Spiritual Formation in Later Life

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to share early results from an ongoing literature review intended to (a) explore the intersection of spiritual formation, aging, and lifelong learning, (b) situate this intersection within profound learning theory, and (c) develop a rich understanding and conceptual model which characterizes the qualities and processes of spiritual formation in later life. We argue that spiritual formation is a subset of profound learning which occurs over the life course. Additionally, we make the case that spiritual formation benefits those later and even at the end of life and should, therefore, be considered a promising arena for research and practice in our field.

Keywords: spiritual formation, aging, profound learning

This literature review is the first part of an empirical study that will explore the qualities, processes, and practices related to spiritual formation in later life and continue the conceptual and theoretical development of Profound Learning Theory. This study was intended to be a systematic review of literature, undertaken in two phases.

Literature Review

First, we planned to explore peer-reviewed journals likely to have spiritual formation within their scope. After developing a deep understanding of the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical research related to spiritual formation, we would then, secondly, focus on later life literature found in the first phase and extend our database research to journals specifically focused on aging. Third, we would review the literature in our field, adult and lifelong learning, related to spirituality and spiritual formation. After summarizing and synthesizing this information, we intended to discover a gap in the literature that empirical work would fill.

Rabbit Hole Methodology
That research plan unraveled almost immediately. The literature on spirituality and aging is vast and extends far beyond our familiar field. We had much to discover and learn. The search snowballed as we explored the tables of contents in related journals, downloaded articles, and reviewed reference lists. Related references were tracked down and read, and their references were tracked down, downloaded, read, and so on. Keywords were added to our original search terms. The pertinent journals expanded as we discovered where scholars were publishing related work. Our initial attempts to document our searches went by the wayside as we followed interesting ideas. Some vocabulary was different - life course instead of lifelong, for example, and deep-thought leaders in these fields were new. Loosening the constraints of our original systematic literature review was freeing and enriching. One of our team members called this the "rabbit hole methodology," wherein exploring new ideas and discovering interesting and related topics was easy, exciting, and provocative. As a team, we recognize that this divergent phase, for

Figure 1

At The Crossroads of Spiritual Formation, Gerontology, and Lifelong Learning

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual Formation In Later Life

Gerontology

Lifelong Learning

all its value, will require a more rigorous, systematic approach to move to convergent thinking.

Adult Education Has a Long History Related to Spirituality and Religion

The relationship of religion and spirituality has been a part of the field of adult education (AE) from the beginning. Fenwick and English (2004) laid out the influence of spirituality in the work of trailblazing AE leaders Myles Horton, Eduard Lindeman, and Paulo Freire, going back as far as Basil Yeaxlee and the Antigonish Movement. They suggest that "certain themes of spirituality would appear to offer a natural alignment with concerns of adult education" (p. 58). Fenwick and English (2004) indicated that "spirituality is gaining prominence as an integral part of AE practice and adult development theory" (p. 49), and Tisdell (2023) pointed out that "discussions of spirituality were relatively absent in the field of adult and higher education until the new millennium…" (p. 40) when spirituality began to be referenced by scholars. Still, as Tisdell pointed out in an earlier piece (2017), "the literature is exceedingly thin' (p.2) in our field when it comes to "discussing the Big Questions of life . . . and relatively limited in exploring the intersection of spirituality and transformative learning" (p. 2). Carr-Chellman et al., in the 2020 *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, recently summarized the state of our field in a chapter entitled Adult Education for Human Flourishing: A Religious and Spiritual Framework, further making the case that "The individual experience might be extracted from the historical and institutional context for purposes of discussion or study, but like all situated learning, religious and spiritual experiences are inextricably tied together" (p. 300).

