

HOW SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT INTERACT WITH AGING

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ABSTRACT: Transpersonal gerontology focuses on factors associated with growth in (a) ability to perceive the spiritual elements of all types of human experiences, (b) capacity to perceive from a vantage point in higher levels of consciousness, and (c) openness to experiences of connection with all of being. The term spirituality refers to an inner field of human experience. It is a capacity that can grow enormously over time. Many of the most spiritually developed human beings are older men and women. Most adults have had experiences they would label spiritual, and most see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. Spirituality has great potential as a vital region of continued psychological growth throughout adulthood but especially in old age. Successive personal narratives of the spiritual journey are excellent sources for studying these factors.

If transpersonal psychology is about integrating spiritual and self-transcendent experiences into psychology, then gerontology—the study of aging—is a field within which transpersonal psychology could be expected to have a very strong impact. For thousands of years, old age has been recognized as a stage of life in which many people reach their peak of spiritual¹ perceptiveness, self-transcendence, and sense of connection with the ground of being. My book, *Spirituality and Aging* (Atchley, 2009), makes exactly this case. This article extends the work of my book by connecting it with transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal gerontology focuses on factors associated with growth in (a) ability to perceive the spiritual elements of all types of human experiences, (b) capacity to perceive from a vantage point in higher levels of consciousness, and (c) openness to experiences of connection with all of being. The term spirituality refers to an inner field of human experience. It is a capacity that can grow enormously over time. Many of the most spiritually developed human beings are older men and women. Most adults have had experiences they would label spiritual, and most see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. Spirituality has great potential as a vital region of continued psychological growth throughout adulthood.

First and foremost, spirituality is a region of experience. Without our own inner experience of the spiritual region of life, talk about spirituality is akin to science fiction. One can imagine what spiritual experience might be like, but by no means is it the same thing as having the experience.

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Here are some responses from my interviews:

As I thought about [what makes an experience spiritual], I began to wonder if any experiences are *not* spiritual. If being spiritual is part of our nature, maybe even the central part, which I believe it is, then as long as we are being, there is a spiritual element. Whether we are aware of them [this] is another thing. *Man, age 92*

Life is more and more spiritual all the time. I have an ongoing experience of being part of a network. It is the backdrop to everything. Sometimes it is faint, almost not there, when I deal with the logistics of everything that I am part of and that is part of me. This “tuning in” has become easier since I moved out of the city. *Woman, age 52*

As a viewpoint or vantage point, spirituality can take three basic forms: intense awareness of the present, transcendence of the personal self, or a feeling of connection with the ground of being—variously conceived as all of life, the universe, a supreme being, a great web of being, and many other conceptions. Most people grow into these perspectives in a succession or upward spiral of increasing understanding we call spiritual development or spiritual growth. Some come to recognize that these vantage points are interrelated and can reside in awareness simultaneously.

The concept of a spiritual journey refers to an individual’s personal narrative about her or his spiritual life and development, including its ups and downs. This narrative usually includes a history of experiences, actions, and insights connected with a search for spiritual meaning and understanding. Underlying the spiritual journey is an intentional process of seeking spiritual experiences, using values and insights informed by spiritual experience to make life choices, and learning from experience with this process. Spiritual journeys also involve learning to persist and be content on a journey into imperfectly known territory, where insights are always limited, no matter how profound they seem at the time. People who have been on a spiritual journey for decades usually have developed a sense of humor about the contradictions and paradoxes they encounter, even as they use these enigmas as food for contemplation. People usually learn not to force the issue. Waiting is an important spiritual practice among elders—not “waiting for” but just waiting. In the space created by patient waiting or contemplation, direct connection with the ground of being may be more likely.

Most spiritual journeys involve elements of commitment, self-discipline, and regular spiritual practice. Some people believe that we become what we think, but there is evidence that we are more likely to become what we do (Walsh, 1999). Returning to spiritual practice over and over again creates habits of mind, habits of body, and habits of being that come to seem natural. If these practices are part of an open context of spiritual seeking, these habits can become enlivening. To many advanced spiritual practitioners, every day appears as a new day. Spiritual practices are things done on a regular basis to celebrate, appreciate, invite, or act on experiences of presence, transcending the

personal self, and connecting directly with the ground of being. Many types of meditation and prayer, devotional rituals and music, inspirational reading and reflection, and movement-oriented spiritual disciplines can be mixed and matched to support a contemplative, practice-oriented spirituality.

