

BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL

SEASONED FAITH: RELATIONALITY, PRACTICE, AND COMMUNITY

by

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# Seasoned Faith: Relationality, Practice, and Community

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## CHAPTER 1

### REDEFINING THE NOTIONS OF FAITH

This chapter establishes the framework for understanding *exemplary* faith. It draws from the scholarship of Emmanuel Lartey, Craig Dykstra, Nicola Slee, and others to demonstrate how *relationality* impacts the evolution of exemplary faith. By building a case for a relational paradigm for faith development, the chapter develops the groundwork for subsequent efforts, which include: 1) an in-depth examination of Howard Thurman's mystical theology and how it illuminates exemplary faith; 2) interpreting selected African American slave narratives and uncovering the embedded elements of relationality, faith practices, and community; 3) constructing a revised critical correlation that explores the language and components of faith, hope, and meaning-making; 4) conducting and assessing a research study that underscores how relationality, faith practices, and community each relates to exemplary faith in addition to establishing the framework for a pastoral theology of "seasoned faith;" and 6) providing a pastoral counseling strategy for caregivers ministering to growing faith exemplars and offering a context that encourages caregivers to attend to their own evolving faith.

#### ***The Concept of Faith***

This study begins with the following personal definition of faith. Faith is *God's spiritual gift to humanity that is developed through ongoing relational arrangements and practices which shape the course of a person's life and ultimately guide one in yielding actively to and depending upon God's presence and promises as sources for hope.*

Clearly stated in this definition are two important components: relationality and faith practices. The outcome of these two components, yielding and depending on God,

focuses on the activity of faith as manifested in individuals. The definition has an embedded emphasis on narrative as a guiding force spanning the lives of faithing individuals. The term *faith exemplars* describes persons that epitomize relationality with God.

Faith exemplars *know* themselves as children of God. Their primary identity is associated in context with their relationship to God. According to Howard Thurman, casting one's primary identity in relational terms between self and God enables one to "absorb all the violences of life."<sup>1</sup> Relationality found in religion serves as a conduit for such an experience for Christians, says Thurman, because it provides

a sense of a personal God, *their* God. And of course if you feel this way, you can stand anything else because people who are doing these things [causing suffering and oppression] to you are mere human beings. But you know the Creator of Existence confirms you, and when you internalize that, you can endure.<sup>2</sup>

This research argues that relational faith is embedded in the personalities of faith exemplars and serves as a source of strength and hope that counteracts the structures of violence and oppression in the world. Such persons are identified by the manner in which they express their beliefs and how they live out such beliefs. Faith exemplars tend to speak with God language built in directly to their conversation and employ faith practices as a part of their daily routine. This project will highlight such characteristics, especially in the chapters on mysticism, slave narratives, and the qualitative research.

### *Assumptions about Faith*

Before deconstructing the definition of faith, we will examine several assumptions concerning faith from an amalgam of schools of thought preceding this

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Eyre, "An Interview with Howard Thurman and Ronald Eyre," *Theology Today* 38, No. 2 (July 1981): 209.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

study. These assumptions help clarify the breadth of experience encompassed in the faithing process.

In her book, *Human Development and Faith*, Felicity Kelcourse proposes several assumptions that undergird a broad range of definitions of faith. She develops these in terms of dualities, the first of which is *faith as trust or cognition*. Here, one views faith as a “confident attitude toward God and others” or as a cognitive state that enables one “to know God”<sup>3</sup> or be knowledgeable of God. The definition in this research takes into consideration both perspectives of this duality. Experience and observation of persons in faith communities reveals that faith is not an either/or hypothesis. It is a both/and reality. Persons of faith incline their attitude (or disposition) toward God. This perspective is based on the assurance of the reality of God. Springsted renames this polarity as “taking God at his [sic] word.”<sup>4</sup>

The second basic assumption concerns whether faith is a *result of proposition or religious experience*. Both assumptions are relevant when seeking a relational faith because persons identify with God and grow to understand the meaning of their faith through established language of the church, such as creeds and doctrine. Conversely, religious experience is also a means of directly relating to God. While this polarity may appear to present opposite ends of a spectrum, it actually exists as conjoining points along a continuum because both are essential for relational faith. Indeed, doctrine itself arises from persons’ first-order experience, although it is usually described as a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> order experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Felicity B. Kelcourse, ed., *Human Development and Faith: Life-Cycle Stages of Body, Mind, and Soul* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Eric O. Springsted, *The Act of Faith: Christian Faith and the Moral Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 245.

A third assumption proposed by Kelcourse concerns whether human beings are *naturally faithing creatures or whether faith is bestowed upon us by God*. Another way of stating the former is by asking if persons can transcend a natural state of knowing and achieve transcendence alone or is God's grace necessary for relationship with the divine? This research argues that faith is God's gift to human persons.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there is an assumption that *faith rests on sets of beliefs and disbelief*. The argument here centers on establishing criteria for what is correct belief and rejecting that which is objectionable. Both are equally important for a growing faith. A person of faith eventually develops a means of discerning what tenets to retain and which ones to relinquish. This project argues from a standpoint of Christian belief, which has a corpus of doctrine. While this project draws from the Wesleyan tradition, there is no intent to argue for the content of orthodox belief. We are interested in the make-up and development of relational faith within the broad Christian tradition.

To recap, the aforementioned assumptions about faith establish the constitutive elements and underscore the breadth of meaning that faith often encompasses. The assumptions provide perspective along a continuum of meaning that offers context for the established definition. It is essential to distinguish that faith is more than a human-induced capacity for trust or confidence. It is God's gift to humanity. What follows is further delineation of the working definition of faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 55. Graham defines *human person* as "a synthesizing and creating center of experience, who both reflects and at least partially reshapes the other systems in which he or she is embedded."

### *Working Definition of Faith*

Faith is *God's spiritual gift to humanity that is developed through ongoing relational arrangements and practices which shape the course of a person's life and ultimately guide one in yielding actively to and depending upon God's presence and promises as sources for hope.* The manner in which one adapts this faith framework is the subject of this project. We will unpack this definition in order to provide a “thick description” of faith.

First, faith in a theological context exceeds our human capacity of creating. For our purposes here, it is an outpouring from God. As John Wesley described, “It is much more properly a ‘gift’ that is graciously evoked in our lives by the pardoning overtures of God.”<sup>6</sup> Wesley’s description captures the *gifted* nature of faith and the essentiality of God’s contribution to the faithing process.

Yet, while God initiates faith, God does not complete it. There is a requisite human response involved in the faithing process. Kinghorn asserts, “that God’s relationship with an individual—as in any interpersonal relationship—cannot be unilaterally established by God. Instead, some kind of human response of faith is necessary if a personal relationship with God is to be established.”<sup>7</sup> He further elaborates on this idea saying, “Any personal relationship involves a mutual recognition of, and response to, the agency of the other person.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Randy L Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Kinghorn, *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs be Freely Chosen?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



Secondly, faith is a perpetual activity of the self. Pastoral theologian F. Gerrit Immink states, “faith is enacted in a constant interaction with the vicissitudes of life.”<sup>9</sup> Though faith may ebb and flow, it is always operational, not dormant awaiting activation. It is an ongoing activity that is *relational*. Judith Jordan, whose work is in the domain of women’s development, speaks of relationality in a manner that informs faith development. She describes relationality as an “increased mutuality (an interplay of initiative and responsiveness) and increased capacity to grow in connection and to contribute to the growing connection.”<sup>10</sup> As Christians, we profess relationship with God (and others) and *actively* pursue it. Over time, faith becomes more relational and etched into our identity. Stokes sums this idea up saying, faith “is an active and ever-becoming part of my life and yours...it is always in process.”<sup>11</sup>

Next, persons of faith *yield*, or give into, God’s presence and promises. Yielding suggests that the self wills its attention toward that which is from God—a vocational call, for example. Concurrently, the self acknowledges a need for obedience, defined by Dykstra as “a response of gratitude and love to a gracious and loving God whose requirements are for the sake of creation.”<sup>12</sup> Not only are persons submitting to God, but also committing to God’s created order. This action serves as a conduit for relationality so practices that give substance to the fabric of shared life will flourish within Christian community.

Yielding to God’s presence and promises has an inherent qualification—confidence (or knowledge) that God is an incarnational reality living in us through Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> F. Gerrit Immink, *Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Judith V. Jordan, *Relational Development: Therapeutic Implications of Empathy and Shame* (Wellesley, MA: Stone Center, 1989), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Stokes, *Faith is a Verb* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith* (Louisville: Geneva, 1999), 28.

Indeed, Christ establishes this element of relationality in faith in his statement, “Abide in me and I in you” (John 15.4). The Greek word for abide, *meno*, means “continue to be present.” Thus, faithfulness has a quality of maintaining awareness of Christ’s continuous presence in our lives, which goes hand-in-hand with participating in Christian practices. Together, they provide meaning to relationality in the life of faith. Practices enable *knowing* God (as in knowledge that arises through experience) and becoming more aware of God’s promises, especially as persons participate in practices such as corporate worship and bible study. (Reading scripture is a practice that facilitates this.) Thus, *yielding* is inherently tied to relationality and practice.

A further distinction is in order here. Yielding, or submitting, in the Christian tradition should not be confused with the metaphor of master/slave or master/servant where one submits against one’s will. Here, one defers *voluntarily* out of love for God and neighbor, not due to force or threat to one’s livelihood. Yielding in this variation does not involve coercion; it occurs freely. In effect, one willingly gives oneself over to God. Such giving may entail sacrifice as one yields to God’s will through the act of love.

Daniel Day Williams asserts, “To love is to be in a relationship where the action of the other alters one’s own experience.”<sup>13</sup> Yielding to God does alter our experience and also alters how we interpret our own agency and the influence of others in our lives. On the one hand, we may be coerced to submit because of structures in society such as patriarchy, sexism, racism, and so on. These are not borne of love, however. On the other hand, we can submit, or yield, because of personal freedom and the promises that God has given us through Jesus Christ. This is borne out of love for God and through it we have the possibility of transcending the aforementioned human-made structures.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 127.

There is a final point concerning yielding. Just below the surface of actively yielding is a stirring of the human will. Within the Christian tradition, some have referred to this as the affections, or the arousal of human emotions. Immink argues,

A definite measure of existential involvement is also typical of a living faith. Knowing and trusting are not merely rational matters, but they resonate in our affections and ambitions. Our inner drives, our emotions, and our goals play their part. Faith is able to lead people to do things. Our affections are stimulated, and our drives and ambitions are involved.<sup>14</sup>

Yielding to God entails harnessing our affections and assenting to trust God even though the choice exists to do otherwise. Indeed, Jones argues that “assent to specific assertions concerning God”<sup>15</sup> is inseparable from faith.

One of God’s promises that faith exemplars take seriously is new or eternal *life*. They expect an experience of transformation as a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5.17). Indeed, faith involves recognizing new life as a present and future reality. Faith allows us to be in relationship with God and others now and eternally. An implicit message here is that exercising and practicing faith in the present yields the promise of life everlasting in the future. The promise of life anew through relationship with God and others provokes an “attitude of empowerment”<sup>16</sup> that shapes persons’ lives potentially into faith exemplars. Along with empowerment comes a steady desire for more closeness (or identification) with God, or growth<sup>17</sup> in faith.

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<sup>14</sup> Immink, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, “The Necessity of Objective Assent in the Act of Christian Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (April-June 2005): 158.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Dykstra offers a nice definition of “growth.” He argues that growth is confined to “power, significance, richness, and depth as more and more dimensions of our individual and corporate lives are touched by and conformed to” God’s presence. See Dykstra, 39.

### *Personal Influences*

Larry Graham argues that a primary source of knowledge for pastoral theology is the pastoral theologian's personality and lived experience. This argument is vitally important.

Since the pastoral caretaker and theologian is a person who is systemically *related* to other realities, his or her personality is a central resource for creating new theory and practice for ministry from the interplay of forces operative in the ministry of care. Thus the religious, psychological, social, and cultural heritages of the pastoral theologian play significant roles in the pastoral theological enterprise.<sup>18</sup>

With this in mind, it is fitting that I identify myself more fully. I am an African American male who was reared in a middle-class upbringing. I am divorced with no children. As a clergy person credentialed in both the United Methodist Church and Unitarian Universalist Association, I find myself indebted to the Wesleyan and Congregational traditions. I practice ministry as a minister of pastoral care in a local church and as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force. This background informs my pastoral theological reflection and practice of ministry.

### *Theological Perspective*

John Wesley held the belief that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. As such, Wesley once argued that faith is “‘a sure trust and confidence’ in the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and a steadfast hope of all good things to be received at God’s hand.”<sup>19</sup> This, indeed, may be the most important assumption to reiterate going forward with this project--that God entrusts human persons with faith and is a primary being in the relationships that bind our faith.

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<sup>18</sup> Graham, 23.

<sup>19</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2000* (Nashville, United Methodist Publishing, 2000), 81.

### *Biblical Perspectives*

In searching the origins of my definitions, several threads emerge. From the Christian tradition, a logical starting place is the description of faith in the Book of Hebrews (New Revised Standard Version). In chapter 11, the author provides the following understanding of faith:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (1-3) [*Italics mine.*]

The definition describes a disposition, or perspective, regarding the future based on what can only be imagined. Highlighting conviction heightens its special bearing on this project. McClendon and Smith describe convictions as “those kinds of persistent beliefs that a person or community holding them cannot easily relinquish without becoming a significantly different person or community.”<sup>20</sup> Convictions are an essential part of personal identity for faith exemplars.

### *Wesleyan Understanding*

Similarly to the writer of Hebrews, Wesley defined faith as

*an evidence, a divine evidence and conviction ... of things not seen; not visible, not perceivable either by sight, or by any other of the external senses. It implies both a supernatural evidence of God, and the things of God, a kind of spiritual light exhibited to the soul, and a supernatural sight or perception thereof.*<sup>21</sup>  
[Italics in original text.]

With this definition, it becomes apparent that Wesley viewed faith as a spiritual gift that endowed its owner with an ability or power to discern God’s presence and activity in the world. One senses Wesley’s belief that faith was beyond ordinary knowledge and contained an intuitive and spiritual element borne out of God’s indwelling in a person’s

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Rev. N. Burwash, S.T.D., *Wesley’s 52 Standard Sermons* (Salem, OH: Schmul, 1988), 442.

life. Faith is gifted from God, through the Holy Spirit, and imbues its holder with “a prospect of the invisible things of God: *we see the spiritual world*, which is all round about us.”<sup>22</sup> Wesley considered faith the key to justification and salvation.

Wesley also viewed faith as the key to Christian maturity. At the core of Wesley’s understanding of faith was a person’s “immediate and indubitable assurance of God’s loving presence in his [or her] heart.”<sup>23</sup> One immediately hears Wesley’s emphasis on trusting in God’s presence. This carries forward when he insists on a faith that enables “confidence in God.”<sup>24</sup> It is this *confidence* that enables one’s dependence upon God.<sup>25</sup>

*James Fowler*

Fowler’s groundbreaking study on faith, *Stages of Faith*, places more emphasis on the cognitive, moral-ethical, and universal dimensions of faith. Reaching beyond the locus of religious orientation, Fowler places his definition in a broader trajectory of knowledge and experiences with an emphasis on meaning. Fowler provides an understanding of how faith can transcend any parochial or tradition-specific meanings and still be grounded in ultimate concern; that is, power and trust beyond the human domain of existence. Fowler’s definition is as follows:

People’s evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and world (as they construct them) as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them) and of shaping their lives’ purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images—conscious and unconscious—of them).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>23</sup> Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley also emphasized that trust and confidence in God was the basis for eternal life.

<sup>26</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 92-93.

Though Fowler’s definition of faith leans towards the cognitive aspect of knowing, one may notice traces of his influence in my working definition. But more significantly, Fowler is important for this project because of his insistence that faith is oriented in meaning-making and has relational and social characteristics that add complexity to the dynamic of one’s orientation. Fowler’s insistence that faith has verb-like characteristics and is rooted in action is congruent with this research. More specifically, faith “is a dynamic process arising out of our experiences of interaction with the diverse persons, institutions, events and relationships that make up the ‘stuff’ of our lives.”<sup>27</sup> A primary distinction of this research is the overarching assertion that faith is God’s gift that has important relational components. Fowler does not take this position.

*Craig Dykstra*

Faith for Craig Dykstra is “primarily a response to a gift, an activity of recognizing and accepting God’s grace, which gives rise to a way of life—a way of believing, trusting, committing, and orienting all one’s thoughts and actions.”<sup>28</sup> His definition, shaped largely from Reformed theological perspectives, emphasizes two components, which he calls “reciprocal realities.”<sup>29</sup> One is faith; the other is the *life of faith*. Here, faith involves belief, knowledge, truth, and freedom. When one has faith, one is convicted of “the deep, life-changing knowledge of something particular: God’s gracious freeing of us and God’s abiding love for us and for the whole of creation.”<sup>30</sup> Dykstra equates conviction with an unwavering certainty and knowledge with an inward experience of God’s presence. The life of faith can be summarized as the disposition of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>28</sup> Dykstra, 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 21.

mind and heart that is “life-oriented, empowered, undergirded, and sustained by the Source of life itself.”<sup>31</sup> From this comes a multitude of life patterns aimed at righteousness, faithful service and hopefulness.

Dykstra’s work reinforces the importance of maintaining a conviction of God’s presence in one’s life and relying upon God’s promises as a way of living in the world. His stress on orienting one’s life activities (heart and mind) based on God’s grace and love resonates strongly with our working definition, which stresses yielding and dependence on God.

Also significant is Dykstra’s classification of faith as a “response to a gift,” which suggests a disposition that results from God’s call to human persons. In an earlier article, he suggests that faith consists of “the wisdom proper to the life of the believer.”<sup>32</sup>

Dykstra argues that “thinking faith” is the inheritance of faithful Christians, who

over the centuries, created a body of thought of immense richness, subtlety, and grace—a body of thought of enormous power to inspire and shape the human heart and will, and of such beauty as to captivate and compel the mind.<sup>33</sup>

One might conclude that such wisdom is the content of the gift to humanity that is deserving of human response towards God. Similar to Dykstra, the response argued for here is an orientation toward God that has the capacity of transforming one’s perspective so that a hopeful future is no longer a matter of question, but a certain reality. This is the type of disposition that faith exemplars appear to maintain.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>32</sup> Craig Dykstra, “Looking Ahead at Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 28, No. 1 (Autumn 1991): 103.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1991, 103.



### ***Statement of the Problem—Our Need for Relationality***

This study will pursue the question, “What is the impact of relationality in the faithing process?” In other words, how is one’s identity as a person of faith, more specifically a *faith exemplar*, impacted as a result of the cumulative effect of interpersonal interaction with others during one’s life? By introducing this question, this research asserts the need for relationality as a vital component in the faithing process. First, I will provide a working definition of relationality. Then, I will demonstrate the extent to which this integral part of faith has been overlooked by other models of faith development. This is followed by introducing current insights on relationality as a means of articulating the need for relationality in the faith development equation.

In *Toward a Relational Voice of Faith*, Devor broadly defines *relationality* as “relationship with God, [and] experience of ongoing connection amidst the loss or threatened loss of connection in human relationships.”<sup>34</sup> Devor’s description of relationality, while not comprehensive, provides us a point of departure. She highlights the essential elements of relationship with God and ongoing connection in human interaction that characterize the faithing process.

In *Women’s Faith Development*, pastoral theologian Nicola Slee provides more specificity regarding the characteristics of relationality. She shares four proposals. First, relationality has a strong emphasis on wholism and being inclusive. This means rejecting dualisms that separate “supernature and nature, spirit and matter, humanity and nature, mind and body, spirituality and sexuality; and an affirmation of the essential

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<sup>34</sup> N. G. Devor, *Toward a Relational Voice of Faith* (Ph. D. diss., Boston University, 1989), in Nicola Slee, *Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and Process* (Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2004), 34.

interdependence of all things.”<sup>35</sup> The second component introduces a three-fold schema of embodiment she describes as “explicitly incarnational.” Emphasis here is on “connectedness to the earth and to matter...with a positive regard for the physicality and bodiliness of human experience...and a stress on the immanence of the divine presence within the world.”<sup>36</sup> Third, Slee emphasizes life-affirming spirituality rooted in giving birth and nurturing life. Finally, relationality is committed to diversity and difference within community. As Slee eloquently states, “interdependence implies the inherent value of every living being, issuing in a reverence for all life, and the freedom of each living thing to be its distinctive self, thus necessitating the embrace of otherness within an essential connectedness.”<sup>37</sup> The stress on connectedness in its various dimensions (within self, self and other--earth, community, and divine) is appropriately at the core of relationality.

Another aspect of relationality that deserves attention is agency. Persons involved in the faithing process maintain volition and the ability to accept or reject God’s gift. Thus, while God initiates faith in relationship with humans, God does not complete the relationship alone. There is a human component that is essential to the faithing process. Kinghorn asserts “that God’s relationship with an individual—as in any interpersonal relationship—cannot be unilaterally established by God. Instead, some kind of human response of faith is necessary if a personal relationship with God is to be established.”<sup>38</sup> He further elaborates on this idea saying, “Any personal relationship involves a mutual

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kinghorn, 51.

recognition of, and response to, the agency of the other person.”<sup>39</sup> This is a vital component of relationality because agency takes seriously the element of human freedom. This project will demonstrate that mature faith develops as one freely chooses to depend upon God’s promises.

### *Developmental Perspective*

While seeking an understanding of how faith exemplars deepen their faith, the research will utilize Robert Kegan’s theory of human development, which provides both an epistemological (ways of knowing) and meaning-making framework. In his book, *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan describes human persons as “active organizers of their experience.”<sup>40</sup> Organizing experience is not limited to thought processes or cognition; it also involves a hermeneutical process that pastoral theologians know as meaning-making. Meaning-making is concerned with formulating an understanding about particular experience(s) or events that occur in human life. While this involves cognitive operations of the mind, it is also more than that. Says Kegan, “It is about the organizing principle we bring to our thinking and our feelings and our relating to others and our relating to parts of ourselves.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, there is a relational aspect in the meaning-making process that complements the cognitive aspects.

To further understand this, it is important to examine what Kegan calls *orders of consciousness*. The term is used to describe “dimensions” of mental organization that persons use in structuring and understanding their everyday experience. According to Kegan, orders of consciousness are structured on three domains of meaning organization: logical-cognitive, social-cognitive, and intrapersonal-affective—where each domain

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1994), 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

underscores a range of development within the individual. There are five organizing principles, or orders of consciousness: 1) independent elements, 2) durable categories, 3) cross-categorical structures, 4) complex systems, and 5) trans-system structures. In this framework, each successive principle encompasses that which precedes it, or “‘goes meta’ on the last.”<sup>42</sup> Kegan’s theory, specifically, the third (cross-categorical knowing) and fourth (complex systems) orders of consciousness are instructive for understanding the faithing process observed in faith exemplars.<sup>43</sup>

Concerning the third order Kegan says, “to be in serious relationship to others entails a co-constructing of ourselves out of the relation between the categories of my perspective and their perspective (the cross-categorical subjectivity).”<sup>44</sup> The term construction refers to what Kegan calls a “socialization” process that results when persons interact in society. This socialization results in persons “bringing inside of [themselves] the other’s point of view.”<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> This process correlates with persons of faith *bringing inside* themselves the faith stories transmitted through significant relations within their faith community. Faith exemplars might be those who have made the other’s point of view “intrinsic” to their own being. According to Kegan, this is not a *cognitive* realignment generated by a “tiny adjustment in our thinking,” or changing the “degree of closeness;”<sup>47</sup> this process is a result of a change in consciousness. Nor can one “assume that a person possesses [third or fourth order of consciousness] because he or she has

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>43</sup> I will describe the first and second orders of consciousness later in the research.

<sup>44</sup> Kinghorn., 126.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> The term *co-construction* is also used by narrative therapists for describing “the process in which people mutually reinforce or transform each other’s (and their own) perceptions.” It is a particularly useful construct in couple’s therapy and refers to the therapist’s role of influencing perceptions through carefully crafted questions and each partner’s influence of the other as they share stories of their experience together. See Phillip Ziegler and Tobey Hiller, *Recreating Partnership* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 217.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

reached a certain age, achieved a certain educational level, or attained a certain social position.”<sup>48</sup> It results from a change in individuals’ ways of being based on relationality.

The transition to the fourth order, argues Kegan, is a result of “a qualitative reconstruction of what self and what other will even be *in relation*.”<sup>49</sup> Persons are no longer *made up by* the two different perspectives, but are capable of “doing something with”<sup>50</sup> the co-construction and being in relationship to it. Concerning faith exemplars, *others* include God and significant people in one’s faith community. For such persons, Kegan argues that they are “bigger than these co-constructions,” and therefore, can decide upon an appropriate response to them without “moving away from”<sup>51</sup> the other(s). An example of this in life might be two persons in relationship but of different perspectives on an issue of faith. The more seasoned person can understand the difference between the two perspectives, recognize the appropriateness of both perspectives, and remain in relationship with the other person respectfully and authentically.

This distinction is paramount in distinguishing faith exemplars from persons whose faith life is largely dependent upon internal experience (how they feel about God or others) or the “present nature of [their] bond” with God (does God love them or does God forgive them?). Faith exemplars possess an internal barometer that operates independently of internal or external experience and enables them to be in relation to God and others based on a faith-grounded consciousness with which they can *do something*. Kegan calls this a “*new kind* of bond or connection.”<sup>52</sup> The manner in which persons grow in relation to God is also related to their theological perspective. The mystics, for

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 121

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

example, encountered God directly as another person and sometimes in nature. Their language, therefore, sometimes was relational; other times, it seemed more organic. This theological perspective more specifically employs the language of faith to describe how persons understand God relationally, themselves as children of God, and the world they inhabit. We will examine that area of research now.

### *Theological Perspective*

Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey articulates the importance of relationality by stating

It appears that the images of significance and importance that wield influence for good and ill in our experience are most often experienced and expressed in relational terms. Relationship, rather than individual isolated subjectivity, is that which impacts us most. In point in fact it is the nature and manner of the relationships we have with ‘significant’ figures that influences our sense of health, well-being, and selfhood.<sup>53</sup>

Persons of faith are under the influence of other persons of faith, within and outside of their community of faith, and with the Triune God. When we take Lartey’s position seriously and examine faith in *relational terms*, we come to understand that faith is interpersonal and interactive. Thus, we are dependent upon God and others for faith to flourish and develop. Lartey argues that humans are “constitutionally ‘programmed’ to discover significance through relationships,”<sup>54</sup> beginning with our parental relations. Conversely, a faith developed in isolation will likely wither.

What are these relational terms of which Lartey speaks? Not surprisingly, he points out expressions used in the family (father, mother, son, etc.), refers to terms that describe our origins as relational creatures (Creator, Sustainer, Renewer), and signifies the “Comforter” (Spirit) in appropriately relational terms. Then, he argues, “It is

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<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 118.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

significant that all the anthropological terms that are used in reference to the nature of God are interpersonal.”<sup>55</sup> Using interpersonal terms to describe God suggests that we best identify with God, and that which is transcendent, when we can use relational language. After all, humans are relational creatures. We are not automatons existing in the world in a mechanical fashion. We are created for and need interaction with others as a source of life. Persons of deep faith need interaction with God, knowing that “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (John 1:3)

Feminist theologians have made relationality a core theme in their research. While emphasizing the differences between men’s and women’s ways of relating and finding significance, such as a focus on autonomous (men) versus interpersonal (women) relations, feminists also point out a *programmed* need for persons to seek out a “living web”<sup>56</sup> where significant relationships flourish and develop meaning. Christie Neuger argues that from this understanding of relationality “various feminist theologians have discovered new ways for the Divine-human relationship to be expressed that would empower women (as well as men) to see themselves more clearly as both created in and able to reflect the image of God.”<sup>57</sup> We will take a closer look at this perspective later in this chapter when reviewing theological perspectives. But next, we begin an examination of mysticism.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>56</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology,” in *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore & Brita L. Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 90.

<sup>57</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, “Women and Relationality,” in *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore & Brita L. Gill-Austern, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 119.

*Howard Thurman's Mysticism as a Window to Relationality*

In the definition of faith, persons grow in relation to God as a living power and source of hope as early in their lives as their experience permits or as they gain an awareness of God's presence. Christian mysticism speaks directly to this point. Speaking on the subject, Rudolf Otto proclaimed, "Mysticism becomes voluntarist in the highest sense—a mysticism of the surrender of the personal will to the active and eternal will."<sup>58</sup> In essence, Otto argues that mysticism is the highest form of relationship with God. Meister Eckhart, a central figure in Christian mysticism, asserted that God's posture is "a drive toward union, or reunion, or more intimate development"<sup>59</sup> with human persons. Both ideas stress relationality with God as central to Christian experience.

Howard Thurman, a noted African American mystic and theologian, confirmed the importance of relationality by stating, "The central fact of religious experience is the awareness of meeting God."<sup>60</sup> For Thurman, the implications of meeting God are two-fold: 1) "the individual is exposed to the kind of experience that is capable of providing an ultimate clue to all levels of reality, to all dimensions of time, and to all aspects of faith;"<sup>61</sup> and 2) "The God-person encounter...is experienced as providing a sense of the ultimate worth of the individual as a private person."<sup>62</sup>

Thurman's writings suggest that meeting God holds enormous transformative potential for persons concerning faith. Regarding the faithing process he says, the "profoundest dimension is the finding of the individual by God and the finding of God by

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<sup>58</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 225-37, as quoted in Marty E. Marty, "Mysticism and the Religious Quest for Freedom" *Christian Century* 100, No. 8 (March 16, 1983): 245.

<sup>59</sup> As quoted in Marty, 245.

<sup>60</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 23.

<sup>61</sup> John H. Cartwright, "The Religious Ethics of Howard Thurman," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 5, No. 1, (1985): 82.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



the individual.”<sup>63</sup> This project argues that this transformative potential is at the heart of faith exemplars’ acquiescence and trust in God.

Thurman also emphasizes relationality in human interaction as a significant means of transferring the content of faith. Speaking personally about his relationship with his grandmother, who was a former slave, he says, “The things that came directly from my grandmother are very important.”<sup>64</sup> He then describes three inheritances from her that include: 1) a drive to become “a strong, positive, self-contained human being;”<sup>65</sup> 2) her “enormous respect for the magic there is in knowledge;”<sup>66</sup> and 3) an “almost unconscious autonomy that did not seek vindication in my environment because it was in me.”<sup>67</sup> Each of these aspects of his grandmother’s personality strongly shaped Thurman’s personality and identity. However, the last quality directly impacted his *faith* identity.

He recounted that his grandmother was fond of telling stories of slave preachers, whom she described as always ending their sermons the same way. In an interview, he described her stories in the following manner.

Then she would say: “He would stand up, start very quietly and then look around to all of us in the room and then he would say, ‘You are not slaves, you are not niggers—you are God’s children’...”<sup>68</sup>

Thurman suggests that his grandmother’s story (part of their relationship) helped solidify his own identity as a person of faith. Her stories became his stories. Being with her, watching her emote, and listening to her recount the stories instilled in him those characteristics that were mentioned earlier. Moreover, the transmission of experience

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>64</sup> Mary E. Goodwin, “Racial Roots and Religion: An Interview with Howard Thurman,” *Christian Century* 90, Vol. 19 (May 9, 1973): 533.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 533-34.

through storying facilitated his *internalizing* a language of faith that became his own, which he later passed along to his own children. This project will examine how such transmission occurs between persons of faith. Part of transmission involves practices, more specifically faith practices, and involves the manner that faith is incorporated into daily life (and transmitted between persons and generations). We will now turn to examine faith practices and their impact on faith development.

### ***Faith Practices***

Lartey argues that, “God seeks us out, pursues us, calls us to come into the loving relationship that we were created to enjoy.”<sup>69</sup> In response, persons of faith say, “Yes!” because we *care* (an essential part of relationality). Experience has shown that mature Christians care so much about their relationship with God that they are willing to stake their *total identity* upon God. When mature Christians describe their experiences, the language of their relationship with God is fully integrated in their speech. Tillich described this type of devotion as the “total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern.”<sup>70</sup> This study intends to pursue the manner in which this devotion is lived out in persons’ faith practices. A primary method will be to explore pastoral theologians’ perspectives about practices.

In the book *Choosing Peace Through Daily Practices*, pastoral theologian Ellen Ott Marshall describes a practice as “an action performed repeatedly so that it cultivates a particular disposition.”<sup>71</sup> Elaine Graham emphasizes that practices may be further

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<sup>69</sup> *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2003), 7.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ellen Ott Marshall, ed., *Choosing Peace Through Daily Practices* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 8.

characterized as “structured behaviour which follows certain rules and patterns.”<sup>72</sup> There are several distinguishing characteristics of practices. First, practice can be “any form of activity.”<sup>73</sup> One need not be limited to specific sorts of activities (meditative, reflective, activist, etc.) The second criterion is that practices be “deliberately chosen.”<sup>74</sup> The third characteristic points to the cognitive activity demanded by practice--reflection. That is, one decides on an activity, then after performing it, looks back upon the experience at its effects. Fourth, the practice “reinforce[s] a habit.”<sup>75</sup> The fifth characteristic of practice is result, or the “effect it promises in our life and world.”<sup>76</sup> Here, Marshall argues that a practice has a purpose beyond itself. Similarly, Dykstra insists that practices position persons so they can “recognize and participate in the work of God’s grace in the world.”<sup>77</sup> For example, establishing a “posture” of prayerfulness, such as when saying grace over a meal, contributes to maintaining a habitual stance of gratitude. These five characteristics will serve as a lens for examining the faith practices of persons in the study.

Theologically speaking, practice is related to the action or activity of reflection and discerning appropriate responses. This often includes reflection upon sacred texts, such as the scriptures, hymns, spirituals, and other forms of narrative. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, embedded in these activities are norms and virtues that “give moral substance and direction to practice.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, in order for such transmission to occur, an “immersion in relationships of obligation and honesty with others”<sup>79</sup> is essential.

Elaine Graham pushes this idea further by arguing that engaging in practices “gives rise

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<sup>72</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1968), 299-300.

<sup>78</sup> As cited in Graham, 99.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

to new knowledge.”<sup>80</sup> Such knowledge can lead to increased competency, as in skills, but also in discerning deeper meanings from experience and storying. This returns us to the task of reflection and discernment. An example of the new competency is trusting God. A person of faith may grow to trust God for positive outcomes rather than worry him or herself into a frenzy. Trust becomes their new pattern for being as they shed their past pattern of habitual worry.

Narrative theology can assist in this task of reflection and discernment. It also aids the pastoral theological task of bringing together mature faith and relationality. In their book, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God in the World in a Transitional Age*, Grenz and Olson argue that

The genius of narrative theology lies in its assertion that faith entails the joining of our personal stories with the transcendent/immanent story of a religious community and ultimately with the grand narrative of the divine action in the world. The divine story mediated by the community of faith transcends our individual, finite narratives; yet it is immanent both in history of the world and by faith in the ongoing story of the life of the believer.<sup>81</sup>

Through the telling of stories, especially those redemptive narratives from the Christian tradition, such as Thurman’s grandmother’s stories, persons discover “the basis for personal identity and existence.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, in this framework, storying and passing down narratives is itself a form of practice. Graham directs attention to the pastoral function of telling stories. She argues that story-telling “defines the shape of the community and helps locate individual meaning and identity; but it also implies certain kinds of value-commitments concerning the nature of truth and knowledge.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Peter Paris argues

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Stanley L. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 271.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>83</sup> Graham, 113.

that in African religion, which is examined in more detail later in this project, “the normative sources of morality are mythology, proverbs, folktales, the oral tradition as mediated through the elders.”<sup>84</sup> This project will pursue and explicate these arguments in an effort to demonstrate how narrative and storying impacts relationality.

As persons develop their faculties for meaning-making, the community to which they belong takes on increasing importance, especially with regards to understanding revelation and the transmission of faith. Citing H. Richard Niebuhr, Grenz and Olson engage in a discussion of narrative and its dependency upon the process of revelation in the community of faith. According to the authors, “one’s community is indispensable in the process of revelation, for it functions as the bearer of narratives and the symbols, which when internalized by the individual become the occasion for revelation.”<sup>85</sup> The significance of this argument for this project is that it alludes to how communal settings are essential for the transmission of faith and its various meanings. It also points to relationality as the bearer of revelation, especially regarding how God’s presence is revealed in a relational setting. We caught a glimpse of this process at work when examining Thurman’s work above. We will examine this in the research on practices.

### ***Structure of Remaining Study***

The remainder of this study is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 will offer a critical description of faith development from the mystical tradition. Howard Thurman’s mystical theology is instructive with its focus on the human-divine relationship, emphasis on faith practices, and community. His spiritual practice accentuates the notion that faith takes hold when a person’s recognition of God as a

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 41.

<sup>85</sup> Grenz and Olson., 274-5.

relational being emerges. Thurman confirms this saying, “The central fact of religious experience is the awareness of meeting God.”<sup>86</sup> It will be on these grounds regarding relationality and faith practices that this research draws conclusions regarding the development of mature faith.

Chapter 3 will provide an examination of practices from the African American slave narratives and will draw from Yuval Taylor’s *I Was Born a Slave*. The intent here is to argue that faith practices from the African American slave tradition can speak to modern-day dilemmas of faith development for all people regardless of ethnicity. The “peculiar institution” will serve as a window into the life of faith. Marty says, “What we find is that when white masters absolutely prevented slave revolt—the ecology of plantations, the presence of swamps and dogs and informers, the prevention of large gatherings for celebration or conspiracy were efficient—the black slaves drew into closer communion with God.”<sup>87</sup>

Chapter 4 will establish a theological framework for exemplary faith, meaning-making and hope by examining Andrew Lester’s pastoral theological framework on transfinite hope. We continue our exploration of developmental theory by closely examining Kegan’s theory of human development and expanding the research to include an examination of his book, *The Evolving Self*. With an eye toward relationality, we will establish a critical conversation between Lester and Kegan. Included will be insights from feminist theory that can be applied to the faithing process. This chapter will also offer an assessment of social constructionism and its contribution to faith development.

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<sup>86</sup> Cartwright, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Marty, 245.

Emphasis will be on how persons make meaning and how they incorporate faith practices into their daily lives.

Chapter 5 will encompass the qualitative study that is foundational to this project. There will be interviews with 10 persons<sup>88</sup> from local church congregations. The strategy is to identify collaboratively persons that might be described as “faith exemplars” to serve as research participants. The sample will be racially and gender diverse. The local church setting will enable me to observe faith practices that persons describe in order to corroborate my results. The questionnaire aims to “discover” what facets of the faithing experience yield persons’ self-identity as “children of God” from a relational perspective and what practices, if any, encourage (or discourage) such an identity. Being objective will permit openness to results rather than approach participants loaded with *a priori* hypotheses in mind. The interviews will be of a conversational nature, tape recorded, and transcribed for later interpretation and analysis. Though the goal is performing one-time interviews, I will reserve the right for returning to participants after the initial interview is completed in the event that more data is required in formulating clear conclusions. This study will draw conclusions that inform the body of knowledge regarding how relationality and faith practices influence faith development.

Finally, chapter 6 will propose a pastoral theology of exemplary faith through relationality by first making a more thorough examination of what it means to be mature in faith, or to have a *seasoned faith*. The research will explore the theological implications of seasoned faith, taking into consideration major theological themes that undergird this research and its depiction of faith exemplars. Furthermore, this research

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<sup>88</sup> Dana Dunn, *The Practical Researcher: A Student Guide to Conducting Psychological Research* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999), 203. Dunn suggests that a sample size of 10-30 participants is adequate.

will offer constructive approaches to pastoral care and counseling revolving around faith development issues. The aim is providing pastoral caregivers with some specific attending and reflecting skills that have clinical application. It is important that caregivers be aware of the need to attend to their own faith journey. So the chapter will offer suggestions in this area. It will conclude with recommendations for areas with potential for further research and study.



## CHAPTER 2

### FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND MYSTICISM

This chapter examines faith development and the process of growing in the life of faith as demonstrated by persons of deep, mature faith, also referred to as faith exemplars. Appropriating Howard Thurman's mystical theology provides a lens through which we can examine how faith exemplars approach relationality with God. The selection of Thurman is based largely on how Thurman's theology and practice illuminates exemplary faith and supports the widely accepted notion that mystics construct faith practices which facilitate direct connection to God. Through relationality and selected faith practices, the mystic solidifies a sense of himself or herself as a child of God. It is out of this identity that persons understand themselves as living according to God's will, and create meaning and purpose in accordance with this identity. By examining Thurman's mysticism, we will uncover elements of relationality, faith practices, and community which serve as normative criteria for distinguishing faith exemplars.

Mysticism combines relationality and faith practices, bringing together two related elements of religious experience. Mystics are defined by their sense of direct encounters with God and vivid accounts of those experiences. Both mystics and faith exemplars employ linguistic constructs which identify them as relational beings striving to live within the will of God while embedded in faith community. In his study on mysticism, Tom Owen-Towle asserts, "relationality is religion's primary paradigm, insinuating that wisdom is uncovered not in me or in you, but *between us*—in

possibilities that yet transcend us.”<sup>89</sup> That relationality can be an overarching construct for faith development as persons deepen their faith identity and grow into faith exemplars is the focus of this chapter.

Mystics are typically faith exemplars in their own right. Yet, as Altany argues, mysticism “is not only for an elite group of super-holy people. Women and men, young and old, celibate and married, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, famous and unknown, saints and sinners have experienced this transformative presence of God in their lives.”<sup>90</sup> In particular, this study is interested in how faith exemplars, persons who have mystical qualities embedded in their faith identity, actualize their faith during difficulties and challenges. How do persons of deep faith draw upon their faith when “their backs are against the wall,” to use Thurman’s expression? Examples of such experiences include deaths and other great losses, traumas, and vocational changes. Following is a description of Thurman’s mystical experience.

#### HOWARD THURMAN ON MYSTICISM

In the pamphlet *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, Thurman defines mysticism as “the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit.”<sup>91</sup> Thurman makes a claim for the “God within.” Here, God, or God’s spirit, resides within the individual continuously; it is the individual’s responsibility to become aware, so that s/he can listen closely to the voice of the divine. In his book *The Creative Encounter*, Thurman gives added weight to this idea claiming, “The *central* fact in religious experience is the awareness of meeting God.”<sup>92</sup> It is in this listening and

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<sup>89</sup> Tom Owen-Towle, *FreeThinking Mystics with Hands* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 91.

<sup>90</sup> Alan Altany, “What Makes a Mystic?” *U.S. Catholic* 57, no. 11 (Nov. 1992): 30.

<sup>91</sup> Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), 6.

<sup>92</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 23.

awareness that the mystic gains the capacity to experience God directly and respond appropriately. Thurman says,

The descriptive words are varied: sometimes it is called an encounter; sometimes, a confrontation; and sometimes, a sense of Presence. What is insisted upon, however, without regard to the term used, is that in the experience defined as religious, the individual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning, *ne plus ultra* being, in which all that the individual is, becomes clear as immediate and often distinct revelation.<sup>93</sup>

For Thurman, the encounter with God emphasizes the immediacy of God's presence.

Borrowing from Bennett's *A Philosophical Study of Mysticism*,<sup>94</sup> Thurman outlines four characteristics of the mystical experience. First, one experiences "a revelation of truth."<sup>95</sup> The revealed truth is less a hidden secret than a plain view of "The Inside," or an absolutely clear picture of God. Second, the experience entails the understanding that experiencing God is not a unique occurrence. It has happened before to him or others, yet for the mystic it is as if a "rediscovery of the eternal"<sup>96</sup> has occurred. Third, the experience incorporates a conformity of one's will to the will of God, whom Thurman describes as "an object of love."<sup>97</sup> Finally, the mystical encounter with God is one of totality. That is, the mystic encounters the truth as a whole, unified: the experience is neither indistinct nor fragmentary.

Thurman offers glimpses into his personal mystical experience in many of his writings. In some instances, the encounters with the transcendent occur while he is in nature, as when he is in the woods as a young boy, and near the ocean in his adult life. During these times, Thurman is overcome by the feeling of utter serenity during moments

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Bennett, *A Philosophical Study of Mysticism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1931), 72 as quoted in Thurman, *Mysticism*, 8.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 9.

of profound stillness. According to Stewart, Thurman regarded nature as a “constant companion” and a normative theological source: “no other element of life is as replete and improvisational in its intimation of life’s ranging possibilities.”<sup>98</sup> At times when amidst natural elements, Thurman reports the sense of unity as “the environment and what was emerging inside of [him] became one.”<sup>99</sup> Thurman’s language offers the clue that he is establishing contact with the transcendent, a mystery beyond himself.

For a more traditional account of mysticism from Thurman, we turn to his description of a meeting with a group of Canadian Indian chiefs. Writing in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, he says

My words went forth, but they seemed to strike an invisible wall, only to fall back to meet other words flowing from my mouth. The tension was unbearable. Then, suddenly, as if by some kind of magic, the wall vanished and I had the experience of sensing an organic flow of meaning passing between them and me. It was as if we had dropped into a continuum of communication that existed *a priori* long before human speech was formed into sounds and symbols.<sup>100</sup>

What is striking in this account is Thurman’s direct reliance upon relationality as a conduit for experiencing the transcendent. A close reading of his account reveals that, together with other persons, he senses a communion beyond ordinary relationship. Indeed, it was the gathering of persons together that initiated the “organic flow” and “continuum of communication” that established the mystical quality of the moment. Through the aforementioned phrases, Thurman concretizes thought and speech, two intangibles. In doing so, he cuts to the heart of mystical experience by demonstrating the mystic’s heightened sensitivity to unseen presence and processes which link human persons in common sympathy, mindfulness, and spirit.

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<sup>98</sup> Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *God, Being, and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 80.

<sup>99</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” (Berkeley: Pacific School of Religion, 1978), 4-5.

<sup>100</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), 129.

How does one validate this experience? This presents a problem for mystics, because they are limited to commonly understood language to describe their experiences, although the mystical experience happens internally perhaps beyond language. Moreover, mystical experience is not ordinarily amenable to empirical evidence, although many have sought to accumulate empirical data as proof of such experiences.<sup>101</sup> Thurman resolved this dilemma by recognizing that one's claim to having experienced ultimate meaning is "inherent and frontal in him is also inherent and frontal in Life."<sup>102</sup> In other words, what is vital to the inner life is also vital to life as a whole. A person, grows in the experience of God, that is, one encounters God "at a deeper level," then begins encountering life at a deeper level as a result. In this interpretation, mysticism is deeply life-affirming.

