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# Spiritual Development: An Exploratory Study of Women's Views on the Connection between Spirituality and Sexuality

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**SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
WOMEN'S VIEWS ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN  
SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY**

By

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

(in Human Development)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

December, 2005

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This study examines the spiritual dimension within human development by looking at the ways in which spirituality is defined, how growth may take place and how one aspect of its connection with other dimensions is experienced. In a survey designed to investigate connection between spirituality and sexuality, 33 women in mid-life and beyond reported experiencing such a connection. Information was obtained by means of a 25-question survey. Analysis of the surveys shows that for these respondents sexual experience does involve characteristics that are spiritual in nature. This study contributes to the foundation upon which further investigation may serve to expand the understanding of spirituality and its development. The potential for understanding intimacy-connectedness with others and with the Divine is abundant for examination.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **Chapter 1**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

As we enter a new millennium the nature of human development is being examined across an expanding range of aspects. The investigation of spirituality and spiritual development is an area that is gaining recognition as “the domain of ultimate concern” as posited by theologian Paul Tillich (cited in Vaughn, 2002, p. 16). This paper focuses on one aspect of spiritual development within human development and the importance of its consideration by individuals engaged in the study of human development and the application of those studies. Indeed, most of the world’s population identifies itself as spiritual or religious (Chopra, 2000; Worthington, 1989). This aspect of the individual may be critically related to the degree of success in accomplishing normal developmental tasks throughout the life span, as well as transitioning through crisis and challenging conditions (Chopra, 2000, 2003; Coles, 1997; Gibson, 2004; Plante & Sherman, 2001; Ruumet, 1997; Scheindlin, 2003; Scott, 2003; Spohn, 1997; Tolle, 1999; Vaughn, 2002; Wilber, 1996; Worthington, 1989). Additionally, a correlation can be made between an individual’s spiritual awareness and their sense of well being (MacDonald & Friedman, 2002; Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004; Vaughn, 2002).

The implications of determining what defines spirituality and how it develops may lie in determining the means by which to measure and enhance this important element of human development. In the words of Scott, attending to spiritual development will “help in the process of recognizing and valuing (our) full humanity...” (2003, p. 130). As the definition of spirituality broadens and spiritual development is appreciated



as an integral dynamic within overall human development, it is important to gain a better understanding of the ways in which this ultimate connection is sought.

The literature reviewed in this investigation spans 32 years of inquiry into understanding spirituality and spiritual development. This review indicates that it is only in the last decade that attention has been focused significantly on exploring differences in the ways the genders experience the spiritual dimension of being and its development (Johnson, 2001; Ogden, 1999, 2002; Ruumet, 1997; Vaughn, 2002; Wilber, 1996, 2000, 2001). In this regard, sexuality as a vehicle for the perception of and connection to the Ultimate life source has gained focus. As posited by MacKnee, “Human beings are sexual creatures. An essence of humanity is to be either male or female. Sexuality...is our way of being in the world and relating to the world as male and female.... Sexuality calls males and females to move toward completeness—to form a unity, or wholeness, that is experienced as wholeness” (1997, p. 212). Thus, relationship--to self, to others, to all of life, and to the Divine—begins to gain recognition as a fundamental aspect of seeking spiritual growth. Within the framework formed by an understanding of how spirituality is defined, how it develops and is influenced, an examination of the connection between spirituality and sexuality is arguably the most compelling aspect of that connection.

I am approaching this topic by examining differing perspectives and how they might affect the understanding of the spiritual dynamic within human development. By effecting the broadest interpretation of this aspect of individual development, one may address issues more completely and in a manner that acknowledges each individual as a whole with interconnected psychological, biological, sociological and spiritual facets within a multidimensional, multi-relational context. From this understanding, a

comprehensive approach may propel us, not only in individual advancement, but along our evolutionary path of human development, as well (Chopra, 2000; Ruumet, 1997; Wilber, 2001).

### **Defining Spirituality**

As the new millennium begins, a dramatic increase in the number of individuals in our society with spiritual and religious concerns has become apparent (Nugent, 2000; Worthington, 1989). Our historically Christian-Judaic society is becoming more pluralistic, with multicultural influences generating a rising interest in Asian religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Islam – as well as in the belief systems of Native Americans, Toltecs, and others (McWhirter, 1989). In light of this pervasive phenomenon, the implications of understanding faith, transpersonal experience and spiritual orientation within human development (and in issues of transition) merits consideration by professionals engaged on any level with human development.

MacKnee (1997) cites the definition of spirituality from Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders (1988, p. 10) as that “which comes from the Latin, spiritus, meaning ‘breath of life,’ is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, life and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate” (p. 213).

In a review of 45 publications concerned with spirituality and spiritual development, specific factors that relate to the spiritual dynamic within human development are examined. From Worthington’s 1989 seminal review of literature relative to religious development (referencing well over 300 works) to current day

literature, there appears to be a trend toward a broader definition of spirituality, when compared with religiousness, or religiosity (MacDonald & Friedman, 2002; Miller, 2004; Ruumet, 1997; Scott, 2003; Spohn, 1997; Vaughn, 2002). Worthington's (1989) examination of "religious development" (p.557) describes the impact of exoteric (popular, external) and theistic constructs on individual development, while in *Faith and Health* religiousness is identified as referring to "both personal and social/institutional aspects of engagement with an established faith tradition" (Plante & Sherman, 2001, p. 8). Other definitions of "religiousness" and "religiosity" tend to focus on external, collective and institutionalized involvement, reflecting institutional qualities in addition to personal qualities (Moody, 1997; Plante & Sherman, 2001; Worthington, 1989). Religion emphasizes the abstract experience of a deity and the personification of a god; religion is generally more directive than guiding and has a more narrowly defined perspective than that suggested by "spirituality" (Moody, 1997). Pargament (as cited by Plante & Sherman, 2001, p. 6), on the other hand, describes spirituality as being "the major function of religion." Plante & Sherman (2001) use the term spirituality to refer to "personal concerns with the transcendent" (p. 8), which may or may not be related to established religion. Worthington (1989) does not offer a particular definition of spirituality or spiritual development.

The mainstream North American focus has tended to be a concern with the maintenance of individual identity (Nugent, 2000) while emphasizing the external recognition of religiousness (Hendlin, 1989). Others (including many major ethnic groups) focus more on the transpersonal dimension of spirituality (and the merging of consciousness into the larger universe), which may or may not draw from organized

religion (Plante & Sherman, 2001). Chopra (2000, 2003), Kabat-Zinn (1997), Mitchell (1988), Nhat Hanh (1995), and Ruiz (1997) describe an increasing spiritual awareness as essential to the process of life development. Philosopher Moody (1997) suggests that altered states of consciousness, considered abnormal in Western psychological constructs, can otherwise be considered transpersonal experiences of paramount importance. The transpersonal dimension and its expression, according to Edinger (1973), are found within all of the world's religions as symbolic functioning - the expression of the transpersonal dimension denoting an orientation more spiritual (internal) than religious (external). According to Vaughn, "Spirituality exists in the hearts and minds of men and women everywhere, within religious traditions and independently of tradition" (2002, p. 16). Scott further differentiates between religion as "a matter of mind, belief and practise (sic), part of cultural expression associated with minority rights and human equality" and spirituality as "an aspect of human development and overall human health" (2003, p. 118). Ruomet asserts that as religiosity transitions to spirituality, dogma will become de-emphasized (1997).

Of the 45 publications reviewed, four attempted to operationally define spirituality (MacDonald & Friedman, 2002; Mascaro et al., 2004; Miller, 2004); these are described below. In this review, spirituality and its development is assessed across the life span: from the specific assessment of spirituality and its development in children (Scheindlin, 2003; Scott, 2003) to the explicit or implicit consideration of development as it occurs at all ages (Chopra, 2000; Gibson, 2004; MacDonald & Friedman, 2002; Mascaro et al., 2004; Miller, 2004; Ruomet, 1997; Spohn, 1997; Vaughn, 2002; Wilber, 2001; Worthington, 1989). Gibson (2004) and Spohn (1997) give consideration to

morality and ethics as component aspects of spirituality and its development, while Scheindlin (2003) proposes linking emotions to spiritual development. Scott, on the other hand, bases his identification of spiritual development on the premise, arising from the 1991 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that spirituality is “seen... as a distinct aspect of human experience that is not contained by categories of moral or mental or emotional development” (2003, pp. 117-8). Specific stages of religious or spiritual development are explored in the writings of Chopra (2000), Gibson (2004), Ruumet (1997), Scheindlin (2003), Scott (2003), Vaughn (2002), Wilber (1996, 2001) and Worthington (1989). Although not formally ordered in stages by Spohn, he implies developmental facets of spirituality as part of the conscious seeking of “life(’s) narrative” (1997, p. 122). Attempts to broaden the understanding of spirituality and its development suggest that “spirituality and associated transpersonal constructs are not related to psychological and physical functioning in a simple, unidirectional manner. Rather, it appears that the association is best characterized as complex, multidirectional, and at least partly the product of how constructs are operationalized” (MacDonald & Friedman, 2002, p. 121). As spiritual definition is sought, the developmental nature of spirituality is revealed.

