AN EXPLORATION OF THE SPIRITUALITY
OF FIFTY WOMEN WHO SURVIVED
CHILDHOOD VIOLENCE

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When violence strikes children, they experience physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual upheaval that commonly has long-lasting effects. This study gave fifty female survivors of childhood violence an opportunity to educate us about their spiritual wounds, struggles, and strengths. Through open-ended questions we explored the effects on early faith training, their current spiritual state, the role of spirituality in healing the wounds of violence, beliefs about goodness and evil, and the pattern of their spiritual journeys from childhood to the present. Our goal was to listen closely to what survivors of violence themselves believe to be most important for helping professionals to know about their spiritual experiences.

Three terms require some definition—childhood violence, survivor, and spirituality. Childhood violence is physical and/or sexual wounding, even if it is only implied or threatened (emotional), perpetrated by another human being upon a child (age birth through 18) (Culbertson, 1995). Survivors are adults who lived through childhood violence. The term “survivor” implies no particular psychological state.

We made the following statement to the participants about spirituality. “Broadly speaking, we define spirituality as seeking and/or connecting with a force in the universe that is bigger than humankind. This may involve awareness of realities, states of consciousness, or dimensions outside of those experienced in everyday life. Spirituality may or may not include any organized religious activity. We expect that each woman will have her own specific definition of spirituality within this broad definition, and we respect each woman’s definition as valid and accurate for her.”

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LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

A review of the social sciences literature on the topic of spirituality among adult survivors of childhood violence (Ryan, 1998) discovered several interesting studies, reporting the following findings. 1) A sizable portion of survivors of childhood violence are not involved in organized religion, reject the religion of their upbringing, and/or turn to a less traditional form of spiritual practice (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Hall, 1995; Irwin, 1994; Russell, 1986; Sargent, 1989; Shaffer & Cozolino, 1992). 2) Survivors of childhood violence often experience negative feelings toward God (Ducharme, 1988; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993; Manlove, 1995a, 1995b; Pritt, 1998). 3) A variety of factors, including type of religious background, attitude, gender, and type of abuse, interact complexly with the effects of childhood violence on spirituality (Elliott, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 1989; Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincellette & Penk, 1998; Reinert & Smith, 1997; Rossetti, 1995; Smith, Reinert, Horne, Greer & Wicks, 1995; Smith, Reinert, Horne, Greer & Wicks, 1996). 4) People commonly find spiritual forms of coping helpful in dealing with a wide variety of difficult situations (Pargament et al., 1990; Pargament, 1996). 5) Specifically, spirituality relates to good mental health among survivors of childhood violence (Elliott, 1994; Himelein & McElrath, 1996; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

A number of scholars and clinicians have also developed theories about the interaction between spirituality and violence. Trauma may push people beyond normal reality, increasing their openness to the spiritual realm, in the form of an immediate transcendent experience and/or enhanced receptivity over time (Adams, 1995; Amery, 1980; Bryant, 1992). The emptiness and despair that often follow people into adulthood, after childhood violence, may propel some to experience a spiritual awakening (Decker, 1993a, 1993b; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Mahedy, 1986; Merwin & Smith-Kurtz, 1988; Muller, 1992) or to turn to spirituality to find meaning (Decker, 1993b; Frankl, 1962; Jaffe, 1985).

While trauma may promote spirituality in certain ways, other scholars have theorized about negative impacts of violence on spirituality. After experiencing violence, a person may feel distrust and fear of God, abandoned and unprotected by God, and disconnected from any higher power (Brown, 1990; Courtois, 1988; Fortune, 1983; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Hall, 1995; Herman, 1992; Kane et al., 1993; Lemoncelli & Andrew, 1996; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Moran, 1990; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Wilson & Moran, 1998). A survivor's spiritual development may be hindered or arrested (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Lemoncelli & Andrew, 1996; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Sargent, 1989; Shaffer & Cozolino, 1992). Also, some survivors may never resolve the spiritual questions of meaning aroused by the violence (Decker, 1993b; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Hall, 1995; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Sinclair, 1993).

