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Spirituality, Death, Loss and Grief: A Life Cycle Perspective

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These scriptures from the Christian tradition reaffirm a reality that all faiths acknowledge: Our spirituality continually changes throughout our life. Yet despite the obvious truth of such a statement and the importance that many place in spiritual beliefs and spiritual development, spirituality, until most recently, has received limited academic study within the social and psychological sciences. Almost 40 years ago, Heenan (1972) characterized the social scientific study of religion as an “empirical lacunae”—a fact just now beginning to change. This partly reflects on the generally agnostic character of the social sciences. Part of the problem also lies in the difficulty of developing an operational definition of spirituality that is distinct from religious affiliation.

While there has been more interest and research in spirituality in the past decade, comparatively little research has focused on life cycle issues. This is unfortunate. Spirituality, even at early ages, offers a vocabulary, symbolism, and approaches to meaning-making that allow individuals ways to understand and to adapt to suffering, dying, death, and grief (Champagne, 2008). In many ways, our spirituality is confirmed, challenged, or changed as we encounter these experiences on our life’s journey.

This chapter explores the ways spirituality develops and changes throughout the life cycle, focusing especially on how encounters with mortality often spur us toward spiritual development. Underlying this discussion is the importance
of understanding, assessing, and supporting individuals, at any age, as they use their spirituality to make meaning in the face of death.

**LIFE CYCLE PERSPECTIVES: FOWLER’S STAGES OF FAITH**

Such a discussion must begin with the pioneering work of James Fowler (1981). Building on the developmental work of Piaget (1965), Erikson (1950), and Kohlberg (1984), Fowler proposed a 6-stage model of spiritual or faith development. His model does not claim that the content of faith changes at each stage. Rather, the style of faith and how we value our faith changes. For Fowler, faith is a verb—a state of being—rather than a noun. Fowler defined faith similarly to how most people define spirituality, rather than adherence to a set of beliefs.

Fowler also differentiated *conversion* from *development*. Conversion refers to a radical change of our faith narrative while development emphasizes a more gradual maturing process.

Fowler did not claim that faith development was inevitable or even essential or desirable. He believed that each person could find a sense of spiritual fulfillment at whatever stage they experienced. While Fowler notes the approximate ages for each stage, he is very clear that even an adult’s spirituality can be characterized by any one of the first 3 stages.

In his stage model, Fowler was also clear that these are “snapshots” of a dynamic, ever-changing process. While Fowler’s model actually begins with stage 1, Kirst-Ashman and Zastrow (2004) suggested a preceding stage 0 that they theorized offers a foundation for the development of faith and trust.

- **Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated** (birth to age 2). While not in Fowler’s model, this stage reflects the very young child’s perception of his or her environmental safety. To Kirst-Ashman and Zastrow (2004), this sense of safety allows the child to develop a sense of trust that underlies the development of faith.

- **Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective** (ages 3–7). The child is just beginning to develop a sense of self and the world. Highly egocentric, the child is trying to make rudimentary sense of his or her experience. They have a difficult time differentiating between the real and the fantasized. Authority is externalized—symbolized by size or other symbols of power and position, e.g., teachers or uniforms.

- **Stage 2: Mythical-Literal** (ages 6–12). The child now exhibits concrete operational thinking. Now, children have begun to understand communal
faith stories and use them to order their experiences. They often have a strong sense of fairness and reciprocity: Good gets rewarded and evil punished. If there is a sense of a deity, it is often anthropomorphistic.

- **Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional** (adolescence). The emerging adolescent now begins to clearly identify with the beliefs of his or her community. This conformity becomes a basis of the adolescent's identity. While the adolescent conforms to these beliefs, they remain largely unexamined.

- **Stage 4: Individualistic-Reflective** (early adulthood). The young adult begins to critically examine and own his or her beliefs rather than simply adhere to the beliefs of others. Symbols, myths, and rituals are accepted if they are personally meaningful. Persons in this stage can tolerate controversy, disagreement, and questions.

- **Stage 5: Conjunctive** (midlife). In midlife, persons become aware of their own mortality. As they evaluate their life, they become conscious of their own underlying polarities: young/old, masculine/feminine, and their constructive/destructive sides. Persons are more open to accept the truths of other positions even as they hold to their own faiths.

- **Stage 6: Universalizing**. This is a stage that only a few individuals such as Mother Theresa or Gandhi may achieve. In this enlightened state, the individual can exhibit a total altruism and a sense of deep connection to all of humanity.