It is important to note that Thurman's linguistic construct of God reflects a broad range of theological training and influences. For Thurman, ultimate concern is described in several terms: God, Creator of Life, and living substance. He describes this as the "religion of the inner light."<sup>103</sup> This theologically general language distinguishes Thurman from other mystics. His naming of God, while born of the Christian tradition, aims to describe universal religious experiences. This can be attributed to Thurman's early religious development and sensitivity. He wrote of how such development took place.

Years ago I had made a tentative discovery when I preached for the first time in the Methodist Church in my hometown and, to my amazement, discovered that I had the same kind of religious experience there that I had in my own Baptist Church. Now, in India, there was a redefining of that experience, only in a much

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<sup>101</sup> See David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) for the classic design studies of mystical experience.

<sup>102</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism," 10.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

more complex and subtle way...I had to find my way to the place where I could stand side by side with a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Moslem, and know that the authenticity of his experience was identical with the essence and authenticity of my own.<sup>104</sup>

Yet, he takes this approach without limiting himself to his Christian perspective. And although he strays outside traditional historical, biblical linguistic constructs, he remains within the broader realm of God language, using concrete Christian imagery and many illustrations drawn directly from the Bible. This inclusive approach to being within God's will and seeking a multi-dimensional approach to religious experience correlates directly with the characteristics of faith exemplars. However, Thurman's ability to see God from various faith traditions adds another dimension which is seldom witnessed outside interfaith dialogue.

One surmises that for Thurman it is the experience of knowing God inwardly that holds meaning; yet gaining the meaning is not the ultimate end. In knowing God, the mystic "senses that he is being dealt with at a center in himself that goes beyond all of his virtues and vices."<sup>105</sup> Here, not only does the experience of God transcend all of one's other experiences; it "meets the deepest need of his life."<sup>106</sup> It is so powerful and all-encompassing that the mystic wants to share it with others so that they too can grow in awareness of the range and possibility of religious experience.

Thurman argues that this is the essence of experiencing God's love. It is total, fulfilling, and pervasive throughout a person's life or as long as one maintains sensitiveness (Thurman's term) to God's presence. Fluker argues that for Thurman, "'the inner life' is primary to 'world consciousness'; i.e., the internality of experience informs

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

the externality of existence.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, one’s internal experience has a direct bearing on one’s experience of the world. Religious experience is had not for the sake of the individual alone. It guides the individual’s sense of direction and purpose for being in the world. One finds confirmation of Fluker’s argument by examining Thurman’s definition of *sensitiveness*, which he derives from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. First, Paul writes, “And it is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge and all manner of insight, enabling you to have a *sense* of what is vital...”<sup>108</sup> (vv. 1.9-10) [*Emphasis added.*] Thurman responds, “To have a sense of what is vital, a basic and underlying awareness of life and its potentialities at every level of experience, this is to be an Apostle of Sensitiveness.”<sup>109</sup> Through this definition, one infers that for Thurman all of life can potentially lead one to encounter God and undergo religious experience. At the core of this experience is knowing love: God’s love, the ultimate consequence of mystical experience. Spencer concurs, arguing that “the Reality which transcends thought *must* be described in terms of the highest and best we know.”<sup>110</sup> [*Emphasis added.*]

The primary purpose for the experience of love, according to Thurman, is so the mystic (or experiencer of love) can “have an intrinsic interest in another person.”<sup>111</sup> Thurman’s concept of mysticism is distinctive because he argues that persons on whom the experience of God in its complete manifestation has been conferred should look beyond themselves, beyond their personal needs and interests, to see another person not

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<sup>107</sup> Walter Earl Fluker, “They Looked for a City: A Comparison of the Idea of Community in Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 46, no. 2 (Winter 1989/Spring 1990): 40.

<sup>108</sup> Text appears to be Thurman’s own translation.

<sup>109</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1973), xi.

<sup>110</sup> Anne Spencer Thurman, ed., *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 2002), 6.

<sup>111</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism,” 13.

for who s/he is at any particular point in time or at any particular deed, but at the person in his or her *fact*, or entirety. Thurman asserts, “A person’s fact includes more than his plight, predicament, or need at a particular moment in time. It is something total which must include awareness of the person’s potential.”<sup>112</sup> Love, therefore, is the act of extending one’s concern to the totality of another in the context of the person’s whole life and being for the purpose of meeting the needs of the other as the other defines them. Love is a giving of self for another’s sake. For Thurman, persons are not called to love “humanity” because, in the true sense of the word, humanity is an abstraction. Theologically speaking, Christ died on the cross for living, breathing, and hungering human beings who are just like us, says Thurman. By seeing others as we see ourselves, we open ourselves to the others’ personalities and personhood. This outward expression of love needs “to be worked at, cultivated as a kind of inner development.”<sup>113</sup> It is here that we uncover, quite subtly, the core of Thurman’s practice.

Love is a practice which is ongoing. It requires continual effort and extending one’s self to others, using “a sensitive and structured imagination.”<sup>114</sup> One might naturally assume the term “imagination” to be a psychological derivative, but in Thurman’s construct, imagination speaks directly to that which is deeply theological in nature. The imagination enables persons to act as *angelos*, messengers of God, by putting themselves in another’s place empathetically, without judgment or prejudice, and using such knowledge to share one’s deepest inner resources. By “sitting where they sit,” persons avoid the taint of selfishness (that is, focusing only on one’s own needs and affairs) so they can fill the need of the other exactly as the need requires. This, according

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 17.



to Thurman, is what redemption means. By meeting the needs of others at their moment of deepest need *and* by seeing them as they see themselves when they are at their best enables us to become God's instruments: We become the instruments of God's love.

For Thurman, this sympathy and companioning have larger societal consequences. The love ethic is lived out as all persons avail themselves to all persons, regardless of race, religion, or culture. In fact, being restricted to such categories actually dampens the spirit of free flowing love. The point here is that all structures in society which prevent loving communion between persons are unsound. Says Thurman,

Then it is clear that any structure of society, any arrangements under which human beings live that does not provide for maximum opportunities for free flowing and circulation among each other, works against individual and social health. Any attitudes, private or social, which prohibit people from coming into 'across the board' contact with each other work against the love ethic....It doesn't matter how meaningful may be the tight circle of isolated security in which individuals or groups move. The existence of such circles precludes the possibility of the experiences of love as a part of intentional living.<sup>115</sup>

Here Thurman injects the Christian commandment to love even one's enemies. He is clear that love precludes our natural or instinctive inclinations; it requires acting at a level of "deliberate intent." By baring our inner selves to persons at the core of their being, digging beyond the visible aspects to seek persons' inmost selves, we can deal with persons in their totality, wholesomely, and redemptively. This is truly a Corinthians 13 form of love—selfless, kind, gentle, accepting, forgetting transgressions, and unrelenting. To accomplish this, says Thurman, one must keep open the doors to one's heart so that love "gets through...at [the other's] center."<sup>116</sup>

Bringing his view of the love ethic full circle, Thurman insists that this is how God loves human persons. God doesn't love humans *after* our sins have been removed,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 42.

but in the midst of human iniquity. Therefore, to love, says Thurman, is the most profound act of religious faith. It is an act which continually renews itself. It is an act which persons of faith must intentionally perpetuate. To have the mystical experience of God is to know that a response is required. Responding with love is the most worthy act of gratitude that persons can offer to God, who is the source of love in its most authentic form.

In another article by Thurman, “The Ground of Hope” (written about 20 years after his primary text on mysticism), he further develops his notion of love. He uses the mystical experience as a connecting point between God and human persons. In this article, Thurman argues that humans’ primary source of despair is the possibility that one’s life has no meaning and goes unrecognized by society and/or that which is of ultimate concern. “It is better,” he says, “to be the complete victim of an anger unrestrained...than to be passed over as if one was not.”<sup>117</sup> If they are to find fulfillment, persons need confidence and assurance that their lives matter and are purposeful. Tied to the significance of purpose, human persons also need a sense of belonging to a community in which there are harmonious relations between its members. These two components—purpose and belonging—form the *ground of hope*, the convictional truth that life exists beyond life (eternal life) and “blossoms into the experience of faith.”<sup>118</sup>

What brings these ideas full circle is that the ground of hope itself has a source which, Thurman argues, is love:

A person must feel that he counts; there has to be available to him something in the immediacy of his world upon which he can put the full force of his weight and

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<sup>117</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Ground of Hope,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 252, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 1980): 44.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

not be thrown back upon himself. At long last there can be no life unless a person has a sense of what he amounts to ultimately. This is the meaning of love.<sup>119</sup>

Here again we hear Thurman asserting that love is the most important result of mystical experience. Where earlier Thurman asserted that love was an outward expression to another being, here he reveals that love also has an inward-directed quality. Both definitions indicate that a person is fully accepted in his or her *fact*, that is, for what he or she authentically may be, but when brought together love is more complete—love for self and love for other.

Finally, Thurman addresses the source of love, and this completes the circle. God is the source. An experience which has the potential to transform completely one's personality and sense of purpose cannot, according to Thurman, originate with a "created thing." He writes, "For in the experience itself a man is caught and held by something so much more than he can ever think or be that there is but one word by which its meaning can be encompassed—God."<sup>120</sup> To encounter God is to encounter love at its ultimate source. One's knowledge of God's presence crowns the experience with a mystical quality.

Thurman bases knowing God on relationality and being a child of God. These two key elements are imperative for faith to develop and grow, under the definition established earlier. They are also essential for identifying faith exemplars. Thurman writes

This sense of Presence must be a reality at the personal level as well as on the social, naturalistic and cosmic levels. To state it in the simplest language of religion, modern man *must* know that he is a child of God and that the God of life

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, 114.

in all its parts and the God of the human heart are one and the same. Such a sense will vitalize the self...with the warmth of great confidence.<sup>121</sup> [*Emphasis added.*]

What is important here is Thurman's grounding the issue of persons' faith development in their identity as children of God, thereby, establishing relationality as an anchor for future growth and maturation in the life of faith. Thurman is clear and unequivocal. A person, he insists, *must* be certain of his or her identity as a source for future hope.

There is a theme running through Thurman's writings that seems to point to what he considers an end-goal of persons of religious faith and belief. This is significant for this project because there is a parallel in the lives of faith exemplars. Thurman often affirms the need to have as a part of one's personality the conviction that one is capable of "transcending all the vicissitudes of experience."<sup>122</sup> The implicit message here is that mystical experience has a purpose which in some way enables persons to deal with personal and societal struggles. As a man of his times, Thurman sought to provide solutions for contemporary socio-political issues, including joblessness, world conflict, and racial discrimination. He was particularly interested in helping political leaders develop solutions to the pervasive, institutionalized racial segregation that existed then in the United States. Thurman was well aware, according to Fluker, that "the need for social transformation arises from the individual's entrapment in the economic and political forces of oppression which hinder self-actualization."<sup>123</sup> Knowing Thurman's personal interest in societal transformation and his keen awareness that persons often struggled with oppression, we can surmise that the "vicissitudes of life" do indeed include

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<sup>121</sup> Thurman, *Deep*, 144.

<sup>122</sup> *Ground of Hope*, 47.

<sup>123</sup> Fluker, 40.

oppressive forces in society and/or community. Religious experience, especially, the *experience of love*, might be, for Thurman, a way to transcend struggles are beyond one's personal influence or control.

Pollard argues convincingly that Thurman discovered in his direct encounters with God “an immediate twofold effect” which could overcome society's socioeconomic stumbling blocks. The first effect was to find that “the debilitating effects of racial discrimination were transcended.”<sup>124</sup> The second effect, broader and praxis-oriented, was the revelation that “self-centeredness was transformed into God-centeredness.”<sup>125</sup> This two-fold outcome of the mystical encounter provides armor for the soul as one combats the “vicissitudes of life.” From this creative encounter results a stronger conviction that no matter the circumstances or power of oppressive forces, deep inside of one's spirit is the knowledge that no “contradictions of life” hold sway like love, which is the only power which retains ultimacy and is eternal.

### *PRACTICES*

Unlike many mystics, Thurman was highly descriptive and deliberative when reflecting on his spiritual disciplines and practices. His writings point to a variety of spiritual disciplines in which he regularly engaged, and many events leading up to the “creative encounter,” his terminology for mystical experience. He often alludes to the converging of senses in a single moment, or a unity of spirit between persons, and sometimes, a unity of meaning emerging as he spent time in nature and became aware of God's overwhelming presence. Pollard asserts that “Thurman sought to satisfy his own hunger for unity in two ways: through such introspective means as the spiritual

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<sup>124</sup> Alton Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: the Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: P. Lang, 1992), 36.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

disciplines and through interpersonal relationships.”<sup>126</sup> An examination of both components follows.

In his book *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman laid out the specific methods he believed were at the core of his practice. Some are uniquely Thurman’s; others were in widespread use. Later, he preached about each.<sup>127</sup> [Some are not covered in this project.] Spiritual disciplines should not be confused with prayer asking God to present Godself before the practitioner. Spiritual disciplines ready the mind, body, and spirit for an encounter with the divine. Through various practices, persons engage in an exercise of faith which permits the practitioner to gain experience of religious depths and knowledge of God perhaps not available otherwise. The mystic knows that the Divine is always present, yet one’s awareness of and sensitivity to the Divine grows keener and more acute through ongoing practice of spiritual disciplines. Thurman emphasized the need to cultivate one’s inner life over time. Such cultivation is a primary method for meeting and experiencing God at the core of one’s being. In Thurman’s words,

It takes time to cultivate the mind. It takes time to grow in wisdom. It takes time to savor the qualities of living. It takes time to feel one’s way into one’s self. It takes time to walk with God.<sup>128</sup>

This quote establishes a primary rationale for practicing spiritual disciplines. Over time, with steady practice, one develops a degree of relationality which endures when one faces the vicissitudes of life. Relationality develops over the course of time as one continuously searches for truth and meaning, incessantly searching God and self for revelation of Godself and God’s purposes in the world. It is important to note that one need not practice all the disciplines examined here. Persons are free to pursue the discipline(s)

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>127</sup> Source documents available only at the Howard Thurman Educational Trust, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>128</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1961), 62.

most congruent with the totality of their lives and relationship with the Divine. We turn now to specific practices.

### *Commitment*

Practicing the spiritual discipline of *commitment* is to “yield the nerve center of his [*sic*] consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or an ideal, which may be more important to him than whether he lives or dies. The commitment is a self-conscious act of the will by which he affirms his identification with what he is committed to.”<sup>129</sup>

Commitment generates spiritual energy necessary for living within the “logic and order in the universe.”<sup>130</sup> Thurman reflects that commitment is a response when one “yields his heart to God.”<sup>131</sup> This discipline is the foundation for all other spiritual disciplines; it establishes the degree and depth with which individuals practice their devotion. Spiritual practitioners, in essence, are called to devote the totality of their selves to God’s service to the point of death. Commitment, then, is an ultimate claim of relationality to a cause or purpose beyond the self.

From a practical standpoint, commitment is an *attitude* of mind and a *way* of being. As an attitude of mind, commitment represents the individual’s steadfast *standing with* God and promise to *abide in* God over time. It represents a mental posture of aligning oneself with not only all God stands for and against in the world, it is also a self-induced obligation of lifestyle pursuant to on-going development of the interior life wherein one’s identity and personhood are aligned with the will and purposes of God. Accordingly, when a person “is able to bring to bear upon a single purpose all the powers

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<sup>129</sup> Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 17.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

of his being, his whole life is energized or vitalized.”<sup>132</sup> This resulting energy is required by all of Thurman’s spiritual practices.

As a way of being in the world, one commits to living an ethical life grounded in love of God, self, and community. One adopts a posture of devotion to justice, peace, and advocacy for those who live their lives with their backs against the wall. Here, commitment means maintaining awareness of the power of God’s indwelling presence as an essential force for combating life’s difficulties. While the mind is the ground of the cognitive element of commitment, the heart is equally important as the wellspring of emotion, especially with regard to love. Being committed to God is akin to being committed to loving one another in community.

There are three questions which help a person move further along the path of commitment. Each question provides the means for reflecting deeply and specifically on a particular aspect of the task. The first question is “Who am I?” According to Thurman, “Within us are so many claims and counterclaims that to honor the true self is not easy.”<sup>133</sup> But our goal is to find ways of bringing the many claims into a state of wholeness and balance by discovering that within ourselves which is “big enough to demand our all.”<sup>134</sup> The second question is “What do I want?” This query helps persons discern their *own* desires (versus others’ desires for them) and develop intentionality about vocation. The emphasis is on avoiding living “casually, going from one thing to another” without the purpose that results from commitment. Finally, one asks, “How do I propose to get what I want?” Here one carefully aligns the means of achieving the goal with the goal itself. In maintaining a commitment, one should consider the impact of

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 30.



pursuits upon relationships, whether a commitment is achievable, and if the commitment is congruent with God's will and purpose.

### *Growing in Wisdom and Stature*

The next spiritual discipline, *growth*, refers to “a change in structure and quality of character.”<sup>135</sup> The measure of growth is whether an individual develops “the kind of discipline...that is essentially spiritual in character.”<sup>136</sup> Growth happens over time, so it is essential that persons accept that time can pass slowly and spasmodically. “Constructive patience” is the process of waiting for the spiritual life to unfold, noticing growth as it occurs, and searching the self when growth seems to lag. Over time, a person develops capacity for handling more responsibility and “revising, refreshing, and reshaping” one's desires.

Growth is a process of becoming, and desires of the heart function as shapers of that becoming. As persons develop dreams of what they hope to become, their actions follow. Discipline follows when a person reconciles dreams of becoming with the “hard facts of our world and our experiencing.” Reflecting on the gospel report that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, Thurman asserts that Jesus' growth was the result of his increased capacity for standing alone in the world, “one of the watershed moments of personality.”<sup>137</sup> Accepting one's individuality is a mark of growth.

Another aspect of growth is dealing with crisis. Here, Thurman emphasizes an individual's ability for keeping structure and form while coping with calamity. Dealing with and resolving life's problems, especially failure, is a sign of growth. He writes, “To be victimized by error and at the same time keep on making choices with integrity is to

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 46.

grow in grace...[and] also in the knowledge and experience of God.”<sup>138</sup> The key is balancing decision-making with prudence. To recover from error, one must recognize the significance and source of mistakes, and acknowledge that what one does affects others, not only self. Thurman’s construct of growing in stature and wisdom hinges on relationality, as persons are called to measure constantly the costs of growth against the impact on social relationships.

In summary, one seeking growth in stature and wisdom moves about in the world with the purpose of aligning one’s purpose with a grand Purpose and wisdom which is woven into a grand Wisdom. All one’s decisions and plans revolve around this goal. Over the course of one’s life, says Thurman, “The discipline of growth becomes the discipline of the spirit, and the increase in stature and wisdom can mean a growth in the knowledge of God and the understanding of His Kingdom.”<sup>139</sup>

### *Suffering*

While Christians often consider their lives to “be filled with suffering,” rarely is suffering thought of as a spiritual discipline. Yet Thurman viewed *suffering* as an essential spiritual discipline. He argued that suffering is a natural pain of life. He defines this existential state this way: “Suffering is physical pain or its equivalent, with reference to which the individual may be inspired to protect himself, so that despite its effects he may carry on the functioning of his life.”<sup>140</sup> Pain is natural to all persons regardless of social, economic, or vocational status, deeds or misdeeds. Pain can be physical and emotional; both forms can be difficult to bear. As a result, human beings have devised all manner of schemes to minimize and avoid it. Pain can encourage persons in the continual

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 66.

assessment of their total experience, appreciation of freedom, and experiencing more growth, but it can also cause one to be completely self-absorbed, indifferent to outside matters and self-pitying. As a spiritual discipline, pain can lead the sufferer to take inventory of personal resources available for dealing head-on with an important act. In tackling one's issues directly, or as Thurman puts it, "through the ministry of his own burden,"<sup>141</sup> a person may be drawn into community with other sufferers in order to find solutions; in recognizing commonality that exists amongst all persons, one discovers companionship which lessens the burden of suffering. Many Christians in the midst of suffering identify with the suffering Christ. Relationality takes precedence as aligning oneself with Christ serves as a supreme answer to the question of how one might confront the pain. Identifying with Christ's suffering and transcendence "is to be transformed by the glory of His life...in His name [persons] can stand anything that life can do to them."<sup>142</sup>

In conclusion, suffering is one part of the experience of freedom. Though suffering leaves us with many questions regarding theodicy and God's role in pain-filled aspects of life, it is a part of growth. Without suffering, a life of faith would not develop as fully. Ultimately, suffering forces humans to deal with the inevitability of death and dying. Mortality provides the tool for measuring how one is proceeding through life. In considering death, persons naturally consider more fully the meaning of their lives. By confronting the meaning of life and death honestly, one can make death an instrument of life. It is here that God enters into the life of the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit, by providing a sense of life's meaning and purpose.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 80.

## *Prayer*

Thurman defines prayer as “the *method* by which the individual makes his way to the temple of quiet within his own spirit and the *activity* of his spirit within its walls.”<sup>143</sup> Prayer is the path to communion with God, the means of sharing God’s love with others, and the avenue for expressing thanksgiving. Prayer is a practice in which persons engage as a source of “strength and renewal for our own spirits, lest we perish.”<sup>144</sup> For Thurman, as for other mystics, prayer is the cornerstone of the spiritual life. Willard echoes this view by arguing for a wholistic approach to the spiritual disciplines saying, “prayer will not be established in our lives as it must be for us to flourish, unless we are practicing other disciplines.”<sup>145</sup> Prayer complements the other disciplines as the other spiritual disciplines complement and help complete one’s prayer life.

Thurman offers helpful instruction on how to pray. First, one should settle down, be still, and find some quiet. Calm the mind and focus on doing nothing at all. Don’t be afraid to rest or sleep. Next, wait for a “centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives.”<sup>146</sup> Then, we pray. Like the other spiritual disciplines, the capacity for a disciplined prayer life develops over time. Certain prayers come and go, as do certain themes of prayer. Eventually, prayer can become a means of communing with not only God, but also with others, as persons learn how to pray communally and collectively develop prayers which meet the needs of individuals and community. Prayer is not necessarily an act of self-isolation and withdrawal, but can be held high in terms of

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<sup>143</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 34.

<sup>144</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1951, 175. Reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1973), xi

<sup>145</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 186.

<sup>146</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 85.

relationality. Prayer can be a shared effort, as persons find ways of engaging the creative encounter together.

### *Reconciliation*

The spiritual discipline of *reconciliation* focuses on the discovery of what Thurman describes as a unity of all life which binds persons together. Recognition of the unifying principle arises as persons begin actualizing their potential by developing a self-understanding which leads to understanding others. This eventually yields an increase in one's quality of wholeness and harmony which permeates all relations. All persons have an innate desire to be cared for and needed, argues Thurman, and when such feelings are violated, persons experience dissonance and conflict. Reconciliation occurs when one grows into the sense of unity within the self and beyond; it also occurs when one senses that s/he is understood by another person, and therefore cared for and needed, at a fundamental level of personality.

The miracle of reconciliation is revealed as persons experience being fully known by another and/or God, are overtaken with joy, and feel compelled to share the experience with others. The discipline of reconciliation can be developed in the following way. First, an individual must desire reconciliation and experience a climate where such growth is possible. Next, one develops an interest in other persons and their needs. Finally, one builds an awareness "for a kind of personal activity in relatedness that may inspire another person to open the door, to turn toward one."<sup>147</sup> At its heart, reconciliation draws on relationality.

Another integral aspect of reconciliation is love. The love of God lies at the core of all religious experience. It is when a person feels God's love touching him or her at the

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<sup>147</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 109.

inmost center of being that the process of integration, or wholeness, is set in motion. Says Thurman, reconciliation is as if a person “saw into himself, beyond all his fragmentation, conflicts, and divisiveness, and recognized his true self.”<sup>148</sup> Like the discipline of reconciliation, love demands that the individual long for it. Love requires intentionality and the desire to extend the self toward another, not for selfish purposes, but in an act of selflessness. Then, by increasing one’s understanding of another, one can find “openings through which his love can flow into the life of the other, and at the same time locate in [one]self openings through which [another’s] love can flow into [the self].”<sup>149</sup> Finally, there needs to be reciprocity between persons so each knows “that our effort to respond to [this] need to be cared for is one with our concern to be cared for ourselves.”<sup>150</sup> The practice of love may seem awkward at first, but over time it becomes second nature. Steady application instills the practice and leads to greater self-discipline. When this process occurs in its fullest, we gain the sense not only of having our words heard, but of being listened to on a level of personality. It is here that love has come full circle. Accordingly, says Thurman, “To love is to make one’s heart a swinging door.”<sup>151</sup>

### *Spiritual Journaling*

Thurman does not list this discipline explicitly, but in reading his many short essays and reflections, one soon realizes that he grew spiritually by reflecting upon his experiences of being with people, God, and nature. Often, Thurman reflected on what ordinarily might seem mundane. Yet the insight he drew was transformative, illustrating

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 127.

not only a unity among all things in creation, but also fundamental longings and desires for relationality which are common to all persons.

Through Thurman's spiritual journaling, one can see Thurman working out complex questions such as love and conflict amongst persons, war and peace, non-violent protest in the face of racism and oppression, and, of course, individual strivings with God in the course of a life of faith. In some books, Thurman was meticulous about categorizing his reflections. No matter the category though, a thread of relationality and religious experience runs through the center of his work. Journaling was Thurman's primary means of sharing his overwhelming encounter with God and in a manner which his readers could appreciate and imitate.

In his book *Deep is the Hunger*, Thurman asks a series of questions to highlight the purposes and end goals of spiritual practices.

What is the significance of spiritual exercises? Precisely what is prayer and how does one pray? What techniques and methods are available for deepening one's sense of the presence of God and how may one work in the world courageously and intelligently on behalf of a decent world, without despair and complete fatigue? What are the resources for personal rehabilitation and renewal?<sup>152</sup>

Thurman brilliantly poses a set of questions which also imply their answers. For example, the third question suggests to the reader that spiritual disciplines will deepen the sense that God is present in one's life. It also asserts that one ought to seek ways of being courageous and intelligent as one goes about doing one's work in the world. The final question implies that one needs to find resources, or spiritual practices, which offer rehabilitation and renewal. Other faith exemplars also *know and practice* the answers to these questions. At some stage in their lives, the answers become a part of their identity. I will explore this identity and its formation in the following chapter.

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<sup>152</sup> Howard Thurman, 1951, 32.

## Community

Thurman viewed all persons as members of God's greater community and fellowship on Earth. As one who cherished sacred texts from a variety of faith traditions and engaged in interfaith dialogue as an ongoing practice, Thurman exemplified community-building. To be with others, especially in the service of God and the search for peace, Thurman made extraordinary effort to bring together persons from diverse backgrounds so they might collectively experience a unity of the Spirit and take that experience back into the world.

After a mystical experience in India, Thurman committed himself to putting his dream of community-building into action. He describes that vision as follows:

We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry-over into the common life, a fellowship that would later alter the behavioral patterns of those involved.<sup>153</sup>

This highlights his desire for merging theology with practice. It also demonstrates his desire to broadcast his vision of relationality and realize it in a diverse body of worship. Thurman keenly understood that faith which did not mature into real interaction and concrete behaviors between God's children was at best a weak faith. The true mark of faith from Thurman's perspective was a visible relationality, one which could be experienced and nurtured into a mature faith.

Thurman's vision was grounded on solid religious tradition dating back to the New England Puritans. They established a pattern for forming church communities and insisting that the true mark of relationality amongst church members was the

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<sup>153</sup> As quoted in Curtiss Paul Deyoung et al., *United by Faith: the multiracial congregation as an answer to the problem of race* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 63.



transformation of belief into visible behaviors. In a discussion concerning the constitution of a church, Wright argues the exact point that Thurman put forth. Says Wright,

So it was that when the New England Puritans gathered their churches, they wrote covenants, by which the members agreed to walk together in mutual fellowship, in commitment to one another as well as to Christ Jesus, who was recognized as the supreme [L]ord of his Church. They acknowledged that under some circumstances the covenant might be implicit; to be discerned not in a document but in the way people behave in *relationship* to one another.<sup>154</sup> [*Italics added.*]

The emphasis here clearly is on relationality as a transformative power in moving persons toward a deeper faith through the development of community. Wright continues detailing the language of the actual covenants, highlighting certain words in 17<sup>th</sup> century English, such as Lord, God, and Blessed word. But their language makes it clear that “The operative words here are: ‘we...doe byond our selves...to walke together.’ They are not: ‘we believe.’”<sup>155</sup> The use of personal pronouns as subjects points to relationality as the motivating force underlying belief and practice. Thurman’s language in the earlier quote begins this same way: “we” initially referred to himself and his wife, but took on a communal meaning as his vision for the church grew into a living reality. Willard reinforces this point by insisting that “members of the body must be in *contact* if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other.”<sup>156</sup> Moreover, Thurman’s insistence that relationality be practiced in a community intent on establishing a relational paradigm had a historical precedent which furthered the claim for the relevance of relationality in faith development.

To this end in 1944, Thurman and Alfred Fisk, a Presbyterian pastor, founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, California. The church was

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<sup>154</sup> Conrad Wright, *Walking Together* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989), 7.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Willard, 187.

deliberately unaffiliated with any single mainline denominational body so it would have the greatest opportunity for diversity--racially, denominationally, and ethnically. The community flourished, with Thurman and Fisk alternately assuming preaching responsibilities. At its peak, membership reached about 350 persons, and another 1,000 supported the fellowship financially. Still a viable congregation with ongoing ministry, its numbers have declined over the years.

Pastoral theologian Zoë Bennett Moore's useful framework for understanding community brings together the joint intentions of Thurman and Fisk. She highlights three components of community which honor the diversity and practice the Fellowship embodied.

The first...is an image of a central commitment which holds things and people together by attraction to the center rather than by a policing of the boundaries. Second, inclusiveness is of itself a gospel value, and as such is more important than doctrinal, political or moral correctness. Indeed, commitments to *love* and to grace as primary are themselves doctrinal, political and moral commitments. Third, vigorous witness to our own perspective on the truth does not entail the silencing or exclusion of those with whom we disagree, of those from different social or religious backgrounds, or of those whose own witness is different.<sup>157</sup>

By turning their vision of a collected community into a real group of people who dwelled together in fellowship in an established house of worship, Thurman and Fisk demonstrated their commitment to community. By their collaboration as they shared the pulpit and worked to establish an ongoing legacy of their vision through church growth and continuity beyond the church's physical walls, they bequeathed their commitment to future generations. And having the Fellowship intentionally remain autonomous rather than aligning with a particular denominational body, Thurman and Fisk established an ecclesiastical polity which made inclusivity one of its highest aims. In these ways,

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<sup>157</sup> Zoë Bennett Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 114-115.

Thurman's theology of love became a practical reality to be lived out in a community determined to bear grace and love amongst its members. Finally, as co-pastors of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, Fisk and Thurman modeled a democratic leadership style for all to see—within and beyond the congregation. The pastors' mixed denominational heritage demonstrated their commitment to social and religious equality and authored a spirit of ecumenism which listened to and valued all voices.

### ***SUMMARY***

As a prolific and descriptive mystic, Howard Thurman qualifies as a faith exemplar. His conception of faith, position on relationality as a conduit for the presence of God, and practice of diverse spiritual disciplines accord with the working paradigm for faith--development and deepening of one's dependence on God for present and future hope. Thurman's work delineates the elements of mysticism as ultimate expressions of religious experience, especially to the direct encounter between human persons and God. It is through this direct encounter that persons construct relationality, in which their personal identity with the transcendent God inheres. Thurman's recognition of the unity of persons, groups, and societies under the influence of God's mystical presence supports his view of relationality: such unity transcends human differences and/or incapacity to influence events absent God's influence.

Another important element of Thurman's mysticism is the broad array of faith practices which concretize relationality into faith identity. He taught a host of faith practices, some of which went beyond the conventions of his time: commitment, growth, suffering, prayer, reconciliation and spiritual journaling. These faith practices become important resources one can call upon during times of trials. By employing these

practices, persons discover within themselves and their relationship with God the means of experiencing transcendence and triumph when “their backs are against the wall.” Such resources are not limited to individual practice, but can be used in the midst of community, as fellow sufferers share their stories and find strength and hope together.

The various elements of Thurman’s mysticism establish for this project normative criteria for evaluating the lives of faith exemplars, persons of deeply mature faith. These criteria contribute greatly to our understanding of a mature faith by clearly delineating the constitutive elements of relationality, spiritual disciplines which further faith development, and showing how community becomes a vital influence in the lives of faithing Christians. This project now turns to the process of meaning-making and its impact upon faith development through the critical correlation of personality theory and theology.

## CHAPTER 3

### FAITH LESSONS FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVES

Faith formation and development has been a subject of interest for pastoral theology since its inception. Drawing on one's faith identity is an important use of self when facing life's existential crises. This chapter will glean how persons living as African American slaves used faith resources, particularly relationality, faith practices, and community, as a means of transcending oppressive conditions and living out their faith in God. This project argues these same faith resources can be used to further the faith experience of persons in the postmodern era. This research also suggests that slave narratives clearly demonstrate how persons conceive and maintain hopefulness when the self is under attack—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Such lessons are important for all believers at various places along their faith journey. Persons serving as educators or mentoring in faith development or seeking to deepen their own faith journey will find the narratives resonating deeply and serving as models of hope and becoming.

The African American slave narratives integrate two milieus—the African slave experience in America and the process of Christian identity formation—and illustrate how faith and meaning-making help persons mature in faith. By focusing on the African American slave experience in particular, this literature highlights broad implications for all Christians developing in the life of faith, especially during ongoing crises.

The methodology employed is reader-response theory. Reader-response theory foreshadows upcoming chapters that critically examine meaning-making. Utilizing this methodology allows the researcher to uncover meaning embedded in the text by emphasizing the themes of relationality and practices emphasized by the narratives'

authors. Our reading emphasizes the mystical qualities of experiences that suggest characteristics of developing faith exemplars. Emphasis on mystical experience permits fuller integration of lessons from Thurman's work. Furthermore, it is particularly helpful due to its focus on relationality. This chapter begins with an overview of the slave narratives, then provides a reading and interpretation of excerpts from three slave narratives, and ends with concluding remarks.

### ***OVERVIEW OF SLAVE NARRATIVES***

As an era in American history, the antebellum period left an indelible stain on the fabric of the nation. When describing that "peculiar institution," West says, "Like other indescribable evils of the recent past, the centuries-long slave trade forces us to wrestle with unjustified anguish and unmerited pain that are difficult to fathom."<sup>158</sup> Even those who witnessed slavery first-hand had a difficult time documenting it. Despite such difficulty, many former slaves managed the unwieldy task of recounting their lives in servitude, and in doing so, created a genre of literature known as slave narratives.

This project examines the three general types of narratives—fugitive slave narratives, spiritual narratives, and historical narratives. The research includes an example of each type of narrative for two reasons. One purpose is to demonstrate objectivity in the selection process. The second purpose is to demonstrate that no matter what the agenda or circumstances facing the narrator, each narrator was working out his or her faith identity and using faith resources as a means of maintaining hope. Each narrative typology is important for this research and is unified by its use of religious experience for meaning-making in the course of faith formation.

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<sup>158</sup> Cornel West, "The Ignoble Paradox of Western Modernity" in *Spirits of the Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Madeline Burnside and Rosemarie Robotham, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 8.

The first narrative presented here is *Confessions of Nat Turner*. As a fugitive slave narrative, its purpose providing “an autobiographical, biographical, or fictional narrative that traced a slave’s assertion of his or her full humanity through the repudiation of, and escape from, slavery.”<sup>159</sup> Escaping from slavery was Turner’s primary impetus for the narrative and provided for the author (and reader alike) an ultimate source of religious meaning. Abolitionists frequently collaborated with the fugitives, developing narratives that identified slaves as children of God, created in God’s own image. “Fugitive narrators testified that all people, even the most victimized, are able to grow in likeness to God, and that in turn God’s love and power are most clearly manifest in the acts of these godlike humans.”<sup>160</sup>

The second narrative, the account of Jarena Lee, is a spiritual narrative, which Pierce says has three characteristics. The first characteristic was that by adopting a religious faith [most authors already had a native faith], the author experienced an *epistrepho*, or a switch from one way of being to another. Such a change could be turning from sin to belief in God or to more righteous living. Second, the religious conversion also involved a *metanoeo*, or “a change in heart and/or a change in mind.”<sup>161</sup> This change typically involved adopting a new set of beliefs and giving up an old set of beliefs. Third, the narrative often included a shift from individualism to community. Such a change might be demonstrated by former slaves retelling their “testimony” to others in an effort to encourage other persons’ transformation, and thereby, begin the process of building

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<sup>159</sup> Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 130.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>161</sup> Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 3.

community. Pierce refers to such efforts as “an outward, active, and continual process in transforming one’s life and one’s community.”<sup>162</sup>

The final narrative presented, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African,” was written as history and renunciation of slavery. Taylor argues that “Even if they did not put it into words, many a fugitive slave may have easily concluded that the mere act of writing was the ultimate act of self-affirmation, the ultimate denial of enslavement.”<sup>163</sup>

The development of a maturing faith identity surfaces as we concentrate on specific accounts within the narratives that depict the influence of religion upon the author’s fight for freedom and re-establishing identity as an emancipated person. The research highlights the inherent use of relationality, which suggests a trajectory for persons becoming faith exemplars. Certain theological themes will surface as evidence of faith formation in the narratives. The five themes that arise are: 1) affirming one’s value as a child of God and the refusal to be objectified by another person, 2) growing in sanctification, 3) vocation and purpose, 4) conviction about God’s justice and righteousness, and 5) supportive community. These pertinent themes will be identified so the reader can focus attention appropriately.

## ***READING STRATEGY FOR SLAVE NARRATIVES***

### *Theory*

For this project, the primary method for reading and interpreting the slave narratives will be reader-response theory. The purpose for employing reader-response theory is to disclose how the contemporaries of the slave narratives found hope in these

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>163</sup> Yuvall Taylor, *I was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), xviii.



writings. This methodology has the premise that individual readers approach literature with a vast array of experience and a base of knowledge. Iser describes the process:

As the reader uses various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the ‘schematised views’ to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results in the awakening of responses within himself.<sup>164</sup>

The individual reader’s experience and knowledge serve as a lens through which literature takes on meaning, so the reader creates meaning in a text as he or she engages the text. There is a shift from searching for a single meaning or truth evident in the text itself; meaning is derived as the reader constructs it during the reading. As Totten puts it, “the text’s meaning is considered to reside in the ‘transaction’ between the reader and the text, not from the text alone.”<sup>165</sup>

Reader-response theory assigns priority to the reader as creator of meaning, thus the text itself is a lesser authority. This strategy, however, does not hold that all opinions regarding a particular text are equally valid. It does suggest that various meanings are found in a text and share commonality through a network of interpretive context grounded in shared experience amongst its constituents. For this to occur, reader-response theory relies on interpretive communities, which consist of similarly-situated persons that form a reading community that engages certain texts.

The notion of interpretive communities is described in Brad Braxton’s *No Longer Slaves* in a chapter entitled “A Reading Strategy for Liberation.” This work is pertinent for the research here because the slave narratives, at their core, were depictions of

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<sup>164</sup> Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980), 51.

<sup>165</sup> Samuel Totten, “Using reader-response theory to study poetry about the Holocaust with High School Students,” *Social Studies* 89, no. 1, (Jan/Feb 98): 2.

persons seeking liberation. Braxton argues that interpretive communities rest on the assumption that persons do not read alone. Instead, they read as persons whose “horizon of expectation” is shaped by a broader community in which they dwell. As such, “The values, purposes, and goals that hold forth in a reading community will determine not only what a reader identifies as meaning in literature but even what a reader considers to be literature in the first place.”<sup>166</sup> For the slave narrators, the interpretive community consisted of the narrators’ contemporaries (other slaves who were literate and who could read to non-literate slaves) as well as the audience that purchased the narratives in published form (free citizens, abolitionists, etc.).

Meaning gathers itself as the reading takes place and when the norms, values, and intentions of the interpretive community converge upon the text. Thus, no meaning occurs before the reading begins. Braxton further argues

Whereas some formalist readings regard certain pre-understandings that readers bring to the text as hindrances to the *discovery of meaning*, reader-response theory regards these pre-understandings, which are the products of community membership, as foundational for the creation of meaning. The authority to create and adjudicate over meaning rests with the interpretive community.<sup>167</sup>

Persons can belong to several interpretive communities based on life experiences, history, and the themes that run through their lives. Stanley Fish, a strong advocate for reader-response theory, asserts “Each of us is a member of not one but innumerable interpretive communities in relation to which different kinds of belief are operating with different weight and force.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002), 30.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>168</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke, 1989), 30.

The goal of the reader-response reading strategy in this project is finding hope as a means for transcending the dire conditions of slavery in the slave narratives. This will be accomplished by identifying examples of relationality and faith practices in excerpts from three slave narratives and teasing out meaning related to faith development. Each narrator demonstrates qualities of a faith exemplar. The hope is that postmodern persons of faith can translate these lessons of overcoming difficult circumstances to current-day situations.

### *Significance*

Identifying the spiritual disciplines in the slave narratives confirms not only the efficacy of relationality and practices, it also validates a premise of this project that claiming and living out one's faith identity can be a significant source of hope. Raboteau offers a starting point for our reader-response. He argues the slave narratives were evidence of saint-like personalities writing sacred texts. He writes

And yet the extent to which the Christianity of American slaves was hindered, proscribed, and persecuted justifies applying the titles confessor and martyr to those slaves. Like their ancient Christian predecessors, they bore witness to the Christian gospel despite the threat of punishment and even death at the hands of fellow Christians.<sup>169</sup>

By applying such titles as confessor and martyr, Raboteau signifies the importance of the slave narratives and elevates the narrators to an esteemed place in faith history so that all persons, regardless of ethnicity and race, might take this material more seriously. Just as Christians down the ages have drawn strength, solace, and encouragement from other religious icons, persons can find strength from these narrators as well.

### *Example of Reader-response by Raboteau*

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<sup>169</sup> Albert Raboteau, "The Dignity of Faith," *Christian History* 18, no. 2 (1999): 42.

Raboteau cites the work of two brothers that were arrested in 1792 for “holding religious services.” During their imprisonment, one brother reported that he would gladly suffer floggings, which he did, for the sake of Jesus. The reading of this text highlights the individuals’ suffering as a spiritual discipline while their worship services included faith practices that Raboteau identified as “secret liturgies.” They had faith that was transformative and exemplary. Raboteau argues, “Their belief in God did not consist so much in a set of propositions as it did in a *relationship* of personal trust that God was with them: ‘He will be wid us, Jesus, be wid us to the end.’”<sup>170</sup> [*Emphasis added.*] He concludes, “They transcended slavery because they believed God made them in his image with a dignity and value that no slaveholder could efface.”<sup>171</sup> This response highlights the narrators’ identity as children of God and their belief that justice would prevail.

#### THE SLAVE NARRATIVES AND READER-RESPONSES

##### **“The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.”**

On August 21, 1831,<sup>172</sup> an African American slave, named Nat Turner, led a group of five men on an insurrection of a plantation in Southampton, Virginia. Their actions resulted in the deaths of more than 50 men, women, and children. Consequentially, repression of slaves worsened as white slaveholders, law enforcement, and state legislatures clamped down on the freedoms permitted slaves, especially with regard to their education and worship practices. Religious clergypersons, including white theologians, quickly revised preaching and evangelizing strategies in efforts that better ensured maximum order in slave societies.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>172</sup> Scholars generally agree that Turner’s revolt occurred in 1831, although his confession supplies the date of August 20, 1830.

Turner confessed his role in the insurrection to Thomas R. Gray, a county lawyer, who sought the assignment largely for economic advantage. In *Nat Turner*, Gray discovered an articulate and literate man that reported assuming the role of “prophet” for the express purpose of fulfilling God’s will of freeing slaves in Southampton. As the selected quotes from Turner’s narrative clearly illustrate, Turner was well-versed in New Testament scriptures, particularly the Gospel of Luke, regularly engaged in religious practices, and was a vital member of a closely-knit community.

As slaves became immersed in *true* Christianity, they learned of the need to testify to the workings of the spirit in their hearts. Such a testimony gave credence to one’s conversion experience and granted persons membership into the church. These conversion experiences, according to Raboteau, were typically

a visionary one, inaugurated by feelings of sadness and inner turmoil...Confident of their election and value to God, slaves who underwent conversion, gained in this radical experience a deeply rooted identity which formed the basis for a sense of purpose and an affirmation of self-worth—valuable psychic barriers to the demeaning and dehumanizing attacks of slavery.<sup>173</sup>

It appears that Turner (and the two narrators that follow) were significantly influenced by this form of worship and preaching style. Each gained an important source of autonomy, confidence, and a deep trust in God as a result of the relationships and spiritual practices that developed in the worship experience.

Turner’s narrative has a lengthy history of interpretation and commentary, especially with regard to its depiction of slavery and its aftermath. The reading here will focus strictly on the interior faith narrative for the purposes expressed earlier.

*Looking ahead at the theological themes*

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 59.

Each of the five theological themes is visible in Turner's narrative. He conceived and implemented the insurrection at Southampton in order to fulfill a mission that he reported being called by God to perform. It is this calling that grounds his life's work that he fulfills by mounting the insurrection. All of his energies, especially with regard to prayer and discerning God's will for his future (and the future of Southampton) became devoted to that one task. One hears Turner repeatedly make note of his spiritual growth and increasing sanctification.

Turner acknowledges in the first excerpt that he was born to accomplish a mission for God. From this point forward, he sought knowledge about his purpose from persons he considered wise within his community. Devoting himself to daily prayer, he made the commandment "pray without ceasing" a spiritual reality. Through his practice of discernment he came to understand himself as an instrument of God's justice.

### *Reader-Response*

Legend:

*Italics* represent emphasis on relationality; Underline represents emphasis on faith practices.

*"I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast..."*<sup>174</sup>

From the beginning of Turner's narrative, he clearly states that his actions were a response to God's call upon his life. Demonstrating signs of his conversion experience, he declared himself "a prophet" of the Lord, who had "shewn me things that happened before my birth." Cornelius argues that such conversion experiences were one of the most prevalent features of slave religion. In such instances, she says, "Their God didn't mount them, as in Africa, but they met and talked with God, who then came to be and remained

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<sup>174</sup> Thomas Gray, "The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia [book on-line] (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division, African American Odyssey, 1832, accessed 1 August 2007); available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>; Internet.

in their hearts.”<sup>175</sup> Cecil Cone echoes this sentiment, arguing “that the true focus of black faith is the Almighty God and conversion experience that marks this encounter. This is an ecstatic experience after which one places one’s ultimate faith in God, and it is as one of God’s children that one is somebody.”<sup>176</sup> The reader senses from Turner’s proclamation that he derived his sense of self not only from within, but also from a divine source—God.