Specific instrumentation to assess spirituality has been constructed by Mascaro et al. In developing the Spiritual Meaning Scale (SMS) the authors examined a sample of 465 undergraduate students at a university in Texas (2004). They analyzed measures of personal meaning (mindfulness to a life philosophy), implicit meaning (engaging in meaningful activities), and personality dimensions along with mental health measures. The authors cite the validity of the SMS when compared with a number of other scales

(.89). Their results show positive relation among personal meaning, implicit meaning and the feature of hope. Also, positively related is the need for cognition, which is expressed as tendencies toward enjoyment of effortful, objective thought and openness to experience. Depression, anxiety and antisocial features are inversely related. According to the authors, further replication of this study is needed in more diverse population samples. They stress that clinical application cannot be endorsed without longitudinal analyses, at which point use of the SMS may provide relevance for therapeutic intervention.

The Miller Measure of Spirituality (MMS) is an instrument constructed and validated by Eric Miller (2004). This instrument rates two domains: prosocial beliefs, and belief in a higher being. In his evaluation of this scale, Miller surveyed 309 undergraduate students at a university in Ohio. He reports that the high reliability rates (.88 and .91) of this scale show it to be empirically sound. From this initial study, Miller proposes the definition of spirituality to be: “one’s core prosocial beliefs about the world, humanity, nature, and one’s higher being; the values by which one should ideally live” (p. 427). Miller, citing Morgan (1993), describes “levels of spiritual activity...the first... is knowledge. The second is the quest for feeling good about oneself, being comfortable in the world...correlated with altruistic behavior...and encompassing the idea that each of us is a part of a larger whole” (p. 423). It is interesting to note that he determines spirituality to be “not necessarily synonymous with the adoption of traditional religious orthodoxies.”

MacDonald and Friedman’s 2002 study looks at “the current status of psychometric testing as it pertains to the measurement and assessment of constructs

relevant to humanistic and transpersonal psychologies” (p. 102). Their research examines more than 100 instruments of spirituality and transpersonal constructs, as well as relevant empirical literature. These instruments are categorized in five general groupings; all have been shown to be independently and comparatively reliable and valid, according to the authors. The five groupings are: (a) cognitive orientation toward spirituality; (b) experiential/phenomenological dimension; (c) existential well being; (d) paranormal beliefs; and (e) religiousness. The authors propose using a broad range of measures as an organizing framework to capture the meaning of spirituality and its developmental nature in a manner that includes information on states of consciousness, as well as how this relates to human functioning. They recommend using multidimensional measures and/or multiple measures in assessing spirituality. In this review MacDonald and Friedman cite correlation between various aspects measured, thus contributing to the body of knowledge by which transpersonal constructs can be assessed. The authors stress the importance of continuing to acquire consistently applied and controlled quantitative assessment in order to add to knowledge of spirituality, as well as to ultimately establish this construct as a credible field of scientific inquiry. By this means psychological service providers can justify and validate interventions related to spiritual issues.

The definition of spirituality offered by Miller (above) shares features with the definitions set forth by other authors reviewed in this paper. In defining spirituality or spiritual meaning, language similar to, comparable to, or inclusive of Miller’s is used in all cases. Mascaro et al. offer this definition of spirituality: “the extent to which an individual believes that life or some force of which life is a function has a purpose, will, or way in which individuals participate” (2004, p. 845). Chopra (2000), Vaughn (2002),

Wilber (1996, 2001) and others define spirituality as an increasing capacity to recognize the aspect of the self that is greater than the ego, with the ultimate goal being enlightenment or pure awareness on all levels, a transformation of consciousness. In accomplishing this state there is a translation into communal or relational action as part of the collective consciousness, as a drop of water in an ocean is at once a drop as well as the ocean. As asserted by Vaughn, spirituality is an “ultimate belonging or connection to the transcendental ground of being” (2002. P. 17). Chopra (2000), Gibson (2004), Ruumet (1997), Scheindlin (citing Hay and Nye, 1998; 2003), Scott (also citing Hay and Nye, 1998; 2003), Vaughn (2002), and Wilber (1996, 2001) all identify spirituality with relational consciousness. Scott defines this as “a spiritual inclination that is expressed... an intentional and natural process of relating to the world, to all things animate and inanimate, to others, including a Divine Other, and to the self” (p. 120). In the work of MacDonald and Friedman, various scales and instruments may be used to measure spirituality in relation to consciousness (2002). Along this line of reasoning, Ruumet envisions psychospiritual “soul development” relating to a collective consciousness that supports our growth toward wholeness (1997, pp. 6-7, 22).

Looking beyond conventional Western frames of reference, Chopra (2000) offers a global exploration of the realm of spirituality by utilizing a mix of biology, quantum physics, and Eastern and Western philosophies. He links human needs to the journey toward soul fulfillment or the “state of union with God” (p. 288) as the infinite source of all intelligence, energy and meaning. A comprehensive view of the inner human reality reveals that the separate elements of religion and spirituality are all pieces of the same all-encompassing puzzle of human existence. “The God of any religion is only a fragment



of God” (Chopra, 2000, p. 42). As defined by Chopra (p. 46), spirit is nonlocal intelligence and the component of being that conceives and translates experience toward the realization of soul (p. 288). Chopra perceives soul as that which is beyond the five senses and exists at the virtual (or spirit) level. It is the infinite source of all energy, intelligence and meaning; “God”; and the state of union with God. Chopra’s (2000) well-reasoned and inclusive thinking is arguably a revolutionary step in the spiritual pursuit of humankind in the new millennium.

In attempting to define spirituality, it becomes apparent that what it is believed to be, how it is experienced, and how it develops or grows are interwoven in ways that reveal the complexities of describing this aspect of being human.

### **Developmental Theories of Spiritual Growth**

While not focusing specifically on spirituality, Worthington’s research focused on religious development and linked it with coping strategies throughout the life span. He looked at the work that had been done regarding moral reasoning and development (including that of Kohlberg and Fowler). Additionally, he related numerous other theories of cognition and psychosocial competence with religious development. The religious maturity that he describes as the goal of religious development mirrors current descriptions of the goal of spiritual development, that is, a tension between individual and communal responsibility and a “transcendence of self” (1989, p. 569). Specific developmental stage models are also put forth by Chopra (2000), Gibson (2004; citing Kohlberg, 1984), Ruumet (1997), and Vaughn (2002). Reviews of early works done by Fowler and Kohlberg describe stages that move from faith rooted in external belief

systems and reinforcements to a shift toward an inner and more transcendental focus and ultimately a universal consciousness.

Fowler, in *Stages of Faith* (as cited by Nugent, 2000), proposes a five stage theory that includes moral, cognitive, affective and behavioral elements. As described by Worthington (1989), Stages 0 to 3 find faith rooted in external belief systems: (0) undifferentiated faith is found in infancy and involves a sense of trust of parental care; (1) intuitive-projective faith involves images of parental religion; (2) mythic-literal faith involves trying to make sense of religious stories, etc.; and (3) synthetic-conventional faith conforms cognitively with the individual's context. In Stage 4, individuative-reflective faith, a shift is made to an inner focus in an attempt to create a rational worldview (Worthington, 1989). Stage 5, paradoxical-consolidative faith, involves the reintegration of the self. In Stage 6, universalizing faith, the individual finds a sense of unified meaning (Worthington, 1989). This shift, from an external and materialistic focus to an internal, more transcendent one, is also identified by Weiss and Bass (2002), who state that as individuals age the search for the meaning of age and of life intensify. Moody (1997) suggests that individuals develop spiritually in five similar stages that "typically occur in midlife and beyond." (p. 33). Worthington (1989) also contends that religiosity increases with age. According to his review, religious maturity may be conceptualized as a "transcendence of the self", which implies a "merging...consciousness into a larger universal" or, at the least, a focus on "aspects of existence outside the self" (p. 569).

Chopra (2000) demonstrates how God Consciousness - an awareness of God and the spiritual aspect of life - unfolds in seven stages. The stages are identified by the

corresponding brain response. They are: 1) Fight-or-Flight Response: God the Protector; 2) Reactive Response: God the Almighty; 3) Restful Awareness Response: God of Peace; 4) Intuitive Response: God the Redeemer; 5) Creative Response: God the Creator; 6) Visionary Response: God of Miracles; and 7) Sacred Response: God of Pure Being – “I Am” (Chopra, 2000). Chopra (2000), in a complex framework, additionally outlines a correlation of each of these seven stages with levels of: associated worldview; ego response; coping response; spiritual response; moral view; specific life challenge; greatest strength; biggest hurdle; greatest temptation; as well as seven levels of fulfillment and of miracles. With each of these constructs, Chopra (2000) delineates seven stages, which correspond to the seven brain response stages. As an example, levels of worldview – from (1) survival to (2) competition to (3) self-sufficiency to (4) insight to (5) discovery to (6) prophecy to (7) transcendence – can be easily connected to his Seven Levels of Fulfillment illustrating spiritual growth. These seven levels categorize the fulfillment of life through: 1) family, community, a sense of belonging, and material comforts; 2) success, power, influence, status, and other ego satisfactions; 3) peace, centered-ness, self-acceptance, and inner silence; 4) insight, empathy, tolerance, forgiveness; 5) inspiration, expanded creativity, unlimited discovery; 6) reverence, compassion, devoted service, universal love; and 7) wholeness and unity with the divine.

