality changed over the past couple of months?

- What insights have you gained?
- What has been most difficult? Exciting?
- How have your relationships with yourself, others, God/Divine changed?

During the discussion, bring out the below didactic points:

Didactics

- Spiritual Struggles are a dynamic process rather than a static state.
- Spiritual Struggles take time to resolve. Just because the group is ending does not mean that group members will be resolving their spiritual struggles.
- It's important to remember what you've learned these past couple of months and to carry that with you into the future

III. Review of Sessions (15 minutes)

Purpose: Review the material covered in the sessions.

“As our journey together is coming to an end, let's take some time to review where we've been.”

Review and discuss the main points from each session by reviewing the session symbols one at a time. Begin by revealing a physical symbol from the session (placing it on the sacred circle in the center of the group). Then, ask participants what they learned/took with them from that session. Weave the summaries below to augment the participants' discussion.

Session 1: Introduction to WR: Travel Log

- In session 1 we discussed that a spiritual journey has smooth and rough spots and that both of these are natural aspects to any individual's spiritual life. We gave you your travel log at this first session to record some of the aspects of your personal journey.

Session 2: Sharing Spiritual Struggles: Picture of a Boulder Blocking a Path

- In session 2 we saw that spiritual struggles are a natural and normal part of life
- There are different types of spiritual struggles and they can be associated with a variety of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- Your spiritual struggle can be like a boulder that blocks your path. You can choose to climb over the boulder, walk around it, sit down and give up, or turn around and walk another direction. Some choices may lead you farther away from your spirituality. Other choices may lead you towards growth and spiritual richness. So, it is very important how you choose to deal with your spiritual struggle.

Session 3: Understanding Your Spiritual Heritage: Compass

- There are a lot of people in your life who may have influenced where you are now on your spiritual path. They are like a compass that has helped to direct your way. They include your family, peers and others you've encountered in life. We discussed these important influences in session 3.
- None of us would be who we are without those influences. But it's also important that we form our own personal perspective and beliefs rather than just accept those of others. This involves some active exploration and facing what barriers might be in the way of forming our own beliefs.

Session 4: Your Spiritual Self: feathers

- In session 4 you had the chance to examine your personal values and spiritual strivings
- By acknowledging the forces that pull you away from, and resources that lead you towards living in accordance with your values & strivings, you will be able to live more in accordance with your personal values and spiritual strivings. The feather represents the wings that you can use bring you closer to living how you want to live. Exercising those wings is hard work but when you get them flapping they propel you to where you want to be. And the more you use them, the stronger they will become.

Session 5: Sizing up your Sacred: The North Star

- We all have different conceptualizations of the Sacred.
- The way(s) we think about the Sacred affects our experience/spiritual struggle.
- It may be helpful in dealing with your spiritual struggle to more closely examine your ideas, beliefs, and feelings about the Sacred.
- It is possible to broaden your conceptualization of the Sacred in ways that facilitate your personal and spiritual growth.

Session 6: Forgiveness: Bridge

- In session 6 we discussed what forgiveness is and what it isn't.
- Forgiveness is like a bridge to wholeness and peace. It is a gift to ourselves, not to the person who hurt us.
- Forgiveness is not an obligation; it is a choice.
- Forgiveness is a **PROCESS** that takes time, deliberation, and effort. Don't be hard on yourself if it doesn't "just happen."
- Although working toward forgiveness is a very difficult, the pay offs make all the hard work worthwhile. The inner peace that comes with forgiveness is priceless and may not be attainable any other way.

Session 7: Acceptance: Backpack

- Sometimes spiritual struggles are like heavy rocks that we carry around in a backpack. Sometimes we need to evaluate what we're carrying and see if there are some burdens that we can leave behind to lighten our load.
- There are some things in life, including spiritual struggles, that we may never have control over. Realizing this may help us to set them down/relinquish them, rather than trying to struggle with them.
- Some spiritual ambiguity and struggle can be tolerated. It is all a part of our spiritual journeys. We may never reach the point of "spiritual perfection," where we can control everything around us and never again experience spiritual doubts, questions or struggles. And this is okay!
- Remember that, with help from the Divine, you possess all the grace you need to embrace your doubts, questions and struggles, and continue moving forward with them and through them.