This claim on his life accomplishes at least two outcomes: first, it provides him with a source of ultimate authority for the mission he carries out; second, it serves as a declaration that he is “set apart” to fulfill mission of divine proportions. With divine authority, Turner acquired an obligation to lead the insurrection, which required no further blessing by any human person. Having the conviction that he was called as prophet, the natural consequence was acting so that God’s word might be fulfilled.

Such declarations had ancient traditions. The Apostle Paul begins his letter to the Romans by identifying himself as “set apart for the Gospel of God.” (v. 1.1) This act of self-identification under the auspices of God accomplishes for him the establishment of divine authority to preach and spread the gospel. Being set apart, in effect, provides Paul the calling and motivation for acting as God’s messenger amongst the Gentiles. Nat Turner, by declaring himself a prophet, re-enacts the ancient tradition. Gordon argues that Turner was further set apart by his “superior intelligence, literacy, and knowledge of the scriptures.”<sup>177</sup> Paul further declares, “we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.” (v. 1.5) By putting

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<sup>175</sup> Janet D. Cornelius, “Slave Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of African and African Religions*, 2001 ed.

<sup>176</sup> Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), 122, 43.

<sup>177</sup> Walter I. Gordon, “The Nat Turner Insurrection Trials,” *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 6, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2006): 137.

forth that he “was intended for some great purpose,” one can interpret Turner as establishing the rationale that his actions were a consequence of his obedience to God through faith. For him, obedience meant searching himself through prayer and fasting for the purpose that he was called to fulfill.

One can imagine that Turner’s interpretive community would strongly identify with his calling. The slave community was strongly grounded in Christian tradition and particularly identified with the children of Israel, who were also held in bondage against their will for many years. Turner’s call to lead the insurrection could be seen contemporarily along with Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt. In a similar way that the Israelites had to fight their way into the Promised Land, so did the insurrectionists feel empowered to fight their way out of slavery. Also similar to Moses was Turner’s direct encounter with God. Saying that “the Lord had shewn me things,” is interpreted here as a reference to his direct encounter with God and God’s encounter with him. Those following Turner could assume similar identity to the Israelites upon hearing Moses speak after his encounter with the burning bush.

An important relational attribute of Turner’s narrative is attributed to his parents, who for faithing purposes, “strengthened” him. As he eloquently described, his parents reinforced his “first impression” that he would become a prophet. This example epitomizes how relationality enhances the faith development of persons. First, the parents are keeping with God’s will concerning teaching children the ordinances of faith. Making reference to such ordinances, scriptures instruct parents to “make them known to your children.” (Deuteronomy 4:9) Secondly, the word strengthened, *endunamoo*, refers to an



increase in strength. We can extrapolate that this means Turner experienced an increase in his faith and trust in what God had shown him concerning his coming prophetic role.

*My grand mother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached --my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to any one as a slave—*

To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant of every thing that was passing, it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed, and although this subject principally occupied my thoughts--there was nothing that I saw or heard of to which my attention was not directed<sup>178</sup>

Turner continues the thread of relationality by identifying his grandmother and master as sources of inspiration and faith. Concerning his grandmother, two reasons are given for her direct influence on him. She was “very religious” and he was “much attached” to her. That Turner cited these two specific qualities regarding his grandmother indicates *why* she was an important influence in his development. We assume that she modeled for him certain faith-related beliefs through behaviors that he later integrated into his own way of being. Next, he recalls that his master, or slave owner, “belonged to the church.” Again, he uses a faith-related descriptor that signifies *why* this person was also influential in his life. Turner associates relationality with membership in their community of faith. Together, these two persons, along with “other religious persons” who remained unnamed, reinforced for Turner that he had “uncommon intelligence” and his calling in life exceeded that of the typical slave. When combined, these relational inputs from Turner’s early life, in essence, provided him with strength for what would become his life’s legacy and the ultimate mark of his faith.

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<sup>178</sup> Gray.

This association with family is an instrumental form of hope for persons on the margins. Persons of faith are “built up” by those with whom they worship. But they depend on close relations for encouragement and hope to deal with day-to-day struggles that occur in-between worship. Therefore, those in contact with Turner’s narrative would be reminded to draw on their familial ties as sources of hope as they engaged in the oppressive work on the plantation.

Historians and theologians alike cite Turner’s close association with religion throughout his life. Harding writes, “On Sundays and at midweek meetings, he exhorted and sang in black Baptist gatherings.”<sup>179</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Turner frequently cites a variety of religious practices as underlying sources of his determination and motivation for following through on his visions of “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle.” In the passage cited, he makes frequent reference to prayer, particularly during worship services. He suggests that relatives and friends that he knew to be praying people were most significant and influential in his life. There is a high probability that such was the case because illiteracy was high amongst slaves, so those that could read, and therefore recite scripture and pray, were regarded with more authority.

Prayer meetings in themselves were a source of communal subversiveness because slaves often gathered against the rules of plantation owners. Slaves knew prayer was liberating and a source of deliverance from the temporal to the transcendent. The content and delivery of prayers amongst slave preachers was known to ignite an intense emotional urgency amongst the “hearers of the word.” Theologically, attending prayer meeting and praying communally was a means of living out one’s vocation and purpose.

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<sup>179</sup> Vincent Harding, “God’s Avenging Scourge,” *Christian History* 18, no. 2 (1999): 29.

The community viewed the gatherings as a Christian duty. This model of community would serve as a beacon of hope for Turner's readers. Moreover, by describing his focus on religion, Turner modeled for others the level of devotion required to accomplish his mission.

...my superior judgment, and when this, in their opinions, was *perfected by Divine inspiration*...

...myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer--By this time, having arrived to man's estate, and hearing the scriptures commented on at meetings, I was struck with that particular passage which says : "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you." I reflected much on this passage, and prayed daily for light on this subject--As I was praying one day at my plough, *the spirit spoke to me*, saying "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you."

The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days--and I was greatly astonished, and for two years prayed continually, whenever my duty would permit--and then again I had the same revelation, which *fully confirmed me* in the impression that *I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty*.<sup>180</sup>

These passages illustrate Turner's manner of growing in sanctification. In a well-known scripture of perseverance and discipline, Paul encouraged believers to "pray without ceasing." (1 Thess 5.17) Though he does not cite this verse, it is clear that Turner maintained such discipline with his spiritual practice. At one point in his narrative, he reported "praying one day at my plough" and hearing the Spirit reply back to him. At another time, he reported that he "prayed continually" for two years. This degree of discipline would certainly inspire the reader to go deeper in pursuit of spiritual practices.

Persons reading Turner's narrative could translate Turner's authority as a prophet into their own sense of authority and religious identity. The careful reader or listener could easily discern that *revelation* was open to all who believed and trusted in God's word. Just as God revealed to Turner through "fasting and prayer" a mission of

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<sup>180</sup> Gray.

insurrection, God could reveal to others similarly situated other missions that might bring about God's righteousness in the here and now. For the interpretive community, the revelation "perfected by Divine inspiration" could not possibly be limited to Turner. Instead, the revelation was applicable to the whole supportive community, and therefore, each person could be inspired in the manner that Turner was inspired. It is quite plausible that such a reader-response is what Turner had in mind when he dictated his *Confession* to Thomas Gray.

Clearly, Turner saw himself as an instrument of justice and righteousness. He seemed intent not on asking for God's resolution of his dilemma, but instead, was intent on exposing his calling by God. Then he sought prayer, fasting, and discernment in how he might offer God a righteous response. By seeking and heeding the Spirit, Turner exemplified the ingathering and exposing of a fragmented life before a transcendent God. This very same ingathering and exposing of the self, along with seeking God's will and trusting in God for future hope, is the mark of a faith exemplar.

What can we take away from Turner's *Confession*? Nat Turner possessed an unshakable faith in God and insurmountable hope that his mission was within God's will. Living as he did, under severely oppressive conditions and institutionalized slavery, he could have taken another route of accepting the situation into which he was born. Instead, he maintained hope in the face of imminent danger. From a pastoral theological perspective, the examined excerpt from Turner's narrative brings together elements of both black theology and black psychology. Watkins Ali argues this point saying

Despairing African Americans can find hope and sustain themselves spiritually in the belief that the God of Black liberation theology is identified with our struggle to be free from our oppressions. Where there seems to be no hope for an immediate way out of circumstances, there is hope in knowing that...God...is

identified with even the very “least” in the struggle and “is able to make a way out of no way.”<sup>181</sup>

Watkins Ali has correctly assessed how African Americans sustain themselves through their faith in God. This can be applicable to all Christian persons, regardless of ethnicity. For persons going through difficult times without the appearance of a viable exit strategy, Turner’s struggle for liberation serves as an impetus for conversion from “ye of little faith” toward a deeper, more mature faith. Turner’s narrative is a constant reminder that knowing God is relational in nature. Concurrently, maintaining faith practices in the context of a supportive community prepares one for the ingathering and exposure needed for encountering and fulfilling one’s ultimate responsibility to God.

#### **“Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee”**

Jarena Lee provides very few biographical details about her early life in her spiritual narrative. However, evidence indicates she was born of free blacks, but worked in the capacity of a servant until a young adult. Despite her lineage, her life was difficult. She left her parents when she was seven and began working immediately. Though burdened by her race and gender, she portrays an even heavier burden after being declared a “wretched sinner”<sup>182</sup> by the Holy Spirit. Following that experience, she began searching in earnest for redemption and salvation, which she eventually experienced. Later, Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, ordained her a preacher.

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<sup>181</sup> Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in the African American Context* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 117.

<sup>182</sup> Jarena Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee” in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed. Susan Houchins (New York: Oxford, 1988), 3.

Called to preach, she continuously met challenge from persons questioning and doubting the authenticity and authority of her vocation. Both men and women heckled her when she preached and many attempted to derail her ministerial credentials. She married early and had a child, but her husband died suddenly forcing her to leave her child behind with friends as she preached to earn a living. As a traveling evangelist, she constantly reminded her readers of the struggles one encounters when living without a permanent residence and nuclear family. Moreover, she had chronic health problems. Through all of this, her faith in God prevailed because she clearly considered herself God's own child "set apart" and called to spread the gospel message.

For the purposes of this project, four major theological themes emerge in Lee's narrative—relationship with God, growing in sanctification, vocation and purpose, and supportive community. Though highlighted throughout this research, Black points out that relationality is particularly pertinent for African American women that connect relationality to faith. She writes

A salient theme within African American women's narratives is that a personal relationship, like a covenant, exists between themselves and God. The strength of their faith, as well as the assertive stance they take in the relationship, equals God's personal concern for them. This active relationship engenders a sense of self-worth and forms a primary means of coping with hardship.<sup>183</sup>

Her unequivocal belief that she is a child of God becomes a self-perpetuating narrative that guides her life. Furthermore, her sense of self-worth endures because she ties it inextricably to her belief that she was created in God's own image, the most enduring image of all for faith exemplars.

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<sup>183</sup> Helen K. Black, "Poverty and Prayer: Spiritual Narratives of Elderly African-American Women," *Review of Religious Research* 40 (June 1999): 363-4.

Significantly, Hubert describes Lee's story as a "narrative of life-in-community."<sup>184</sup> A component within the experience of community, especially amongst African Americans, is testimony. For a traveling evangelist who became a part of many communities, Lee's narrative is a testimony of how community supports faith development, and therefore, abiding trust in God's promises over the course of one's life. Excerpts of Lee's testimony delineated below will show how community support for Lee sustained her when she had virtually no tangible resources of her own. Hers is a narrative of faith; a resource that Black insists can be "used as a means to cope with hardship and to experience ultimate reality."<sup>185</sup>

The vocational theme is prominent in Lee's narrative. All persons can find strength from Lee's struggle and belief that she will overcome her difficulties with God's forbearance. As one called to the ministry and set apart to spread the gospel, Lee's narrative serves as testimony for the interpretive community to which she writes. Integral to Lee's narrative is a call to other women to listen for God's call upon their lives. With God on their side, they too, could endure the hardships of life. Accordingly, "Lee's voice comes from her people and speaks to them, offering both challenge and hope."<sup>186</sup>

#### *Looking ahead at spiritual disciplines*

Commentators have referred to her spiritual narrative as a travelogue due to the style of her writing and the discipline she applied to documenting her travels (and travails). When she turns her thoughts inward, reflects on her difficulties in ministry, and opens her heart to the reader and God, the narrative quickly assumes the tone of a

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<sup>184</sup> Susan Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*," *Journal of Religious Thought* 55, no. 1 (Spring/Fall 1998): 46.

<sup>185</sup> Black, 359.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

*spiritual journal*. The intimacy with which she discusses her anger, frustration, and need to persevere demonstrates how one can make journaling a true spiritual discipline and work through pressing issues of faith. One might say that Lee serves as a “companion for the journey” for her interpretive community.

As an African American woman with a calling to ministry during the slave era, she is clearly a “triple minority.” Lee is African American, female, and called to a male-dominated vocation. She appropriately belongs to at least these three interpretive communities. The reader can learn from Lee’s experience and find encouragement by sharing with her when she does experience moments of transcendence during her journey of extraordinary hardship. Thurman teaches that suffering is an unavoidable aspect of living. People suffer, he says “as a part of the experience of freedom. They suffer as a part of growth of life itself. They suffer as a part of life.”<sup>187</sup> Lee embodied this element of suffering and freedom in her narrative. It can be argued that Lee’s narrative contains elements of what womanist theologian Stacey Floyd-Thomas and feminist scholar Laura Gillman call a biomythography, an autobiographical account that “locates the struggle for moral agency and self-identity in a context of social oppression.”<sup>188</sup> Throughout Lee’s work, she clearly establishes that the context in which she lives and ministers is oppressive and that she must fight with all of her will for moral agency and self-identity. In such a context, argue Floyd-Thomas and Gillman “biomythography makes visible the social ills, internalized within the fabric of one’s own life...[and] allows for the understanding of the self separate and apart from the objectified position one holds in

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>188</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, “The Whole Story is What I’m After”: Womanist Revolutions and Liberation Feminist Revelations Through Biomythography and Emancipatory Historiography,” *Black Theology* 3, no. 2 (July 2005): 184.



society.”<sup>189</sup> Lee’s narrative certainly accomplishes this biomythographical task.<sup>190</sup> And throughout her narrative, the supportive community is one constant that sustains her in the midst of suffering.

### *Reader-Response*

Legend:

*Italics* represent emphasis on relationality; Underline represents emphasis on faith practices.

“During the exhortation, *God made manifest his power* in a manner sufficient to *show the world that I was called* to labor according to my ability, and the grace given unto me, in the vineyard of *the good husbandman*.” (17)

The manifestation of God’s power in Lee is of utmost importance to Lee’s readers, especially those who were white. It was a certain indicator of Lee’s full humanity and equality with whites. Without God’s power, whites were likely to view Lee as less than a child of God. Not only was Lee making a theological declaration, she was also make a political declaration. This theme runs throughout the narrative. Abolitionists were keen to call attention to such details in the narrative.

Having discussed the nature and impact of exhortation earlier, the emphasis in this passage is largely on relationality. In particular, the narrator speaks directly of her relationship with God. Congruent with Black’s earlier argument about the reciprocity between black women and God, Lee reports, through inference, that God knows her. In fact, the divine knowledge of her is such that God literally acts on her behalf “to show the world” that she is *set apart* with pastoral authority.

Likewise, Lee demonstrates that she knows God by her command of scripture. Her language reflects this knowledge of God as depicted in the scriptures when she uses

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> The reader is invited to examine Lee’s narrative in its entirety for a comprehensive understanding of Lee’s experience.

Pauline-like linguistic phrasing. The apostle spoke of God's power made manifest through the spirit with reference to spiritual gifts. Teaching how persons can discern their spiritual calling, Paul invokes the power of the Holy Spirit arguing, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Cor 12.7) He then lists several gifts that include knowledge, wisdom, and faith. From Paul's perspective, using one's gifts is an obligation. Says Hubert, "all members of the body are to use their gifts."<sup>191</sup> Each of the manifestations of the Spirit can apply to various forms of ministry. Feeling led by the spirit, Lee ingenuously depicts her calling as an outgrowth of her relationship with God, and importantly, God's relationship with her.

She is congruent with both of the earlier narratives when she invokes the term "showed" (previously written as "shewed") in reference to another person extending self on her behalf. In this case, *God* is showing the world Lee's gifts and grace as a preacher. It is significant that she declares God her "husbandman." The terminology suggests a marriage of two intimate partners in faith. By naming God as her spiritual husband, she implicitly names herself as God's spiritual wife. Her choice of words foreshadows a lifelong commitment to God, which her narrative goes on to prove.

*"I felt a greater love for the people than ever...Religion is love—God is love. But it was nothing less than Divine power that brought me through..."* (25)

In this quote, Lee hints that there exists direct correlation between her religious practice and relationality. Her exhibit of loving feelings towards persons in her congregation and persons that have supported her ministry has grown during her years of labor "in the vineyard." By trusting God through turmoil in ministry, she now reaps the benefits through the outpouring of the Spirit. This inward expression of love points to the

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<sup>191</sup> Hubert, 51.

outward manifestation that is lived through religious experience. By declaring, “Religion is love,” Lee unknowingly reaches the conclusion of many mystics. Here, we hear the echoes of Thurman, who described love as the essence of God’s being and the pinnacle of all religious experience.

“That year I travelled two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons. *Praise God for health and strength*, O my soul, and *magnify his name* for protection through various scenes of life.” (51)

Commitment is a spiritual discipline, as we learned from Thurman. The opening statement of the quote above is a testimony of Lee’s commitment to God and her calling. The numbers from her preaching itinerary alone do not depict the depth of her commitment. What does? She mostly traveled by foot with a single companion, who was often another woman. As two black women traveling during an era where blacks were under constant surveillance and life-threatening pursuit, the women had virtually no protection from those who might inflict harm upon them. Modern readers can only imagine the dangers and risks associated with her form of evangelism. The assumption of such risk is another form of testimony to Lee’s faith and trust in God.

Another faith marker for Lee and other faith exemplars is their attributing God for both the goodness *and* suffering in their lives. They praise God for blessing them with grace in all of its manifestations. Then, they glorify God for lessons learned during hardship and reconstruct difficult experiences as God’s method of drawing them closer to Godself, strengthening their faith, and bringing them through. A scripture that supports their faith is “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30.5) The Old Testament prophets often taught God’s people to “praise God” day and night. Lee follows this tradition throughout her narrative.

“My money was gone, my health was gone, and I was measurably without a home. But *I rested on the promises of God*... Without having a dollar to help myself, *I saw the Lord would verify his promise*, bless his name for it.” (61)

Not only was her ministry a demonstration of commitment, it was also a form of suffering, as we see in this quote. At this point in her life and ministry, Lee had forsaken all material possessions and her health for the sake of preaching the gospel message. We can assert that through sacrificing her all, including her health and well being, Lee endured the ultimate form of suffering. No doubt, she was prepared to risk her life if her missionary endeavors extracted such a price. As a faith exemplar, Lee viewed her suffering as a natural consequence of her abiding trust in God.

The word “promise” suggests an abiding relationship between the promissory and the promised. A promise is a guarantee in the present of something deliverable in the future. On a promise rests one’s hope, confidence, and faith in a tendered offer. The offer, of course, for faith exemplars is eternal love and right relationship with God. Therein lies a stake, an investment of self, and an expectation that the Promissory will make good on the guarantee. Norris reminds us that promise also implies doing something. In her words, “A promise, then, is a call to take action, to move, to perform a required service. [Therefore], we are not so foolish after all to regard God's promises as the solid ground on which we stand.”<sup>192</sup> Such is the makeup of hope. With regard to religious experience, looking ahead with hopeful expectation, one lives in a certain manner as a means of preparing for the outcome at the end of the faith contract. It becomes increasingly apparent as one engages Lee’s spiritual narrative that she viewed her calling as an embodiment of God’s promises that she would realize in the future. By living out of her

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<sup>192</sup> Kathleen Norris, “Standing on Promises,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 24 (November 29, 2005): 21.

faith, she epitomizes the manner in which faith exemplars demonstrate their trust and hope in God.

**“The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African”**

Oludah Equiano wrote his narrative with the intent of painting a broad portrait of the African slave trade in all of its viciousness and paradox. Published in 1789, Equiano’s narrative drew strong attention and critical acclaim due to its scope and sense of adventure. Over the course of the narrative, Equiano’s life has innumerable transformations, to include, but not limited to: beginning in remote Africa, being transported across the Atlantic, living as a slave and later as a free person, becoming a businessman, and serving as British government employee. Having seen the worst of slavery, he became a leading abolitionist in England. It is said that John Wesley was an avid fan and asked that acquaintances read passages from *The Interesting Narrative* while on his deathbed.

A primary agenda of the narrative was exposing the evils of slavery. Accordingly, Taylor says

Equiano’s reading helped him appropriate certain aspects of the noble savage mythology while repudiating others, see both the blessings and curses of assimilation into British society, and balance his antislavery arguments with acutely perceptive self-revelations and vividly described adventures.<sup>193</sup>

Another purpose for writing the narrative involved proving the humanity of Africans. By displaying his intellectual prowess and literary skill, Equiano redefined Africans as intelligent beings whose value transcended the purely economic gain that manual labor presented slave traders and owners. Pudaloff argues this point convincingly saying

Equiano not only understands this (as did every other black author for the next century or more) but also embraces writing as a particular form of a general case:

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<sup>193</sup> Taylor, 31.

exchange, commerce, commodification, and trade, like writing, are the signs of being human.<sup>194</sup>

By writing their narratives, former slaves demonstrated they were not mere commodities, but human persons. The content of the writing also presented Africans as capable of *relating*. Advancing his argument further, Pudaloff writes, “Being human is defined by relationships...”<sup>195</sup> While most slave narrators tended “to assert their individual humanity in dehumanizing [the] institution of slavery,”<sup>196</sup> this reading advances that intent even further by asserting that being human is also a means of making a claim of relationality. From the perspective of this project, relationality is a definitive measure of humanity. In particular, relationality with God is the ultimate measure extolled by faith exemplars.

Thus, while Equiano’s account of his quest for freedom repudiated slavery, his testimony regarding God’s involvement in his ultimate liberation should not be underestimated. In fact, some have argued that the narrative’s high point comes with Equiano’s experience of redemption and salvation through Christ. To this effect, McKanan argues “Even Equiano, who clearly had antislavery motives for writing his autobiography, made his conversion to Christianity, well after his manumission, the climax of his story.”<sup>197</sup> Such is the perspective of this research. To this end, the excerpts examined here from *The Interesting Narrative* necessarily will concentrate on the aspects of Equiano’s account that emphasize his faith perspective and appropriation of faith resources as a means of maintaining hope while facing what otherwise might have been perceived as hopeless circumstances.

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<sup>194</sup> Ross J. Pudaloff, “No Change Without Purchase: Olaudah Equiano and the Economics of Self and Market,” *Early American Literature* 40, no. 3 (September 2005): 508.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Owen Whooley, “The Political Work of Narratives: A dialogic analysis of two slave narratives,” in *Narrative Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (2006): 306.

<sup>197</sup> McKanan, 130.

### *Looking ahead at spiritual disciplines*

When he was twelve years old, Jesus' parents found him in the temple "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." (Luke 2. 46) Such a disposition for learning is the essence of *growing in wisdom and stature*. Excerpts from Equiano's narrative begin with him attending churches on a regular basis in search of salvation. He also reports spending considerable time in prayer and bible study. His search for spiritual growth witnesses him sitting among many teachers, preachers, and fellow Christians asking questions about how "to be with Christ." Exercising great initiative, he reads a new book with questions and answers about spiritual conversion that he obtained from friends. Equiano's spiritual quest fits Thurman's description of faith development: "the ways in which the growth of human beings yields or makes for the kind of discipline in the individual that is essentially spiritual in character."<sup>198</sup> Throughout the excerpts from Equiano's narrative there is evidence that he applies discipline that builds up one's spiritual character.

The spiritual discipline of *reconciliation* has to do with unity of life. According to Thurman, reconciliation is a quality of wholeness that "seeks to effect and further harmonious relations in a totally comprehensive climate."<sup>199</sup> Wholeness also has to do with renewal. Thus, by restoring wholeness, persons experience renewal and are reconciled one to another. Paul associated reconciliation with newness arguing that when we are reconciled with God through Christ we become "a new creation." (2 Cor 5.17) Equiano's resolve "to be saved" parallels the Christian pursuit of becoming new through reconciliation with Christ.

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<sup>198</sup> Thurman, 1963, 38.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 105.

One seeks harmony internally by quieting inner conflict and externally by healing broken human relations. In the selected passages by Equiano, the underlying theme is reconciling himself to God. In one instance, he goes to a man known for having “the love of God shed abroad in his heart.” In another instance, he searches for and finds Christian fellowship. Both bring about a calm quality of wholeness for him. In the end, he discovers “the wonderful change the Lord had wrought” in himself. Though that experience had the markings of reconciliation, he also discerned, like many faith exemplars, that reconciliation with God happens in God’s time, not his own time.

### *Reader-Response*

Legend:

*Italics* represent emphasis on relationality; Underline represents emphasis on faith practices.

I first frequented the neighbouring churches, St. James's, and others, two or three times a day, for many weeks: still...I really found more heartfelt relief in reading my bible at home than in attending the church; and, being *resolved to be saved* (136)

After enduring many years in captivity, Equiano worked his way out of slavery and became a free black. He gradually began searching for the path of salvation after hearing many persons talk about it. This first quote reveals that he had become steeped in religious practices, especially worship, and became fervent in seeking a salvation experience. As a consequence, he attended many churches, but typically came up short of his hopes. He then resorted to bible study in the privacy of his own home.

However this was my conclusion, at all events, to read the four evangelists, and whatever sect or party I found adhering thereto such I would join...*I asked different people questions about the manner of going to heaven, and was told different ways...I found none among the circle of my acquaintance that kept wholly the ten commandments.* (137)



Underlying Equiano's quest for a conversion experience was encouragement of many believers. They had pressed upon him that God would not change his heart in a spiritual way unless he received the spirit. Not finding such an experience in church, he discerns a need to study the four gospels. The gospels then became a model for discerning which church he would join. It is clear that Equiano's conviction of will is strong. Once he made up his mind to experience conversion first-hand, he allowed nothing to dissuade him from that goal. Instead, he sought out persons who were self-identified Christians for assistance.

Here, the narrative takes a surprising twist when he reveals that although he "was told different ways," he began looking around his circle of friends and discovered that none were following the biblical teachings. In this quote, he has clearly established criteria for determining whether his acquaintances are reliable and authoritative examples of living in a Christian manner. By referring to the ten commandments as his guide for discerning Christian character, he confirms that he has been reading the Bible himself and has become an arbiter of right and wrong. It is significant that Equiano has by this time established a disciplined approach to the spiritual life. By reading the Bible, he has begun growing in faith. On the surface, his statement may point to judgmentalism on his part. More importantly, it demonstrates his devotion to religious practice.

I had a great desire to read the bible the whole day at home...and that day as I was walking, *it pleased God to direct me* to a house where there was *an old sea-faring man, who experienced much of the love of God shed abroad in his heart. He began to discourse with me; and, as I desired to love the Lord, his conversation rejoiced me greatly; and indeed I had never heard before the love of Christ to believers set forth in such a manner, and in so clear a point of view.* (139)

We now witness Equiano growing in matters of faith from within his self. He speaks of his desire to study scripture in an effort to know God. As his desire increases,

his manner of acknowledging God's will for his life becomes more apparent. Here, he directly identifies God's actions affecting the persons that he chooses to relate with concerning the spiritual life. Relationality takes on a positive note as "an old sea-faring man" offers his testimony to Equiano. The testimony is homage to God's love for persons. In the manner of a true faith giant, or a person seeking greater faith, Equiano interprets this encounter as being in God's will. The practice highlighted is subtle, but important. It illustrates how Christian fellowship serves as the best teacher of Christian character for him.

This kind of *Christian fellowship I had never seen*, nor ever thought of seeing on earth; it fully reminded me of what I had read in the holy scriptures...It was the first soul feast I ever was present at [and]... *produced me things, spiritual and temporal, sleeping and waking, judgment and mercy, that I could not but admire the goodness of God.* (140)

In this passage of Equiano's narrative, he describes a joining of persons that exemplifies what mystics call union. For mystics, union is a form of relating between God and human persons whereby both entities spiritually become one. He is not specific in the details that are presented, but the reader might conclude that the persons gathered in that place and time were in some way in union with one another and with God. For many mystics, this is the epitome of religious experience. It is the goal of much religious seeking.

Though Equiano does not employ the term, what he described could be classified as a mild form of *ecstasy*. In this and the preceding passage, he clearly states that it was a first-time experience. This, too, is typical of the mystical union. It is a fleeting experience, which in itself makes the encounter seductive for many seekers. What tends to separate persons of great faith and maturity in this regard is an ability to employ

restraint. Faith exemplars are careful not to allow experiences of unification to be the goal of their religious practice. Instead, it is a by-product.

The specific term that Equiano uses to describe this experience is “soul feast.” This term does not appear in the Bible and has no discernible history in itself, so Equiano himself must have derived it. Nevertheless, it suggests a festival or time of great hospitality displayed by the celebrants toward each other. In this case, the occasion induced for him interior sensations revealing the “goodness of God.” This personal characteristic is reminiscent of Jesus’ saying that “no one is good but God.” (Matthew 19.17) From a relational perspective, the perception of goodness evidences a closeness and intimate quality that one gains from being in relationship with another. At a minimum, the word goodness suggests *knowledge of* another’s personhood and character. By coming in contact with God’s goodness through the fellowship of other believers, Equiano demonstrates how relationality induces growth in the life of faith. The gathering is also suggestive of how community forms around religious practice.

As I was going *they lent me* a little book, entitled "The Conversion of an Indian." ...The above book was of great use to me, and at that time *was a means of strengthening my faith.* (141)

A direct means of transmitting communal norms and beliefs is through sharing sacred texts. Determined to attain his goal of conversion, Equiano accepted a book that could possibly have been a faith narrative and studied it. One might presume that he pursued the text in the same manner that he read the scriptures, hoping it would further instruct him. He does not specify the content beyond the title, only the format of the text (question and answer). He reports that the text furthered his spiritual quest by “strengthening my faith.” The reader surmises that the material dealt with converting

persons to Christian faith. It may have been an instruction manual for evangelists or missionaries that contained specific scriptures regarding faith and belief. Regardless of its specifics, those presenting the text had sufficient relationship with Equiano that he accepted it on faith and applied the lessons offered.

This quote is another example of both relationality and active faith practice. That someone claimed a vested interest in Equiano's faith journey points to relationality. Furthermore, he was known for seeking out mentors; persons renowned for their knowledge in the faith and who lived their faith visibly. From a practical standpoint, sharing sacred texts is a standard form of mentoring another person in faith. In general, persons tend to mentor those with whom they have a relationship or common interest.

*I went to Westminster chapel; the Rev. Mr. P----...for the minister exhorted me much... but recommended me to read the scriptures, and hear the word preached, not to neglect fervent prayer to God, [then] ... I took my leave of him, with many thanks, and resolved to follow his advice, so far as the Lord would condescend to enable me. (143)*

The first statement above highlights the writer's initiative regarding his spiritual practice. He attended worship with the expectation of encountering his spiritual guide, the Reverend Mr. P. Thus, primary emphasis is on attending worship. In the slave community, worship was a focal point that was typically done under the cover of darkness. That Equiano was able to participate in public worship indicates his unusual circumstances and his commitment to live out his faith under conditions that were less than favorable. In fact, it is well within reason to advance that worship served two functions: first, it was a communal celebration of praise to God; second, it was a means of sharing and participating in the suffering of fellow believers.

Next, the narrator reports being “exhorted.” Exhortation is a spiritual discipline with elements of reciprocity. That is, it effects change in both the exhorter and the exhorted. On the one hand, it refers to the speaker’s teaching function. She or he informs, warns, guides, urges the listeners to take seriously God’s word. That is, they should do something in response, not just listen and remain unchanged. The Letter of James says, “*Be* doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (v. 1.22) Here, the exhortation focuses on being and doing. Thus, a speaker or preacher offers the word, but is also accountable to the word s/he preaches. On the other hand, the hearer or listener comes to worship expecting guidance by the word and receives clear direction.

Worship in itself is largely passive as it occurs, yet demands an active response later as the hearer seeks application of the gospel message in her or his daily life. In this instance, it is clear that Equiano saw himself as an active participant by taking initiative to be in worship, and by seeking exhortation, sought guidance for his manner of daily living. A key characteristic of the faith exemplars is this searching for ways to be in God’s will and for practices that instruct exemplars on the content of God’s will. They move beyond their own wisdom for signs or instructions that point to God. In this passage, that instruction comes directly from the scriptures read during the preaching.

Relationality is illuminated here when the narrator follows the advice of the preacher, but even more prominently as he prays asking God to “enable” him. While we cannot be certain why he desires to be enabled, we can hypothesize that Equiano is seeking relationship with the transcendent God in the midst of hardship. He desires relationship with God as a source of strength, encouragement, and wisdom. He also seeks God, one can presume, as a source of future hope.

I had *heard of the Reverend Mr. Romaine*, and his great knowledge in the scripture...He very clearly *shewed the difference* between human works and free election...*These glad tidings set me entirely at liberty*, and I went out of the church rejoicing, seeing *my spots were those of God's children*. I went to Westminster Chapel, and saw some of *my old friends, who were glad when they perceived the wonderful change that the Lord had wrought in me*...Now my whole wish was to be dissolved, and *to be with Christ*--but, alas! I must wait mine appointed time.

Another relationship with a preacher emerges in this section. Referring to the preacher as “the Reverend” shows Equiano’s high regard and reverence for pastoral authority and pastoral identity. As mentioned in an earlier passage, since slaves typically could not read, they bestowed authority upon those in their number who could read. In Equiano’s case, he was a literate ex-slave by the time his narrative was published. So his high regard for the pastor is likely for at least two reasons. One, he knows the significance, meaning, and intelligence of a fellow literate person. Two, he respects another literate person for having “great knowledge” in sacred scriptures, which are the source of ultimate meaning. As with Turner, the word “shewed” refers to an important established relationship.

Receiving sacred teachings is a source of spiritual freedom, reports Equiano. Being “at liberty” apparently resembles mystical experience whereby a person undergoes ecstatic feelings and casts off ordinary burdens and limitations. In this state, the sense of joy overcomes mind and body. In slave religion terms, one is said to be “happy.” For the literate Equiano, he uses the more formal term “rejoicing.”

Then, he describes himself in the manner of faith exemplars as one of “God’s children.” This language points to relationship between God and the narrator. It also alludes to the *imago dei*, that is, the writer although a slave comes from God, is of God, and is created in God’s image. And as a child born with direct parental lineage, he has

inherent relations with his parents, especially his spiritual parent in heaven. Of all the self-identifying titles that faith exemplars may employ, being a child of God is the most significant with regard to relationality.

Returning to chapel, the relational theme continues. This time, however, “old friends” noticed the impact and “wonderful change” the spiritual practices had upon the narrator. Since Equiano qualifies his description of his friends as “old,” we intuitively recognize that a prior relationship existed that provided a benchmark for measuring change. The reader can infer that having been observed as a changed person, the observation in itself reinforced such change as a reality. In other words, having relations of significance serves an important role in faith development because those persons are then in a position for confirming the transformation “the Lord had wrought.” Being alone, one might imagine or feel like a different person as a result of participating in religious practices, but by being in community one gains observers or confirmers of change.

As a result of the reported observations, Equiano begins seeking union with Christ. In essence, he becomes a practicing mystic as he lives out his faith. We can further conclude that his growth in the life of faith elevates his stature amongst his fellow congregants. While he may have been perceived as a youngster in the faith earlier, his display of faith elevates his status amongst his friends, and possibly, confers upon him the role of exemplar in the life of the faith community. And as a budding faith exemplar, he recognizes the value and need for patience in his search for unity with God. Importantly, he says that he must wait his “appointed time.” This expression of faith points to a time in the future in which he places his trust and hopefulness.

## TOWARD A PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF FAITH EXEMPLARS

In his African American pastoral theology *Our Home is Over Jordan*, Homer Ashby, Jr. proposes the use of a conjure as a means of instilling hopefulness and vision for the African American community. A conjure, according to Ashby, is a literary device that creates in persons' minds "various images, stories, and rituals in order to transform the reality in which they live."<sup>200</sup> The conjure is a catalyst for change in everyday circumstances and long-term vision. Since Africans first touched American soil, they have made use of the power in conjures as a means of transforming suffering and oppression into meaning and hope.

The story of Joshua and the Israelites claiming Canaan as a homeland is thought to be a conjure.<sup>201</sup> As a story of conquest, it served as a rallying cry for a demoralized people that strongly needed a reminder of God's promises of the "promised land."

Through the use of conjure, Joshua reminded the children of Israel that

the promises of God remain true. Although scattered, they have the promise of coming back together to become the great nation that God promised to Abraham. Moreover, God's promise includes God's will to make it happen."<sup>202</sup>

Joshua's interpretive community was in dire need of a story of hope after being lost in the wilderness for so many years. Hearing Joshua's conjure, therefore, provided the images, stories, and rituals that could transform their sojourn in the desert into an experience with meaning and purpose. It provided the community with a renewed sense of identity and destiny that enabled them to resume trusting in God's faithfulness.

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<sup>200</sup> Homer U. Ashby, Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan: A Black Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 19.

<sup>201</sup> See Ashby's text for details on this argument.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



The African American slave narrative can also be viewed as a conjure for its interpretive communities—past, present, and future. Certainly, the interpretive community that was contemporary to the narrators found in the narratives images, stories, and rituals that were transformative of the conditions in which they lived. Though they lived as slaves or bonded Africans in a “land of milk and honey,” they were several times removed from enjoying the fruit of the land. Hearing stories of persons who had struggled to overcome similar circumstances served as a conjure to get themselves through on-going struggles. The present-day reader of slave narratives finds a painful reminder of legalized oppression and suffering that can be appropriated in the here-and-now in the post-Civil Rights era. Today’s youth are tomorrow’s adult leaders that need such stories to overcome present challenges. These narratives also conjure up images of hopefulness that can be propelled into the future and transform difficult times into experiences of transcendence and transformation.

Ashby provides characteristics of the conjure that are helpful for this pastoral theological framework. First, the conjure recognizes that struggle is a major component when persons are recovering “identity, pride, and empowerment.”<sup>203</sup> The image of the land “flowing with milk and honey” provided the Israelites with a vision of what was to come, but the journey to that land was filled with many battles and conflicts. The same situation existed for the interpretive communities of slave narratives. They could employ the conjure to imagine the future, but they still had to struggle through their conquest for freedom, which was not realized for another generation.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

Second, though God promises justice and righteousness and gives it freely, the “gift requires something of the recipients.”<sup>204</sup> In the case of the Israelites, God required that they exhibit “courage and obedience” in order to follow God’s will through a series of difficult struggles. Each of the narrators demonstrated exceptional courage and obedience as they interpreted God’s will for their lives. Turner sacrificed his life, Lee was sacrificed when she left her parents during childhood and later sacrificed all of her worldly possessions to preach, and Equiano sacrificed freedom by selling himself into slavery at one time to achieve ends before earning his freedom again. This dominant theme of giving up something served as a “balm in Gilead” for the narratives’ readers.

The last component is the need “to adapt what one has to the environment or decide that because there can be no adaptation, the item has to be discarded.”<sup>205</sup> The items Ashby refers to are disenfranchisement, health threats, backsliding, eroding cultural identity, and lack of vision. Items of this nature become burdensome and can hinder survival, therefore, they must be discarded if one is to reach the promised land. Like the Israelites, the narrators struggled to loosen themselves from such baggage. In some ways they were successful, while in other ways they continued to struggle. Even to this day, persons of faith have this same struggle.

In summary, Ashby’s development of the conjure as a means of galvanizing hope for the future provides an excellent framework for viewing the slave narratives. Through the use of imagery, story, and ritual, the narrators portrayed their lives with God and their pursuit of being in God’s will in such a way as to inspire their interpretive communities to join with them in their journey through the vicissitudes of demonstrated that their

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

future rested on God's promises of justice and life in search of a transformed future. Through the use of conjure, the narrators righteousness, and in doing so, secured for themselves a place amongst faith exemplars.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNDERSTANDING FAITH THROUGH HOPE AND MEANING-MAKING

This chapter will establish a framework for understanding the developmental process of faith exemplars. It will entail an investigation of hope and meaning-making as significant resources for a pastoral theology of exemplary faith. The chapter will: 1) provide a theological context for understanding how persons of faith frame the future; 2) establish the framework for a theology of hope, by appropriating the work of Andrew Lester and other pastoral theologians (including feminist perspectives); 3) explore the nature of meaning-making through the lens of Robert Kegan's developmental theory and its implications for persons of faith, especially with regard to relationality; and 4) present a critical correlation between Lester's and Kegan's theories. This critical correlation between theology and behavioral science will explore common ground and distinctions between the two theories as a means of advancing the human condition.

#### **What is Meaning-Making?**

The human search for meaning is a natural course of our existence. History is filled with persons who have tried to find meaning in their experience and searched for the significance of life's events. Thurman declared, "Inherent in life is meaning."<sup>206</sup> There are many approaches to making-meaning. Some believers compare their experience to the Christian narrative (biblical texts) and derive meaning. Some seek out others, such as clergy, family and friends, and derive meaning through dialogue and discernment. Still others engage in a mix of spiritual disciplines as a means of discovering the meaning of experience.

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<sup>206</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1961), 14.

Persons of faith often search for answers within their experience and expect such answers to inform their future, confirm their faith, and, thus, strengthen their relationship with God. Writer Dana Jennings puts it this way:

As my 40s lengthened, I inexplicably became ravenous for wisdom and meaning. I devoured theological tomes – the works of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Catholic writer Thomas Merton come to mind – as if they were particularly fine cuts of steak.<sup>207</sup>

Our primary task with regard to making-meaning is discerning and interpreting the unspoken meaning that arises out of experience. In this project, *meaning-making is the act of organizing experience and/or striving for answers, conclusions, interpretations, and other forms of truth underlying human experience.*

This is a difficult task and is often fraught with inconclusive outcomes. What one concludes as the definitive meaning of a particular experience can change in the midst of that experience and at anytime following that experience. There have been times in this writer's life when God's direction was particularly clear (such as a call to a congregation) and the answers later revealed were strikingly different than anticipated. Such is especially the case when attempting to interpret experience. This research recognizes that there is a developmental element of meaning-making and allows that as persons move through life we create meaning as we view our experience through the lens of authoritative knowledge, sacred texts, relational encounters with God and others, personal and guided reflections, and by engaging spiritual disciplines. Each element is critical for organizing experience and striving for conclusions and interpretations of experience.

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<sup>207</sup> Dana Jennings, "Religion is Less a Birthright Than a Good Fit," *New York Times*, 2 March 2008, Week in Review, p. 5.

## **Andrew Lester—Hope and Meaning-Making**

This project draws significantly from Andrew Lester's pastoral theology of hope. His theological framework of hope includes: 1) the narrative of past suffering, 2) the expectation of the present fulfillment of God's promises, and 3) the future oriented posture of faith exemplars that transforms suffering into joyful anticipation. Each element is foundational for understanding the construction of faith exemplars' faith identity (and echoes the spirituality of Howard Thurman and the faith narratives in the slave accounts).

As faith exemplars actively engage in meaning-making, they hopefully anticipate God's will, praying to God, "not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). By aligning their will with God's will, they claim a faith identity which constantly looks both backward and forward at their relationship with God over the course of their lives. This state of existence relates directly to time—past, present, and future—or what Lester calls *temporality*. The three aspects of time-consciousness affect how persons recall, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences. When explaining how persons make meaning, understanding temporality is helpful; it establishes a framework which accounts for how events accrue significance and importance over time.

The following excerpt is from the qualitative research conducted for this project. Note elements of hope combined with meaning-making in the participant's narrative. First, the participant, Lonnie, describes a life situation from his past. Then, he alludes to moving into the future and associates his narrative with a biblical narrative. Next, he makes meaning out of his own situation.

[Description of past event] Yes, I had a crisis. I went through a divorce. It was a crisis because the Lord had called me to the ministry. My first wife turned and went the other way. She didn't want to serve the Lord and she just turned her back

against the Lord; and didn't want any part of the church. I just kept on doing the will of the Lord; kept going to church.

Sometimes, I prayed by myself, sang by myself, and read by myself. And at that time, I was working for a mission...But I didn't turn my back on the Lord because I was going through a crisis. So I kept on going [future orientation], and the Lord gave me a joy, peace, happiness and all of that, just like he did for Job [Association]. Job went through the same problems, and the devil told him—told God—I'll make Job curse you to your face. But God had somebody that loved him. [Meaning-making] So, I kind of put my situation like Job did.

This thread will continue throughout the section on hope. It will highlight how faith exemplars construct hope out of their experience.

### *Temporality*

Using an existentialist framework, Lester demonstrates how temporality affects the human condition. Human beings are embedded in time. We cannot escape the fact that time proceeds continually and we “are at every moment of our existence both bound by and potentially freed by time.”<sup>208</sup> As we look back over time, we interpret and assign meaning to experiences. In the present moment, time moves us forward into the future. As time continues, it “provides the possibility of development, change, healing, and liberation.”<sup>209</sup> We are free to pursue relationships with God, self, and others.

Kierkegaard asserted that people are not totally bound by necessity nor are our lives predetermined. In the present, we are free to pursue possibilities. For faith exemplars, the most important dimension of time is the future. By looking to the future, where God's promises are fulfilled, persons of faith find discernment for the present. This is a key diagnostic insight of Lester's work. That is, by looking forward into the future, persons imagine the present and use their future story to shape their present, ongoing experience. Their future story provides direction which guides actions which continually

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<sup>208</sup> Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 15.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

shape their faith identity. As identity forms, so does the meaning of experience. In Lester's words, "Being conscious of future time...allows us to give meaning to our existence so that we construct purposes for survival that create future goals. Being self-transcendent, we decide whether life is meaningful or meaningless."<sup>210</sup> Significantly, Lester is asserting that we employ our future imaginings to *create* purpose, and therefore meaning, and this process permits us to determine how we live in real-time.

### *Hope and Transfinite Hope*

For Lester and Stone, hope is a theological construct defined as

[The] recognition of possibilities that lie ahead, a trusting anticipation of a time when troubles lessen or end, an investment in tomorrow that holds promise. It is based upon a trustworthy God who calls us into an open-ended future, who promises deliverance, liberation, and salvation.<sup>211</sup>

This definition shows that hope is an expression of expectation. Hope resides in the future, the birthplace of possibilities, residence of the self-to-be, and destination of one's eventual story. To imagine this, simply recall a plan which once came to fruition. Before that plan was fulfilled, you envisioned its outcome. Before the deadline, you took actions which assured goal completion. Eventually, you achieved your goal, but all along there existed a picture of the imagined results. While hope originates in the present, persons project their hope into the future, anticipating outcomes to materialize in the not-yet. In this way, the future "energizes" the present.

