

Appendix

Exploring the Concept of Spiritual Development

The purpose of this document is to examine previous attempts at describing spiritual development described in the literature and to offer a model that presents a synthesis of this material. Comparisons will be drawn from a wide diversity of spiritual development schemes cutting across many cultures. Hopefully this document will shed some light on the poorly defined term “spiritual development”.

Spiritual Development

Seeking a definition

Thus far this author has not found a published definition of the term “spiritual development”. I asked three people whom I considered quite spiritual to give me their definitions. The first was a mature woman who is considered by most who know her to be kind and giving to all she meets. Her answer was, “It is about living a good and sacred life.” The second person was a middle-aged man who had studied to be a Catholic priest but took his life in another direction. He said, “It is about being true to the practices of my faith.” The third was a fundamentalist Christian who said, “It is about giving my life to Jesus as my savior and helping others to do the same.” These ideas may represent a *common sense* conception of spiritual development.

The components of this common sense definition of spiritual development are as follows: 1) spiritual development involves changing ones life to better match a sacred way of living, or a “good” way of living, 2) spiritual development involves practicing some ritual(s) according to that persons faith, 3) spiritual development involves a deep commitment of faith, that is, one must “give up one’s life” to be “reborn” in the spirit and 4) that spiritual development involves a social commitment to help others. Each of these points will be revisited throughout this document as they all point to a universal definition of spiritual development that is present throughout all the major religious traditions.

Another factor that likely influences the common sense definition of spiritual development is the common sense conception of the term *development*. When one considers the idea of “developing” some aspect of self, as with spirituality, what is likely to be thought of is a progression of doing something to accomplish the self development. We develop our talents by doing, we develop our relationships through practice, we develop our bodies through maturity and healthy physical activities, and we develop our minds through academic pursuits. There are numerous examples of doing through time that can be linked to perception of “development”. In the above

common sense definition of spiritual development doing through time is contained in “leading the good life”, “practicing ritual”, and “helping others”. Even the ideas of “giving up one’s life” and being “reborn” can be thought of as having to “do” something. This conception of doing as part of the definition of spiritual development will be revisited in the discussion of the ascetic path of spiritual development, and contrasted against the concept of not doing within the mystical path of spiritual development.

The common sense definition of the term “spiritual development” also includes what is defined as “spiritual”. Elizabeth Lesser sent a questionnaire to 200 spiritual leaders asking them what they thought the word “spiritual” meant to them. From their responses she concluded that there was no single answer and “that all of us, from the unusually sage to the normally confused, can only add our own bits of wisdom to the poetry of mystical conjecture.”¹ She continues to state that in the eclectic melting pot of spiritual ideologies that is this country there is a new definition of spirituality² one that transcends the old archaic systems and yet incorporates the fundamental principles upon which those systems are built.

The descriptors Elizabeth Lesser used to clarify this emergent definition of spirituality are included within the list that follows.³ I have paraphrased the author’s descriptors, enumerated them, and then added three of my own (taken from this work on the mystic relationship) to develop **Ten Descriptors of Spirituality**:

- 1) Process: It is a process that is individually experienced as sacred but not as religion, cynicism, or narcissism.
- 2) Living Sacredness: Sacredness can be lived in ordinary life as a way of being.
- 3) Bliss with Balance: It is about experiencing divine bliss within balance.
- 4) Heroic Journey: It is not instant even when it seems so. It involves the patient and heroic journey – often through “darkness”.
- 5) Humbleness: The process moves one to humbleness and “the beginner’s mind”.
- 6) Quiet Longing: There is a hunger, or a longing, that is always present and that one learns to hold in quiet solitude [I termed empty desire⁴].
- 7) Quiet Being: There is a deep calmness, a peace that is beyond all understanding, which can penetrate mind, heart, body and soul [I termed empty self⁵].

Based on my personal experience, my research on the sacred quality of healing⁶, and my research on mysticism⁷ I add to these the above list:

- 8) Sacred Communication: There is a sense that some part of our being is able to benefit from spiritual knowing, attributed to *a relationship with one’s concept of God* (The Divine, The Creator, the Tao, Lord, Yahweh,

cosmic consciousness, an all pervasive living energy, the source, the ultimate reality, Allah, an infinite sacredness or simply “I AM”), and that without sacred communication we are in some way unhealthy.

- 9) Deep Compassion: When spirituality is compassionately shared there is a potential community (couples, families, groups, towns, cities, countries) benefit from sacred communication and without it our community is in some way unhealthy. Spirituality is linked to a sense of sacred well being, a striving for sacred well being and a sharing of sacred well being with others in our community in an effort to promote their well being. Spirituality has, across many cultures, embraced *compassion* (love, empathy, relationship oneness). Without compassion as a fundamental part of the definition of spirituality, it is easy for a person’s definition to become self-centered, dogma centered, or “guru” centered. An important part of defining spirituality is linked to our knowledge of deep compassion.
- 10) Living Toward Oneness in the Between: In almost every spiritual tradition there is a link drawn between the spiritual journey and the deeper and more penetrating experiences of oneness⁸. This is sense of oneness with a state of awareness between duality and unity while encompassing both. As these oneness experiences accumulate there is an increasing sense of being part of that oneness, as it connects to all things. With time this sense becomes more than knowledge. It becomes a way of life, of being that penetrates into the smallest of daily activities.

We can use the above *Ten Descriptors of Spirituality* as the starting point for exploring the concept of spiritual development and for addressing questions around the problem of generating a model of spiritual development. Each of these Ten Descriptors could be defined in greater detail, but that is beyond the scope of this document.

The definition of spirituality has been described in more condensed version in the following quotes:

“Spirituality is the human awareness of a relationship or connection that goes beyond sensory perceptions. This relationship, as perceived by each person, is an expanded or heightened knowledge beyond or outside of his or her personal being.”⁹

“Spiritual well-being is the affirmation of a life in relationship with God, self, community, and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.” (Definition provided by the Interfaith Coalition on Aging.)¹⁰

Any model that is proposed to offer a description of spiritual development should address these Ten Descriptors. Before I address how a model of spiritual development might accomplish this I will present an overview of past spiritual development models.

Proposed “stages” of spiritual development – the “ancient” ways

This author has not yet located a detailed description, or model, of spiritual development that follows along the lines of other developmental theories. No such theory of spiritual development has been proposed that describes hierarchical stages, with corresponding ages (along with possible sensitive, or critical, periods¹¹), and developmental tasks that are tied to the Ten Descriptors. But this does not mean that there isn't some common sense notion that a person does make progress in spiritual awareness, that one develops along the Ten Descriptors, throughout the course of life. There are stories of people who have described spiritual progress, and there are proposed “stages” that author's ascribe to these people. Some of this information on spiritual development can be found in the literature addressing mysticism and contemplation – the two historically documented paths of spiritual development.

Perhaps one place to start when looking for information on describing a spiritual developmental theory would be to look at how authors have described the life of the mystic, shaman, holy person, messiah or guru. These spiritual figures throughout the course of their lives have served as examples of people who have made progress, as defined by their community, in their spiritual development. Authors who have studied their lives, and their progress, have offered us some insights into the nature of spiritual development.

As early as the 8th century mystics of Islam, Sufis, practiced an acetic path that incorporated both the idea of stages, and the idea of qualities (like the Ten Descriptors). Several authors have translated these stages and qualities in different ways, in some instances listing many more than presented here.¹² The most coherent description lists the stages as 1) repentance [or awakening], 2) abstinence and renunciation, including voluntary poverty [the acetic life], 3) patience and trust in God [the discipline of prayer and building a relationship] and 4) satisfaction in God [a deeper knowing of the relationship one has with God that penetrates all being].¹³ While these stages are considered linked to acetic practice the qualities, or “states”, are more like spiritual feelings. These “states” are meditation, nearness to God, love, holy fear, hope, spiritual longing, intimacy with God, tranquility, contemplation and certainty.¹⁴ Without being immersed in Islamic culture it is difficult to understand how these stages and states intertwine. But there are similarities between these Sufi stages and the stages reported by mystics from other cultures.

Stages in the Christian mystical process were proposed in the late 12th century by Richard of Saint Victor and described as follows:

“In the first degree God enters the soul and turns it inward on itself. In the second degree, it ascends above itself and is elevated to God. In the third degree, the soul that is raised on high to God is merged wholly... In the fourth degree, the soul passes utterly into God.”¹⁵

These four stages could be described as 1) self-awareness with possible purification, 2) shifting from the worldly view to the sacred view through mystical illumination, 3) initial experiences of sacred unity with one’s relationship with God, and 4) experiencing the sacred unity in ones being. This has often been referred to as the spiritual development path of the mystic and the reader will see later how these 12th century stages came to be repeated in later works addressing mysticism and spiritual development.