The theories in the above two paragraphs look at the effects of violence on spirituality. There are also several theories on the effects of spirituality upon the impact of trauma. Spirituality may help a person transcend the pain (Frankl, 1962; James, 1902; Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995; Tessier, 1992), develop a sense of meaning and
purpose (Bowman, 1993; Cheung, 1994; Frankl, 1962; Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995; Maton, 1989; Pargament, 1996; Peltzer, 1997), or feel hope (Moran, 1990). On the other hand, some scholars see impediments to recovery from the trauma of childhood violence in certain spiritual belief systems that may have the effect of silencing, blaming, or burdening the victim (Fortune, 1983, 1995; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Okamura, Heras, & Wong-Kerger, 1995; Schmidt, 1995; Taylor & Fontes, 1995; Wulff, 1997).

Several clinicians specifically promote addressing the spiritual dimension in therapy with survivors of violence (Breene, 1995; Bryant, 1992; Decker, 1993a, 1993b; Featherman, 1995; Frankl, 1962; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Garbarino, 1996; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Jacobs, 1989; Merwin & Smith-Kurtz, 1988; Ochberg, 1995; Peltzer, 1997; Propst, 1988; Sargent, 1989; Seamands, 1985; Tan, 1996; Wilson, 1989; Wilson & Moran, 1998). They agree that psychological interventions tend to be too narrow and that addressing diverse spiritual needs requires innovative approaches.

METHOD AND PROFILE

Between June of 1997 and January of 1999, fifty North American women who experienced sexual, emotional, and/or physical violence before age 19 responded to a questionnaire containing nine demographic questions and seven open-ended essay questions. In addition, we interviewed nine of the women individually and a group of four women together to explore their responses in more depth. The women were recruited through advertisements in survivor newsletters and Internet sites; announcements sent to psychotherapists, massage therapists, and clergy; and advertisements in three city newspapers and two magazines. Some of these resources were national, while the rest were in the Middle Atlantic region where the author is located.

Demographically the respondents are fairly diverse with the exception of ethnicity and education. Only four are African American, while the rest are Caucasian. On average, they have at least completed college, with only one person not completing high school and many going on for graduate education. Thus, they tend to be relatively highly educated.

The women’s age at the time of the survey ranged from 19 to 67, with an average of 44. They live all over North America, although the majority come from the Middle Atlantic region of the U.S. Their residences include rural areas, small communities, suburbs, and large cities. Incomes range from under $20,000 to over $80,000. Forty percent (40%) of the women are married, 32% are divorced, and the rest are either single, separated, or have a live-in partner. Slightly under half of the women have no children, while the rest have from one to four children, yielding an overall average of one child per respondent.

The group is also religiously diverse. Their childhood religions include Judaism, Catholicism, several Protestant denominations, and no religion. Currently, almost half reported that they have no religious affiliation. The remainder reported affiliation
with Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism, several Protestant denominations, and pagan circles.

We also gathered basic information about the violence itself. The overwhelming majority of this group of survivors experienced their first episode of violence before the age of seven and experienced it on-going over an extended period of time. Four of the women reported that the violence they experienced was primarily physical; two described it as primarily emotional; and the remainder indicated that it was sexual or sexual and physical. Only two survivors described their assailants as strangers and one as a friend of the family. The rest said the assailants were either family members or a combination of family and friends of family. A few of the respondents reported that they did not remember the violence until later in life, but most were at least partially cognizant of it all along.

Besides education and ethnicity, there are two additional ways that this group of survivors is probably rather homogeneous. First, twenty-one of them voluntarily mentioned that they have been in therapy. In fact, several indicated they have spent years in therapy working on issues related to the violence. It is likely that some of those who did not happen to mention therapy also have some experience with it.

Secondly, survivors who responded to the idea of a study on their spiritual experiences probably have a relatively active spiritual life. Although there was no direction or expectation that the respondents be attuned to spiritual things, someone who was not so attuned probably would not have much interest in responding to this topic. Therefore, the responses in this study are mostly from Caucasian, highly educated women who are spiritually minded and therapy-experienced, yet diverse in religion and many other respects.

RESPONSES

*How did being violated affect your adherence to your original faith training?*

Forty-eight percent (48%) of the women in this study reported that they currently have no religious affiliation. This number is remarkably high, considering the fact that these women probably do think of themselves as spiritual, since they voluntarily responded to a questionnaire on spirituality. Three-fourths of the women who were raised in a religion reported that they have left the faiths of their childhood, either to join another religion, to practice a non-traditional form of spirituality, or to denounce religion all together. The women’s responses suggest five reasons why so many of them left. The reasons are not mutually exclusive, as many women gave more than one reason.