The distinguishing characteristic of Lester's formulation is *transfinite* hope, a form of hope used by persons grounded "in subjects and processes that go beyond

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>211</sup> Andrew Lester and Howard Stone, "Hope and Possibility: Envisioning the Future in Pastoral Conversation," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 262.



physiological sensing and the material world.”<sup>212</sup> Transfinite hope develops when human persons project their hope beyond the immediate future and base their convictions on ultimate values such as freedom, equality, and love. Persons in whom Christian narrative is integral to their personal narrative place transfinite hope in theological convictions such as redemption, salvation, and eternal life. These are the “things hoped for” that make up faith. This form of hope is open-ended. Rather than viewing the future as finite and closed, one remains confident that the possibilities for experiencing transcendence exist indefinitely. Promises of the divine are sustained in a timeframe beyond human understanding because such promises belong to God, who is eternally faithful.

For Lonnie, keeping transfinite hope alive got him through a true existential crisis. After his divorce, he remained faithful to God’s promises. In his own words:

God blessed me after a few years--maybe six or seven, eight years, or ten years. I didn't keep the exact count, but the Lord blessed me with another lady. And she was a missionary. And she had the same faith I did. So that was one crisis that I went through. Instead of going back into the world, I kept on following Christ.

This excerpt illustrates that the appropriation of transfinite hope is a vital component of faith exemplars’ way of being. Faith exemplars dwell in the land of transfinite hope. Their hope “is over Jordan.” The explicit claim here is faith exemplars over the course of their lives have developed their own internal faith resources which enable them to look far into the future of God’s promises and know with confidence that those promises will be realized in God’s time. As a result of their confidence, their embedded sense of transfinite hope, they can invest themselves in the vocations or lifestyles to which God has called them, such as working for justice and countering oppression in their communities.

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<sup>212</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 64.

*Building a Pastoral Theology*

The first component of Lester's pastoral theology is temporality, with special attention to the future dimension. As time-conscious beings living in God's creation, human persons cannot escape the reality that all meaning is made with some reference to past, present, and future. For Christians, faith history is recorded largely in the sacred texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, which catalogue God's movement in the past. Our present-day affairs give witness to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that guides our thoughts, actions, and purposes. And, the promise of Christ's second coming and the fulfillment of God's reign lie in the future. Therein is our hope of becoming children of God.

Lester argues that it is a mistake to link Paul's trilogy of faith, hope, and love in a one-to-one correspondence with past, present, and future. Instead, each element is more accurately associated with all dimensions of time. Hope reflects upon the past and reinterprets the mighty acts of God. Hope motivates us in our present state, then casts its vision to the future in anticipation of the manifestation of transcendence. Speaking about the fulfillment of faith, Wesley reinforced the notion of time-consciousness, saying, "But you shall not be disappointed of your hope [past]. It will come, and will not tarry [future]. Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment [present]! Why not this hour, this moment? Certainly you may look for it *now*, if you believe it is by faith."<sup>213</sup> By accounting for the three aspects of time, Wesley implies that faith development is directly linked to temporality.

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<sup>213</sup> John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford, 1964), 282.

The second component of Lester's theological framework considers *how the future uniquely enhances being human* and concerns how the human mind aggregates its awareness, both consciously and unconsciously, of time yet to come. Psychologically, the mind attaches hope to forthcoming experiences, expectations, and manifestations. We seek new ways of tapping into our inner organization rather than relying on perspectives rooted in the past (or the present, which is limited and fleeting). Theologically, our reasoned choice is the future dimension because its open-endedness allows the greatest possibility for experiencing transcendence through ongoing relationship with God. Accordingly, Lester insists, "Future is the dimension of finitude that is less fixed, the dimension of time that provides the potential for growth, development, and becoming."<sup>214</sup> The future is where the self has true potential.

Feminist pastoral theologian Christie Neuger expands upon the notion of enhancing the experience of being human by arguing that, as persons "begin to realize that they do have choices and at least some power to make meaning out of their life experiences, they begin to have confidence in a future story that has value for them."<sup>215</sup> Persons considering the possibilities of the future discover a greater sense of agency and empowerment. A renewed awareness of self can engender new interpretations of the past, greater clarity about the present, and a more vivid picture of how transcendence might be experienced ahead.

Temporality is a relational element of our being which expands human consciousness, and, therefore, our personhood. It is a part of who we are as human beings. Our ability to imagine the future as a contextual source of experience enables us

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<sup>214</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 23.

<sup>215</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 188.

to relate to one another and God through time, and expect outcomes based on faith. Pastoral theologian Brita L. Gill-Austern insists that relationality is important for women because it helps them “rewrite their lives in ways that speak truth of their existence, their dreams, and their hopes.”<sup>216</sup> The relational aspect of the future gives us a context for responding to God’s faithfulness to us as children of God. Our capacity “to respond [to] and seek relationship with the Creator” is possible only when we acknowledge temporality and the inevitability of the future dimension.

The third component of Lester’s pastoral theology focuses on *how persons develop stories*, a key element of faith identity. In its elemental form, a story is the result of “the mental process by which the raw data from the senses is organized,”<sup>217</sup> so that the brain can capture, store, and recall experience. A story, also known as a narrative, is vitally important for meaning-making. Lester argues, “An event accrues meaning only as we apply narrative structure that connects the event to its impact on the future—the consequences for the rest of the story.”<sup>218</sup> This is the *organizing principle* of how persons make sense of their experience. Robin Marantz Henig supports this position in her investigative work on the psychology of religion. She argues, “The human brain has evolved the capacity to impose a narrative, complete a chronology and cause-and-effect logic, on whatever it encounters, no matter how apparently random.”<sup>219</sup> Creating narratives is a normative means of understanding day-to-day experience. Stephen Crites supports this argument, saying, “the form which active consciousness assumes in its

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<sup>216</sup> Brita L. Gill-Austern, “Pedagogy Under the Influence of Feminism and Womanism,” in *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 155.

<sup>217</sup> Andrew D. Lester, *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 95.

<sup>218</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 28.

<sup>219</sup> Robin Marantz Henig, “Darwin’s God,” *The New York Times Magazine* (March 4, 2007), 41. [36-85]

experience of the world is narrative form.”<sup>220</sup> Putting events in order is a basic activity for conceptualizing reality.

This theme is relevant for Lonnie’s narrative. After his second wife died, he continued to story his life around his experience with her and with God. He said, “Well, back in June 2004, the Lord saw fit to take my wife and carried her to a better place. She was 84 when the Lord took her. And since then, I still have a determination to keep on living for the Lord, and I haven't lost [faith].” His wife’s death provided a context for understanding his relationship with God as a faith exemplar.

The fourth element of this pastoral theological construction is understanding one’s *core narrative*. A person’s core narrative is essential for understanding a person’s life and what makes one unique. By the same token, understanding a person’s faith narrative is essential to understanding a person’s faith identity. It is not enough to know a person in a particular moment: we must make an effort to know one’s entire “fact,” as Howard Thurman argued. One’s fact might equate with one’s core narrative. As persons move through time, they develop an interpretive framework which serves as a coherent structure for making meaning of their experience. Metaphorically, one might imagine a jigsaw puzzle comprised of many interlocking pieces. Each piece fits with others and eventually forms a whole picture. An individual’s narrative is composed piece by piece and eventually becomes a picture revealing much of the meaning of a person’s life. Such narratives structure every facet of life—religion, family, work, recreation, etc. As Lester

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<sup>220</sup> George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 76.

insists, “The core narratives of a person’s life, rather than mere data about them, set the parameters of that individual’s sense of self.”<sup>221</sup>

Theologically speaking, narratives directly influence how persons understand faith. Narratives shape how persons understand and relate to God, self, and others. For Christians, the Christian narrative, specifically, the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is central to their identity. It is through this narrative that persons of faith move into relationship with God, especially within the community of faith. Persons begin “to know God’s story through the stories of those who have relationship with God,” says Lester.<sup>222</sup> As persons individually share their stories with one another, they contribute to a communal faith identity. Pastoral theologian David Hogue cites the example of worship, saying

Stories that are read and enacted within a worship setting create a common narrative experience that deepens a sense of connection with others in the group. As our brains imaginatively reconstruct the stories of our faith, they engage us in a world shared by others around us.<sup>223</sup>

Persons collectively interact as they develop faith narratives based on God’s promises for the future. The sacred Christian story literally pulls them into the future.

The fifth element of Lester’s pastoral theology of hope is the recognition that human brokenness is directly related to the future. Here we locate the connection between temporality and suffering. From a narrative perspective, suffering occurs when a person’s worldview, or constructed reality, is threatened or disrupted, thereby inducing a crisis. As the core narrative is interrupted, a sense of crisis develops which induces a negative

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<sup>221</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 30.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>223</sup> David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 101.

future perspective. The anticipation of the negative future causes suffering or despair in the present.

Suffering and despair are theological concepts often rooted in hopelessness which results when historical events and current circumstances converge and threaten our well-being. The notions of suffering and despair were thoroughly examined earlier in the slave narratives. The reader-responses illustrated how persons' future stories were directly influenced by historical events and current circumstances. While the narrators were unable to change their past, they were aware of their power to act in the present in order to influence their future and, thereby, stave off future suffering. In other words, by looking toward a future they could not see, only imagine, the narrators were illuminating the possibilities that come to light when living with transfinite hope and trust in the open-ended future.

For the narrators and faith exemplars, hope is grounded in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Their belief in God's reign in the world, even in the midst of egregious injustices, prevailed and strengthened their hope that "no weapon formed against [them] should prosper." (Isaiah 54:17) According to Lester,

Even when events are chaotic, Christians believe that God is immanently involved in the process. The God who has a hand in the chaos is trustworthy. Humans participate in the ongoing creative process by choosing direction as individuals and communities. By interacting with our activity, God's possibilities are introduced. We do not know the final shape of things to come, nor do we know the specifics of the ending; but we can trust the One who is trustworthy, who is steadfastly engaged with this becoming.<sup>224</sup>

Such conviction anchors strength as persons overcome suffering and despair and repairs broken future stories. It is further evidence that having deep, mature faith goes hand in hand with transfinite hope.

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<sup>224</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 70.

Finally, let us examine the importance of community in this pastoral theological framework. Hope places strong reliance on relationality, growing when persons are connected to others rather than living in isolation. The human spirit thrives on such connection with others, especially amongst persons of shared concerns. By gathering together, people form bonds with one another and share in each other's hopes and dreams. Much of the social constructionist understanding of reality and truth is based on this relational aspect of making meaning. The creative processes of meaning and hope are similar. Lester argues, "Though each person brings individuality to the creation of personal stories, these stories are not created in isolation."<sup>225</sup> It is the interaction of selves and intermingling of experience that create one's ongoing personal history. Hope follows this same dynamic.

This communal experience gives birth to more hope, as shared visions are communally projected into the open-ended future. Within the Christian community, the image of the resurrected Christ gives life to believers' conviction that, although this life will have a finite end, there is a life to come which is transfinite. This belief is born in a community of faith with a tradition of hoping together and sharing other faith practices which engender intimacy and relationship with God. It is out of this context that narrative theology takes its form. Narrative theologian George Stroup offers the following:

Narrative theology does recognize...however, that Christian faith is rooted in particular historical events which are recounted in the narratives of Christian Scripture and tradition, that these historical narratives are the basis for Christian affirmations about the nature of God and the reality of grace, and that these historical narratives and the faith they spawn are redemptive when they are appropriated at the level of personal identity and existence.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Lester, *Angry Christian*, 93.

<sup>226</sup> Stroup, 17.



Stroup points to the theological content of the Christian narrative, to its communal nature, and how it affects individuals. The faith perspective argued in this research insists that the content of the Christian narrative and hope are so intertwined that they are inseparable. As one appropriates the communal faith narrative, one appropriates hope, as well.

It is important to note that in specific communities of faith, say, amongst women and persons of color, narratives develop in ways unique to those communities and may serve particular functions. For example, feminist theologian Jane Kopas argues, “women’s self narratives demonstrate the way faith matures in different ways and the way religious tradition is appropriated in new contexts.”<sup>227</sup> Kopas stands strongly against patriarchy in the church and society, and asserts that women’s narratives of struggle, perseverance, and relationships with each other and God empower women in important ways. Womanist pastoral theologian Carroll Watkins Ali argues persuasively that African American communities, in response to years of racial oppression, have generated faith narratives, which contribute to building necessary survival and liberation strategies which empower their members. She writes,

[A] common experience of all African Americans, regardless of social location, is the experience of racial oppression in one form or another....There are a multitude of stories of lived experience in the African American context....Whether dealing with individuals, families, or communities, an awareness of historical background, social location, and personal experience of culture is essential in providing guidelines for wholistic care.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Jane Kopas, “Something Particular: Women’s Self Narratives as a Resource for Theology” in *Themes in Feminist Theology for the New Millennium (I)*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova Univ., 2002), 29.

<sup>228</sup> Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 125.

Both Kopas and Watkins Ali raise significant issues about the use of narrative, especially with regard to using stories as sources for reframing present conditions and contexts and for re-imagining future stories.

Reflecting on Lonnie's situation, he remained confident through his struggle with marriage and death to trust God and discovered a healing narrative. He reported, "I have a mind to keep on following Christ, and doing what I can, as long as I live. I am happy."

Hogue supports this saying,

The "discovery" that telling stories is often a healing experience is old news. Nonetheless, stories, past, present, and future have taken center stage in spiritual practices because of the ways they tell us about the joy, fears, values, and commitments of the people we are and of the people for whom we care....Intersecting our stories with stories of faith is not a simple academic or analytic venture; it is instead an emerging commitment of the self.<sup>229</sup>

#### *Examination of Lester's Pastoral Theology of Hope*

Lester has offered a finely crafted pastoral theological framework of hope. It is an exceptional resource as a gauge for understanding the faith development of faith exemplars, especially with regard to how they might envision a hopeful future. This examination focuses on two concerns designed to challenge the implicit assumptions in Lester's work. These issues are raised in hopes of guiding pastoral theologians as they develop models of care for people for whom imagining a hopeful future is complicated by fragility.

#### *Temporality and Agency*

For hope to blossom, one's past and present stories must engender a sense of *agency* and optimism. However, for many persons, the development of hope is a fragile

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<sup>229</sup> Hogue, 114-15.

experience. All persons do not have healthy stories. This is especially true for persons who continuously find “their backs against the wall.” In certain communities, say, persons of color and women, stories past are embellished not with freedom and optimism, but with limited or restricted opportunities and societal structures that systemically disrupt or altogether kill the hope necessary for generating healing future stories. Lester alerts caregivers to “be concerned with justice issues.”<sup>230</sup> Lester and Stone point out, “Those who lack the capacity to fantasize, to imagine, to picture in their mind’s eye events that have yet to occur, cannot hope.”<sup>231</sup> We can extend Lester’s analysis by exploring self-in-relations theory. Theorist Judith Jordan writes, “At a societal level, people are forced by judgments, prejudice, and bias from more powerful others into inauthentic connection....Often they are silenced.”<sup>232</sup> By countering silence with relationality, a stronger sense of hope emerges.

Jesus’ parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-8) is an excellent illustration of this analysis. A farmer sowed seed for his crop and some fell on rocky soil and died almost immediately for lack of water. Some seeds fell amongst thorns, grew and soon withered. Some fell on good ground and bore fruit one-hundredfold. This parable alludes to the conditions in which many persons with their backs against the wall find themselves—living in a barren or hostile environment. Historically and currently, a large segment of minorities and women find themselves barely surviving rather than thriving. When one is barely surviving, hope is concentrated in the present and immediate future. Rarely does it

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<sup>230</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 136.

<sup>231</sup> Lester and Stone, 262.

<sup>232</sup> Judith V. Jordan, “A Relational-Cultural Model: Healing through mutual empathy,” *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 96. [92-103]

see into the distant future. The economist William J. Wilson highlights this predicament, arguing vigorously that

Perceptions of racial differences obscure the fact that the various racial groups in America suffer from many common problems, including the decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor, the increase in income and wage inequality, and the slow growth of real wages....[Furthermore], that rising inequality is not only accompanied by new constraints on the use of federal resources to combat social inequities; it is also occurring at a time when government policies and actions tend to *exacerbate* rather than alleviate the economic stresses faced by ordinary families.<sup>233</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Pastoral theological analysis benefits by taking into account that structures (political, socio-economic, religious, etc.) presumed to support individual and familial agency are lacking for many persons. When such support and agency collapse in certain communities, persons' sense of possibility (a vital element in generating hope) can also collapse and their capacity for imagining new possibilities and futures is severely compromised. West Indian theologian Neville Callum calls the theological community to a heightened sense of awareness of this condition, saying, "The community of those who are reconciled to God, 'who live with the memory of the cross and the empty tomb and [who] look forward to the final takeover by Christ, cannot be passive about the political and economic issues of the world.'"<sup>234</sup> When pastoral theologians take into account such perspectives, we demonstrate our recognition that for persons in marginalized communities creating and maintaining hope, especially transfinite hope, is a fragile experience.

### *Nihilism and Love*

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<sup>233</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>234</sup> Neville Callum, "Hope: A Caribbean Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 50, no. 2 (April 1998): 140.

The second concern about Lester's pastoral theological framework for hope is the need for more attention to *love* as a source for hope with which to develop and grow faith. Referring to Paul's trilogy of faith, hope, and love, Lester correctly identifies hope as rooted in time. It should be noted that the ability to frame the future with hope is largely shaped by the quality of care received in the past and present. Care grounded in mutuality, that is, love for self, others, and God sits at the apex of all Christian caring. Acknowledging that some persons in the Christian community have not benefited from loving nurture can further Lester's position. Some have suffered at the hands of nihilism.

Christian ethicists and other social commentators identify a widespread nihilism pervading large segments of American society. Such a position is shared by theologian Cornel West, who identifies nihilism as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness."<sup>235</sup> Within this definition, one sees the counterforces of hope and meaning-making. According to West, earlier generations of blacks inoculated themselves from the nihilistic threat by creating "buffers consist[ing] of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence."<sup>236</sup> Undergirding these buffers were networks of religious and civic organizations. Over time, says West, capitalist structures (motivated by profit motives and consumption) and a dearth of social and moral leadership has led to a collapse of the aforementioned inoculating structures, or "nonmarket values—love, care, and service."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 14.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Pastoral theologian Lee Butler extends this analysis to the family unit of many minority groups, arguing, “When the extended family system is destroyed, the ethnic cultures embodying that system are also destroyed.”<sup>238</sup> West proposes that nihilism can be deterred by a “politics of conversion”<sup>239</sup> that has a love ethic at its center. Love directed toward self and others engenders both higher self-worth and self-esteem, but it also encourages the black community to recall its politically activist and subversive past that instilled in it a resistance to destructive forces, whether market, political, cultural, or social. The love ethic is loving, critical, yet affirms black humanity, according to West. Pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay pushes this framework further by encouraging a theocentric perspective. She argues

To do so is to recover the priority of the first command to love God with all our being. Our value and identity are rooted in God’s creative love for each of us equally. This affirmation orders our love for one another properly, for it clarifies that the value and worth of each person is unique in God’s eyes.<sup>240</sup>

Ramsay establishes mutuality as a normative quality grounded in love which maintains a profound resistance to any attempts of dehumanization and demands justice as a means of countering despair. To that end, Anderson insists that experiencing love enlarges persons’ capacity to move from nihilism toward good will.<sup>241</sup>

Overall, Lester’s pastoral theology of hope provides an excellent perspective on the manner in which faith exemplars imagine the future and cast their trust into a distant time. The trajectory of his work can be extended with attention to concerns that often besiege those in marginalized communities who are especially prone to despair due to

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<sup>238</sup> Lee H. Butler, “The Unpopular Experience of Popular Culture: Cultural Resistance as Identity Formation,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 11, no. 1 (June 2001): 44.

<sup>239</sup> West, 19.

<sup>240</sup> Nancy J. Ramsay, *Pastoral Diagnosis: A Resource for Ministries of Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 182.

<sup>241</sup> H.A. Overstreet, *The Mature Mind* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 103.

socio-political, economic, and cultural impediments. Now that we have identified these concerns, the research turns to Kegan's developmental theory.

### **Robert Kegan and The Evolving Self**

Making meaning is a fundamental activity of life. Persons use cognition, that is, their thinking and perceiving abilities, and, most importantly, social interaction, for making sense of what they do and what happens to them. According to Kegan, making meaning "is the primary human motion, irreducible."<sup>242</sup> In this sense, it is a basic activity of human interaction comprised of physical, social, and survival components which are inseparable from the human person. As Kegan asserts, "we *are* the meaning-making context."<sup>243</sup> Religious educator E. Byron Anderson expands Kegan's idea:

Meaning, with the self, requires relationships, conversations, and languages; in such lies the possibility for being recognized and being known, for re-cognizing, re-knowing, and re-creating the sense of self. In relationship both meaning and the transformation of self-meaning are made possible.<sup>244</sup>

This quote echoes Thurman, who argued very specifically on the necessity of "being known" as an essential element of love and being in relationship with God. The larger point is that meaning-making is essentially a relational activity which occurs over time. Without this relationality, little meaning-making takes place.

In postmodern terms, human persons construct the reality they perceive as they proceed through life. Persons of faith, especially faith exemplars, experience events as *God's will* for their lives. As they encounter the holy, they assign meaning to their experience. This meaning is then integrated into their personal narratives. Concurrently,

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<sup>242</sup> Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), 19.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>244</sup> E. Byron Anderson, "A Constructive Task in Religious Education: Making Christian Selves" *Religious Education* 93, no. 2 (Spring 1998), 177.

persons engage the experience of others who might lend further interpretation and meaning. Such co-creation of meaning points to the intersubjectivity, or the social construction, of narrative. This research will argue that with regard to the social construction of faith narratives, persons of faith integrate their shared experience of being in a faith community along with their practice of spiritual disciplines as they generate meaning.

Harlene Anderson suggests that this is an *intersubjective phenomenon* in postmodern faith perspectives. In “A Collaborative Language Systems Approach to Therapy,” she argues

Human action takes place in a reality of understanding that is created through social construction and dialogue and we live and understand our lives through socially constructed narrative realities, that is, that we give meaning and organization to our experiences and to our self-identity in the course of these transactions.<sup>245</sup>

Anderson’s argument confirms the multiplicity of linguistic and hermeneutic systems converging in the activity of human meaning-making. Persons in the life of faith integrate personal, cultural, social, and religious sources into their meaning-making framework. This intersubjective experience will be visible in Kegan’s work.

#### *Introduction to Kegan’s Construct of Human Development*

Let us turn our attention to Kegan’s construct of human development as a foundation for understanding how persons of faith make meaning in relation with others.<sup>246</sup> Kegan’s developmental theory is a refreshing perspective on meaning-making

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<sup>245</sup> Harlene Anderson, “On a Roller Coaster: A Collaborative Language Systems Approach to Therapy” in *The New Language of Change: Constructive Collaboration in Psychotherapy*, Steven Friedman, ed. (New York: Guilford, 1993), 324.

<sup>246</sup> I remind the reader that my construct of faithing does not argue for *stages of faith* in the structural sense. However, it is important that I examine Kegan’s proposal to provide an understanding of the



and a valuable resource for pastoral theology for understanding how persons grow in the life of faith. Persons ascribing to a life of faith create an understanding of the world and experience based on a particular faith history (from the Bible and other sacred written and oral works) and establish beliefs based on “things not seen.” These faith activities, such as imagining sacred future stories, create meaning. Kegan’s theory is instrumental for illuminating faith development because his theory is closely related to making meaning of one’s experience and projecting that meaning into the future. The theory demonstrates the essence of living by faith.

Consider another scenario from the qualitative research. Note the primary experience cited, the outcome, and the meaning derived by the participant as a result of the experience. The participant, Polly, is describing a stillbirth.

[Experience] After I lost that baby, I almost lost my life, also. I had reaction to the medication, had no blood pressure, and blacked out. They poked me with needles and I wouldn't come to. [Outcome] And they did do something that got me back. [Meaning-making] After that I realized that my greatest possessions were people: my children, my living children. People think you can't -- you can take the heaven with you. My life just turned around to be more centered toward God, relationships, and in trusting him in all the circumstances.

As a consequence of the stillbirth and near death, Polly grew more meaning-oriented. She became more relational and her faith in God deepened.

A person who seeks God’s will for her life as a child of God has two tasks directly linked to meaning-making. She individually discerns the will of God for her life; this entails engaging in spiritual practices such as reading the Bible to gain an understanding of God, praying for accurate interpretation, and reflecting on her understanding of the outcomes of these practices. She also maintains meaningful relations

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evolution of his framework because I do make significant reference to his notion of *consciousness of mind* later in this chapter.

within a community of faith which facilitates reflecting, living out, and validating her interpretations. All of these activities signal the subjectivity and fluidity inherent in discovering meaning. A close examination of Kegan's work reveals a solid foundation for examining the course of faith development over a lifetime, as well as the attendant components of relationality and practice(s).

Building upon Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, who emphasized cognitive structuralism, Kegan advances their work to a radically different conclusion by emphasizing making meaning and focusing more attention on affect and relationality. He argues that persons become authors or interpreters of their experience. The human capacity for authoring and interpreting their experience has a trajectory suggesting growth over time.

Kegan is indebted to self-in-relations theorists, whose work with women had already identified relationality as the vital and necessary component to human development and growth. He embraced much of this position. Though his progenitors firmly claimed cognitive development as the primary developmental pathway, he constructed a hybrid developmental theory which asserted relationality as a primary developmental pathway. He argues that both men and women yearn for connections as leading theorists have convincingly argued. Janet Surrey, for example, views relationality as "the basic goal of development: i.e., the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence."<sup>247</sup> Jordan supports this, arguing that persons "grow through and toward connection rather than toward separation, and that their sense of meaning and

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<sup>247</sup> Janet L. Surrey, "Self-in-Relation: A Theory of Women's Development," (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women, No. 13, (1985): 2, [http://www.wcwoonline.org/pdf/previews/preview\\_13sc.pdf](http://www.wcwoonline.org/pdf/previews/preview_13sc.pdf).

well-being is anchored in relationships throughout the life span.”<sup>248</sup> When persons become “relationally effective,” they grow freely and confidently in their journey toward being authentic selves.

Genero and others write that mutuality, defined as “the bi-directional movement of feelings, thoughts, and activity between persons in relationships,”<sup>249</sup> becomes more significant as persons become aware of their freedom to choose and manage their relationships. When mutuality is present in relationships, growth occurs. When absent, despair and isolation increase. Self-in-relation theory encourages an “attitude of relatedness, of mutuality, of openness, of participating in experience. This can occur in solitude, in nature, when we feel connected and in relationship with our surroundings. [Conversely,] in isolation, we are not in relationship, we are cut off, we are not in mutual responsiveness.”<sup>250</sup> Theologically speaking, Ramsay asserts, “The criterion of mutuality affirmed in the ethic of God’s universal love substantiates the importance of adequate self-regard and verifies the importance of attention to power and empowerment in every relational sphere.”<sup>251</sup> These emphases will be explored later in this chapter.

Polly’s narrative has elements of mutuality throughout. Talking about her work as a nurse, she remarked,

There were a couple of patients that I had that surprised me because when I prayed for them, they turned around and prayed for me. That was so strengthening, knowing that they were on hospice -- and they knew their end time was coming and yet they were praying for strength for me. That really changed my way of thinking about what the Lord can do in people's lives.

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<sup>248</sup> Jordan, 95.

<sup>249</sup> Nancy P. Genero, Jean Baker Miller, Janet Surrey, and Lawrence M. Baldwin, “Measuring Perceived Mutuality in Close Relationship: Validation of the Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 6, no. 1 (1992): 36.

<sup>250</sup> Jordan, 97.

<sup>251</sup> Ramsay, 182.

Kegan's theory recognizes these themes and has two specific components. First, "relations *become*."<sup>252</sup> The self develops continuously throughout life, although persons may become "stuck" at certain stages. Second, relations occur "in the world; they are not simply abstractions."<sup>253</sup> Kegan argues that the self evolves by interacting with others.

When persons isolate themselves from relations, the self ceases growing. This idea of a continuously evolving self is important with regard to persons growing in agency.

Through interaction with others, the self-in-relation develops more capacity to act on its own volition. By doing so, the sense of self-worth and self-esteem increases and eventually develops the capacity to love. Here we witness a fragile sense of hope being overcome by the growing sense of transfinite hope.

While Kegan's theory illuminates meaning-making in the life of faith, faith development may not necessarily follow the pattern of evolution Kegan posits, especially with regard to age. Yet, because persons of faith may evolve from, say, candidates for deep, abiding faith to faith exemplars, Kegan's theory provides a framework for how such a process might occur. This research draws on Kegan's theory as a general means of explaining meaning-making activity and specific dynamics of relationality. The project will suggest that faith exemplars fit best into two of Kegan's stages.

### *Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Psychology*

At the core of his constructive-developmental theory or neo-Piagetian psychology,<sup>254</sup> Kegan argues that the self develops in response to changes in social

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<sup>252</sup> Kegan, 114.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> For a full description of the *neo-Piagetian* framework, see Robert Kegan, "Meaning Making: The Constructive-Development Approach to Persons and Practice," *Personnel & Guidance Journal* 58, no. 5 (Jan 1980), 374. Here, he argues his constructive-development framework is *neo* because "it moves from Piaget's study of cognition to include the emotions; from his study of children and adolescents to include adulthood; from the study of stages of development to include processes that bring the stages into being,

relationships. According to Kegan, “Constructive developmental psychology reconceives the whole question of the relationship between the individual and the social by reminding that the distinction is not absolute, that development is intrinsically about the continual settling and resettling of this very distinction.”<sup>255</sup> Persons grow in a “culture of embeddedness.” The terminology here is derived from Winnicott’s idea of the “holding environment.” Both terms describe “psychosocial environments”<sup>256</sup> which support individuals’ growth by providing dynamic social interactions from infancy into mature adulthood. Motion results when cultures of embeddedness change as persons’ relationships and contexts for living change. Over time, persons develop and experience shifts resulting in their personalities becoming less “psycho” and more “social,” that is, less inherent and more relational.

The growth process of faith exemplars contains similar characteristics. As persons of faith seek being within God’s will, their understanding of what this means evolves over time. One would expect changes in the meaning-making process as one clarifies over time one’s definition of “God’s will.” *Cultures of embeddedness* provide a surround for the self that promotes growth through confirmation, contradiction, and continuity over time. Each function is essential for optimum growth. Congregations are cultures of embeddedness and, as Parks argues, can

serve as a community of confirmation and also, when necessary, as a community of contradiction. [For example], emancipation from a narrow faith and from distorting subjectivity may occur only in a community that distinguishes between

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defend them, and evolve from them; from Piaget’s descriptive, outside-the-person approach to include study of the internal experience of developing; and from a solely individual-focused study of development to include study of the social context and role in development.”

<sup>255</sup> Kegan, 115.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 116.

evil images—those that separate, distort, and diminish selves and communities—and life bearing, truthful, vital images.<sup>257</sup>

Congregations also serve as communities of continuity. Kegan cites the family as a metaphorical congregation whereby we “move from being ‘brought up in the faith’ to becoming ourselves spiritual adherents *to* that faith.”<sup>258</sup> Over time, persons become embedded in a series of cultures which provide a “life-surround” from which persons are individuated. Kegan argues,

The person is an “individual” *and* an “embeddual.” There is never just a you; and at this very moment your own buoyancy or lack of it, your own sense of wholeness or lack of it, is in large part a function of how your own current embeddedness culture is holding you.

Faith exemplars are clearly both individual and embeddual. Being a child of God is ultimately a one-person enterprise based on one’s personal profession of faith and the practices sustaining one’s faith. Yet, the individual is also a product of the holding environment(s) to which he is tied, and, therefore, he takes ownership of values and beliefs of the particular communities to which he belongs.

### *The Balances*<sup>259</sup>

Kegan’s theory asserts that the personality develops through a series of six stages which “are only a way of marking development.”<sup>260</sup> Initially, he used the term *balances* to describe the stages. In his later work, Kegan adopts a new term, *orders of consciousness*, to describe the stages. Each balance demarcates growth in terms of subject and object while depicting the degree of “embeddedness” which individuals experience.

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<sup>257</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 123.

<sup>258</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1994), 267.

<sup>259</sup> See “Summary of Orders of Consciousness” diagram. Permission requested from author/publisher.

<sup>260</sup> Kegan, “Meaning Making,” 374.

The root word *-ject* captures the motion of personality development because, at each stage, there is a “throwing off” of subject to become object.

Generally, a person *is* subject and *has* object. Specifically, a subject is an element of knowing which persons identify with, attach or fuse, or embed. An object is an element of knowing which persons can reflect, hold or look, relate, internalize, or act. Growth is “the process of the restless, creative activity of personality.”<sup>261</sup> Consider this illustration.

An example is a preteen who is able to assert her independence from her parents and advocate forcefully for her needs (newly acquired abilities because her separateness and impulses, which earlier in her life were inseparable from her sense of self, are now *object*). [*sic*] However, she is yet unable to consider the needs and feelings of others in her decision-making and actions (because her needs, interests, and wishes are still *subject*).<sup>262</sup>

At each transition from one balance to the next, as a person’s meaning-making ability increases, elements of one’s *subject* are discarded and become *object*. This chapter will describe in detail only the fourth and fifth balances, which are those most closely associated with faith exemplars.

### *Interpersonal Balance*

The *interpersonal* has the most direct link to relationality and implication for the faithing process. This phase is characterized by one’s ability to make needs object while one is still subject to “relationships, roles, and rules.”<sup>263</sup> Again, being *subject* means a person is embedded in those elements: they are a *part of* the person. Roseborough insists that in this balance, “others’ values are so much internalized that there is practically an

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Patrick G. Love and Victoria L. Guthrie, “Kegan’s Orders of Consciousness,” *New Directions for Student Services* 88, (Winter 1999), 66.

<sup>263</sup> Karen Eriksen, “The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan.” *The Family Journal* 14, no. 3 (July 2006): 294.

identification...and [one] can only assert oneself against the group's opinions by risking rupture of the social fabric."<sup>264</sup> Rules and commandments can be included here. Persons in the interpersonal balance reflect on their values, ideas, and beliefs. They also do what fully socialized persons do, including considering the needs and wants of others, developing meaningful friendships, and establishing families. All of these aspects of life are relational. Importantly, persons develop the ability to "subordinate" their own points of view to their relationships or to other persons' points of view. This means that persons are now able to prioritize the *bond* in their relationships versus their personal needs.

Relationality matters take on intrinsic meaning as persons' relationships become less utilitarian and more associated with the bond between persons and maintaining that bond. Ignelzi argues, "The individual's sense of meaning-making resides partly in other people...so there is no coherent sense of meaning-making or self apart from those other people."<sup>265</sup> Relationality develops a long-term quality as persons look for sustainability and determine what is required moving forward. This implies that persons acquire purposefulness as they move into the not-yet.

#### *Implications for Faith Development*

Important for faith development is the notion of hope with regard to individuals' capacity for adopting a future orientation, or "the ability to conceive a relationship between the present and what has not yet happened."<sup>266</sup> This sense of future has direct implications for this project, since faith is primarily forward-focused. In this balance,

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<sup>264</sup> David J. Rosenborough, "Coming Out Stories Framed as Faith Narrative, or Stories of Spiritual Growth," *Pastoral Psychology* 55, (2006), 50.

<sup>265</sup> Michael Ignelzi, "Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process" *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 82 (Summer 2000), 8.

<sup>266</sup> Eriksen, 294.



individuals base their expectations on premises established in the past, but projected into a time which has not yet come.

Anticipating the future, especially God's action, influences how persons conceive their beliefs and actions and construct their faith. Anticipation also influences how persons conduct relationships. In this balance, persons co-construct meaning with others in their sphere of relationality. Ignelzi argues this component of meaning-making is essential, saying, "When an order 3 meaning-maker shares what she or he thinks, believes, or feels, another (person or source) is always implicated."<sup>267</sup> Relationality is integral to the activity of meaning-making for persons in the interpersonal balance.

Faith exemplars emerge in this stage. Author John Lamy, who has studied the stages of consciousness, argues that only 10% of the population lives in this stage.<sup>268</sup> While this author does not attempt statistical bracketing, the working assumption is that persons of faith mirror the general population. This is congruent with the term faith exemplar, which itself implies that only a small percentage of people achieve such distinction.

Subordinating one's self and needs for the sake of personal relations has important implications for faith development. For example, subordinating one's will to God's will is the ultimate expression of faith and fits squarely with the definition of faith exemplars. In the parish setting, one routinely observes faith exemplars who seek the meaning of life events, asking, "What is God telling me through this?" The search for meaning is a strong indicator of a person's self-identification with the life of faith. Faith exemplars instinctively pursue this line of personal inquiry. This orientation to faith

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<sup>267</sup> Ignelzi, 8.

<sup>268</sup> John Lamy, "Find Your Stage of Consciousness," *Spirituality and Health* (January-February 2008): 36.

demonstrates the primacy of faith in their lives and illustrates the much-sought-after posture of “putting God first,” a phrase heard frequently in the parish. Polly exemplified this position saying, “I believe that God puts you in a certain place at certain times in divine appointments and God will bless you and use others to grow you.”

Interpersonal knowledge insists, “Whatever happens, the bond that I have with this person is more important than what will happen to me.”<sup>269</sup> Faith exemplars place their bond with God on the same level of primacy. Asking what is God telling one forces a person to distinguish amongst internal feelings and impulses, reflect on them, decide whether their personal needs fit with their relationship with God, and make the appropriate response. For faith exemplars, the relationship with God holds ultimate value. Preserving the primacy of one’s relationship with God is the faith exemplar’s most distinctive feature, separating the exemplars from all others.

### *Institutional Balance*

At Stage 4, the *institutional* balance, persons acquire capacity for making relationships, roles, and values object. Here, persons are embedded in the institutions providing their jobs and roles, and in the theories and beliefs governing their personal relationships. Roseborough reframes this idea, saying, “It is no longer the group or society that determines truth, but an internal system that is derived from a critical internal examination of these outer voices, along with their investments in one’s own identity.”<sup>270</sup> One’s internal judge guides the narrative between self and other instead of the other guiding the self, as was seen in the previous balance.

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<sup>269</sup> Eriksen, 294.

<sup>270</sup> Roseborough, 51.

### *Implications for Faith Development*

The institutional faith personality claims an identity as *child of God* based on personal meaning-making, reflection, and decision, rather than on outside influences. At this stage of development, an individual has gained the capacity to make others' viewpoints object. Remaining in the life of faith is the product of conscious awareness as well as choices and meaning made from one's inner resources. Ignelzi explains it succinctly, saying, "the self can internalize multiple points of view, reflect on them, and construct them into one's own theory about oneself and one's experience."<sup>271</sup> In theological terms, the individual has developed relational perspectives, faith practices, and other sources of one's particular faith orientation, has integrated them into his or her own shaping, and determined the best course of meaning-making. This is termed a self-authored faith.

Persons who self-author, or critically engage life, can significantly influence others' meaning-making perspectives. Though the interpersonal balance is where faith exemplars emerge, persons in the institutional balance may nurture others into becoming faith exemplars. *Evolved* (using Kegan's terminology) religious professionals, such as ordained clergy, spiritual directors, religious educators (including CPE supervisors), and other academics at the institutional balance can serve as mentors of faith. A word of caution: such instruction or mentoring should be given only with serious attention to the protégé's present stage of meaning-making capacity. The spiritual guide must be firmly established at balance 4 or higher in order to make such judgments. Later Polly demonstrated movement toward this balance when speaking about how her experience

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<sup>271</sup> Ignelzi, 8.

allowed her to grow in her own way. She remarked, “A lot of our growth in the later years. It's being alone with God and going through trials and being able to give those to God. Then, he'll [*sic*] bless and show you his purpose. Not always, but when you learn the word of God, because that's where our strength is.”

Kegan supports the notion of helping persons make a “leap of consciousness,” or a transition from one balance to the next. Facilitating such a transition to the institutional balance demands that certain experiences occur that create a shift of perspective in meaning-making so “other people’s perspectives can be relativized and people can be seen for who they are: people with a limited picture of the ‘truth.’”<sup>272</sup> This is important, because as a person moves forward or grows in the life of faith, she needs reliable structures for making meaning of her experience. She must have rock-solid interpretation of scripture, understanding of her calling, and establish secure faith practices. At the same time, she must remain connected to her chosen faith community, which offers support “by encouraging the person to develop an identity apart from the group.”<sup>273</sup>

Ignelzi offers some concrete suggestions on how persons might be supported in their development from the interpersonal to the institutional balance. His ideas are highlighted to indicate that the process of becoming a faith exemplar is indeed ongoing and can be encouraged in persons who desire to expand their meaning-making capacity. Here is a summary:

1. The spiritual guide<sup>274</sup> needs the ability to communicate that s/he understands the one being guided. The effect is an increase in the relationality needed for co-constructing meaning-making.

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<sup>272</sup> Roseborough, 51.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> I use this term *spiritual guide* as a catch-all for describing those persons who might help others make meaning out of their faith experience.

2. Consider offering supervised practice that encourages one to generate one's own ideas and theories regarding faith and practices.
3. Encourage group work that furthers development as interpersonal persons of faith listen to self-authored views of faith and practice articulating and assuming responsibility for their own views.
4. Find ways to celebrate the move toward a self-authored faith perspective and understanding of being a child of God and living in God's will.<sup>275</sup>

Herein also lies the self's weakness, because the self may view the world as operating "on behalf of its personal enterprise."<sup>276</sup>

### **Critical Conversation**

This portion of the chapter presents a critical correlation, or conversation between the two disciplines of theology and psychology. The intent is to put the disciplines in touch with each other in a manner which "preserves their uniqueness and independence while fostering a mutually constructive dialogue and creative interdependence."<sup>277</sup> This critical conversation will focus on the strengths of Kegan's work and how it might inform Lester's perspective. Then, we will explore a central concern with regard to Kegan's theory of human development: the possibilities of self-authoring. While it is recognized that Kegan's theory is not theological in nature, it is valid to use his stages of human growth and maturity for Christian notions of faith development so we can see how pastoral theology might contribute to transforming the human condition.

#### *Strengths of Kegan's Perspective*

##### Authority

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<sup>275</sup> Roseborough, 51.

<sup>276</sup> Kegan, 223.

<sup>277</sup> R. Paul Olson, *The Reconciled Life: A Critical Theory of Counseling* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 53.

The notion that persons construct meaning as they experience life is significant for a life of faith in two ways. Authority for the Christian believers arises out of the narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It is the story that illuminates how human persons are made known to God. But the meaning that Christians discern as they make sense of their experience in the world has a relational aspect that occurs as persons interact with God, each another, and self. Kegan's theory helps pastoral theologians better understand the construction of meaning. While persons may view their experience through the lens of sacred texts, ritual, worship, and spiritual practices, they still assign meaning within those contexts. Though such meaning may be compared to normative Christian claims, individual interpretation and practices will vary from person-to-person based on experience.

This integration of personal experience and meaning-making brings a transformative and transcendent element to the hoping process. By relying on one's own experience with God, persons have increased freedom for understanding their own situation. For a person whose sense of hope and justice is fragile or has been diminished due to extraordinary social or economic circumstances, Kegan's theory posits the possibility that persons can transcend their present circumstances by growing into a more self-determining posture and perspective on making meaning, and thereby, revise or transform what may have perceived as a predetermined future into a more open-ended future. This in turn enables persons to emerge from simpler versions of hope and live their lives based on transfinite hope.

Cultures of Embeddedness

Kegan's idea that persons grow in cultures of embeddedness is helpful in two ways. First, he asserts that persons continue to grow from infancy to adulthood. Such growth is essential if one is to overcome past experiences of injustice, which can render hope fragile, and move forward into the future where transfinite hope might be experienced. Lester's notion that present experience shapes the future outcomes is significant because a present filled with growth is likely to produce a future of infinite possibilities. Kegan's view of an evolving self integrates well with Lester's view of an unfolding narrative. As the self evolves, so evolves one's narrative along with one's capacity for imagining a hopeful future.

Cultures of embeddedness provide a helpful frame for understanding congregational life. Communities of faith are cultures of embeddedness that certainly encourage growth through ongoing social interaction. Pastors and other ministry professionals facilitate growth by confirming, contradicting, and offering constancy to those who are growing in faith and love. As embeddedness, persons become more than just a self. They truly are products of the environment that holds them. Pastoral caregivers, then, take on a greater responsibility of nurturing growth in the community of faith.

#### *Concerns about Kegan's Theory--The Possibilities of Self-Authoring*

We have suggested that faith exemplars are most likely to belong in Kegan's interpersonal or institutional balance. Persons here are in transition as they transform their faith from subject to object. Under Kegan's system, becoming a self-authored person is liberating. This level of development begins in the latter stage of the interpersonal balance and is realized in the *institutional* balance. There one *uses* self to make meaning and shape the future. On the other hand, Lester's pastoral theology has an

assumption of the self's capacity for awareness of internal resources and available possibilities beyond itself. Both Kegan and Lester ground their understanding of human becoming in postmodern thought, which suggests that the construction of meaning is shaped through language and personal narratives, and change and growth occur in the course of communication (dialogue).

Adult development specialist Jennifer Berger argues that a limit the self-authoring way of making meaning imposes is that persons become embedded in a "self-governing system."<sup>278</sup> First, self-authors, as a consequence of their development, realize they have discovered a "higher way" of thinking and experiencing the world and want to share their understanding with others (who typically are not self-authors). The limit here is uncovered in relation to the next stage of development, the self-transformational, where the person finds comfort with other perspectives, including the non-self-authoring personality. The self-transformational person refrains from judging, and, therefore, expects and accepts differences between competing worldviews. With regard to faith, it can be argued that a self-transformational person of faith *expects* to encounter occasional despair rather than aiming to transcend despair altogether. The significance for a pastoral theology of hope is that here despair is recognized as inherent to life itself; it need not be experienced as hope-diminishing, but as a temporary condition which will be alleviated in the future.

