

OLDER PEOPLE'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This present study aims to explore the spiritual journey of older adults from childhood to later years. The study utilized a qualitative research design more specifically, a narrative approach since the study is focused on the stories told by individuals. A total of ten (10) participants from different backgrounds were asked to accomplish a spiritual life map followed by an interview at the participants' convenient time. The collected stories were arranged in a chronological order from their childhood years to old age to restore them in a framework that makes sense. The qualitative data analysis was both the description of the story and the themes that emerge from it. The restore was divided into three parts. The first part was "Laying the Foundation" which focused on their spirituality during childhood. The second part was "Amidst the Storm", which highlights their journey during adulthood. The last part entitled "To Flourish and Blossom" tells about their journey starting from their senior years to present including their relationship with a higher being. The identified significant themes across the life course were importance of having a religious role models or spiritual mentors to emulate and build meaningful relationships at an early age; positive and negative life events increase the person's spirituality; and prayers and personal devotions are keys to spiritual transcendence. Therefore, introduction to spirituality can occur at any given age and all are capable of spiritual growth.

Keywords: *spirituality, life change events, qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the spirituality among the older people, one needs to look at the beginning of their spiritual journey. The exploration of the person's rich experiences in life is a key to understanding the importance of one's spirituality. Spirituality has been recognized as a source of strength and hope among all age groups but more so among the older population (Stinson, 2013). This present study is critical in the process formation of spirituality from childhood to older adulthood as it explores the religious upbringing and factors that influence the person's spiritual journey using a narrative approach. Spirituality is considered to be a narrative process because it deals with meaning-making (Thompson & Randall, 1999).

It has been observed that the spiritual beliefs and religious practices of older people stem from what they observed, lived and practiced from their childhood years. This only shows that religious and spiritual practices evolved across the life span. Older adults recognized religion/spirituality as a number one priority in their lives (Emery & Pargament, 2004). Religious and spiritual experiences in the early stages of life are predictors of later adulthood's spirituality

because it helped in the development of internal spirituality like devotion, love, trust, and respect that were carried throughout their adult life (Stinson, 2013). In the same manner, the significance of religion in the lives of older adults, and the impact of godly and devoted parents or mentors were the two recurrent observations in one spiritual life review (Wong, 2010).

It is the purpose of this present study to explore the different starting points of spirituality that emerge not only from childhood but also from those who found meaning in life and have relationship with God in the later years of life. It aims to provide a generous discussion on how older adults establish a relationship with God and described the meaning behind the performance of spiritual and religious practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design to explore the beginning of one's spirituality. More specifically, a narrative inquiry was utilized because the study is focused on the stories told by individuals and their spiritual experiences. Narrative is referred to as a spoken or written text placed in a chronologically order as an account of events or actions (Creswell, 2006).

In recruiting potential participants, a convenient sampling was used. Inclusion criteria include being male or female, sixty years old and above, from any Christian denominations demonstrating normal mental functioning as assessed by the Short Portable Mental State Questionnaire (SPMSQ). It is also important that the participants were able to read and perform fine motor skills.

Steps were followed during the interview of the participants. First, the demographic profile of the participants was taken which include age, gender, civil, educational attainment, religious affiliation and family composition. Second, the participants were guided to construct a spiritual life map. For this study Hodge's spiritual life map was used as the tool to conduct a spiritual life review among older adults. A spiritual life map is the participants' own pictorial presentation of their spiritual journey and relationship with God (or transcendence) from childhood to present age including future orientation. David Hodge suggests that after the life map is completed, it is best to ask open-ended questions to the participant to facilitate an in-depth exploration of their identified spiritual strengths and assets (Hodge, 2005).

Third, when the spiritual life map is finished, a one-on-one interview followed. Probing questions were asked from the religious and spiritual history of the participants and the religious practices learned from childhood that help the person establish relationship with God to present spirituality. An interview guide was utilized to help elicit rich information about the spiritual journey and religious practices of the participants from childhood to present age. Permit was sought for the use of the interview guide and was granted by the author herself. The interviews were audio-recorded which lasted approximately between 30-45 minutes. All the information at the time of the interview was kept confidential and participants were given opportunity to ask for any questions or clarifications.

Next, the participants' stories based on the spiritual life map and interview were analyzed and integrated to "restory" them into a framework that is logical. Restorying refers to the process of reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework. The framework consists of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (time, place, plot, and scene) and then rewriting the stories to place them

in a chronological order with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Beyond the chronology, the research proponent then detailed themes that arise from the story to provide a more comprehensive discussion of the meaning of the story. Lastly, to capture the spiritual journey and experience of the participants, analysis of the qualitative data was the combination of the story's description and the emergent themes (Creswell, 2006).

RESULTS

The Restory

This is the story of ten individuals from the city of Iligan. Their names were changed per confidentiality protocol however, the details of events and circumstances were true and correct based on the participants' narration.

