Chapter 7
Spirituality as a Framework for Confronting Life's Existential Questions in Later Adulthood

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Humanity's oldest surviving literary work, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tells of the title character's search for the answer to one of life's great issues: the search for eternal life as an answer to the question "What happens next?" Ever since, we have struggled to find answers to life's great existential questions: What is the meaning of life? Why do bad things happen to good people? Is there anything more than this life? Why is there so much suffering? Why am I here? Attempts to answer these questions form the core of every major religion; have been continual themes in philosophy; have been the message of countless works of literature, poetry, music, art, and other forms of expression; motivated scores of heated debates over every conceivable beverage; and even served as the focal topic of a Monty Python film.

That we are still seeking definitive answers after more than 4000 years of documented attempts belies both the timeless nature of the issues and their seeming intractability. It may also be a reflection of the fact that whatever answers are achieved are individual ones, not generalizable ones that could apply to all. It is this latter perspective that is adopted in this chapter. My basic premise is that each person reaches an individual resolution of the great existential questions that is a result of the confluence of all of the usual developmental aspects (e.g., physical, cognitive, personality, emotional, sociocultural, interpersonal, etc.), operating within the broader sphere of accumulated knowledge and understanding of the underlying rules governing the universe as understood at any specific point in time (e.g., quantum theory, general relativity, string theory, chaos theory, etc.) (see also Wessels & Müller, 2013). As will become clear, the optimal point for the creation of individual resolutions is in later adulthood, when certain developmental processes and experience are best aligned to handle the inherent ambiguity of the issues and to place oneself in a larger context.

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Before delving into these matters, it is important to differentiate between what this chapter will (and will not) discuss. First, this chapter focuses on *spirituality*, as differentiated from *religion*, *religiosity*, or *religious involvement*. Spirituality in this context is viewed as the search for the sacred (Pargament, 2013) and the search for meaning (Park, 2013; Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). Pargament (2007, 2013) and Pargament and Mahoney (2005) note that the sacred refers not just to traditional concepts of a higher power but also to any object or thing (e.g., a relationship) that takes on a sacredness or transcendence. Park and colleagues (Aldwin, Park, Jeong, & Nath, 2013; Park, 2013; Park et al., 2013) point to the centrality of spirituality in meaning making and "can inform all aspects of meaning, informing beliefs and providing ultimate motivation and primary goals for living and guidelines for achieving those goals, along with a deep sense of purpose and mattering" (Park, 2013, p. 42). In contrast, religion and related concepts are usually viewed as concerning organized belief structures that are most often institutionalized into formal groups (e.g., Oman, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013). It is all too common for the various terms to be used interchangeably, with the unsurprising outcome of general confusion in the literature.

Second, the later adulthood developmental frame for this chapter focuses only on the potential interactions of the various components. Detailed discussions of the individual developmental trajectories of the components are beyond the scope of this chapter. Additionally, the emphasis here will be on the specific interactions among cognitive/intellectual and psychosocial development. While acknowledging that there are numerous other key influences on human development, in terms of later adulthood, these are the areas in which most of the relevant empirical research has been done.

Third, there are clear connections between this chapter and the field of transpersonal psychology in that I will discuss the integration of spiritual and transcendent aspects of people's experience and psychological theory; a thorough discussion of this field is beyond the scope here. The interested reader might consult Johnson (2005), Balaban (2006), Geary (2006), Humphrey (2015), or others for more detailed discussions.