A few centuries later a stage approach to spiritual development is offered through the “mystical ladder of Nicolas of Cusa” (1519 AD) where the “human being ascends to God by use of the imagination, reason and understanding on one hand, and thought, meditation, and contemplation on the other.”¹⁶ This idea introduced the concept of two paths of spiritual development, one through study, and the other through contemplation. This was an idea that differed from the mystical spiritual development path and was to be expounded upon centuries latter.

In the seventeen century a new branch of theology was formed which its foundations in the ideas stated by Nicolas of Cusa, and influenced the concept of spiritual development through study and contemplative practice. This differed from the mystical process that was often seen as a “gift”.¹⁷ Jopseph de Guilbert stated this as follows:

“Strictly: we may term mystical the interior life of those souls who are habitually led by the inspirations of the Holy Spirit [sacred energy], who are made so sensitive and so docile to this inspirations that their whole interior life is lived under this leading grace [sense of sacred communication]. On the other hand, we can find an ascetical state in which personal effort and the methodical performances of spiritual exercises are more evident, while the continual flow of grace into the souls is less apparent and less perceived experientially.”¹⁸

The mystical path was considered a path of direct experience that was part of a sacred “calling”, but not everyone was called follow such the mystical spiritual development path. There was another path built upon the old myths of the heroic journey. The idea of taking the journey to “find an ascetical state”, as a path to enlightenment and spiritual development, underlies a strong contemplative history in both Western and Eastern religions.

Thomas Merton, a monk with expertise in the study of contemplation and called the great American Mystic, wrote volumes on the contemplative process as it contributes to spiritual development.¹⁹ He included both Eastern and Western religious history in his writings.²⁰ In one of his final lectures, which he gave in India before his untimely death, he spoke about the person one who chooses the ascetic path of spiritual development. Calling that person a “monk” he said that this person chooses to live on the outskirts of society and was a “marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human existence.”²¹ He continued by saying that the term monastic should be applied broadly to various forms of “contemplative dedication” which involve 1) detachment from the secular world, 2) preoccupation with deep inner beliefs, and 3) “a special concern with inner transformation, a deepening of consciousness toward an eventual breakthrough and discovery of a transcendent dimension of life beyond that of the ordinary empirical self and of ethical and pious observance.”²²

The American Mystic continues describing this ascetic path of spiritual development by describing a transcendent process that:

“Achieves a wholeness which is described in various ways by the different religions. This is not necessarily a matter of personal charismata (special divine illuminations or prophetic tasks), but it is usually expected to follow from discipline and initiation into a traditional religious way, that is to say a special mode of life and of consciousness which meets certain unwritten, indeed inexpressible, conditions. The special formation required to meet these conditions is imported by experienced persons, or judged by a community that has shared something of the traditional consciousness we may call mystical, contemplative, enlightened, or spiritually transformed.”²³

An important part of what has become the contemplative path of spiritual development is the “sharing of consciousness”. Merton sheds some light on this stating that this sharing comes from the deepest level of our being:

“And the deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity.”²⁴

These are some of the clearest writing I have encountered describing the contemplative path of spiritual development.

As stated above, there are two proposed paths for spiritual development, the contemplative and the mystical. In the early 1900’s Evelyn Underhill wrote a masterful (although quite verbose) work on mysticism, which has since become a classic in its field. She described the stages of mystical spiritual development as follows: 1) the

awakening of the self, 2) the purification of the self, and 3) the illumination of the self, punctuated and sometimes followed by experiences of “mystic pain” (also termed the “Dark Night of the Soul”) and moments of Divine unity.²⁵ These stages were probably based on even earlier ideations on spiritual development.²⁶ More recently, Ursula King, in her book on Christian mystics, describes the stages “through which the mystic had to pass” (stages of mystical spiritual development) as 1) the purgative life (the way of purification), 2) the illuminative life (the way of coming to know God), and 3) the unitive life (the way of being one with God).²⁷ These three stages do justice to the historical descriptions of mystics lives seen in a broad view and they are continually referred to throughout the more recent literature on mysticism and mystics.

Shaman’s are considered to be holy men (women) and as such may also be considered mystics in that they follow a spiritual path with characteristics similar to those attributed to mystics described by the above authors. The shaman is also a healer and the characteristics these sacred healers attribute to the “work” they do is described elsewhere.²⁸ Becoming a skilled shaman is often described as a process of development that includes 1) a calling, 2) a personal transformation and 3) years of rigorous training. The following material describing these three “stages” is edited from the material presented in my earlier publication on the healing relationship.²⁹

2. The “Calling” – A predisposition to becoming

Predisposition may be a necessary component of becoming an “expert” shaman much like it is in becoming a prodigy in any domain. In the selection of people who will serve the community as healer practitioners there is special attention paid to the innate characteristics of the person at an early age. Something we do in our culture with respect to some domains (like music and sports), but not to the process of spiritual oneness (or unity). Perhaps certain people have a predisposition to becoming skilled “shamans” while others will remain good technicians. The community needs both but one will advance to demonstrating the art of negotiating the spiritual realm for the benefit of others (becoming a skilled phone operator). This is the fulfillment of the prodigy’s destiny or calling, a match between one’s innate nature and the duties one is asked to perform on behalf of the community. The shaman will only be called when his powers are needed to restore health and relationship balance.³⁰

But “calling”, as used among indigenous spiritual leaders, also involves the receipt of a “vision”. This vision tells the person, and the elders who will provide tutelage, that this person is being called to receive the wisdom of the ancients. Thinking of certain novice practitioners as “gifted” may also fit into this idea of being called to becoming an expert in a human service domain. In our culture we may not embrace the use of visions as guiding our vocational decision making, but

we do respect the concept of finding the best match between one's abilities and one's job duties.

Entering a profession as a matter of choice is not the same as being driven due to some innate predisposition or calling. Many will be asked to serve but few are actually called. As in every domain there are some who are gifted, called to move beyond the level of technician to becoming an artist. In every domain there will be a Mozart or a Michael Jordan. Entering college to get a degree, or completing that degree, does not mean that one is ready for to become a facilitator of the healing relationship, that they are called to become the artist. In our culture, I know of no assessment tool that would delineate the novice who was called to a spiritual life from the one who was not.

The "calling" of the shaman often involves a "vision" – thus the term vision quest. But it is not just any vision that defines the prospective shaman. It is a vision that includes a personal transformation.

3. Personal Transformation

Whether it is through the vision quest, a near death experience, a spiritual awakening, or a healing encounter, those who are called to become "shamans" also report experiencing a transformation as part of their preparation to serve in the "shaman" role. There is a "death of the self" and a "rebirth". This is followed by a new perspective on doing helping work.

The training of the shaman can be described as composed of "the call", the "sickness or withdrawal from previous activities" and the "emergence of the formed shaman."³¹ In the process of becoming a healer the shaman moves through a symbolic self-death and rebirth that is then followed by a different way of perceiving the world.³² The concept of the wounded healer, moving through one's suffering to being healed, is prevalent through out the literature on mystic healers, including shamans.³³

This heroic journey of overcoming of personal obstacles is an important part of the shaman's training:

"Individual shamans, as they gradually become heroic personalities to the tribe, cease to pursue the powerful spirits and begin to identify themselves as a manitou [powerful spirit]. They see themselves as having compassion on their patients just as the manitou had compassion on them as fasting visionaries."³⁴

This struggle with self and rebirth has also incorporated the concept of the “wounded healer”.³⁵ The practitioner battles with his past trauma history and his present suffering and proceeds through it to some place of greater peace and understanding. She has moved through her own pain to experience a deep state of well being accompanied by clarity and wisdom. What was once broken is now less broken. The journey of the shaman, the healer, the human service practitioner, often involves self-healing.