Chopra’s (2000) stages can be correlated with life span stages proposed by Erikson (as cited by Nugent 2000) and the resolution of conflict through stages involving (1) trust, (2) autonomy, (3) initiative, (4) industry, (5) identity, (6) intimacy, (7) generativity, and (8) integrity. Worthington (1989) also recognizes “a plethora of attempts to apply stage theories of development to the development of faith” (p. 563).

Coles (1997) focused attention on “moral intelligence” and the development of conscience as an awareness of morality. His observations about the “moral spirit” of children have led him to the examination of the psychodynamics involved in its development. In his 1994 review of Coles, London asserts Coles’ assumption to be that morality is learned by children from the world around them, which includes family, community, state and nation, and by the “interplay between areas of freedom and areas of constraint” (p. 5).

In his examination of the psychological models of development, Ken Wilber (2001) suggests at least four widely used definitions of spirituality. They are: “(1) spirituality involves peak experiences or altered states, which can occur at almost any stage and any age; (2) spirituality involves the highest levels in any of the lines; (3) spirituality is a separate developmental line itself; (4) spirituality is an attitude (such as openness, trust, or love) that the self may or may not have at any stage” (p. 271). Although these four definitions are generally considered to be separate, Wilber purports that they can be successfully merged with his integral approach (see pp. 14-16, 19 below). Wilber and Chopra’s theories have given rise to models of spiritual development, such as those asserted by Ruumet (1997) and Vaughn (2002), who both maintain the complexity of the development of spirituality and its relation to consciousness. This approach is supported by MacDonald and Friedman’s psychosocial assessment of the construct and its multidimensional nature.

### **Transition Theories of Spiritual Growth**

In addition to purely developmental theories of spiritual growth, Moody (1997), Weiss & Bass (2002), Worthington (1989) and others highlight theories of transition as

key to spiritual advancement. These theories suggest that crises are trigger events that present the individual with opportunities to examine her/his life and grow toward self-understanding. C. M. Hall (as cited by Worthington, 1989) concludes that these conditions “appear to be ... necessary ... for the more dramatic rates of spiritual growth.” (p. 563) By looking at this construct from other perspectives, an argument can be made that this contextual premise originates in Western ideologies and may not give consideration to more transcendently based perspectives. Within exoteric belief systems, awareness is held by “ego-bound self-referencing” (Moody, 1997, p. 279), which is only escaped through peak experiences. It is then (Edinger, 1973) that the ego separates from the transpersonal center to allow for growth. Goleman’s (1996) research of Asian faiths highlights their focus on the understanding of mental activity, mental states and meditation as an ongoing spiritual means to mental health (Goleman, 1996). From this perspective, crises may be spiritually significant in a less “dramatic” manner and as part of the ongoing process of spiritual unfolding. Also focusing on transitions, Zukav and Francis (2001) provide a thorough examination of the relationship between emotions and spiritual development. As presented in *The Heart of the Soul*, emotions are messages that bring the individual’s attention to both ego and spiritual needs on which one needs to focus in order to grow. An awareness of emotions is an individual’s first step in aligning the personality with the soul: as emotional crises are resolved, progress is made, growth is advanced, and personal empowerment is furthered.

### **Awareness, Consciousness and Enlightenment within Spiritual Growth**

Wilber’s approach (2001) merges developmental theories and transition theories by examining the relationship between developmental stages and states (or spheres of

awareness) as general realms of consciousness. In his well documented theory of integral development, he proposes that the “continuous process of converting temporary states into permanent traits or structures... in (which) no structures or levels can be bypassed...does not prevent all sorts of spirals, regressions, temporary leaps forward via peak experiences” (p. 266-7). Wilber’s exploration of the dimensions of awareness has led him to the conclusion that consciousness must break identity with the body/mind in order for spiritual growth or advancement to take place. This may occur profoundly during crises, giving rise to temporary states of consciousness (peak experiences); however, development of a responsible ego depends on ongoing, although not necessarily linear growth and transformation (1996, p. 4). Wilber uses, to describe units of organization (including development), the word “holon,” which was coined by Hungarian author and philosopher Arthur Koestler. Holon is a combination of the Greek word holos, meaning whole, and the suffix on, meaning particle or part. A holon is an identifiable part of a system, yet is made up of subordinate parts and in turn is part of a larger whole (Tecnix, p. 1). Wilber further uses the term holarchy to refer to an “increasing order of wholeness” (p. 38). This refers to all domains, including the spiritual domain. Meaning given to any holon is context-dependent (2001, p. 92).

The context of spiritual development lies within the development of the consciousness system, as proposed by Wilber (1996). According to Wilber, the consciousness system has at least three main components (p. 2). The first structures are relatively permanent; they are the linguistic component, cognitive capacities, spatial coordination and so forth. These basic structures are also the basic holons of consciousness (i.e., sensation, perception, impulse, image, symbol, concept, role, meta-

role, vision-logic, psychic, subtle, causal). The second features of the system are relatively transitional; they come into existence but are replaced or phased out. Such is the case with moral development. Mediating between the basic and transitional structures is the third major component, the self-system. “At any given level of development, the self starts out identified with...the basic structure of that level...but if development continues, the self will begin to...differentiate...or transcend that structure, and then identify with the next higher stage while integrating the previous basic structure into the new organization” (p. 3). Wilber emphasizes that there is “nothing linear about the self-sense” and that it can “roam all over the spectrum of consciousness” (p. 4). Religion and wisdom traditions adhere to a hierarchy of being and knowing in that spiritual attainment, or enlightenment, is the highest goal of development and evolution (Wilber, 2001, p. 39). However, as Wilber points out, this fails to take into consideration the paradox of the holarchy: “Spirit...the summit of being, the highest rung on the ladder of evolution...is (also) the wood out of which the entire ladder and all its rungs are made” (p. 39). According to Wilber’s construct, “Soul is both the highest level of individual growth we can achieve and also the final barrier...to complete enlightenment...simply because as transcendental witness it stands back from everything it witnesses” (2001, p. 42).

The ultimate goal of spiritual development or transformation is enlightenment (Chopra, Tolle, Walsch, Worthington, et al.), which is defined in a number of ways. Walsch (2004) purports that we, as human beings, “are searching for a definition of enlightenment” and believe that something specific must be done in order to get there and that there is one best way to do so (p. 370). He asserts that, to the contrary, and much as plants or other life grows, so growth happens even without awareness (p. 20).

“Spirituality ... will allow humans to express their natural impulse to seek and experience the Divine” (p. 12). Rather than focus on *how* to become enlightened, Walsch suggests that we focus on *being* enlightened by finding love, joy and peace in every moment. Doing so will create an awareness whereby energy will be focused on the state of being, which in turn will cause God to respond to the vibration created (p. 375). Chopra (2003) defines enlightenment as “the recognition that I am an infinite being seeing and seen from, observing and observed from, a particular and localized point of view. Whatever else we are, no matter how much of a mess we may have made of our lives, it is always possible to tap into the part of the soul that is universal, the infinite field of pure potential, and change the course of our destiny” (p. 79). He identifies relationship as a tool for spiritual enlightenment (p. 188) and a way to expand personal awareness (p. 192) so that “by knowledge” we can approach God.

Many belief systems - such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Toltec wisdom - hold that awareness and conscious living are the way to spiritual enlightenment (Chopra, 2000; Nhat Hahn, 1995; Ruiz, 1997). Prayer and meditation are contemplative vehicles of religion and belief systems and can have the effect of centering attention in the present moment. Through mindful living (or living in awareness) a connection can be made with the soul (Chopra, 2000; Zukav & Francis, 2001). The perpetual struggle with ego needs distracts us from an inner focus and spiritual growth (Zukav & Francis, 2001); the way these needs are addressed is the point at which an individual may move or not toward enlightened spiritual personal empowerment (p. 40).