Merton, Rohr, and an Approach to Spirituality in Later Adulthood

The idea that significant spiritual development occurs during adulthood has been embedded in writings on spirituality for centuries, largely grounded in the experience of mystics within various traditions. For our purposes, we will focus on the developmental shift initially developed by Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century Trappist monk whose writings on spirituality drew not only from the Judeo-Christian tradition but also extensively from the Buddhist and other eastern traditions. In his books *Seeds of Contemplation* (Merton, 1949) and its revision *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Merton, 1962), Merton draws an important distinction between the

False Self and the *True Self*. Essentially the distinction is between the superficial, external self that we mean when we use the first person singular pronoun "I," the self that Merton considers a prison from which we must escape, and the joy of dwelling in union with the essence of everything in the universe in the core of our soul, the self that Merton argues we must become. The False Self reflects egocentric desires; the True Self reflects oneness with the universe.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, takes this progression and further refines it (Rohr 2011, 2013). Rohr writes that spiritual development across adulthood consists of the movement from Merton's *False Self* (that Rohr defined as a focus on personal achievement grounded in the ego) to the *True Self* (that Rohr defined as a reference point that is both "utterly within you and utterly beyond you at the very same time").

Rohr (2011) writes that the False Self is rooted in a relative identity that each of us creates for ourselves, an identity that depends critically on external indicators of success (e.g., title, prestige, salary, status, etc.). The False Self is inherently fragile, tends to be dissatisfied because it depends on external definitions of achievement, and is felt as separate from others in the sense that we want to belong to the "in" group and define others selectively as members of the "out" group. Change is to be feared. Morality is defined in terms of adherence to rules. In short, the False Self is the result of building one's ego structure based on incorporating external messages regarding of "values" and "success." There is a heavy emphasis on doing things "correctly" according to the rules of the group or society.

In Rohr's (2013) view, achieving the True Self involves (re)discovering the universality and wholeness, an "authentic inner knowing," that has always been within, but has gone unrecognized or unacknowledged. The True Self does not see anything with absolute certainty, which is what Rohr means by mature faith. The True Self is the fulfillment of the search for answers to the core existential questions. It entails a letting go and an acceptance of what is.

Rohr, along with mystics such as Merton, Julian of Norwich, Hafiz, and Rumi, provides a parallel description to Erikson, Jung, and others, all of whom it could be said described the search for personal meaning in life to, in the end, be a search for becoming who we already are in a fully integrated way. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, we discover that we already had everything we need, so the apparently empty basket is given to us as an opportunity to fill in our own way.

A key characteristic of the True Self (or the integrated self as Erikson (1982) might have put it) is a holistic, universalist view of higher principles. There is a recognition that all things are connected, both within and without the individual. There is an understanding of a certain immutability to truth and that relationships are the real foundation on which all else is based. External standards and judgments no longer matter. It is not about personal achievement but personal integrity based on inner truths that does.

Merton (1955) argued that the True Self depends critically on the cognitive abilities to deal with paradoxes and contradictions and to tolerate ambiguity. For example, he points out that real love is only kept by giving it away, and it can only be given perfectly when it is also received. He also points to numerous examples of

deep contradictions in the New Testament, such as the notion that those who attempt to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives will save them. Such ability to hold and unpack both sides of a paradox or contradiction requires advanced cognitive developmental outcomes that unfold in adulthood.

For both Merton and Rohr, the True Self reflects the *soul*. By whatever label, it is an experience of the transcendent nature of the universe. It is a recognition that life in some sense (e.g., as energy) continues beyond personal death, which results in a different, less anxiety-ridden view of personal death.

The developmental transition described by Merton and Rohr (as well as others) from the False Self to the True Self has its genesis in the processes underlying adult development more generally. Now that the broad pattern of change in spiritual perspective has been briefly described, let us turn to these underlying processes before returning to consider how all of these coalesce into a coherent framework for understanding spirituality in later adulthood.

Setting the Stage: Cognitive Development in Adulthood

The development of thought and reasoning across adulthood has received a great deal of attention over the past few decades (Sinnott, 2009, 2010, 2014). Whereas formal-operational thinkers (a level first achieved by most people in adolescence but that extends into adulthood; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Siegler & Alibali, 2004) arrive at outcomes based on logic grounded in their own experience, and are quite confident that their reasoning is absolutely correct, adults tend to think differently. As a rule, adults are reluctant to draw conclusions based on the limited information explicitly provided in a problem or specific situation, especially when the problem can be interpreted in different ways (Sinnott, 1998). Rather, adults often point out that there is much about the problem or issue we don't know, making it much more ambiguous. Adults may eventually decide on a particular outcome or conclusion, but they do so only after considering aspects of the situation that go well beyond the information given or that is obvious. Such thinking shows a recognition that other people's experiences may be quite different from one's own and that other points of view are equally valid to their own, at least at the conceptual thought level.

