The Role of Self-Reflection in the Spiritual Quest to Make Meaning of Experiences

Ikenna Q. Ezealah
Clemson University, ezealahiq@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations/2514

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
THE ROLE OF SELF-REFLECTION IN THE SPIRITUAL QUEST TO MAKE MEANING OF EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership, Higher Education

by
Ikenna Q. Ezealah
December 2019

Accepted by:
Dr. Michelle Boettcher, Committee Chair
Dr. Matthew Boyer
Dr. Tony Cawthon
Dr. Hans Klar
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role that self-reflection has in the spiritual quest to make meaning of experience. It also examined how spiritual quest can operate within moments of spiritual struggle in order to make meaning of the experience through a process of self-reflection. In the literature view, relevant theories and concepts by preeminent scholars in the field of spirituality were examined. Though the spirituality of students in higher education was discussed in the literature, as well as the concepts of self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009), spiritual quest (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2011; Vaughan, 2002), and spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008), a gap was identified through the missing example of how students might use a process of self-reflection to support their spiritual quest to make meaning of life experiences (including instances of spiritual struggle).

Scholarly personal narrative (Nash & Bradley, 2011) is the qualitative methodology used, and it is about conveying the personal narrative of life experiences organized in themes, and then using the literature to systematically examine them in order to draw universalizable insights that enhances the literature. In the following study, I used a structured process of self-reflection to draw spiritual meaning from life experiences, which were organized into the following themes: relationship, leadership, career, and education. A total of eight experiences (four themes subdivided into spiritual quest and spiritual struggle) were then examined in the following structure: description, reaction, insights. Finally, the insights were examined with the literature and then their implications, recommendations, and future research was discussed.
DEDICATION

TO MY PARENTS:
For all the sacrifices you made to invest in my future… here is the dividend.

TO MY WIFE:
For the tireless support that strengthens me, and the eyes that always sees the best in me.

TO MY CHILDREN:
May this effort raise the standard and inspire you to achieve the highest in all you pursue.

I further dedicate this work to current and future generations of students who spiritually seek insights that will illumine their life experiences with greater meaning. May this encourage and strengthen you along your spiritual path, and turn your gaze upward toward luminous heights. As you draw value for yourselves, may you be inspired to help build an environment that supports the spiritual development of others who will come after you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank God the Father for His love and guidance throughout my life, for the grace that protected and preserved me, for the inspirations that continually deepen my insights.

To my parents Benjamin and Evangeline Ezealah—I felt your affection, watched your effort and sacrifice, and your resilience in the face of adversity. I observed your great love for learning and drive for success. Thank you for this example.

To my wife Ezimna—I am thankful for your unwavering love and support, for the respect and consideration you always show, and the confidence you have in my destiny. Thanks for being such a great person.

To my children: Umani, Adanna, Okenna, and Odera—thanks for filling the air with laughter, chatter, and noises from your play, all those things that add perspective to life and diffuse inner tension I was experiencing at different points in this program. No matter what trials I faced during the day, when I came home I was always a hero in your eyes.

To my uncle Gene—thanks for being a solid pillar during trying moments of my life. Your gregarious nature has produced many memorable moments I recall with joy.

To Dr. Michelle Boettcher, the chair of my doctoral committee—thanks for your effort, guidance, and encouragement throughout this process. I appreciate you giving me the room to be genuine in my scholarship, and your willingness to embrace a different type of research study.
To my doctoral committee members, Drs. Hans Klar, Tony Cawthon, and Matthew Boyer—your feedback and comments always gave me cause to reflect and approach my writing in different ways. Your unique personalities and expertise helped to lighten the journey and help me become a better scholar. You each (all committee members) played a pivotal role in my academic journey for which I am grateful.

To Dr. Natasha Croom—thanks for being an advocate and taking an interest in my success. You demonstrate the type of strong support I will show students in the future.

To the Southern Regional Education Board—I am thankful for you not only funding my doctoral program, but providing the social and professional infrastructure that enabled me to reach the goal. Those annual conferences were not only insightful, motivating, and fun, but they were always the highlight of my academic year.

To the Graduate School—thanks for making it easier to navigate this process, and connecting me to resources and support that smoothened this journey.

To Kayode—thanks for being such a supportive friend throughout this process. Our enriching conversations always provided a helpful boost.

To my peers who I started the program with and met along the way—I have learned much from each of you. Through the qualities you expressed, I experienced many things that gave me rich insight about human nature. My journey was enriched through you. As you are too innumerable to count, please accept a general thank you! You know who you are.
To all other family and friends—Just as a fruit is a product of the combined contribution of different forces of nature, so is an individual success the product of the combined contribution of different forces of human relationships. Hence, no matter how apparently small the contribution, you are each part of this achievement. So, thank you all!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE CALL OF THE SPIRIT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Research Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Spirituality? Its Role in Education</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate Terminology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY AND SELF-REFLECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unaddressed Need</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Between Spirituality and Religion</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCLA Research on Spiritual Development</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and Leadership</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reflection</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions of Spirituality</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Development</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Development Theories</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Assessment</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of Spiritual Theories</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. DEFINING SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of Scholarly Personal Narrative</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting Perspectives/Data Collection</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly Personal Narrative Concerns</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Scholarly Personal Narrative</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. INSIGHTS FROM LIFE EXPERIENCES</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating My Reflection</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Quest: Relationships</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Struggle: Relationships</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Quest: Leadership</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Struggle: Leadership</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Quest: Career</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Struggle: Career</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Quest: Education</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Struggle: Education</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Research Questions</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships: RQ1</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships: RQ2</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership: RQ1</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership: RQ2</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career: RQ1</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career: RQ2</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: RQ1</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents (Continued)

Page

Education: RQ2 ........................................................................................................... 155
Implications for Practice ......................................................................................... 157
Recommendations for Future Research ................................................................. 167
Concluding Statement ............................................................................................. 170

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................ 172

A. Tables Comparing and Contrasting Key Concepts and Theories ............ 173
B. List of Theories and Spiritual Development ................................................. 176
C. Tables Connecting Findings to Literature ....................................................... 177

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................... 185
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Religion and Spirituality Compared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Integrated Model of Self-Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Relationship of Spiritual Dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Themes of Life Experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Call of The Spirit

One autumn evening during my freshman year of college, I sat reflectively in the cafeteria. I reached a crossroads in my life and felt the urgent need to make a spiritual change, to search for meaning, and to earnestly pursue a life of commitment to higher values. Experiences over the previous years had prepared the soil where my desire was sown and was now germinating. I asked myself, “Where do I turn?” “What should I do?” and “How do I make sense of this deep inner longing?” I had more questions than answers.

In this formative period of my life I knew I could not turn to higher education, because there was nothing it offered that would allow me to freely explore these pressing inner questions. If my spiritual quest and struggle could not be quantified or physically measured, they were relegated to the realm of religion or personal beliefs. The unspoken belief that only what is physically visible is real and objective contributes to the culture in higher education where only outward aspects of the student experience are increasingly given focus, to the detriment of the inner aspect…their spirituality. I only knew I felt a deep urge for something more than the classroom could offer, and I was determined to nurture this spiritual quest and make sense of the inner struggles at all costs.

In this moment, I bowed my head and whispered a quiet entreaty, petitioning for clarity and strength. Just like a plant opens up to sunlight to absorb energy to grow, so was I now inwardly opening myself to draw the living power from above to answer this call of the spirit. Therefore, with this entreaty, I was seeking not only the reinforcement
of this desire for spiritual change, but it was also an expression of my commitment to pursue it. However, I knew I would have to find answers for myself, and pursue higher values without expecting any assistance from the institution of higher education, whose pursuit of knowledge appears to end at the boundary of the spirit.

The subsequent months brought conflicting feelings because, despite the value of many elements of education, I could neither reconcile my spiritual quest and inner struggle with most course content, nor could I find a place where it was nurtured. I thought, “Where is the space and opportunity to explore my spirituality? And why is it missing?” These questions bothered me and intensified over the years. But all I felt I could do was seek a personal outlet and individually explore this inner longing rather than centering my quest in my academic experience. Yet, I knew there were others like me who increasingly sought spaces in higher education to engage in the spiritual quest, but lacked a formal structure to nurture it. And since what is not nurtured eventually withers, I resolved to create spaces for the exploration of spiritual quest and the resolution of inner struggles in higher education if ever I had the opportunity. Little did I know how this resolution would guide my professional path and open opportunities that would set me on course to address this need for a space for spirituality in higher education.

**Background of the Research Problem**

What is the historical relationship between higher education and society? According to Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2015) colleges and universities, “generally reflect and perpetuate the values and practices of the larger society in which they are
embedded” (p. 3). Implicit in this is the idea that higher education usually adjusts to the evolving needs of society. Soon after the first group of European immigrants landed in the territory that was later renamed Massachusetts, society had a need to establish a moral and social norm that would guide the development of this new society (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Responding to this need, the Puritans founded Harvard College in 1636 and their motive was threefold: to create learned leaders for the community and the church, to ensure the transfer of cultural and intellectual traditions originating in Europe to the New World, and to elevate learning and humanism as tools to express a commitment to the Divine. Education was a tool of character development inspired by the moral doctrine of the Church, as well as a preserver of European culture (Hendrickson et al., 2013).

As information increased and different disciplines evolved through the 19th century, society wanted to explore these disciplines, so universities began providing more curricular offerings (Hendrickson et al., 2013). The increased student-centered focus coincided with the emergence of behavioral sciences in the late 19th and early 20th century, in which interest grew in the study of the mind, thoughts, emotions, and general capabilities of humans (Strange, 1994). The growth in these areas caused people to become concerned about the holistic growth of students and how universities were molding the college experience to nurture the cognitive and affective growth of students (Hendrickson et al., 2013). This new initiative was the forerunner of the field of student development (student affairs) and different theories that emerged in response to this need.
Student development is the study of how students change, and higher education institutions are forming their mission statements based on the type of change desired, in the outcome of students (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Although higher education is increasingly focused on student development, the rapid technological developments society has experienced since the industrial revolution has caused a shift in the function of higher education. Gibbons (1998) alluded to this market mentality when he stated the function of universities has changed in favor of the role of providing qualified manpower and producing knowledge. This has created a situation of a great imbalance between the heavy emphasis on rational empiricism and professional preparation, and the effort to help students address issues of inner authenticity and spiritual growth (Chickering et al., 2006).