“My own journey into shamanism was guided by my desire to become whole. In healing my own soul wounds, I learned to love myself and others. I walked the path of the wounded healer and learned to transform the pain, grief, anger, and shame that lived within me into sources of strength and compassion. I was able to feel for another’s pain because I knew what it was like to hurt... Every student embarks on a journey of self-healing in which he or she transforms soul wounds into sources of power. Students learn that this is one of the greatest gifts that they will later offer to their clients: the opportunity to discover power within pain. Students also learn that healing is a journey that their client embarks upon, not a procedure the healer performs.”³⁶

Dr. Elvin Semrad, psychiatrist and trainer of practitioners, was asked, “What do you think helped build your capacity to help others bear intense feelings of loneliness and loss? He answered, “a life of sorrow, and the opportunity that some people gave me to overcome it and deal with it.”³⁷

The vision that accompanies the calling shows the shaman the path from suffering through a “shift in perspective” accompanied by ecstasy.³⁸ This phenomenon serves as the signpost directing future efforts of the shaman. The “shaman” must struggle with his/her own suffering and accomplish some movement toward well being in order to understand the nature of the journey from suffering into well being. That is part of the quest, the heroic journey that also involves an extensive period of training. The signpost serves as a guide along that journey.

4. An Extensive Period of Training

After the shaman is “called”, and this calling is confirmed, then there is training or “time of calling”. When training shamans in Rhodesia, it was believed that the calling was passed on genetically within families, but “it appears that many healers who claim to have inherited their healing spirit have, in fact, also had a long apprenticeship.”³⁹ The training of a Malay healer starts training at an early age with special attention paid toward finding children with specific traits.⁴⁰ Historically, healers across cultures have always had to endure long periods of rigorous training.⁴¹

Authors have reported the training of shamans to occur in stages and it is also reported that not all practitioners make it through all the stages. Native American healer Dhyani Ywahoo said that the training involves passing through many initiation ceremonies but “not everyone goes through the complete cycle.”⁴² Training of shamans in the Eskimo society of the St. Lawrence Islands indicates this developmental process:

“The St. Lawrence Islanders had a system of their own by which differences in shamans’ proficiency were indicated. In English, the evidence lay in such phrases as ‘really shaman’, ‘sort of shaman’, ‘partly shaman’, and ‘foolish shaman’, the last term being used for anyone considered a ‘quack’.”⁴³

This developmental process is illustrated in the description of Apache shamans who are described as using the healing power “like lightning”⁴⁴ and that some shamans are stronger in this power than others:

“There are celestial and terrestrial classes of power of varying strengths. According to Mescalero shamans, one who is entitled to call upon the ‘little whirlwind’ or ‘little star’ has ‘little power’; one who can summon the strength of the *diyín* on the sun or moon has ‘medium power’; one who can invoke the lightning wind, or large hail has ‘big power’.”⁴⁵

The Ojibay Indians training of shamans involves a number of different developmental levels, or degrees, and that “occasionally a shaman undergoes all eight midewiwin degrees, over an extended period of time.”⁴⁶ Andean shamans are described as having to go through as many as seven levels.⁴⁷ Holger Kalweit, in reviewing many healer traditions, stated that stages of training are common across cultures.⁴⁸ As proposed herein, it appears that there are developmental levels in shaman training, and that not all healers reach the maximum level of training possible. The reasons for this are not exactly clear but they may relate to the same conditions that affect the development of a prodigy in any domain – predisposition (calling) plus environmental support, plus opportunity and motivation.

The training path of the indigenous mystic healer was not so much about learning techniques, or about climbing the ladder of some inferred hierarchy of training, but about learning how to negotiate shifted states of awareness on behalf of the individual seeking relief from suffering.⁴⁹ Characteristic of the healer’s shift in perception on behalf of the participant is the dissolution of the world of things replaced by a radiant world, a sense of time without boundaries, it can be considered a form of enlightenment belonging to the natural history of man.⁵⁰ Holger Kalweit offers this developmental sequence in learning shifted states of awareness as part of the healer’s training stating “the principle that binds the various levels is an increasing feeling of unity with the surrounding world”⁵¹:

- 1) “In normal consciousness the separation between ego and external world is the greatest. At this level the unity of being is either not experienced at all or is experienced only as mechanical exchange.
- 2) With a slight intensification of emotion, the sense of self connects directly with the environment, with things and beings. At this level the capacity for sympathy, empathy and compassion develops – the ego extends itself beyond the boundaries of normalcy...
- 3) With increase in intensity of emotion, the separation between self and environment can temporarily disappear. With greater emotional concentration, with fear or strongly conceived desire, but also with love, hate, and anger, we identify ourselves in such a way that ego consciousness is almost replaced by the object of emotion.
- 4) An altered state of consciousness would be seen as an extreme of strong emotion. This can result in a complete splitting off from the normal ego, to that contents completely fill consciousness...
- 5) The next level is where the appearance of paranormal phenomena could be placed...
- 6) We could regard the highest level as that of unconditional consciousness, free from all concepts and human concerns.”⁵²

At this final stage the sense of unity is experienced. It is a sense that changes both action and thought in the life of the shaman mystic. The emphasis is on learning to live with a shifted way of perceiving the world, as if veils that obscured reality were gradually lifted revealing the ground, the essence, of being.

Placing “veil removal” and the experiencing the oneness of being into a step-like hierarchy may not adequately describe the process of spiritual development. The four “ancient” stages are connected to this process of “veil removal”. The four “ancient” stages of spiritual development are 1) awakening or calling, the initial transformation, 2) purification, contemplation or struggle with the “darkness” through many years of training, 3) a shift in perspective accompanied by additional episodes of illumination, punctuated and sometimes followed by experiences of “mystic pain” and moments of Divine unity (and more years of training) and 4) living in a sustainable relationship with the Divine that results in an expanded awareness of the shift in perception toward the all pervasive penetrating nature of the Divine, the oneness of being.

These four “ancient” stages are found in the mystical traditions, the contemplative traditions, and the shaman traditions, particularly with the emphasis of shaman development toward the shift of awareness into a state of oneness, or unity, with the divine (the creator). Holger Kalweit continues, stating that the focus of indigenous shaman training is to “broaden and deepen the normal emotionality that we all know. Shamanism is thus not a somehow obscure or incomprehensible or mysterious magical path, but a simple heightening of the emotional experience of the world.”⁵³ Mystics and the ascetics also speak to us about heightening, or shifting, our perceptions so that we may better understand the divine, echoing these sentiments.

Nelson Price writes about the stages of heightened spiritual perceptions from the Christian mystic perspective (in particular the middle ages) speaking of “states of infused contemplation”:

“[These] states of mystical union... listed from “lower” to “higher” are 1) the Prayer of Quiet... 2) the Prayer of Union... and 3) Rapture – also called “ecstasy” and “flight of spirit”...The states of infused contemplation are taken to be essential ingredients in the spiritual life of the developing mystic. In fact, the occurrence of these states is regularly used as a way of measuring the experiencing mystics progress along the mystic path.”⁵⁴

Price continues by saying that in the Prayer of Quiet “God and the soul are only “close”, whereas in the Full Union and in the culmination stage of Rapture, God and the soul are in direct contact – usually in mutual embrace.”⁵⁵ The author states that the Full Union and the Prayer of Quiet occur “in the normal domain of the soul”, whereas the Rapture occurs in a different domain, “in another world.”⁵⁶

As has been stated before the goal of the mystics journey is the “union with God” (or union in the between) and there is no doubt that mystics have had many ecstatic experiences along the way. But it is very doubtful that a person gets labeled a mystic through these experiences alone. There must be a testimony of faith, wisdom, insight, prophecy, and healing to accompany these experiences. The person needs also to exemplify the radiant compassionate being in life and in published works. If the person is to become a mystic of notoriety, one that is studied and whose works form the basis for that study, then there must be insightful works to study. It is that testimony that has formed the literature upon which mystic theology is based not the “magic” of various shifts in perception.

The question this author poses is not whether these shifts in perception have occurred, for there is an abundance of reputable testimony to support them, but whether the conception of a developmental stage process can be applied. The sequence described by the mystics, ascetics, and shamans, is one that is repeated over and over as the person progress toward a greater sustainable awareness of oneness

through the shifting of perception. It can be expected that the nature of these repetitions changes over time, and that through repetition there is some progress or development, but previous research has not addressed this.

This four stage spiritual developmental scheme suggests a sequence of steps, but that suggestion should be regarded with great caution. The focus is rather on a shift toward a BEING in a state of unity and BEING a radiant compassionate presence and a movement from doing. This is not practicing to be in a state of unity. It is not remarking on the magic and ecstasy associated with unity or trying to put such “mystical” experiences into some hierarchy so that one can collect them as trophies of accomplishment. It is more about a life dedicated to being in being, to being present in a state of unity and removing whatever is personally in the way of that mystical spiritual development. This is where the emphasis of a spiritual development definition should be placed. Thomas Merton spoke of the same caution in regard to the contemplative spiritual development path saying that what was really essential to the monastic life was the seeking of “true self-transcendence and enlightenment... but not in the acquisition of extraordinary powers, in miraculous activities, in a special charismata, visions, levitation, etc.”⁵⁷ This is a caution that must be heeded for if it is not then one can easily become confused.