First, clergy persons abused five of the women. This violation naturally diminished their trust in clergy and churches, if not all of spirituality. As Mary said, “I don’t believe, because the experiences I had shattered the security and the believability of that faith.”
Secondly, religious beliefs were in other ways used against at least nine of the survivors by their perpetrators. This misuse of the beliefs caused the survivors to doubt both those beliefs and the people and institutions that taught them. For example, Kayla’s perpetrators told her, “God is going to punish you if you aren’t good. You are bad because you enjoy having sex with us. We only do this because you want it.” And, Mollie’s perpetrator used an image of an angry, vengeful God to coerce her to be silent, saying, “God will get you if you tell.” Whatever churches, religions, or belief systems were related to these messages become untenable upon reflection.

Next, as some theorists predict (Fortune, 1983; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Wilson & Moran, 1998), twenty-five of the respondents questioned a religion and/or God that were supposed to be so good, yet did nothing to stop the abuse. Zanthea described her anger as a “white-hot rage against God and religious people for their lack of caring.” She wrote, “I eventually lost all my faith in organized religion and began to question all my beliefs about God.” Kristin concluded, “This whole thing about God that I’ve been taught makes no sense [in light of my experiences]—that God loves children, God’s a good father, and God created this earth.” These women left the churches and religions by which they felt abandoned.

The fourth reason suggested by the responses for turning away from original faith training is identification between abusing parents and the God of that faith. This idea is presented repeatedly in the literature (Brown, 1990; Courtois, 1988; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Hall, 1995; Kane et al., 1993; Lemoncelli & Andrew, 1996; Moran, 1990; Phillips & Frederick, 1995; Pritt, 1998). Laura expressed this directly, “Presumably, my first models of ‘God’ were my parents who together presented largely as authoritarian and punitive, and demanding of perfection; yet unpredictable and lacking in compassion including at times even being sadistic. … I am also indirectly aware of currently applying some and perhaps all of these same notions to ‘God’ on a more primitive and unconscious level. Specifically, I fear an omnipotent ‘God’ if I am not perfect in discerning ‘God’s will’ (lest I be killed or at least experience deprivation).”

Finally, as several theorists have also suggested (Fortune, 1983, 1995; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Okamura et al., 1995; Schmidt, 1995; Taylor & Fontes, 1995; Wulff, 1997), various religious structures and values, such as accepting suffering, placing men above women, obeying parents, and forgiving those who sin against us, contributed to some respondents questioning the relevance of church and a God of those beliefs. Rather than healing their wounds, religion seemed to ignore them or burden them further. For example, Lorraine concluded, “I gave up on faiths, which I came to view (and still do) as men praying to a man for other men.”

On the other hand, five women did not think the abuse adversely affected their adherence to their original faith training, and six women mentioned that the church or faith was a refuge for them in childhood, as Moran suggested (Moran, 1990). Thelma wrote, “Being a Christian helped a lot. I would go outside at night and look at the stars at night and pray. I didn’t feel like I was alone anymore.” And, Brittany claimed, “It
was my faith in God, which got me through the violence.” The violence in childhood did not reduce the relevance of original faith for everyone.

*Would you say that your spirituality was stronger before, during, or since you were violated? What is the relationship between your experience of violence and your answer to this question?*

While some respondents answered otherwise, the largest portion (64%) reported that their spirituality is the strongest now than it has ever been and that dealing with the experience of violence in some way involved a spiritual journey. This is consistent with Garbarino and Bedard’s assertion that “these experiences of the dark side need not be spiritual dead-ends, but rather can serve as the beginning of an even deeper spiritual awakening” (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996, p.469). Betty summed it up by saying, “My experiences with violence [have] led me on a spiritual quest that has been the greater part of my life.”

Several women wrote about discovering a new spirituality as they were doing healing work. Connie explicitly connected the healing and spirituality when she said, “As I began to explore the abuse, I [understood] my own behaviors. As I understand my behaviors, I’ve begun to forgive myself and in turn learned compassion with a different understanding, which is spiritual. The exploration of the violence has brought me to the spiritual for the healing.” Teresa’s wording was even more striking, “The abuse was terrible. Reliving it in therapy is terrible. But this is the very process that enables me to draw closer to God.”