Despite “knowing thyself” being at the heart of the philosophical and literary traditions from which liberal education is derived, the cultivation of an inner self-awareness is receiving little attention in colleges and universities (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). However, as spirituality is an intrinsic part of being (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008), the lack of support and opportunities for the development of this part of the student creates a void. The consequence is that students can pass through academia and receive a formal education without cultivating a deeper self-awareness that comes through developing oneself holistically.

UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute conducted research on the spiritual lives and interests of 112,232 freshmen from a sample of 236 colleges and universities (Astin et al., 2011). Major findings included:
Four in five students communicate they “have an interest in spirituality,” nearly two-thirds say, “My spirituality is a source of my joy.” More than three-fourths believe in God, and more than two in three say their spiritual beliefs “provide me with strength, support, and guidance.” Furthermore, when they enter college as freshman, students express high expectations for their own spiritual development. Half of new freshmen say that finding their purpose in life is a “very important” reason for attending college, two-thirds say it is “very important” or “essential” that college “helps you develop your personal values” and “enhances your self-understanding.” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 3).

If colleges and universities have historically responded to the evolving needs of society, and if society today as reflected in the annual incoming freshmen have expressed a desire to explore and develop their spirituality while in college (this being a reason why they even attend College), then the void in higher education to serve this urgent spiritual need of students reveals a neglect. Subsequently, to truly serve the needs of students and change the college experience to address this noticeable gap, the attention of educators must turn toward spirituality. If not, there will be a fragmentation on campus and less overlap between the spiritual and intellectual domains of students’ lives. However, overlap is an important aspect of education, because it connects and reinforces holistic learning (Chickering et al., 2006).

The separation of learning from a spiritual search for meaning, according to Chickering et al. (2006), “depersonalizes education and greatly reduces its transforming power…”, and this causes “many students feeling estranged in the higher education
setting” (p. 170). But since spirituality serves as the “central and organizing force in people’s lives” (Finger, 1997, p. 117), then the exclusion of spirituality causes many students to separate the motivating in their lives from their academic goals (Chickering et al., 2006). Spirituality and matters of faith are so central to life and cannot be relegated to the background (Fowler, 1981), that it can provide a unifying and combining force that protects against this feeling of fragmentation (Emmons, 1999).

**Why Spirituality? Its Role in Education**

As I developed my research question for this study, I reflected on the journey students take through the academic experience. I admire how children freely question and explore their environment, seeking to experience it with a soul filled with burning questions. But the moment they enter school, something changes. As their minds are inundated with information, less time is spent asking new questions in the ways that younger children do. The academic workload increases through high school and college. What is your major? What career are you preparing for? Education becomes a rung on the ladder to “success” (whatever that means). But in all this frenzy, I pause and ask: Do students really know anything about themselves, their inner lives? Are they still filled with burning questions? Have they taken the time for true self-reflection, to try and understand the reciprocal relationship between the soul and the outer world? In higher education, use the word “student,” but since the student is the human soul, should we not provide opportunities for them to explore what constitutes what makes them human? And to thereby discover the reciprocal relationship between the inner and outer world?
Love and Talbot (2000) noted an increased urge for spiritual fulfillment in society, and by failing to address students’ spiritual development in academia, educators are invariably ignoring an important aspect of their development. About 70% of incoming freshman say spirituality is an important part of their lives (Yocum, 2014); four in five students expressed an interest in spirituality (Astin et al., 2011); about 75% of new students indicated they were searching for meaning and purpose; and almost 50% of students suggested they believed themselves to be on a spiritual quest (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). When the increasing interest in spirituality is not balanced by opportunities to explore it, it leaves a noticeable void on college campuses.

A concept closely related to spiritual quest is spiritual struggle. According to Bryant and Astin (2008), “Spiritual struggle is an experience familiar to many students whose college years are marked by reflections on faith, purpose, and life meaning and by efforts to understand the preponderance of suffering, evil, and death in the world” (p. 1). Spiritual struggle has been linked to difficult life circumstances (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005), or facing experiences that unexpectedly threaten to disrupt one’s customary state of being (Smucker, 1996). A study conducted by Johnson and Hayes (2003) revealed that 44% of students experienced at least some distress related to a religious or spiritual concern. Since existing literature asserts that where there is a spiritual quest there is often a spiritual struggle, these are key concepts used to frame this study.

During the coursework component of my doctoral program, I took a college teaching course. For the final project we designed a course on the topic of our choice. I
used this opportunity to develop course entitled “Foundations of Spirituality” that I created to fill the void on campuses in relation to spirituality. This course was designed to give students space and tools to freely explore and develop their spirituality. The pedagogy used, and curriculum designed allowed students the liberty to surface their burning questions and to investigate their answers using life experiences through a process of self-reflection.

Since there are challenges to gaining approval for a new course as a doctoral student, I opted for a different approach: to demonstrate through my dissertation the value offered through the course. As a step in the process of providing a rational for the course, I chose to use the qualitative method of scholarly personal narrative to demonstrate how self-reflection supports spiritual quest, and how this spiritual quest can be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle to make meaning of experiences. As a result, my research questions for this study were:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?
2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?

**Statement of the Problem**

One problem with higher education today is that the amount of attention devoted to the inner and outer dimension of students’ lives has become imbalanced (Astin, 2004). It is ironic that many of the traditions at the core of education are rooted in the maxim “know thyself,” yet this development of self-awareness is what students are lacking and is receiving little attention (Astin et al., 2011). Moreover, according to Astin et al. (2011),
if students lack self-understanding “the capacity to see themselves clearly and honestly and to understand why they feel and act as they do—then how can we expect them to become responsible parents, professionals, and citizens?” (p. 2). Astin (2004) expressed doubt about how the contemporary domestic and global problems can ever be solved without an increase in individual self-awareness and self-understanding, which are necessary prerequisites to understand others and resolve conflicts. To be clear, the issue is not with scientific methods or rational inquiries about human nature, but the problem accordingly to Chickering et al. (2006), is the assumption that these methods require us “to eliminate questions of purpose, value, and meaning, and to assume that we humans are only machines or collections of molecules or interacting subatomic particles” (p. 29).

Throughout my academic journey through higher education, my personal search for spiritual meaning together with the dearth of existing opportunities have often caused me to feel inwardly “divided,” or what Chickering et al. (2006) called “estranged,” owing to the separation of learning from the spiritual search for meaning. This estrangement for me resulted in a development of strategies and opportunities to individually explore and nurture my spirituality. However, the problem with individual endeavors is that, without institutional support, not everyone has the ability to successfully undertake spiritual work. Consequently, a more formalized institutional approach is needed to address this need among college students for “if part of being human is being spiritual, then a commitment to holistic development demands that we come to terms with this dimension of life” (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008, p. 14).
One of the first steps to supporting the spirituality of students is by providing opportunities to seek these personal values in daily experiences. A process of personal self-reflection is implied in this seeking. Personal reflection is one of the keys to an effective service learning experience (Astin, 2004), and it is relevant to issues of spirituality because it serves as a useful tool for the processing and spiritual quest for meaning within experiences. Parks (2000) designated these opportunities that serve as an ideal for positive change and inner equilibrium as “hearth,” while Bryant and Astin (2008) noted that hearth can assume different forms, but in their essence would give students a space for critical reflection.

Even in traditional models of learning, reflection is a key part of the process. Kolb’s (2014) model of experiential cycle of learning has four components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Although this learning is about cognitive development, it shows the crucial role that the self-reflective process plays in the proper understanding of experiences. In relation to spirituality, it follows that a process of self-reflection is needed to draw meaning from experiences that will support inner growth. Consequently, this scholarly personal narrative (SPN) study demonstrates how I used a process of self-reflection to explore the spiritual meaning of my experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study explored how spiritual quest, when supported by a process of self-reflection, can enhance the meaning drawn from experiences. The study also explored how self-reflection can nurture the spiritual quest for meaning within experiences of
spiritual struggles. I used SPN to tell a story of my own spiritual quest in the context of higher education, and the crucial role that regular self-reflections (in the form of essays, blog posts, journals) played in the process of making meaning of experiences. I sought to demonstrate how consistent practice in this inner process sharpens self-awareness and personal development. Through this study, I explored the ways my own spiritual quest for this process of self-reflection impacted inner growth.

SPN is a method that tells how life has meaning, both for the individual and others. It demonstrates how a life tells a story and is a collection of experiences that, when narrated in themes, can convey moments of self and social insights to readers (Nash, 2004). SPN is the right choice for this study because it allows me to explore and make spiritual meaning from my life experiences, and thus group them together into a series of stories and themes that convey personal insights. Therefore, for the purpose of supporting the spiritual quest to make meaning, SPN offers the best opportunity for this exploration.

**Research Questions**

To better understand the spiritual need in higher education, I subjected my own life experiences to a process of spiritual inquiry. To achieve this, I used SPN to frame this research study, and in the process my thoughts were guided by two questions:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?
2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?
Theoretical Framework

As this study was a spiritual inquiry, it relates to the idea of spiritual intelligence that, according to Vaughan (2002), can be cultivated through questing, inquiry, and practice, and whose goal is the seamless integration of the inner life of the spirit with the outer life of work in the world. Altogether, there are seven areas of inquiry where spiritual intelligence can be explored, and these include scientific inquiry, spiritual choices, relationships, parenting, solitude, varieties of spiritual experience, and self-concept (Vaughan, 2002). For the purpose of this study, I chose four themes of spiritual exploration: relationships, leadership, career, and education. In using self-reflection to make spiritual meaning of my experiences, I used my experiences in several of these areas to search for spiritual insights.

Despite it being a spiritual inquiry, the framework used for this study bears elements of a traditional scientific inquiry on one hand Gibbs’ reflective cycle (1988) and Bassot’s (2013) integrated reflective cycle and on the other, elements of spiritual intelligence associated with spiritual inquiry (Vaughan, 2002). In the framework I used, the process of self-reflection has three stages that is comparable to and connects with existing reflective frameworks (Gibbs, 1988; Bassot, 2013). The stages are as follows:

- Description of the experience: What happened?
- Assessing the reaction: What feelings and thoughts were stirred?
- Making sense: What insights can be drawn the experience?
This self-designed framework will help me assess my experiences for the purpose of this study. I used the questions outlined above to analyze my data, which consisted of journal entries, blog posts, essays, and other personal reflections.