Proposed “stages” of spiritual development – modern ideas

The questions this author faces seeking a modern description of spiritual development are 1) how do the modern efforts at describing spiritual development fit with the “ancient paths” (contemplative, mystical, and shamanic) and 2) how do the moderns efforts fit with the Ten Descriptors? Finding these answers is not an easy goal. It may seem like common sense to say that there is a common sense perception of spiritual development, but it may be much harder to offer a wise model. Although it may seem reasonable to propose schemes of spiritual development, we need to take care to examine to see if they are founded more on what the mystics were trying to tell us about the “meaning” of their journeys as opposed to founding the schemes on an ever increasing intensity of ecstatic, magical, miraculous, or supposedly mystical experiences.

Deepak Chopra, coming from a combined Hindu and medical perspective in his book “How to Know God”, describes “seven levels of fulfillment” or “seven levels of miracles” as follows: 1) flight or fight response, 2) reactive response, 3) restful awareness response, 4) intuitive response, 5) creative response, 6) visionary response and 7) sacred response.⁵⁸ His developmental “stages” reflect an attempt to merge neurophysiology with a spiritual perspective. The questions that must be seriously asked when evaluating these proposed stages are; 1) Are they consistent with mystical ancient paths of spiritual development? 2) Do they represent developmental stages, that is, do people experience them in a hierarchical manner and do people need to learn

from one before proceeding to the next? 3) Do these “levels” represent types of experiences that people can - and probably do - have under a wide variety of circumstances that are not related with spiritual development? It is likely that all of these seven responses are very much a part of the human experience – but this does alone not offer us a spiritual development path.

Wayne Teasdale, Catholic priest, after a review of the literature proposes in his book “The Mystic Heart” the following stages of awareness on the mystic path: “infancy; childhood; adolescence; self-conscious awareness; other-centered consciousness; partial, complete and total enlightenment; transpersonal, angelic and divine consciousness.”⁵⁹ The author follows this by saying, “There are all kinds of transformative contemplative, mystical stages of awareness.”⁶⁰ If there are all kinds of “stages” then how does the average person seeking spiritual development make sense of them all? I think that there are all kinds of magical and ecstatic experiences, and sometimes these may seem like going through “stages” but the two are not the same. In any proposed spiritual development scheme the seeker needs to ask questions about the descriptive emphasis given to types of “mystical” experiences without greater consideration to the processes of development behind the experiences.

A mystic experience alone, although appearing magical to some, is empty without a meaningful life to support it. The richness that the lives of the mystics offers is not in the miraculous but in how they came to know the depths of wisdom, compassion and wonder in their unity with the divine. This can happen under a wide variety of human described experiences. The wide variety of these experiences does not warrant categorization into “levels” or “stages”. The term “stages of development”, particularly when viewed as hierarchical and goal directed, may not be fully applicable to the mystic way.

“An arctic explorer can tell from his map when he has arrived at the pole, but in spiritual exploration the map shifts with every step you take. ‘You need to realize that there is no fixed ‘me’ who is looking for enlightenment’, a guru told his disciples. ‘You have no fixed identity – that is just a fiction made up by your ego. In truth there is a different experienter for every experience.’”⁶¹

You can never experience your foot in the river the same way twice – the mystical experience is always experienced fresh and new. It is important when considering modern models of spiritual development to also consider the importance of the “enlightenment” experience – not as magic or ecstasy, but as an entry into a deeply personal, and meaningful transformation. Many authors and spiritual teachers warn of seeking the “magic” or the “ecstasy” instead of the personal transformation.

The spiritual development scheme developed by Marjory Zoet Bankson in her book “The Call to the Soul” is built on the idea that the “call” is about understanding

our reason for being – “an invitation to wholeness, a spiritual prompting to complete the work of love that we are here to do.”⁶² Ms. Bankson presented six stages⁶³ (in developmental sequence, bold emphasis of author’s key terms): 1) first we **resist** the call, 2) then we **reclaim** connections to our spiritual nature, 3) a **revelation** occurs showing us our spiritual path, 4) we take the heroic journey facing the **risk**, 5) we share, **relate**, with others, giving back to community, and 6) there is a **release**, a letting go. These stages convey the struggle to reshape our lives in the face of spiritual insights. There is little emphasis placed on “magic” and “ecstasy”. The only concern I have about this author’s scheme is that it fails to address more advanced stages of spiritual development, but it presents an adequate representation of the early processes of spiritual development.

James Fowler attempts to describe advanced “stages of faith”⁶⁴. Fowler proposes these stages as ways of understanding how one might interpret a sermon, that peoples’ interpretations are related to their stage of development. Fowler’s stages are as follows (presented in developmental sequence):

Intuitive-Projective: curious and self projecting, fascinated by the “magic”.

Mythic-Literal: concrete, focus on categorization, rules and cause/effect.

Synthetic-Conventional: focus on experience, community service, and relationships (and with the divine).

Individuative-Reflective: seeking a balance between role/relationship and self (responsibility), seeks acknowledgment for developmental progress, integrates central spiritual concepts into life (religious commitment).

Conjunctive: Beginning to know the mystery, sitting with duality, letting go, understanding the “dark and the light”.

Universalizing: “an identification with God in which the basis of identity, knowing, and valuing are transformed.”⁶⁵

Fowler’s stages are strongly based on cognitive processes, which is to be expected given his starting premise of developing a system of helping pastoral professionals to understand how members of the congregation interpret sermons. But this process of interpreting sermons may not be the same process as following one’s individual path of spiritual development. It is likely that there is an overlap. People who have made progress in their spiritual development are likely to interpret the sermon differently than those who are beginning travelers. There are aspects of the spiritual journey missing from Fowler’s scheme – in particular the idea of calling.

The start of the mystic way, and the start of most mystic seekers true journey into exploring the sacred life, begins with the conversion calling – which is a glimpse into enlightenment. The contemplative path is aimed at revealing “enlightenment” through discipline and discipleship. No matter how many “enlightenment” experiences a person has they never compare to the initial calling. That first experience is the first

time we get to experience a hidden side of knowing. This is a transformative event, an exposure to the Divine Oneness.

This “enlightenment” experience happens as an indicator of where to take your quest and without it there is now way of knowing how to travel because no amount of study or self-examination can bring you to the same point of knowing. It is a moment where the oneness is experienced and it shifts your perspective. It is a moment that cannot be discounted in terms of its significance for spiritual development because without it you have no idea of where you should be headed and thus there is no spiritual development. There are many ways, almost an infinite number, one can use to describe this mystical experience, but the important point is that during that conversion calling moment you have been shown the oneness. Within that moment there isn’t less oneness because of our inadequacies. There isn’t more oneness because you are older and wiser and have been deemed to possess stronger “faith”. It is a moment of Divine Oneness that needs no change from us and no change from us in our human development could make the moment different. You cannot “develop more” and have this moment be different. And when you have a second experience at some point later in our lives, the oneness will still be ever constant and unchanged, although you are likely to experience it differently.

How can the transformative mystical experience, which can and does occur at “beginning levels”, be incorporated into the construct of spiritual development? We often think of these transformative experiences and happening to adults, but they have been reported to happen at younger ages, and like a seed buried and waiting to bloom they can remain as an important influence on the course of the person’s development through life.

Huston Smith, writes 15 years after his classic “Religions of Man”, that the convergence point of all religions is the knowing of that infinite presence that serves as a ground for all perceptions of reality.⁶⁶ “The view of reality consisting of graded levels of being dominated man’s outlook until the rise of modern science” and with pre-civilized man these graded levels of being were equated with the sacred.⁶⁷ But, “to speak of anything in science as having different ontological states – as being better, say or more real – is to speak nonsense.”⁶⁸

If developmental models propose to be a credible part of science then they also propose to offer something that can be observed and lead to predictive outcomes. The question under consideration here is if such “scientific” models can be applied to spiritual development given our current level of knowledge. Professor Smith stated, “Since reality exceeds what science registers, we must look for other antennae to catch the wavelengths it misses.”⁶⁹ He proposes that the great mystics from all cultures have tuned into these wavebands and through their lives broadcasted to us the “missing” pictures of reality. This has also been this author’s contention. But do the mystics

speak to us of development as some hierarchical process that could fit into a modern conception of developmental theory?