Second, self-authors value and focus on complex forms of making meaning. In community, they may feel frustrated and judgmental when they encounter persons embedded in less complex thought or idea-systems. Self-authors' complex mode of

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<sup>278</sup> Jennifer G. Berger, "Living Postmodernism: The Complex Balance of Worldview and Developmental Capacity," *ReVision* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 22.



creating meaning, or continually imagining possibilities (as Lester would say), disrupts their potential for becoming when they find themselves mismatched with non-self-authoring persons. It is difficult, Berger says, for self-authors in such circumstances “to operate in the fullness of their complexity and in the certainty of their complex worldview.”<sup>279</sup> Self-transformationals, however, are less likely hindered while embedded in their meaning-making, or being amongst persons of less complex thought or imagination. Instead, the self-transformational generates patience and accepts that life’s journey is fraught with diversions and processes which may not exactly meet one’s expectations, philosophy, or theological orientation.

This position is congruent with our pastoral theological analysis which sees this transition from interpersonal to institutional as suited for persons maturing in faith and developing hope.<sup>280</sup> The Wesleyan notion of faith development is particularly suited to this assessment and critique of the self-authoring person of faith. Wesleyan thought suggests that persons will experience a back-and-forth movement of conviction and belief as they “move onto perfection.” The person of “mature” faith is so designated, in part, because of his or her understanding that, at certain points in one’s faith journey, one will sense closeness to God, greater fullness of love in one’s heart for self and neighbor, and more piety through religious practice than at other points.

The most significant implication of self-authoring concerns how institutional and transfinite personalities appropriate the self’s capacity for using inner resources to generate wisdom. While self-authoring does not guarantee wisdom, Berger asserts that,

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>280</sup> The term self-authoring is used to describe persons who are deeply engaged in the meaning-making aspects of faith. It is not intended to replace traditional depictions of how faith is manifested in persons’ lives nor suggest that believers “create” their own faith. From the outset of this research, it has been stated that faith is a gift.

“The self-authoring mind generates wisdom that comes from *certainty*, from having a perspective and believing in it fully. It is the wisdom of persuasion, of taking on multiple perspectives in order to hone and sharpen your own.”<sup>281</sup> Certainty expresses depth of conviction, which is essential if one is to trust in the future.

Extrapolated from transfinite hope, certainty has distinct advantages over institutional embeddedness. While the institutional mind is inextricably linked to the mind of the human person to whom it belongs, the transfinite, hoping mind is linked to the mind and purposes of God. Pastoral theologian Daniel Schipani’s understanding of wisdom offers a rationale for this argument. He writes that as the symbol of divine wisdom, Jesus’ life and his ministry

evokes the tension between the *already*—gifts bestowed and divine dreams partially realized, as human dreams are transformed and realized in history—and the *not yet* of God’s reign—divine promises and expectations for humankind and for the whole world, which intersect with our human longings.<sup>282</sup>

The identification of temporality as a key component of Christ’s ministry is striking. Wisdom originated in the past, lives in the present, and is projected into the future. God’s reign establishes the normative culture to be realized in the future. Schipani understands wisdom as truth “that is in tune with, as well as dependent on, divine will.”<sup>283</sup> Its purposes are to guide how persons live and conform to the normative culture and to create a world which is pleasing to God. The certainty of God’s promises, through Jesus Christ, also anchors transfinite hope.

Relating wisdom to God’s will and reign in the world, which persons of faith are certain is transfinite, avoids the limits of self-authoring. Theoretically, a self-authored

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<sup>281</sup> Berger, “Living Postmodernism,” 22.

<sup>282</sup> Daniel S. Schipani, *The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003), 38.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

hope is limited, by and large, to the single generation of its author. The truths self-authors find may be shared with others, but such sharing can be fraught with frustration and impatience. On the other hand, the truths associated with God's will and reign may be transmitted multi-generationally as communally-accepted truths (such as doctrine and other statements of faith) continually establish normative culture for persons seeking to live out God's promises and live within God's will. The truth of the Gospels is the foundation of hope for faith exemplars. Their truth is nurturing, healing, sustaining, reconciling, and liberating as it projects one beyond the immediate self and into God's self and promised future.

#### *Further Integration of Lester and Kegan*

One might assume that persons begin formulating hope, and eventually transfinite hope, without regard to stages of development. Perhaps, this assumption can be informed by Kegan's developmental theory.

While hope is relational and grows in the context of community life, is it possible that our understanding of meaning-making can point out ways that hope can be nurtured? Kegan's developmental theory does, indeed, point to the possibility of nurturing hope. Liebert's model of spiritual direction embraces Kegan's theory and demonstrates its appropriateness in congregational settings. It is directly applicable here because we are interested in helping persons transition into deeper, more mature faith. Affirming our opening question, Liebert argues "We can teach ourselves to search for the balance between confirmation, creative contradiction, and continuity within a variety of church

structures and programs.”<sup>284</sup> She offers a six-step model adopted from Carlsen’s model of meaning-making.<sup>285</sup> In summary, the model aims to accomplish:

- 1) Establishing a climate of trust that grounds congregational dynamics...by consciously attending to that which fosters trust between members of the pastoral staff, between the staff and the parishioners and among the parishioners themselves.
- 2) Encourage appropriate groups periodically to examine a wide range of facts, assumptions and speculations which are part and parcel of the parish’s meaning-making system.
- 3) Assurance that pastoral leadership has developed a sufficient sense of self and pastoral identity that they themselves not become overcome with anxiety in the face of differing perspectives and conflicted situations.
- 4) Helping clients change inappropriate behavior and the structure of the meaning-making systems within which they act by employing free-thinking and imagination.
- 5) Guiding pastoral staffs as they help the members of the congregation reflect self-consciously on their own processes.
- 6) Encourage pastors to remain in contact with their parishioners, continuing their confirming and creative contradicting as their parishioners learn more effective ways of being and acting.<sup>286</sup>

Each of these goals beckons the pastoral caregivers and parishioner to engage in serious “rethinking and reenvisioning” processes that contribute to developmental transitions in the faith community. The interventions that are implemented are relational at their core and are often matters of common sense, says Liebert, but “they become developmentally powerful when honed to the particular developmental contingencies of one’s parishioners.”<sup>287</sup> By implementing this model of caring, pastoral caregivers can make significant advances in nurturing the growth and deepening of faith in persons and actively participate in the development of faith exemplars.

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<sup>284</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 143.

<sup>285</sup> See Mary Baird Carlsen, *Meaning-Making: Therapeutic Processes in Adult Development* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>286</sup> Liebert, 143-145.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

Temporality places a significant role in Lester's pastoral theology. As such, how might Kegan's work benefit from Lester's perspective, especially with regard to narrative structuring? A strategy for furthering Kegan's theory is to engage in helping persons that are approaching the interpersonal stages of development bring to their awareness their internal resources in order to effect change in their lives. Pastoral caregivers can be instrumental in this process by engaging conversation around future stories and exploring the manner in which persons conceive possibility and change. While Kegan argues that persons create meaning by interpreting experience, he downplays persons' ability to intentionally learn new ways of structuring experience and integrating deliberately acquired knowledge. Lester's approach creates a window of opportunity for persons to re-imagine possibilities. But, we can go further by nurturing a revised strategy for envisioning freedom and change that encourages those on the cusp of an interpersonal narrative.

Psychotherapist Allen Wheelis offers a helpful framework for how persons conceive freedom and necessity. When caregivers understand how carereceivers conceive the possibility for change they are better positioned to nurture the change necessary to grow in faith. Wheelis defines freedom as "that range of experience wherein events, courses of action, attitudes, decisions, accommodations are seen as elective."<sup>288</sup> He argues that persons often elect to be "removed from choice and hence from freedom."<sup>289</sup> Conversely, some persons naturally conceive constraint and necessity on issues that could be otherwise elective. Necessity, he argues, "is that range of experience wherein events, courses of action, attitudes, decisions are seen as determined by forces outside ourselves

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<sup>288</sup> Allen Wheelis, *How People Change* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1973), 23.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

which we cannot alter.”<sup>290</sup> Within the category of necessity there is arbitrary necessity in which persons perceive forces within themselves to be outside of themselves. For example, a person may indicate the desire to find employment, but insist “I can’t because ‘the system’ is against me.” While institutional and societal forces do marginalize persons, as we have shown earlier, persons still have the choice to persist. Persons of growing faith can also fall prey to the limits of necessity, and therefore, find themselves limited in growing their narrative.

In such situations, Wheelis argues “we must point out that she specifically denies this choice for which she now claims oblique awareness, that she locates the determining duty outside the ‘I’ and its wants. And we might add that if she continues such metaphorical speech long enough she will eventually convince even herself; her ‘theoretical’ choice will become more and more theoretical until, with no remaining consciousness of option, it will disappear in thin air.”<sup>291</sup> In other words, caregivers can coach such persons in such a manner to allow them to grow in awareness of alternative possibilities as a means of staving off further erosion of future possibilities of freedom and change. According to Wheelis, “the more we are threatened, fragile, vulnerable, the more we renounce freedom in favor of an expanding necessity.”<sup>292</sup> On the other hand, “the more we are strong and daring the more we will diminish necessity in favor of an expanding freedom.”<sup>293</sup> By nurturing hopefulness, through encouraging one’s awareness of choice and freedom, pastoral caregivers can help persons grow in the life of faith. As

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<sup>290</sup> Wheelis, 24.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

care-receivers begin to view their hope as originating from inside the “I” as they grow in relationship with God, they can begin to develop deeper faith resources.

Finally, it is important to consider what Lester’s attention to accrued wisdom might say to Kegan’s context for development and vice versa. Growing one’s ability to hope and imagine the future at higher levels of consciousness is a demanding task. Lester advocates for a community of shared ideals as a source of inspiring hopefulness. Being in a community where people feel a common bond and identify with each other strengthens the roots of belongingness. According to Lester, “We look for community in which we share hope and share visions of the future. Hope pushes us toward relationships because it is trusting of others and thrives on intimacy and mutual love.”<sup>294</sup> The idealized image of the beloved community is found in the Trinity, where God’s nature is revealed through the interactions between “Creator, Spirit, and Logos.” Lester’s perspective guides us toward a communal understanding of hope and growing in faith. The faith community, therefore, is a holding environment where shared visions produced deeper bonds that generate a more durable form of hopefulness.

Kegan supports the idea of community through holding environment and cultures of embeddedness. Within this context, he argues for increased psychological independence but intentional closeness to others, supportiveness of persons within community, and awareness of personal histories as a guiding force for continued growth. Where Kegan’s perspective can benefit from Lester is in the notion of shared ideals and visions for deepening community. Conversely, Lester’s perspective might benefit by appropriating Kegan’s push for increased differentiation between persons that urges more critical engagement of others’ ideas in order to better discern the validity of ideas. Such

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<sup>294</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 95.

psychological distance from one's community represents "a wholly different way of constituting the self, how it works, [and] what it is about."<sup>295</sup> At some point in the growth of faith, if one is to make the categorical leap to faith exemplar, it is probable that one will need such a stance if one is to relate to God authentically and in a manner that appropriates one's personal understanding of God's will for one's life. While the community is the source of shared values and vision, a wholly different way of constituting one's faith eventually becomes essential for exemplary faith to develop.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has established a theological framework for understanding faith and meaning-making. We have examined Lester's pastoral theology of hope. This examination demonstrated how persons construct hope and transfinite hope as a means of not only living in the world, but also a way of creatively imagining the future and maintaining confidence in positive outcomes. We also demonstrated that maintaining transfinite hope is a mark of faith exemplars' trust in God's promises and anchors their ongoing capacity to align their will with God's will. The hoping process, as seen through the lens of core narratives, is relational and encompasses persons' propensity to be future-focused and communal (God, others, and self). Also, within the hoping process of faith exemplars is the activity of meaning-making.

Kegan's theory of meaning-making provides a window for advancing how faith exemplars develop hope and trust in God's promises for a joyful future. His developmental theory posits that meaning-making is an activity of life. Through the

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<sup>295</sup> Kegan, *Over*, 111.



various stages of growth, we experience cultures of embeddedness which are vital to how we organize and understand experience. Faith exemplars are meaning makers of deep maturity based on Kegan's orders of consciousness and/or developmental balances. Their manner of making meaning out of experience is highly relational and grows toward a self-authored state as persons grow over time.

We have also engaged in a critical conversation between the two disciplines highlighting how each is transformative for faith development and this research. In the process, there was an examination of both Lester's and Kegan's work offering a critique of each and suggestions for how each theory might advance the other. This project now turns to the qualitative research investigating how relationality and religious practices impact the developmental trajectory of faith exemplars.

## CHAPTER 5

### SEASONED FAITH: RELATIONALITY, PRACTICE, AND COMMUNITY

#### *Overview*

This study proposes that persons of deep, mature faith are sustained by a highly-developed sense of relationship with God, a heightened desire to be in God's will, consistent engagement in faith practices, and participation in faith communities through time. These factors converge to describe *seasoned faith*, or exemplary faith. The qualitative research conducted for this project examined the aforementioned components of seasoned faith through a series of interviews with persons considered to be faith exemplars. The study showed that for these persons, faith and identity are frequently inseparable. When persons' core faith narratives develop as a consequence of their confidence in God's providence, they also develop unwavering faith and transfinite hope in the future.

This chapter presents the qualitative research and its conclusions on exemplary faith. The research hypothesis is that each of the four elements--1) relationality, 2) desire to be in God's will, 3) faith practices, and 4) participation in a faith community—is essential for deep and mature faith identity to develop. To support this argument, I examined each component in the participant interviews, which are included here as excerpts along with in-depth discussion. The supporting theological reflection and conclusions are drawn from the research findings and significantly further our understanding of seasoned, or exemplary, faith.

#### *Review of Theories and Constructs Supporting Seasoned Faith*

The following definition was established for this project: *Faith is God's spiritual gift to humanity that is developed through ongoing relational arrangements and practices which shape the course of a person's life and ultimately guides one in yielding actively to and depending upon God's presence and promises as sources for hope.* Howard Thurman's mystical theology demonstrated that faith flows from God's love, generates hope, and guides persons when confronting the vicissitudes of life. Faith develops and grows when persons practice sustaining faith disciplines and relate with others in community. Thurman argued that God's love penetrates human persons to their core and provides a constant reassurance to persons of their identity as a child of God. This relationship with God enables one to anchor one's own faith identity (meaning and purpose) in God's will for one's life. Thurman's mystical approach emphasized "meeting God" and allowing God's constant companioning presence to infuse one's experience of God, people, and others so that one might imagine greater possibilities and the transcendence of life's vicissitudes in the future. Additionally, his emphasis on spiritual practices (individually and communally) provided an avenue for deepening one's experiences in the life of faith. The combination of knowing God and being known along with faith practices provides the source of meaning in one's life.

Andrew Lester's pastoral theology of hope illustrated how faith exemplars nurture and sustain hope in God's promises for the future. Lester's construct of hope provides an understanding of how one's core narrative, which is often grounded in past suffering, can be transformed into a hopeful outlook by shifting one's perspective to a future orientation. Referring to our orientation of time as temporality, Lester demonstrates that hoping is directly linked to the human capacity to imagine beyond the present and into

the “not-yet.” Persons that are able to trust in God’s promises of the future over the course of their lives exemplify transfinite hope. Such trust is grounded in ultimate values such as freedom, equality, and love. Persons in whom the Christian narrative is integral to their personal narrative also maintain deep convictions in values such as redemption, salvation, and eternal life, which lead to transfinite hope. This research considers such persons as possessing seasoned faith. Therefore, we linked exemplary faith to transfinite hope. Transfinite hope is also relational in that it develops and matures in a community of faith as persons share visions of an open-ended future.

The research appropriated Robert Kegan’s developmental theory and established that meaning-making is an activity of the self. A highly relational construct, Kegan’s work emphasizes how human interaction promotes making meaning and is integral to human existence. This framework, which is based on cognitive structuralism and self-in-relation theory, helped establish how persons of faith construct meaning of their experience, particularly as children of God seeking to understand God’s will for their lives. We established that relationality is a primary pathway to ordering experience over the course of the lifespan. Making substantial use of self-in-relation theory, which emphasizes mutuality and community, Kegan argues that as the self becomes and develops the capacity to make meaning, persons grow in volition and ability to act as agents in the world. By demonstrating how relational dynamics influence meaning making, Kegan’s work contributes to our understanding of how faith exemplars’ identity as children of God evolves over time and how they grow into their understanding of God’s will for their lives.

The term *seasoned faith* refers to faith that develops as one interacts with God and other persons of faith, deepens one's trust in God, and builds the capacity for maintaining hope over the span of one's life. The participants in the study discussed the trajectory of their faith journey throughout their lives and described how they developed trust in God's promises and benevolence. Often, there were specific events that precipitated categorical shifts in the participants' perceptions regarding their lives in faith. But, across the board, participants described both their intentional and unintentional efforts of relating with God and others and how such interactions contributed to their seasoned faith. The interviews revealed in the participants' well-developed levels of resilience the ability to overcome life's difficulties and still maintain an abiding trust that God had "a ram in the bush" awaiting them. They attributed such confidence to their ongoing relationship with God. To this end, the faith exemplars in the study endured loss of relationships, heartbreaking vocational transitions, deaths of significant family members, and other vicissitudes, while managing to maintain transfinite hope.

As a construct, seasoned faith represents an internalized and concretized state within the believer that God's promise to deliver promises in the future can and will not fail. Theologian Eugene Roehlkeparta offers a two-part description of such faith saying that "First, faith is a way of living, not just an adherence to doctrine and dogma. Second, faith is life-transforming and has a dramatic, lasting impact on the believer."<sup>296</sup> He continues by saying that persons of deep faith "experience both a life-transforming relationship with God...and a consistent devotion to others."<sup>297</sup> The faith exemplars in the study typified this description. All of them were selected due to their "way of living."

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<sup>296</sup> Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, "What Makes Faith Mature?" *Christian Century* 107, no. 16 (May 9, 199): 497.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

They were thought by their pastors to be the type of persons that lived out their faith on a daily basis in word and deed. This was borne out in their interviews as each identified ways that their faith in God had transformed their lives. The participants held strong convictions that God would see them through both good times and bad.

The faith narratives shared by the respondents were characterized by experiences and memories created and shared with others. A recent *New York Times* article on aging provides a perspective that similarly illuminates faith development. The research asserted that expecting positive outcomes is related to maintaining relationships over time, expecting vicissitudes to come, and knowing one can endure and overcome such experiences. A seasoned faith is also related to familiarity in relationships, to include those involving God and human persons. Current brain research indicates some “people may simply be better able to deal with the *emotional vicissitudes* of love.”<sup>298</sup>, <sup>299</sup> [Emphasis added.] As such, they maintain more resiliency in their outlook. A similar resiliency enables faith exemplars to hold on tightly to their love interest--God. Over time, they develop a seasoned love for God. Our participants’ responses clearly resonated with the assertions in the cited article.

Seasoned love (and faith) also accepts that challenges will arise, yet continues viewing the world positively. This perspective is rooted in faith exemplars’ deep conviction that God’s providence is a governing force in the world. Providence refers to the “purposive action of God in the created order.”<sup>300</sup> According to Outler, providence is

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<sup>298</sup> “Love in the Time of Dementia,” *New York Times*, 18 November 2007, Week in Review, p. 3.

<sup>299</sup> The cited age limiter (older) is not meant to imply that faith maturation is also tied directly to age.

<sup>300</sup> John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 82.

also “the manner in which God’s purpose is manifested in human life.”<sup>301</sup> As exemplars grow to trust God more fully and faithfully, they begin living out this manifestation of God’s purpose and they develop more acceptance of God’s purposes for themselves and the created order of the world they inhabit. Such conviction inspires a positive outlook. This is particularly applicable to relationships with God. Faith exemplars also maintain a positive outlook toward the will of God. They report more desire to be in God’s will than exercising their own will. Their lives are a manifestation of commitment to God.

Exemplars are quick to point out Christ’s model of submission as a guide. In one of his darkest hours, Christ declared to God, “not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Some biblical texts assert that after rendering this prayer, an angel appeared before Christ and “gave him strength.” Exemplary faith is a strengthening mechanism in the life of believers. Ashby alludes to the Old Testament story of Joshua as an example of providence. Ashby argues

Joshua is a powerful story of hope in which the promise of God, the will of God, and guarantees of God all come together to provide a safe haven for a people lost in the wilderness...the story of Joshua gives [the ancient Israelites] hope for the future. Joshua reminds them that the promises of God remain true...Moreover, God’s promise includes God’s will to make it happen.<sup>302</sup>

Whether faith exemplars ground their theology in the New or Old Testament, they gain assurance of God’s ceaseless and untiring faithfulness with regard to God’s promise to see God’s purposes fulfilled in a future time. They know with confidence that the will of God will be done.

Kegan’s developmental theory demonstrates that as persons advance in development, their relational skills and capacities become more integrated into their

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<sup>301</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, Sr., review of *Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence*, by Albert C. Outler, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 1 (March 1970): 114.

<sup>302</sup> Homer U. Ashby, Jr. *Our Home is Over Jordan* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 22.

personhood. As such, persons of exemplary faith may appear remarkably instinctive. Conversations with persons of seasoned faith reveal an “instantaneous” quality in their responses. They speak with certainty and confidence. Their speech regarding God and their experiences in the life of faith is not contrived; it is authentic. To the uninitiated, such behavior and spiritual presence may seem natural. However, what one is witnessing is the by-product of deeply-engaged relationality and faith practices described in the previous chapters. The instinctive quality also reflects the gifted nature of deep-seated faith, which was delineated fully in the definition of faith. Exemplars also retain curiosity, especially when using religious language to describe their experience. Such qualities held prominence for the research, especially in identifying persons for the qualitative study. Clergy persons that nominated persons as participants were asked to make recommendations with these qualities in mind.

Faith exemplars know God, yet they also wonder what God desires for their lives. Lester’s work helps us understand that this condition is rooted in temporality. Human beings are future-oriented and those who are grounded in faith have a natural curiosity with regard to God’s will. Exemplars know that God’s plans may change. What they confidently consider to be their calling may change subtly or abruptly. A person of faith, therefore, continuously looks with curiosity, often through the lens of prayer, into the not-yet hoping to get a glimpse of what God has in store. They believe, but acknowledge unbelief. (Mark 9:24) Theologian John Ortberg poses two questions that exemplify this stance: “What if all things are going to be well? What if Jesus knew this?”<sup>303</sup> The exemplars in this study engaged in serious reflection to such questions while remaining open and trusting to how God might reveal the actual answers.

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<sup>303</sup> John Ortberg, “Hunger for Joy,” *Christian Century* 124, no. 18 (September 4, 2007): 39.



This open and trusting stance taken by the exemplars during the interviews in itself conveys how God’s purpose manifested in their lives. By participating in the study wholeheartedly, without second-guessing their responses, and maintaining confidence that God’s love for them would be revealed during the interviews, the exemplars demonstrated the manner in which providence is displayed in the world. They demonstrated their trust in God’s good intentions for their lives. They exemplified the faith that Outler described as “confidence that God’s love is invincible.”<sup>304</sup> Such is the content of seasoned faith.

Assuming the future offers positive outcomes and trusting God to author such a future accurately describes seasoned faith and is evidence that a person possesses transfinite hope. Lester instructs that transfinite hope peers deep into the future and expects God’s purposes to manifest themselves as promised. What is distinctive about transfinite hope is its infinite farsightedness and strong reliance on faith. This is a vision that goes well beyond what the eye can see and the mind can imagine. To own such hope, one must also have an invincible *love of God*. Faith exemplars look into the future with hopeful expectation as they anticipate “the consequent living a life based in confidence upon this love.”<sup>305</sup> These characteristics borne out of living in the life of faith describe the gifted nature of seasoned faith.

## **THE STUDY**

The qualitative study, “*Uncovering a Seasoned Faith: Relationality and Faith Development*,” explored the impact of relationality, faith practices, and community on seasoned faith. The study included 10 participants covering a broad demographic range.

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<sup>304</sup> Roberts, 114.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

A clergyperson familiar with the participants' faith narrative referred each participant. The clergypersons considered the participants mature in their faith convictions and practices. We sought a broad sample of participants without preference for ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation. The study included Christians, only.

### *Respondents*

The demographics were as follows: 5 women, 5 men; 4 African American, 6 of European descent; 7 married, 2 widowed, and 1 divorced; and the average age was 66.3 years old. All participants reported they were active in a local church. One participant was preparing for ordained ministry.

### *Questionnaire*

The qualitative research was conducted using a questionnaire designed to examine several aspects of the participants' faith life. Underlying the questions was an emphasis on each participant's identity as a "child of God." Our concern was to gain an understanding of how this identifier impacted faith development and the respondent's relationship with God and others. Therefore, the questionnaire was structured to investigate the participants' core faith narratives starting early in life, or as far back as the participants considered their faith was beginning to take root in their lives. Theologically, Lester's construct of temporality with its emphasis on past, present, and future was important. Additional emphases derived from Thurman's theological framework, especially with regard to direct experience with God and prayer, were important considerations, also. Psychosocially, the questionnaire reflected Kegan's models describing the complex nature by which the self evolves relationally through time and structures meaning.

### *Procedure*

All participants in the study were Dallas-area residents. All signed consent forms and agreed to audiotaping. The interviews were conducted privately and each lasted about an hour. Several were conducted by telephone. The questionnaire concentrated on the respondents' experiences in three areas: elements of their faith narratives signaling deep and trusting relationship with God; relationships that contributed to deeper faith structure, and faith practices developed over time.

### *Format*

The respondents received a briefing on the questions in advance due to the reflective nature of the questions. The interviewer adhered to the questionnaire, but asked more focused questions in order to elicit fuller responses in key areas. Some questions solicited very detailed responses. We condensed those responses in this presentation. The first question, in particular, yielded energetic and thoughtful responses. The question was:

*As an adult, what experiences have you had where you felt God's presence up close and personal? Another way of putting it, describe when you had direct contact with God.*

Another question regarding relationality elicited fresh and insightful responses:

*Describe how significant relationships during your life have shaped how you understand your faith and yourself as a Christian.*

The answers to some questions were more comprehensive than initially anticipated, so the questionnaire was revised to avoid redundancy amongst later respondents. Each interview concluded with a question designed to evoke responses about the respondents' thoughts and feelings about their purpose in life and its relation to their faith journey. In the following section, all participants' names are changed to protect their privacy.

## FINDINGS

This section focuses attention on the key elements of seasoned faith as described above. The excerpts presented from the interviews are grouped by major element. Comments are interspersed that highlight pertinent responses within the respondents' answers. The questions were presented once and were followed by several responses. Some responses include follow-up questions for respondents. Certain theological themes are prominent in the interviews and the discussion that follows. While the questions guided the participants to discuss relationality, they often spoke relationally throughout the questionnaire. The participants emphasized their confidence in God's providence in many instances. Many responses reflected the participants' deep sense of hopefulness and confidence in the future. Most expected their faith to continue growing as time passed, as their relationship with God deepened, and as their reliance on God increased. The reader should note these emphases while reading the interview excerpts.

### *Relationality*

Respondents reported that relationality was important for their faith development. Some discussed formative experiences during their youth. Others began with adult experiences that referenced a spouse, pastor, or group of persons that influenced their belief structure. Most persons had at least one person who strongly influenced his or her faith development.

Q: For you, the Christian experience or the formation of your Christian identity began when you were four going to bible school, praying, and learning about Christian life. Then when your father remarried, you were out of the church. Later, you remembered your earlier experience and that brought you back to church?

Larry: Right. It occurred when I came out of service, moving to a new neighborhood. There was a new church and a new pastor. While I grew up Baptist, this was a Methodist Church. Reverend Zan Holmes was the pastor.

Well, he was one of the first pastors that really influenced me in becoming more involved in church. I attended the church, of course, and I attended very faithfully. He would visit my home after each one of those services and talked with me. I never had that kind of experience. He was always available when something happened in your life, like when my daughter was born; that sort of thing. So that got me much more closer. I began to attend church regularly and began to do some work in the church.

Q: Would you say that Pastor Holmes was a role model for you in terms of your Christian life?

Larry: Yes. Talking about the pastors or the people who have made a difference in my life my Christian experience, Reverend Clara Reed [another pastor] has made quite a difference.

Ray: Bob was definitely a teacher and not a pastor. But, you know, he really woke me up in terms of theology and introduced me to Martin Buber [a theologian], who has remained very crucial to my own development.

Each of the above participant responses includes descriptions of specific persons from the participants' lives that influenced their faith. Recalling material from earlier chapters, especially the slave narratives, we recognize this as a familiar pattern amongst faith exemplars. Nat Turner, for example, recalled his grandmother and plantation master as "sources of inspiration and faith." His attachment to these people and their ability to model faith were instrumental to his own growth. Like the study participants, Turner associated growing in faith with relations with particular members in his community of faith.

Jean: My parents never sat down and said, "This is the way Christians act. This is what we do because we are believers of Jesus Christ." They walked before me. They did it! My whole life was service and not realizing this is what Christians do. When there was someone who needed a place to stay--family, friend or otherwise--our home was always available. Someone else was always there besides my parents and siblings. At dinner time, whoever was there at the house, sat down to eat, and you ate until you were full. No one was ever turned down.

Jean: My previous pastor, watching her walk before me, not just in word, but also in deed, helped to form my faith walk because it gave me a plumb line. It gave me

a measuring stick to see what happens in the midst of situations or how you respond. She helped to give me confidence.

For example, when I became more and more desirous of learning scripture and getting into the word, her response to me was, “I want you to teach the Sunday school class.” I was like, “Wait a minute, pastor. I want to learn. I don't want to teach.” But it was in her wisdom that she realized in teaching I would learn more. That relationship has really helped me to see humankind and [gain] some direction.

Jean: We have prayer teams at our church. We have teams of three--either families or individuals. There is one individual, in particular. She has such a quiet, strong faith. She practices spiritual disciplines religiously. As a matter of fact, while I was going through my cancer, and during the greatest part of my treatment, I could not fast. She stood in the gap for me and fasted an extra day each week until I was able to return to fasting.

Pearl: I think, I have to really say the first person was my mother. My mother passed away last year. She was almost 90, and all of her life she was a wonderful Christian and brought us all up in a Christian environment where we learned bible verses and all that kind of stuff. She never stopped trusting in the Lord. She never did really lose the faith. She lost a lot of her memory, but her faith in God never wavered. And I remember the day she died. Up until the day before she died, she said, “Well, I got good peace and I am ready to go.” I remember thinking, you know, I have such a wonderful mother and I have to live a better Christian life. I just really wanted my faith to be deeper.

Returning to Turner, we notice he associated his grandmother with his faith because she was one “who belonged to the church.” He also cited “other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers.” In a similar manner, Jean cites her pastor as demonstrating how one lives out faith. Pearl’s similarly cites her mother as influential. Then, the teaching element of Ray’s pastor stood out as “crucial.” Each participant has combined relationality with faith practices in various ways to show the origins of their growing faith.

In the last statement above by Pearl, we also note the origin of core faith narrative as it begins to develop. She cites several elements: being reared in a Christian environment and learning bible verses at an early age, the influence of her mother’s trust

in God, and the deepening relationship with God inspired by the choice to “live a better Christian life.” Each of these inputs creates a narrative that has a faith identity at its core.

### *Faith Practices*

Reflecting on the work of Bourdieu regarding practices, Moschella writes “When religious practices such as visual piety or ritual processions become regular or habitual, they constitute features of *habitus*.”<sup>306</sup> For Bourdieu, *habitus* meant “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history.”<sup>307</sup> The manner in which the participants adhered to faith practices often had this quality. While some committed themselves to daily practice and others engaged faith practices less frequently, their practices were often described as if they were both filled with tradition and second nature. In the first response presented here, the respondent tied practice to relationality.

Q: How has it changed over the course of your life, your relationship with the Almighty?

Jes: How has it changed? Not very much.

Q: It has been consistent.

Jes: Yes, he [“the Almighty”] delivers me.

Q: He delivers you?

Jes: Yes, he delivers me. He comes to my rescue. And here of late, I've been asking Mrs. Donna [wife] to bring the morning prayer for the past two months. Well, in a sense, in her deliverance of praying and everything, [I] feel very confident, and that has impressed me. I'm going to believe. I'm not going to say I believe in God simply because I want this. I want to be sincere; not just because I'm asking for something.

Jes: [My pastor] is consistent in that he comes over, prays with me, prays for me, and he has been doing that for the past 20 years.

Lester argues that Christians believe that God is immanently involved in their lives even when chaos prevails. Such was the case for Jes, who was struggling with chronic illness.

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<sup>306</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Living Devotions: Reflections on Immigration, Identity, and Religious Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 141.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

Declaring that God “delivers,” he was confirming his confidence in God’s promise to interact during the entirety of his experience.

Q: Talk about some of your spiritual practices that have led you closer to God.  
Annie: God was showing me so many things in scriptures and circumstances. But mainly, I started reading the scriptures, and that's when I began to grow. My trust began to develop to the point where I totally surrendered to whatever he wanted me to do. I read *The Purpose Driven Life* and I felt him saying, “You need to share this with people.”

The practices that Annie engaged in fall into the category of *growing in wisdom and stature*, according to Thurman. Her statement indicates her desire to wait on God, which in Thurman’s words “is to discover one of the precious ingredients in the spiritual unfolding of life, the foundation for the human attribute of patience.”<sup>308</sup>

Q: It sounds like you had a couple of spiritual practices, like going to church, visiting with your pastor, reading the Bible, and going to bible study. Do you have any other spiritual practices that you participate in on a regular basis?

Larry: Well, I go to Sunday school now. I started attending Sunday school and that was good for me. You know, I joined this church and for years heard many sermons. And I didn't get as far as I have reading the Bible. I didn't gain anything going into church and listening to the preacher preach. When I began to study the Bible, attend Sunday school, and the Disciple classes, that's where I really developed a real Christianity and the Christian experience became real to me.

Larry’s deep level of engagement in Christian practices demonstrates another spiritual discipline, commitment, which Thurman described as “the act by which the individual gives himself in utter support of a single or particular end.”<sup>309</sup> Larry was committed to witnessing the scriptures come alive in his life, which allowed him to testify to the power of the Christian community as a source of encouragement and empowerment.

Ray: I’ve been going back to prayer groups for the last 37 years. These are kind of emotional and deeply caring for me. In terms of the trials and triumphs and everything, there is a lot of deep sharing that goes on.

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<sup>308</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 42.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



Jean: The spiritual disciplines that I practice regularly are prayer, as well as, continuous prayer throughout the day. I am a prayer servant on a weekly basis. I can pray with and for others, as well as meditate. I am learning to use quiet time as I grow in my prayer life; learning to listen *to* God and listen *for* God as well as to be able to *talk* to God.

I fast at least weekly. During my time of fast, I've gone from it being a time of not eating anything to using that time and replacing the physical desire for food with spiritual desire.

Speaking on prayer, Thurman declared, "Prayer is a form of communication between God and man [*sic*] and man and God. It is the essence of communication between persons that they shall talk with each other from the same basic agenda. When this is not done, communication tends to break down. If, however, an atmosphere of trust is maintained, then one learns how to wait and be still."<sup>310</sup> This attitude and disposition described by Thurman is a precise match to Ray's and Jean's experience of prayer.

Q: Can you talk about how your spiritual practices have contributed to you becoming a more mature Christian?

Jean: My spiritual practices have contributed by helping me to be more disciplined. They have helped me, oh God, to focus less on self and more on God. They have helped me to share my faith more maturely since it is a part of me.

Lynn: For our practice [of reading the Bible], my husband and I have done this very often; probably for five years now. We have gone through the Bible in a year. We go through it day-by-day. We've gone through that, and every time, I think I should know it all by now. Then, something new, some new inspiration shows up from that, and I'll say, "Did we read that last year?"

Larry: Yeah. I taught Disciple Bible classes and I took about three or four of those classes under [my pastor]. From that experience, I learned to enjoy reading the Bible. I had never studied it before. It never made sense to me before. From that experience, I began to get more serious about church and reading the Bible. It finally became enjoyable to me to read after that.

As faith exemplars described their lives, it became clear that they did not grow without being deliberate about their faith practices. By attending to spiritual disciplines and the call they felt upon their lives, their lives took on increased meaning. It was evident that

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 88.

attending to faith practices led to growth in self-fulfillment, a discipline of the Spirit that Thurman described as “a sense in which one’s life moves within the structure of pattern and plan.”<sup>311</sup> Each exemplar quoted above demonstrated a pattern of deliberately planning to move his or her interior life toward God’s will.

*Faithfulness (Being in God’s Will)*

Several participants viewed their lives as a search for God’s will. They sought alignment with God’s will as a sign of their faithfulness. Many related their purpose in life to being a servant for God. Importantly, each participant identified himself or herself as a child of God.

Q: Can you give an overview of your life as a Christian, starting with some early memories that you think shaped you?

Kim: God really set me apart, or called me, was when I was 15. I went to Honduras with a medical mission group and had an experience. God had made this impression on my life with that experience. And in seeking work, I couldn't do without that. I couldn't live apart from that.

Q: As an adult, what experience have you had where you felt that God was directly present in your life up close and personal?

Annie: I had a hunger in me to know God like never before. That is when I began to read the word of God, and to ask God questions. Like Katherine Pullman says, “God is more real than you are.” This is when God really began to work in my life. All I wanted to do was to be alone with him. I had a part time-job. I was babysitting a little bit and that's when I begin to follow the word and be in prayer. That was all I wanted to do.

Lonnie: I was about 28 or 29 years of age when the Lord called me from my old life to my new life. It was a change in my whole life. When the Lord called me from my old life to my new life, I didn't know the direction that the Lord wanted me to take until he opened my eyes; until he opened my ears, then I could hear the voice, and I could obey what he told me to do. So, that's how I stand today.

Q: What aspect of your life do you attribute to God taking charge or taking hold of you?

Lynn: I had always wanted to be a nurse from the time I was probably eight or ten years. I was the youngest in the family and was kind of told that I really wasn't

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<sup>311</sup> Howard Thurman, “No Life Without War and Affliction,” in *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, ed. Anne Spencer Thurman (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 2002), 59.

able to do anything. I was too young to do this, and too young to do that. I was literally too scared to go be a nurse. The whole idea petrified my husband and me. Somebody challenged me when I was in my late 30's. Well, we needed camp nurses, for, you know, church camps. I thought I could do that. That's not going to be too hard. So, that was my call. The Lord directed me that I could just go. We had an uncle living with us and he left us some money so that I could go to Baylor. I felt like the Lord was directing me. I felt like the Lord was leading me. It was not until a year before this position, did I actually do what I said I was going to do at the beginning.

Q: Would you consider that [breast cancer diagnosis] a crisis that your faith enabled you to get through?

Jean: Oh yes. Undoubtedly, I feel like that. That was the only way that I made it through.

Q: How did your faith support you in that way, in that situation?

Jean: Well, I knew even in the midst of the diagnosis that it was going to be okay in spite of the fact that I had breast cancer. I knew that God was going to see me through it. It wasn't going to be easy and it wasn't. It was painful--physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It was through my prayers and prayers of others that sustained me. As a matter of fact, the reason I even went to the doctor was a matter of my faith.

The exemplars' responses demonstrated the close connection between seeking God's will and meaning-making. Their narratives were filled with a desire "to know" that seeking God has purpose in itself. In this sense, their statements contained a narrative hermeneutical quality that underlies the assumptive task, which according to pastoral theologian Elaine Graham, is "to relate actions and behaviours to the deeper underlying meanings, by analyzing concrete events, their contexts and causes, their significance and desirable outcomes."<sup>312</sup> Meaning and purpose surfaced as outcomes are sought and realized. A similar pattern existed in the following responses.

Q: Discuss any major crises that your faith allowed you to overcome.

Pearl: The one that was really difficult, of course, was when my oldest son was diagnosed with kidney disease when he was about 12. It was just one of these little old experiences that I had to realize that his life was in God's hand. He was a Christian and he said, "Mom, it's okay, you know. I'm ready to go if the Lord wants me." It is just a wonderful thing. No matter what we are going through,

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<sup>312</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 118.

how sad it is, and how heart-breaking it is, God is always there to give us comfort and to let us know that he really cares.

Annie: [After a stillbirth] I realized that my greatest possessions were people, my children, my living children. People think you can't take the heaven with you. My life just turned around to be more centered toward God, relationships, and in trusting him in all the circumstances.

Q: Do you feel you have ever had any type of indication that God did show up in your life or where you had a close experience with God?

Annie: Now, when I was alone with God, I went through a period of over a year, and I said, "Lord, I just want to be with you." And one day the Lord said, "You're being selfish. You need to get out and share your testimony with other people." I wasn't really happy about that, but I got happy. Because there is fulfillment and there is peace when you do what God wants you to do.

Ray: I was trying to figure out what I needed to do. I went on a long walk with my closest colleague and talked about it, then went back to the church. I laid down on one of the church pews.

First Church of Chicago is this great gothic cathedral type of building. I was just dozing off there and what happened is that a voice definitely spoke these words of assurance. The sort of message like "Let go, let God." It was a kind of experience that said, or the message was, "You don't have to fix everything. You don't have to do this, you know. Just let things, you know, unfold." I don't know--I don't know exactly what the specifics were of the message, anyway. It was very powerful. It was very real and not like anything else I have ever experienced.

The reader witnesses the exemplars deeply working through important matters of identity and being as they describe their direct encounters with God. Experience and interpretation are inseparably intertwined in the narratives at this point. According to Graham, "Meaning in this sense is not simply a question of coherence or understanding, but is given a normative and prescriptive status: interpretation of a pastoral situation aims at articulating a language of the good or the normative, especially in terms of human identity and ultimate purpose."<sup>313</sup>

Q: It sounds like you are trying to be in God's will. Is that an accurate statement?  
Pearl: Definitely.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 119.

Q: Do you feel like you are living in God's will?

Pearl: Well, I do believe that. I believe he is in my common space. I think after we walk with God, so long as we come to understand him, I think we can sense he is guiding. If he is not guiding, there is kind of a little spirit that lets us know. Then, I find I have become more tolerant of people. I can't explain it. I just know it is only something the Holy Spirit can do. Without him, it would not be possible.

Q: It sounds like as a result of those practices and spiritual disciplines that you've used and adhered to, you feel closer to God.

Pearl: Yes, yes.

Q: More of a child of God?

Pearl: Well, I know I've been a child of God since I became a Christian.

It would be a mistake to attribute all of the above meaning-making to individual experience and interpretation. Kegan would caution us to consider the culture of embeddedness that each of the exemplars dwells in, particularly their communities of faith, which are largely responsible for their assimilation of language. From a pastoral theological perspective, this is an important awareness to maintain because communities of faith do have their own languages. Often, it is a faith community's particular language that sets itself apart. Language, then, is a cornerstone for the community's "common identity, common authority, common memory, and common vision."<sup>314</sup> The integration of this common language into the self as the self interacts with other selves in community is largely responsible for persons feeling that they belong in the community of faith.

Accordingly, Kegan argues

Some of our meaning-making is completely idiosyncratic and falls under no governance or regularity other than the regularity of our unique personalities. And some of our meaning-making may derive from our membership in various subgroups of the human family... These subgroups may endow us with their own meaning-regulative principles, ways we know or see that derive from our membership in these subgroups.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>315</sup> Kegan, *In Over*, 206.

Communities of faith are included amongst the “subgroups of the human family.” As such, it is important to acknowledge the influence they have on meaning-regulative principles of faith exemplars. Parks, who supports this perspective, argues that the transmission of meaning-regulative principles starts early, and says

Religious faith communities can serve as mentoring communities, initiating young adults into patterns of meaning-making and faith that assist young adults in discovering where and who they are in space and time, meeting them in their quest for both authenticity and hope.<sup>316</sup>

Indeed, from Parks’ perspective, communities are not only a strong influence on nurturing exemplary faith early in life, communities have a responsibility to take the nurture of exemplary faith very seriously for the continued sustenance of hope.

### *Hope*

The study confirmed that faith exemplars developed their strong sense of hope by taking seriously relationships that nurtured their faith and by intentionally engaging in a variety of faith practices in a highly disciplined manner. It was the combination of these efforts, along with God’s guidance and providence that enabled the participants to maintain transfinite hope in God’s promises. In other words, the hope experienced by the participants was a by-product of the complex processes described in the earlier chapters. During good and bad times, they remained confident that the future will yield positive outcomes. Their trust in their values and convictions deepened over the course of their lives.

Q: Have you had any experiences of extreme joy or elation, that you attribute to your faith, or that you felt were religious or ecstatic experiences? Perhaps, you thought the experiences were the result of being in a relationship with God?  
Lonnie: When the Lord found me and saved me, I had much joy, much happiness, much peace, and I could experience that.

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<sup>316</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 2000), 205.

Q: You were describing your knowing that the Lord had found you.

Lonnie: Because he said, we are a new person after we have been born again. He said you are a new creature. And so, that's how I knew I had been changed. Since I got joy, I got peace. I got happiness. All those other habits that I had didn't bother me anymore.

Q: Why do you say the Lord found you? What happened that gave you the ability to say, "The Lord has found me, and I have a lot of joy and happiness in my life?"

Lonnie: Well, after that I really turned my life over to him.

The next vignette was obviously a very profound experience for Jes. An assault by a law enforcement officer and subsequent arrest became a formative faith experience for him, drew him closer to God, and secured his hope. He drew on his faith and concluded that the Almighty *had* to be working on his behalf. Why else, he concluded, would his employer provide legal assistance throughout the ordeal?

Q: Since you have known the Almighty, have you had any experiences that have guided you towards the Almighty? Any major crises that helped you get through those times?

Jes: I was 19 years old, with a wife, two little bitty children, and working. I'm coming out of this building during Christmas time. This policeman, a young white boy, was walking, you know, to what they called "a beat." I was in front of him. So, he said to me, "Hey, boy." I knew he was talking to me, you know. I resented that. I said, "Yeah, yeah, what is it, man?" "Where you going?" I said, "Going back to work." He said, "What's your name?" I gave him all he asked for, and he said, "I'll put you in jail." I said, "Put me in jail! For what, man? I haven't done anything. What are you going to put me in jail for?" You wouldn't believe it. He grabbed me by the arm, you know. "Come on around here!"

He ushered me or attempted to usher me to the back of the building there in the alley. I said, "You don't have to do that. I'll go around there with you." We walked on around to the back of the building and when we get there, he goes in this little building and gets this, this baton, night stick [and began beating me]. [Jes was arrested by three policemen.]

So, the people I was working for hired this lawyer. This lawyer represented me. He came down to the jail, and secured my bond and freedom. I got out to go back to work the following day. Each time the case number would come up, the lawyer, my lawyer, would throw it out, you know, like that. That went on for

months. So, in the meantime, while all that was going on I got called to the military. That was in 1953.

Q: You think the Almighty had something to do with that.

Jes: He hooked me up with them people that I was working with because I couldn't represent myself. I didn't have any money.