Spirituality as a Travelling Concept

Spirituality, Peng-Keller (2019) said, has had many "genealogies" (p. 87) with complex roots. Sheldrake (2013) wrote that Christian spirituality began with the early church and, over the centuries, has included monastic spirituality, spirituality in the city, spirituality in the Ages of Reformation and Reason, and its evolution through the era of modernity to postmodernity. Atchley wrote that "...each of the major faith groups–Christian, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism–is rooted in the profound, direct, authentic mystical experiences of its founder(s)" (p. 4), and Sheldrake (2013) writes that spirituality "is actually the core of all the different religions. It focuses on a virtuous life, religious experience, and the process of spiritual transformation" (p. 209). Atchley (2009) noted the contemporary popularity of spirituality as

well, as in 2007, Amazon.com listed more than 130,000 book titles related to spirituality, but he pointed out few authors try to define spirituality explicitly. Peng-Keller called the term spirituality a "travelling (sic) concept" (p. 95) and stated that "[m]ore than many other concepts labelled (sic) in this way, it has changed colour and shape in its restless travelling (sic) between different discursive worlds" (p. 97).

Spirituality is not only of interest to religions *per se*. For example, Balboni et al. (2022) reported a comprehensive, systematic review of studies that looked at spirituality when undergoing severe medical illness, end–of–life, or palliative care, looking for the connections between spirituality and health outcomes. The study's expert Delphi panel review developed eight statements based on solid evidence. Their top three implications for serious illness were:

> (1) incorporate spiritual care into care for patients with serious illness; (2) incorporate spiritual care education into training of interdisciplinary teams caring for persons with serious illness; and (3) include specialty practitioners of spiritual care in care of patients with serious illness. (p. 184)

> These findings place spirituality and spiritual care squarely in the realm of education and training and are compelling reasons spirituality and learning should be a potential focal point for theory, research, and practice in our field. The transformational, formational, and developmental processes – the learning processes – are of particular interest to lifelong learning scholars, education practitioners, and learners.

Spirituality
As the previous section suggests, a comprehensive discussion of what spirituality means is well beyond the scope of this article. Atchley, in his book *Spirituality and Aging* (2009), provided helpful grounding,

> ...spirituality in its purest form is an inner, subjective experience. Pure, nonverbal experience of being is the spiritual field within which occur the mindfulness and present-moment awareness of Buddhists, the Christ-consciousness of Christians, the witness-consciousness of Hindus, and awe so prized by Jews, and the ecstatic consciousness of Muslims. (p. 6)

Sheldrake (2013) said the way contemporary spirituality approaches life is integrated and holistic, seeking the sacred, meaning, life purpose, and "ultimate values" (p. 4). Finally, Tisdell (2023) articulated spirituality as ". . .a journey toward wholeness, enabling one to see the extraordinary in the ordinary business of life, and our interconnectedness both to the natural world and to something bigger than ourselves" (p. 37-38).

Spiritual Formation
For purposes of this paper, we adopted the definition of spiritual formation described by the Sharing Spiritual Heritage Report, "Spiritual formation is the deliberate attending to the process of growth, maturation, and learning on the spiritual journey" (Scheidt & Campbell, 2020, p. 10). In the sense of "deliberate attending to the process," spiritual formation moves spirituality from an idea to a learning process and is thus a topic of interest in our field. This process can be considered from theoretical perspectives (these variables cause this to happen with these outcomes), a developmental/life course process (this is how spiritual formation occurs over a lifetime), and from a practical perspective (this is how one can intentionally learn or teach others how to become more profoundly spiritual in identity and lived experience). Spiritual formation,