The mystics have always addressed life as containing a sense of separation from the infinite, the divine, while also speaking of moments where that separation disappeared. Their purpose was to live more in those moments of sacred oneness where separation no longer existed. There is a sense of improving one's ability to do this throughout life, but there is little evidence to support a sense of hierarchy in this improvement. Professor Smith says that the idea of levels is not to be conceived as something "out there" that needs to be ascended, but rather that "they are removed only in the sense of being inaccessible to ordinary consciousness – invisible... In this respect the multiple states of being resemble multiple dimensions."⁷⁰

Professor Smith describes the "zenith of being" as the point to which all spiritual development is aimed, as oneness with the infinite, a "supreme plane" of reality.⁷¹ Along this developmental journey to the zenith one encounters three dimensions embedded in the ground of infinite being: 1) the terrestrial plane, 2) the intermediary plane, and 3) the celestial plane. The first is associated with perceptions of the physical world. The second is associated with perceptions of the following: psychic and paranormal events, archetypes (including deep rooted myths), dreams, angels, and other aspects of the spirit world. The third involves a sense of the transcendent of experiencing the "being" of things, their "suchness", a discernment of soul, a relationship with the divine that has an apparently tangible element. "Mystics endowed with the 'eye of the heart' can intuit this celestial expanse."⁷² The professor offers us a further step in development by hinting about directly experiencing the infinite beyond the celestial dimension, described as "unbounded" and "undifferentiated".⁷³ It is oneness with this infinite ground, which is within, around, and without, the three other dimensions, that is the direction of all spiritual development. This concept of 1) being with the world, 2) experiencing something "mystical" (intermediary) and not of the material world, 3) developing a relationship with the divine and then 4) developing a state of "oneness" with the divine is similar to the developmental schemes outlined by other authors (as outlined in the previous section). The question still remains as to whether this can be offered as a developmental model or are these different states of perception that can be experienced in non-hierarchical manner.

Native American spiritual teacher Jamie Sams offers a developmental scheme she calls "the seven paths of human transformation."⁷⁴ Her developmental sequence is as follows:

1. The first stage is to become "illuminated", to receive a calling and recognize a divine purpose.
2. There is a struggle to move beyond habitual reactions and unhealthy emotions.
3. Healing the wound of the past.

4. Becoming compassionate, sharing with community.
5. Discovering a relationship with the intangible aspect of the divine.
6. Developing the divine relationship as a part of everyday life.
7. Walking “through life in a state of full spiritual awareness, without any separation of judgment.”⁷⁵

Sams starts her developmental scheme with the calling, almost suggesting that there is no spiritual development prior to the calling. This may be a reflection of the Native American wisdom, which places a high degree of importance of the idea of calling. In our culture there is often more of a struggle that can occur prior to the calling. Harry Moody and David Carrol address this struggle in their book “The Five Stages of the Soul.”⁷⁶ Their five stages are as follows: 1) the call, 2) the search, 3) the struggle, 4) the breakthrough, and 5) the return. But the author’s use of the term “the call” is not the same as the general use of the term “calling” used in describing the spiritual journey. The term “calling” would more closely match the author’s term “breakthrough”. The author’s are proposing that there is a natural curiosity that drives us to know about our being, a call. This is followed by a struggle, which for some is followed by a breakthrough and then a return to community service. The author’s have provided a missing piece of the spiritual development literature by addressing these pre-calling stages. Combining their scheme with the scheme offered by Sams, along with the key features of the historical concepts of spiritual development could yield a more complete model of spiritual development.

Whether on the contemplative path or the mystical path of spiritual development both involve coming to understand a shifted way of perceiving the world. This is the transformative experience and without it the person on the spiritual development journey has no compass, no map, no signposts. However one designs a model of spiritual development it must include this “awakening”, transformative, experience. Once the transformative experience has occurred then the nature of the hard work can become clear. The transformative experience is a brief glimpse of the oneness at the start of our life as the mystic seeker so we can understand the new life we are about to undertake. Then, as we then take the step like journey of personal responsibility we may have more of these sacred oneness moments, with each illuminating the path ahead, and they may last longer – but they will not change. But we still have to walk that path or personal responsibility and it is here that our awakening develops in combination with our humanness. It is the combination of transformation and personal responsibility that forms the path of spiritual development.

“What changes in life is not our union with God, but the modes of it’s experience, its levels of realization.”⁷⁷

The idea of level of spiritual development refers to an overall level of personal growth, insight, and change in one’s behaviors. It refers to a shift toward living as a compassionate being in a sacred relationship with the divine. It does not refer to the

number of experiences (or types of experiences) you have had, the number of good deeds you have done, nor the amount of time you have spent in study (although all of these can be indicators of your calling in life). Care should be taken not to confuse having “ecstatic” events (healing or spiritual) with the concept of spiritual development as a process of awakening through both humanness and transformation. The “ecstatic” event is often used as a measure of the unitive experience (as illustrated above), but it may not be a reliable measure. Placing it in a spiritual developmental scheme can lead to confusion and perhaps to misplaced teachings.

Spiritual development has often been described as “realizing and actualizing who we really are in our ultimate being”.⁷⁸ In this sense it is again a departure from the classic concept of step-like skill development. We are, in our true nature soul beings. Our souls have an innate wisdom – something we possess but which we have forgotten how to access.

“European and Western psychology in general had overlooked a fact of tremendous importance, namely, that we do not remember ourselves; that we live and act and reason in deep sleep, not metaphorically but in absolute reality. And also that, at the same time, we can remember ourselves if we make sufficient efforts, that we can awaken.”⁷⁹

“From the beginning, God’s light has been shining on the soul, but the soul could not comprehend it until all obstacles to vision had been removed.”⁸⁰

It is an issue of clearing the cobwebs of amnesia more than building a specific “ecstasy” skill set. There are years of hard work and it is likely that during these years there is an overlap between human development and our processing of spiritual development.⁸¹ There is the connection to the mystical transformative experiences – they provide a glimpse through the cobwebs into our soul. Unfortunately we have great difficulty turning that “glimpse” into a more constant vision, and, this is the path of spiritual development. It is one that is ever revealing.