That Jes recalled a story from almost 60 years in his past indicates that it is part of what Lester describes as a core narrative. The story also highlights an element of human brokenness in the core narrative. The transformative element is represented by the narrator's ability to recast a story where "the hoping process is threatened"<sup>317</sup> into one that allowed him to regain hope. As Lester says, "We believe that God wants abundant life, justice, and mercy to be a part of life in the present."<sup>318</sup> By recognizing God's action in the past and continually projecting it forward, the narrator demonstrated how finite hope is connected to transfinite hope. The exemplars' stories were filled with such narratives reflecting their devotion to prayer, attending worship, bible study, and other faith practices.

Q: How have spiritual practices and fellowship made a difference for your faith?

Annie: I missed [certain things] in the church I am in now. They don't have prayer and testimony service on Wednesday night. I didn't realize how much I missed that. We miss the small things, you know. Testimony doesn't have to be this big, huge, horrendous life changing event. But, it's a small recognition sometimes of how God is working in your life and how he has made a change.

This response, and others like it, reflects the hope-filled posture of faith exemplars and the confidence that God is actively involved in the believer's life. The small groups mentioned above nurture such hope. By acknowledging her desire to get back in such a community, the narrator alerts the reader to her intentional manner of maintaining transfinite hope. Lester argues that pastoral theologians and caregivers alike have a role

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<sup>317</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 57.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



in helping persons maintain an open-ended future. While finite goals of a closed-ended horizon will provide structure and meaning to the present, we are still prone to despair if short-term goals fail. He argues, “We are responsible for helping people evaluate their travel story, identify where they are going, and assess the adequacy of their horizons for supporting hope.”<sup>319</sup> Pastoral caregivers accomplish this task by helping persons envision the “transcendent horizon in the distance.”<sup>320</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

All participants in the study shared personal faith narratives containing elements of seasoned faith. While some had core narratives with emphasis on relationality, others had core narratives emphasizing their faith disciplines and practices. All expressed conviction that they considered themselves “children of God.” Some self-identified themselves as such and others confirmed that identity when asked. Their spiritual practices included, but were not limited to, bible study, prayer, meditation, and solitude. All participants maintained hope that is classified as transfinite because it is grounded in ultimate values and concerns, such as love, salvation, and hope. Faithfulness to God, or being in God’s will, was a theme that ran through all of the conversations. Based on these results, the research affirmed that each person could be appropriately categorized as a faith exemplar.

### Theological Reflection

The relational aspects of faith point to how God is involved in the human experience of faith. Immink argues, “God gets personally involved in our lives and

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

descends into our earthly existence to bring salvation.”<sup>321</sup> Persons of faith witness this most visibly by participating in the sacraments when we commune with Christ taking the bread and wine. Immink describes two forms of communion: social and ideal. The *social* form of communion refers to interactions between mutual acquaintances while the ideal form of communion has to do with sharing norms and values. The social exists as a part of the ideal, which is grounded in one’s relationship with Christ.

The *ideal* dimension of communion is relational and continuously serves as a resource that actualizes within the church community. Accordingly, “Interaction within the faith community is thus both a social and a theological event: communion with God is not only embedded in interpersonal communications but, further, has an impact on interpersonal relationships.”<sup>322</sup> In other words, as persons immerse themselves in the life of faith, they pick up on norms and values originating within that context which further guide interactions beyond the community of faith. The life of faith permeates the whole of one’s life. Faith exemplars tend to epitomize this experience of the ideal dimension of communion. As their relationship with God develops and matures, it results in a “caring, committed love [that] is a resilient living bond...that gets stronger over time and finally gets to the point where life’s adversities and pain only serve to strengthen it further.”<sup>323</sup> As persons immerse themselves in their faith community, their relationships with others take on a similar quality.

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<sup>321</sup> F. Gerrit Immink, *Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 64.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>323</sup> Paul Bauermeister, “Mate Selection: Cupid’s Three Level Radar and Why It Does Not Always Work,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 11, no. 4 (August 1984): 231.

### *Relationality*

The study presented clear evidence that relationality is a powerful means by which one can find, grow, deepen, mature, and depend on faith as a means of sustaining hope. Maintaining meaningful relations, whether in the family, church, or broader community, proved to be a certain path to developing transfinite hope for the faith exemplars. For example, Maggie spoke specifically about being in groups, comprised of pastors' wives and camp counselors, which she said "helps you grow over the years." This type of language prevailed throughout the interviews and confirmed the essential nature of relationality for maturing in the life of faith.

During the interviews, the exemplars spoke passionately about their experiences of God directly intervening in life situations. They shared vignettes of experience informing the interviewer that faith identity is virtually inseparable from personality for some people. Their core narratives and faith narratives were so intertwined that distinguishing one from the other proved difficult. Pearl's responses regarding her purpose in life illustrates the interrelatedness between the two types of narratives. She reported, "being dealt with in the Spirit," on a daily basis. For her and the other faith exemplars, to be alive equated with living alongside God. Lonnie reported he became a changed person as a result of being found by the Lord. His statements emphasized God's activity. Such conviction resonates with Thurman's mystical theology, which asserts that meeting God is the equivalent of being dealt with at one's core.

The participants reported experiencing God early in their lives and sensing God's presence increase over the course of their lives. Some reported they were "set apart" as youth; others developed more awareness of God's presence as adults when their core

narratives experienced categorical shifts. The faith exemplars reported their beliefs were transformed into convictions during such shifts. These experiences included losing loved ones to death or divorce, life-threatening illness, and other vicissitudes of life. They reported that through prayer and seeking God's will for their lives, their hope remained strong and intact--transfinite. All faith exemplars expressed certainty of God's direct intervention.

### Theological Reflection

Faith practices are wide, varied, and by no means limited to those identified in this research or practiced by the participants in the study. Other faith practices that flourish within the Christian community cited by Dykstra, but only presented partially here include:

1. telling the Christian story to one another;
2. interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church's experience;
3. confessing our sin to one another, forgiving, and reconciling;
4. tolerating one another's failures and encouraging one another;
5. giving generously of one's means and receiving gratefully gifts others give;
6. providing hospitality and care;
7. listening and talking attentively to one another about particular life experiences;
8. criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns that destroy human beings; and
9. working together to maintain and create structures and institutions according to God's will.<sup>324</sup>

Each of these practices is a means of binding persons to God, community, and the world beyond. Often for faith exemplars, such practices are so engrained in their everyday life and rituals they are not consciously aware of the many ways that their practice models

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<sup>324</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva, 1999), 42-43.

faith for others. Oman and Thoresen call this practice *spiritual modeling*, which they argue

Expresses the idea that people may grow spiritually by imitating the life or conduct of one of one's spiritual exemplars, whether the exemplar is a member of their own family or community, or the exalted founder or mystic of a world religion. Central to spiritual modeling phenomena is what we term *observational spiritual learning*, that is, the learning of spiritually relevant skills or behaviors through observing other persons.<sup>325</sup>

Many research participants confirmed that they grew spiritually by observing and imitating their faith mentors, who had unconsciously modeled exemplary faith practices. Thurman brought this perception of experience into reality by naming the disciplines of the spirit, which often escape naming. In his list, he included commitment, growing in wisdom and stature, and suffering. He reminds us that spiritual practice consists not only of deliberate attempts to connect with God and others spiritually, but also in the day-to-day activities of living out one's life.

Asserting that such practices constitute the manner that Christians are called to be the church, Dykstra says

They are, likewise, practices that place people in touch with God's redemptive activity, that put us where life in Christ may be made known, recognized, experienced, and participated in. They are means of grace, the human places in which and through which God's people come to faith and grow to maturity in the life of faith.<sup>326</sup>

The faith exemplars in the study may not have used this exact language when describing their faith practices, yet it was clear that they were seeking God's redemptive activity. Each was on a pilgrimage to that place where faith finds its resting place, that place where one communes with the triune God, and that place where the community of faith

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<sup>325</sup> Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 13, no. 3 (2003): 150.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

lives out its sacred calling as it dwells in the faithful promises of God. Each step along this sojourn supports the “religious vitality”<sup>327</sup> essential for exemplary faith to grow and deepen.

### *Faith Practices*

Prayer and bible study were the most prevalent forms of faith practices amongst the participants. Each cited prayer as a faith-sustaining spiritual discipline. Their prayers included petitions for help and guidance, praise and rejoicing, and gratitude for God’s continual presence. Several reported reading the Bible daily. Lynn said that she and her husband read the Bible in its entirety every year, so the readings are a continual source of personal growth for them. Being in support groups stood out as a source of spiritual encouragement and renewal for the participants. In such groups, persons share intimate stories, and find encouragement and partnership while participating in the joys and struggles of each other’s lives.

In some instances, the faith practices resided on the border of spiritual formation and vocational identity. One participant was thoroughly immersed in activities of the church and preparing for a life of ministry. For her, faith practices were not only a means of drawing closer to God and the community of faith, they were also her primary avenue to her second career, or calling. Others beyond retirement age continued laboring in the vineyards of faith as though they were realizing a second career. Others still were on the border of formation and vocation, securely engaged in God’s call upon their lives, but openly seeking God’s perfect will while participating in the faith disciplines of their choosing.

### Theological Reflection

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<sup>327</sup> Moschella, 195.

In an essay titled “Practicing Imagination,” Marshall offers a theological framework that bridges our reflection on faith practices with meaning-making. Similar to meaning making, imagination is that part of our awareness that “enables us to picture people, places, and occurrences that are not immediately present or accessible to us through the senses.”<sup>328</sup> It is a visioning process that moves us beyond the present moment and creates a sense of that experience. Marshall argues that there is a prophetic element of imagination that “emphasizes sight beyond experience.”<sup>329</sup> This language provides a theological perspective for understanding meaning making. Prophetic imagination enables faith exemplars to reflect theologically upon their experience and assign alternative meanings “which both critique the present and inspire agency.”<sup>330, 331</sup> Such a reframing is particularly important for those for whom hope is fragile. Claiming a prophetic posture in the midst of marginalized experience empowers persons to rise above the vicissitudes of life and “challenge those pieces of reality that have become absolutized.”<sup>332</sup> Thus, meaning-making envisioned through the lens of imagination has the capacity of transforming the seemingly concretized understandings of life experiences into more fluid visions of how the life of faith can be lived out. Just as prophets of the Christian narrative experienced transformation of their own lives in marginalized communities, so can modern-day persons experience such transformation on their way to experiencing exemplary faith.

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<sup>328</sup> Ellen Ott Marshall, “Practicing Imagination,” in *Choosing Peace Through Daily Practices* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 67.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>331</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). This use of this term and the title of this text are entirely coincidental.

<sup>332</sup> Marshall, 70.

It should be noted that the use of prophetic imagination is not limited to marginalized persons or others with fragile hope. This modality is useful in all contexts of meaning-making, and therefore, pastoral theologians and pastoral caregivers alike should creatively seek out ways to appropriate it. Pastoral theologian Edward Wimberly reinforces this position by acknowledging the *symbolic functions* of spirituality, or “the ways that communal narratives, metaphors, and *images* bring meaning and purpose to the lives of their members.”<sup>333</sup> Prophetic imagination can be viewed as having a symbolic function of assisting persons to better interpret dominant narratives within Christian experience which enables them “to fashion for themselves a spirituality that gives meaning to their lives.”<sup>334</sup>

### *Meaning-Making*

Significantly, each person employed the language of faith when explaining how he or she made meaning. They immediately used God-language in their responses when discerning meaning in major life events. Just as their core and faith narratives were intertwined, so were their methods of finding meaning and purpose in their lives. The study showed that faith practices are a means of making-meaning. When struggling with decisions, the faith exemplars prayed, meditated, fasted, and attended prayer groups as a means of discerning God’s message of meaning.

We note that the questionnaire was not an instrument specifically designed to measure Kegan’s categories of knowing. However, as reported earlier, the respondents’ answers generally fell into one of the following categories: interpersonal and institutional

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<sup>333</sup> Edward Wimberly, “The Family Context of Development: African American Families,” in *Human Development and Faith: Life-Cycle Stages of Body, Mind, and Soul*, ed. Felicity B. Kelcourse (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 118.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*



knowing. Six respondents appeared to be interpersonal knowers. Their responses indicated embeddedness in interpersonal relationships. In the interpersonal stage, individuals are subject to their relationships. For example, Pearl stated that her faith is a “part of her.” This indicated that her faith is subject. Persons in this grouping were largely growing towards *becoming* self-authors.

Four respondents exhibited definite characteristics of institutional knowers, or persons who make relationships object. Their responses suggested reflection upon their life situations and *managing* aspects of their faith experience rather than being managed by it. Larry, for example, denied being a “recruiter” for the faith, but saw his purpose as “to be a role model, live a certain life, be honest and fair, treat people right, and be helpful to people.” Another example is Maggie’s recollection of a period when “I wasn’t able to get from the Bible what I guess I needed at the time to grow.” She then began using secular materials and returned to growing in faith. The persons in this grouping were already acting as self-authors and moving towards *becoming* self-transformational. Such distinctions between the participants’ modes of meaning-making illustrate the developmental theory supporting this research.

## CONCLUSION

The research demonstrated that faith exemplars’ identity is highly relational, characterized by purposeful and intentional engagement in a variety of faith practices, and more likely to flourish and deepen when persons are situated in a supportive and nurturing community. Each participant had a wealth of rich narratives that described growing into his or her identity as a child of God and developing a lasting trust in God’s promises. Throughout the interviews, the participants shared recollections of events that

were marked by exceptional resilience that enabled them to cope with the difficulties, or vicissitudes, of life.

Theological themes prominent throughout the interviews included relationality, providence, faithfulness (alignment with God's will), and hope. At the forefront of the exemplars' experiences in the life of faith was their deep, abiding relationship with God. This was grounded in their confidence that God's purposive action was on behalf of all creation, to include their lives, intentions, and calling to serve God and others. Part of the ongoing Christian obligation of persons of faith is the faithful alignment with God's will. The participants were dedicated to this aspect of their Christian calling. All of these elements converged in the lives of each faith exemplar to create a solidified sense of hopefulness that reached beyond the immediate future into a transcendent horizon where all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PASTORAL CARE WITH GROWING FAITH EXEMPLARS**

The previous chapters of this research laid out the foundation for understanding the trajectory of exemplary faith. The theological context of faith development was established through the exploration of Thurman's mystical theology and Lester's framework for transfinite hope. Together, these perspectives advanced our understanding of how faith exemplars structure their relationship with God and develop confidence in God's promises. Distinctive emphases included the dynamics of faith, relational components of the faithing process, supporting and nurturing faith practices, and the influence of community. The research appropriated Kegan's developmental theory and demonstrated how the self evolves as an agent of meaning-making.

This chapter will demonstrate how pastoral caregivers can participate in the aforementioned process with care-receivers. First, it examines how pastoral caregivers can create a context (sacred space) for pastoral care with persons growing in faith. Included is a discussion on compassionate listening, hospitality, and initiating pastoral conversations about relating to God. The chapter then explores core faith narratives and offers strategies for developing pastoral care skills that encourage meaning-making. Then, the chapter focuses on caregivers nurturing their own faith development by being intentional about ongoing spiritual formation and self-care. Through each of these sections, there is emphasis on using solution-focused pastoral counseling skills that enable care-seekers to better discern core narratives and make meaning from religious experience. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and study.

#### **Helping Persons Explore Their Relationship with God**

## Establishing Space and Covenant

Pastoral caregivers create a sacred space for offering care by attending to the covenantal nature of relationships. The covenant implies a sacred agreement between two or more persons and God. As caregivers, we must recognize “the privilege of receiving another person’s trust”<sup>335</sup> and respond accordingly. Highlighting the necessity for creating space, Freedman and Combs insist that many people show up for counseling because “there is not a legitimate space for their stories.”<sup>336</sup> Effective pastoral caregiving acknowledges this situation by paying attention to the relational aspects of care. Anderson and Goolishian call this “inviting people into a dialogical space.”<sup>337</sup> When two or more persons gather together in a space to discuss life concerns in a pastoral setting, they implicitly enter into a covenantal relationship.

To create space, caregivers should pay attention to three components in covenantal relationships. In her work with women in lesbian relationships, pastoral theologian Joretta Marshall argues that covenantal partnerships are grounded in love, justice, and mutuality. I argue here that these are essential aspects of care for *all* people, especially those searching for meaning and a better understanding of their core narratives. Persons seeking space for this kind of work open themselves up to examine how God meets them at their core. Therefore, utmost sensitivity is demanded. According to Marshall, love is important because it establishes a “sense of security” and it “fosters partners to reach out to others.”<sup>338</sup> When opening a space for pastoral conversation to

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<sup>335</sup> Howard W. Stone, *Theological Context for Pastoral Caregiving: Word in Deed* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>336</sup> Mary Frances Schneider, “A Narrative Dialogue: An Interview with Jill Freedman and Gene Combs,” *Journal of Individual Psychology* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 418.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>338</sup> Joretta L. Marshall, “Covenants and Partnerships: Pastoral Counseling with Women in Lesbian Relationships” (Work in Progress), *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 5, no. (Summer 1995), 88. [81-93]

flourish, a sense of security cannot be overestimated. Care-receivers are more likely to partner and participate fully, or reach out, if they sense their stories will be received appropriately and with care.

The second component of covenantal relationships is justice. Often an unspoken element of relationships, justice is concerned with the equitable handling and sharing of power and resources. Persons expect justice in their partnerships, but typically do not discuss justice issues until someone in relationship perceives an injustice. Caregivers can better insure that justice is perceived in pastoral relationships by being mindful of “qualities such as honesty, openness, courage, and fortitude.”<sup>339</sup> These qualities can be modeled during pastoral conversation and can be acknowledged by the caregiver as they are demonstrated by care-receivers. Affirming positive behaviors not only brings them to persons’ awareness, it is also a way of facilitating transformation in persons’ lives. An excerpt from an exemplar’s interview illustrates this from a practical perspective. That is, by following her pastor’s example, she began listening for God’s voice in her own life in a way that generated significant faith and health consequences.

My pastor, at the time, had experienced chest pain and had gone in to have a mammogram. She said hers turned out fine; she was okay. But, because of her response to the Holy Spirit and her obedience to the Holy Spirit, she said to me, “You need to go in and get checked.” Well, it was the end of September and beginning of October and I told her, “I’m not due for my physical until January. I’ll go then.” She said, “No, you need to go now.” And it was because of God, her obedience and my obedience to her, that the cancer was even discovered. Because it wasn’t a lump that was felt or anything. The doctor told me it would have been a year maybe two years later before a lump would have been found.

The final component of covenantal relationships is mutuality. This research has argued for the essential nature of mutuality. Marshall argues that concerning relationality, mutuality is comprised of “finding reciprocal ways of holding one another accountable in

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

the relationship, experiencing mutual ways of being vulnerable with one another, and exploring what it means to participate in relationships of mutual fidelity.”<sup>340</sup> Each component is vitally important for creating a sacred space for pastoral conversation. Reciprocity and accountability suggest both caregiver and care-receiver are in the relationship together and imply a give and take. Recognizing vulnerability acknowledges that one is opening up and rendering oneself to judgment by others. Thus, being vulnerable is an act of courage that demands special care and consideration. Participating with fidelity is a call to truthfulness and sincerity. With these components in place, a sacred space is created for caregiving. Also, space is created by extending hospitality.

### Hospitality

Helping persons explore God’s will for their lives as they grow in faith is an act of hospitality. Pastoral theologian Archie Smith, Jr. defines hospitality as “the cordial, warm or generous reception of, or disposition toward, guests or strangers.”<sup>341</sup> This definition affirms pastoral care with growing faith exemplars because as caregivers we model hospitality to persons who come to share their stories of being with God, who has generously received us as guests through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We invite others to participate in a deep and abiding relationship with God.

Smith appropriates Luke’s parable of the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes his feet with her hair, and anoints them with ointment to examine the implications of hospitality. (Luke 7:36-50) The woman is portrayed by Jesus as a person

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Archie Smith, Jr., “Hospitality: A Spiritual Resource for Building Community,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 140.

of exemplary faith because she had little to give, except her faith in him, in exchange for him forgiving her sins. She gave gratefully and cordially to Jesus. Moreover, she gave out of love for Christ because he had forgiven her. Jesus could have rejected her, so Smith highlights that the risks persons accept when extending hospitality, such as encountering others who are unappreciative of such acts, demand that hospitable persons have courage. One also needs sensitivity (or compassion) to others' needs to extend hospitality. Smith argues that persons typically respond favorably to hospitality.

Extending hospitality invites community, argues Smith, as persons become aware of their "situation before God, experience forgiveness, and hospitality as an expression of joy and gratitude."<sup>342</sup> The sense of community between caregiver and care-receiver promotes telling narratives, discerning meaning in persons' lives, and deepening faith. Such activity occurs in community as persons experience personal agency and accountability for one another. In such an environment, people develop agency with increased "capacity for language and purposeful activity."<sup>343</sup> In Smith's words

As a moral agent, one has the capacity for self-control, to think, work with others, make decisions, evaluate self, change harmful behavior, anticipate consequences, effect beneficial change. Interdebtedness and interdependence upon others is recognized as *co-creating worlds of meaning*.<sup>344</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Hospitality is vitally important for developing faith through exploring core narratives. Smith's argument is significant for the case here because it links hospitality, agency, and meaning-making as components of exemplary faith which can be appropriated between caregiver and care-receivers as they co-create new futures.

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

Privileging care-receivers' responses is a means of extending hospitality and compassion to the care-receiver. Compassionate listening informs the care-receiver that his or her narrative is being taken seriously. In counseling theory, this is known as acknowledging the client as "expert" on his or her life. This is significant because without this orientation caregivers can easily fall into the trap of acting as experts. Combs and Freedman argue this point saying, "We are born into beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of interacting constrain the possibilities that we can perceive."<sup>345</sup> One constraining assumption is that caregivers are expert. The pastoral caregiver *is* a specialist trained in the language of faith, yet maintaining willingness to privilege the client's "expert" perspective enables collaboration with the client to make sense of God's movement in the client's life. Pastoral theologian Nancy Gorsuch reinforces this argument saying

In many instances, careseekers also bring an operative theology of God to bear in their situation of need and are invited to explore their understanding of God's presence and activity in collaboration with the caregiver. In this collaborative conversation, the traditional language of faith, which characterizes God in terms of love, sovereignty, grace, judgment, and the like, may serve purposes of care and counseling quite well.<sup>346</sup>

This collaborative effort demonstrates hospitality.

Another way of looking at this important dynamic is that pastoral caregivers offer hospitality by allowing the care-receiver the opportunity to explore alternative meanings of experience that might have been discounted or totally dismissed by others. VanKatwyk argues "Not only [is the client] expert on the problem, the client also has the inner

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<sup>345</sup> Schneider, 418.

<sup>346</sup> Nancy J. Gorsuch, *Introducing Feminist Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 55-56.



wisdom and courage to come to insights and solutions.”<sup>347</sup> Accepting the client’s experience of God as valid, although different, welcomes that unique experience into the community of care in a powerful and transformative way. Freedman and Combs argue that “if somebody decides that he or she prefers a different kind of story and a different set of values for his or her life, it is quite difficult for that story to stay alive and to feel like a valid choice unless it is treated as valued by at least a few people.”<sup>348</sup> In the work of meaning making, pastoral caregivers can be one of the few who honor their covenant with clients by affirming alternative stories and helping keep those stories alive. Together, caregiver and client “work collaboratively in entertaining novel perspectives and unthought-of possibilities.”<sup>349</sup> We now return to the importance of listening.

### Compassionate Listening

Careful attention to listening introduces an element of transcendence into pastoral conversations. Pastoral theologian Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger puts it this way:

Since they aim to intercede on the other’s behalf, caregivers strain to hear the inarticulate longings beneath the needs that are expressed. They endeavor to deepen the other’s connection with himself so that he might bring all of himself—his joys and sorrows, his fears and doubts, his gratitude, regret and lament before God.<sup>350</sup>

The caregiver is called to multitask as she draws closer to the speaker while listening to the speaker’s story *and* by paying explicit attention to the details as she (the caregiver) draws both herself and the care-receiver closer to God. Hunsinger continues, “Caregivers

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<sup>347</sup> Peter L. VanKatwyk, “Therapy Talk and Therapeutic Conversations: The Formation of Pastoral Counselors,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 380.

<sup>348</sup> Schneider, 420.

<sup>349</sup> VanKatwyk, 380.

<sup>350</sup> Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, “Paying Attention: the art of listening,” *Christian Century* 123, no. 17 (August 22, 2006): 24.

listen to everything being said in the light of God's purpose and calling."<sup>351</sup> Essentially, the caregiver is interceding on behalf of the care-receiver in God's presence.

Caregivers initiate their pastoral conversations and counseling by engaging in *compassionate listening*. Compassionate listening involves active listening, but is distinguished by paying attention to the care-receiver's language about God and how he or she perceives God moving in his or her life. It is compassionate because it prioritizes the speaker's language system and perception. The caregiver deliberately attempts to assist the care-receiver to identify and magnify God's unnoticed activity in the care-receiver's life.

A working assumption here originates in Romans 8, which reminds us "in all things *God works* for the good of those who love him" (v. 28). The emphasis points beyond human efforts to show that God is always working on our behalf. By illuminating God's activity in the life of the client, the caregiver brings the theological context to the foreground of the conversation. Identifying God's movement as a sign of providence can help the client develop a greater capacity for theological reflection as meaning is assigned. Also, grounding listening in providence reinforces the understanding that God is involved in this vital pastoral counseling activity.

Compassionate listening also emphasizes relationality within the therapeutic relationship. By listening with special intent and encouraging the care-receiver's narrative to unfold, caregivers can model compassionate listening. Sharing some of the caregiver's own story of listening for God further establishes relationality. In other words, compassionate listening involves a degree of reciprocity as the caregiver demonstrates that God is listening, too. Theologian Roberta Bondi says, "If I want a real

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

relationship with God, I have to tell him [*sic*] what's going on...As with any relationship, you don't know in advance how it's going to turn out. You just do it, you make yourself accessible so you're prepared to receive grace when it comes."<sup>352</sup> Offering a personal narrative of how God spoke to her through the church, Alley says in her own words

It also encouraged and lifted up specific gifts the members perceived in me. I received notes complimenting my speaking ability and my enthusiasm, or offering appreciation for my willingness to serve...Members asked me verbally and in writing whether I was considering the ministry as a vocation...[e]ven though ordained ministry was not the primary direction that I was exploring.<sup>353</sup>

Such personal sharing on the part of the caregiver emphasizes relationality and encourages the care-receiver's story to flourish. Furthermore, engaging care-receivers through this degree of relationality strengthens the covenant between each other and the therapeutic bond.

Finally, compassionate listening demands energy, or what theologian William Placher calls energetic listening. Referring to Robertson Davies, he says "To instruct calls for energy, and to remain almost silent, but watchful and helpful, while students instruct themselves, calls for even greater energy."<sup>354</sup> As Placher stresses the need for listening as a core element of teaching, this research encourages energetic listening for the process of discerning meaning-making, also. Caregivers exert energy to remain silent, yet are watchful and helpful, as care-receivers appropriate lessons in faith as they make meaning of their experience of God. Compassionate listening is demanding in this sense. It is an act of giving of the self while in the presence of another. Having established the

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<sup>352</sup> As quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward, "Is God Listening," *Newsweek* 129, no. 13 (March 31, 1997): 58.

<sup>353</sup> Linetta S. Alley, "Listening for God's Call in One's Life," *Brethren Life and Thought* 46, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2001): 145.

<sup>354</sup> William Placher, "Teaching Moments," *Christian Century* 122, no. 4 (February 22, 2005): 22.

framework for compassionate listening, we now shift attention to the actual conversation on the speaker's relationship with God.

### Starting the Conversation

Two questions propel the conversation regarding the person's relationship with God. The first one is, "How do you see God working in your life?" The second question is, "What do you believe is God's will for your life?" These two questions provide foundation for the pastoral care and meaning-making. As faith exemplars know, "God works in mysterious ways." Caregivers, therefore, can listen for subtle clues of God's handiwork in a care-receiver's narrative. Small clues will eventually point towards more significant events that the care-receiver can identify as God's mysterious action.

It is important that caregivers help the care-receiver develop answers with as many details as possible. This helps solidify the narrative and makes God's movement a personal reality rather than existing only in the person's imagination. Ezekiel 37 is a pericope that provides a guiding metaphor for this step of compassionate listening. God tells Ezekiel, "I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord" (v. 6). Caregivers can breathe life and help care-receivers put "tendons and flesh" on their core faith narratives using this pastoral care approach of listening and guiding.

### **Exploring Core Faith Narratives**

#### Finding Meaning

The second task of helping persons explore their relationship with God and grow in faith involves identifying core faith narratives and expanding them to discover *meaning*. The core faith narrative is the care-receiver's primary story of relating to God

over the course of his or her life. In a traditional life review, one looks back and reflects on life while searching for significant events without regard to faith. The distinguishing feature for pastoral care, however, is emphasis on faith elements in the care-receiver's narrative. By searching the care-receiver's core narrative for God's footprints, the evidence of faith will rise to the surface. The caregiver can focus this conversation by asking a question such as "How have you experienced God guiding you?" Then concentrate on meaning-making by asking "What do you make of your experience?" or "Describe when you sensed God was present in your experience?" Asking the care-receiver to describe her experience with God moves the pastoral conversation beyond life review in the direction of faith.

### Productive Questions

Hunsinger argues that caregivers can expand their pastoral conversations by asking *productive* questions. This "involves the ability to ask both questions that are open-ended, which serve to elicit further sharing, and questions that are essentially closed, which serve to clarify meaning."<sup>355</sup> Though the emphasis remains on listening, the caregiver hones in on specific aspects of the narrative to expand it more fully. The open-ended questions serve as a tool for eliciting broader responses and bringing forth details that are easily overlooked. When the broader responses are offered, according to Hunsinger, "it is helpful to notice when a person offers free information—that is information beyond what is specifically requested."<sup>356</sup> Caregivers should also be prepared to ask several questions before getting free information because building trust usually requires the extra time. Unlike the interviewing techniques observed in popular culture,

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<sup>355</sup> Hunsinger, 25.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

where every response is intense and transparent, the listening and responding described here requires patience and skill that develops over time with practice.

Productive questions take into consideration that what a person thinks she says and what she actually says may leave gaps in the narrative. There will also be gaps in perception between speaker and caregiver. While sharing a narrative, the caregiver may get confused and need deeper levels of clarification when the speaker is unclear. The following example from Hunsinger can be appropriated for a pastoral conversation on meaning-making.

If a colleague says, for example, “I didn’t like the way everyone was talking about changing the curriculum at the meeting the other night,” several things might need clarification. Which meeting is he referring to? Whom does he mean by his reference to ‘everyone’? To which specific comments did he object... Focused (or closed) questions would help elicit the specific, concrete information needed for understanding. They would elicit particulars of the story in terms of place, time, persons involved, and his concrete reactions to what occurred.<sup>357</sup>

All of the particulars are important when a speaker recounts experiences with God and makes meaning of the experiences. As the speaker reflects on the caregiver’s productive questions and answers with more details, he or she can begin fleshing out the narrative and eventually better discern God’s will. Also important for the process, the caregiver will gain more confidence that his or her efforts to listen compassionately are yielding sought after results.

### Follow-Up Questions

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 29.

Follow-up questions revolve around how the care-receiver *knows* his or her experience reflects the movement of God. The intent is to help the care-receiver develop confidence in the truthfulness and validity of his or her *own* experiences.

Q. I'm wondering whether you consider yourself a mentor for other people, a mentor in faith, a faith mentor of some sort. Reverend Steele said that you are a person of deep faith and mature faith. Have you begun to see yourself as one who mentors other people in the Christian faith?

A. Well, I'm not sure. I'm not one to go out and solicit people to come in. I just try to be a positive example in some of what I do that may be attractive.

Q. What about, say, encouraging people?

A. Yes, I encourage people. And I encourage them to pray. I encourage people to have faith and believe, but I don't campaign .

Eventually, confidence will grow as a natural extension of the care-receiver's identity and personhood. These questions can be used during the initial or subsequent session(s).

When you told that story, you used the word \_\_\_\_; what does it mean to you?

When you try that, what happens?

How did you manage that?

What made you think of that strategy?

What do you think might happen if you maintain this course for the next week, month, etc.?

What can we talk about that might help you maintain the progress you've made?

What would you say has been the most helpful part of our conversations in the past?<sup>358</sup>

The caregiver's primary task remains listening compassionately as the client shares the narrative. Remaining curious about the narrative also helps one remain hospitable and relational.

### **Discovering Meaning in Experience**

The caregiver and care-receiver collaborate to explore meaning-making. The line of questions helps the care-giver bring the meaning-making process to client's awareness and take ownership of the meaning. One working assumption is that as a person tells her

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<sup>358</sup> Glenn E. Boyd, "Pastoral Counseling: Relational Listening and Open-Ended Questions," *Pastoral Psychology* 51, no. 5 (May 2003): 358-359.

story, she will begin “making connections for herself.”<sup>359</sup> Questions enable the pastoral caregiver to highlight structure and significance in the client’s meaning. As caregivers, our role is “to be there as these meanings unfold and to help her appreciate this story in all its depth.”<sup>360</sup> A goal is to keep questions open-ended and continue extending hospitality.

### Continuing the Conversation

The caregiver can expand this conversation by asking a question such as “How have you experienced God *guiding* you?” Then concentrate on meaning-making by asking “What do you make of your experience?” or “How do you make sense of your experience?” By encouraging the care-receiver to describe his experience of God and associate meaning to the experience, the caregiver participates in meaning-making. Caregivers will increase their effectiveness by aiming their questions at “the level of interpretation.”<sup>361</sup> In other words, concentrate on the care-receiver’s interpretation of events. As the care-receiver responds to questions, the caregiver can ask more questions that might spur meaning and enlist the care-receiver “in a mutual process of interpretation, but it amounts to asking her [counselee] to join him [counselor] in taking a perspective on her experience.”<sup>362</sup> By hospitably encouraging new perspectives, the caregiver furthers the strategy for the care-receiver to construct meaning.

### The Multistoried Nature of Persons

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<sup>359</sup> Hunsinger, 425.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), 279.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.



Another working assumption of meaning-making is that persons are multistoried, that is, “having experienced many events that meaning could come from”<sup>363</sup> and can derive multiple meanings from any singular event. When persons present themselves to a pastoral caregiver to discuss how God is involved in their experience, they may not realize the multiple possibilities that exist in their narratives. Through the act of asking questions, the caregiver can collaborate to help some of the multiple possibilities come into the light so that meaning can be discerned. Similarly, as pastoral caregivers become more experienced in making meaning in their own lives and recognize the many events from which meaning comes, they will deepen their own faith stories and experiences of God.

Knowing that people are multistoried and maintaining the therapeutic posture that persons are experts in their own lives instills confidence in the meaning-making process. Narrative therapist and author David Epston illustrates this with a story about a client who had an ongoing medical problem. The client’s mother gave him a dog, which Epston used as the focus of his questions, paying attention to the relational aspects between client and dog. As the boy began shifting his attention to the relational story concerning the dog, his illness ceased. Epston pointed out that amongst persons’ stories “there’s always a dog.”<sup>364</sup> Pastoral caregivers know there’s always God! Often it is a matter of looking for God amongst the multiple stories in the client’s experience with God and helping the client privilege his own experience and meaning of that experience above the meaning of others.

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<sup>363</sup> Schneider, 427.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

### A Relational Model of Listening

We will now reconsider the act of listening for the meaning-making process in pastoral care by expanding upon the skills discussed in the earlier section using Boyd's relational model of listening. This also builds upon the work of the self-in-relation theorists in earlier chapters. In Boyd's model, the caregiver is a listener, or a self-in-relation to the speaker. The self-in-relation is a "continually listening self."<sup>365</sup> Being in-relation encourages a mutual appreciation for the other's perspective and affirms the speaker's story and way of making meaning. Instead of judging the listener, the caregiver offers grace through acceptance.

Listening as a self-in-relation privileges the speaker's perspective as the authority on the situation and changes the relationship, according to Boyd, as the caregiver refrains from challenging the speaker. This is important in helping a person make meaning because the line of thought presented by the speaker may lead to an entirely different conclusion than anticipated by the caregiver. Maintaining the capacity to be a self-in-relation builds respect into the process and initiates "a relationship of discovery-in-safety"<sup>366</sup> whereby the speaker finds more freedom to explore a core narrative.

### Cause-and-Effect

It is valuable to consider causation, or cause-and-effect. By tuning one's ears to hidden cause-and-effect within a care-receiver's story, the caregiver can help uncover instances where factual data can be used to explain meaning. For example, when a parishioner is exploring grief related to a spouse's death, often there is a natural desire to know what the death means or what God is saying to the surviving spouse through the

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<sup>365</sup> Boyd, 353.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 354.

loss. There are infinite possibilities to such queries. However, it is within the pastoral caregiver's authority to also explore the *cause* of death as a means of answering the query. Perhaps, the deceased spouse was a heavy smoker and the surviving spouse took a stance against the smoking. The caregiver may want to explore feelings and thoughts related to the deceased spouse's refusal to quit smoking. Amongst the feelings may be anger, resentment, disappointment, helplessness, and frustration with God for allowing the addiction to occur, etc. All of these feelings and thoughts can help the spouse make a guided reflection upon past experience in order to make meaning and find significance in the loss.

### Future Stories

Lester suggests exploring future stories as a means of nurturing hope. Future stories also point to meaning-making since the future guides the present. Pastoral caregivers will find clues about the care-receiver's meaning-making by listening to responses to questions such as the following:

What do you think life will be like for you in five years?  
What do you anticipate if things do not change?  
What are you most worried about?<sup>367</sup>

Each of these questions directs the care-receiver's attention to the future. They alert the caregiver to the meaning already formed. It may be appropriate, but not necessary, to point out to the care-receiver that she has *constructed* meaning (versus discovered latent meaning) so that she can become aware of her own process.

### Attention to Problematic Narratives

It is important that the caregivers be alert to core faith narratives that are based on unhealthy or problematic assumptions. Under such circumstances, the caregiver should

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<sup>367</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 108.

be prepared to challenge the faulty assumptions, a process known as *deconstruction*, and begin the task of helping the care-receiver re-examine those assumptions so that new narratives can be created. This process is known as *reconstruction*. Reconstructing narratives does not equate to fixing the narrative. It is a means of helping clients discover alternative experiences and re-focus their attention and discover meaning. Freedman says

There are a lot of other experiences [people in therapy] have lived that could be available to them—stories that they could tell and, in the telling, make meaning of. The new meaning could lead in very different directions...Telling the stories of those events would lead to different ideas about who they are as people and about what is possible for them.<sup>368</sup>

When listening for core narratives, caregivers should also be aware of *other faith experiences* that clients can attend to that might lead in new directions. Those stories will help the client find different ideas about who she or he is as a person of faith.

The key, according to Combs, is “to look for as-yet-untold stories”<sup>369</sup> for the potential they hold. The writer has discovered that persons often have stories that have been overlooked or thought to be insignificant. Such stories when told in relation to a problematic narrative can have a healing effect. Helping persons discern and attend to these alternative stories is a way of putting a new perspective on a problematic narrative so that new meaning, and therefore, a new narrative can emerge.

Caregivers can ask certain types of questions to help elicit accounts of experiences that lead to new narratives. These questions are asked in a way that invites the client to draw on his or her qualities and faith skills that have been overlooked or overshadowed by the problematic narratives. For example, “How would your relationship with God be if you didn’t have this problem?” Or “If someone new in the faith came to

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<sup>368</sup> Schneider, 426.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 427.

you for guidance, what personal qualities in yourself would you draw upon?” Combs and Freedman encourage caregivers to draw upon the client’s everyday experience for such questions, when possible. Persons continuously experience events in their daily lives that eventually become storied. While the events are real, and not stories, we organize the events into stories to better understand them and “these stories make it possible for us to reflect on our experience and make choices that shape our lives.”<sup>370</sup> Faith exemplars all tell stories that have been pulled together from experiences in the life of faith. Their faith is exemplary due to their ability to reflect (theologically), continually re-examine who they are before God, and make choices that they discern are within God’s will. Caregivers attending to core narratives, problematic or otherwise, have the opportunity to create space so such decisions can be made.

#### Reciprocity in Meaning-Making

Boyd’s re-imagining of listening as a relational experience acknowledges reciprocity in pastoral caregiving. While the listener is tasked with helping the speaker, the self-in-relation model reminds us that caregivers benefit because listening also helps us hear ourselves. In Boyd’s words

After a year of full-time pastoral counseling, I realized that the one who benefited most from listening to clients was me. When they dealt with their disappointment, grief, anger, or fear, I was helped to deal with my own. By allowing myself to venture into their reality, I could not help exposing myself to my own reality. I learned something from every one of my clients. The speaker’s story always touches the listener’s story in some way.<sup>371</sup>

Similarly, Combs reports that the relational aspect of counseling “gives meaning to *my* life when I hear [a] story unfold.”<sup>372</sup> This caregiving perspective encapsulates what it

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>371</sup> Lester, *Hope*, 108.

<sup>372</sup> Schneider, 426.

means to be a self-in-relation by portraying the humanity and honesty needed to care authentically for another. Recognizing the common points between one's own core narrative with those of the other breaks down barriers and allows relationality to flourish. Later, we will explore in more detail the importance of attending to caregivers' own narratives.

### Developing Faith Skills

Growing in the life of faith is an acquirable skill. Persons can become competent in faith skills just as they become competent in other life skills. *Faith skills* are competencies in trusting God to deliver on God's promises, staying engaged in vital, faith-affirming relationships, and maintaining hopefulness over time. The faith exemplars in this study grew into their faith identity by practicing their faith with specifically chosen spiritual disciplines. The more they practiced, the deeper their faith became. Over time, their method of making meaning also evolved so that meaning reflected their faith in God.

This research identified several key faith practices of faith exemplars. These include, but are not limited to: learning to identify God's activity, identifying God's will, building confidence that one will make it through difficult times, learning to work through suffering, and increasing one's capacity to sustain transfinite hope in God.

Just as faith is an open-ended enterprise, developing faith skills is also open-ended. Pastoral caregivers can use their pastoral identity and authority in unlimited ways to help persons discover their unique faith skills. Pastoral counseling strategies that advance developing faith skills include: encouraging relationships that build stronger faith, encouraging practices and spiritual disciplines that secure faith identity, and

suggesting reading and study materials that help persons develop interpersonal skills and discover suitable faith practices. The key is listening compassionately and helping persons flesh out their core faith narratives.

### **Attending to One's Own Ongoing Faith Journey**

One doesn't wake up and suddenly find one's faith is self-authoring or self-transformational. Becoming a self-authoring or self-transformational person of faith, or faith exemplar, demands continual openness to God's will in one's life. It is an ongoing journey that is sometimes linear, but more often circuitous. This same understanding applies to pastoral theologians, pastoral counselors, and laypersons growing in faith. All of us must tend to our interior lives and be open to the Spirit's movement in us so that we carefully discern God's will for our lives. God's will varies from person-to-person, so all of us with "ears to hear" must listen prayerfully and energetically as God speaks.

### Theological Reflection

As a part of continuing spiritual formation and self-care, this research encourages on-going theological reflection on God's will for one's life. Warren and colleagues support this position by arguing that formation and self-care is best when it is viewed as a habit grounded in theological reflection. They define theological reflection as "a self-conscious, intentional act in which one seeks to know God and be known by God so that one can love God and others as God loves. It is theological because it consciously relates the divine to the human in a way that makes transformation into wholeness possible."<sup>373</sup> This definition is inherently relational with its emphasis on knowing God, being known by God, and its stress on the divine-human encounter. Each of these

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<sup>373</sup> Heather A. Warren, Joan L. Murray, and Mildred M. Best, "The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection," *Journal of Religion and Health* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 324.

components suggests an evolutionary quality to formation and relationality. As caregivers grow in relation with God, they can expect change in their understanding of God's will for their lives. Such reflection, according to Murray, can be on one's personal history, doctrine, liturgy, and scripture. Making theological reflection habitual expands one's openness to God's will, and thereby, supports the self-authoring and self-transformational possibilities that accompany a growing exemplary faith.

Persons may find that God's will for their lives changes over time as they grow and develop in the life of faith. A vocation that was meaningful in one's 20s is likely to become less fulfilling as one grows into one's 30s and beyond. In some cases, vocation and the meaning of life will become more nuanced as persons create families, deal with the vicissitudes of life, and discover joy. Likewise, persons' images of God will change over time as faith matures. This will impact their development of faith skills and their process of meaning-making. Becoming a faith exemplar as a caregiver is, therefore, an ongoing process demanding ongoing theological reflection and engagement in faith practices in order to "become more fully immersed in and articulate about the relationality of life, especially the relation between God and people and people with each other."<sup>374</sup>

### Spiritual Practices

The caregiver's faith journey will continually evolve and take on new dimensions as caregivers engage in sustaining spiritual practices and/or discern new practices that help them know God and be known by God. Practices, like theological reflection, should also become habitual. By habit, we mean the sense of acting "in a

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 326.



nearly involuntary way and in the ontological sense as a way of being<sup>375</sup> as one grows and matures in faith. Caregivers that intentionally develop a habit of spiritual practice do not necessarily insure they will become faith exemplars; however, intentional practice is a means of positioning oneself to recognize and know God's voice when God speaks. This is vitally important when trying to discern God's will for one's life.

### Community

It is essential that caregivers who are serious about attending to their own inner lives and furthering their faith formation be part of a community that nurtures such formation. Caregivers need a community of similarly-situated caregivers that can act in a supportive manner, hold each other accountable, provide feedback on pastoral caregiving, and offer prayer and other forms of spiritual support. Many clergy belong to such spiritual networks as a part of their ongoing denominational, academic, or professional commitments. However, for those pastoral caregivers who are not affiliated with such networks of care, seeking out this form of association and support is important so that one can get necessary professional and collegial nurture, and therefore, avoid spiritual burnout or other forms of spiritual decline. Pastoral theologian Sondra Matthaëi argues persuasively for this form of care saying

The aim of faith formation is deepening relationship with God, what some would call "spirituality," and the faithful witness through word and action that grows out of this relationship. Through this relationship with God, persons are transformed to a life of loving God's creation, including oneself and others. While the faith community's efforts do not cause this transformation, they provide the environment and opportunities for lives to be transformed by God through the process of faith formation.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>376</sup> Sondra Higgins Matthaëi, "Rethinking Faith Formation," *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 57.

Pastoral caregivers need a community of care that facilitates ongoing faith formation even if that is not the primary reason for gathering. For example, participating in a covenant group of other caregivers who use their time together as a support group will encourage theological reflection. On the other hand, working with a spiritual director or spiritual mentor is a more direct way of insuring communal support, even though the caregiver is working one-on-one. God is present when “*two or more*” are gathered. These means of forming community take seriously the notion that “they *provide the environment and opportunities* for lives to be “transformed by God.” [Emphasis added.] Smith encourages caregivers to continue struggling through our faith journey as we discern ways to “increase awareness of our situation before God.”<sup>377</sup> Struggling with such spiritual issues, he argues, provides “an opportunity to travel together and thereby deepen a sense of care within community.”<sup>378</sup> It also helps pastoral caregivers continue on their journey toward an exemplary faith.