Clearly, the thought processes adults use are different from formal operations (Kitchener, King, & DeLuca, 2006; Sinnott, 2009, 2010). Unlike formal-operational thinking, this approach involves considering situational constraints and circumstances, realizing that reality sometimes constrains solutions and knowing that feelings matter.

Based on numerous investigations, researchers concluded that this different type of thinking represents a qualitative change beyond formal operations that happens in identifiable steps across adulthood (King & Kitchener, 2004; Kitchener et al. 2006; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Sinnott, 2009, 2010, 2014). Such thought, called **postformal thought,** *is characterized by a recognition that truth (*i.e., *the correct answer) may vary from situation to situation, that solutions must be realistic to be*

reasonable, that ambiguity and contradiction are the rule rather than the exception, and that emotion and subjective factors usually play a role in thinking.

Several research-based descriptions of the development of thinking in adulthood have been offered. Two are most relevant for the present discussion.

One view concerns the development of reflective judgment, *a way in which adults reason through dilemmas involving current affairs*, *religion*, *science*, *personal relationships*, *and the like*. Based on decades of longitudinal and cross-sectional research, Kitchener and King (1989) and Kitchener et al. (2006) refined descriptions and identified a systematic progression of reflective judgment. The first three stages in the model represent prereflective thought, levels at which people do not acknowledge and may not even perceive that knowledge is uncertain. Consequently, they do not understand that some problems exist for which there are not clear and absolutely correct answers. About halfway through the developmental progression, people think very differently. In Stages 4 and 5, they are likely to say that nothing can be known for certain and to change their conclusions based on the situation and the evidence, representing an understanding of the subjective nature of knowledge. As adults continue their development into Stages 6 and 7, they begin to show true reflective judgment, understanding that people construct knowledge (and hold firm convictions) using evidence and argument that is situational and carefully analyzed from multiple perspectives.

A second approach is Sinnott's Complex Theory of Adult Cognitive Development, also premised on postformal thought (Sinnott, 1998, 2009, 2010, 2014). It is grounded in the premise that a key aspect of adult development is increased ability to be self-reflective, or mindful, about one's own thought process, a fundamental aspect of many spirituality traditions and approaches (e.g., Buddhism, mysticism). For Sinnott, the key developmental pathway is one of deeper understanding of alternative "logics" or ways of viewing and experiencing reality. The main characteristics of postformal thought in Sinnott's approach are as follows:

- *Metatheory shift* is the ability to view reality from more than one overarching logical perspective. Put simply, it is the ability to take another person's frame of reference and understand reality from their vantage point.
- *Problem definition* is the realization that there is always more than one way to define a problem, so each person may have a unique definition of the same problem.
- *Process/product shift* is the realization that one can reach both a "content-related" solution to one specific problem and a solution that gives a heuristic or a process that solves many such problems.
- *Parameter setting* is the realization that each person must choose those aspects of the problem context that must be considered or ignored in order to reach a solution.
- *Multiple solutions* means that each person can generate several solutions to the same problem, based on several different ways of viewing the problem.
- *Pragmatism* means that each person is able to evaluate the solutions created for the problem and then select one that is "best" by some criterion (criteria).

- *Multiple causality* is the realization that a situation can be the result of several causes.
- *Multiple methods* is the realization that there are several ways to get to the same solution of a problem.
- *Paradox* is the realization that contradictions are inherent in reality and that a broader view of a situation can resolve contradictions.

The main point in Sinnott's approach is that as people traverse adulthood, they become increasingly able to hold and bridge contradictory concepts or multiple points of view and create adaptive syntheses of them at a higher level of understanding. Sinnott argues that this developmental progression is most likely to be facilitated through interpersonal relationships.