Key features of spiritual development – the five components

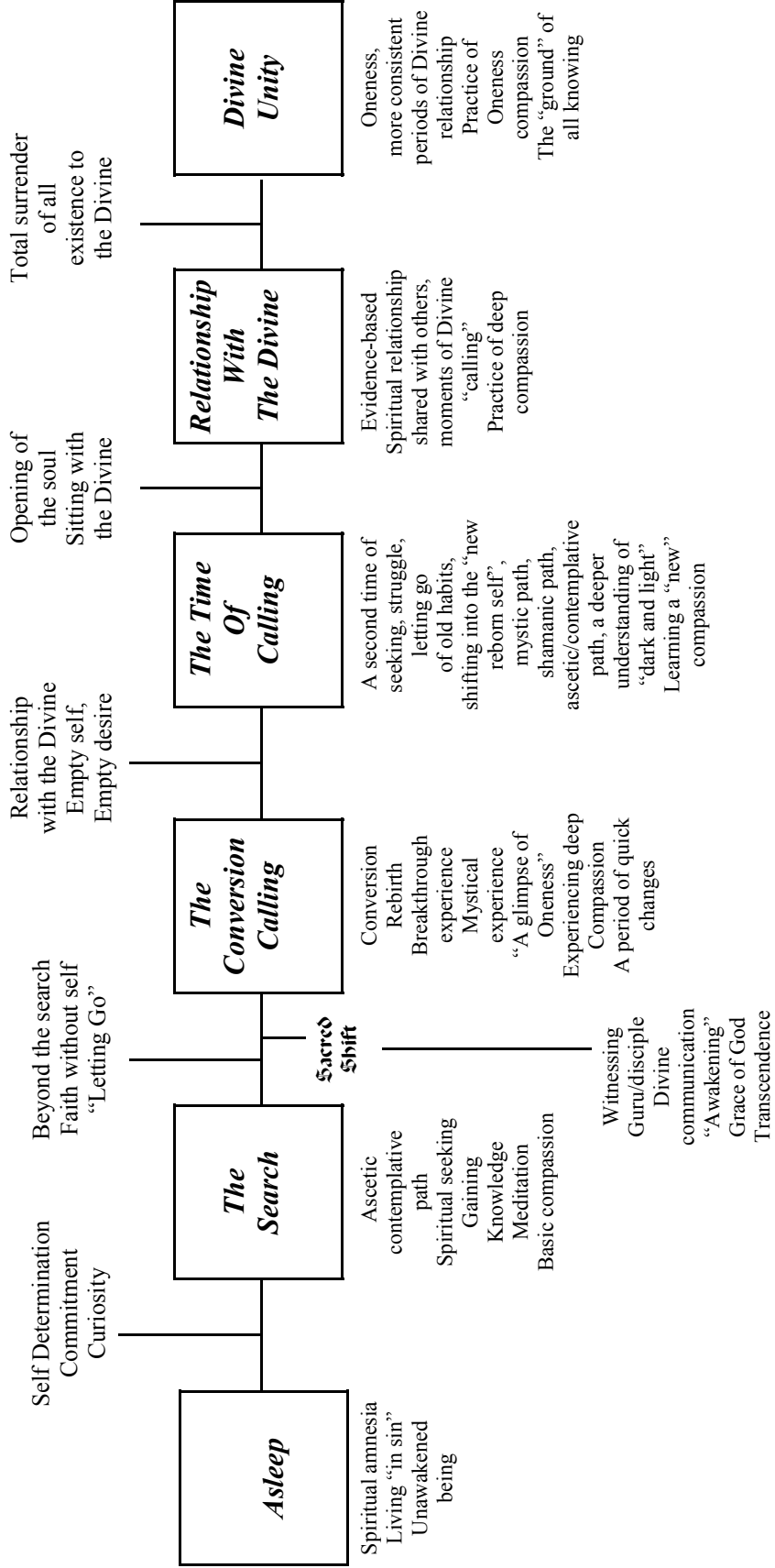
There are many difficulties in proposing a spiritual development scheme. It may be that there is no stage theory that appropriately describes the process. It may be that there are no levels of spirituality (but there may be levels of wisdom). But the consistency of reporting that describes the five components of the spiritual development process cannot be denied. These five components are: 1) Pre-Calling Struggle: there is a search to understand one’s essence, purpose, being, 2) Calling Away From One’s World View: being with the world, experiencing something “mystical”, and struggling to integrate it into life, 3) Human/Spiritual Growth: taking the spiritual journey,

including coming to know empty self and empty desire, punctuated by more “mystical experiences” and experiences with “darkness” – it is the training time where human development and spiritual experiences are intermingled, 4) Divine Relationship: developing a relationship with the divine (additional training but it is more about the divine relationship and less about “self”) and then 5) Divine Unity: developing a state of “oneness” with the divine. During all these five components the person on the spiritual journey is developing the Ten Descriptors.

But these five components of spiritual development are not stages and should not be viewed as if one were climbing up a set of stairs to some ultimate goal. In a review of the literature on mystics no mystic ever reported such a stair-climbing ascent to unity with the divine (although people describing mystics have tried to fit the lives of mystics into such a hierarchy). Spiritual growth is very much a process (process is one of the Ten Descriptors) and cannot be viewed in such a linear manner, but this does negate the possible influence of human growth and of wisdom acquired as one learns to interpret and integrate the mystical life.

Human growth and development, and possibly each of the Ten Descriptors, may go through stages, and as such influence how we come to understand the mystical life. This does not mean that our “spirit”, or that the nature of the mystical events, are experienced in a hierarchical sequence of developmental stages. It means that our human understanding of spiritual experiences is affected by human development and confusing the two can result in proposing cumbersome spiritual developmental schemes that may be more annoying than useful. The term spiritual development should refer to a process of awakening punctuated by mystical illumination that never changes (that do not “develop”) because the communication experience of oneness with God cannot be experienced as “lower” or “higher”, as “more” or “less”. This is not the same as saying that we (as human species) do not develop, possibly through stages, in our human understanding of these mystical experiences and in our human preparation for sitting within a mystical moment.

The Path of Spiritual Development



A new model describing the “Path of Spiritual Development”

The model of spiritual development proposed by this author is illustrated in the diagram entitled “The Path of Spiritual Development”. This model presents a synthesis of the various modern authors schemes discussed in this document, incorporates the five components of spiritual development, and is commensurate with the ancient ways: the ascetic/contemplative, the mystic and the shamanic paths. In addition the model is designed to reflect the major features of spiritual development as reflected across a broad range of religions and cultures.

This model of spiritual development is built upon five basic assumptions:

1. It is human nature to perceive being as including the spiritual. (This has been reflected throughout history even in preliterate times.)
2. The full understanding of our spiritual nature is “hidden”.
3. Spiritual development is a process of discovering our hidden spiritual nature.
4. It is possible to make progress in our spiritual development. (It is not reserved especially for those that are gifted.)
5. There are models of the “ideal” (in spiritual development) present in every culture that provide us directions for making progress in our personal spiritual development journey.

There is not the space in this document to argue the philosophical merits of each of these assumptions. They are offered here as a foundation for building of the spiritual development model presented – the path of spiritual development.

The path of spiritual development includes the following stages:

Asleep: consciously unaware of our hidden spiritual nature.

The Search: responding to the inner drive to know about our being we begin to search and learn basic compassion.

The Conversion Calling: the time immediately following *the sacred shift* (breakthrough, calling, rebirth). It is a time of rapid change and experiences of expanded perception. It is an introduction to a new form of compassion.

The Time of Calling: This is a time of slower change, a struggle accepting the calling of our spiritual nature. It is a time of learning the basic features of

walking a spiritual path as it reflect upon the nature of self. The new compassion is practiced and self-adjustments are made.

Relationship with the Divine: This is a time of coming to know one's relationship with the divine as more than something intangible. Gradually the relationship becomes tangible, not separate from life. This divine relationship is infused into the concept of compassion and then shared with others.

Divine Unity: There is a deep release of the boundaries of self and one's prior perceptions of the world culminating in a total surrender to the divine. This is not a surrender of sacrifice but of a divine compassion, a unbounded relationship, that penetrates all existence. The person learns to walk through life in this unity relationship (gradually increasing time spent within the relationship). The person demonstrates, in observable ways, a life of oneness with the divine.

These stages should not be viewed in the same manner as stages of human biological development. These are not like the developmental process of learning to use our physical body. We do not learn one set of skills, like crawling or taking baby steps, and then build upon those while the entire time progressing forward. During spiritual development the process is slightly different.

There are two features in spiritual development that make the analogy to human biological development cumbersome. First, the sacred shift that occurs when we are still crawling (spiritually speaking) shows us not only what it is like to walk, but to run, dance and be a gifted athlete. But even more than that, the sacred shift offers us, even if ever so briefly, the experience of being gifted (spiritually). For a moment we are transformed to the experience of divine unity. We do not have to go through the entire developmental process. This transformation serves as a guidepost, a map, directing us on the process. Second, the process is not strictly hierarchical, because of the transformation processes that bypasses the hierarchy and because experiencing "slips backward" are common. One may experience some moments of divine relationship, even divine unity, but spend most of life in the time of calling.

Another problem with the concept of hierarchy is the one of judgment. This path of spiritual development is like a map of the world. A person can start the journey with the intention of seeing the entire world, but then decide to settle in one place and explore that place in more detail. This would be their specific spiritual calling and it would be no less important than any other calling. We should not use the path of spiritual development to judge the development of others in a way that says, "Oh, he is not that spiritual because he is not at that stage ..." In addition we should not use the path of spiritual development to judge ourselves, thinking we are either more spiritually developed than another person or less developed. Thinking we are more developed can lead to a narcissistic attitude void of humility and compassion. Thinking we are less developed can lead to self-degradation. Like the person who is on the journey to see

the world, we are each on our own journeys. We have each seen something of the world that others have not seen. It is in our collective spiritual wisdom that we come to a deeper spiritual harmony and a deeper compassion.

In the path of spiritual development, the development of compassion happens together with the development of a relationship with the divine. This is a universal feature of the world's religious doctrines on the topic of spiritual development. The core principle in the definition of the term spiritual is that we are in some way building a relationship with the divine. In seeking to understand our hidden spiritual nature we are seeking a relationship with the infinite spiritual nature of all things, the divine. The nature of this relationship is not one that is cognitive alone. We cannot rationally think our way to a relationship with that which is intangible and often perceived outside the boundaries of rational science. This divine relationship is one of compassion – defined as empathy plus wisdom. If we travel the path of spiritual development then we also travel the path of compassion development. We cannot come to a deeper relationship with the divine except through the simultaneous development of spirituality and compassion.