Given an understanding of spiritual development that is based on consciousness and awareness, it might be argued that the act of questioning an individual about spirituality or its development inherently functions as an intervention. That is to say, raising the issue of spirituality with a person will cause their attention to be focused on the transpersonal. Awareness is generally considered to be an initial step toward the ultimate goal of spiritual development, which is enlightenment (Chopra, 2000; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Vaughn, 2002; Wilber, 2001; and others). Chopra (2000) purports that spirituality is “hard-wired” into the human psyche, and when it is brought to awareness, its development may be enhanced and, in turn, promote an overall sense of well being. This assertion is supported by the work of Scheindlin (2003) and Scott (2003), whose proposed interventions are based on their research with children and spiritual development. In Scheindlin’s 2003 research regarding children’s emotional perceptions, emotions are identified as a mode of consciousness that is connected with spiritual development. He postulates that emotions are key in bringing to awareness issues to be addressed within development that relate to morals, ethics and spirituality. His suggestions are geared toward how best to educate children in a way that incorporates cognitive and emotional capacities as a base for the development of a view of life enhancing spiritual development. Vaughn (2002) and Zukav & Francis (2001) also stress the importance of emotionality. Vaughn recognizes emotional intelligence and its role in spiritual intelligence, which she describes as the discernment necessary to make spiritual choices. As cited in Scott’s 2003 work reviewed in this investigation, his hypotheses rely heavily on the work of Hay and Nye (1998), whose main tenet is that spirituality can be defined as relational consciousness. Scott asserts that a holistic developmental

perspective is important to understanding the development of relational consciousness as well as how it might shift in later stages of life. By identifying what he calls “touchstones of engagement” (identifying key points of transition, openness and sensitivity to spiritual awareness) he provides a means by which intervention might occur in order to enhance spiritual development. Scott’s article further suggests the “need to open up the understanding of relational consciousness, to test it in research and in practice...” (p. 129) in order to advance the area of spiritual development.

Wilber’s ontological theory approach (1996, 2001) may provide a more holistic and inclusive metaphysical examination of the realm of the soul and spirituality and its connections to the physical (material), emotional and intellectual. In *The Eye of Spirit* (2001) Wilber defines soul as “the higher or subtle mind, the archetypal mind, the intuitive mind, and the essence of our indestructibility of our own being” and spirit as “the transcendental summit of our being, our Godhead” (p. 41). He integrates the relationship of the seemingly separate facets of being human in what he terms the “spectrum of consciousness” model. According to Wilber (2001), a series of multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multimodal approaches involving hundreds of researchers around the world is being undertaken in an “exhaustive mapping of the entire range of consciousness” (p. 33). This mapping offers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the entirety of consciousness in order to “directly intuit the mind of some eternal Spirit” (p. 32). The focus on spirituality is referred to by Wilber as The Atman Project, “...the attempt to find spirit in ways that prevent it and force substitute gratifications” (p. 50).

Kabat-Zinn (1997) views mindful parenting as a spiritual discipline based on intentionality. He asserts that intentions remind us of what is important (p. 381), and further that the foundations of mindful parenting are sovereignty, empathy, and acceptance. In making a conscious commitment to parent in a way that honors the child, a parent can raise an individual who has been given choices and knows how to make healthy ones. In parenting with empathy, a parent may see their children as unique beings and impart the capacity for sympathetic awareness. In practicing and modeling acceptance, a parent teaches their offspring to appreciate and learn from everyone they encounter. In this manner, spiritual growth may be enhanced (p. 381). Coles, too, identifies “awareness (as) a fundamental moral aspect” of us as human beings (cited by London, 1994, p. 3).

Neale Donald Walsch (2004) outlines conditions that help to enhance positive self-image, which in turn foster the mind-body-spirit connection, thus opening the individual “to the Creator Within ...returning them to their own inner wisdom... and innermost truth” (p. 310). His vision for development, which may be furthered through education, centers on teaching humanity first and subjects second. According to Walsch, imagination is key to trusting and expressing what is known on a deep and spiritual level and individuals who are raised with this mindset in a sharing, caring and loving manner are able to live in a way that is more spiritually connected (p. 300). In as much as this takes place in an individual’s life, that person may be enhanced spiritually. By taking responsibility for the world we create, we are empowered and contribute to the evolution of mankind (p. 214). This is what Chopra (2003) identifies in his theory of synchrodestiny, connecting the conscious intelligence energy field (or universal soul)

through spirituality (or personal soul) to the actions of humankind individually and collectively (p. 79). It is a way of relating that brings us closer to spirit (p. 177).

In Eastern faith traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism) the intent of spiritual practice is to endeavor toward self-realization and “a personal experience of the Divine” (Kumar, 2000). Hinduism describes the spiritual path to follow energy, called Kundalini, up through the body through seven energy centers called chakras. The chakras correspond with the endocrine system of glands. The chakras and their associated issues are: base (or root) -- survival and physical needs; sacral – emotional balance and sexuality; solar plexus – personal power and self-will; heart – love and relationships; throat – communication and self-expression; third eye – intuition and wisdom; and crown – spirituality. The seven chakras and their issues correspond loosely with Chopra’s seven stages of spiritual development (see above pp. 9, 10). Chopra (2003) also suggests that intention, or awareness, is “a force in nature, like gravity, but more powerful...No one can say, ‘I don’t believe in gravity,’ because it is a force at work in the world whether we understand it or not” (p. 208). Wilber (1996) purports that awareness (or conscious acknowledgement) of the intersection between the personal and transpersonal dimensions is necessary for growth to occur (p. 13). Walsch (2004), on the other hand, asserts that all individuals evolve spiritually and only the speed at which that occurs depends on awareness (p. 20).

### **The Search for Connection**

As individuals age, it is generally agreed that the search for the meaning and connection in life intensifies (Moody, 1997; Nugent, 2000; Weiss & Bass, 2002; Worthington, 1989; and others). Worthington’s assessment (p. 9 above), that religious

maturity entails “a transcendence of the self“ and implies a “merging...consciousness into a larger universe,” seems to be indicative of current thinking with regard to the correlation between aging and spiritual development. Fowler, Moody and others identify mid-life and beyond to be the stage at which spiritual development shifts to an internal, transcendent focus (see page 9 above). MacKnee (1997) states that “it is probable that individual maturity is important for enhancing the maturity of the union relationship. ...Possibly it is only those who are willing to actively seek the full spiritual or sexual union that are mature enough to actually experience it and grow from such an experience. ...One can integrate personal experience in relation to God and to another person. Enlightenment follows” (p. 219).

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Gilligan (1982), Wilber (1996, 2000, 2000, 2001), and others have examined the role of gender as it relates to human development and specifically to the development of consciousness, morality and spirituality. Wilber’s (1996) model of consciousness and its relation to spiritual development in conjunction with psychological, emotional and interpersonal development recognizes “basic native” differences in male and female value spheres (1996, p. 20), expanding on Gilligan’s groundbreaking work in the area of women’s psychological development. Wilber notes the creation of value spheres--as influenced by worldview, biology (notably hormones), modes of production and translation, and more--are vastly different in the development of men and women. Unlike Gilligan’s linear model of development, Wilber imagines a more holarchical unfolding, that is, including both hierarchy and heterarchy (1996, p. 15). He does, however, posit that although “both men and women exist as agency-in-communion...men tend to

translate with an emphasis on agency, women with an emphasis on communion.” Despite developing through the same general stages of egocentric, sociocentric, worldcentric, and spiritual domains, women and men seem to develop with different emphasis (expressed “in a different voice”). Men tend to emphasize “agency, rights, justice, and autonomy, whereas women tend to develop...based more on communion, responsibility, relationship, care, and connection.” This does not negate the fact that both women and men have “decisive access” to both styles of translation.

The relational aspect of spiritual development is further examined by Johnson (2001), MacKnee (1997, 2000, 2001, 2002), and Ogden (1999, 2000, 2002) in connection with the role of sexuality. These researchers and others describe sexuality as a means whereby connection can be made with others, with the self, with all of life, and with the Divine. This connection can be at once very personal and yet beyond the self, a transcendence (Johnson, MacKnee, Ogden). The transpersonal dimensions shared by sexuality and spirituality are striking. The complementary nature and experience of the connection between sexuality and spirituality is examined by MacKnee, who describes “the arousal and desire of these two energies...rooted in a pervading sense of human incompleteness and yearning for wholeness” (2000, p. ii). He suggests that this parallelism serves to demonstrate their integral relationship (1997, p. 210). MacKnee further observes that “the arousing nature of psychic energy relates the sexual to the spiritual (1997, p. 215).

Ogden’s studies (1999, 2002) have focused on the investigation of connection associated with sexuality and spirituality. In *Women Who Love Sex: An Inquiry into the Expanding Spirit of Women’s Erotic Experience*, Ogden gives voice to “the joyous

integration of sexuality and spirituality” that can be appreciated from her research, in that “what ... women...are talking about is the spiritual dimensions of sexual relationship” (p. xv). As women begin to define their sexuality--previously defined within the male paradigm and influenced largely by mass media (Johnson, 2001; Ogden, 1999, 2002; and others)--it is being described by its relational components, rather than by those that are purely physical or biological. The results of the first large-scale survey designed to investigate the sexuality-spirituality connection are described in *Sexuality and Spirituality in Women's Relationships*. Ogden's exploratory survey sought to “address...important and underresearched aspects of sexual response, such as love, oneness, and transcendence” (2002, p. 6). Distribution of her survey was by means of a snowball convenience sample and by magazine publication, thus creating limiting biases; however, the data presents an opportunity to expand the knowledge of women's sexuality and its relatedness to spirituality.