In addition to an increased understanding that there is more than one "right" answer, adult thinking is characterized by the integration of emotion with logic (Diehl et al., 2014; Jain & Labouvie-Vief, 2010; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Labouvie-Vief, Grühn, & Studer, 2010). As they mature, adults tend to make decisions and analyze problems not so much on logical grounds alone, as on pragmatic and emotional grounds. Externally prescribed rules and norms are viewed as relative, not absolute. Mature thinkers realize that thinking is an inherently social enterprise that demands making compromises with other people and tolerating contradiction and ambiguity. Such shifts mean that one's sense of self also undergoes a fundamental change.

Setting the Stage: Personality Development in Adulthood

To understand how personality is inextricably intertwined with key life outcomes such as well-being, health, longevity, and spirituality, let us base our approach in the definition of one of the founders of the filed, Gordon Allport (1961): "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine [the person's] characteristic behavior and thought" (p. 28). For our discussion, the operative concepts here are that personality is dynamic and that it drives behavior and thought. From this view, people are best understood as both who they are and what they are attempting to accomplish or to be (Cantor, 1990).

The Six-Foci Model of Personality and Adult Development

A contemporary model of personality that integrates several conceptual threads and research lines is Hooker's (2002) and Hooker, Choun, and Hall (2010) six-foci model. This model integrates personality structures (traits, personal action constructs, and life stories) with personality processes (states, self-regulation, and self-narration). The structures and processes are paired into three levels of increasing individuality: traits

and their accompanying states (Level I) are found universally; specific personal action constructs and their accompanying self-regulatory processes, often described as personal goals (Level II), can be shared but are more individualized than general traits-states. Finally, one's life story and its accompanying self-narration (Level III) are unique to each individual (Hooker & McAdams, 2003).

A full description of the six-foci model is beyond the scope of this chapter. For present purposes, it is the Level III pairing (life story and self-narration) that is most germane. Level III has been developed most completely through Erikson's life span theory of psychosocial development, the latter stage of which we turn to next.

Integrity Versus Despair

As people enter late life, they begin the struggle of *integrity versus despair*, which involves the process by which people try to make sense of their lives. According to Erikson (1982), this struggle comes about as older adults work to understand their lives in terms of the future of their family and community. Thoughts of a person's own mortality and death are balanced by the realization that they will live on through children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and the community as a whole through their life's work. This realization produces what Erikson calls a "life-affirming involvement" in the present.

The struggle of *integrity versus despair* requires people to engage in a *life review*, the process by which people reflect on the events and experiences of their lifetimes. To achieve integrity, a person must come to terms with the choices and events that have made his or her life unique. There must also be an acceptance of the fact that one's life is drawing to a close. Looking back on one's life may resolve some of the second-guessing of decisions made earlier in adulthood (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), especially given that the longer-term (positive) consequences of those decisions may now be apparent. In contrast, others feel bitter about their choices, blame themselves or others for their misfortunes, see their lives as meaningless, and greatly fear death. These people end up in despair rather than integrity.

Research shows a connection between engaging in a life review and achieving integrity, so life review has become a basis for effective mental health interventions with older adults (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010), especially for older individuals with depression (Hallford & Mellor, 2013). A therapeutic technique called "structured life review" (Haight & Haight, 2007, 2013) has been shown to be effective in helping people deal with stressful life events.

Reaching integrity is an individual journey. Erikson (1982) emphasizes that people who demonstrate integrity come from all backgrounds and cultures and arrive there having taken different paths. Such people have made many different choices and followed many different lifestyles; the point is that everyone has this opportunity to achieve integrity if they strive for it. Those who reach integrity become self-affirming and self-accepting; they judge their lives to have been worthwhile and

good. In Erikson's view, integrity involves coming to terms with one's "one and only lifecycle" and, after integrating all the aspects of one's life, realizing that "death loses its sting" (1959, p. 98). This final stage in Erikson's theory brings the person face to face with the existential question: Did I lead a meaningful life?