Empathy Development and its Link to Spiritual Development

Human development is defined in many ways⁸² and it is not the contention of this author to review all proposed developmental schemes, as that would be well beyond the scope of this document. Instead the focus here will be on empathy development and possible similarities to the characteristics of spiritual development as described previously. There have been many authors who have proposed stages of development that may have connections to the nature of spiritual development.

The goal of all spiritual development schemes, whether the mystical, the contemplative, the shamanic or the modern, is to experience that union, or oneness, with the divine. There are examples of similar discussions about a developmental progression toward oneness outside of spiritual discourse. It is these human developmental schemes that address a progression toward oneness that are the focus of this section describing human development. Some of this research was presented in an earlier publication by this author, including Table One (modified for inclusion here).⁸³

Table One: Developmental Sequence in the Application of Empathy

Becoming an Expert	Stages in Practitioner Development	Empathy Development
<p><u>Novice:</u> Facts, rules, and concrete applications of basic tools.</p>	<p><u>Conventional and Professional Training:</u> Continues use of the patterns developed as the “helper” while struggling to accommodate to new ideas.</p>	<p><u>Basic Empathy:</u> The use of empathic listening*, sensing global emotions. Basic empathy includes <u>sympathy</u> learning to know another’s feelings by remembering self.</p>
<p><u>Advanced Beginner:</u> Learning to apply the tools specific to the domain. Practice and failure while receiving feedback.</p>	<p><u>Expert Imitation, and Conditional Autonomy:</u> Trying many different approaches, theories, concepts and developing a counseling “style” that is continually modified through multiple sources.</p>	<p><u>Advanced Basic Empathy:</u> The development of subtle empathy* where feelings are felt and distinguished as different from self, reception and reflection are developed.</p>
<p><u>Competence:</u> Develops hierarchical view of the tools and when to apply what problem solving approach. Can know what are the most important elements to focus upon.</p>	<p><u>Exploration and Integration:</u> Information about counseling is integrated into a personal view which is eclectic and synergistic. The therapist uses this view to explore beyond the known. The therapeutic relationship becomes an intervention tool.</p>	<p><u>Competent Empathy:</u> The practitioner feels the other, experiences skilled empathy*. The processes of reception, reflection, and mutuality improve. The difference between sympathy and empathy becomes clear at this stage of development.</p>

Table One: Developmental Sequence in the Application of Empathy (con't)

Becoming an Expert	Stages in Practitioner Development	Empathy Development
<p><u>Proficiency:</u> Due to the experience of the person in the domain pattern recognition happens very quickly. Problem solving in the domain becomes easier because the person “intuitively” knows what needs to be done.</p> <p><u>Expertise:</u> Occasionally the person experiences “flow”, a oneness with the task and the success accompanying this oneness.</p>	<p><u>Individuation:</u> Experienced based sources of wisdom become a strong influence in the counseling process, and the practitioner’s development as experience and concepts merge. Personal data are integrated into the counseling process in a professional manner. Self- directed learning and authenticity become a way of being. The therapist is the instrument.</p> <p><u>Integrity:</u> Being oneself - a sense of comfort, a oneness with the style of the therapeutic relationship that is used to help the client while still continuing to learn and improve that style.</p>	<p><u>Proficient Empathy:</u> The practitioner feels the other at a deeper emotional level. Multiple levels of feelings and issues are experienced. Reception, reflection and mutuality are further improved and occasionally experiences of advanced empathy* become part of the process.</p> <p><u>Empathy Expertise:</u> The practitioner experiences proficient empathy while also occasionally experiencing halopathy* - a oneness with the participant.</p>

* The five types of empathic experiences defined within Hoisington, 2002.

Table One provides a comparison of research suggesting a developmental progress toward oneness that includes the following:

- The development of “expertise” within any skill based domain. Expertise is proposed as the end product of a hierarchy of learning culminating in holistic information processing – or the experience of oneness with one’s efforts in the domain of expertise.⁸⁴
- Research on the development of “expert” counselors – a oneness with the practice of one’s style of counseling.⁸⁵
- This author’s research proposed a model of empathy development that included holistic empathy, oneness with another, which was termed halopathy.⁸⁶

Additional support of this developmental concept of oneness is provided by the research done on “Optimal Experience” or the feeling of “being with the flow” when skill level is developed to the point where this can happen.⁸⁷ In the development of domain expertise, people who become very skilled, can experience moments of “flow”, or a sense of oneness:

“Anyone who has experienced flow knows that the deep enjoyment it provides requires an equal degree of disciplined concentration...one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life....They stop becoming aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing”.⁸⁸

The flow experience happens to those who have developed a level of expertise in something they enjoy and in which have become very adept. There is the sense from the person “in the flow” that they are such an intertwined part of what is happening that it would be impossible to experience anything but the whole. This flow experience is NOT associated with any other level in the developmental sequence.

The observation that such “flow” experiences are reported by those who are skilled in their domain fits the developmental model of “becoming an expert” (see Table One). It is not too difficult to stretch the imagination and see how a gifted athlete, after many years of practice, may have moments of flow – moments where there is no thinking about parts and patterns, a moment where there is a sense of oneness. The next step in the developmental sequence, the step beyond the parts-whole perspective, is to experience the whole.

At the level of “expertise”, and perhaps exemplified further at the level of “maestro” (expert after being a prodigy), there are ways of “seeing” the world that seem almost superhuman. Mozart is quoted as describing composing as:

“All this fires my soul, and provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself, becomes methodized and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete and finished in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture or a beautiful statue, at a glance. Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them, as it were, all at once. What a delight this is I cannot tell.”⁸⁹

Here is the almost magical quality of experiencing oneness. There are no pieces. The entire subject is seen as a whole, in one glance. It is experienced in its entirety in that moment with no sense of linearity of succession. This is what this author has described regarding holistic empathy - halopathy.

Each of these developmental schemes refers to a progression of skills that comes from the practice of doing. Spiritual development often refers to the practice of becoming, or of no practice and no self (empty self) allowing the person to BE within a

sacred relationship of oneness with God. Is this what is happening when the “expert” experiences a sense of “oneness”? Are they also experiencing the empty self?

Except for this author’s writing on empathy oneness, using the term halopathy, there is no other mention of such experiences relating expertise development to the empty self. Empathy oneness also is reported (by this author) to generate a sense of deep compassion and sacredness. These are also sensations not associated with the development of expertise in other domains – although additional research is needed to explore the possibility across a wider range of domains and cultures.

If compassion is linked to empathy and this author’s conception of empathy development is valid then perhaps compassion can be taught, practiced and described as part of a spiritual developmental progression linked to human development. Compassion is described as one of the Ten Descriptors, and has been used as a descriptor of various ecstatic states that refer to union – as empathy refers to union. With spiritual development the seeker is moving toward an experience of infinite compassion, of a peace that is without bounds, and of wisdom without limits. The human development of compassion may be the bridging concept between being human and being a radiant being who has moved into this divine relationship of infinite nature.

The initial “calling” or “awakening” is a strong universal presence across many attempts to describe spiritual development. The “calling” provides a glimpse into that infinite compassion, but it doesn’t show the entire journey. Spiritual development is a journey where wisdom is attained along with the human developmental progression toward compassion. It is along this progression that compassion expertise could occur and this may possibly be the bridge between human development and spiritual development. The idea that the mystical experience is a seed in the garden that is nurtured through the development of compassion is a unique part of the spiritual development process. The mystical experience is as if one was shown (as an experience not just taught), if only briefly, what it was like to be an expert. It is a vision that is held in the mind, body, spirit that provides direction throughout the human development process toward expertise in compassion. It is as if one has experienced the oneness of compassion expertise and now knows that experience and wants to design his/her life to return to that experience – to become that experience, to attain that level of expertise. This is the nature of spiritual development and its links to human development.

Summary and Conclusions

As in the ancient teachings of Islam, I have proposed a distinction between the qualities that can be used to describe spirituality (the Ten Descriptors of Spirituality) and terms used to describe the path of spiritual development. It is also proposed that

there is a distinction between the path of spiritual development and human development, but also some possible overlap tied to empathy and compassion.