Johnson's 2001 investigation examines the link between sexuality and spirituality within a feminist social construct, utilizing empirical data gathered from application of the Sexual Self-Esteem Inventory for Women (SSEI-W) and the Spiritual Orientation Inventory (SOI). She assessed results from 96 women ages 18 to 50. The majority of the sample was from conservative churches or church-related institutions. Johnson cites a “global relationship ... between sexual self-esteem and spiritual orientation,” as well as “more detailed relationships between moral judgment, idealism, and altruism” (p. iii). All of the results, according to Johnson, “can be understood from the theme of connection.” In Johnson's account of the limitations of her study, she points to the need for the investigation of the spirituality-sexuality connection in women from “more liberal church

traditions or other faiths” (p. 83). She also suggests that a combination of quantitative and qualitative research may yield richer results than her quantitative approach. Johnson concludes that continued investigation “may serve not only to give individual women new frameworks that help them in understanding their experiences, but it may also give women as a whole, shared language and meanings with which to communicate and connect with other women “ (p. 85). As well, her research supports evidence of the spirituality-sexuality link for the women participating in her study.

From her investigation, Johnson (2001) reasons that “perhaps, as women get older they are more sure of themselves as sexual beings” (p. 74). And that “to an extent, how one feels regarding her sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (sic), is related to her awareness of herself as a spiritual being” (p. 80). In Ellison’s (2000) investigation of *Women’s Sexualities*, the link between sexual maturity and transpersonal and spiritual aspects is noted (p. 198), also. Ogden (2000) examined survey responses from individuals over the age of 50, which tended to “use rich detail in their discussions of spiritual discovery” (p. 1) related to sexuality “with language that reflects the whole person” (p. 2). In an initial analysis of her complete research data (2002), Ogden found that “older respondents reported more connections between sexuality and spirituality than younger respondents” (p. 14). They also “used a greater number of strategies...to incorporate spirituality into their sexual experiences.” Forty-one percent of respondents 60 and older reported that “sex always needs to have a spiritual element to be satisfying” and 58% from the same age group reported having “experienced God in a moment of sexual ecstasy.” She concludes, “this exploratory survey represents a crucial step in



understanding how sexuality and spirituality might be integrated in women's lives" (p. 21).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the degree of connectedness or relationship between spirituality and sexuality as reported by women age 50 and older. This particular sample was chosen for its characteristics related to the dual aspects of the investigation, that is, spiritual development and sexuality. As is outlined above in *The Search for Connection*, mid-life is generally recognized as the point at which spiritual development gains central attention in the lives of most individuals. Ellison, Ogden and others have noted the richness of experience of individuals 50 and older. Additionally, within life span development, issues of reproduction and procreation do not generally confound matters of sexuality in this stage of life, providing the likelihood that more attention is focused on spiritual, as opposed to physical, considerations. The female gender was chosen because of the recent research expanding the understanding of both spirituality and sexuality within a relational paradigm. And finally, women attending the Unitarian Universalist Church were investigated because of the diverse, more liberal tenets and traditions of the church (see Appendix A), as Johnson (2001) suggested merit further research.

### **Research Questions**

In the exploration of the connection between sexuality and spirituality, a review of relevant literature raises questions that merit further investigation. In response, the questions for this research are:

- 1) How do women who attend a church with liberal tenets experience the relationship

(or connection) between sexuality and spirituality?

- 2) What are the similarities or differences of their experiences?
- 3) Is there a generational difference in their experiences?

## Chapter 2

### METHOD

#### Sample

Of 75 survey questionnaires distributed through five Unitarian Universalist Churches in the central Maine area, 33 women completed and returned the survey, representing a 44% response rate. Eighteen women reported being 50 to 59 years old (55%), eight 60 to 69 (24%) and seven 70 to 79 (21%); the median age is 59. Thirty participants indicated their ethnic identification as Caucasian (White). With regard to highest level of education attained in this sample, two respondents checked high school, ten college, 19 Master's, one doctorate and one post-doctorate. Reported household income ranged from a low of \$17,500 for one individual to a high of \$100,000 for four individuals; four offered no information regarding income. The median income was \$45,000. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average Maine household income for 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) was \$39,594.

Of the respondents, 23 of the 33 report being either married or in a committed relationship, comprising 70% of the sample; ten report being either separated or divorced, widowed, and/or with no current partner, comprising 30% of the sample. Thirty identified themselves as heterosexual (91%), two as lesbian (6%) and one as bisexual (3%). Religions that the participants "grew up with" were: Roman Catholic, six (18%); Protestant, 19 (58%); Fundamentalist Christian, two (6%); Unitarian Universalist, two (6%); agnostic, one (3%); Quaker, one (3%); and none, two (6%).

An overview of the sample reached in this study can be described as follows: Respondents were women attending a Unitarian Universalist Church in the central Maine

area, primarily heterosexual and primarily Caucasian, ranging in age from 50 to 79. Eighteen participants were in their fifties and the other fifteen in their sixties and seventies, with the average age being 59. These women were highly educated, with over half of them having Master's degrees or doctoral degrees. In light of this fact, it is not surprising that they reported living in households with above average income for the State of Maine. Seventy percent were in marriages or committed relationships. The majority, 58%, was raised within a Protestant faith and 18% as Roman Catholic. Only two reported growing up with no religion (6%).

### **Procedure**

In order to recruit the sample, a letter was mailed to the ministers of five Unitarian Universalist Churches in the central Maine area (see Appendix B). Upon receiving their agreement to disseminate survey materials, key individuals in each church — generally the pastor of that particular congregation — were asked to introduce the study to members of their congregation. As women who met the qualifications of the study agreed to participate, a packet was provided to each individual. Packets contained a copy of the Recruiting Letter/Informed Consent (see Appendix C), the Questionnaire (see Appendix D), and a listing of literature relative to the topic of this research (see Appendix E) in appreciation for their contribution to this investigation. A stamped, pre-addressed, unidentifiable envelope was included in each packet for the return of the survey.

### **Survey Questions**

A survey questionnaire was designed to investigate the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. The survey itself seeks to define spirituality, as it is experienced by the participants, within the context of the experience of sexuality. The

first nine questions are demographic in nature. Questions 9 through 24 were taken from Ogden's 1997 survey *Integrating Sexuality and Spirituality* and one narrative question utilizes MacKnee's (2000) "descriptive themes...of common meaning and experience of profound sexual and spiritual encounters" (pp. 8-11). Responses were evaluated to determine how women experience the connection between spirituality and sexuality, as well as to ascertain common themes or differences in their experience.

### **Data Analysis**

Survey results were derived from both statistical and narrative data. In order to analyze the statistical data, descriptive methods were used. Narrative data was evaluated for common themes. The last question, which is narrative, is supported by examples from MacKnee's (2000) research (see Appendix D).

## **Chapter 3**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter will review the descriptive results, as well as the narrative results, of the survey. Results are reported for each of the three research questions.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, how do women who attend a church with liberal tenets experience the relationship between sexuality and spirituality?

Questions 9 through 24 have descriptive, structured choices about the relationship between spirituality and sexuality as experienced by the respondent (see Appendix D). In response to Question 25, two women underlined particular descriptors of their experience from those listed on the questionnaire, while eight women provided narrative answers further describing their profound spiritual experiences during intimacy.

Question 9 lists ten items, activities and expressions that may be related to both spirituality and sexuality (see Appendix D). The most commonly selected were words of comfort (82%), music (79%), words of love (76%), candles (76%) and flowers (67%). Thirty-one respondents (94%) indicated that they associate two or more of these with both sexuality and spirituality. One indicated nothing on the list was associated with both sexuality and spirituality; the other did not respond to the question. Twenty-one individuals associated five or more of the list with both sexuality and spirituality; this represents 64% of the total and 68% of those responding to any association.

Question 10 was evaluated to determine the most frequent choices of characteristics the women identified as being involved in sexuality and spirituality. The characteristics of sexuality, so identified, were oneness with partner and caring for others.

The characteristics of spirituality most frequently identified were oneness with power greater than self and caring for others.

Question 10 serves as the basis for evaluation of Question 11, which asked which of the statements in Question 10 was most true of their current experience. The top choices of characteristics identified in Question 11 were identical to the most frequently chosen characteristics in Question 10. The statements that were “most true” for these respondents regarding characteristics involved in their current sexual experience were oneness with partner and caring for others. The characteristics most frequently chosen regarding current spiritual experience were oneness with power greater than self and caring for others. These common characteristics of oneness and caring would seem to represent a connection between the experience of sexuality and spirituality.