Acacia (71), Belinda (78), Cherry (68), Daphne (73), Hazel (70), Magnolia (60), Olive (72), Myrtle (73), Oak (72) and Bamboo (76) provided a clear description of their spiritual journey from childhood until adulthood. They shared their failures, victories and significant events that brought them to continue believing in God and understand the meaning of life. They may be common people in the community but their journey is worth telling – their voices need to be heard.

Laying the Foundation

This is the story of the ten people I met from different backgrounds and walks of life, who generously shared their spiritual experiences from childhood until this present time. Laying the foundation explored their spirituality during childhood. Acacia, Daphne, Magnolia and Hazel, Daphne and Olive grew up and were raised in Catholic traditions with either their mothers or grandmothers as their first spiritual mentor. These six little girls also joined flores de mayo to learn more about the catechism of the Catholic church. Some of them also joined other church-based ministries, like being a choir member when they were young.

Belinda, Cherry and Oak told a different story. The three of them were born Catholics but they did not grow up in a devoted Catholic family. Their families were just church-goers during Sundays but never active in any church activities. Among the ten, Bamboo was the only one who grew up in a Baptist family. It was also inculcated in him the importance of going to church every Sunday.

Amidst the Storm

Life is not lived without struggles and triumphs. In all of these, God has been the constant force that keeps them going. Myrtle stopped school at the age of thirteen and started working to help her family financially. However, she fell in love too early, eloped, and even if not on her plan, got married at the tender age of 15 while her husband was 17 due to the latter's family decision. As a couple they experienced so many challenges in their marriage. What brought her closer to God was the death of her two sons in 1987; she was 44 years old then.

Unlike Myrtle, Belinda married at 28, which was considered late at that time. She was thankful to be married to someone who was prayerful and influenced her to listen attentively to the gospel every Sunday. In 1990, she joined the Charismatic Renewal Movement which awakened her prayer life. They raised their children in a Catholic tradition and taught them right from wrong. Later, she received a very bad news about her husband being diagnosed with a stage four colon cancer. She did not know what to feel and what to do at that time because of the condition of her husband and the sudden death of her mother. With a heavy heart, she just prayed to God to guide her and help her on what to do during this time. She even bargained to God for the healing of her husband. Then, after four months of struggle with cancer, her husband died. With the passing away of her husband, Belinda became lonely and aloft to other people. She does not like to go out and socialize with other people. One day, her friend invited her to become a member of the Order of Discalced Carmelites (ODC), of which she reluctantly joined. From novice she rose up from the rank and now at a definitive level. Somehow, her participation in the ODC helped her moved on from the loss of her husband. She admitted that before when she was not yet a member, she had difficulty understanding the Bible, but now she has deeper understanding about God.

Like Myrtle, Cherry, who married at 25 and Magnolia at 19, also encountered challenges in their marriage. After two years of their marriage, Cherry found out that her husband was having an affair with another woman. From that experience, Cherry started to go to church more often and prayer became her weapon against bitterness, disappointments and unforgiveness. She was able to wholeheartedly forgive her husband and when they had their second baby, she noticed the

changes (in a good way) in her husband.

On the other hand, Magnolia's weapon from the start was prayer. Every time she would feel that someone is tempting her husband, she would kneel down to pray to keep him away from temptations. It was also a challenge to her that her husband was not religious and she would influence her to become more prayerful and to attend mass. She was thankful for all the trials in her life because it made her closer to God and wants to be always near Him.

Meanwhile, Acacia and Daphne had a wonderful married life. Acacia found her right man at the age of 21 while Daphne married a doctor at 23. All throughout their married life, they considered themselves happy and blessed beyond measure. In gratitude, they continued to serve God being active members of the church and raising their children in a godly manner.

Unlike Acacia who kept her faith and religion from the start until the present, Oak and Hazel experienced God's presence through another religion. It was not until God averted potential danger to happen in their lives that they became a believer.

Olive and Bamboo experienced increased in spirituality due to illness. Olive's test of faith came late in life when she was diagnosed with stage three colon cancer this March of 2016 and had colectomy last April. She acknowledged that even if with or without cancer, her faith and trust to God remains the same. At present, Olive is in her seventh cycle of chemotherapy. Bamboo, on the other hand, was diagnosed with stage 2 lung cancer. He admitted to be a smoker and only stopped when he was in his 60's. He had an operation of which he cannot recall which left a scar at his back. He confessed that he felt closest to God every time he has problems and faced with a near death experience. In this moment of crisis, both Olive and Bamboo had their faith in God as the most valuable thing in life. Both admitted that they are ready to meet their Maker.

To Flourish and Blossom

In their sunset years, the ten people I met continued to practice their faith tradition and declared that along the way they gained deeper understanding of who God is in their respective lives.