Fowler's model is a valued one for a number of reasons. It represents a relatively early attempt to map spiritual development. Fowler was sensitive to the dangers and limitations of such a model. Like many stage models, it often fails to fully characterize the diversity or complexity of how individuals struggle with their spirituality through the life cycle. Also, like many stage models, it lacks a clear empirical basis and it has a clear linear and prescriptive bias. Stage 6 seems a desired, even if generally unattainable, goal for spiritual development. Nonetheless, many of Fowler's ideas will be evident in the ensuing discussion.

**SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIFE CYCLE**

**Childhood**

Rather than a stage approach, it is probably more useful to begin by acknowledging the inherent relationship of spirituality to underlying themes of meaning-making, identity, and connection. In short, from the very beginning of personal consciousness, as we grapple with our place in the world and the
meaning and significance of events, we inevitably encounter spiritual issues and concerns.

Naturally, this begins early in childhood. When a very young child, perhaps a little older than a toddler, asks “Why?” after picking up a dead bird, he or she is asking an inherently spiritual question. One of the difficulties of stage-based and developmental approaches is that these frameworks often focus on what the child can or cannot cognitively comprehend. In doing so, they miss an essential corollary: that children, even at young ages, are trying to make sense of their world.

Coles (1990), in his classic work *The Spiritual Life of Children*, employs a useful metaphor. Coles was trained as a psychiatrist by Erich Lindemann—famous for his initial work on grief (Lindemann, 1944). As Coles worked in the 1950s with children stricken with polio, he listened carefully to how the children’s spirituality helped them adapt to this encounter with illness and mortality. Their spiritual stories, whether from the Bible or the Koran, helped them look not only upward but inward.

Children, Coles claims, are *spiritual pilgrims*. By that, he means that children try to make sense of the world without the cognitive-spiritual maps that adults possess. Their sense-making is a spiritual work in progress, a continued exploration in a territory they do not fully know or understand.

In that quest, they often attempt to apply the broad understandings that have been conveyed to them within their spiritual traditions. Christian children, for example, often reflected on the incarnation, taking comfort from the reality that Jesus really knew what it was like to struggle with childhood. To Islamic children, surrender to the will of Allah was a major theme while Jewish children looked to the moral precepts of their faith to guide them through life.

As children encounter illness, loss, and grief—whether their own or of someone close to them—they seek to understand the event, to make sense of their experiences. This inevitably is a spiritual process as they turn to their beliefs, faith narratives, rituals, and practices. They may not yet have the cognitive capacity to reach conclusions. Their questions may show innocence and naiveté. When her maternal grandmother died, my 3-year-old granddaughter took comfort in the belief that her grandmother would watch her from heaven. However this led to a very practical concern. Would her grandmother be able to see her on the toilet? The point is that children, no matter how young, are trying to make sense of their world and are inevitably encountering their spirituality.
Adolescence

This spiritual process continues into adolescence. In much developmental theory, adolescence is often divided into three periods. Early adolescence corresponds to the middle school years while middle adolescence is identified with high school. Late adolescence is harder to define but is generally recognized as the period after high school but before the child becomes psychologically (and perhaps economically) independent of his or her parents. In some cases, for example, when a child graduates high school and immediately finds a job, marries, joins military service, or establishes an apartment, the period can be quite short or even nonexistent. In other cases, such as when the child is in college, dependent on the family, or living at home, this period can be protracted.

In each of these periods, the adolescent struggles with three core issues: independence, intimacy, and identity. It is the latter process that underlies spirituality (Quinn, 2008). As part of identity, the adolescent, now capable of critical thought, asks, “What do I believe?” There is a process of differentiation here. Adolescents are aware of what they have been taught by parents, family, and spiritual leaders. The question now becomes what beliefs will become part of their personal identity—that is, what beliefs they will personally own.

Moreover, as adolescents begin to develop critical thinking, they are encountering their own spiritual questions. “Why do people suffer and die?” “Why do disasters occur?” While these questions may have been encountered earlier in their lives, there is greater depth to that reflection.

In addition, as the adolescent struggles with their individuality, there can be a growing awareness that death—nonexistence—represents a great threat to their emerging identity. In some cases, this may lead to extensive denial of death or challenges to death evident by the dangerous behaviors common in this stage of life.

The threat of death can be accentuated by the stress and isolation the adolescent experiences. With an emerging sense of individuality, a growing sense of aloneness may emerge. “There is no one like me” easily becomes “There is no one who fully understands me.” These questions of meaning, identity, and aloneness are core existential, and therefore spiritual, concerns.

For some adolescents, the transition to college can deeply accelerate this process. Here, they may be exposed to new people and ideas. Professors may challenge their once pat answers. For some students, the loss of their prior
beliefs can be profound, creating a sense of crises and loss that can even generate grief over their now-lost faith (Barra et al., 1993).