Considerable evidence supports the idea that spiritual concerns, experience, and development become increasingly important for many people in middle and later life. This evidence is found in the narratives of individuals as well as in social science surveys (Atchley & Barusch, 2004). Beginning around age 35 or 40, as age increases, so does the proportion of people who are consciously involved in an inner exploration of the meaning of their existence and their relation to the universe. Albert Winseman (2003) reported that adults age 65 or older were more than twice as likely to see themselves as spiritually committed than were adults 45 to 54. Spiritually committed people are often engaged in spiritual practices that heighten the possibility of numinous, mystical experience. In addition, those who experience transcendent, non-personal levels of consciousness often feel called to serve, and spiritually rooted service takes many forms.

We usually experience spirituality not in an inner vacuum of pure existence but in the context of acting in some way, even if that action is deep contemplation while sitting relatively still. Undoubtedly, pure being is present underneath everything we do. If we were not experiencing being, at least in the background of our awareness, then how could we experience anything else?

The spiritual journey can be seen as a quest for balance between being and doing. In the process of learning to function in the social worlds into which we are born—family, work, community, society, and so on—many people become overly focused on acting within the context of socially defined positions and roles, their attention is absorbed by this social world, and they lose sight of the liberating qualities of being that are there also. We learn to identify with our niches, actions, and lifestyles rather than with our more fundamental being. The spiritual journey is often about learning to bring *being* back into consciousness. People are often motivated toward this sort of journey by their feeling that something is missing from their conventional role-centered lives. For many people, learning to bring being back into consciousness introduces a healthy distance from, and perspective on, social roles and also a needed element of creativity and spontaneity to one's lived experience.

The essence of fully developed spirituality is an intense aliveness and deep understanding that one intuitively comprehends as coming from a direct, internal link with that mysterious principle that connects all aspects of the universe. As fully awakened spiritual beings, people feel their interconnectedness with everything. In most spiritual traditions, mysticism lies at the heart of spirituality. Mysticism refers to transcendent, contemplative experiences that enhance spiritual understanding.

Humans are notoriously susceptible to self-deception, so how do we know that mystical clarity is real? This is why many spiritual traditions counsel dialogue

with a circle of sages to identify and deal with ego-based self-deception. The realized sage is one whose inner process always leads back to a core of being that is free of personal considerations. But our society generally lacks a framework for identifying sages and giving us the opportunity to get their counsel (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995).

So, why do most elders experience turning inward and a profound shift toward dwelling in higher levels of consciousness? Few perspectives on psychological development recognize the interactions between aging, life stage, and spiritual development. Two that do are Erik Erikson's stages of psycho-social development and Lars Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence.

Erikson's theory (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986) presumes that as we grow, achieve maturity, and age, we confront a predictable set of developmental dilemmas associated with each life stage we enter. For Erikson, spiritual development begins in middle age with a development of generativity—a concern for the well-being of younger generations—which balances our self-absorption. In later adulthood we develop wisdom to balance integrity and despair. Integrity is being able to stand back from the mosaic of one's multitude of characteristics and life experiences, both positive and negative, and see this mosaic as an interconnected whole. To do this, we have to be able to look directly at our negative qualities and life experiences, accept them, and move on into being who we are (Hillman, 1999). If we cannot do this, then negative personal qualities and experiences can drag us into despair. Having practice adopting a transpersonal vantage point is a key asset in this balancing process.

Spirituality finds its way into Erikson's framework through the gradual emergence of a type of consciousness that results in a "heightened awareness that can by no means be claimed by the usual 'ego'" (1986, p. 51). Erikson defined this as a special kind of "I," which could be called a transpersonal "I am."

Using Erikson's framework, one can see that the young adult's quest for intimacy, the middle-aged person's concern for generativity, and the older person's concern for transcendent wisdom as involving successive increases in capacity to stand outside one's own self-centered agendas and feel connection and concern for things larger than oneself. This capacity is rooted in existential spirituality. The "sense of 'I' in old age still has a once-for-all chance of transcending time-bound identities and sensing, if only in the simplest terms, an all-human and existential identity which world religions have attempted to create" (p. 53).

For Erikson, wisdom is the result of balancing integrity and despair in old age, realizing that both are part of life at that stage. Wisdom is one of those words that we use as if everyone knows what it means, but it is hard to define. Wisdom is revered, but what is it that we revere? In my opinion we revere the ability to respond to a situation with clarity, compassion, deep understanding, broad knowledge, deep listening, and well-honed interpersonal skills. This is no

small skill set, and it rests in two main domains: well-contemplated life experience and transpersonal consciousness. It is this contemplative, transpersonal mental space that sets wise elders apart.