Some women even declared there was a blessing in their experience of violence as a motivator toward spirituality. Janoff-Bulman has observed that “the experience of victimization often leads survivors to a reconsideration of life and what is important. The confrontation with physical and psychological annihilation essentially strips life to its essentials, and for many survivors becomes a turning point from the superficial to the profound” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 136). Treva provides an example. “It’s sad to say, but I think I’m actually thankful. I don’t think there’s growth without discomfort, and that includes pain. . . . It sent me through a very painful process, but at the same time, I don’t think I would ever be as spiritual as I am now, or desire to be, had I not seen that. I think it’s taught me what’s real and what’s not real. . . . I can’t say the experiences were great, but it was well worth the pain in the long run.”

The group of four women who were interviewed together discussed the difference between the spiritual journeys of survivors versus persons who never experienced violence. All four women reported having had mystical experiences. They speculated that they are more open to these experiences than the average person because of the violence. As Adams, Amery and Bryant suggested, facing death, ego dissolution, and altered states of consciousness so early in life may have created this opening (Adams, 1995; Amery, 1980; Bryant, 1992).

The interview group made another point on this topic. Perhaps the content of survivors’ spiritual experiences is not particularly different from non-survivors’, but the experiences may come about with more force or speed or exaggeration and less
intentionality. As one of the women expressed it, "Perhaps survivors have it punched, while others ooze into it." The women related their own experiences to Grof's concept of spiritual emergency, while they surmised that most people experience something more akin to spiritual emergence (Grof & Grof, 1990).

How has spirituality been involved, if at all, in your process of recovery from the violence?

Valentine and Feinauer reported in their study that spiritual beliefs were important to female survivors of childhood sexual abuse in helping them to overcome the experience. "It was important in assisting them to make meaning of the experience in a manner that served to free them of blame and guilt for the abuse. It also assisted them in making sense of the experience in a manner that gave them the faith to hold onto life and find meaning and purpose in their lives" (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993, p. 220). Ninety-two percent (92%) of the women in our study indicated that spirituality was important in helping them heal the psychic wounds left by the childhood violence.

We have grouped our forty-six responses regarding the role of spirituality in healing into five general categories. Again, some respondents offered more than one of these ideas. Consistent with Pargament's finding that people under stress often feel that God directly helps them through difficult times (Pargament et al., 1990), sixteen of our respondents asserted that God/a higher power/the divine energy of the universe has been the agent for survival and healing in their lives. For example, Sheila said, "Each step of the way, God was leading me along to where I could finally ... get the help I needed."

The second category of responses indicated that spirituality has provided meaning and/ or perspective for the traumatic experience of childhood violence. Several theorists and researchers have noted this function (Bowman, 1993; Cheung, 1994; Decker, 1993b; Frankl, 1962; Jaffe, 1985; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995; Maton, 1989; Pargament et al., 1990; Pargament, 1996; Peltzer, 1997; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Ten of our respondents mentioned that their spirituality has helped them in this manner. As Nell said, "My loneliness, fear and suffering drove me to spirituality [for] an explanation."

In the Netherlands, Imbens and Jonker interviewed nineteen female survivors of incest. Although these women expressed significant negative feelings about God, they also mentioned gaining a sense of security and comfort from God (Imbens & Jonker, 1992). Similarly, eight women in the current study mentioned security, comfort, or peace when they describe how spirituality has helped them to heal. This is the third category of responses, which is demonstrated in Lorraine's statement, "It definitely provided comfort and the only positive constant in my life," and Carmen's assertion that spirituality allows "me to be secure enough to face and remember the worst of the abuse."

As Moran suggested, survivors may also benefit by experiencing spirituality as strengthening, supportive, or a reason to have hope (Moran, 1990). Eight of our respondents mentioned something related to this fourth category. Micki provided a
good example of this type of response. "There have been many times in the healing process when I would have given in to hopelessness but for the spiritual supports that were already in place in my life," (prayer, meditation, religious practice, etc.). "It's because of the spiritual side of life that makes it not hopeless."

In Pargament’s study of 586 Christians, experiencing God’s love and care had the highest average ranking as an element of coping with various types of stressful life events (Pargament et al., 1990). Six of our women mentioned feeling accepted or loved by a higher power, the fifth category of response regarding how spirituality has been important in healing from the childhood violence. Oona expressed it this way, "Letting ourselves receive the love of spirit can soothe and soften the self-hate we developed because of violence done to us and can teach us how to love others."