Definition of Terms

Spirituality

The most favorable definition of spirituality for the purpose of this study is by Mayhew (2004) who defined spirituality as “the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world” (p. 666). Although there are many definitions among scholars, I define spirituality as the activity of the human spirit. That is, the way the human spirit interacts with its inner and outer environment. The definition will be used within the context of the study to identify how the human spirit interacted with an experience to draw personal meaning.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is the process of clarifying the meaning of experiences in relation to the self (Boyd & Fales, 1983). It is an instrument that gives people the freedom, power, and responsibility to continually adjust the direction of their lives (Toole & Toole, 1995). Taken together, a spiritual reflection is the process by which the human spirit attempts to clarify the meaning of experiences in order to make sense of self in connection to the external world.
Religion

According to Walsh (1998), religion is an “… organized belief systems that include shared and institutionalized moral values, beliefs about God, and involvement in a religious community” (p. 72). The concept denotes a structure of beliefs that are socially accepted as a way to interpret and bring order to life.

Spiritual Quest

A spiritual quest is a person’s journey toward answering questions such as “Who am I” and “What is my purpose in life” (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Spiritual quest is the core of this study and is seen as pursuit to make spiritual sense of life. Hence, I define spiritual quest as a person's search for spiritual insights in their daily experiences.

Spiritual Struggle

Spiritual struggle is composed of five elements: questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; feeling unsettled about spiritual/religious matters; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling angry at life; and feeling disillusioned by with one’s religious upbringing (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Spiritual struggle is used broadly in this study and is about the challenging experiences in life that take individuals outside their comfort zone through which they struggle to make sense of. For me, my spiritual struggle consists of (1) the tension arising from a person sensing gaps in their spiritual understanding, and (2) the difficulty in finding meaning in daily experiences.

Alternate Terminology

As a relatively new approach to scholarly research, scholarly personal narrative has equivalent concepts to traditional research but, due its subjective nature, captures
them in alternate terminology. Consequently, SPN research uses the term “according to my experience,” instead of “according to research” because it expresses an acceptance of full responsibility for the person-disclosures, universal themes, and illustrative stories (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Since perspectives are drawn from personal experiences, the criteria of validity in traditional research finds expression in SPN as plausibility, honesty, and coherence (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

The strength of validity is the degree to which the researcher’s voice emerges from the writing as trustworthy, credible, honest, and cohesive. A more stringent test is how seamlessly connected the different experiences are to the driving theme, thus creating a coherent picture from the different pieces of events. This undertaking presents an artistic and creative opportunity, but it also presents a limitation because the writer has to communicate in an honest and coherent way while carefully balancing subjective disclosures with as much objective analysis, to ensure in the concluding implications that the lessons are universalizable for the readers. It is a unique challenge, but every limitation can become a strength with the right attitude and approach.

**Delimitations**

Between the decision to make a spiritual change during my freshman year and the present moment, more than a decade has passed. During that time, I will have attained three degrees: Bachelors, Masters, and a PhD (once this study is complete!). Each of those degrees has been connected to a different higher education institution, and each of those stages has been marked by different experiences that have affected my spirituality. In each stage of the journey, I have used personal writings (essays, blogs, journal entries,
and journal entries) as a form of self-reflection to process the experiences and make spiritual meaning.

In this dissertation, I focused my study on the experiences that occurred during the timeline of my academic journey, complemented my professional development, and where instrumental in shaping my recognition of the role of spirituality in higher education. Although the experiences I used for this study are varied, they all cover the different areas of inquiry where spiritual intelligence can be found (Vaughan, 2002). Furthermore, regardless of their variety, they each seek to demonstrate the important role that self-reflection plays in the process of searching for spiritual values within daily experiences.

**Summary**

Students come to higher education in an exploratory period of their lives. During this crucial phase, desires stir within to explore different ideas. One of these desires is the increasing spiritual search for meaning and purpose. Furthermore, owing to how closely related spiritual struggle is with spiritual quest, the research questions for this study were:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?
2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?

Consequently, this study explored how a process of self-reflection can encourage the spirituality of students by enhancing the meaning drawn from their experiences. It also explored how self-reflection can nurture the spiritual quest for meaning within experiences of spiritual struggles.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Spirituality and Self-Reflection in Higher Education:

A Literature Review

Chapter One focused on providing an overview for this study, which was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?
2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?

This chapter provides background through the existing scholarship related to this study. Specifically, this chapter highlights unaddressed needs related to spirituality in higher education, spirituality, faith, religion, the relationship between spirituality and religion, and self-reflection.

One day a friend and I were exchanging updates on our semesters. After I summarized mine, she started sharing highlights of hers. In general, she expressed satisfaction about her classes, but then shared an experience she had with a professor she considered difficult and insensitive. For context, she mentioned how this professor frequently challenged students and undercut their points in class, causing many to doubt themselves. But about the experience, she shared how she once made a comment, and he retorted in a flippant (and what she expressed as a condescending) way. She was perturbed and aggravated by his comments and attitude, and to some degree even hurt.

I listened carefully to her anecdote, knowing from previous conversations that she shared the aspiration to make meaning from the experience that would support her
spirituality. Therefore, I began this collaborative self-reflection and inquired: “What feelings did you allow his words to stir within you?” and “What thoughts accompanied those feelings?” These preliminary questions were designed to first identify the coarsest elements of the experience that comprise thoughts and feelings, and only gradually move toward the spiritual center. After she contemplated these questions and responded, I followed up with the questions: “What unexamined expectations did you have that were disappointed by his comments?” and “What is the source of these expectations?” I asked these questions to help her move from dwelling on feelings, to understanding the reasons for the thoughts she used to interpret the experience. In this regard, I emphasized I was not minimizing any legitimate concerns about this professor, but just trying to refocus attention to what was within the realm of control, and above all what will support her spiritual quest to make meaning of the experience.

In our conversation, I was applying two principles I have experienced over the years: 1) our thoughts are the eyes we use to see an experience; and 2) through our reaction, experiences reveal what is within us. Consequently, if our thoughts are the lens through which we interpret things, as well as the switch that triggers our emotions in reaction to experiences (and thus what we “feel”), and if we are always responsible for our thoughts, then it is important to understand our thoughts and what is behind them.

She acknowledged being sensitive about the “dumb blonde” stereotype, so she was always trying to disprove it through her work. I then inquired, “How did your thoughts about this stereotype influence your reaction to his comments?” It became apparent her focus on this stereotype revealed an insecurity she had not fully recognized.
She reflected and conceded that this thought might have influenced her expectation of this professor (the desire to have her intelligence validated). But when the reply disappointed her expectations, it stung the latent insecurity. The dialogue was rich and honest, and I used my personal experience to inquire about the role that the public encounter might have played in her reaction. Through mutual reflection, we realized her insecurity about not falling into the blonde stereotype might have exacerbated the pain by adding a layer of humiliation, which caused her to be extra sensitive and feel so infuriated by his comments. Therefore, in a sense, his comments revealed these latent thoughts inside her. In conclusion, we both enjoyed and were glad for this rich process of self-reflection that helped make meaning of the experience to support her spirituality.

The difficulty my friend faced is one I can relate to: carrying the desire for spirituality, but struggling to draw value and meaning from challenging experiences. The more I have committed myself to a disciplined process of self-reflection, the more meaning I have been able to draw from experiences. And it is this practice over the years that enabled me to be a support to my friend. The anecdote is an experience that demonstrates the potential ways that a process of self-reflection can support the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences. It is an example of what I used in this study (via my personal experiences) to explore: the role of self-reflection in the quest to make spiritual meaning of our daily experiences.

Before beginning the study, I examined the literature. Therefore, the following is a literature review that explored the concept of spiritual quest, spiritual struggle, the role of self-reflection as a tool for meaning making of college students, and different spiritual
theories and related frameworks. Furthermore, as the terms faith, religion, and spirituality are often confused, the relationship and differences between them was discussed. Doing this clearly positioned the purpose of this research study as it relates to the use of self-reflection as an aid to the spiritual quest to make meaning.

The Unaddressed Need

According to Capeheart-Meningall (2005), “College is a critical time when students search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual beliefs and values” (p. 31). When they begin this time, most incoming freshman students have an interest in spirituality (Yocum, 2014), yet there is a noticeable gap in higher education to address this need (Talbot & Love, 2009). Spiritual development is a part of the overall student development, so why is this hunger for spirituality ignored? Lindholm (2007) asserted, “To ignore the role of spirituality in personal development and professional behavior … is to overlook a potentially very powerful avenue through which many of us construct meaning and knowledge” (p. 10). Furthermore, Riggers-Piehl and Sax (2018) suggested that students show increases in spiritual characteristics when professors encourage students’ spiritual pursuits. This means students enter college seeking to develop and are interested in spirituality, but the lack of reinforcement of this essential need even by professors can cause it to wither.

In a way, spirituality today is in a situation similar to that of behavioral sciences in the late 19th and 20th in which interest grew in the study of mind, thoughts, and emotions. As attention to behavioral sciences grew, concern for the holistic growth of the student increased, prompting questions about how the college experience was promoting
the students’ cognitive and affective growth (Hendrickson et al., 2013). In the case of spirituality, the increasing urge within the college student for meaning and purpose, the search for wholeness, the desire to explore the spirit which defines our humanity, and also the desire to make sense of life by understanding how the inner world influences the outer one are prompting more questions about how the college experience is promoting the spiritual growth of students (Astin et al., 2011; Chickering et al., 2006; Love & Talbot, 2009).

The unaddressed need highlighted in this section of the literature review is what I addressed in this study. Through this dissertation I used myself as the instrument to capture my own ways of navigating issues of spirituality in an attempt to answer my research questions. In order to do this effectively, I must first understand the existing scholarship in this area. With this information, I can move on to understand how self-reflection can help in a spiritual quest and how that quest is nurtured by self-reflection.

**Spirituality**

What is spirituality? The word spirituality has the Latin base word -SPIR that means, “to breathe” or “a breathing” (Ayers & Cherry, 1986). The suffix -ity forms abstract nouns expressing a state or condition. Together, spirituality implies the state/condition of being spiritual (i.e., the state/condition of the animating “breath;” the human soul). In academia, the definitions of spirituality are numerous, some of which include the following:

- A search for meaning, direction, purpose, and belonging (Astin et al., 2001; Teasdale, 1999);
• Transcendence, connection, wholeness, compassion (Jones, 2005); 
• “The development of the inner person in regard to individual beliefs and values and the search for meaning, belonging, and purpose” (Greenway, 2006, p. 2); 
• The process of developing into a well-rounded person who allows for a complete and personal relationship with God (Taylor, 2002); 
• The sense of who we are and why we are here… (Astin et al., 2011); 
• An awareness of a transcendent dimension that causes a way of being and experiencing which is informed by certain values (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988); 
• The search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, for the highest of human potential (Pargament, 1999); 
• “The human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world” (Mayhew, 2004, p. 666); 
• A triarchic concept involving 1) a connection to someone or something beyond oneself, 2) a sense of compassion for others, and 3) a desire to contribute to the good of others (O’Hanlon, 2006).