However, wisdom does not just appear. It results from practice. When situations ask for wisdom, the spiritually mature are more likely to be able to respond, mainly because they have been willing to act as a wise person in the past and have been asked to be wise before. When we are asked for our wisdom, it demands that we be able to go to a transpersonal place within our consciousness from which we can manifest the characteristics of wisdom. This process has been going on in humans for thousands of years.

Here is an example. In his mid-eighties, William projects an air of robust good health. He attends a worship group regularly, but rarely speaks. Yet he constantly serves as a living example of what it means to be radiantly at peace. He is comfortable with his spiritual nature, and it shows in his clear, soft voice, bright gray eyes, and ready smile. There is a serenity about William's being that many people in the group have remarked on. There is also a sense that the group is missing an important presence when William is not there.

Gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) asserts that spiritual development gradually and steadily increases from middle age onward and results in a shift from a materialistic, role-oriented life philosophy to a transcendent, spiritual perspective in late old age. According to Tornstam, gerotranscendence is present to some extent in most aging adults, but becomes a prevalent metaperspective mainly in adults over 70. Gerotranscendence varies within the older population because it can be promoted or stifled by social factors such as language, normative constraints, opportunity structures, social class and education. Evidence generally supports these various assertions (Atchley, 2009; Sherman, 2010).

The broadened spiritual perspective that typifies mature gerotranscendence has three dimensions. In the cosmic dimension, concepts such as life, death, space and time are seen as involving an element of mystery and are seen against a backdrop of infinity. In the self-transcendent dimension, the personal self is no longer the center of attention, and there is increased honesty and acceptance about the personal self. In the social selectivity dimension, relationships focus mainly on close friends and family, and much less energy is spent relating to casual acquaintances and strangers, with a consequent increase in solitude and less emphasis on pro forma role playing. Attitudes toward material possessions shift from acquisition to maintaining the bare essentials for a comfortable life. Social selectivity leads to a much more thoughtful, contemplative stance toward relationships, activities, and lifestyles.

When I first began to lose my hearing, I was frustrated that I could no longer effortlessly participate in things. I often didn't know what was going on because I couldn't hear the discussion or directions or whatever. I tried reading lips but never really got the hang of it. Then I began trying to simply be" with people—to merely be there with them, to look gently into their eyes,

to sense their energy. It was an amazingly pleasant experience, and I would often smile a little, which seemed to make people relax. My world is mostly silent now, and I have lots of friends to guide me through it safely. *Man, age 85*

When I was a boy, I attended a boarding school where we spent great energy memorizing psalms. Now I am old, hard of hearing, and blind, and I find great pleasure in being able to recall these psalms from my memory. I sometimes feel moved to recite a psalm for friends, and I am so at home with the text that I feel I can go beyond the text to touch the source from which the psalms came. *Man, age 89*

So, what stimulates new cycles of spiritual development? For Erikson it is the demands of a new life stage. For Tornstam transcendence is an inexorable inner magnet that, absent sociocultural or personal hindrance, draws people to it more and more as they move into later life. For me (Atchley, 2009), cycles of spiritual development are responses to events and reflections in individual lives—a parent dies, divorce happens, we confront a major health problem, on reflection we feel that something is missing in life, we feel attraction to new spiritual experience, we feel that there must be more to life. The variety of circumstances that can lead to spiritual seeking is enormous and highly individual. Once interest in spiritual growth is awakened, people can go through periods of learning, practice, contemplation, integration, and intention. Cycles usually end with a new or renewed sense of spiritual direction. In this view, spiritual development is creative and improvisational, and the individual is ultimately in charge.

Contemplation exponentially grows more important for many people as they age. When elders are “just sitting,” we are quick to assume that there is nothing going on, but we may be badly wrong. I had the following conversation with an 80-year-old woman:

“There are times when you seem to be in a far-off place in your mind,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Is it a pleasant place?” I asked.

“Oh my, yes” she said.

“Can you tell me what it is like?” I asked.

She replied, “Words don’t describe it. It’s warm and cozy. Thoughts come and go, but are of no importance. I feel completely at peace.”

No wonder she liked to have her contemplative time in the afternoons. We should be careful not to assume that everyone needs to be busy all the time. Contemplative time is important, too.