Acacia finally had her dream come true when she became a member of Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, officially known as Ordo Carmelitarum Discalceatorum Saecularis (OCDS). Belinda is also an

active member of the OCDS. She continues to develop her prayer life and gain deeper understanding of God's word. In the same way, Cherry continues to be an active member of the church and found a new happiness in her grandchildren. Daphne, on the other hand, remains positive in life and continues to be a cheerful giver. It is her pride and joy to raise children in the fear and love of God.

Hazel now finds meaning in what she is doing. Reading God's word widened her understanding of who truly God is. God is her ever-present help in times of trouble. She learned that service to God is not always easy, you need to be tested but if you hold on, he will give you the comfort to overcome. Magnolia continues to be active in church and other church-based activities. She is very grateful for every blessing that comes her way. Meanwhile, Olive has become a source of inspiration to others by giving talks during church meetings and sharing her journey with cancer. She remains to be God's humble servant.

Myrtle continues to trust God although she felt guilty not being able to go to church as often as she wanted because she had a stroke three years ago. She said that it is very important to seek God and be near Him all the time. She also emphasizes the importance of asking for God's forgiveness because we cannot predict the time when God will take us.

Oak continues to study God's word and very thankful to have reached this moment in his life. He said that as long as he lives, he will serve his purpose in life. Lastly, Bamboo offers everything to God and trusts God's divine plan for his life.

The ten people I met, practice their own personal devotion to God and in their old age continue to bear fruits. It is their delight to relinquish the legacy of faith to the next generation.

Themes

There were three themes that emerged from the narrative; importance of having a religious role models or spiritual mentors to emulate and build meaningful relationships at an early age; positive and negative life events increase the person's spirituality; and prayers and personal devotions are keys to spiritual transcendence.

DISCUSSION

This section highlights the embedded themes that

emerged from the restory. A significant theme that arises from the narrative is the importance of having a religious role models or spiritual mentors to emulate and build meaningful relationships at an early age. Role models are expected to demonstrate how to live life in accordance to what is good and right in the eyes of God that can help motivate and inspire others to "go and do likewise" (Plante, 2008). From the experiences of the participants, their religious upbringing greatly impacts the development of their spirituality. At first, it may seem like a pattern or obligation that must be done in the context of religion however; as the years go by they start to find meaning in those religious practices. As children, they are constantly being influenced by the examples of others and their own personal experiences.

Innate spirituality is present in all children and it is vital to educate them about the means and ways to express, activate and nurture their spirituality so that as they grow older, it will develop to enable them to become an actualized person. The religious practices from childhood can help children developed spiritually by providing a framework of a common creed and code, as well as pattern of worship that gives value and space to spiritual experience (Grajczonek, 2010).

Man's spiritual journey follows a developmental pattern from childhood to adulthood. The spirituality of children and development of their religious and spiritual aspects have been exposed in various studies to be of great significance to who they are as a person and who they will become in the future. It was evident that an early age, religious and spiritual practices can be patterned from one generation to another. However, a person's spiritual introduction and initial experience of spirituality can happen at any given stage of development.

Along the spiritual path, people would likely meet someone who can engage them even more in their respective religious beliefs and practices. This can be a friend, an acquaintance, other family members or religious personalities. However, the knowledge about God is more experiential in nature and building a relationship with Him is more of an intentional and personal effort.

In man's spiritual journey, circumstances and decisions in life give color to one's spirituality. Trials, bad decisions and physical illness help a person to practice or put into action his faith and trust in God. Over the

course of a lifetime, a person experiences changes in his religious activity and knowledge about God. A significant theme that emerged from the study is that both positive and negative life events increase the person's spirituality by entrusting everything to God even though the purpose may not be clear at first. However, those with strong relationship with God revealed that for them, circumstances do not matter because their faith in God remains the same or will continue to increase whether they experience good or bad events in life.

On the other hand, the result of the study Albrecht and Cornwall (1989) revealed differently which suggests that negative religious experiences tend to reduce belief. Those whose faith had decreased were more likely than those whose faith had increased to report having experienced negative church relationship changes and to have engaged in what we have defined as negative religiosity—did something wrong according to church standards, questioned beliefs, and so on. Overall, the number of positive religious events was associated with increased belief and commitment while the number of negative religious events was associated with the opposite effect.

Entering senior years all have shown increased in their level of spirituality based on their narration and dealings with day to day activities in life. Even those who started learning and knowing God personally during adolescence and adulthood also showed spiritual maturation. The significant theme that surfaced during this stage is that prayers and personal devotion are keys to transcend spiritually. In fact, it has been said that the older people are amongst the greatest prayer warrior in the world.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual journey of the participants goes through the process of spiritual development. It may have different beginnings but the same destination. All stages are capable for spiritual growth. Significant events in life, prayers and personal devotions are important vehicle to propel individual towards God. Therefore, each individual varies in the beginning of his spirituality and it has a tendency to grow over time.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended to get more samples from famous and successful individuals as subjects of the study.

They might provide a different insight and view on spirituality. It is also recommended to conduct the same study using cross-sectional approach.

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