### **Areas for Further Research and Study**

The combination of relationality and faith practices deserves further attention and broader application. Howard Thurman’s work in this area is particularly fruitful. This research left much of his corpus untouched. His devotional materials are especially applicable to the areas of pastoral care and spiritual direction. The area of meaning-making has received little examination in the field of pastoral theology. It is an area that is ripe for study in pastoral counseling. This is evidenced by the popularity of such books as *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which helps Christians find meaning in their lives. Because so many religious leaders are using such texts to grow their congregations and develop

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<sup>377</sup> Smith, 149.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

bible study groups, pastoral theologians and caregivers should be alert to the vacuum of meaning in parishioners' lives. Finally, pastoral theologians must continually find ways to apply the lessons of faith exemplars. Their narratives offer universal meaning to persons seeking growth in the life of faith.

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## APPENDIX

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Note concerning transcripts:

These transcripts were conducted condensed, and edited to maintain consistency and readability. All effort was made to maintain faithfulness to the speakers' intent.

## TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview of “Jes” on Friday, September 21, 2007. He is a 78 year-old-black male. This interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. You talk about your life as a Christian. Maybe you can share some early memories that were important to you.

A. Well, in the first place, I would have to say, I don't go to a church, and I'm not deep into the Christianity thing.

Q. You're not?

A. Uh-uh. However, I do believe in the Almighty, you know.

Q. Okay. So do you believe? Can you say when you first start believing in the Almighty?

A. Early on, early on.

Q. Early. At an early age. 14 years old, after 10 years old, 20, 30?

A. Well, something like 20, 30, something like that.

Q. Okay, 20, 30, okay?

A. But, I never did pursue aligning myself with God and the church, you know.

Q. I got it. Any reason for that?

A. Any reason for not aligning myself?

Q. Yes, sir.

A. None particularly. Just did not do it.

Q. Just didn't do it. Okay. Okay. Well, since you have known the Almighty have you had any experiences that have guided you towards the Almighty?



A. Not necessarily. Well, I've had different things that happened to me that had it not been for the Almighty then it would have been much worse.

Q. Much worse. Okay, okay. Any major crises that helped you get through those times?

A. Almighty.

Q. Okay. Can you talk about maybe one of them?

A. Well --

Q. That made you trust God more?

A. -- well, I'll tell you about my experiences with the Dallas Police Department.

Q. Okay.

A. Here I was, 19 years old, a wife, two little bitty children and working. In fact, I was working when this incident happened. So, I'm coming out of this building, and incidentally it was on Jefferson Boulevard. Right up here. So, I went in this building to transact some business for the people I worked with, and on my way out when I came out the front door -- it was during Christmas time. This policeman, young white boy, was walking, you know, to what they called "a beat," and I was in front of him when I came out the door - I was in front of him. So he said to me, "*Hey boy.*" I knew he was talking to me, you know, I resented that. I said, "*Yeah, yeah, what is it man?*" "Where you going?" I said, "*Going back to work.*" He said, "*What's your name?*" I gave him all he asked for, and he said, "*I'll put you in jail.*" I said, "*Put me in jail for what, man? I haven't done anything. What are you going to put me in jail for?*" "*You don't believe it,*" and he grabbed me by the arm, you know, "*come on around here,*" and ushered me or attempted to usher me at the back. To the back of the

building there in the alley. I said, "*You don't have to do that. I'll go around there with you.*"

We walked on around to the back of the building--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. -- and when we get there, he goes in this little building and gets this, this baton, night stick--

Q. Uh-hum.

A. -- and he got me here, in this. So I grabbed his arm. Hell, he couldn't get away.

Q. Uh-huh?

A. I was 19, strong, didn't know how strong I was. So when he saw he couldn't get loose, he cried for some help. "*Hey y'all come over here and help me with this nigger.*" Here come two civilian whites. They broke-in, trucking, they run over there. All three of them went to grabbing me then. One had the arms, one had the legs, and he's on top of me. They wrestled me to the pavement, but he's on top of me. So I reared back some and kicked him off of me, and, when I come, I come up with him. I came up with the policemen, like this. Boy, I tried -- I tried to break every bone in his body. So he pulled his pistol out then--

Q. Oh, okay.

A. -- he said, "*Hey nigger, get back over against the wall.*" He called the paddy wagon. There I was standing there. So the paddy wagon came, and carried me to jail, and they put resisting arrest and aggravated assault on me.

Q. On you? You were just walking down the street?

A. Working.

Q. Working. Okay?

A. So, these people I was working for hired this lawyer. In fact, that's where I had been, in this lawyer's office for some other business. These people were in the real estate -- title -- correct title for your house --

Q. Uh-huh.

A. -- so, this lawyer represented me; he came down to the jail, and secured my bond, freedom. I got out, came on; came on back to work the following day. Each time the case number would come up, the lawyer, my lawyer, would throw it out, you know, like that. That went on for months. So, in the meantime, while all that was going on I got called to the military. That was in 1953 --

Q. Yeah.

A. -- so I go to the military, and do 21 months and get a separation and come back here.

Q. Okay.

A. After I had been here about a month, here this trial comes. You need to appear such and such place at such and such time. The State of Texas versus me--

Q. Right.

A. -- so, I did, but I went and got this lawyer that represented me before. So we got out, go down there and they said, "*Plea guilty and I'll get you out of this mess.*" So I plead guilty. So they followed me on down to the county jail. Where you're going to, you know, the penitentiary then, the last place you go. They fingerprinted me, all that, mug shot. But, I got released from there, cut loose, you know, because I hadn't done anything.

Q. So he got you freed -- I mean you plead guilty?

A. Yeah.

Q. Do you have a record or something like that or did they drop everything, the other charges?

A. Oh yeah, the record is there.

Q. The record is still there?

A. Yeah, but anyway, I got away clean. That lawyer was there.

Q. You think the Almighty had something to do with that?

A. Yeah.

Q. In what way?

A. He hooked me up with them people that I was working with.

Q. The people that you were working with got you the attorney?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay?

A. Because I didn't -- I couldn't represent myself. I didn't have any money.

Q. I see?

A. Yeah. A poor lad myself.

Q. Okay.

A. Nineteen years old.

Q. Must have been a tough time for you.

A. Yeah, wife and two children.

Q. A wife and two children?

A. And they didn't know nothing.

Q. Okay.

A. Rough time, rough time.

Q. Well, since that time how have you pictured the Almighty as part of your life?  
Has it changed? Grown?

A. Well, it's grown, and he allows me to be here. So, you know – I've got a birthday coming next month --

Q. Next month?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. Happy birthday to you.

A. -- blessed me with twenty-five to thirty grandchildren.

Q. Twenty-five to thirty grandchildren?

A. Yeah.

Q. How do you think that God, being in your life these days -- what I'm saying is, how do you see God acting in other people's lives?

A. Well, I really haven't--

Q. Haven't paid attention to that?

A. -- well, should they go through their ups and down, I know they do, God is ever present -- omnipresence.

Q. Omnipresence, that's right?

A. Yeah. He is there. He is everywhere.

Q. Okay. I'm going to change the subject, to relationships that affected your faith, and the first question is; can you describe the relationship with your parents? And how that affected your view of the Almighty?

A. Well, I was raised by a single parent --

Q. Single parent?

A. My mother was a young lady. In fact, she was only 20 years old when I was born. She passed away at the age of 55; just a kid herself. I had a good relationship with her. She was willing, tried to do everything she could for me, you know, and I just loved her to death and my daddy, I didn't dislike him or anything, but he wasn't here. He was traveling around the Midwest playing baseball, shucking and jiving.

Q. Okay. Are your parents a couple -- were they married, or what? Your daddy was away working or they weren't --

A. They weren't together.

Q. -- they weren't together. Okay, I see, I see. Did your mother talk about the Almighty to you?

A. No.

Q. She didn't?

A. No, no, she directed me to go the church.

Q. What about your grandparents?

A. My grandparents?

Q. Did they help you to go to church?

A. No. My grandparents, my mother's daddy didn't go to church, and my daddy's daddy, he never cared nothing about the church.

Q. What about grandmothers?

A. My grandmothers. My great grandmother went to church because my grandfather's brother on my mother's side he went to church.

Q. So, could they have been examples for you or role models?

A. No, they -- I never did look upon them as role models in that sense.

Q. In that sense?

A. However, I didn't have no qualms against my grandfather, he was tough. You know what I mean. Hard worker. Drank that whiskey and rowdy.

Q. Rowdy?

A. Yeah, but he was good.

Q. Good guy, okay.

A. And I didn't have no fault in him. How he conducted himself, you know.

Q. Right, got it, okay. You considered yourself having a good relationship with the Almighty?

A. Yeah.

Q. You do?

A. Yeah.

Q. How has it changed over the course of your life, your relationship with the Almighty?

A. How has it changed? Not very much.

Q. Has it been consistent?

A. He delivers me.

Q. He delivers you?

A. Yeah.

Q. Well, that's a good way for it to stay the same then?

A. Yes, he delivers me. Comes to my rescue.

Q. Okay.

A. And here of late, I've been asking Mrs. Donna to bring the morning prayer every morning for the past two months.

Q. That's your wife?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. Do you see her as a person of strong faith?

A. Do I see her? Oh, yeah, she has strong faith.

Q. She has strong faith?

A. Yeah. She has strong faith.

Q. Has her faith in the Almighty influenced you to be stronger?

A. It's working on me.

Q. Working on you. Wait. What do you mean by that?

A. Well, in the sense -- in her deliverance in praying and everything, she feels very confident, and that has impressed upon me and I like to be -- well -- I don't want to seem like -- I don't want to be one just because I need this or that, I'm going to believe or I'm going to say I believe in God simply because I want this. I want to be sincere. Not just because I'm asking for something.

Q. Right, I understand.

A. Yeah.

Q. To be sincere in your desires?

A. Yeah, and really believe.

Q. Right.

A. Yes, that's what I want to come to me.



Q. I understand, I understand. Maybe there have been some persons in your church?

A. I don't know.

Q. Or in other relationships that have influenced your growth in faith, also?

A. No, I don't ever go to church.

Q. You don't go to church?

A. However, the preacher over there -- his -- the preacher over there where Mrs. Donna was going he seems to be pretty right.

Q. Pretty right?

A. Seem to be a good guy. Seems to believe and he is consistent in that he comes over, prays with me, prays for me, and he has been doing that for the past 20 years.

Q. He has?

A. Without letting up.

Q. That's pretty powerful.

A. Yeah, prays for my immediate family.

Q. Prays for the immediate family?

A. When I'm getting sick or something, he'll be right there.

Q. That's a pretty powerful testimony to be coming 20 years.

A. Yes. His name is Taylor, Josh Taylor.

Q. Josh Taylor?

A. Well, I think he was at -- out to St. Paul. You were there.

Q. You mentioned him, but -- I-- he wasn't there when I was there. I didn't meet him there.

A. You didn't meet him?

Q. No, sir. Your wife told me about him --

A. You didn't meet him.

Q. -- but I didn't meet him there at the time. I don't know if he came before or after, but I didn't see him.

A. You didn't see him?

Q. Well, have you had anybody in church -- have you had anybody at all that has tried, you might say, to guide you in the faith towards the Almighty?

A. Yeah. They have tried to guide me there.

Q. Like a mentor?

A. Well, not necessarily. Not necessarily as a mentor. They want me to commit, but I don't want to commit like that.

Q. You don't want to commit like that? Okay, okay. When they say commit, what do they want you to do, I mean specifically?

A. Confess.

Q. Confess what, sins?

A. Well, not necessarily, confess that I believe in Jesus Christ.

Q. Okay. Would you call Reverend Taylor or anybody else a role model for you?

A. No.

Q. No role models?

A. Nah.

Q. But, what of Mr. Taylor, what would you say that he has done for you that is important to you? Is it that he comes by and prays for you and has been consistent?

A. Yeah, consistent.

Q. In his prayers?

A. He seems to be interested.

Q. Interested?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. In you as a person?

A. Yeah.

Q. In your well-being?

A. Yeah. Of my well being. Concerned.

Q. So would you say that prayers have been a regular spiritual practice that you have been engaged in with him?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. That's -- how often does he come by?

A. Well, he doesn't have a certain time to come by. Maybe a couple of weeks.

He and his wife would come.

Q. They would come together?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. Do you pray on your own?

A. Don't know how to pray.

Q. Don't know how to pray?

A. No.

Q. That's surprising?

A. Yeah. I don't how to pray.

Q. But, you've been seeing Brother Taylor pray for you 20 years. You haven't learned?

A. No, I haven't learned.

Q. So, what do you mean you haven't learned?

A. Learn how to pray.

Q. You've learned. You know the Lord's Prayer?

A. Oh yeah. Our Father which art in heaven.

Q. Right. You know that one?

A. Yeah.

Q. You think you're proficient enough to say that one?

A. Yeah. I'll say that.

Q. Okay. Why do you say that's not a prayer then?

A. I'm not saying -- - that, I said, I didn't know how to pray.

Q. Okay.

A. I guess I want to be a little more eloquent.

Q. Eloquent? Okay. All right. So you can pray, but you may not feel you are as eloquent as others you have heard pray?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. Brother Taylor -- Pastor Taylor, he's eloquent?

A. Yeah. He prays, you know, eloquent. And those -- I find that -- I've reached a conclusion. I find that these preachers and things have got a high sense of imagination. They read a scripture, and then they ad-lib to that the thing that they pulled out of this particular topic. They explain it as they see it.

Q. Are you saying that they see things in it that you may not see or other people may not see, and that they get creative with it?

A. Yeah. They are able to ad-lib.

Q. That's true. A lot of them do.

A. Yeah. They have a good imagination.

Q. They really got to have to have some gift of speaking languages and --

A. Yeah. Uh-huh, and in all this talking between the different people in the Bible -- in this particular -- whatever they are trying to present. These people have a conversation.

Q. Right.

A. And they relate the conversation about whatever it is they are talking about, but this is something that they inject.

Q. I see.

A. You understand what I'm saying?

Q. Yes.

A. Like acting.

Q. Acting?

A. Like acting.

Q. It's a word for that. Some people would say that -- when you go to Seminary you learn these types of terms. One is called, Exegesis?

A. Yeah.

Q. Exegesis. You may have heard that. It's what preachers do when they read a Bible; they study from commentary, and then they help the congregation to tease out the meaning of the text.

A. Yeah.

Q. So there may be words that are hard to understand in Greek.

A. Yeah.

Q. And they may look up that word, and figure out what it means in detail. They help the scripture take on more meaning or deeper meaning that a person may not see or read as they're just skimming along in the Bible. That's been considered the correct way or a correct way.

And then there's what they call Isogesis. That's where you have a text, the person says something that's not in the text, and they put it in there.

A. Themselves?

Q. They put it in themselves. Some of that could be making their own interpretations?

A. Huh-uh.

Q. Some could be sort of fortifying the word to make it mean something to fit their scripture, or fit their needs, their sermon. So there's a lot of ways to go about that. Does that help you when you see people doing that?

A. Well, it sounds good.

Q. So, is that what you mean, is that part of eloquence?

A. Like I said not necessarily. Not necessarily, it completes the story.

Q. I see. It completes the story. Okay. Have there been any changes that you've done in your spiritual life as you've gotten older?

A. Yeah, yeah. I don't drink as much whiskey as I used to.

Q. Don't drink as much whiskey. Okay. That helps your spiritual life?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. It has. How?

A. Gives me a clearer head.

Q. Gives you a clearer head. Does it help you to see the Almighty better?

Understand the Almighty?

A. Yes, it does.

Q. Okay. Are there any ways that you would like to see your life of faith grow?

A. Oh yeah.

Q. What ways are those?

A. Well, I would like to see my life grow where I would be whole again.

Q. Whole? Physical health?

A. Yeah.

Q. What about spiritual, emotional health? Do you feel like you have...

A. Yeah, I need some spiritual, emotional health. So I can really get out into it, you know.

Q. What would you do differently if you could change something to be more whole?

A. Well, I'll have to be physically able to be whole. I would lend myself more to learning all the 66 Bibles -- 66 books--

Q. Sixty-six Books of the Bible.

A. -- I would lend myself to learn.

Q. In other words, you would read more scriptures?

A. Yeah.

Q. Read more scriptures?

A. Where I can have more understanding.

Q. More understanding?

A. Yeah. You know in reading the paragraph and in the discussion, you and I might read the same identical thing and get a different view of what the deal is.

Q. Right. I think that's probably normal.

A. Yeah.

Q. I think both -- I would say that both probably could have some elements of truth in it.

A. Yeah, but I want to get the truth.

Q. You want to get the truth. That truth is always elusive though?

A. Yeah. But now I don't want to go to the extreme whereby, simply because I can't get someone to see it my way --

Q. Uh-huh?

A. -- that it's going to make me mad or something like that, you know, anger me.

Q. Right?

A. Just a mere discussion, you know.

Q. I got it. I'm going to change something one more time. Do you think your life has a purpose?



A. Really -- I really haven't given that a thought. What am I here for? What purpose? And I've been stumbling around here, going on my 78th year and I haven't found it, yet.

Q. You haven't found it, yet?

A. What my purpose is. Surely I have one. A purpose for being here.

Q. Brother Jes, can you repeat what you see your life -- the purpose of your life is?

A. Can I repeat the purpose of what my life is?

Q. Yes, sir. You said, you have -- I told you that the Bible says that our purpose is to give God praise, to be obedient to God's command. Scripture says that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves, love God with all that we do heart, soul, and mind.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. You said, that -- what did you say about that?

A. I said I practice that all the time.

Q. Right. You'd say that's status quo for you?

A. Yeah.

Q. That's why I think that some people would say that you are a person of exemplary faith, because you do what the bible commands, what Christ has commanded, God has commanded on a normal basis. So you've always lived that way; right?

A. Yeah?

Q. Always lived that way?

A. I've never had no (inaudible) program for nobody. I'm straight. I come to you straight --

Q. Right?

A. -- this is what I propose. Let's do it like this. I'm not going to try to hoodwink you or nothing or try to steal from you.

Q. Right.

A. -- stuff like that. This is it right here. Let's do it like this, you know.

Q. Got it. You said, as you -- I asked you, did you consider yourself as a child of the God, you said?

A. I said I had to be.

Q. You had to be?

A. Considering, the things that I've been up against.

Q. And you said that you've been delivered?

A. Yes, I've been delivered.

Q. Okay. That concludes it then. I appreciate it.

A. Yeah.

(End of Jes's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an edited version of a phone interview with "Kim," a 57-year-old male of Baptist denomination. The interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. Kim, can you just give a little overview of your life as a Christian, starting with some early memories that you think shaped you?

A. I grew up in a Christian home. Both of my parents were very active or are very active in church, so I was taken early on, at 10. It was at that time they helped me understand what it meant to be a Christian, and how I might want to do that.

God really set me apart, or called me, when I was 15. I went to Honduras with a medical mission group, and had an experience that when I came back and tried to live apart from it -- God had made this impression on my life with that experience, and in seeking work ... I couldn't live apart from that. So at 18, I made the decision, or accepted the fact, that God had called me to minister. I really didn't know vocationally what that meant. All along the way it became clearer and clearer that was what God was calling me to do, to work with college students to help them through, particularly through this time of their life.

Q. Why do you think God had something to do with that?

A. Because that's how I understood God to work in my life. From my Bible study and attending Sunday school and church, I knew it was God.

Q. Since that time, how has your picture of God changed or grown?

A. Well, I know that God is always with me. I'm not sure that I see Him the way I did when I was young, since I've grown, but I have positive images of God.

Q. How do you see God acting in your life and other people's lives?

A. Well, I know God is omnipotent and omniscient. I believe that God guides us through our daily lives. We need to acknowledge His presence.

Q. I'm changing the subject to relationships that affected your faith, and the first question is, can you describe the relationship with your parents?

A. Well, my parents were good to me. We had a good relationship.

Q. Did they encourage you to go to church?

A. Yes, my parents encouraged that. Both of my parents were active in church. They wanted me to be active and live a Christian life. I am grateful for their encouragement.

Q. So, could they have been examples for you, or role models?

A. Absolutely. My parents were very significant role-models in the faith. As a consequence, I've tried to be a role model for others, just as they were for me.

Q. How has your relationship with God changed over the course of your life?

A. I've grown closer to God. God is a constant companion. As a minister, I know that God is active and guiding my steps.

Q. Has it been consistent?

A. Yes.

Q. Are there relationships that have influenced your growth in faith?

A. Yes, my wife is a good role-model. My pastors over the course of my life have been very influential, also.

Q. Have you had anyone who has guided you in the faith?

A. Yes. As a youth, my pastor and youth minister were influential. My co-workers here, also. I believe we might inspire each other.

Q. What regular spiritual practices have you been engaged in?

A. I pray and go to church. Sometimes, I sing.

Q. How have those practices impacted your life?

A. I think I've grown more disciplined. Praying makes you stronger in life, helps you get through things.

Q. Have there been any changes that you've done in your spiritual life as you've gotten older?

A. I am more aware of God in my life. I don't drink as much.

Q. Are there any ways that you would like to see your life of faith grow?

A. I'd like to make an impact on people and be a good example for people.

Q. I'm going to change the subject one more time. You think your life has a purpose?

A. That's something that I always ask myself. I do feel that I was set apart by God. My work is fulfilling and has purpose. But is it my truest calling? I don't know.

Q. You haven't found it yet?

A. I'm just not that sure.

Q. My final question is whether you consider yourself a child of God.

A. Yes, I do.

Q. Okay. That concludes it. I appreciate it.

A. Thanks.

(End of Kim's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an edited transcript of an interview of "Lonnie," age 81, a black male, on September 24, 2007. The interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. Can you talk about your life as a Christian and maybe share some early memories that helped you become a person of faith?

A. Well, I was about 28 or 29 years of age when the Lord called me from my old life to my new life. It was a change in my whole life. I was doing some of the wrong things, such as drinking, staying out, (being) disobedient, and (doing) things I had no business doing.

I was in jail for one ticket I did not pay (for) speeding up and down the highway, but after I became a Christian, the Lord changed me from all that bad stuff. I got off the bad road and I got on the good road. I've been trying to do what's right ever since the Lord opened up my eyes so I could see. Opened my ears where I could hear. But before, I was kind of like Paul. I was blind. I didn't know the direction that the Lord wanted me to take until he opened my eyes, until he opened my ears--then I could hear the voice, and I could obey what he told me to do. That's how I stand today.

Q. Can you say what happened that made you find that conversion at 28, 29?

A. Yes.... I had had typhoid pneumonia, and I wasn't doing any better. I was like I was on my way down, instead of on my way up. Three days, three nights, I couldn't eat. I was going down, down, down, but after I changed, after I got prayer, the Lord touched me, and all the feeling went away. My appetite came back, and that got my attention, and started me on the right track.

Q. Do you say more that the prayer was a prayer you had for yourself, or one someone prayed for you?

A. At the time, I had prayer, but I hadn't become a Christian. I went to Reverend J. C. Epper when he was living (he's deceased now) and got prayer, and while I was standing in line, before he got to me, the Lord just touched me, and all the fever went away, and my appetite came back, and that got my attention.

Q. Okay.

A. And so that was one ripple that got me thinking. And from then on, I was thinking on the good side of what the Lord could do, instead of otherwise. That kind of led me in the right direction.

Q. Do you have any more recent memories of how the Lord has been working with you?

A. I know that not only that time, (but) several times since I got up in age, in my marriage experience. I married a Christian lady, and I got a lot of experience from her. She led me in the path that the Lord wanted me to go because she was a Christian, too. I learned a lot from my wife, and she had more experiences than I had.

Q. Your marriage was really a spiritual practice for you--

A. Right.

Q. --in the way you practice your faith in everyday experiences?

A. Right. I was poor and I could hardly keep my bills paid. I got a good job, and I started to prosper while I was serving the Lord, and after then I just kept going, going, going, and I could see it's better to serve the Lord than to serve the devil, because I was pulling up. I had a good view. I had a good future, and I could tell the difference. Serving the Lord will pay off and the devil had me going downhill. When I started serving the Lord, I start going uphill.

Q. Got it. Let me ask you a question about your childhood. Do you ever feel when you were a child that you had God's presence close up to you as a person?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. You had made some direct contact with God?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. You did?

A. I was always a quiet kid, and when I went to school, I wouldn't play with the other kids. I would be somewhere reading a book or sitting under a tree or something, and the

teacher would come by and make me go out and play with the other kids. I'd say, "I want to read this book." I was a different child. When I was a kid, I didn't want to do what the other kids were doing.

I had an experience when I was a kid. We were on the farm. We had cows, we had hogs, we had chickens, we had just about everything we needed to survive when we were kids. We had a bunch of cows. We had to put a rope around them and lead them to pasture. I got one of them to start running and I couldn't stop it. The rope got hung around my feet and the cow was dragging me down into the woods. It dragged me so far. It could have taken my life, but the Lord sent an angel to stop the cow. That's how I got loose of the rope. It was hooked around my feet and I couldn't get loose. I was too light. I weighed about a hundred pounds, maybe.

Q. A hundred pounds, maybe?

A. Maybe. And we had to shell corn and take it to the mill to have it ground to make our cornmeal every week. We had a team of mules. We went in the wagon to the mill, and I had a team of mules run away with me. I couldn't hold them. They were going down a steep hill, and I couldn't stop them. I fell out of the wagon, and I was dragged under the mules. I was being dragged under the wagon. The lines hooked around my feet, and the Lord sent an angel at the bottom of the hill to stop the mules, and that's the only way I could get out from under the wagon. They could have kept going and probably killed me. I know by that that the Lord was with me even when I was a child. That is (another) of the incidents I know about and can remember.



Q. Okay. Have you had any experiences, I'll say, of extreme joy or elation that you attribute to your faith, or that you felt were religious experience or ecstatic experiences, perhaps--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --that you thought were the result of being in a relationship with God?

A. Yes, when I came of age. My mother and dad told me, "When you turn 21, you're on your own," and I had to experience that drinking beer. I never did work with dope. I don't think they had much dope going when I was back like 21, 22. They had what they called wine, whiskey, and beer and chalk, stuff like that. I was hooked on that for a while. I thought joy and happiness was in that, but there was no happiness, there was no joy, no peace or anything until the Lord found me.

Q. The Lord found you?

A. Most times, people say, "I found the Lord." The Lord was never lost. He knows where you are at all times, and so when the Lord found me and saved me, I had much joy, much happiness, much peace, and I could experience that.

Q. Why did you say the Lord had found you? What happened that gave you the sense to say, "The Lord has found me, and I have a lot of joy and happiness in my life?"

(Interrupted by phone ringing)

Q. Okay, you were describing your knowing that the Lord had found you--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --and how did you know?

A. He changed the old man, and He put the new man to work--

Q. I see.

A. --because He said I was a new person after I had been born again.

Q. Right.

A. He said, "You are a new creature."

Q. A new creature, right.

A. And that's how I knew I had been changed. I have joy, I have peace, I have happiness, and all those other habits that I had, they don't bother me anymore.

Q. Don't bother you anymore?

A. Right.

Q. So you had to kind of overcome all those bad habits?

A. Right.

Q. That you had been wanting to get rid of anyway?

A. Right.

Q. Got it. It didn't cause you to suffer any pain?

A. Right.

Q. To get rid of them?

A. Right.

Q. All right. Can you discuss any major crises that you have endured, and show or say how your faith has changed as a result of those crises?

A. Yes. One crisis I had was wanting a divorce. The Lord had called me to the ministry, and that was one (crisis) that I went through. My wife, first wife, she just turned and went the other way. She didn't want to serve the Lord. She just turned her back on the Lord and didn't want any part of the church. I just kept on. I just kept on doing the will of the Lord, kept going on to the church.

Sometimes I had prayed by myself, sung by myself, read by myself. And at that time, I was working out at a little old mission in White Rock addition. After about two or three years, they (started) a new development out there. I couldn't keep on, because they were building big houses that cost \$25,000 to \$100,000 and all of those big developments were coming through there. I had to give it up, because I wasn't able to meet the qualifications.

I gave that up, but I didn't turn my back on the Lord because I was going through that crisis. I kept on going, and the Lord gave me joy, peace, and happiness, and all of that, just as he did Job. Job went through the same problems, and the devil told Him--told God, "I'll make Job cuss you to your face," but God had somebody that loved Him, so I kind of (viewed) my situation like Job's.

God blessed me after a few years, maybe six or seven--I didn't keep the exact count, but the Lord blessed me with another lady. She was a missionary--

Q. Uh-huh?

A. --and she had the same faith I did. That was one crisis that I went through, that instead of going back into the world, I kept on following Christ.

Q. Sounds like your divorce--despite your divorce, you continued to follow God's calling upon your life?

A. Right.

Q. And eventually by being obedient to God, being within God's will--

A. Yes.

Q. -- God led you to another wife, another marriage—one that was more in line in your way--

A. Right.

Q. --trusting and following God--

A. Right.

Q. --it really became a blessing for you?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. And how has your picture of God changed over your life? How have you imagined God to be early, and how has it changed now that you're older?

A. How has it changed now?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, back in June 2004, the Lord saw fit to take my wife and carried her to a better place. She was 84 when the Lord took her, and since then, I still have a determination to keep on living for the Lord. I've lost conversations--talking together, and going to church together--I've lost all of that--

Q. Companionship?

A. --relationship. But as far as any bad circumstances, like going through with (my) heart broken, my spirit broken, down and out, and the devil (putting in your mind) you might as well give it all up, you aren't getting anywhere, I don't have that mind. I have a mind to keep on following Christ, and doing what I can, as long as I live. I am happy.

Q. Okay. Let me explain the question a little more. Some people, when they're young, they think of God as being like a person in the sky who just grants their wishes. Some people will even see God as one who gives out punishment for doing wrong things in life. Other people see God as being a big father in the sky who oversees and protects them.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Those are the types of images that I was thinking about. Do you have any images like that of God?

A. No. I feel that regardless of what you do before you're changed--before God changes your life, before you know Him, He'll forgive you for all of that. After you know Christ, all the things that come in life--trials, tribulations, and heartaches, maybe misfortune--maybe all that is in the Christian's walk with God. I don't feel that God is punishing you. I feel that those are the things that we have to go through in order to be soldiers for Christ--

Q. Umm, Okay.

A. --and I feel that if we go through whatever is in front of us in being Christians, those things are trials. Just as Job had trials and Paul had trials. Peter, James, and John, all His followers had trials -- they beat Paul and Saul and put them in jail. Beat them, and whipped them, and all the things you read about, after they became followers of Christ. You don't see where they said, "No, I'm not going to follow him any more." You see where they went through and they got the victory, and so that's the way I look at it. (It's) all the same process in life. Now it's just trials for us, and the Lord is going to try everyone, and see what salt they're made of.

Q. Do you see yourself, in a sense, as a soldier for God and do you see, and identify with, certain persons in the Bible who went through difficult times and came through?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. With God on your side?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Those are strong, powerful images for you?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Personalities you can look at as role models?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Comforts?

A. Right. Yes. That's the way I look at it.

Q. My next question is whether there are any parts of your life that you attribute to God taking over and taking hold of you, something that happened that you can say that this is evidence that God was moving in my life, or evidence that God was in control of that situation?

A. Yes. I can: everything that I did for God, as far as working out His will here on Earth, like church work. Maybe doing something for the church or for a human being or for people who hunger or people going through hard times. I have experience (of God) when I help those people and do for those people -- I always receive a reward. When I do something for mankind, I always see where the Lord has rewarded me.

It doesn't have to be money all the time. It can be where He can keep you in good health. He can let you have a good appetite, and that's a blessing, too. He has so many ways of blessing you. It doesn't have to be money, money, money all the time.

I have had people, too, help me in financial (ways). If I bless somebody, it (may not) be long (until) I run into a hardship. I need a little help with money, and I ask this person whom I have confidence in, and (he is) the one who can help me. I have done a lot of things for the church since I've been a Christian. I spent, one time, \$1,600 to put a fence around the church, \$1,600 and some odd dollars. I didn't even charge the church anything. I spent that because the church needed a fence around it, to keep people from going in and

breaking the glasses and all the windows out of the church. One time I bought a piano, bought it out of my (own pocket). The church didn't have (the money), said they weren't able to buy one. I didn't even charge the church one penny.

Q. Would you say that you saw those acts as following God's call on your life?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. I mean, by responding to God's will for your life?

A. Uh-huh, because you read (in) the first chapter of Haggai, "We sat in our steel houses and we let His house go to waste." A lot of people don't realize that God's house and His business should go on just the same as our business. We pay our lights, we pay our gas, telephone bill, and sometimes we say, "Ooh, I'll take care of God's business later, I'll help God out next time." He said, in Malachi 3, "This whole nation robbed me, and they say where have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings." The Lord's business has got to go on, just like our business. Those are the experiences that I have gone through. By doing right by God, He'll do right by me.

Q. Let us shift gears here just a little bit to relationships. I'm wondering if you can describe how your parents and your relationship with your parents affected your faith-growth?

A. Well, when we were kids, even little kids, they were Christian, and they brought us up believing (in) God. (If) you got a headache or a cold or anything happened, we didn't know anything about a doctor. We never did go to the doctor. We didn't know anything about him, and if we did, they weren't able to pay the bill anyway. We came up believing that God would do this, would do that, whatever happened to us.

I almost got my toe cut off. They had remedies back in the old days. They put some coal oil on it. The toe never got cut off. They wrapped a rag around it, tied it up. "Y'all

go on. You'll be all right," that's what she told us. If you had a cold, coughed, and your nose ran, they had remedies they gave you, and told you, "You'll be all right," and they prayed for you.

Q. Say the prayer. The parents would pray for you all, and tell you to pray for yourselves, and that all served as a way of healing, okay?

A. Uh-huh, and that's how they got most of our attention when we were young. You know the scripture says, "Train a child in the way he should go and when he gets old he won't depart from it."

Q. Right. So your parents were role models and they were also instructors, religious instructors, too?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. They taught you how to regard the Lord as your Lord and Savior?

A. Right.

Q. Did you have any other relationships that shaped you? Can you talk about any others who have encouraged you or shaped your faith journey?

A. Yes.

Q. Christians?

A. Yes. I have other Christians who always encourage me and tell me not to give up. You know God is always going to work out a way for you--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. --regardless of whatever it is. So far the Lord has been good to me, working out my problems, as far as comfort and relationship with my wife. I never had been so sad and so down and out.



Some people when they get down and out, they think (about) committing suicide and throwing up their hands, forgetting about the whole thing. I never have had that thought, (but) when I go to church, I miss her. I miss her in the home. I miss her all the time, but the Lord says, "If I'm for you, I'm more than the whole world against you." In other words, if you have God on your side, you've got everything you need, if you put him first in your life. So far, I haven't had a nervous breakdown or any mind to do the wrong things, committing suicide or throwing up my hands, forgetting the whole thing. I've always had a mind to go forwards, not backwards.

Q. Some people have described you as a person who has very deep, mature faith. I'm wondering if persons in your church or your other religious fellowships have influenced your growth in faith.

A. Well, I don't know if I'm saying it right, but this is what comes to my mind. The scriptures says, "If we acknowledge Him in all our ways, He will direct our path," and so whatever prompts us in life, if we will acknowledge Him first, I believe He'll direct our path. He'll direct us which way to go. He is a director, "Acknowledge me in all *your* ways, and I will direct your path." If we acknowledge Him in any process in life, I believe he will bring us through.

Q. Bring us through?

A. Victorious.

Q. Have you had people in your church with whom you've shared your experience or who have shared their experiences with you in dealing with life who have helped you--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --grow in the Lord?

A. Yes. I have members -- we call them sisters and brothers in the church. Some of them have lost their loved ones -- lost their husbands, lost their wives -- and they have the same problems that I'm going through. We shared our testimony with one another, and it's almost the same.

Q. The same?

A. Almost the same testimony but--

Q. Do you think you all share in the suffering together--?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --in that way? Fellow sufferers?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. A community of sufferers?

A. Yes, about the same, and we comfort one another, and when they share their testimony and I share mine, it's just about the same thing.

Q. If people share how God has brought them through those difficult times--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --and can that be a sense of encouragement for you--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --knowing that what God did for your brothers and sisters in Christ, he'll do for you, also?

A. Right, right.

Q. Do you have any people whom you would consider as spiritual mentors?

A. I didn't quite get that one.

Q. Do you have any persons in your life whom you consider your spiritual mentors or persons who have guided you?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Friends who grew up--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --in the faith?

A. Uh-huh, yes. I have various men, brothers in the ministry, just like you, for one. You have encouraged me so much, and you know quite a bit about my misfortune because you were here, and you saw my wife, and you encouraged me so many times, and I think about it all the time.

Then I have other ministers that I talk with, and they give me some very good encouragement, (talking about) how they went through certain things in life. That's very helpful, (sharing) the same experience that another person had. As a matter of fact, the same thing that they're going through, you might be going through. That's the most (helpful) thing, that they have had the same experiences.

Q. Would those persons be considered spiritual role-models in that you can see how they've gone through the same thing you have?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. In that you can watch how they get through it?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. And maybe use some of those same lessons?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. And maybe do some of the same things they did?

A. Uh-huh, yeah.

Q. Is there anything in particular that these persons told you that they did to help them get through?

A. Yes. I had one spiritual minister who told me he went through the same thing. He was trying to do the will of the Lord, and his wife did (to) him just as Job's wife did (to) him. (She) said, "You aren't getting anywhere, you can't even meet the needs here in the home." She told her husband she was going back out into the world to do her thing, and she went back out in the world.

Q. What did he do to deal with that?

A. He kept on, kept on holding to the Lord, and he didn't let the Lord go, and the Lord blessed him--blessed him with his ministry, church, members in the church, and she passed on living that fast life. She got shot.

Q. Okay. Let me talk about some of your spiritual practices, such as prayer, or Bible study. Obviously you are very familiar with the Bible because you have quoted the Bible quite a bit during our conversation today--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --maybe going to church, or some might say that suffering is a form or a way of getting closer to God-. A. Uh-huh.

Q. --Do you have any of those types of practices that you can talk about?

A. Yes. I've learned that since I've had some illnesses. Now I suffer with gout in my left foot, and also, at 60 years old, I had prostate problems. The doctor was put here for us, to help us, so I went to St. Paul (Hospital). I couldn't urinate and it scared me. I went there and had to wear a syringe on my body for a month, maybe longer. I couldn't urinate

properly, but the Lord healed me of that. I went to the doctor, and after a month wearing that syringe on my leg, the Lord just touched me and healed me of that prostate problem.

Q. Were you praying during that time?

A. Yes.

Q. You were praying?

A. Yes, and I haven't worn that syringe since. That's been over 20 years ago--

Q. Twenty years ago. That's a long time.

A. --and every time I have a check-up (I have to have a check-up every six months)--

Q. Every six months?

A. --they say, "You're doing fine." They check your blood. They check your pulse, and they check you out really well. They say, "What are you doing? Whatever you're doing, keep it up."

Q. Okay.

A. That's what the doctors tell me.

Q. Okay.

A. And, that's some of (my) experience in health--

Q. Uh-huh?

A. --that I know nobody can do but God.

Q. Nobody can do that but God, right?

A. God's going to do that; only God can do it.

Q. Don't you have a Bible lying around and other spiritual devotional materials?

A. Yes.

Q. Do they help you?

A. Uh-huh. Reading spiritual literature, and watching TV on spiritual TV.

There's a lot of stuff on TV that isn't good for you. I think the person who wants to be Christ-like, follow Christ, has to find what will help him.

Q. I notice you had the TV on religious broadcasting when I came in. I don't know if it was TBN or Trinity network?

A. TBN.

Q. TBN, okay. They had a preacher on?

A. Yes.

Q. And he was talking about prayer and so forth, and the singer was talking about...?

A. (God) told us in the Psalms to keep our minds stayed upon Him. You know, David said (Psalms are mostly David's reading), "Keep thee with a mind stayed upon Him".

Q. Is that your goal in life?

A. To be spiritual?

Q. To have your mind stay on God?

A. Uh-huh. Not all the time -- you can't keep your mind on Him all the time. But most of the time when you do have available time, you say, "Well, I believe, I'll read my Bible, or my Sunday-school lesson, or watch TV, a spiritual program," or something that is beneficial to you.

Q. Right.

A. You can read a lot of stuff (that) will tear you down instead of tearing you up. So we should read spiritual literature and listen to spiritual programs and not a bunch of garbage. There's a bunch of garbage on TV--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. --and a bunch of garbage on the radio--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. --and if you want to be a follower of Christ, you have to read spiritual material.

Q. Yes. I have a few more questions and we're almost at the end. Do you enjoy the spiritual life?

A. Yes. I really do.

Q. You do. What does it do for you?

A. When you enjoy it, it's beyond the joy that you get when you are serving the devil. See, when you are serving the devil, that joy doesn't last. No longer than you're doing it--

Q. That's as long as it lasts?

A. --but the joy that the Lord gives lasts from day to day and night to night.

Q. It's almost like a permanent sense of joy that you have. A permanent sense of joy.

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. We have just a few more to go, and this next section is about miscellaneous stuff. I'm wondering, what do you believe is the purpose of your life?

A. When God made man, we read in Genesis, when He made Adam and Eve, God made us to serve Him. That's the purpose of God making man, He made us to serve Him, not

the devil. The joy that God gets out of us is (our) serving Him. In Psalms, I think it's 9:14-15, God says, "Any nation that forgets God will be destroyed." I look at all this turmoil going on, wars, and earthquakes, and storms, and floods. Even Sodom and Gomorrah, that was such a wicked place--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. -- people got so wicked He destroyed them. He told Lot, "Get out of there. Get out of here, Lot, because I am going to destroy them, I'm going to burn this town down." All the destruction going on now is God trying to get people's attention. He said in Chronicles 7--2nd Chronicles 7:14, "...that if my people which are called by my name humble themselves, and pray, then they'll hear from heaven." So much wickedness is going on now, God is trying to get people's attention, and if they (pay attention), (if) people turn from all this wickedness--

Q. Uh-huh.

A. --we'll have a better world to live in. We'll have more joy, more peace --

Q. Uh-huh.

A. --see, there wouldn't be all that fighting and stuff. God made us to serve Him, not to be confused, and have all this stuff going on.

Q. Do you think of yourself as a child of God, or a spiritual giant?

A. Do I consider myself--?

Q. A child of God--a person strong in the faith?

A. Yes. I do consider myself a child of God, but I'm not the strongest person in the world. I always feel that there's room for improvement in my life, but I feel that I am



happy serving the Lord, and I don't see any need to go back into the world to find any joy. I find all my joy and peace in the Lord, and I'm happy all the time.

Q. You're happy. What in your Christian experience helps you to identify yourself as a child of God?

A. How I identify myself?

Q. Uh-huh?

A. Well, to identify myself in God is (to not do) the things I used to do. I don't have the desire to do them any more.

Q. Okay. Okay.

A. That's one (way). I can pass by some of the temptations that I used to yield to. I have victory over (temptation) now.

Q. You have victory over it now?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Got it.

A. So I know something has happened in my experience, my walk with God, because there was a time I couldn't do that. I couldn't pass by certain things my flesh desired and wanted. I had to yield to it. I don't have to yield to it now.

Q. Some might say that you might call that growing in wisdom and stature--that you have grown to become more wise--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --and you have a higher stature--

A. Uh-huh.

Q. --in the faith.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. What you describe sounds like that.

A. Yes. You can describe (it) like that. That part goes with it. When you know that the things that you used to do, you don't have a desire to do them anymore, or you have power over those things, that is growing. You're growing in the spiritual things of God.

Q. In the spiritual things?

A. In the spiritual things of God. That is what He wants us to do, grow into knowledge by doing the things He wants to do. See, the devil wants us to do the bad things. God wants us to do the good things.

Q. Got it. The last question is, do you think of yourself as a spiritual guide for other people?

A. I try to live that kind of life, to be a role model to the younger generation or to the older generation, either one.

Q. Right, right.

A. I tell you, I was in the store two months ago. I just had on my blue jeans and just looked like any ordinary person, but I have a cap I wear which says "There is nothing too hard for God." I wear that cap quite a bit. I had my cap on. I was buying groceries, and I got up to the register, and a man was buying and he was using vulgar (language), and saying bad words. Then somebody behind him said, "Don't do that Mister, read that cap that man has on." And that gives you to know, God's word is beyond anything. His word is more valuable than anything on Earth, God's word is. That's all she said, "Stop that bad talk. Read the word that man has on his cap." And so not only your life can be a mirror to the world. The things

you wear, the things you do, and the things you say, everything you do has something to do with Christ following you.

Q. So then all your personality, I guess, where you live, what you wear, your countenance, your personality, all that can be used to God's glory--

A. Right.

Q. --for other people--

A. Right.

Q. to learn how to be a better Christian?

A. Right.

Q. Well, that concludes my interview. I appreciate your time.

A. All right. All right.

(End of Lonnie's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview with "Ray," white male, 61 years of age, Christian. This interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. Just briefly provide an overview of your life, and maybe, provide some early or later memories that have shaped your faith journey.

A. Well, I grew up in my conscious life very, very aware of the fact that my mother's family, a Unitarian family [with Christian orientation], goes back for at least five generations. Although, prior to about third grade we moved every couple of years, and my life was unstable, I can remember our visiting churches from time to time...not necessarily

Unitarian churches. But, I don't recall ever being -- feeling like we were part of a church until we moved to New Hampshire and started to attend regularly in church and my parents became very, very, active and were much like leaders.

I sang from the time I was about in 6th or 7th grade. I mostly went to church. I didn't have much to do with the Sunday school. I have minimal memories of that. But, the church was a very key part of my life. And it continued on through high school, and in particular, between my junior and senior years in high school. There was a program for high school youths out at the Starr King School for the Ministry, which I attended with about 14 other Unitarian youths from around the country. It was three weeks of Bible seminars, touring the bay area, being with this group of leaders, and the three Starr King students, one of whom I became very close to and comes into my story a little bit later on.

Then, I went off to college and ministry was one of the things that I thought as a possibility along with music and medicine. I come from a line of doctors. But, you know, basically I went, but wasn't too much involved in church during that period of my life. When it came time to graduate, I wasn't at all sure what I wanted to do. And with the draft booming, I enrolled in law school for a year. It didn't work out very successfully, but it got me to Boston. Then, a year after that year in law school, I had started meeting with Unitarian ministry in particular, and other people that I knew about in the church. Ultimately, at the end of that year, I made the decision to go to seminary and enrolled at Starr King.

