

Spirituality: Living Successfully

The Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality at Ochsner (IMESO)

Rev. Anthony J. De Conciliis, C.S.C., Ph.D.

Vice President and Director of IMESO

Abstract: In this essay, a comprehensive definition of spirituality is presented that is meant to facilitate discussions about the nature and purpose of spirituality in the practices of medicine, education, and spirituality at Ochsner. This definition of spirituality will serve as a bridge when considering the relationship between spirituality and religion since it attempts to embrace all religions and spiritual practices. It is specific in that it calls people to self-transcendence based on what one considers to be the ultimate value in life which for many is interpreted as transcendence. The discussions, based on the definition, are meant to help all in the Ochsner community to find ways to include the emotional and spiritual in the healing and teaching roles to assist patients, families, and caregivers. Finally, reflection on spirituality will help all employees to fulfill Ochsner's mission of healing, serving, leading, educating, and innovating.

Spirituality: An Essential Aspect of Living

The investigation into the nature and purpose of spirituality is essential to human growth and healing because it impacts, throughout the lifespan, the major and minor decisions one makes, whether consciously or unconsciously. A consciously applied spirituality, understood and practiced, offers not only a roadmap, but goes beyond to the actual wisdom journey in life, especially when making decisions. These decisions include attitudes and choices for careers, relationships, service, faith, love, endurance, virtue, and ultimately, death. The development and practice of spirituality demand a conscious effort, but the effort is necessary to insure an integrated and fulfilling life.

Historically, the word spirituality has been used by both eastern and western cultures and the religions that have risen from them. The practice of spirituality, based on a life of virtue and values, was meant to support the development of the spiritual life in concert with religious practices and rituals. Spirituality development was meant to enhance one's religiosity. In this way, spirituality was understood as the lived experiences of faith-filled people who practice virtuous lives, usually informed by their religious beliefs and traditions. As the concept of spirituality has developed, it has taken on a new independence and identity.

Spirituality: A Lived Experience

The understanding of spirituality in healthcare has expanded as the present generation responds to its own socio-political-religious environments. Today the definition of spirituality includes not only the development of the spirit, but also the body and mind. In fact, the relationship between religion and spirituality has changed to include spirituality as a lived experience. Some in this generation seek to focus on human experience as the existential ground for personal and professional transcendence and meaning and not a specific religious tradition. Such individuals seek wholeness and do not find adherence to a specific religious tradition necessary to experience transcendence as a reality in life. These individuals are characterized as spiritual, but not religious. There are others who perceive themselves as both religious and spiritual. We find in them a desire to be part of a specific religious tradition, but at the same time, they follow a spirituality which enhances their meaning and purpose.

Spirituality, as a lived experience, has taken on a new identity as an object of academic study, while at the same time defining the way to live a virtuous life that enhances the individual's physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being. In this sense, spirituality allows for the expression of new ways to understand core beliefs both in a religious tradition and independent of it. Spirituality, then, can be generally understood as the process of embracing, celebrating, and voicing all the connections within and beyond a person. Through the practice of spirituality, a person lives the daily journey with more meaning, purpose, direction, and values. A person's spirituality is strengthened in daily connections to others and in meditative acknowledgement of the environment, the mysterious universe, and a movement toward self-transcendence. The resultant spiritual development results in personal and professional well-being throughout the lifespan.

A lived spirituality represents a profound and authentic desire to find wholeness in the midst of fragmentation: for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for self-transcendence in the face of self-absorption, for the meaning of life in a troubled world, and for values that endure.¹ Ultimately, human beings are spirit-centered individuals living in a more and more complex physical world. To aid in the development of a meaningful life, then, it is important to identify and develop a personal commitment to the spiritual life as a result of reflection and meditation on lived experience.

¹ Schneiders, S. "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies*, 50, 1989, p.696.

Spirituality Defined

Three Views²

1. Theological View: This view supports an integrative spirituality as a value of life and so the practice of values and virtues are important to spiritual development. It emphasizes the human hunger for self-transcendence and well-being. Hans Urs von Balthasar, a theologian, says spirituality is “a basic practical or existential attitude which is the expression of how one understands ethically committed existence.” Another theologian, Augmann, in support of the value of spirituality in life says, “spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one’s actions flow.”
2. Historical-Contextual View: In this view, the definition of spirituality includes the beliefs of the community, the theology that formalizes these beliefs, and the truth claims of those beliefs.
3. Anthropological View: In this view, spirituality is an element in human nature and a depth dimension of human existence. An excellent example of this view is the definition offered by Schneiders, a theologian noted for her work in spirituality as an academic discipline. Her definition is based on actual lived experience that can be subjected to measurement and investigation and cuts across religious traditions. From her research and reflection, she concluded that in the context of a lived experience

...spirituality is the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.³

Each of these views has significant merit and is important to the development and study of spirituality in the workplace. The definition offered by Schneiders captures the basic tenets of spirituality without excluding other definitions.