Setting the Stage: The Development of Felt Connection

There is another key developmental process in adulthood that is central to understanding the development of spirituality—the development of how we feel connected to the various sides of the self, to others, and to the universe at large (i.e., transcendence). Sinnott (2004, 2006, 2010, 2014) calls this collection of connections Felt Connection. She proposes that the three aspects noted above are central to understanding the notion of self and comprise the origins of the developmental changes in the self noted in the previous section.

For Sinnott (e.g., 2010), connecting the sides of the self involves being in touch with and relating to the various aspects of our personalities, including those that constitute unacknowledged aspects such as the Shadow (Jung, 1930/1971). Connecting with others involves interactions between or among persons that we experience daily. Connecting with the transcendent involves having an ongoing relationship with a power that is larger than oneself, for example, the Great Spirit, the Universe, or God.

In Sinnott's view, each of the three arenas has a motive and pathology (or negative outcome), and the three sets of bilateral interactions each includes challenges and a common prerequisite. These can be understood as follows:

- *Connecting sides of the self:* The motive is to heal the self into one integrated whole. The negative outcome or pathology is inner conflict.
- *Connecting to others:* The motive is the importance of relationships for any species. The negative outcome or pathology is isolation.
- *Connecting with the transcendent:* The motive is to become larger than the local self. The negative outcome or pathology is living a meaningless life.
- *Challenges in the dynamic interplay between connecting with self and connecting with others:* The challenges are the interactions from a multifaceted self and the self viewed from the perspective of others.
- *Challenges in the dynamic interplay between connecting with others and connecting with the transcendent:* The challenges are to see the self and the transcendent in others and see one's identity as both self and transcendent.
- *Challenges in the dynamic interplay between connecting with the transcendent and with the self:* The challenges are to understand the transcendent from an "unfinished" self and to the understanding of the self taking transcendence into account.
- *Common prerequisite:* For development in all three arenas, postformal thought is a necessary requirement.

The common prerequisite of postformal thought underlying successful achievement of each of the three connections connects the developmental progressions apparent in personality, especially the self, and their respective roles in preparing the individual to face the ultimate existential questions. For example, one can easily see the inherent tension and contradiction between the concepts of "self" and "transcendent" as pitting a concept grounded in the importance of "me" being central to all things against a concept grounded in the importance of "all creation" being a unified whole and indivisible into separate "selves." As we will see in the next section, Sinnott's Felt Connection framework is especially useful in understanding the underlying adult developmental processes impelling (or inhibiting) the transition from the False Self to the True Self.

Existential Questions, Postformal Thought, Personality, and Connections: Spirituality in Later Adulthood

The integration of the aspects of spirituality and its underlying adult developmental processes discussed in this chapter results in what could be described as a more integrated notion of the self in service of meaning making (e.g., Kavar, 2015; Nelson-Becker & Gilbert, 2014; Park, 2013; Sinnott, 2009, 2010) as a way for the individual to resolve the core existential questions. This linkage with meaning making has a long history in psychology, most notably dating from Frankl (1946).[1] Lips-Wiersma (2002a, 2002b) extends this connection to the workplace and argues that people's resolution of existential questions in the workplace such as "What is the meaning of my work?" is resolved through a spirituality-based approach to meaning making. The present contribution to this tradition is to further ground meaning making with respect to the existential questions of life with core underlying adult developmental processes.

The dependence of the development of spirituality in later adulthood on the underlying developmental processes of cognitive and personality development, integrated through Sinnott's Felt Connection framework, gives a new and more thorough understanding to Merton's and Rohr's co-description of the developmental progression from the False Self to the True Self in spirituality. Common to both Merton and Rohr is a basis of False Self in what could be considered as thinking that is trapped in a single logical structure, unable to conceive of alternative points of view. For instance, Rohr (2011, 2013) frames the False Self as the basis for exclusionary practices, such as claiming that there is only one true faith (the believer's own) and that all others are heretical. From the earlier discussion in this chapter and the fuller descriptions in both Merton's and Rohr's writings, it is clear that this single logic, egocentric perspective of the False Self is incapable of understanding the