And that's -- I started ordination-- that was in '69. I was ordained in '72, and I was in involved in three churches. The thing that I've come to realize in terms of looking back on all of this after some years is that I feel that I was called to the church. I was called to the church and not out of some great binding spiritual quest or vision. A matter of fact, I

always remember from at least in high school, maybe in junior high school, being always impressed with the story of Paul in Damascus. That was powerful and I remember kind of emulating and wishing that God would speak to me.

I recognized that he was working on me. But, it actually was almost two years later as an assistant minister in Rhode Island at the Shelter Rock congregation. Then I went to St. Louis where ultimately I ended up spending 27 years. It was somewhere around after, I don't know, three to five years in St. Louis, that, you know, that I began to just seriously reflect about the church--the value of the church as an institution that brings people together, and at it's best, it brings people together to do good things. Not only for each other, but in the wider world. But it sort of all characterizes all those things that I value as being in a way secular or in the horizontal dimension way of life. At some point, you begin to more consciously pursue what is really behind all of that.

Q. Let me ask you this before you go on. When you talk about wanting to have that Damascus Road experience when you were younger, do you feel you ever had any type of indication that God did show up in your life? Where you had a present, up-close experience with God?

A. Right. It was under a very odd circumstance that I had the one experience that stands out in that regard. I was persuaded by my colleagues in the Central Midwest to run -- to become a trustee on a (inaudible) Board of Trustees. And, found myself embroiled in a very political and sort of nasty campaign. I had made a joke about it because the elections were held at one of the churches in Chicago. Chicago, as you know, is somewhat famous for the crookedness of their elections.

Well, just before the meeting where our election was to take place there had been a scandal where a bunch of the voting boxes were found at the bottom of the Chicago River. That kind of thing. So, I made a little witty remark about that in my speech on Friday night. Lo and behold, on Saturday, the nominating committee came to each of the three candidates and said there had some irregularity in the voting. They went into this whole background to -- what ended up happening (inaudible). I was trying to figure out what I needed to do. I went on a long walk with my closest colleague and talked about it, then went back to the church. I laid down on one of the Church pews.

First Church of Chicago is this great gothic cathedral type of building. I was just kind of dozing off there. What happened is that -- I'm not going to say exactly it was a voice, but I was definitely spoken to with just these words of assurance. The sort of message like "let go, let God." It was the kind of experience that said, or the message was, "You don't have to fix everything. You don't have to do this, just let things unfold." I don't know -- I don't know exactly what were the specifics of the message, but the general feeling of it and everything was very powerful. And it was very real and it's not like anything else I have ever experienced.

People said, "What should we do"? And I said, "Do whatever you want." It ended up they had another election. I was narrowly defeated, which was probably the best thing that could have happened because after that many, many people of my church came, and said they were quite concerned that doing that work was taking me away from my calling.

Q. Okay, other than that, did it help that specific experience of having that divine intervention or divine voice influence you throughout your life since then?

A. I preached on that from that experience the next Sunday in the church. I remember, you know, kind of weeping, as I said, "Now, I don't know, how you really feel about this, but I don't just believe. I know that we are held by everlasting arms." That was kind of the sense of that experience. I mean it's something, you know, it's something that I have always felt, but I would never have articulated it quite that boldly, directly, or, you know, ever had articulated without that experience.

But, over my 27 years experience that I was in St. Louis, you know, my preaching became much more powerful. It was painful for a lot of those people, but they, you know, they hung in, almost all of them and yeah, I definitely was changed.

Q. Can you say how your faith has helped you deal with crises in your life?

A. Well, actually my life at King's Chapel has been certainly one crisis after another. I came to be in a place where I expected it to be easier to feel God. And actually, it's been harder here than elsewhere to keep my bearings. It's been a challenge. Despite the fact that I'm supported here by a liturgical tradition, the prayer books and everything. It's very, very, you know, very much a part of my spiritual life.

Q. Say that term again you used. That you said you realize you are more -- more like than you thought you were?

A. Puritans were reacting against the Anglican prayer book tradition and their formalized prayers and their repetition prayers and all that kind of things, but that is one of the things that attracted me.

But at the same time, you know, as a spiritual community in terms of, you know, things in a way in which the community of people, you know, supported each others where we are expected to do that. The community being much stronger. The place where people,

you know, they are verbal, the use of language is more open. It's turned out not to be that way here. The sense of religious community is so much stronger in St. Louis.

Basically the only thing I do absolutely without fail. Well, absolute. Without fail is going too far. Rarely do I miss -- the first thing in the morning I'm up and out walking for a good hour or more, which is both physical and spiritual. I just want to let the body breathe. The Spirit just kind of soaks it all in.

Q. Let me ask you, how has your image of God changed over the years for you? Or how you understand God, you know, acting in the world?

A. I don't have a strong concrete image of God. I do think of God in a personal kind of a way. My relationship to God is personal in the same way that I connect to other persons is the best way I can express it. And that respect has been changed dramatically over the years.

Q. Let me ask you this then. Besides from that early experience when you were at that meeting. Are there any aspects in your life about which you imagine would credit to God's direct intervention? Does that question make sense to you?

A. Well, I guess, you know, in looking at my life, I feel very fortunate in my life. And, so, I -- I do have a sense that there were some other forces that other than my individual decisions, that were there, because I sort of struggle with decisions, you know, at all levels and it's always been difficult for me. I am trying to think of the only decisions where I think, I really made or accredited myself of having making the major share of the decisions are not necessarily the best decisions to me. There's a sense in which I look back and say, "Dude," amazing that I ever took that path.



A. And for the most part its worked out. Okay, well, it's something -- it's not like, you know, in that the part of that experience, what makes that stand out was the concreteness of the experience. As I said, I prayed for that kind of clarity, but I usually don't have it.

Q. Let me shift to relationships. You mentioned relationships, in your relationship with God and in your family. And the question revolves around this idea that Daniel has described you as a person who has exemplary faith and matured in the matters of faith. So, what I'm interested in is the way the relationships in the church or other religious fellowships have influenced your growth in faith.

A. Well, I think the community of the ministry, the community of professional ministers, stands out to me. This is something that in the last couple of years, I've been sort of focusing on more consciously in the terms of ongoing relationships -- the ordained men and women that I've been closest too, and that does includes both mentor and mentee. It includes those who have taught me and those who I have taught something and that body of people that are outside of my family who are the most continual and sustaining presence in my life.

I mean, even though, I stated, I went to one church for a long, long, time and even though I had close relationships with many people in that church, you know, with a couple of exceptions, maybe two exceptions. Those people don't have that same sense of closeness as I do with my colleagues.

One of the most rewarding things of my ministry has been some people who have been interesting working with--close to 30 people, including seminary, and Daniel being among them. You don't know how much I've taken from those relationships and experiences. In terms of, you know, good mentoring, it has always been a two-way street in term of the learning. I don't think that I would have sustained a long-term ministry in St. Louis at all,

perhaps, but certainly not, positively without saying -- without that kind of infusion year after year of new energy, idealism, hope, and knowledge and all of those kinds of things.

Q. So would that have come from saying -- how did you say -- the combination of the encouragement, and support and Christology, and mentoring?

A. Right. Those things are all together.

Q. The key elements that came through the relationships.

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. Okay and can you say the person that has modeled the faith for you, and well, what they did that made an impact on you?

A. Well, the first minister that I knew well was the minister of our church in South New Hampshire. In my junior high and high school, he was a close personal friend of my parents who were major leaders in the church. He was very musical, as I was. There were lot of things to identify with him, but, you know, more as a pastor than as a preacher. I guess I would say that was the first learning and the first real model that I had for the ministry.

Then as a theologian the second one that comes to mind was Bob Kimbelow, who was the president-elect during the year I was there, who I first met actually as a high school student. Then there were Kimberwitz and Towick. Bob was definitely a teacher and not a pastor. Really, they are the ones that woke me up in terms of theology.

Q. So they introduced you to theology and the way of doing the ministry; is that what you're saying?

A. Yes, and then several of the-- I don't know if you want to log most of these?

Q. No, no, it's fine. I just want to kind of get a sense of specifically what they may have done?

A. I mean in the world of theology, Kimbell was the one that introduced me to Towicks and Talong and Martin Buber, the other major theologian. Those three names have remained very crucial to my own development.

Then, actually The Association Prayer Group which began when I started in 1974 in St. Louis and John Wolf were very influential. James Farr was very influential. Frank Kilman was very influential. I mean there's several, but these guys were much more theistic in languages than I had encountered in my previous Unitarian existence. Now going back to prayer groups, this is my 37th consecutive prayer group (laugh).

Q. That's a lot of consistency?

A. And, you know, that's three or four days every year for the last 37 years. These are kind of emotional for me and caring deeply over that time. In terms of the trials and triumphs and everything, there is a lot of deep sharing that goes on.

Q. Now you mentioned your daily walk and how it allows you to meditate and relate with God. Do you want to add any other spiritual practices in that you participate in?

A. I work at trying to get a, you know, a routine and I'm always thoroughly advising other people to do it. I haven't been able to sustain it. I do think that writing sermons is a spiritual practice--

Q. Oh yeah certainly?

A. But certainly, it's the most regular pattern of my life. I'm somebody who does not get a great charge out of giving sermons. That part of it isn't as important as the process

of getting to something that might be worth somebody hearing. I struggle to write, so there's a lot of internal processing that goes on.

Q. What ways would you like to see your faith continue to grow?

A. Well, I'm still longing for that more directive God.

Q. Where God gives you more directions and shows you what to do?

A. You know, I struggle in my existing. You probably know that wonderful story about the guy who fell off the cliff and grabbing on to a twig on the side of the cliff. "Help! He is calling up for help and finally a voice says, "Just let go and everything will be fine." And the guy says, "Is there anybody else up there". (Laughter) Well, I don't know. As I say, I feel secure. The everlasting arms are the thing that feels real to me, but I still long for more.

Q. In the last set of questions I have three more. The first one is what do you believe is the purpose of your life? And how has your faith influenced how you understand the answer to that questions?

A. Well, I have, over time, I've come to realize that some of the more important things that have meant the most to other people that were largely unconscious on my part or unnoticed or unknown. I only find out about them some long time later or short time afterwards.

So I feel like I'm very privileged to be called to serve in the way that I have. The reality is that it comes back to what got me in this in the first place, is that I really do believe the church is a worthy place to spend one's efforts in one's life. And I think I have done more good than harm in term of my contributions.

Q. The next one is, do you think of yourself as a child of God or as spiritual exemplar?

A. No.

Q. And if so, what are your faith experiences that may have contributed to the way you have identified yourself?

A. I don't feel like any kind of exemplary of anything. I'm just being the only me or the best me that I know how to be. I'm much more comfortable with the image of being a child of God. That's me, a beginner, always a beginner. I'm still learning. We all are.

Q. Okay, and the last question, and I appreciate your time for all of this. Do you think of yourself as a spiritual guide for other?

A. Well, I'm conscious that people do look to me, you know. We are all looking for a guide in things, so I do have a conscious sense of trying to live up to the best I know, and like many of the times I fall short of that. So I guess the answer is yes. Yes, to your question.

Q. Now, if you want to add something to what you've said already you can at this time?

A. Well, what I was just thinking, I just did an interview for someone who is getting their PhD thesis and he was talking to ministers about how much they knew about hearing loss (laughter) and this has been a lot more challenging than that.

(End of Ray's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview with "Jean" on October 4, 2007. The interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. As an adult what experience have you had where you felt God's presence close-up and personal? Another way of putting it might be an experience where you had a direct contact with God.

A. There are two things that -- well actually three that really stand out and I'll be very brief with the first two and the third is a little more detailed. The first one that comes to mind is my mid 20s when I relocated to Texas from Missouri. I stepped out on the faith, did not have a job, only knew two people in Houston when I moved here, and I know that his hand was over me because of everything that just felt it came into place and I went along. And the second one would be when I was in school about thirty years old when I met and married my husband. I just really feel like this was the man that God would have me to be with. I had not planned on marrying. I was not even dating, actually wasn't even thinking about it, and at the time I met my husband and for two years after that time we thought we were cousins, and yet there was something deep inside of me that I knew this was the man, and we've been together almost 22 years. And the third thing is that whole experience from the beginning to this day that I've felt God's presence and hands over my life.

Q. Since the diagnosis of breast cancer?

A. Yes.

Q. Would you consider that last one, that crisis, that your faith has enabled you to get through?

A. Oh yes. Oh, undoubtedly, I feel like that. That was the only way that I made it through, from the time the doctor pronounced the diagnosis, even the moment that he told me that it was breast cancer; that it was, in fact, cancer. I had a couple of them [results] come back to me prior to that, and they were always benign but even at that moment there was --

that was okay. All right, now, what do we do -- next step you told me I have cancer. No, what do we do now, what's the plan of treatment?

Q. How did your faith support you in that way, in that situation?

A. Well, I knew even in the midst of the diagnosis that it was going to be okay in spite of the fact that I had breast cancer. I knew that God was going to see me through it. It wasn't going to be easy, and it wasn't. It was painful, physically painful, emotionally, spiritually painful and it was through my prayers, prayers of others, and, as a matter of fact the reason I even went in to the doctor was a matter of my faith.

My pastor at the time, had experienced chest pain and had gone in to have a mammogram and she said okay, hers turned out fine, she was okay but because of her responding to the Holy Spirit and her obedience to the Holy Spirit. We were good friends as well and she said, okay, you need to go in and get checked. Well, at this time, it was like the end of September, beginning of October and I told her I'm not due for my physical until January, I'll go then. She said, "No, you need to go now. And it was because of God, her obedience and my obedience to her, that the cancer was even discovered because it wasn't a lump that was felt or anything and the Doctor told me it would have been a year, maybe two years later before a lump would have been found.

Q. Being that we are talking about relationships here, and that was my next area; can you describe how significant relationships during your life have shaped how you understand yourself as a Christian?

A. Can you repeat that again? I want to make sure I understand what you're asking.

Q. I want to know how your relationships have influenced the way you identify yourself as a Christian.

A. My previous pastor, watching her walk before me, not just in word, but in deed helped to form my faith walk because it gave me a plumb line. It gave me a measuring stick to see what happens in the midst of situations or how you respond; it has helped to give me confidence. For example, when I became more and more desirous of learning scripture and getting into the word, her response to me was, okay, I want you to teach the Sunday School Class, and I was like, wait a minute, pastor. I want to learn, I don't want to teach. I want to learn, but it was in her wisdom that she realized in teaching I would learn more, and so that relationship has really helped me to see mankind and some direction. That's how it was with my parents. My parents never sat down and said; okay, this is the way Christian act. This is what we do because we are believers of Jesus Christ. They walked before me. They didn't say, okay this is what Christian do, but they did it. My whole life was service and not realizing, okay, this is what Christians do. When there was someone who needed a place to stay; family, friend or otherwise who needed a place to stay our home was always there -- someone else was there besides my parents and siblings. At dinner time whoever was there at the house, sat down to eat, and you ate until you were full. No one was ever turned down.

Q. So your parents and your pastor both model the Christian life and Christian character for you?

A. Yes, very much so.

Q. Okay, and the last question in this area would be: can you talk about any other persons in your church or any other religious fellowship that you've been a part that has influenced your growth and faith?



A. Oh, there are many, but the first one that comes to mind, is one of my prayer partners. We have prayer teams at our church, and we have a team of three either families or individuals and one individual -- I want to call her by name -- or do you want her name?

Q. No, that's fine, you can go on. I don't need a name.

A. She has such a quiet strong faith. Spiritual disciplines are practiced religiously; as a matter of fact, while I was going through my cancer and during the greatest part of my treatment I could not fast and she stood in the gap for me and fasted an extra day each week until I was able to return to fasting.

Q. Wow, that's pretty powerful right there.

A. Pardon me?

Q. That's pretty powerful.

A. Yes, it is. It really is and there was time during my early months of treatment that I was just either too tired or just too sick or just too out of it to practice stringently my faith spiritual disciplines, and she would call or send me e-mail, I mean not a bible study lesson, but just give me a scripture or just send me a picture.

Q. The question is, can you describe the spiritual practices that you participate in regularly?

A. The--

Q. Practices or discipline?

A. The spiritual disciplines that I practice regularly are prayer and to find time for the prayer, as well as continuous prayer throughout the day. I am a prayer servant on a weekly basis. I can, as well, lead, in that time to pray with and for others, as well as

meditation. I am learning to use quiet time as I grow in my prayer life, learning to listen to God and listen for God as well as to be able to talk to God.

Q. Okay?

A. I fast at least weekly and during my time of fast, I've gone from its not just being a not eating kind of thing to using that time and replacing the physical desire for food with the spiritual desire.

Q. Can you talk about how your spiritual practices have contributed to you becoming a more mature Christian?

A. My spiritual practices have contributed in that it has helped me to be more disciplined or I guess it's hard to express that and what I mean. What I'm trying to say is, by doing them, by practicing them, actually going through them, for example, like I said, about fasting, early on it was -- it's about not eating and it got to the point where it was more than not eating and it wasn't an overnight thing; it was gradual. They have helped me, oh God, to focus less on self and more on God, and they have helped me to more -- I don't know how to say it but to say it -- but more maturely share my faith because it's a part of me.

Q. I see. I see. So the faith has become more of your personal identity, personality would you say?

A. Yes.

Q. And you can share that with other people?

A. Yes, and not so much pull out a Bible and quote scripture kind of thing, but I have found myself more able to be at peace in the midst of a crisis or situation. I have found that good, bad, or indifferent people come to me when they are in a midst of a situation.

Q. So people see you now as a spiritual mentor, a guide, now?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay?

A. It's recycling -- someone shares with me and then I'm sharing with someone else.

Q. And this is what I'm going to ask you: the grand question is, what do you believe is the purpose of your life?

A. The purpose of my life. Should I just give an example first -- when I was being diagnosed with breast cancer, one of the things, I learned many lessons. One of the lessons I learned was to share, or not becoming more self-centered but more open to real life. That my life is not my own, and understanding that God has placed me, God has placed all of us into this world to share him. To share Jesus Christ and be it through say a diagnosis of breast cancer or be it through this craziness that goes on, on the job, be it through whatever is going on I know, I mean, and it gets in a rut and I'm not trying to trivialize but it gets down to the point where if I miss a stop -- if I missed a green light and I ended up at a stoplight, and I was really in a hurry, there was a reason that I was at that stoplight. To spread the knowledge and to introduce others to Jesus Christ and to built the kingdom through those experiences and those situations, undoubtedly.

Q. The last question is do you consider yourself a child of God?

A. Undoubtedly.

Q. Undoubtedly?

A. Without hesitation, yes. I was a child of God before -- at the beginning of the great mind of God at the beginning of the creation.

Q. Okay. That's it.

(End of Jean's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview with "Pearl" on October 4, 2007. This interview was conducted by Xolani Kacela.

Q. What experiences have you had where you felt a direct contact with God?

A. Well, I've got so many, since I've been a Christian now since I was -- well, I accepted the Lord when I was 13 and I really begin to show myself faithful, which has been almost 50 years... I have so many, but, one, I think the one that I can remember was when I was about 26 -- that would be my major breakthrough when I really decided to dedicate my life. It was around Easter time. So, and I don't know, for some reason or another that was the first year that the Lord significantly (inaudible) and all that really became so real to me that I was just so overcome and so into God and just saving us and you know I just felt like, God was there you know, it was just so different, it was nothing really. I had gone to visit a friend of mine and we were just praying and singing songs and talking about the Lord and I don't know it just dawned on me what a wonderful thing He had done.

Q. Can you discuss any major crisis that you had that your faith has allowed you to overcome?

A. Okay. Do you want more than one or just one?

Q. One.

A. I guess I can tell you about my later one. The one that was really was -- of course was when my oldest son was diagnosed with kidney disease when he was about 12.

Q. Kidney disease.

A. Yes. It was a disease called [**Clamellon?**]; that's why it spread to the kidney stones, it failed to flush out the toxin and I don't know, if I hadn't been a fallen Christian-- anyway I had though that it was just one of these little old experiences then I had to realize that his life was in God's hand and he was a Christian and he told me, he said, "Mom, it's okay, you know, I'm ready to go if the Lord wants me," so it is just a wonderful thing no matter what we are going through and how sad it is and how heart breaking it is. God is always there to give us comfort and to let us know that he really cares, but anyway my son is now-- so, I mean he didn't die -- so, I mean the Lord he -- the Lord, how can I say, he healed him of that illness.

Q. Okay. Can you tell me how significant relationships during your life have helped you understand yourself as a Christian?

A. Okay. Well, I think, I have to really say the first thing was my mother. My mother passed away last year. She was almost 90 and all of her life she was a wonderful Christian and brought us all up in a Christian environment where we learned Bible verses and all that kind of stuff, and so I don't know, I guess I kind of took it, but I would say that -- she was- she was just a --- she was the one who spit in my face and even though she had Alzheimer's and she died last year, she never stopped trusting in the Lord. She never did really lose the -- she lost a lot of her memory but her faith, faith in God never wavered and I remember the day she died, up until the day before she died and she said, "Well, I've got good peace and I am ready to go" and I remember thinking, you know, I have such a wonderful mother and I've got to live a better Christian life but I just really wanted my faith to be deeper, to deepen this year, you know. I don't know what you were looking for.

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. We're going to switch over to practices; can you describe any spiritual practices that you participate in on a regular basis?

A. Well, in my personal life I have always maintained a quiet meditation time for years and my current meditation booklet that I use all the time is "My Utmost for His Highest;" my all time favorite for spiritual and then --

Q. Can you repeat that, I didn't hear it?

A. The devotional booklet that I really use most of the time that I keep going to -- it's called "My Utmost for His Highest. "

Q. Okay.

A. It is awesome, my all time favorite.

Q. Okay.

A. But I've always-- I read through the Bible all the time. I just-- but then I put my Bible up -- well, I study the Bible a lot but then I need prayer station to practice. I don't know, I just -- just -- I've always been just kind of bonded to my Christian life, how you did, you went to Bible school, you know, stuff like that. You know, I don't know what you mean by practices; is that what you mean?

Q. Can you say how your practices have contributed to your relationship with God?

A. Oh yes. Oh yes, just like now, it's more like there, like if I can't do what I need to do -- I don't-- it like I'm so unrealistic -- it's just they have helped me to come to understand God is Providence and we can approach his son at any time. I mean like I told someone the other day, I really don't worry about anything anymore. A lot of things have happened -- so

many things have happened this week, I just like say, okay Lord, what do you want me to do? What are you trying to show me, it's just never, oh Lord, show me why this happened to me. So, I can really see the Christian growth, but really I see the Holy Spirit but it's not me. You know what I mean?

Q. Yes, ma'am.

A. God could just fall back, but I try not to do that. It's a humble experience -- but listen, if I've been walking with Christ all these years it should be something, you hear what I am saying?

Q. It sounds like you are trying to be in God's will; is that an accurate statement?

A. Definitely.

Q. Do you feel like you are living in God's will? Is that a goal of yours?

A. Well, I do believe that, and I believe he is in my common space area. I think after we walk with God so long, as we come to understand him, I think we can, we can sense he is guiding and if he is not guiding there's kind of a little spirit that lets us know -- and then I find I've become more tolerant of people and I can't explain it. I just know it is only something the Holy Spirit can do; without him it would not be possible.

Q. And it sounds like as a result of those practices, the spiritual discipline that you used -- adhered to, you feel closer to God?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. More of a child of God?

A. I didn't hear the last thing.

Q. You feel like you're a child of God?

A. Well, I know I've been a child of God since I became a Christian.

Q. All right. Okay, and the last question would be: what do you believe is the purpose of your life?

A. Well, I think I said it earlier just to have Christ in my life every day--

Q. Christ in your life?

A. --uh-huh --not to have any agenda, but just to see the spirit and do what he says, you know, and when I say that I mean being dealt with in the spirit and allowing the Lord to show up in my life and that's it. It means that when my little human tendency comes up and I want to do this or I want to do that. It's like the Lord says, you know, you don't have to go there and so you end up praying for people or speaking out other things rather than -- you understand you become more God-centered. That's the way my mother was. I can't explain it, and I didn't see it for a long time but I do now.

Q. Now you understand it, and do you think of yourself as a spiritual mentor for other persons?

A. Well, other people seem to think I am.

Q. They think you are; okay?

A. I felt that way because I think that if I was youthful I gave as much as I give but I think that because I am older and I may have a little more wisdom and because of my personality, other people do consider me that way.

(End of Pearl's interview.)

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview with "Maggie" on October 10, 2007. This interview is conducted by Xolani Kacela.



Q. Can you give me your age, please?

A. It's seventy-five.

Q. Seventy-five. Okay, and can you give me your marital status also?

A. I'm a widow.

Q. Okay. That's all I need to know. The first question, Maggie, is can you tell me about the experience you had where you felt God's presence close-up and personal?

A. One of those -- well, there have been many because I always believe that God is present in my life, but there was a time, I don't know whether you are familiar with Moore Ranch --

Q. No, ma'am.

A. -- down in South Texas it's not too far from Parkville, it's a beautiful ranch that was given to the Presbyterian church, and I was out there and I was walking up through the hills, and I really felt that God was there, and I could reach out and I could touch him; that was a very impressive and wonderful experience.

Q. What made you feel God's presence?

A. I'm not sure what made me, whether it was where I was or the stillness of the place, you know, because I was all alone and there was no one talking and no other noise.

Q. But you had the confidence that God was there?

A. Oh yeah, very close.

Q. Can you tell me of any major crisis that you endured and how your faith was changed as a result of it?

A. I guess, I'm not sure my faith was changed, I know it was changed for a while when my first husband divorced me. I had loved him since I was 14 years old, if a 14 year old

knows anything about love, but anyway we had been married for 21 years, and I always say, he had traded me in for a younger and newer model, and I didn't dart in the doors of a church for four years, because he was a Presbyterian minister and I had gone through all that with him, you know, putting him through school so forth and so on. But it turned out to be a blessing because during that time, it was when self-help books had come out and I never been able to, well, back then I wasn't able to get from the Bible what I guess I needed at the time to grow, and I read and read and read and that really helped to put me on the road to growth and spiritual healing. Although I'm not sure I knew that at the time, and then the next step was that I helped organized the West Plano Presbyterian Church which included knocking on doors and talking to people.

Q. I see. So it sounds like you were compelled to starting reading the Bible more often?

A. Well, that came in the later years.

Q. That came in later years?

A. Yeah, yeah.

Q. Well, then you had the self-help books that were helping you and then you later became more involved in Bible study or your own Bible study?

A. Not particularly, not then.

Q. Okay.

A. This was later like at this church that I was in called Old Nation Mission Church. We studied, it was called the Disciple's Bible study and it went for probably 8 to 10 weeks, maybe 12 weeks, I'm not real sure, and then I was in another study at that same

church, and I guess that's --and then when I was younger in church we did, you know, Sunday school classes. Not real young, but say I was married but we did Bible study.

Q. Well, let's sort of clarify though how the divorce --

A. Well, the Bible did not help me during the divorce.

Q. Did not help you.

A. I was too angry.

Q. Too angry?

A. I was angry at my husband. I was angry -- I guess I took it out on the church.

Q. I see, okay.

A. Like I said, I didn't dart in the church for four years.

Q. For four years. I got it, okay.

A. As far as growth was concerned and having good self-esteem and feeling good about myself, until you love yourself you can't love anyone else.

Q. I see. I got it. That's so true. Okay. My next question would be: what aspect of your life do you attribute to God taking charge of you or having taken hold of you?

A. That's a difficult question because I was born and raised, growing up in a church and there were-- when you were a teenager -- after the Presbyterian church, I joined a Unity Church and that's not Unitarian Church, its Unity, and then if you want to call them sermons, and Bible study there, prayer groups there and I believe that's when I -- and I was older, too, you know I wasn't real, real young when I felt that God was in control of my life and I read books, and one of them was -- I can't remember the name of it, because I'm not real good on remembering the names or authors, but it was like what is God's purpose for your life.

Q. Did you find your purpose?

A. I'm still looking and I pray a lot "please God let me know what my purpose is" and other people have said, it's this, this and this, but I don't see it.

Q. Okay. The next set of questions begins with: can you describe how significant relationships during your life have helped you to grow as a Christian?

A. Okay. My first husband he wasn't-- I mean he became a Presbyterian minister later in our relationship. In our lives together, we were working with the teenagers in the church and he started to go to college you know on a GI bill; he found out unless you have a Bachelor, a divinity degree. That helped me in seminary, you know, I was in the group of wives, groups called the pastor pushers and we would get together for Bible study and support. It was sort of like a support group and we spent many hours together with the other wives just while our husbands were studying. They had to take Greek and Hebrew studying and some of them would do that together so that whole experience was a journey I would call it. Then he was called to a little church to minister: quit preaching what people want to hear, preach the gospel and I will always remember that, and then my daughter worked in the Head Start Program.

Q. And the groups that T. I.[unclear] and working on the church camp throughout as kind of a camp counselor all gave you some relationships that helped you grow over the years; is that right?

A. That is correct.

Q. Okay. All right, can you say--

A. And then my second husband, we were married 28 years, when he got cancer and we thought we had it licked and it came back with a vengeance and he died and I did an

awful lot of praying during that time, and still do, and I still miss him and it's been ten years but he died when he was 58 in 1998, so he was younger than I was, but he always said that he wasn't going to live long and it's interesting because his grandparents and his mother and father lived --- I don't know whether you ever had anyone close to you die and that was the first one that I -- I wasn't real fond of my mother and father so you know their deaths didn't affect me real strongly, so I guess after he died I wasn't afraid of death, anymore. If I had been afraid of death, because I knew I would get to be with him again, and I don't believe you don't get to be with God until you die because I believe God is present in my life right here and now and always.

Q. Okay. So what I am going to shift to now is talking about your spiritual practices: earlier you talked about reading the Bible and going to Bible study and talked about the groups you were in. Do you have any spiritual practices now?

A. Yeah, but when I was in high school at that time you could take-- study the Old Testament at your church and get high school credit, and so I did that and I can still spout out the books of the Old Testament in case you are interested.

Q. I'll trust you on that.

A. And then after that you can take the New Testament and get high school credit and so I did that.

Q. You've done a lot of reading?

A. Reading at home. So it's just kind of a continuous thing, like I said, I can't tell you every day of my life I sat down and read the Bible, I did not.

Q. Okay. Do you find -- do you feel like you're living in God's will?

A. Well, I'm not sure I can tell what God's will is, but that's kind of like what is God's purpose, what is God's purpose for your life. All I can say is I'm trying to.

Q. And I think my last question is do you think of yourself as a child of God or a spiritual mentor?

A. Both.

Q. Can you say, why?

A. Probably not, but I definitely believe I'm a child of God, that we are all children of God, he's our creator, and I'm not sure that I can give you any examples of that right now.

#### TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

This is an interview given by Xolani Kacela with "Larry." My first question is:

Q. Can you tell me about an experience where you felt God's presence up close and personal?

A. An experience where I felt God's presence.

Q. Yes, sir.

A. I have to guess. Well, let's see, about ten years ago I had a major accident, and my car ran out in a creek and I felt like there was a super power intervention and that I came out of it without any major injuries.

Q. Can you say how you discerned that God was with you then?

A. Yes, I think it could have been much much worse because it was a tragic thing where the accelerator got stuck in my car and couldn't stop and ran into the trees and fences

and then ran off into a creek about 40 feet below, so it was water up into the windshield in the car, and so yes I felt that was a spiritual intervention.

Q. Did your faith in God change as a result of that accident in any way?

A. Yes. I think so, I haven't had any, you know, other high moments, much of my experiences have been kind of on an even level playing ground, but it's been moments that I felt, I felt the presence of God of the faith, or I guess spiritual intervention.

Q. So would you say that for you God's presence has been a steady influence versus something that happens only when you have these intense experiences?

A. Yes. I think that's fair because of my experiences; coming from my military experiences some of the crazy things that I did, and as I look back on it, it had to be some force or somebody's prayers or something that was affecting me, because I had no regard for my own safety I guess you could say.

Q. I see. Well, it sounds like you had some relationships also that are working on your behalf. You say that you had other people praying for you and divine interventions, would you say that is an accurate statement?

A. Yes, very much so, because in my younger days, I was not engaged in any spiritual activity or anything and there were a lot of things that I went through; there had to be divine intervention or somebody's prayers.

Q. Would you say those prayers or those relationships helped you discover God?

A. Yes.

Q. Or the Christian life?

A. Right, and I think another thing that may have made a major difference in my life. When my son was born I was overseas in Germany at the time, just me and my wife and

no family around and when he was born, to me it seemed like the world was just not the same anymore, that it wasn't -- well, really I felt like the world wasn't good enough for my son and the only force I could see that was standard and reliable was the Christian experience and church and so I begin to attend church at this point. Well, my first experience was to go to church once a month at least and look respectable and all that sort of thing.

Q. Okay. So your son's birth brought you an awareness that the Christian experience was the only steady thing that was going on in your life, I understand you saying, and can you say how you knew about the Christian experience, you say you went to church, but was there any other aspect that you knew of, heard of, or had direct encounter with that you relied on or felt back on?

A. Well, let's see, my biological mother died when I was about four so I was raised a while by my great-great grandmother and at that time they every week-- that was yeah, I was about four and something. We had to go to Sunday school every Sunday. I can remember that. Then when my father married again we went and stayed with him and so we didn't attend church very much, only occasionally, but my new mother always taught us to pray and so we had to say our prayers and learn the Lord's Prayer, that sort of thing. So I was always aware of the Christian experience even though I didn't go to church - that caused me to believe in God and things like that, and so I had to pray when I had difficult experiences and things like that.

Q. Okay. For you then the Christian experience or the formation of your Christian identity begin when you were four going to bible school and praying and learning about Christian life then and things like that and then when your father remarried you were



out of the church and then later on you remembered that experience and that brought you back to church?

A. Right.

Q. Okay.

A. And then I guess I can say, well, when I came out of service. Moving to a new neighborhood, a new church, a new pastor and while I grew up Baptist and this was a Methodist Church. Reverend Van Holmes, you might have heard of him.

Q. I know Van.

A. Well, he was one of the first pastors that really influenced me in becoming more involved in church, because I attended the church of course, and I attended very faithfully and he would visit my home after each one of those services and talked with me and I never had that kind of experience and he was always available and when something happened in your life, like when my daughter was born, that sort of thing. So that got me much more closer, and I see begin to attend regular and begin to do some work.

Q. Would you say that Pastor Holmes was a role model for you in terms of your Christian life?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay?

A. And I --

Q. Go ahead, you can go ahead.

A. What? You were broken up?

Q. No, I said; go ahead you can finish your sentence.

A. Oh, I was going to say since I was talking about the pastor or the people who have made a difference in my life my Christian experience and Reverend Reed has made quite a difference.

Q. Sarah Reed?

A. Yeah. I taught disciple classes, bible classes and I took about three or four of those classes under her, and from that experience I learned to enjoy reading the Bible. I had never studied it before. It never made sense to me before, and from that experience I begin to get more serious about church and reading the Bible; it finally became enjoyable to me to read after that.

Q. And so it sounds like you had named a couple of spiritual practices, like going to church, visiting with your pastor, reading the Bible, going to Bible study. Do you have any other spiritual practices that you participate in on a regular basis, and if you don't have any others that is fine, I just wanted to ask you if you had any others?

A. No. I-- well, I go to Sunday school now. I started attending Sunday school, and that was good for me, you know I joined this church for years and preached sermons, and I don't get any as far as the Bible, I didn't gain anything going into church and listening to the preacher preach when I begin to study the Bible, like Sunday School, and the disciple classes that's where my -- I really developed a more real Christianity and the Christian experience became real to me.

Q. Well, since Reverend Steel referred you, she referred you because she thought you were a person of deep faith. I'm wondering do you feel like you are a mentor for other people, now?

A. Say that again?

Q. I'm wondering whether you are -- you consider yourself as a mentor for other people, a mentor in faith, a faith mentor of some sort. Reverend Steel said that you are a person of deep faith and matured faith, and I'm wondering whether you have begun to see yourself as one who mentors other people in the Christian faith.

A. Well, I'm not sure. I'm not one to go out and solicit people to come in. I just try to be a positive example in some of what I do that may be attractive but as part of recruiting I'm not a person that does a lot of that.

Q. What about say, encouraging people?

A. Yes. I encourage people, and I tell them, I encourage them to pray. I encourage people who have faith and believe, but I don't campaign or --

Q. I got it. You don't evangelize or door knock or do that sort of thing?

A. No.

Q. And have you discovered what your purpose in life is?

A. Well, that's a good question, and that was hard too, for me, as my therapist, and I think -- is to --let me see how to say it, I think it's just to be a role model, live a certain life, and be honest and fair, and treat people right, and be helpful to people, whatever I can.

Q. Okay?

A. Does that make sense?

Q. Yes, sir, it makes sense.

A. So, on a personal relationship it means a whole lot. It means a lot. You know, talk to groups but you have to interact individually I think.

Q. Right?

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION.

This is an interview with “Annie” and “Lynn” on October 22, 2007.

Q. As an adult what experience have you had where you felt that God was directly present in your life up close and personal or another way to put it is can you name an experience where you felt you had direct contact with God?

A. (1st lady) I can. We had our family established with two sons and I went to church one day and I looked up and was looking for my children, you know, my son's there and my other son was back there with some friends, and I look forward and there was a little girl with blond hair with my son, and I said, that's my daughter, and then I stopped because I didn't have a daughter at that time. I went home and ask my husband what he would think about adoption, and he got this great big smile and said, I've just been waiting for you to be ready. So it took us about a year to go through all the process of adoption, and then they told us we had to wait four to five years before actually getting a child, and I had a little bit of problems with my son when he was born, and so I was kind of afraid of having a baby again. They called us within three weeks and said we have a baby a month old at this point in time. Would you like to have this child? My heart was racing and everything was happening, and I got down on my knees and I said, Lord you need to let me know if I can handle this because I don't want to bring a child into this home if I can't handle it, and everything -- I mean in seconds flat just went calm, cool, and collected and that to me I felt the whole presence of the Lord just laying his hands on me, just saying that's a good thing to do.

(PAUSE IN TAPE)

When I got up, I had a hunger in me to know God like never before, when I began to read the word of God, and to ask God questions like, Katherine Pullman says, "God is more real than you are" and this is when God really began to work in my life, and all I wanted to do was to be alone with him. I had a part time job. I was babysitting a little bit and that's when I begin to follow the word and be in prayer. (It was) All I wanted to do. As God was showing me so many things in scriptures and circumstances, but mainly, I started reading the scriptures, and that's when I began to grow. My trust began to develop where -- to the point where I totally surrendered to whatever he wanted me to do. I read the "Purpose Driven Life" book and I felt him saying you need to share this with people.

Now, when I was alone with God, I went through a period of over a year, and I said, Lord, I just want to be with you, and one day the Lord said, you're being selfish, you need to get out and share your testimony with other people, and I wasn't really happy about that, but I got happy. Cause there's fulfillment and there's peace when you do what God wants you to do.

Q. What aspect of your life do you attribute to God taking charge or talking hold of you?

A. I had always wanted to be a nurse from the time I was probably eight or ten years old, and I was the youngest in the family, and was kind of told -- I really wasn't able to do anything. I was too young to do this, and too young to do that. I was literally too scared to go be a nurse, which the whole ideal petrified me, and my husband -- somebody challenged me when I was in my late 30s. Well, we need -- we need camp nurses, for, you know, church camps, and I thought, I could do that -- that's not going to be too hard. So that was my -- the Lord directed me that I could just go. We had an uncle living with us and he left us some

money so that I could go to Baylor which made it close, which made it easier. My husband was such a -- he was just my support and help and everything and so, I mean, I felt like the Lord was directing me. I felt like the Lord was leading me, and not until a year before this, did I actually do what I said I was going to do at the beginning.

(Pause in tape).

I had to stop in Des Moines; went to prayer service that night, and the prayer service that night was "How does the Lord direct you to certain places?"

(Pause in tape)

Q. In the relationships that you've had you both have talked about crises that God has helped you through, and the interesting thing about that part is out of your crises how would you say your faith as changed?

A. Oh, my, I can answer that one.

Q. Okay.

A. I was very-- even though I was a Christian, when I was first married, I lost a baby full-term, and I was very materialistic. I had to have new furniture. I wanted a certain house and I wanted this and that, and I was very -- trying to keep up with the Joneses, okay. But after I lost this baby, which I told the Lord he could have if it was His will, because I didn't want to bring any baby into the world that would not grow up and trusting in the Savior and to serve. And anyway after I lost that baby, I almost lost my life, also. I -- the medication reacted when I've gone through Labor and Delivery over in Delivery Opt and I had no blood pressure and blacked out. They poked, poked me with needles and I wouldn't come to and they did do something that got me back and after that I realized that my greatest possessions were people, my children, my living children. People think you can't -- you can take the

heaven with you and my life just turned around to be more centered toward God and relationships and in trusting him in all the circumstances.

Q. Describe how the significant relationships during your life have shaped you; how you considered yourself to be a Christian.

(Pause in tape)

A. To patients that want us to pray with them, but I will tell you, if there were a couple of patients that I had that surprised me because when I prayed for them, they turned around and prayed for me, and that was so strengthening, knowing that they were on hospice -- and they knew their end time was coming and yet they were praying for strength for me, and that really changed my way of thinking about what the Lord can do in people's lives, and they weren't ever going to give up and to keep on sharing the gospel with whoever came into their home and that was impressive. Well, I've had people, other Christians, that encouraged me from the teaching and things that they have learned that the other people have taught me and that kept me going on to share.

Q. You finished?

A. Yeah.

Q. So the next question would be, you've been described both as persons of deep faith and persons that are matured in faith and can you say that -- you've already answered that -- how relationships in church, religious relationships have influenced your faith?

A. Sharing stuff but through all the involvement in that church I wasn't, but in this church the women were allowed and were much involved in coming up and giving prayer and sermon as anybody else in the church but I didn't preach, but I did learn to pray and give testimony of things that had happened and people are very accepting and when you do that

and you get to listen to other people give their testimony-- and that is one of the things I missed in the church I am in now, they don't have prayer and testimony service on Wednesday night, and I didn't realize how much I missed that, because we miss the small thing you know, testimony don't have to be this big, huge, horrendous life changing event, but it's a small recognition sometimes of how God's working is in your life and how he has made a change and I've missed that, and that is what I've missed about the small groups, and just listening to people pray or to give a testimony, because we forget all the little things to thank the Lord for.

Q. I like that. So the worshiping service would be more of an incentive to teaching and learning?

A. Correct, yeah.

Q. And being in the groups listening to testimony to confirm and affirm what God is doing in your life --

A. And to share that.

Q. --and share it.

A. More than I could ever do before.

Q. (2nd lady) that's a tough one. I am trying to think. My husband and I went to Bible school and that was the community Christian Bible school and with the experiences and being with others and being in the word we were able to grow and to share. We were able to develop a relationship and you know we trust one another and pray for one another to be okay, and to let me preacher?? -- transpire (inaudible) and all I can say I believe that God puts you in a certain place at certain times in divine appointments and God will bless you and use others to grow you in turn you are to grow others and help them to learn. God loves us



absolutely once we become his child and in his family he is not just going to drop us, you know, I believe you can remove yourself from his family if you do so willfully by continuing in sin, you know, God-- why should we continue to sin when Jesus, that's exactly what he died for, to save us from, and --but anyway, God has just been there for me to bless me and I mean he continues to discipline, because the Bible says whom God loves he is going to chasten that we might be servant son or daughter that is cleaving to him and so that's my whole life is to please the Lord, and, like I say the word of God-- now, that is not saying that I've not been in church. I've always been in church, even though my family from a young age, my mother did not go to church. I just had a grandmother that kind of tugged at my heart strings to go, and I mean, I'm just walking, eight years old I'm walking to church and taking my brothers and sisters with me. The ones I could and I just believe it was none of my doing. It was just -- the church and of course a lot of our growth in the later years it's being alone with God and going through trials and things and able to give those to God and then he'll bless and show you his purpose, not always, but when you learn the word of God, because that's where our strength is. Knowledge comes from the word, then we put our faith and our trust in him helps to develop us more.

Q. You've given some good answers. Describe your faith practices that you often engage in.

A. I'm only chuckling because of this job here that potential, but other than that, try to go in Sundays, Sunday school, church, would like to be in the choir, but I'm too tired to stay up for choir practice and to get there early enough for Sunday, go run through it quickly. So our practice, my husband and I have done this very often, probably for five years now, where we have to go through the bible in a year thing. Go through it day by day by day and

we've gone through that, and every time I think I should know it all by now. Something new, some new inspiration shows up from that, and I'll say did we read that last year? And yeah, he's read, you know, my husband is the Bible scholar. He was, pastor for I don't how many years, he loves to -- he loves history. So not only does he do the pastor, you know, knows the bible but he knows all the history too, that goes with that period of time. So he can make it come alive. So sometimes they have to back off-- get him to back off and say I like to read this, I don't need the historical significance right now, you know. Then it becomes a teacher/student and that is not how I want to do this. I want us to do it as equals reading the bible.

Q. Do you ever see your work as nurses as spiritual practices in any way?

A. Oh yeah. There's people when you go there and you just say something like, would you mind it if I pray, and you just watch a whole countenance change, oh I would love that, and you know that there's ways to confront them--not to confront them, but they know they're not doing well. They know things aren't going well, but there are ways of doing it in but you are strong in the spirit and especially if you know that. I mean you just don't go up to someone you've never met and do that.

Q. What do you believe to be your purpose in life? And the second part of it is how your faith influenced the answers here?

A. My purpose in life is to bring glory to God, give him praise and worship and to become like the character of his son Jesus, and that the flesh would die, the desires and lust of the flesh would die and that Jesus would shine through.

Q. That is pretty good.

A. (2nd lady) Ditto.

Q. Do you think of yourselves as a child of God?

A. (Both ladies) absolutely.

Q. Okay. Another part, do you see yourselves as modeling a Christian life for others?

A. Try. Part falling off, part failing sometimes.

A. (2nd lady) Oh you know I think you can try. I think you are going to stumble.

We aren't perfect. We aren't like Christ so I think you can try. We all, you know fall --

Q. Short of the Glory?

A. That's the word that I was definitely looking for. But he did leave a pattern and so, that is the pattern we need to follow and I think --

Q. You think you try to --

A. Try to be like Christ and I think that is why we have to go to the bible and you have to read and you read good books and not all of them, you know, the Bible is one good book and there maybe other good books, like "The Purpose Driven Life" to read too, and so you find good books and you read them and get some inspiration to help you be more like Christ and what God wants you to be.

Q. That concludes our interview.