Although the questionnaire did not specifically ask the survivors what tools or experiences had been particularly helpful to them in their healing journeys, many respondents volunteered this information in the course of answering other questions, mentioning a wide variety of practices. Fourteen of the women stated that attending church has been helpful to them. Twenty of the women mentioned personal prayer and/or meditation. Other practices that more than one woman brought up are pagan rituals, 12-step groups, Native American traditions, shamanic journeying, chanting, reading about religion or other spiritual matters, and following "A Course in Miracles." Only one Christian woman and one Jewish woman specifically reported that they have received spiritual direction around the issues raised by experiencing violence in childhood. On the other hand, twenty-one women volunteered that they have made use of therapy.

**What would you most like to share with other survivors about your spiritual experiences?**

We offered this question to make sure the respondents got ample opportunity to express what they felt was most important about their spiritual journeys in light of being survivors of childhood violence. We will focus here on the several thoughts that came up repeatedly. Nearly all of the respondents tried to convey encouragement and empathy to other survivors, using words like, "I know how you feel," "You deserve something better," and "Don't give up, there's hope." They went on to discuss what they thought could be most helpful for others to hear about their own spiritual beliefs and experiences.

The words *honor, respect, trust,* and *truth* appeared over and over. "Honor the earth, the feminine, and our bodies." "Treat yourself with respect." "Trust the healing process." "Seek the truth." Thoughts with these words as well as others of a similar nature in thirteen of the responses emphasized the process of seeking a spiritual path that resonates with each individual's needs. These thoughts seldom referred to religion or a religious construct. In fact, only two respondents even mentioned a specific religion in their answers. Instead, the women advocated development of a very personal spirituality.
Personal spirituality also emerged prominently in references to aspects of self in nine of the responses. For example, Lorraine said, “We are, each of us, beautiful inside our minds and hearts ... The surest help is inside ourselves, and in becoming one with nature, or God, or whatever Force one believes is most beneficial.” Similarly, Connie reported, “I am struggling to find the place inside me where spirit (God) lives and let it heal me.” And, Lacy declared, “There is a part of self that has remained fully whole, with all the light and all the innocence that you come into life with.” These types of statements emphasize a personal spiritual connection based within the individual.

Twelve respondents wanted other survivors to know that they are never alone because there is a loving spirit, which some called God, always present. Nadine urged others to “believe that you are loved,” and Amy proclaimed, “It feels great to be held in God’s hands!”

Some respondents wrote here about gains from experiencing childhood violence. Six mentioned spiritual gifts, lessons, or soul work. Pamela summarized, “Behind every experience I’ve had, there is a gift and a lesson. That keeps me going.” Four individuals also talked about gaining inner strength through adversity. Kylie advised, “It is my opinion that we need to focus on the new outlooks, the empathy, and the sensitivity we have developed because of this experience,” and Molly proclaimed, “Our pain can paralyze and trap us. It can also be transformed into strength, compassion, and beauty.” Janoff-Bulman concluded something similar from her studies. “For the survivor, the traumatic experience serves as an unexpected source of strength rather than weakness. There is a feeling of personal triumph, of mastery in spite of extraordinary difficulties and demands of the experience. There is also the sense of possessing a new, special sort of wisdom, which derives from the most potent type of education—personal experience” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 175).

Another thought that came up in four responses was forgiving the perpetrators of violence in order to promote the survivor’s healing. For example, Ingrid avowed, “The true path of healing is forgiveness,” and Nadine declared, “Through forgiveness, you will find peace of mind.” In the personal experience of these four women, forgiveness brought relief.

DISCUSSION

Like the participants in several previous studies (Finkelhor et al., 1989; Hall, 1995; Irwin, 1994; Russell, 1986; Sargent, 1989; Shaffer & Cozolino, 1992), many of our respondents have changed religions, taken up non-traditional spiritual practices, or denounced religion altogether. Half of them are currently not involved in any organized religion, and three-fourths of them left the faith of their childhood upbringing, (which included Judaism, Catholicism, and various Protestant denominations). We cannot draw any conclusion as to whether these statistics relate to experiencing violence, being highly educated, having gone through therapy, and/or something else. However, the focus of the study was to listen to what the women themselves had to say about the connections they see between violence and their spiritual lives. The responses gave us insight into how the violence contributed to their decisions. 1)
Abuse by clergy destroyed trust in the church. 2) Manipulation of religious tenets by perpetrators against their victims created negative associations with religion. 3) The experience of violence contradicted church teachings about the power, presence, connection, and protection of God, creating a sense of abandonment. 4) Identifications of abusing parents became attached to God, creating a negative God image. 5) Patriarchal, narrow, rigid, or judgmental religious structures intensified a survivor's sense of victimization and alienation.