While adolescents may question or review their spirituality, it remains a critical aspect of adolescent stability. While research on spirituality and adolescence is limited (Petersen, 2008), studies of religiosity have found a positive correlation with an adolescent sense of well-being, positive life attitudes, altruism, resiliency, school success, health, and positive identity, as well as a negative correlation with alcohol and drug use, delinquency, depression, excessive risk-taking, and early sexual activity (Benson, Ruehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003).

**Early Adulthood**

Developmental theorists often stress that early adulthood focuses on externals: obtaining a job or career, developing an independent lifestyle, and possibly finding a life partner and establishing a family (Erikson, 1963). Internal issues such as spirituality often take second place to these core developmental tasks.

Such a perspective neglects the spiritual issues inherent in mate selection and child rearing. As one selects a life partner, the question of spiritual compatibility looms large. Individuals need to reflect on their own core spiritual values and determine to what degree those values need to be shared by their partner. "Does my partner need to share my faith? How will we raise our children? What spiritual values, rituals, and practices do we wish to pass on to our children? What religious holidays or events will we choose to celebrate or commemorate?" Often these questions may be re-evaluated once children actually arrive as the decisions once settled or tabled now have new currency.

Moreover, there are aspects of early adult life that do, at least in a remote way, raise the specter of mortality. As young adults begin to accumulate assets and responsibilities, they may begin to execute documents such as wills, advance directives, or guardianships. Such documents assume an implicit recognition of mortality, which inevitably invokes spirituality.

**Middle Adulthood: Spirituality and the Awareness of Mortality**

The growing awareness of personal mortality spurs us toward spiritual development (Doka, 1988, 1995). A number of conditions and circumstances contribute to an awareness of mortality in middle adulthood. First, as adults reach their 30s, 40s, and 50s, they begin to experience varied physiological and
sensory declines that reinforce the reality of aging and eventual death. Women experience menopause and both men and women may experience a gradual diminution of sexual prowess. This, too, is a vivid reminder of loss and aging. And, as Kastenbaum and Aisenberg suggest (1976), there may be an inverse relationship between reproductive capability and a sense of terminus.

Second, there is a dramatic increase in the mortality rate for those in their 40s or older. Adults in midlife may begin to experience the death of peers from causes other than accident or suicide. The loss of others in one's cohort is a vivid reminder of personal vulnerability.

A third factor is that adults in midlife begin to see their own parents aging and dying. Not only does this create new relationships with aging parents, it reinforces one's own aging and death. Adults in midlife may also have children establishing their own families and careers, reinforcing the reality that one's own cohort is advancing in age toward distant but inescapable death. As Moss and Moss state:

> The loss of a parent represents the removal of a buffer against death. As long as the parent was alive the child could feel protected, since the parent by the rational order of things was expected to die first. Without this buffer there is a strong reminder that the child is now the older generation and cannot easily deny his or her own mortality. (1983, p. 73)

Other factors in midlife may also increase awareness of mortality. Grandparenthood is often interpreted as a mark of age. Preparation for retirement, albeit somewhat distant, reiterates the passage of time. The approach of what is perceived as a significant birthday (e.g., 40, 50) may also be understood as a mark of age. A serious operation, health crisis, or onset of chronic illness may increase the awareness of mortality.

It would seem, then, that given the differing conditions and circumstances that lead to the awareness of mortality in adults, that this awareness can develop gradually, over time, as a person slowly becomes aware of physical declines and personal vulnerability. In other cases, this awareness may be a sudden insight in response to a crisis. When any given individual achieves this recognition will vary depending on the situations and circumstances of life.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully discuss the implications of this emerging awareness of personal mortality (see Doka, 1988, 1995), one
such implication is a modified sense of time. The child primarily looks toward the future. Time is measured from birth. The older person may be more oriented toward the past. The “time remaining” is considered both cogent and short. Neugarten (1972) theorizes that this restructuring of time occurs in middle age as the increasing awareness of finiteness leads one to think in terms of both time since birth and time left to live.

As the recognition of time shifts, there are profound implications for the sense of self. As stated earlier, the recognition of personal mortality leads to a reassessment of one's self-identity. The middle-aged person must consider what one has been, what one wished to be, and what one can still become. As Erikson (1963) states, generality becomes a central issue. “What is to be left behind?” “What is the legacy?”