Question 12 asks to what degree sex needs to have a spiritual element to be “really satisfying.” Seventeen individuals responded always or sometimes (52%), with ten indicating neither true nor untrue (30%), and six seldom or never (18%). The top three responses to Question 13 from the list of characteristics that have contributed to sex being a spiritual experience were: (a) being in love (76%), (b) feeling safe (70%), and (c) feeling committed to my partner (67%).

Twenty-nine of the participants had done one or more things from the list in Question 14 “to help bring a spiritual dimension to (their) sexual experiences.” The top choices were shared deep feelings with my partner (67%), made eye contact with my partner (61%), kissed soulfully (58%), touched reverently (52%) and laughed together (52%). This question seems to imply intention, which may indicate an experience of relationship or connection between sexuality and spirituality.

Specifics elicited in Question 15 show that the majority of participants indicated that their spiritual beliefs had led them to express their sexuality more fully. These were: (a) by affirming that love is good in all its forms and expressions, (b) by opening them to risk deeper intimacy, and (c) by sanctioning feelings of longing and passion. Conversely, Question 16 revealed that the three main characteristics of their spiritual beliefs that had prevented these participants from expressing their sexuality more fully were: (a) by giving the message that “good girls don’t,” (b) by making sexual desire a source of guilt, and (c) by making body pleasure a source of shame. Further examination related to this question may show, in addition, whether there is a relationship between these answers and the religion of origin (Q8). Responses to Question 17 showed that the two most prevalent other things that prevented these respondents from experiencing a sex-spirit connection were depression (39%) and worry about looks (36%).

Of the respondents, 27 (82%) reported experiencing sexual ecstasy (Question 18) while 15 (46%) reported experiencing spiritual ecstasy (Question 19). The most reported elements associated with both sexual satisfaction (Question 20) and spiritual satisfaction (Question 21) by these respondents were: (a) peace and serenity (64%), (b) feeling loved and accepted (58%), and (c) feeling loving and accepting (58%). At least one respondent reported associating each element listed with both sexual and spiritual satisfaction. Twenty-four percent of respondents (n=8) indicated having a sense of experiencing God/Universal energy in a moment of sexual ecstasy (Question 22), while only 12% (n=4) indicated having felt a surge of sexual energy in a moment of spiritual ecstasy (Question 23).



Question 24 asks respondents to indicate how important sexuality, spirituality and religion are for their present situation. The importance of sexuality, spirituality and religion as reported by these individuals was 39%, 88% and 46% respectively.

Ten women (30%) acknowledged in Question 25 that they had experienced a profound spiritual occurrence during sexual intimacy. Question 25 elicited personal information that adds a depth and richness to this investigation of how women experience the connection between sexuality and spirituality. In addition to comments from the ten women who reported a profound spiritual experience during sexual intimacy, three others made comments regarding Question 25 and to the survey as a whole. One 62-year-old woman wrote that she did experience “freedom from inhibitions, to an extent.” Two women (one aged 54 and one aged 59) wrote that they hadn’t thought of a connection between spirituality and sexuality until taking part in this study. One of them wrote that she will “look for “ the connection from the point of doing the survey. The other wrote that having been raised in the Catholic church, she didn’t think about the relationship until she “became UU and learning (sic) to accept (herself) as okay in all ways...and met a man (her second husband) who believed sexuality was a very special part of being human.”

Themes that emerged in answer to Question 25 included: a sense of wonder and amazement, emotional cleansing, intense union, intense physical arousal, euphoria, transcendence, transformation, loss of the dimensions of time and space, passionate awareness, holistic involvement, and sense of sacredness. Three women underlined elements from those listed on the questionnaire (see Appendix D) and did not add comments in their own words. Women who did write comments expressed having

experienced a sense of oneness and/or closeness with their partner, trust, liberation, sacredness, gratitude, awe “in the face of the Divine” and a sense of being one with the Universe, “not separate at all.” One 64-year-old woman described the sense of healing she gained from experiencing the connection between sexuality and spirituality. Through the experience, she has “learned to live in love and not fear.” See appendix F for written comments quoted from the surveys.

It is clear that the participants in this study overwhelmingly have experienced such a connection. Even respondents who indicated that they hadn’t considered there to be a connection between sexuality and spirituality identified commonalities with their experience of these two dimensions. The ways these women have experienced the connection range across all of the itemized answers provided, however, there were significant similarities in those characteristics identified most frequently.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked what are the similarities or differences in the experiences of these women? All questions were examined for similarities as well as differences.

Responses to Questions 9, 10 and 11 showed that the majority of responses are limited to a few of the itemized elements or characteristics. Question 9 lists ten elements associated with both sexuality and spirituality; more than half of the respondents (n=21) associated at least the same five choices (as identified above, p. 31). On Questions 10 and 11 respondents indicated experiencing five of the listed characteristics regarding their sexual experience: (a) a sense of oneness with partner, (b) caring for others, (c) honesty and (d) intense body pleasure. Responses regarding spiritual experience were limited to

four characteristics: (a) a sense of oneness with a power greater than the self, (b) caring for others, (c) integration and (d) honesty.

Responses to Question 13 show a constellation of three characteristics from 15 (see p. 32 above); responses to Question 14 clustered around five of 15 characteristics. Characteristics preventing these women from experiencing a sex-spirit connection were reported to be primarily three of six (Q 16) and two of 16 (Q17) factors. Questions 20 and 21 also show similarities in the association of sexuality and spirituality (see p. 33 above).

While this sample reveals a range of experience, there do appear to be constellations of answers. This preliminary evaluation suggests that there are more similarities than differences in the experiences of these women.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked if there is a generational difference in these women's experiences.

When examined by age group, responses to Questions 9 through 24 were generally consistent across the three generations represented. Of the ten written responses to the narrative question (Q 25) five were from the 18 women in their fifties (28%), two from the eight women in their sixties (25%) and three from seven women in their seventies (43%) comprised this group. Again, this may reflect individual experience rather than purely that of a generational nature.

Given the small number of respondents overall (n=33) and the small number of women in their sixties (n=8) and seventies (n=7), there is insufficient data to determine whether differences are individual or generational. Further investigation may provide statistical information that could add clarification to this question.

## **Chapter 4**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study examines one aspect of the spiritual dynamic within human development by looking at the ways in which spirituality is defined and how spiritual growth takes place, as well as how it is connected to other features of human development. Examining this complex, multi-relational, multidimensional aspect of being human may provide important implications for understanding overall development. Regardless of one's view regarding how spirituality develops, there is general agreement that spirituality becomes a predominant concern within individual development by mid-life. In the last decade attention has been focused on exploring differences in the ways the genders experience the spiritual dimension of being and its development (as cited on p. 2 above). Within this framework, sexuality as a vehicle for the perception of spirituality has gained focus. According to MacKnee, "An essence of humanity is to be either male or female. Sexuality...is our way of being in the world and relating to the world as male and female.... Sexuality calls males and females to move toward completeness—to form a unity, or wholeness, that is experienced as wholeness" (1997, p. 212). Thus, the experience of relationship to self, to others, to nature and to the Divine may be perceived in relation to the experience of spirituality.

#### **Research Questions**

In a survey designed to investigate the connection between sexuality and spirituality as experienced by women in mid-life and beyond (n=33), respondents reported that their sexual experience does involve characteristics that are spiritual in nature. The research questions posed in this study represent a preliminary attempt to gain

an understanding of how women in this stage of life experience the connection between spirituality and sexuality. By undertaking an exploratory investigation of women who attend a church with liberal tenets, a contribution has been made to broaden the understanding of the dimensions of sexuality and spirituality. By examining the personal experience, for this particular sample, of the connection between these two dimensions, it is apparent that there is a wide range of spiritual elements within and connected to sexuality and its experience. There appear to be more similarities than differences in the experience of the respondents in this study.

Women in this study appear to find a connection between these two dimensions that are generally considered to be separate by “mainstream Western belief systems” (Ogden, 2002, p. 4). This study supports the work begun by Ogden with her 1997 survey; her study shows that women do experience a connection between sexuality and spirituality, which is reported increasingly as age advances.

The results of this study of women age 50 and older attending a church with liberal tenets corroborates the results of Johnson’s 2001 study of women ages 18 to 50 attending a conservative church or church-related institution. Her findings indicate a “global relationship...between sexual self-esteem and spiritual orientation...understood from the theme of connection.” She postulates that “perhaps, as women get older they are more sure of themselves as sexual beings...and ...how one feels regarding her sexual thoughts...is related to her awareness of herself as a spiritual being” (pp. 74, 80).