As is observable from the above definitions, and as Love and Talbot (2009) accurately noted, “there is no commonly accepted definition of spirituality” (p. 616). The definitions of spirituality among scholars are innumerable, but despite these differences there are similar characteristics. Spirituality in these definitions denotes a search to discover inherent qualities whose expression will connect us to something higher and makes us “whole.” Consequently, this study involved the spiritual quest to discover these
high values in our experiences through the tool of self-reflection. As informed by the above definitions, and as the suffix -ity expresses a state or condition, my working definition of spirituality is the lifestyle of authentically expressing the inherent qualities of the human spirit (the “animating breath”).

**Faith**

The word “faith” is derived from the Latin *fide* that originates in the PIE (Proto-Indo-European) base word *bheidh*, which means “trust” (Ayers & Cherry, 1986). The base word *fide* is the same one found in “confidence” (Ayers & Cherry, 1986). Thus, the etymology of the word faith implies trust, and trust implies reliance in a certainty of knowledge. Therefore, to have faith in this context is a lifestyle of trust, to confidently live in the reliance of a certainty of knowledge about life. The relationship to spiritual quest then is clearly defined, for the latter is the process of the search and faith is the lifestyle of living the discovered knowledge.

James Fowler is the preeminent scholar in faith research through the pioneering and publishing of his renowned faith development theory (Fowler, 1974). Fowler saw faith as a feature in human beings, and characterizes it as an internal process underpinning the formation of the beliefs, values, and meanings (Fowler, 2006, p. 36). Fowler further elaborated on the concept of faith by relating it to the immanent human need to make meaning, and to specifically do this within the framework of a trusting relation to the Divine Being who created and designed the whole Universe (Fowler, 2004). He further asserted that this type of faith will naturally orient the individual “to life and its purposes, and to creation, with its origins, its ordering, its enormity, its
hospitality to life in its myriad forms and expressions, and its mystery” (Fowler, 2004, p. 412).

The etymology of the word faith (Ayers & Cherry, 1986) is found in Fowler’s description through the word “trust” that implies developing an inner confidence in the principles of life. Furthermore, the assertion of this type of faith orienting the individual to “creation, with its origins, its orderings …” implies the entire Universe is immutably ordered. In this case, faith is a lifestyle of oneness with this order, which implies both the awareness of this order, and then an adjustment to it. The notion of meaning-making, against the backdrop of this description, naturally assumes a new light in relation to faith development theory. Meaning-making (Mayhew, 2004) can be framed as the search for an order and purpose to the pattern of events manifesting in our lives, and then to reconcile this pattern with the broader order of creation.

The definition of faith in relation to this study is about the search for insights that will bring order to experiences. Through self-reflection, I searched my experiences for these principles in order to make meaning that will support my spirituality.

**Religion**

The word religion among scholars is connected with two different concepts: *relegere* and *religare* (Hoyt, 1912). Relegere means, “go through again” (in reading or thought) and is from re- “again” + legere “read or contemplate” (Hoyt, 1912). However, religare means, “to bind fast” (like rely), and implies the binding/connection that brings an obligation/responsibility (Hoyt, 1912). Interpreted from the two etymologies, religion
can be seen as commitment (to bind fast) where repetitive practice (go through again) is used to internalize a set of moral principles.

Scholars have defined religion in a myriad of ways. Armstrong (2004) saw religion not as a set of rules and regulations, “but doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy” (p. 270). Religion is also positioned as a “self-contained set of beliefs or an institution in society” (Batson et al., 1993, p. 41). Religion is a system that provides reason, order, beauty, and meaning in life experiences; granting protection and a scaffold from the hazards of the world and human impulses that encompass pain, guilt, and self-doubt (Pargament, 1997; Chickering et al., 2006). Stamm (2006) defined religion as, “the conceptual framework and the recognized institution within which a society’s deep moral values and the rules governing what is defined as correct behavior for individuals are generally associated” (p. 91). When viewed collectively, religion appears associated with a bounded set of beliefs and structured system that an individual, through continual practice, seeks to integrate to their life.

The journey of my spiritual quest actually began with religion, because it was readily available and provided a convenient framework to approach life. However, as I grew, I inwardly required something different to satisfy me spiritually. But, despite this transformation I have retained some elements of religion (specifically Christianity). Therefore, in my spiritual quest to make meaning of my experiences, as some elements of religion has been part of this journey, then some of the concepts are featured in my meaning making process.
Relationship Between Spirituality and Religion

Having examined the definition of the key concepts of faith, religion, and spirituality individually and how scholars conceptualize it, the next step was to examine religion and spirituality side by side. The interrelatedness and distinctness of religion and spirituality in discourse today (Astin & Lindholm, 2011; Mayhew, 2004; Yocum, 2014), and the ease with which they can be confused necessitate such an examination. Table 1.1 provides a comparison of the definitions of religion and spirituality as explained by the literature.

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 17)</td>
<td>“Suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Organized belief systems that include shared and institutionalized moral values, beliefs about God, and involvement in a religious community” (Walsh, 1998, p. 72)</td>
<td>“An internal set of values--a sense of meaning, inner wholeness, and connection with others” (Walsh, 1998, p. 72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-level experience (Miller &amp; Thoresen, 2003)</td>
<td>Individual-level experience (Miller &amp; Thoresen, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discreet and identifiable beliefs and practices (O’Hanlon, 2006)</td>
<td>“A sense that something bigger is going on in life” (O’Hanlon, 2006, p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A system that provides beauty, reason, and order to the world (Pargament, 1997)</td>
<td>“Meaning and purpose in one's life, a search for wholeness, and a relationship with a transcendent being” (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, &amp; DeFanti, 2006, p. 219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A pathway in the search for self and for self-growth” (Chickering et al., 2006, p. 42)</td>
<td>“Our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The means and methods such as practices other prescribed behaviors, through which the search for the sacred is validated by and reinforced from a recognized group (Hill et al., 2000)

A corporate experience that provides an opportunity to practice a belief system with others who are like-minded, and seeks to codify the commonalities between beliefs - doctrinal, ecclesiastical, ritualistic. (Yocum, 2014)

“Consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (Wuthnow, 1998, p. viii)

“A phenomenon whereby individuals seek to find answers to life’s questions, to discover their own identity, to find a sense of purpose in life, to understand the difference between good and bad.” (Yocum, 2014, p. 81)

Side by side, it is easy to recognize the big difference between these concepts.

Spirituality, unlike religion, is not bound to any institution. Although spirituality can exist in religion, the two concepts are distinct. According to Astin (2016), religiousness implies “acceptance of a set of beliefs and practices associated with a particular religious denomination or group”, while spirituality is associated with those who “may believe in a deity or in some sort of reality beyond the physical world of matter but…are unable either the theological claims, code of conduct, or rituals of the particular religious denominations” (p. 16). The implications for this study are that, in my spiritual quest to make meaning of my experiences, I was not seeking to perpetuate the ideals of a religious institution, but rather I used a process of self-reflection to examine my experiences and search for my own sense of meaning and purpose.

Finally, although religion and spirituality have been associated (Zinnbauer et al., 2015), Waggoner (2016) explained that the current interest to experience spirituality apart from religion is based on
a growing dissatisfaction by many with religious systems that are seen as less and less relevant explanations of and guidance for modern life, and perceived alternative means to achieve personal fulfillment grounded in the authority of and care for one’s self. (p. 148)

The following study addressed these trends by providing an example of the process of searching for answers within the framework of personal experiences through an inner process of self-reflection.

**Spiritual Quest**

An essential component of spirituality that is linked with spiritual struggle is the concept of spiritual quest, which is associated with a person’s journey toward answering questions such as “who am I?” and “what is my purpose in life?” (Patton et al., 2016). As one measure of spirituality in the research conducted by Astin et al. (2011), spiritual quest involves a search for meaning and purpose, a journey for answers, a seeking for concepts that will bring order to life. In the concept of quest, there is a belief in something unseen that, if attained, will provide illuminating answers. Consequently, spiritual quest in relation to spiritual struggle is the “motivating desire” to find answers and inwardly grow through a trying experience.

As spiritual quest can be seen as a person's search for spiritual principles in their daily experiences, then it follows that self-reflection can be used a tool for this search. Therefore, in this study, I used a structured process of self-reflection to support my spiritual quest to make meaning of my experiences. This study adds to the existing
research because there is little scholarship on the role of spiritual struggle or spiritual quest as they relate to higher education.

**Spiritual Struggle**

One of the key prompters of spiritual growth is the notion of struggle and adversity. In this case adversity can be defined as those experiences that compel us to exert more energy and cultivate a deeper understanding of life to surmount. Cartwright (2001) stated that, “Individuals’ subjective experiences, including social interactions, context, and life events, stimulate the process of transcendence by forcing individuals to move beyond prior cognitive processes and engage in new modes of thoughts” (p. 217). Other scholars have explained that adversity can be a catalyst for spiritual development (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998). For example: conflict motivates the development of faith (Fowler, 1981), external conflict with family or internal conflict facilitates spiritual development (Wink & Dillon, 2002), and life stressors (positive and negative events) can provide a drive for spiritual development.

In a study pertaining to spiritual struggle during college years, Bryant and Astin (2008) defined it as intrapsychic concerns about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning of life that is comprised of five elements: 1) questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; 2) feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters; 3) struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; 4) feeling angry at life; and 5) feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing. The study framed spiritual struggle as being caused by different factors that include difficult life circumstances, confusion about beliefs and values, and weak spiritual orientations (failure to accept troubling accepts of life).
Consequently, spiritual struggle can manifest through varied experiences, but at its core it is the experience of disequilibrium caused by a momentary inability to adjust to a new situation, the struggle to make meaning of something in a way that facilitates inner development. In relation to spiritual quest, reframing adversities as opportunities for growth is fitting. Regarding crisis as a precursor to development, the faithful change study identified three categories of crisis: significant exposure to diverse perspectives (people with different concepts), significant multicultural exposure (people who live differently), and general emotional crisis (Bryant & Astin, 2008). All of these, in addition to life stressors and moments of “conflict,” create moments that compel movement toward change.