The best place to look for material proposing a spiritual development scheme is in literature about mystics – those who may serve as an example of spiritual development. A cursory review of published materials addressing spiritual development can be broken into two categories: ancient and modern. The ancient category includes mystical, contemplative, and shamanic spiritual development concepts. These concepts date back thousands of years and are supported by a long lineage of mystics. The problem is that the persons writing about the concepts are often not mystics and they lack the necessary insider view to help represent ancient material in a modern light. The modern presentations have not carefully integrated the ancient descriptions, nor have they shed light on the problems inherent in applying a “stage” or “level” model to spiritual development.

It has been proposed here that a “stage” or “level” model could be applied to each of the Ten Descriptors, given that oneness is the culmination of development. The development of holistic empathy, oneness with empathy, or halopathy was presented as an example. It was suggested that there is a strong link between empathy and compassion. Because compassion is one of the Ten Descriptors, it was suggested that empathy oneness could be a bridging concept between human development and spiritual development.

It is beyond the scope of this document to present a developmental scheme associated with each of the Ten Descriptors. But, what is important to note is that developmental stage theory could be applied to these Ten Descriptors and this could possibly provide people with some guidance along the blended path of human and spiritual development.

Spiritual development does not lend itself well to “stage” or “level” concepts. The four components of spiritual development offered here are not offered as levels but rather as recurrent themes in a process. The five components are: 1) Pre-Calling Struggle: there is a search to understand one’s essence, purpose, being, 2) Calling Away From One’s World View: being with the world, experiencing something “mystical”, but struggling to integrate it into life, 3) Human/Spiritual Growth: taking the spiritual journey, including empty self and empty desire, punctuated by more “mystical experiences” and experiences with “darkness” – it is the training time, 4) Divine Relationship: developing a relationship with the divine (more training but it is about the divine relationship) and then 5) Divine Unity: developing a state of “oneness” with the divine. Thinking of these four components as recurrent themes, rather than experiences or levels, fits them more into the way the mystics describe them. They are continually revisited in new ways throughout the life of the mystic. They can happen in any sequence, and there is no “higher” or “lower”, “better” or “worse”.

The model of spiritual development proposed by this author is illustrated in the diagram entitled “The Path of Spiritual Development”. This model presents a synthesis of the various modern authors’ schemes discussed in this document, incorporates the five components of spiritual development, and is commensurate with the ancient ways: the ascetic/contemplative, the mystic and the shamanic paths. In addition the model is designed to reflect the major features of spiritual development as reflect across a range of religions and cultures. This model contains the following stages: **Asleep, The Search, The Conversion Calling** (following *the sacred shift*), **The Time of Calling, Relationship with the Divine, and Divine Unity**.

Caution needs to be taken when reading “stage” or “level” spiritual development proposals offered by writers. Often writers are too quick to place the “magical” and the “mystical” into categories and then offer that as a proposed developmental scheme. The three key phenomena that are often missing from such stage schemes are 1) The early experience of Unity in the conversion calling (a necessary part of the spiritual development process), 2) the process of “slipping back”, 3) the role of the empty self, where it seems like no development (or not doing) and 4) the recurrent experiences of mystical phenomena, of many types, throughout the life of the person dedicated to the path of spiritual development. These three concepts do not fit well into a stage or level model of spiritual development, but fit better into a process model. The path of spiritual development should be thought of as a process, like using a map to navigate a journey.

What is likely to show gradual development over the course of time is our interpretation of these recurrent themes and our ability to integrate them into our daily lives. It is likely that interpretation and integration is affected by one’s development of the Ten Descriptors. This leads to a discussion of the difference between *traits, states, and stages* as applied to the process of spiritual development. A clear distinction between these has not been made in previous writings on spiritual development and only attempted in a cursory way here. This is a multidimensional subject that will need to be explored in future publications.

End Notes and Comments

¹ Lesser, 1999, p. 28.

² Ibid – defined by the author as “The New American Spirituality”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hoisington, 2003.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hoisington, 2002.

⁷ Hoisington, 2003.

⁸ Lasser, 1999 does make brief mention of the importance of unity, but has not elaborated on the concept of experiencing oneness in the between.

⁹ Schultz-Hipp, 2001, p. 86.

¹⁰ Moberg, 2001, p. 15.

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- ¹¹ Havighurst, 1972 as cited in Newman & Newman, 2003.
- ¹² Nicholson, 1914; Arberry, 1950; Smith, 1994.
- ¹³ Nicholson, 1914.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Borchert, 1994, p. 201.
- ¹⁶ Also quoted in Borchert, 1994, p. 270 from the edition of Pseudo-Dionysius by Jean Eck, 1519.
- ¹⁷ Johnston, 2000.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 89, quote originally taken from “Theologia spiritualis ascetica et mystica” by Joseph de Guibert, Rome 1946.
- ¹⁹ See Merton, 1992 for a list of his writings.
- ²⁰ Merton, 1967.
- ²¹ Merton, 1992, p. 227.
- ²² Ibid, p. 229-231.
- ²³ Ibid, p. 230.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 229.
- ²⁵ Underhill, 1999. pgs. 169 and 380.
- ²⁶ These three stages may be based on the three stages of the soul’s ascent as described by St. Augustine in his “Confessions” (described in Collins, 1989), but may also be based on the works of Richard of Saint Victor.
- ²⁷ King, 2001. Also described by Roberts, 1985. These three stages may be based on the three stages of the soul’s ascent as described by St. Augustine in his “Confessions” (described in Collins, 1989).
- ²⁸ Hoisington, 2002.
- ²⁹ Hoisington, 2002.
- ³⁰ Sarangrel, 2000.
- ³¹ Grim, 1983, p. 169.
- ³² Halifax, 1979; Grim, 1983; Eliade, 1974.
- ³³ Dossey, 1987.
- ³⁴ Grim, 1983, p. 119.
- ³⁵ Nouman 1979; Dunne, 2000.
- ³⁶ Villoldo, 2000, p. 6.
- ³⁷ Semrad, 1983, p. 206.
- ³⁸ Eliade, 1974
- ³⁹ Chavunduka, 1978, p. 20.
- ⁴⁰ Werner, 1986.
- ⁴¹ Perrone, Stockel and Krueger, 1989.
- ⁴² Perrone, Stockel & Krueger, 1989, p. 66.
- ⁴³ Murphy, 1996, p. 74.
- ⁴⁴ Boyer, 1996.
- ⁴⁵ ibid, p. 397.
- ⁴⁶ Grim, 1983 p. 133.
- ⁴⁷ Villoldo, 2000.
- ⁴⁸ Kalweit, 1992.
- ⁴⁹ ibid.
- ⁵⁰ ibid.
- ⁵¹ ibid, p. 218.
- ⁵² ibid, pgs. 218-219.
- ⁵³ ibid, p. 219.
- ⁵⁴ Price, 1992, p. ix-x.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 20.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Merton, 1992, p. 235-236.
- ⁵⁸ Chopra, 2000.

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- ⁵⁹ Teasdale, 1999, p. p. 68.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 71.
- ⁶¹ Chopra, 200, p. 193.
- ⁶² Bankson, 199, p. 21.
- ⁶³ Ibid
- ⁶⁴ Fowler, 1988.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, p.30.
- ⁶⁶ Smith, 1976.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 3.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, p.6.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, p.17.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 21.
- ⁷¹ Ibid, p. 25.
- ⁷² Ibid, p. 49.
- ⁷³ Ibid, p. 57.
- ⁷⁴ Sams, 1998.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 5.
- ⁷⁶ Moody & Carroll, 1997.
- ⁷⁷ Roberts, 1985, p. 40.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 77. See also Sinetar, 1986.
- ⁷⁹ Ouspensky, 1949, p. 121.
- ⁸⁰ Roberts, 1985, p. 42.
- ⁸¹ May, 1982a, stated that “spiritual development follows a series of stages similar to those of personality development... from childhood’s narcissistic relationships with God-images through adolescent rebellion and adult efficiency to a more compassionate and accepting experience of faith in maturity. But there are always exceptions... Thus it is wise to hold all concepts of stages in spiritual growth very loosely” (p. 18-19).
- ⁸² Newman & Newman, 2003.
- ⁸³ Hoisington, 2002 – “The Healing Relationship”.
- ⁸⁴ Trotter, 1986; Prietula & Simon, 1989; Benner, 1984; Cooke, 1992.
- ⁸⁵ Skovholt & Helge 1992.
- ⁸⁶ Hoisington, 2002.
- ⁸⁷ Cskszentmihalyi, 1990.
- ⁸⁸ Cskszentmihalyi, 1990, pgs. 41-53.
- ⁸⁹ In Levine, 2002, p. 78, quote taken from Howard Gardner.