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations presented by this study. The major limitations are related to the sample. They include the sample size, its homogeneous racial, cultural

and ethnic characteristics, and its limited geographical range, as well as generational and socioeconomic restrictions. On one hand, the impersonal nature of the survey (as opposed to interviewing) may not have elicited the depth of information that face to face contacts might have. On the other hand, the impersonal nature of the survey may have allowed for responses from women who may not have been comfortable revealing such intimate information about themselves.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

As the attempt to define spirituality evolves, seeking to understand connections between the subtle dimensions of human existence, including sexuality, may enhance the understanding of spirituality and its progression along a continuum of growth. The survey data, as well as the narrative data, collected in this investigation add a personal richness to a developing understanding of the connection between sexuality and spirituality for women, going beyond the physical realm of experience. Adding women's voices to the discourse contributes an underrepresented and relational component, as well as a linking of the meaning of spirituality and sexuality, in the examination of these realms. Further research involving individuals, male and female, from all religious faiths and personal belief systems, other racial and ethnic groups, other geographical areas and other generations will be important in broadening the understanding of connection between the spiritual and other dimensions. Despite its limitations, this exploratory investigation represents a meaningful contribution to an evolving understanding of spirituality, its relation to other dimensions and to broadening the understanding of how spirituality is defined.

As the complexities of the spiritual dynamic within human development are examined and better understood, it is important to give this dynamic full consideration. Spiritual development is extraordinarily complex, dynamic and multifaceted and is interwoven with all other aspects of development (Plante & Sherman, 2001). This dynamic, in addition to contributing to a more complete understanding of the individual, is connected to overall health, including mental health (Plante & Sherman, 2001). By exploring the connection between spirituality and sexuality for women and its relation to age, our understanding may be augmented as we seek to further define ourselves in relation to others, to nature and to the Divine. Further examination may provide more meaning to the multidimensional experiences of human existence. By giving consideration to the role of spirituality, as well as the degree of recognition of the spiritual dimension there is an individual's life, strategies which further the progress of spiritual development may, in turn, further the progress of spiritually oriented human development and the resolution of issues that arise throughout the life span.

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## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A: UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH PRINCIPLES & PURPOSES**

### **Principles and Purposes**

The following statements were adopted as Bylaws by the 1984, 1985, and 1995 General Assemblies.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

## APPENDIX B: PASTOR LETTER

September 12, 2005

Dear Pastor:

My name is Hannah Osborne, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maine. As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research regarding the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Specifically, I am interested in how women age 50 and older may experience a connection between their spirituality and sexuality. Although this information is very personal in nature, it may help us to gain a better understanding of this important area in the lives of women.

Because there is a lack of information about the connection between spirituality and sexuality as experienced by individuals involved in religions that are liberal in nature, I am focusing my investigation on women attending the Unitarian Universalist Church. I am asking your assistance in my investigation by announcing my research project to your congregation and providing survey packets to women volunteering to participate.

The survey questionnaires are anonymous and will be in stamped envelopes addressed to me at the University, where they are to be returned by October 21. The survey takes approximately 40 minutes to complete and questions may be skipped, if desired. Each packet will have a participant consent form attached to it for clarification.

If you will help with the distribution of my survey, as described, I will provide the packets to you by the end of September. If you have any questions, please contact me at ###-####.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

## **APPENDIX C: RECRUITING LETTER/PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

My name is Hannah Osborne, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maine. You are being asked to participate in a study regarding the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. This research is being conducted as part of my master's thesis. I am looking for women age 50 and older who may have experienced a connection between their spiritual and sexuality. Although this information is very personal in nature, it may help us to gain a better understanding of this important area in the lives of women.

### **What Will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you meet these qualifications and choose to participate, please complete the enclosed questionnaire that takes approximately 40 minutes. This survey includes questions concerning your experience(s) related to sexuality and spirituality. You will also be asked questions about your background. This kind of information is important in describing the people who participated in the study in general terms (e.g., average age). Please complete the survey and mail it to me in the postage-paid pre-addressed envelope provided by October 21.

At any time you may elect to have material deleted from the information you provide.

### **Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you decide to take part in this study, you may stop at any time without loss of benefit. You may skip any question or questions you do not wish to answer.

### **Benefits and Risks**

You may benefit from participating by reaching an enhanced understanding of your own experiences in relation to spirituality and sexuality. The topic and your answers may elicit a range of emotions (including discomfort, etc.). Except for your time and inconvenience, there are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in this study. If you experience emotional stress due to the topic of this study, you may want to talk to your clergy or a local counselor. You can also contact the statewide network for Crisis Counseling at 1-888-568-1112.

### **Confidentiality**

Please do not put your name on the survey. Since you will not be giving me your name, your information will be anonymous. Once the research is completed, the questionnaires will be destroyed by shredding. The results collected from this study may be published or used at a conference in the future.

### **Contact information**

If you have any questions about the survey or the research project, please contact me at 207-453-4392 or by email at [hosborne@umit.maine.edu](mailto:hosborne@umit.maine.edu) or my thesis advisor Dr. Sandra Caron at 207-581-3138 or by email at [Sandy.Caron@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Sandy.Caron@umit.maine.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Rights Subject Review Board at 207-581-1498 or email at [Gayle.Anderson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Gayle.Anderson@umit.maine.edu).



## APPENDIX D: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire inquires about the relationship between spirituality and sexuality, and your participation is extremely valuable. Since each person's experiences are unique, there are no right or wrong answers. You are invited to add your personal statements at the end. Please write anything you feel is relevant even if you do not complete the questionnaire. All of the information will remain anonymous. It will be used to educate and inform others. Thank you for your participation.

Hannah Osborne, LSW

Please check the alternatives that best describe your experience, adding whatever information may be necessary.

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Gender: Female \_\_\_\_\_ Crossgender \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Ethnic identification** (check all that apply)  
Caucasian (white) \_\_\_\_\_ African-American (black) \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
Native American \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)
4. **Highest education completed:**  
Grade School \_\_\_\_\_ High School \_\_\_\_\_ College \_\_\_\_\_  
Masters \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_ Post Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_
5. **Yearly household income:** \_\_\_\_\_ (in round numbers)
6. **Relationship status:**  
No current partner \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ In a committed relationship \_\_\_\_\_  
Divorced/separated \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)
7. **Sexual orientation:**  
Heterosexual \_\_\_\_\_ Lesbian \_\_\_\_\_ Bisexual \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)
8. **Religion you grew up with:**  
Roman Catholic \_\_\_\_\_ Protestant \_\_\_\_\_ Fundamentalist Christian \_\_\_\_\_  
Jewish \_\_\_\_\_ Buddhist \_\_\_\_\_ Mormon \_\_\_\_\_ UU Church \_\_\_\_\_  
Atheist \_\_\_\_\_ Agnostic \_\_\_\_\_ None \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)

9. **Sexual romance and religious worship have many kinds of symbols and rituals in common.** (Please check *all* that you associate with *both* your sexuality *and* your spirituality.)

- |         |       |                        |       |
|---------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| Candles | _____ | Special foods          | _____ |
| Incense | _____ | Words of comfort       | _____ |
| Flowers | _____ | Words of love          | _____ |
| Wine    | _____ | Laying on of hands     | _____ |
| Music   | _____ | None of the above      | _____ |
| Dancing | _____ | Other (please specify) | _____ |

10. **What do sexuality and spirituality involve in your life?**

(For each pair of statements, please check the line segment closest to the statement that best reflects your experience.)

- Sexuality Involves**
- |    |  |       |   |
|----|--|-------|---|
| 1  | Excitement                             | _____ | Boredom                                 |
| 2  | Honesty                                | _____ | Deception                               |
| 3  | Caring for others                      | _____ | Caring for self                         |
| 4  | Numbed senses                          | _____ | Heightened senses                       |
| 5  | Intense body pleasure                  | _____ | Minimal body pleasure                   |
| 6  | Intense inner vitality                 | _____ | Minimal inner vitality                  |
| 7  | Constraint                             | _____ | Liberation                              |
| 8  | Integration                            | _____ | Fragmentation                           |
| 9  | Oneness with self                      | _____ | Distance from self                      |
| 10 | Oneness with partner                   | _____ | Distance from partner                   |
| 11 | Oneness with a power greater than self | _____ | Distance from a power greater than self |
| 12 | Worship                                | _____ | Blasphemy                               |
| 13 | Other (please specify)                 | _____ |   |

- Spirituality Involves**
- |    |  |       |   |
|----|--|-------|---|
| 14 | Excitement                             | _____ | Boredom                                 |
| 15 | Honesty                                | _____ | Deception                               |
| 16 | Caring for others                      | _____ | Caring for self                         |
| 17 | Numbed senses                          | _____ | Heightened senses                       |
| 18 | Intense body pleasure                  | _____ | Minimal body pleasure                   |
| 19 | Intense inner vitality                 | _____ | Minimal inner vitality                  |
| 20 | Constraint                             | _____ | Liberation                              |
| 21 | Integration                            | _____ | Fragmentation                           |
| 22 | Oneness with self                      | _____ | Distance from self                      |
| 23 | Oneness with partner                   | _____ | Distance from partner                   |
| 24 | Oneness with a power greater than self | _____ | Distance from a power greater than self |
| 25 | Worship                                | _____ | Blasphemy                               |
| 26 | Other (please specify)                 | _____ |   |