For healthcare providers and patients, this definition offers a broad range of spiritual understanding so that it can serve those who identify with a religious tradition and those who are spiritual, but not religious. The definition has many implications and benefits for the healthcare community: first, it is capable of encompassing a pluralistic range of religious

² McGinn, B. “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” *The Cresset*, June 1993, pp.13-22.

³ Schneiders, op. cit., p. 684.

traditions, beliefs, and practices ingrained in the human community; second, it is adaptable to academic research and review; third, it has been discussed in research journals and among professionals in the field; and finally, it encourages the study of spirituality from the viewpoint of the human sciences.

Spirituality and Integrative Care

Including spirituality in the practice of medicine and in medical education acknowledges that spirituality is an essential aspect of healing. Enlightened healthcare providers offer integrative care, always considering the interaction of the mind, body, and spirit in treatment and care.

Current research is uncovering scientific evidence that spirituality affects a person's well-being and healing process. Innovative genetic, neurological, and brain studies are pointing to possible neural connections resulting in behaviors such as cooperation, compassion, empathy, and other important behaviors related to well-being. Researchers are finding that the brain acts to support connections with others which are so important for personal well-being. Is it possible that our brain was evolved to aid in the development of spirituality and its behaviors? Is it possible that human beings have evolved to find goodness, beauty, and truth?⁴

The natural development of spirituality is a response to an instinctive human desire: to find meaning and a way "to spiritualize" each human action, thought, and feeling.⁵ The study of spirituality can encompass, in its simplest form, the day-to-day lived experience of the person. So the true object for the study of spirituality is something that is fundamental and necessary to the human condition.⁶ In this context, the word is universally understood as an intensely personal experience. It stresses a personal response and an interior commitment that radically changes the person in the process.⁷ Spirituality then refers to a desired state of wholeness, including the physical, emotional, social, political, and religious. It describes a religious experience emanating from lived experiences.

Spirituality is viewed as a science in that it studies specific behaviors and sentiments, such as empathy, gratitude, compassion, courage, connections, forgiveness, joy, kindness, openness, and zeal. The practice of these behaviors moves people from self-centeredness to other-

⁴ Daaleman, T. P. and Frey, B. B. The Spirituality Index of Well-Being: A New Instrument for Health-Related Quality-of-Life Research. *Annals of Family Medicine*. September/October 2004, Vol. 2, No. 5. Sloan, Richard. *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*. St. Martin's Press, New York. 2006. Williams, Joshua. *Religion, Spirituality Heals Patients*, University of Chicago, 2011. Koenig, H. *Aging and God: Spiritual Pathways to Mental Health in Midlife and Later Years*. Haworth Press. 1994. Peterman, A. H., Fitchett, G., Brady, M. J., Hernandez, L. Measuring Spiritual Well-Being in People with Cancer: The Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (FACT-Sp). *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 2002, 24 (1): 49-58.

⁵ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*, New York: Macmillan, 1973, p. 231.

⁶ Ibid, p. 676.

⁷ Heagle, John, "A New Public Piety: Reflections on Spirituality," *Church* 1 (1985), p. 53.

centeredness. As such, these behaviors and sentiments affect the interaction between people and can be subjected to critical scrutiny in the academic arena. So, for example, does a patient's well-being, to say nothing of patient satisfaction scores, improve with a compassionate or empathetic physician or nurse as opposed to one who is technically excellent, but interpersonally lacking?⁸

The mission of IMESO is to inspire integrative healing of body, mind, and spirit through research, education, and innovation. It will aid Ochsner Health System's mission to bring the finest integrative care to all. IMESO will focus its mission on the benefits brought to bear on our practice of healthcare by the consideration of spirituality as a beneficial asset in healing, teaching, and inspiring.

IMESO will use the definition presented above to stimulate discussion and reflection as people serve and are served in the healthcare environment. The definition includes themes that are commonly accepted by many academic scholars: progressive (always open to further understanding based on reflection), a consciously pursued personal integration, aimed at self-transcendence, and influenced by a chosen ultimate value.⁹ These four themes, and others we may choose to include in our discussions and research, can serve as a way of speaking about spirituality throughout the entire System and the way we assess its benefits in the treatment and education of all.

The Institute will encourage strategic initiatives for implementation throughout the System, leading to person-to-person discussions, educational programs, and assessment processes. We will use the ideas presented in this essay and other essays to create lively and informative discussions about the integration of spirituality into the life of the System which will hopefully change and modify behavior. In the end, integrating spirituality into daily life will assist in the realization of both the mission and the vision of Ochsner Health System.

IMESO 2013
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⁸ For a discussion on the relationship of spiritual issues and patient satisfaction see Alexander Clark et.al. *Patient Centeredness: Addressing Patient's Emotional and Spiritual Needs*. (2003) Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Safety, vol. 20, 12, 659-670

⁹ Ibid. p. 684.