like learning, continues over a lifetime and includes formal education, life experience, and developmental learning. "Spiritual aging," Weber and Osborn wrote, "...is the opportunity to grow spiritually throughout the course of our lives that is part and parcel of our growing older…" (2015, p. 10) and, as Mattes (2005) indicated, "The aging process by its very nature fosters a deepening personal spiritual development by drawing a person through the spiritual tasks of discovering, pondering, integrating, surrendering, growing, and companioning" (p. 59). Spiritual formation does not end at any particular time of life or any stage. Only death stops formation. Porter et al. (2019) offered a "meta-theory of spiritual change" (p. 8). Their discussion of the distinctions and relationships between spiritual, characterological, and moral formation can be applied to lifelong learning and profound learning theory in particular. Spiritual formation,
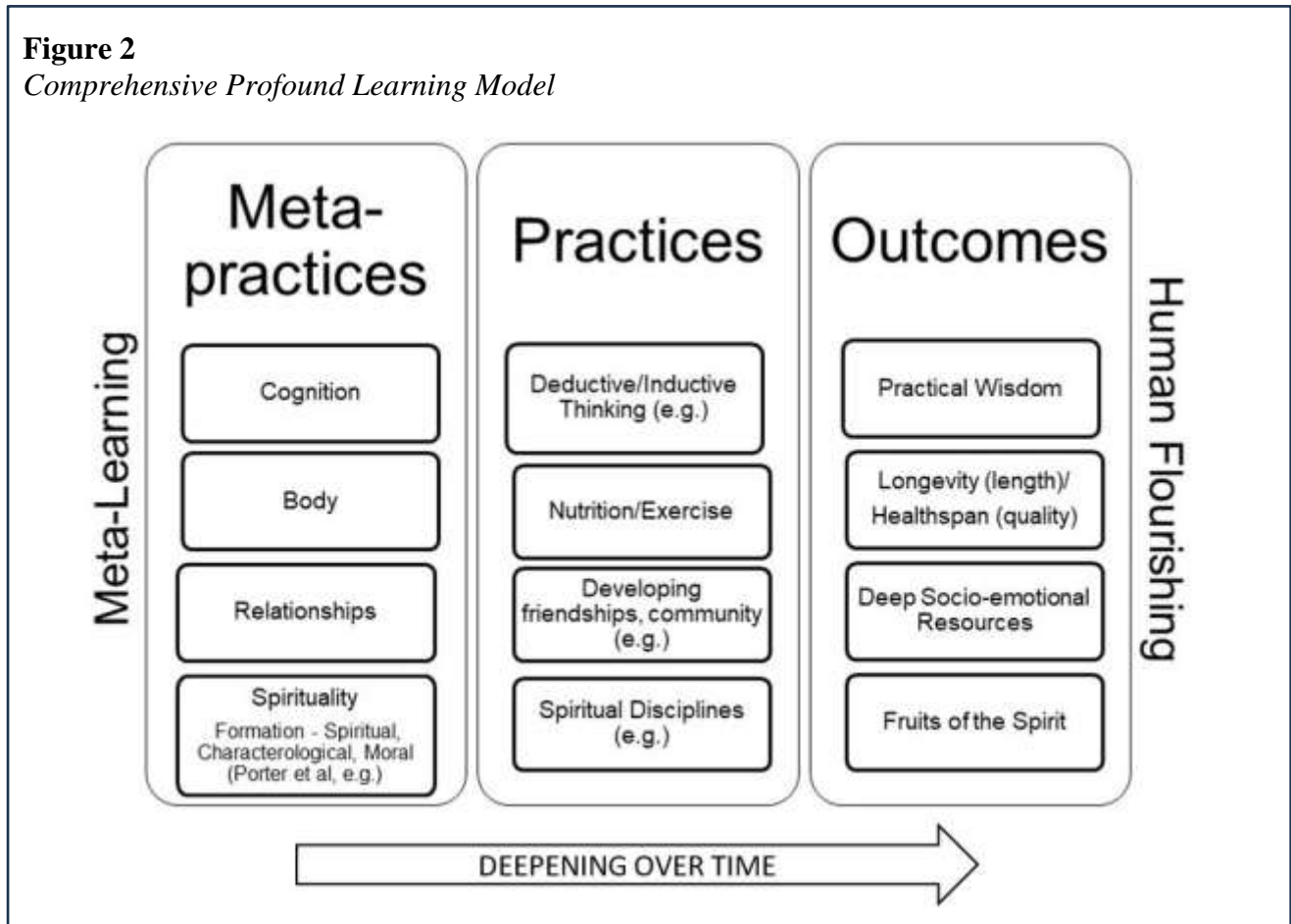
> ...has to do with features of an individual or group's relatedness to God and/or what is held as sacred (e.g., God-image, the presence of God, love of God, word of God, filling of the Spirit, Scripture, etc...). 'Characterological' formation refers to the development of the habituated, virtuous dispositions (e.g., kindness, generosity, compassion, love, etc.). And 'moral' formation is meant to emphasize the outward behavioral manifestations of virtue in a person or group's life (e.g., forgiveness, service, enemy love, etc.). Each of these interrelated terms qualifies as 'formation,' which is meant to pick up the notion of positive change/growth. (pp. 8-9)