So, how do we study spiritual development? Erikson relied mostly on case study methods to create his framework, whereas Tornstam did extensive survey

research on elders in several countries. My own research is based partly on 20 years of longitudinal panel data but only for a limited number of questions. Most of my good ideas and evidence came from listening to or reading more than 500 responses to a very general question: “Tell me, how did you become the spiritual being you are today?”

My ideal data set would contain accounts of spiritual journeys beginning early in adulthood with an update near every decade birthday. With such data it might be possible to overcome some of the problems with retrospective accounts. The main problem with retrospective accounts is that the past is very malleable and history is very revisionist, especially for elders.

I prefer individual accounts of the spiritual journey for several reasons. First, the accounts are in the language of the specific individual, and I believe Kelly (1955) was correct in his assertion that while we may seem to be using the same language, in fact we attach so many personal meanings to each word that it takes a lot of context to understand another’s meaning. Second, with concepts such as spiritual experience and spirituality, triangulation of language is one of the best techniques for understanding how someone conceives of a field. Third, narratives of the spiritual journey are highly individualized reflections of personal values and constructions of life events and circumstances. If free to construct their own narratives, individuals provide a richness of context and process that is very difficult to find with structured interviews and questionnaires. Fourth, how people construct their spiritual journey narrative is in itself important data. It reveals much about how people interpret their spiritual experiences. Since spirituality is ultimately a subjective experience, subjective methods are very apropos.

Spiritual experience, spiritual development, and transpersonal states of consciousness are mostly absent from gerontology research, education, and practice today. This represents a tremendous opportunity for transpersonal psychology to fulfill an important part of its promise.

How Am I Living and Practicing Transpersonal Gerontology? Author’s Note

I have been interested in spiritual experience since I was a young boy, but my conscious spiritual journey did not begin until the mid-1970s, when I was about 35. I was director of a large gerontology center, author of several books, a full professor with tenure, and award-winning teacher. The rest of my life was successful and “on-schedule” in terms of personal, family and community involvement. Yet I felt that there had to be more to life than this, and I embarked on a spiritual quest. Ever the academic, I began with a systematic search of the literature in the field of spirituality, and I found this field rich in perspectives and insights but also confusing. In addition to reading, I took numerous workshops and retreats concerning human potential, Hindu and Buddhist meditation and philosophy, and journeying inward. This subjective work helped me a great deal to understand the many layers of my consciousness.

I was struck by the extent to which research and teaching about adult development and aging had ignored spiritual concerns. Many people I interviewed in my research on adaptation to aging and encountered on my personal spiritual journey were elders who had been consciously nurturing their spiritual capacities for many decades and for whom spirituality was a strong motivating force in their lives, a significant anchor for their lifestyle decision making, and an important resource in coping with what life brought. Yet these elders were invisible, missing from what was being studied or taught in gerontology and adult development.

In the summers of 1978 and 1979, I spent several weeks in Bombay, India, engaging in dialogues with the noted Indian sage Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a master of Advaita Vedanta but who taught from an existentialist perspective. I returned from India fully in touch with my own present-moment awareness, non-personal consciousness, and contemplative consciousness. I began from then to practice *being* in these realms of consciousness as much as possible. This continues to be a difficult but very rewarding spiritual path for me.

By 1980, I had collected enough scholarly material on spiritual development to begin to include this subject in my graduate course on adult psychological development. I also began to include questions on spirituality in my twenty-year longitudinal study of adaptation to aging (Atchley, 1999). Steadily, for more than a decade, I developed fluency with the emerging non-religious vocabulary on spirituality, because I saw this language as a key for communicating about spirituality while avoiding the experience of division that often accompanies the use of religious concepts and language about spirituality in interfaith or secular settings.

In 1992, I attended a conference called “Conscious Aging,” which was sponsored by the Omega Institute and featured speakers such as Ram Dass and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi from the world of spiritual awakening and development and Maggie Kuhn, Rick Moody and Thomas Cole from the world of gerontology. I was invited by Omega to be part of a think tank on “The Future of Conscious Aging,” in the summer of 1995. I went on to present my perspectives on spiritual development in workshops with both Ram Dass and Reb Zalman in the late 1990s.

During that same time period I also began publishing my ideas about spirituality and spiritual development. I published articles on spiritual development and wisdom, the everyday nature of mysticism in later life, and the relationship between spirituality and aging. I also published the results of my longitudinal study, which showed that the importance of spiritual development grew as people in the panel aged (Atchley, 1999).