[1] Although Frankl does not explicitly use the concept spirituality, his notion of meaning making is based on "the self-transcendence of human existence," an idea very much in line with both Merton and Rohr, for example, who frame it within spirituality.

rich, deeper meanings of the inherent contradictions and paradoxes that form the core of the major religious traditions (e.g., Jesus' teachings in the New Testament, Zen kōans, Daoist teachings, etc.), instead focusing on the surface meanings alone. Research on the development of the self and on Felt Connections indicates that the False Self is incapable also of deeply understanding the challenges underlying truly reciprocal relationships, such as those exemplified by the Golden Rule. As Rohr notes, doing what is best for another often involves "hating" oneself in the sense that the action ("love") toward another means that in the specific situation at hand, the self "loses" so that the other may "gain."

In contrast, the True Self depends critically on postformal thought in order to resolve the contradictions and paradoxes that unlock the connection to the transcendent, which for Merton and Rohr is a cardinal characteristic of this higher spiritual experience. In particular, Merton and Rohr describe similar processes by which one integrates various aspects of the self, one's relationships with others, and one's relationship with the transcendent (which they both label as God), all of which, as Sinnott (2004, 2005, 2010) notes, depend on postformal thought. To read Merton's and Rohr's descriptions of the True Self is to sense the triumph of the full integration of thought with emotion and self, to have the corrective lenses necessary to see through the blurriness of paradox to a clarity never before experienced.

When in the fullness of time one faces the ultimate existential questions regarding life's meaning, how each individual resolves them (or not) depends entirely on whether the developmental processes underlying the movement from the False Self to the True Self have been nurtured and completed. Certainly, attempting to work through questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" or "Is there anything after this existence?" is approached fundamentally differently depending on developmental level. Just the difference between the compulsion for a single view, tolerating no others, and the realization that there are untold numbers of answers and this is the one I choose for me at this point in my life reflects a complex confluence of underlying developmental processes.

Concluding Thoughts

As understood through Merton's and Rohr's progression from the False Self to the True Self, the developmental trajectory of spirituality in later adulthood becomes a key example of the dynamic interplay among the underlying adult developmental processes of cognition, personality and the self, and the connections we establish within ourselves, with others, and with the transcendent. Taken a step further, it can be argued that personal spiritual development rests first on the deep understanding and resolution of the inherent contradictions and paradoxes that form the core beliefs within religious traditions, described as such by mystics in each of them. It is the fundamental cognitive capacity to hold both aspects of a paradox in mind simultaneously and to be at peace with that that provides the basis for beginning the transition from the False Self to the True Self.

It is this cognitive ability that powers our ability to integrate the various aspects of ourselves into the whole described by Erikson. This, too, involves resolving paradox via the integration of the Shadow (or other aspects of our self typically kept out of conscious reach). Both Merton and Rohr are clear that the transition they describe involves coming to peace with the understanding that the ultimate legacy issue is whether it is based in tangible "stuff" or intangible relationships and their ripple effects. As did the author of *Ecclesiastes*, Merton and Rohr argue that an integrated approach to relationships is what ultimately carries the day. This sets the stage for the last component—the integration of the contradictory aspects of ourselves that form the components of our connections with others and with the transcendent.

In his book *No Man Is an Island*, Merton (1955) makes the point of finding the "one thing necessary" in life, from which all meaning and happiness flows. But here's the kicker:

> Happiness consists in finding out precisely what the "one thing necessary" may be, in our lives, and in gladly relinquishing all the rest. For then, by a divine paradox, we find that everything else is given us together with the one thing we needed. (Merton, 1955)

Answering the ultimate existential question of whether one's life has had meaning in the affirmative depends critically on the ability to live in the paradox. That, in turn, depends on the ability to think at a deeply abstract level and to embrace and integrate all the parts of oneself into a single, paradoxical whole. Doing that will, assuredly, provide the "one thing necessary": the happiness of a meaningful life.

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