Session 8: Meaning Making: Cross Stitch Pattern

- As we saw with the cross stitch pattern – sometimes spiritual struggles can be confusing on the one hand but also contain meaning on the other hand. Spiritual

struggles can lead to personal and spiritual growth. Spiritual struggles can create positive changes in the way you think about and treat yourself, others, and God.

- Often it may take TIME to get meaning; Often it may take a different PERSPECTIVE to get meaning (i.e. seeing the other side of that cross stitch pattern).
- However, sometimes you may never see any meaning in your spiritual struggles. Understanding the meaning in your spiritual struggles does not take away all of the confusion and unpleasant feelings of the struggles

IV. Shifting to the Future (15 min)

Purpose: Help participants understand how lessons learned in the group can be applied to the future

“These session symbols and experiences will be with you forever and you can draw on them in the future. There are many twists and turns that might come up as you continue on in your journey. For example, you might meet fellow travelers, or you might get lost, you might find new peaks and vistas, you might get rained on, at points you might get hungry, other times you will reach safe and nurturing campsites. We hope that you will be able to take the experiences from our time together with you on your path. Before we leave today, let’s spend a few moments thinking about what we learned and how it can apply to our journey in the future.”

Facilitator Probes:

- What experiences did you gain from this group that you can take with you in the future?
- Thinking about the future, are there times/situations that may intensify/exacerbate your spiritual struggles? What lessons can you apply during these times?
- Do you think you will have difficulty applying/remembering these lessons in the future? Explain.

In discussing participants responses, emphasize the following didactic points:

- Spiritual struggles are not a static stage in life but are a dynamic process that involve change over time
- It is important to periodically reflect on where you’ve been, where you are, and where you are going in relation to your spiritual struggles

V. Fire Ceremony (30 minutes)

Purpose: emphasis how the group has helped shed some light on our experiences with spiritual struggles.

Participants should be seated in a circle around a table with a candelabra or some vessel for holding candles. Each person should have a candle in front of them.

“An important part of any journey is having a light to guide us. Light allows us to see where we’re going, makes the unknown less daunting, and gives us heat. This activity symbolizes the light that we have shed on our spiritual struggles. After we have lit all of our candles, we would like to give you the opportunity to express something that you are thankful for that is related to the time that we have shared over the past 9 weeks.” *Facilitator lights his/her candle.* “We would like to create a campfire together by lighting each of our candles.” *Facilitator allows*

person next to him/her to light his/her candle from the facilitator's candle and indicates for the participant to share with the person next to him/her and to go around until everyone's candle has been lit. When all the candles are burning: "now, we will all place our candles in the center to symbolize our camp fire – a central source of light and warmth." Allow everyone to place their candle in the center. Facilitator then models a statement of gratitude (e.g. I'm grateful that each of you was willing to be vulnerable in our group; or, I'm grateful to have had time to reflect on my own understanding of God....). "Who else would like to share something they are grateful for?"

If participants are having difficulty expressing gratitude, say: "Your gratitude doesn't have to be long or complex; it can be something you have learned, a lesson that has helped you grow, or a comment from another participant that was meaningful to you, etc."

"As we sit around the "campfire" together, we want you to reflect on our journey together. Take a few moments to think about where you started and where the path has led you. Think about where this path will lead you, personally, once this group is over. [brief pause] What are your thoughts, hopes, and concerns about the future?"

After everyone has shared: "This leg of our journey together is over. Please stand so that we can blow out our fire together. Blowing out these candles represents that this leg of our spiritual journey has ended. We will no longer be working together to shed light onto our paths. Instead, each one of us has the responsibility to use this candle and light our own path, using our own resources and strengths." Blow out candles. Each Facilitator takes half of the candles and one by one hands a candle to each participant with the statement: "Thank you for sharing this journey with us, take this candle to remember that you carry a part of this group with you on your continued journey to light your path."

Take home points:

- Spiritual struggles are not a static stage in life but are a dynamic process that involve change over time
- It is important to periodically reflect on where you've been, where you are, and where you are going in relation to your spiritual struggles
- Even though our journey as a group is coming to an end, you have likely gained new knowledge and experience that you can carry with you
- The personal journey of your spiritual struggle continues forward from here