I mention this background to make three points: (a) I have been working in gerontology for more than 40 years and in the field of spirituality and spiritual development for more than 30 years, (b) I have done a lot of researching, especially interviewing more than a thousand people, contemplating, and

writing about spiritual, spiritual development, and aging, and (c) I have learned much from the fires of criticism associated with my lengthy list of publications on these subjects.

I did not develop my ideas and language about spirituality and aging sitting in an “ivory tower.” I developed them using an open feedback system in which I read and reflected, interviewed and observed aging people, listened to sages, meditated, wrote summaries and tentative conclusions, took these imperfect insights out into the field and got feedback, and went back to the drawing board over and over. I have readjusted my intellectual frames of reference and information base many times over the course of this journey. A main challenge is to remain open to discovery. The more I can keep my attachments to my own ideas loose, the greater possibility for new clarity to appear. I am still practicing daily the integration of present-moment, non-personal, and cosmic consciousness.

During the period when my ideas were developing, I have myself grown older, of course. I was in my early 40s when I started writing and teaching about spiritual development, and as I write this I am 71. This is not a necessary qualification for understanding spirituality, spiritual development, and aging, but my personal experiences, especially integrating spirituality with “life,” have provided me with a depth and richness of experience that I am sure has made me a better, more tuned-in reader, listener, and participant. Living with the concepts and language for such a long time has affected what I perceive in texts I read, conversations I hear, and experiences I have. I am much more aware now of the layers that lie within texts and the high degree to which adequate interpretation of what one sees depends on deep background with the subject. I think it is no accident that, for centuries, philosophical and spiritual wisdom has mostly been the province of people with a lot of well-contemplated experience with the subject.

Parts of the text of this article are adapted from Atchley (2009).

ENDNOTE

¹There is no generally accepted word for the class of experiences that many people call “spiritual.” We use *spiritual* as a placeholder for this class of experiences, recognizing that the word carries negative connotations for a significant minority of Americans. Also, the English word *spiritual* cannot easily be translated to or from other languages. *Spiritual* is a sensitizing concept rather than a denotative concept. This means that it refers to a region of experience that covers a wide variety of types of experience. It does not denote a specific type of experience.

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Robert C. Atchley, Ph.D., is Distinguished Professor of Gerontology (emeritus) from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he served as director of the Scripps Gerontology Center (1974–1998). His gerontology interests include adult development and adaptation, spiritual development, and work and retirement. He is known for developing continuity theory, a widely-used framework for understanding individual adaptation to aging. He wrote the first best-selling textbook in social gerontology, currently in its 10th edition and was principal investigator in a 20-year NIMH-funded longitudinal study of adaptation to retirement and aging, the findings of which were published in his book, *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging* (1999).

Dr. Atchley was President of the American Society on Aging (1988 to 1990) served in numerous leadership positions in the Gerontological Society of America and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, and as associate editor, *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*, founding editor of the journal, *Contemporary Gerontology*. He is author of more than 100 articles and book chapters in the social gerontology literature, more than 200 op-ed pieces and more than two dozen books and research monographs, including *The Sociology of Retirement* (1976), *Aging: Continuity and Change* (1987), *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging: Creating Positive Experiences* (1999), and ten editions of his introductory gerontology text, *Social Forces and Aging* (2004). His latest book, *Spirituality and Aging* published by Johns Hopkins University press early in 2009, received the Richard Kalish Award for Innovation Publication from the Gerontological Society of America in 2009. He has received over a dozen awards for his scholarship, teaching, and professional service in the field of aging: the ASA Award and the Dychtwald Award from the American Society on Aging and three from the Behavioral and Social Sciences Section of the Gerontological Society of America: Career Achievement (1999), Mentoring (1994), and Innovative Publication (2009).

Spiritual experience, spiritual development, and transpersonal states of consciousness are mostly absent from gerontology research, education, and practice today. This represents a tremendous opportunity for transpersonal psychology to fulfill an important part of its promise. How Am I Living and Practicing Transpersonal Gerontology? Interest in spirituality and aging has increased recently, owing to overwhelming evidence of positive health outcomes linked to spirituality and religious participation. Increasing longevity in modern society puts spiritual needs of older adults at the forefront of societal priorities. Understanding individual spiritual perspectives becomes increasingly important, given the issues of loss, physical illness and mortality that are confronted in old age.