It should be noted that spiritual growth through a crisis is not automatic, for a personal decision must be made to draw insights from the experience. In addition, a balance between the adversity and support systems must be present (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004). Without adequate challenge, inertia may set in; without adequate support, hope of growth might be lost. As a potential solution Parks (2000) proposed that “hearth,” a place of equilibrium that offers a healthy balance of stability of motion, will serve as an ideal place for position change. However, students today who are faced with different levels of inner crisis, bereft of these “hearth” spaces and an accommodating environment of spirituality in higher education, might struggle and feel overwhelmed. And when the great difference in personal support systems among students is considered, it is easy to conceive how the impetus for spiritual development would wane overtime, like a flame slowly dying out without oxygen. The concept of “hearth” is broad, for it
refers to any space or environment that is conducive and supportive of the deep inner reflections and search for meaning. In their research, Bryant and Astin (2008) found that poorer students who struggle spiritually might designate the college environment a place not conducive for spiritual development.

In a sense, the following study is about my own creation of a “hearth space” that I used to process and make spiritual meaning of my experiences over the years. Since the space is not formalized in higher education, I used self-reflection in different formats (journals, blogs, essays, and poems) to aid my spiritual quest to find deeper meaning. Using scholarly personal narrative, I used this study to demonstrate the process of my self-reflection and fill a gap in the literature about the intersection of spirituality and education.

**Spiritual Development and Religious Culture**

Ackerson (2018) conducted a study that examined the relationship between students’ perception of institutional support for spiritual development, and students’ own deepened sense of spirituality. Using Morey and Piderit’s (2006) four types of Catholic culture types (immersion, persuasion, cohort, diaspora), the study was religious-based and sought to bring awareness on how Catholic colleges and universities can more effectively support students’ spiritual development (Ackerson, 2018). Ackerson stated in the findings that “Across all culture types, there is a strong positive correlation between a student’s perception of the institution’s support for student spiritual development and student’s reporting a deepened sense of spirituality” (p. 154).
The findings emphasized that, to have the greatest effect, an institution’s Catholic culture and support for spiritual development must encompass all aspects of the student experience (Ackerson, 2018). Ackerson’s (2018) study focused specifically on religion, but the exploration of the relevance of the findings with regard to spirituality and college students today is missing. This is a gap my study helps to fill. Namely, if there is a relationship between a deepened spirituality and the students perceived sense of institutional support, then I hoped to provide examples of practices that, in my spiritual quest for meaning, I adopted to form a personally supportive spiritual culture. In so doing, I hoped the examples might add to the existing literature of ways to help create a supportive culture for spirituality among college students.

**UCLA Research on Spiritual Development**

One of the most robust and contemporary studies on spiritual development in higher education was Astin et al.’s (2002) seven-year study funded by the John Templeton Foundation to examine the spiritual development of students during their college years. Specifically, the study was designed to “enhance our understanding of how college students conceive of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students’ spiritual development” (UCLA, 2010). The primary research questions were: 1) what role does spirituality play in the lives of today’s college students?; 2) How do students’ spiritual qualities change during the college years?; and 3) what are institutions doing that aids or inhibits students in their spiritual quest?
Analyzing data collected from 14,527 students attending 136 colleges and universities, and supplemented by personal interviews with some students, focus groups, and surveys and interviews with some faculty, Astin et al. (2002) developed the following two sets of measures:

**Five Spiritual Qualities:**

1. *Equanimity* (find meaning in times of hardship)
2. *Spiritual Quest* (actively searching for purpose and meaning in life)
3. *Ethic of Caring* (concern about others and the world around us)
4. *Charitable Involvement* (Philanthropic endeavors)
5. *Ecumenical Worldview* (strong connection to all humanity)

**Five Religious Qualities:**

1. *Religious commitment* (alignment of teachings and daily life)
2. *Religious engagement* (praying, reading sacred texts, attending religious services)
4. *Religious Skepticism* (doubt; science will explain everything)
5. *Religious Struggle* (unsettled about religious matters)

Spirituality as defined by the study is a combination of all five spiritual qualities. Examining the spiritual lives of college students based on these qualities, Astin et al. (2010), among other findings, discovered that:
● Students show the greatest degree of growth in the five spiritual qualities if they are actively engaged in “inner work” through self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation.

● Students also show substantial increases in spiritual questing when their faculty encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose or otherwise show support for their spiritual development.

● Educational experiences and practices that promote spiritual development—especially service learning and self-reflection—have uniformly positive effects on traditional college outcomes.

Astin et al.’s findings demonstrate the need for higher education to provide opportunities involving self-reflection for college students (and faculty and staff) to pursue spiritual development. However, how can students gain practice of this inner process of self-reflection? It is this question I answer with this dissertation through personal demonstration.

**Spirituality and Leadership**

Leadership in literature has many definitions and has been conceptualized as person-based, purpose-based, process-based, position-based, and/or results-based (Grint, Jones, Holt, & Storey, 2006). Northouse (2004) identified four common themes of how leadership is conceived in the literature: leadership (1) as a process; (2) involves influence; (3) occurs in a group context; and (4) involves goal attainment. However, some definitions of leadership “restrict it to purely non-coercive influence towards shared (and socially acceptable) objectives” (Bolden, 2004, p. 4). In this way, leadership attains
a standard of inner qualities that occupation of a position alone cannot bestow. The etymology of the root word lead is the Old English word “loedan,” meaning to go, to travel; while the suffix -ship usually denotes a state or condition, qualities belonging to a class of human beings, or rank or office (Grace, 2003). As “to go/travel” infers a destination, then the word implies guidance toward a goal (i.e., the destination of the “travel”). Linking the etymology to the literature, leadership can be seen as the qualities exemplified by a person of developed ability who guides toward a goal.

The difference between spiritual and religious leadership can be found in the different concept associated with both words. Religion is associated with a formal/organizational institution, while spirituality is more associated with closeness to God that fosters a sense of interconnectedness with the world and all living things (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Another key difference according to Yocum (2014) is that religion is a corporate experience that provides an opportunity for like-minded people to practice a belief system; while spirituality is when individuals seek to find answers to life questions, to discover their own identity, and to find a sense of purpose in life. Despite the differences, there is significant overlap. However, Reaves (2005) mentioned that, regarding leadership, it is important to distinguish these concepts in the workplace because of the dangers of proselytizing. Consequently, while religious leadership can express much of the same qualities as spiritual leadership, the main distinction is that religious leadership is based on an accepted doctrine among like-minded people, its vision being oriented toward the belief system, and thus seeks to guide others toward its realization (Yocum, 2014).
Spiritual leadership is not about a fixed system of beliefs but rather is about the cultivation and expression of certain qualities. Reaves (2005) treated spiritual leadership as a phenomenon when a person embodies spiritual values and, through their exemplary behavior, encourages the same standard in others. Fry (2003) defined spiritual leadership as “the values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to intrinsically motivate oneself and others so they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (p. 694-5). In the definition, “calling” is the transcendental recognition of how one makes a difference through service to others and, in process, derives meaning and purpose; while “membership” is establishing a culture based on altruistic love that produces a sense of connection with others and the feeling of being understood and appreciated (Fry, 2003; Komives, 2005).

**Origins of spiritual leadership**

Ohmann (1955), in his classic work *Skyhooks*, discussed how people were losing faith in society’s materialistic values, and a spiritual rebirth was needed in the ranks of leadership. Reflecting on this thought and its relevance to the present-day, Fry (2009) mentioned “never in human history have people ever had so much yet enjoyed so little real satisfaction” (p. 79). Ohmann (1955) contended that people were searching for “skyhooks”—an opportunity to serve a worthy objective that will integrate life’s experiences and give it greater meaning (Fry 2009; Singh, 2005). The focus on spirituality in business is a megatrend that has become so pervasive that ignoring it is tantamount to ignoring a fundamental feature of what it means to be human (Aburdene, 2005; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Fry, 2008). In view of the growing need at the time
that still holds today, Ohmann (1955) formed the idea of a leader with following characteristics as one who provides invisible skyhooks into which daily experiences can be given meaning:

- Providing a vision without which the people perish;
- Philosophical and character values that help relate one’s goals to eternal values;
- Setting the climate within which these values become working realities;
- Integrating the smaller, selfish goals of individuals into the larger, more social and spiritual objectives of society;
- Resolving conflicts by relating the immediate to long-range and more enduring values.

Following this, more theories have emerged seeking to explain the relationship between spirituality and leadership. One of them is the nature of ethical leadership and spirituality (Johnson, 2009), in which there are two levels of spirituality in an organization: individual and collective. Johnson (2009) stated that individual spirituality arises from “values, feelings, and practices of each person in the organization;” while collective spirituality consists of “organizational culture and climate that fosters shared meaning and connection” (p. 76-77). Essentially, Johnson (2009) emphasized that personal workplace spirituality prepares leaders for Ethical Leadership by:

- Providing a sense of mission and meaning;
- Focusing attention on the needs of others;
- Fostering humility, integrity, and justice;
• Highlighting universal moral principles; and

• Generating feelings of hope and joy.

More recently, Afsar, Badir, and Kiani (2016) identified the following four components of spiritual leadership in that a spiritual leader:

• Helps an individual to be a whole person and seek meaningful work by connecting to others, society, self, and transcendent, thus motivating them to a higher purpose and meaning (Hudson, 2014).

• Encourage others to think beyond themselves by taking into consideration concerns of the society, planet, and nature.

• Integrates core organizational values, processes and systems with core values and aspirations of individuals, thus causing them to fit better with the organization (Benefiel, 2005).

• Encourage people to pursue a greater purpose of life, meaningfulness of work, transcendence, altruism, and sense of community.

Despite the initial call by Ohmann (1955) to emphasize more spirituality in leadership, not much has changed (Fry, 2008). Some attribute this lack of spirituality to the overemphasis on material success and technical skills in the system of higher education (Chickering et al., 2006). In addition, the high level of spiritual interest in college students (Astin et al., 2010) makes the need of spiritual leadership more urgent. In this regard, the more notable model of spiritual leadership is by Fry (2009) who saw it as comprising “values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to intrinsically motivate oneself”
and satisfy fundamental needs for spiritual well-being through calling and membership” (p. 80).