Recently, formation has been proposed as a framework for lifelong learning (Kroth et al., 2022), suggesting that depth of learning is influenced by meta-learning and meta-practices that individuals intentionally pursue and develop; "profound learning revolves around rich, deep, durable, and meaningful experiences, and recognizes that people can learn and cultivate these kinds of experiences. Theoretically, these qualities can become a learning disposition, developed over time through practices" (Kroth et al., 2022, p. 27). The authors proposed four meta-practices that relate to the body, cognition, relationships, and spirituality, which lead to human flourishing. The intentional meta-practices, practices, and routines that lead to spiritual formation over a lifetime are the general topic of this paper; how that formation develops naturally or intentionally in later life is the specific interest here. Figure 2, Comprehensive Profound Learning Model expands the conceptual idea of meta-learning leading to human flourishing, as found in Kroth et al. (2022, p. 32), to include outcomes and incorporate Porter et al.'s (2019) discussion of the spiritual, characterological, and moral aspects of a "meta-theory of spiritual change" (p. 8).

Later Life Spiritual Formation
Moberg (1991) noted that "among all domains for change in human lives, the one that provides the most opportunity for growth in later years is the spiritual" (p. 9). While the physical, cognitive, and relational aspects of life inevitably decline in later life, spiritual growth is one area where lifelong learning can flourish. Later life can be considered in the context of transitions and rites of passage (Pevny, 2014) or developmental theory (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Mattes (2005) said, "The aging process by its very nature fosters a deepening personal spiritual development by

Figure 2
Comprehensive Profound Learning Model

Meta-Learning

Meta-practices

- Cognition
- Body
- Relationships
- Spirituality
  Formation - Spiritual, Characterological, Moral (Porter et al, e.g.)

Practices

- Deductive/Inductive Thinking (e.g.)
- Nutrition/Exercise
- Developing friendships, community (e.g.)
- Spiritual Disciplines (e.g.)

Outcomes

- Practical Wisdom
- Longevity (length)/ Healthspan (quality)
- Deep Socio-emotional Resources
- Fruits of the Spirit

Human Flourishing

DEEPENING OVER TIME

drawing a person through the spiritual tasks of discovering, pondering, integrating, surrendering, growing, and companioning" (p. 59). He compares the aging process to a journey, which includes the hope of arriving at a final destination. Fowler (1981) proposed the eight stages of faith development, beginning with early childhood and continuing until late adulthood. Demarest (2008) conjoins journey and developmental thinking by looking at how spiritual progress can be considered as stages along the path, moving from "spiritual infancy (immaturity) to spiritual adulthood (maturity)" (p. 163). Spiritual formation can also be considered in light of qualities or experiences that are usually normal or unique to people in later life. Facing the increasing proximity of death and decline, for example, is expected for people in their 70's, 80's, and beyond. The need to remember *Memento mori*, the Latin phrase meaning "remember, you must die" (Ostberg, 2023), whispered in the ears of Roman conquerors and a key part of Stoic philosophical thinking, seldom needs reminding for older people. Facing death is a way of life for elders.

Conclusion

The study of spirituality, spiritual development, and spiritual formation is a topic highly related to the field of AE and lifelong learning and an arena that could provide paths to human flourishing for those in later life. Developing a deep understanding, theoretically and practically, is a topic ripe for plucking for AE scholars and practitioners.

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