Despite the negative impact that many of these women experienced in their early religious lives, all but four of them currently described themselves as spiritual. Many of them, like previous research participants (Ducharme, 1988; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane et al., 1993; Manlowe, 1995a, 1995b; Pritt, 1998), have had negative feelings toward religion, God, and/or spirituality. However, at this point in their lives, the group was not nearly as negative about God or the universe as some theorists might have expected (Fortune, 1983; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Wilson & Moran, 1998). In fact, nearly two-thirds of them reported a positive connection between having a strong spiritual life now and having to deal with the experience of childhood violence. For them, healing work was also a spiritual journey. Some of them even viewed the violence, in retrospect, as a blessing because it created the pain that motivated them to seek healing and meaning through spiritual avenues.

Addressing painful wounds from childhood violence involved the development of deep, personal spirituality. Through healing work, spirituality appeared, and through spiritual seeking, healing occurred. The women gave the following descriptions for the role of spirituality in recovery from childhood violence (in order of frequency mentioned). 1) A spiritual agent caused survival and healing. 2) Spirituality provided meaning or perspective for the experience of childhood violence. 3) Spirituality contributed security, comfort, or peace to the women's lives. 4) Hope, strength, and support came from spiritual sources. 5) The women felt accepted and loved by a higher power.

In answering the full combination of seven questions, the respondents provided an overview of their journey from the childhood violence to strong spirituality. While the details varied widely, the process seemed to take a common path. In childhood, most of the women were exposed to some type of religious teachings. As Janoff-Bulman described; the violence shattered initial assumptions about the world and a higher power (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), including many religious teachings heard up to that point. Most of the women went through a stage next of doing whatever they could to avoid feeling the pain, during which they often experienced very little spiritual connection. Their early childhood faith no longer worked for them, and they had not replaced it. However, the combination of psychic pain generated by the wounds of childhood violence and movement of the Spirit eventually motivated a healing journey that involved coming to a new sense of personal spirituality through facing and seeking truth in all things. The respondents described this process as on-going, rather than ever reaching a final state of completion.

A person could conclude that the spiritual journey of these survivors has followed a course consistent with Fowler's six stages of spiritual development (Fowler, 1981). In
his schema, children tend to accept whatever ideas of spirituality the significant adults in their life give to them. However, in the early twenties they tend to relocate authority within themselves and in rationality, distancing themselves from previously held value systems like religion. Then, in mid-life there is a shift back toward spirituality involving a more personal relationship with the divine energy of the universe, rather than the concrete and literal understanding of God developed in childhood. Thus, the survivors’ rejection of early faith systems and eventual development of a deeply personal spirituality follows this same path.

A mid-life shift such as Fowler describes has been particularly noted in the American “baby-boomer” generation in recent years (Keen, 1994; Sinetar, 1986). “Millions who have become disillusioned with a secular view of life but are unmoved by established religion in any of its institutional forms are setting out on a quest for something—some missing value, some absent purpose, some new meaning, some presence of the sacred” (Keen, 1994, p. xix). Women, in particular, are redefining the sacred to provide them with more personal meaning than traditional patriarchal forms (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Wulff, 1997).

The process that Fowler describes, as well as the phenomena noted among “baby-boomers” and women, may all be factors involved in our respondents’ spiritual journeys. However, the respondents point to an additional element stemming from the experience of violence itself. That factor was inescapable physical and/or psychological pain that shattered the survivors’ initial world-view and eventually compelled them to search for something deeper. The spiritual point to which these women have come in middle age may not be markedly different than the general population, but the process was seldom a gentle evolution.