Bearing in mind the aforementioned ideas of “calling” and “membership” (Fry, 2003; Komives, 2005), personal spiritual leadership, according to Fry (2009) is practiced by:

Authentically pursuing a personal vision, based in altruistic values, that creates a sense of calling and membership and produces high personal commitment, productivity, and life satisfaction. It is initiated by focusing on one’s inner life and embarking on the spiritual quest for a Higher Power or God from which one can draw strength and give unreserved commitment and devotion. (p. 80-1)

The definition can be enacted by operationalizing it three components: vision/mission, altruistic love, and hope/faith. According to Polat (2011), vision is about defining the destination and journey that is filled with high ideals, altruistic love is about exemplifying qualities toward others (humility, kindness, patience, integrity, trust), and hope/faith is about perseverance (i.e., putting consistent energy with positive expectations toward a noble goal). Enhancing the picture, Kurth (2003) identified four key spiritual practices to adhere that is important for strong personal leadership: know oneself; respect and honor the beliefs of others; be as trusting as you can be; and maintain a spiritual practice (e.g. time in nature, prayer, meditation etc.).

Another way of enacting spiritual leadership is based on four threads: vision, coherence, virtues, and strategic decisions and direction (Statnick, 2004). Vision is about forming the goal and direction, coherence is about drawing people around the vision
based on a resonance of cherished beliefs, strategic decisions and direction are the decisions that reflect the vision and set direction for action, and virtues are the inner qualities of the human spirit that will set the standard of the behavior for how the vision is pursued (Stanick, 2004).

Kaya (2015) found a relationship between spiritual leadership and employees’ connectedness, citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, and positive moods. Furthermore, spiritual leadership has also been found to have a positive relationship with organizational citizenship behaviors, altruism, and courtesy within education (Raddanipour & Siadat, 2013). Therefore, if spiritual leadership is integrated within organizations today, it can provide a support for the spirituality of constituents, thereby offering “skyhooks” both in higher education and the workplace, which would allow people to make deeper meaning of their experiences. That is the work that I have begun in this study in an effort to fill a gap in the literature.

**Self-Reflection**

What is self-reflection? And why is it such an important tool in the spiritual quest to find meaning in our experiences? When we reflect, we pause to review or evaluate an experience for deeper understanding. Toole and Toole (1995) wrote:

The ability to reflect gives people the freedom, power, and responsibility, perhaps unique among all living things, to continually choose or adjust the direction of their lives. That is why reflection is at the heart of becoming a self-directed and lifelong learner. (p. 100)
Boyd and Fales (1983) defined reflection as “the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experiences (present or past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world)” (p. 101). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (2013) wrote that experience alone is not the key to learning, and the more they questioned what enables learners to gain the maximum benefit from experiences, the more they realized the importance of reflection. Reflection must be pursued with intent, and is not indolence meandering and endless daydreaming, for reflection is a focused, explicit, and goal-directed activity (Boud, 1985).

In relation to spirituality, self-reflection is a focused goal-directed process (Boud, 1985) of seeking deeper understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the inner life (self) and outer experience (Boyd & Fales, 1983). Reflection is also a sifting, strict process of winnowing in which different parts of an experience are separated and examined to better understand the more fundamental relationship (Procee, 2006). Reflection also takes different forms and can be implemented in the classroom in a variety of ways. Grossman (2009) identified the following four types of reflection:

- Content-based reflection: examining an experience with a specific learning objective;
- Metacognitive reflection: self-assessment; report thoughts about one’s thinking;
- Self-authorship reflection: transcending thoughts and feelings to observe how concepts are dynamically interrelated and influence action;
- Transformative and Intensive reflection: becoming aware of why one thinks, perceives, or acts as one does (Peltier, Hay & Drago, 2005); insights enabling one to become more socially responsible, self-directed, and less dependent on false assumptions. (Kiely, 2005)

My research used SPN to make meaning of experiences and involved a combination of the above four types of reflections. As the goal of self-reflection is seeking deeper understanding, I used this goal-directed process as a tool to seek deeper meaning of my experiences in a way that supported my spiritual development. The framework I used provided a structure of how I processed my experiences to arrive at this understanding. For an overview, the Table 1.2 below shows the integrated side-by-side comparison of the self-reflective models and their various stages, their relationship to one another, and shows how the framework of self-reflection I used comprises elements of existing models in the literature.

Table 1.2

*Integrated Model of Self-Reflection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe experience</td>
<td>Describe experience</td>
<td>Content-based</td>
<td>Description of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(examine experience)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on actions, feelings and thoughts</td>
<td>Reflection on actions, feelings, and thoughts</td>
<td>Mega-cognitive (self-assessment; report one’s thoughts)</td>
<td>Assess the reaction (thoughts, feelings, assumptions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion (what you learned)</td>
<td>Theory (use concepts to interpret experience)</td>
<td>Self-authorship (transcending thought and feeling)</td>
<td>Making sense of experience (insights to be drawn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action plan (changes for future)</td>
<td>Preparations (use reflection to prepare for future)</td>
<td>Transformative (awareness of why one thinks, perceives, or acts as one does)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dimensions of Spirituality

Some scholars studying spirituality over the years have compiled and synthesized research on its different dimensions (Mayhew, 2002; Elkins et al, 1988). Providing some of these dimensions of spirituality helped provide a deeper understanding of what spirituality entails. Elkins, Hughes, Saunders, Leaf, and Hedstrom (1988) identified components of spirituality that include: transcendent dimension (belief in a transcendent dimension to life), meaning and purpose in life, sacredness of life (the sense of awe of the value of life), material values (material things are tools to be used for a spiritual purpose), altruism (we are our “brother’s keeper”), idealism (commitment to the betterment of the world), and fruits of spirituality (tangible manifestation of spiritual values in one’s life). These dimensions reveal broader aspects of spirituality that carries the innate desire to realize something deeper and higher, and to have this show through the conduct of one’s life. It shows what a student seeking spiritual development is trying to realize.

Mayhew (2004) conducted a phenomenological study of eight students with eight different worldviews and then identified some major themes about how they perceived spirituality, which included: local moment (being present in the moment), pervasiveness (connection with unbounded infinite environments), local environment (the sacred perceived through Nature), relationship with humanity (deeper connection and love for others), internal process of making meaning (making sense of oneself in relation to the world) external process of meaning making (understanding the natural world). Table 1.3 highlights the relationship between both spiritual dimensions.
Table 1.3

Relationship of Spiritual Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Transcendent dimension</td>
<td>• Pervasiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meaning and purpose in life</td>
<td>• Internal process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• External process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sacredness of life</td>
<td>• Local moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Material values</td>
<td>• External process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fruits of spirituality</td>
<td>• Internal process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Idealism</td>
<td>• Relationship with humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Altruism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.33 above draws parallels between both spiritual dimensions. The transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988) and pervasiveness (Mayhew, 2004) are both about connecting to a higher power that transcends the moment. Meaning and purpose in life (Elkins et al., 1988) is related to both the internal and external process of meaning making (Mayhew, 2004) because both are about meaning that involves the internal and external world. Sacredness of life (Elkins et al., 1988) and local moment (Mayhew, 2004) are related because being present in the moment often accompanies the perception of the sacredness of life. Material values and fruits of spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988) are related to both the internal and external process of meaning making (Mayhew, 2004) because they are about using material things for a spiritual purpose, while the internal and external meaning making process is about understanding the dynamic between the material world (external) and the spiritual world (internal). Finally, idealism and altruism
(Elkins et al., 1988) relates to relationship with humanity (Mayhew, 2004) because they are both about improving relations and bettering the world.

These themes that emerged from different people show the personalized element of spirituality. It reveals how the personality and concept of each person will cause them to experience spirituality in different ways (Mayhew, 2004). Through such studies, we further recognize the difference between religion and spirituality in that the former is more institutionalized and collectively oriented, while the latter is personalized and individually-oriented.

Like other concepts, spiritual development has a premise and set of assumptions. Love and Talbot (2009) identified five of these assumptions and propositions. However, the listed propositions are not stages, but are just characteristics that are associated with spiritual development:

- Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.

- Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity.

- Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with the community.

- Spiritual development involves developing meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.
• Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

The essence of the propositions of spirituality (Love & Talbot, 2009) accords with the other dimensions of other scholars through the similitude of the aspiration to make deeper meaning of experiences, to inwardly open the spirit to higher values and then have them influence all aspect of life. These concepts speak to the intention of this study, which was an internal process of making meaning (through self-reflection), in order express and open oneself to higher values. Thus, the propositions list the different elements that were featured in the process of this study.

A Taxonomy of Spirituality

Based on McSherry’s (2007) exploratory study on patients, healthcare professionals and healthy individuals, Torskenaes et al. (2015) listed the following eight descriptors of spirituality:

• Theistic: believing in a Supreme Being;
• Religious affiliation: believing in a God, practicing religious strategies, customs and rituals;
• Language: using certain language such as inner strength and inner peace;
• Cultural, political and social ideologies: subscribing to a particular political position or social ideology that influences attitudes and behaviors;
• Phenomenological: learning from life experiences, by living and learning from a variety of situations and experiences, both positive and negative;
• Existential: finding meaning, purpose and fulfilment in all life events;
• Quality of life: the standards used to measure daily life;
• Mystical: relationship between transcendent, interpersonal, transpersonal and life after death.

The eight descriptors show the different dimensions and layers of spirituality within people, and the varied ways it can be identified. It relates to my study because I described different experiences during the process of my spiritual quest that reflect aspects of the taxonomy above.

**Spiritual Development**

Despite the first colleges in the United States being created by clergy to give youth a morally grounded education (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012), public higher education over the last century has been reluctant to address the spiritual development of students (Patton et al., 2016; Tisdell, 2003). According to Speck (2005), there are three potential factors that have contributed this avoidance of proactively integrating spirituality in higher education:

1. The erroneous belief that the constitutional requirement of separation of church and state precludes any mention of matters that could be construed as religious;
2. The emphasis in higher education on objectivity and rationality; and
3. The lack of preparation that most educators have to address the topic of spirituality.
The notion of “objectivity and rationality” in relation to only what is physically visible is a questionable premise, for the mind cannot be touched yet its function is quite objective. The narrowing of “objectivity and rationality” to only tangible things highlights the challenges associated with engaging in dialogue related to spirituality particularly in the context of higher education (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobsen, 1987; Love & Talbot, 2000). Additionally, as Palmer (1993) noted that as western cultures are often driven by positivistic and “objective” notions of knowing (particularly in an academic context), it has proven difficult for academe and academics to engage in concepts such as spirituality.