11. **Which *one* of the above statements would you say is *most* true:**

- (1) of your current **SEXUAL** experience? \_\_\_\_\_
- (2) of your current **SPIRITUAL** experience? \_\_\_\_\_

12. **Sex needs to have a spiritual element to be really satisfying.** (please check one)

- Always true for me \_\_\_\_\_
- Sometimes true for me \_\_\_\_\_
- Neither true nor untrue for me \_\_\_\_\_
- Seldom true for me \_\_\_\_\_
- Never true for me \_\_\_\_\_

**13. Which of the following have contributed to sex being a spiritual experience for you?**  
(please check *all* that apply)

- Being in love \_\_\_\_\_
- Conceiving a baby \_\_\_\_\_
- Being pregnant \_\_\_\_\_
- Having no fear of getting pregnant \_\_\_\_\_
- Feeling committed to my partner \_\_\_\_\_
- Feeling free of responsibility to my partner \_\_\_\_\_
- Feeling safe \_\_\_\_\_
- Experiencing a personal crisis \_\_\_\_\_
- Feeling in control \_\_\_\_\_
- Feeling controlled \_\_\_\_\_
- Being in the mood \_\_\_\_\_
- Aggressive thrusting \_\_\_\_\_
- Danger \_\_\_\_\_
- Drinking or drugs \_\_\_\_\_
- None of the above \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**14. Which of the following have you done to help bring a spiritual dimension to your sexual experiences?** (please check *all* that apply)

- |                                      |       |                          |       |
|--------------------------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------|
| Made eye contact with my partner     | _____ | Kissed soulfully         | _____ |
| Shared deep feelings with my partner | _____ | Played music             | _____ |
| Lit candles or incense               | _____ | Danced                   | _____ |
| Bathed                               | _____ | Fantasized or daydreamed | _____ |
| Enjoyed special foods                | _____ | Laughed together         | _____ |
| Meditated before getting physical    | _____ | Let go of control        | _____ |
| Made love in a special place         | _____ | Did nothing special      | _____ |
| Touched reverently                   | _____ |                          |       |
| Other (please specify)               | _____ |                          |       |

**15. How have your spiritual beliefs led you to express your spirituality more fully?** (please check *all* that apply)

- By affirming that love is good in all its forms and expressions \_\_\_\_\_
- By teaching that making love is holy \_\_\_\_\_
- By opening me to risk deeper intimacy \_\_\_\_\_
- By giving me faith when I've felt like running away from pleasure \_\_\_\_\_
- By sanctioning my feelings of longing and passion \_\_\_\_\_
- By making the physical part of relationship into a sacrament \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**16. How have your spiritual beliefs prevented you from expressing your sexuality more fully?** (Please check *all* that apply)

- By giving me the message that "good girls don't" \_\_\_\_\_
- By making sexual desire a source of guilt \_\_\_\_\_
- By making the body a source of shame \_\_\_\_\_
- By teaching that sex is not for pleasure, but for procreation \_\_\_\_\_
- By teaching that pleasure is more important for a man than for a woman \_\_\_\_\_
- By Keeping me from exploring sexual taboos \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

17. **Has anything else in your life prevented you from experiencing a sex-spirit connection?**  
 (please check *all* that apply)

- |                           |       |   |       |
|---------------------------|-------|---|-------|
| Childhood abuse           | _____ | Pregnancy   | _____ |
| Abuse as an adult         | _____ | Parenthood  | _____ |
| Drinking and/or drug use  | _____ | My partner only thinking about physical kicks     | _____ |
| Depression and/or anxiety | _____ | Not loving my partner                             | _____ |
| Physical disabilities     | _____ | My partner not loving me                          | _____ |
| Worry about how I look    | _____ | Sex isn't that interesting to me                  | _____ |
| Getting older             | _____ | Spirituality isn't that interesting to me         | _____ |
| Not having a partner      | _____ | I've never thought of spirituality as part of sex | _____ |
| Other (please specify)    | _____ |   |       |

18. **Have you ever experienced sexual ecstasy?** Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

19. **Have you ever experienced spiritual ecstasy?** Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

20.-21. **Some people feel that experiences they associate with sexual satisfaction are similar to experiences they associate with spiritual satisfaction. What do you associate with your sexual and/or spiritual satisfaction?** (please check *all* that apply)

	Associate with:	
	20. Sexual satisfaction	21. Spiritual Satisfaction
Release of body tension	_____	_____
Release of emotional tension	_____	_____
Heightened senses	_____	_____
Clarity of understanding	_____	_____
Surge of energy	_____	_____
Peace and serenity	_____	_____
Feeling loved and accepted	_____	_____
Feeling loving and accepting	_____	_____
Oneness with self	_____	_____
Oneness with partner	_____	_____
Oneness with nature	_____	_____
Oneness with a power greater than self	_____	_____

22. **In a moment of SEXUAL ecstasy have you ever had a sense of experiencing God/Universal energy?** Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

23. **In a moment of SPIRITUAL ecstasy have you ever had felt a surge of sexual energy?** Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

24. **Please indicate how important the following concepts are for your present life situation.** (please circle numbers below)

	Not at all Important					Extremely Important					
Sexuality.....	1	.....	2	.....	3	.....	4	.....	5	.....	6
Spirituality...	1	.....	2	.....	3	.....	4	.....	5	.....	6
Religion .....	1	.....	2	.....	3	.....	4	.....	5	.....	6

25. **Have you ever had a profound spiritual experience during sexual intimacy?**  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**If yes, please describe your experience.** (Please provide as much detail as is comfortable for you about your relationship with your partner, your feelings and your state of mind before, during and after the actual encounter. It is not uncommon for individuals to use descriptions that include the following--sense of wonder and amazement, emotional cleansing, God's presence, intense union, intense physical arousal, euphoria, transcendence, transformation, loss of the dimensions of time and space, passionate awareness, holistic involvement, sense of blessing, ineffable mystery, and sense of sacredness.)

## APPENDIX E: HANDOUT OF SUGGESTED READINGS FOR PARTICIPANTS

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## APPENDIX F: QUESTION 25 NARRATIVE COMMENTS

51-year-old woman:

“Over the years I have felt all of the underlined feelings (sense of wonder and amazement, emotional cleansing, intense union, intense physical arousal, euphoria, transcendence, transformation, loss of the dimensions of time and space, passionate awareness, holistic involvement, ineffable mystery). My husband and I have been together for almost 30 years. Our sexual relationship ranges from routine, to intense, to fun and new and daring. When I’ve been in the routine of meditating regularly, I am able to carry that meditation with me thru (sic) my daily life. When I carry that meditation into sexual intimacy, the physical and emotional and spiritual intensity is heightened.”

56-year-old woman:

“On at least two occasions of sexual intimacy I felt a complete sense of power of love – no boundaries experienced between us – and an incredible happiness and peacefulness I had never experienced before. These incidents are recent since my new spiritual beliefs and sexual relationship (with same long term partner) came together after years of healing growth.”

59-year-old woman:

“I’ve felt at one with the Universe and not separate at all.”

63-year-old woman:

“In times of experiencing orgasm, I have had the sense of transcending my own body, a sense of rising out of it, a liberation. Obviously these experiences have involved intense physical arousal and a feeling of euphoria. There is definitely a sense of sacredness to all of this as I believe that all acts of love are sacred.”

62-year-old woman:

“Freedom from inhibitions, to an extent.”

64-year-old woman:

“I was sexually abused to some degree from early age. It was not until I was on my own, in my own home, I started on the healing journey which included goddess study with accepting women, traditional therapy, Native American studies and practice for about 20 years. A year and a half ago I turned my life over to Creator and have had incredible experiences...A man came into my life...(and) made me realize the extent of my healing. He is a very spiritual man and some of our beliefs overlap. I have learned so much from him including what it means to

be human, to live in love and not fear, about living a spiritual life by example.... I though I'd loved and desired before, but that all pales in comparison. My body has had desire to share this love in physical ways I never thought of doing. ... I awake in the morning with his warm caring wrapped around me like a soft blanket...and I feel incredibly safe.”

70-year-old woman:

“Spiritual element of sexual intimacy is usually a sense of closeness, wonder, gratitude that such an experience is possible.”

78-year-old woman:

“Afterwards oneness with partner, gratitude, union. Abuse when I was 12 years by family friend blurred my ability to be o.k. physically; ashamed of, guilty about, my body. This affected my spirit during sex.”

## **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Hannah Osborne was born in Houlton, Maine on January 21, 1951. She was raised primarily in Maine and graduated from Houlton High School in 1969. She attended The University of Maine in Orono and graduated in 1973 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. She has worked as a social worker and counselor and entered the graduate degree program in the College of Education and Human Development in 2001.

After receiving her degree, Hannah will continue her work to assist others in fulfilling their potential as productive, creative and unique human beings. Hannah is a candidate for the Master of Science degree in Human Development from The University of Maine in December 2005.