There is some support for the idea that death anxiety peaks in midlife (see Doka, 1988, 1995; Neimeyer, 1994). Middle-aged persons, though, become aware of death when their commitments and opportunities are extensive. Death becomes the haunting specter that may yet rob them of the opportunity to achieve their goals and enjoy the fruits of their efforts. Death perhaps is the greater terror, stalking midlife, threatening goals and plans, heralding incompleteness, and even for some, suggesting the futility and meaningless of existence. We can posit that the recognition of eventual death may encourage spiritual reflection in middle adulthood. Perhaps this crisis forces midlife adults to confront life and find or construct meaning as to avoid the terror of death. Aware of limited time, even if it is measured in decades, a midlife adult becomes deeply concerned that his or her life have meaning. There is a reassessment of one's life. For those generally content with their past and present life and content with the direction life seems to be taking, this concern with meaning may not be overly troublesome. They need simply to reaffirm the meaning they have already found and perhaps recommit to their current goals. Such persons may reprioritize their goals and themes, deciding, for example, to spend more time with family. Others may wish to make major life changes or feel despair over their choices that seem too late to correct. There may simply not be enough time to find meaning in a heretofore meaningless existence. Perhaps the “midlife crisis” is a manifestation of this frantic concern to achieve meaning by rearranging one's present and future.

The awareness of mortality engenders a re-evaluation with the state of present life and triggers a renewed interest in the afterlife. As we confront our own mortality, we are likely to reflect on our beliefs and hopes about any
afterlife. In short, the awareness of mortality in midlife prompts a period of spiritual reflection and reevaluation (Wink & Dillon, 2002).

**Later Life**

Spiritual development remains a cogent issue in later life (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Here, the recognition of mortality becomes an awareness of finitude (see Marshall, 1980). Death is perceived as closer. This does not mean that we expect to die immediately, but rather that we realize that death is part of life. Hence we are reluctant to perceive or plan too far into the future. Time is now primarily viewed through the past (Neugarten, 1972).

Both Marshall (1980) and Butler (1963) see the awareness of finitude prompting a *life review process*. Here the individual reviews his or her past life to affirm that it had meaning and value. To Erikson (1963), a successful life review means that the older person can view life with a sense of *ego integrity*, that is, a sense that one has lived a worthwhile life. Thomas and Cohen (2006) found it helpful for participants to identify their major spiritual turning points since this process facilitates meaning-making by helping identify varied spiritual interpretive frameworks. The ultimate goal of life review is, as Marshall states, that one's life should be a “good story” (1980). If the life review is not successful, one may perceive that one's life has been wasted, yielding to a sense of despair.

Much like the awareness of mortality, the timing of the development of an awareness of finitude is inexact. Events such as nursing home institutionalization, illness, or frailty can certainly accelerate it. On the other hand, a chronic illness that leads to an expectation of an early or imminent death can create an awareness of finitude and subsequent life review even in the very young (Bluebond-Langner, 1965).

The awareness of finitude also often engenders a concern with a good, appropriate death (see Marshall 1980; Weisman, 1972). This means that the person wants to die in a way consistent with their values, wishes, or earlier life. On a practical level, that might mean that older persons are intent on instructing their adult children about their estate, advance directives, and even their wishes about funerals and other rituals. Yet the discussion suggests that this may create a paradoxical situation: As older adults may need to address the issues of their death, middle-aged children struggling with their own awareness of mortality may be deeply threatened by their parents' death and hence avoid such discussion. That same paradox may trouble adult children's end-of-life decision making as they confront the death of an older parent.
As we approach life’s end, the issue of beliefs in the afterlife looms larger. Lifton and Olson (1974) suggest that we look for a form of symbolic immortality. This can be found in varied religious beliefs of an afterlife or transcendence or through a more secular emphasis on a return to the cycle of life. It may also be a sense that we live on in our progeny or work and accomplishments.

It has been debated whether or not older persons become more religious as they age. Such a debate avoids the central issue: that later life raises profound spiritual concerns of meaning and connection. Whether we reconnect, review, or renew prior religious beliefs or whether we are even open to new religious experiences, we are likely to engage in some forms of spiritual searching—perhaps religious, perhaps not—but spiritual.

**CONCLUSION**

Naturally, the life cycle is just one factor that influences spiritual development. Other events such as caregiving experiences or life-threatening illness can also influence spiritual development (Doka, 2003–2004, 2008), as can a myriad of other factors including culture, gender, education, or social class.

Nonetheless, life cycle development should always be part of spiritual assessments. Such assessments can include identification and analysis of spiritual turning points (Thomas & Cohen, 2006) or spiritual autobiographies that trace spiritual development throughout the life cycle. The value of these techniques is that they can reveal sources of spiritual strengths and facilitate coping, connection, and meaning-making. They also reaffirm the truth of Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s observation that “perhaps we are not human beings on a spiritual journey but spiritual beings on a human journey.”

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