Besides this point, the erroneous conflation of religion and spirituality (as I earlier differentiated) might play a role in the avoidance of spirituality. When the differences are not understood, both are confused, causing people to avoid both. In the findings of his mixed methods study, Yocum (2014) observed the same tendency in his pool of participants in that they continually confused the two concepts.

However, with many college freshmen declaring spirituality to be important part of their lives, higher education and its educators who are interested in the holistic development of students must become familiar with the spiritual needs of students. It is necessary because as Love and Talbot (2009) noted, “by failing to address students’ spiritual development in practice and research we are ignoring an important aspect of their development” (p. 615). However, as the third factor above suggests, most educators are not adequately prepared or encouraged to address spirituality in their own lives and thus make it a natural lifestyle, so consequently they do not understand or know how to address it in higher education.
As a result, spirituality in its essential nature has to first be understood within the context of life experiences. This is directly related to my study because it uses the process of self-examination to explore the naturalness of spirituality (as distinct from religion) through the context of my daily experiences.

**Gender Differences in Spiritual Development**

Astin (2007) conducted a study to examine gender differences in spirituality and to explore the personal and educational factors associated with changes in spirituality during college. Although the term spirituality is used, the study was focused on spirituality as it related to religious expressions. In the study, religion is seen as a “commitment to a supernatural power that is expressed through ritual and celebration both individually and within the context of a faith community” (Bryant, 2007, p. 1); while spirituality is broadly seen as a process of seeking personal authenticity and wholeness, deriving inner meaning and purpose in life, and an openness to explore a relation to a higher power (Love, 2001; Love & Talbot, 2000; Parks, 2000). While spirituality and religion were differentiated, they were positioned in the study as being interrelated in their association with internal processes and traits, and the outward manifestation of those inner qualities (Bryant, 2007).

Overall, five primary findings emerged from Bryant’s (2007) study of the gender differences in spirituality.

Women in all 13 scales were more spiritually and religiously inclined than men; discussions of a spiritual nature and charitable involvement were positively associated with both men’s and women’s spiritual development; religious identity
was more strongly linked to men’s spirituality than to women’s; the academic experience negatively associated with men’s spirituality is the hours per week spent studying and doing homework assignments, and majoring in one of the scientific fields; and finally, religious relationships has a great influence on women’s commitment to integrating spirituality into their lives than it does with men (p. 9).

Furthermore, in a religious and spirituality study, Astin (2016) noted that “women are most concentrated among SNR (spiritual-not-religious) students (57%), and those who say religious and spiritual (58%)” (p. 20). Collectively, the findings of the two studies highlight key differences in the spiritual orientation of the genders, as it is expressed through religion. Nevertheless, the findings do not explain the specific reasons for these differences or, more explicitly, the factors that might influence them.

Despite the unanswered questions, the findings are relevant to this study because I am a man on a spiritual quest to make meaning of my experiences. As a result, not only will this study be from the perspective of a man, but also the characteristics deeply embedded in my masculine nature will probably influence my spiritual meaning-making process. Therefore, despite this study being about the process of my spiritual quest whereby I aim to be as objective as possible, I know there will be many factors in my social, gender, and cultural experiences that will influence the final outcome.

**Spiritual Development Theories**

**Fowler’s stages of faith development.** Fowler’s (2006) faith development theory was an offshoot of his early work as a minister in which he taught applied theology at
Harvard Divinity School. His initial course grew out of his experiences at a retreat and his interest in practical theology that addresses and expresses the human experiences of growth and awakening to faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006). The class was supplemented by weekly gatherings with students in which they would share their reflections about the read texts, and often within the context of the moral challenges of the time. These experiences shaped the beginnings of his theories of faith development. Eventually Fowler was introduced to Kohlberg (1976) and, under the influence of coming to him as well as the circle of young investigators around him; he began to have his students conduct faith development interviews (Fowler & Dell, 2006).

The analysis of the data from their interviews and questionnaires is what eventually became known as the faith development theory (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Fowler and Dell (2006) developed a broad definition of faith, for they saw faith as something deeper than beliefs—even underpinning the formation of the said beliefs and meanings that:

1. Give coherence and direction to persons’ lives;
2. Link them in shared trusts and loyalties with others;
3. Ground their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference; and
4. Enable them to face and deal with the challenges of human life and death, relying on that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives.

To Fowler, developing faith involves all aspects of human development, including biological, emotional, religious, and cognitive development. For this reason, faith
development takes place only within the different contexts and unique experiences in which the individual is involved. Furthermore, the stages do not imply an automatic advancement based on biological age, but rather the degree to which the components of each stage have been experienced and attained by the individual. In total, Fowler (2006) identified seven stages of faith development.

**Stage 0: Primal faith (infancy).** In this pre-stage, the initial experience of faith is “prelinguistic and occurs as the child builds trust in the world based on his or her early dependency on parents and other caregivers” (Chickering et al., 2015, p. 54).

**Stage 1: Intuitive-projective faith (early childhood).** From approximately three to seven years old, this stage is marked by a hyperactive imagination and fantasy, and fluid thought patterns in which children seek to understand and make meaning of its environment; and its heavily influenced by individuals and stimuli from its environment (Fowler, 2006).

**Stage 2: Mythic-literal faith (middle childhood and beyond).** The child begins to adopt the stories, beliefs, and observances of its environment as its own (Fowler, 2006). Still lacking a broader logical framework, beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations.

**Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence and beyond).** In this stage, as a person’s experience of the world extends beyond family, faith must become more comprehensive and “provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements” (Fowler, 1981, p. 172).
Stage 4: Individuative-reflective faith (young adulthood and beyond). In this stage, the individual unfolds into an identity that is no longer the composite of one’s roles or meaning to others (Fowler, 2006). The ascendancy strength of this phase is marked by its role for critical self-reflection on identity and ideologies.

Stage 5: Conjunctive faith (early midlife and beyond). In this stage, the adult becomes a reflective thinker who makes sense out of paradoxes and maintains the tensions between multiple perspectives (Fowler & Dell, 2006). The individual develops a “second naïveté” and opens to the voices of one’s “deeper self;” and in the process makes new meaning of one’s past.

Stage 6: Universalizing faith (midlife and beyond). People in this stage are “concerned with the transformation of those they oppose as with bringing about justice and reform … and they work to liberate humanity from the ‘shackles’ of social, political, economic, and ideological expectations and constraints” (Chickering et al., 2015, p. 56).

A requirement for the advancement through the latter stages of Fowler’s faith development theory, as is noted in stage 4, is the individual’s capacity for self-reflection. This critical reflection allows individuals to examine their inner beliefs and thus arrive at their own personal understanding of its meanings.

As the personal reflections of the assigned texts shaped the beginning of the faith theory (Fowler & Dell, 2006), then this experience demonstrates the importance of personal reflection to deeper understanding. Consequently, as this study is about my spiritual quest for meaning, I demonstrate my own process of self-reflection that supported my search for a spiritual understanding of my experiences. By so doing, I
aimed to contribute to the literature that explores ways to support the spiritual
development of college students.

**Parks’ faith development for the college years.** Parks (2000) formulated a theory specific to young adults of the college population that complements Fowler’s (Fowler & Dell, 2006) theory of faith development. She saw that the quality of individual young adult lives and also the collective future culture depends primarily on fostering spirituality in college students (Parks, 2000). Broadly, faith development is defined as “a spiritual quest to make sense out of life experiences and to seek patterns, order, coherence, and relation among the disparate elements of human living” (Chickering et al., 2015, p. 58). Park’s theory (2000) includes an additional stage of faith development between adolescence and adulthood, and thus includes two separate stages within Fowler’s (Fowler & Dell, 2006) fourth stage of individuative-reflective faith. The outcome is a four-stage model of faith development outlined below.

**Stage 1: Adolescent or conventional faith.** Faith is initially focused in forms of authority outside the self (Parks, 2000). As the individual matures, the absoluteness changes into an “unqualified relativism” form of knowing that recognizes knowledge is shaped by context. The recognition of error in traditional authority prompts a more nuanced view of life.

**Stage 2: Young adult faith.** In this stage, young adults are still semi-dependent on authorities, yet they feel and have a need to define a path that shapes their own future by constructing personalized meanings of life (Parks, 2000). Here, mentoring communities are helpful as they offer a source of identity reinforcement and belonging.
**Stage 3: Tested adult faith.** In this stage, faith development “moves from a focus on external authority to an internal focus … to an interaction and healthy integration of the two” (Chickering et al., 2015, p. 60). There is openness to diverse experiences and perspectives.

**Stage 4: Mature adult faith.** In this stage, as personal faith assumes a more refined form, the individual is comfortable interacting with the broader world (Parks, 2000). Through these sometimes-paradoxical views, mature adult faith is open to the shades of doubt and uncertainty that exist within certain beliefs.

The stages above highlight the process a young adult might go through as their hitherto one-dimensional beliefs are compelled, through the force of new experiences, to expand through grappling with new and paradoxical ideas. Former beliefs are not always abandoned, but are often seen in a new light that allows the world to be experienced in a more comprehensive way. This literature relates to my study as I sought to examine the process a person might go through during their spiritual journey. Specifically, it explored not only the experiences that encourage a change in belief and understanding, but also especially the self-reflective process by which this deeper meaning is found.

**Yocum’s spiritual needs framework.** Yocum (2014) created a spiritual needs/motivation/volition framework through autoethnographically generated data and Maslow’s writings. The framework was then used and validated in a mixed-methods research study among undergraduate students. The research study highlighted that though over 70% of incoming college freshman deem spirituality and religion as an important part of their lives, and educators would support a holistic approach to education that
meets the spiritual needs of students, there is a disconnect between this fact and what is currently offered in the classroom (Yocum, 2014). Thus, the developed framework was used as a tool to help understand the different factors that influence the spirituality of students, should educators seek to begin changing the educational environment in order to make it more conducive for spiritual development. Yocum’s (2014) framework has three main categories with different subcomponents, and the categories within the three main frameworks are not meant to be hierarchical and terminable but can be continuously achieved at different times.

**Spiritual motivation.** Spiritual motivation represents extrinsic motivators of spiritual development (Yocum, 2014). These extrinsic motivators include: Personal influences (role-modeling, family, friends etc.), educational influences (teachers, administrators, professors, school constructs), and life stressors (positive and negative events that exert a pressure and prompt change).

**Spiritual needs.** Spiritual awakening is the beginning of asking important spiritual life-questions, and personally making the effort to earnestly seek the answers (Yocum, 2014). Spiritual connectedness is concerned with enhancing spiritual relationships with others in a homogeneous group. Spiritual self-actualization is the confidence that allows one to devote consistent energy toward self-improvement.