How can therapists use this information? Garbarino believes that treating the meta-physical and spiritual challenges of violent trauma is essential. According to Wilson and Moran, “acknowledging and including the spiritual dimension in a holistic approach to therapy can aid the survivor greatly as he or she attempts to reclaim his or her world” (Wilson & Moran, 1998, p. 173). The descriptions that our participants have given offer insight into issues that such therapy might explore. These include personal spiritual history, negative impacts of violence on faith, the spiritual meaning that the violence has to the survivor, the role of a higher power in survivors’ lives, and spiritual practices that are personally strengthening.

The fact that nearly half of our respondents volunteered that they had made use of therapy underscores the need for therapy to include these issues. That is, the opportunity exists within the therapeutic setting to address what so many of the women (92%) reported was a very important, if not the most important factor in recovery—spirituality. Clearly, many of our respondents separate spirituality from religion. Therefore, the opportunity to address these issues may, in fact, reside less within churches than it does within therapy offices.14

Can the insights from this particularly spiritual group of female survivors of childhood violence be helpful with survivors who do not relate as strongly to spirituality? Giving the same questionnaire to such a group of people would be very informative. By coming at the questions from a different perspective they might provide further
insights into facets of the spiritual experience to explore. If they were more negative about God/religion/spirituality, would that mean that their process is different or that they are currently in the rejecting stage of the same process that was described by our respondents?

CONCLUSION

For many of the fifty female survivors of childhood violence who participated in this study the effects of violence contributed to turning away from early religious upbringing. However, eventually, the continuing pain from their psychological and spiritual wounds motivated most of them to search for healing, truth, and meaning which fostered development of a deeply personal spirituality. That spirituality, in turn, was a powerful resource for recovery. Although the women in this study may relate more positively to spirituality than some other survivors, their example strongly supports the recommendation that therapists explore spiritual issues in their work with survivors of childhood violence.

NOTES

1 This definition allows for a wide range of experiences, from singular to continuous, minor to nearly fatal, and familial to foreign.

2 Note that we did not use the term God in this statement, because some people connect the word with a very narrow definition, while we wanted a broadly inclusive definition.

3 While some of these researchers may have had a fairly narrow definition of the term God, we use it here, across studies, to inclusively represent any spiritual concept of a divine or higher power.

4 Some of these theories about trauma are not specific to childhood violence, but it would be included as one form of trauma.

5 Our goal with the essay questions was to explore areas that were suggested by the literature review, while also creating an open forum for expressing whatever felt most important to the women themselves about the relationship between their experiences of violence and spirituality. We developed an initial set of questions, then pre-tested them on a few women. Using their suggestions for clarifications and additions, we created the final format.

6 Of course, every case involved emotional violence, because perpetrators control children primarily through fear.

7 Four of the essay questions are included here. A small book is being written to encompass treatment of the entire set of questions. The other three essay questions were as follows. "How do you define the term spiritual?" "What was the general nature of the violence you experienced, your relationship with the perpetrator(s) and your age at the time(s) it happened?" "How have you resolved the spiritual question of good and evil for yourself?"

8 Eight of the women were brought up without much faith training. Therefore, they are not included in this figure.

9 In order to preserve the confidentiality of the women who participated, all names and other identifying information have been changed for this article.

10 Because we did not ask directly about mystical experiences in the questionnaire, we cannot say what portion of the respondents have had them. However, eight women voluntarily wrote about experiencing transcendence, and all but one of the women who were interviewed reported such experiences.
Two of the remaining four women did not feel spirituality was important to their healing process, and two did not answer this question.

Since the first few questionnaires did not include this question, we collected forty-two responses to this item.

Of course, these women who voluntarily responded to a request to complete a survey about spirituality and violence may be more likely to have a positive view of God or the universe than other survivors do.

At the same time, religious leaders could use this information to enhance their ability to meet survivors' needs and perhaps reduce the perceived gap between spirituality and religion for these women. Also, we have previously noted that our group of women may be more likely to have experience with therapy than the average female survivor of violence. Therefore, we cannot predict whether the average survivor would have more opportunity to deal with these issues in church or in therapy.

REFERENCES


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Ending violence in children’s lives and investing in early childhood are first and foremost a question of children’s rights, further supported by scientific evidence which shows that a violence-free early childhood matters: the first 1,000 days of a child’s life are the foundation for a person’s whole future development. 2. The Agenda 2030 vision. A world free from fear and from violence, where no one is left behind, is the inspiring, ambitious vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Agenda 2030 recognizes the crucial role played by early childhood development in creating p