**Spiritual volition.** Involves personal expression (creative works using abilities), communal expression (personal expression within the context of a collective endeavor), and service & sacrifice (devoted towards improving environment and helping others; Yocum, 2014).
The framework provides a helpful path that shows educators a potential way to practically integrate the spiritual needs of students into education. The framework emphasizes that the spiritual pursuit must be personal, and something that people inwardly desire and actively pursue for themselves. And only after this personal commitment to cultivate spiritual values can a community of like minds help to reinforce this trajectory. For reliance on a community before a strong personal commitment leads to reliance. Another element to this framework to emphasize is the subsection of stressors under spiritual motivation.

The stressors category is similar to the concept expressed in Cartwright (2001) about conflict, adversity, and unexpected life challenges as being a pressure (positive or negative) primarily responsible for individual change. In a way, it is reminiscent of the concept of spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008) when a person is confronted with an experience that encourages them to transcend or expand an existing concept. The difference is stressors involve both positive and negative events.

My research connects with this literature because it seeks to capture the process of an awakening spiritual need within a college student, the motivations that come through experiences, as well as the spiritual volition that is expressed through the creation of original works. Through a process of self-reflection, I demonstrate how this spiritual quest for self-actualization motivated the meaning made of experiences.

**Spiritual Assessment**

Despite the call to reintegrate spirituality into dialogue, assessment instruments are lacking (Hodge, 2001). Precipitating interest in spiritual assessment is the
accumulation of findings about spirituality’s effect on different areas including mental health, coping ability, self-esteem, and the realization of personal strengths (Ellison, 1993; Maton & Salem, 1995; Pargament, 1997; Ventis, 1995). Another factor stirring the interest of spiritual assessment involves the field of social work where there is a growing agreement of the “strength perspective,” which holds that personal and environmental strengths (spirituality being one) are key to the helping process (Cowger, 1994; Hwang & Cowger, 1998). And it is in the process of inquiring how to identify this strength that the need for an assessment grows.

Even with this need, the major of spiritual frameworks and assessments are quantitative (Hodge, 2001; Lukoff, Turner, & Lu, 1993). This approach has been critiqued because it does not afford an individualized understanding of experience, so valuable information can be lost in the process of trying to fit experiences within the limited options of specific scales (Hodge, 2001). The challenge is particularly pronounced in the domain of spirituality because the latter, being a subject inner reality, is difficult to quantify in any manner (Reed, 1992). Consequently, spirituality seems to be better served by qualitative approaches that tend to be holistic, open-ended, individualistic, ideographic, and process oriented (Franklin & Jordon, 1995; Hodge, 2001).

Spiritual assessment informs my work because I looked into my experiences and carefully examining them with a framework in order to discover patterns. The questions within this framework are a form of self-assessment that allowed me to identify different areas of my inner life. Equipped with this knowledge, I can then make changes. This
process is a model that can potentially be helpful in assisting college students to spiritually assess themselves. The trends that develop from these individual assessments can be instrumental in developing a new form of spiritual assessment.

**Spiritual Anthropology**

Anthropology is the study of the development of human societies and cultures, so it presages the development of a spiritual assessment since it drives the methodology (Bullis, 1996). Furthermore, as Hodge (2001) noted, it provides the framework for gathering the information and understanding the results. In this regard, Nee (1968) provided an anthropology that conceptualizes the human spirit as a unity of communion, conscience, and intuition. He further mentioned that all three dimensions influence each other and that, concurrently, they are integrated with affect, cognition, and volition (Hodge, 2001; Nee, 1968). In their definitions, communion is about a person’s ability to relate with the Ultimate, conscience is one’s internal ethical guidance system, and intuition is associated with the insights arriving at one’s conscious level directly (Nee, 1968).

The dimensions of spiritual anthropology outlined here provide a foundation through which the questions of a spiritual assessment can be developed, and the organizing concepts that might frame a relayed experienced. This is directly related to my study because in the examination of my experiences through self-reflection, the main objective of my spiritual development is the pursuit of communion, and the meaning making process is an interpretation of experiences based on the ethical guidance system of the conscience in league with intuition.
Framework for Spiritual Assessment

Nino’s (1997) spiritual quest is an assessment that uses a compilation format. Nino offered the following 10 prompts: "1. I see myself now … 2. I think the spiritual … 3. The people I have met … 4. Thinking about my past … 5. When I feel fragmented … 6. My relation to God … 7. The world around me … 8. A meaningful life … 9. The best thing I have ever done … 10. What I would really like to do …" (p. 208). The descriptions are then supplemented by selecting a time in the event that explains the nature of the responses above (Hodge, 2001). When these assessments are compiled, they provide an insight into the spiritual life of people, and thus give clues to professionals about how to help and support someone’s spiritual journey. To this effect, Pruyser (1976) offered seven categories for pastoral diagnosis and suggested there were seven areas to explore.

"Awareness of the Holy:" What does one experience, or hold to be, sacred?
"Providence:" How does trust or hope function in the consumer’s life? "Faith:" What does one commit oneself to? "Grace or Gratefulness:" For what is the client thankful? "Repentance:" How does the consumer handle personal transgressions or guilt? "Communion:" Who does one feel connected to? "Sense of Vocation:" What sense of purpose is found in life and work? (p. 60).

According Hodge (2001), Pruyser advocated listening to client’s stories and relating them to these seven themes. In so doing, patterns could arise about the meaning the individual gives to experiences.
Fitchett (1993) offered a 7 x 7 model that assessed seven spiritual dimensions within broader framework. The goal is to produce an assessment that embraces all biopsychological-spiritual factors related to wellbeing. The factors dimensions include: "beliefs and meaning," "vocation and consequences," "experiences and emotion," "courage and growth," "ritual and practice," "community," and "authority and guidance" (Fitchett, 1993, p. 42).

Finally, Hodge (2001) introduced a new qualitative spiritual assessment instrument of nine questions that consist of two components: a spiritual history in which people relate their spiritual life story (initial narrative framework), and an interpretive framework to assist practitioners with eliciting and synthesizing the potential strengths in a person’s spiritual life (interpretative anthropological framework). The initial narrative framework (question 1-3) is about describing the religious or spiritual traditions a person grew up in, and then identifying if one has matured or changed through those experiences. Next, the interpretive anthropological framework is about undertaking a deeper assessment of the six different anthropological elements of spirituality (Nee, 1968) that include: affect, behavior, cognition, communion, conscience, and intuition.

The different spiritual assessment instruments are tools meant to help a person move from broad ideas to identifying specific elements of their experiences that can be built upon. The motive of these instruments from the literature accord with my research because, as Hodge (2001) intimated, experiences of spirituality cannot be pressed into quantitative measures. Consequently, by adopting SPN, I used a qualitative approach to tell the story of my spiritual quest. Furthermore, as all the aforementioned instruments...
involve some element of personal reflection, my own study used a framework that connects with literature and involved a process of self-reflection that sought to make spiritual meaning of experiences.

**Measure of Spiritual Intelligence**

Gardner (1983) proposed a list of eight intelligences that include linguistic, logical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. In subsequent years, other intelligences such as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and existential intelligence (Halama & Strizenec, 2004) have emerged. Some of these intelligences became forerunners of spiritual intelligence that transcend mental ability. Spiritual intelligence is “concerned with the inner life of the mind and spirit,” implies “a capacity for a deep understanding of existential questions and insight into multiple levels of consciousness,” and is the endeavor when individuals explore the meaning of questions such as “Who am I?,” “Why am I here?,” and “What really matters?” (Vaughan, 2002, p. 30).

In support of the theory of spiritual intelligence, Emmons (2000a) provided four core abilities in association with Gardner’s (1983) criteria: 1) the capacity for transcendent awareness (of a divine being or oneself); 2) the ability to enter spiritual states of consciousness; 3) the ability to sanctify everyday experiences; and 4) the ability to utilize spirituality to solve problems (Emmons, 2000a). Later, Noble (2000) augmented the abilities with the following: “the conscious recognition that physical reality is embedded within a larger, multidimensional reality” (p. 46). In addition, Amram (2007)
proposed seven themes of spiritual intelligence that included: meaning, consciousness, grace, transcendence, truth, peaceful surrender to self, and inner-directed freedom.

Additionally, King and DeCicco (2009) proposed a model and self-report measure of spiritual intelligence that included four components: critical existential thinking (capacity to critically contemplate meaning and purpose), personal meaning production (ability to construct personal meaning and purpose in all experiences), transcendent awareness (capacity to perceive transcendent dimensions of self), and conscious state expansion (ability to enter spiritual states of consciousness).

The components of spiritual intelligence and the model from the literature connect with my study because several of these qualities and components were featured in the process of my search for spiritual meaning. Moreover, many of these criteria are both universal and fundamental, and implied in my spiritual quest of making meaning is the endeavor to inwardly attain to a higher consciousness.

**Relationship of Spiritual Theories**

Figure 1 (see Appendix B) approximates the relationship between the different theories and concepts of spiritual development. Only the last three stages of Fowler’s faith development theory (1981) are included because, whereas the first three are primarily concerned with biological maturation, the last three are mainly concerned with faith development in adulthood. The individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizable faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006) all express the same qualities. However, it should be noted that as each faith stage reflects a more nuanced spirituality, how the same qualities would be experienced in each stage would be different. For example, both the
aforementioned phases have equanimity that is defined as the ability to find peace in hard times (Astin & Keen, 2006), but since conjunctive faith is marked by an ability to see paradoxes in life (Fowler & Dell, 2006), then the sense a person at this stage could make of challenges would be different. However, as Fowler and Dell (2006) noted about the stages of faith, “to identify a person’s stage or stage transition does not imply that his or her spiritual life is better, more faithful, or desirable than anyone else’s, whether in that stage or another” (p. 40). Therefore, though I am distinguishing, it is not to imply a better or less than, but simply to suggest a more nuanced expression.

**Process of Spiritual Development**

The stages of faith development (Fowler, 1981) in relation to the spiritual needs/volition/motivation framework (Yocum, 2014) is similar to their relationship in the UCLA spiritual qualities (Astin et al., 2011) in that each faith stage contains the same general qualities. However, for the same aforementioned reasons, the expression of these qualities in Yocum’s (2014) framework would be more nuanced based on the stage of faith. For example, the personal expression under the spiritual volition involve acts such as prayer, meditation, as well as artistic expression such as journaling, poetry, fine arts, etc. (Yocum, 2014). A person who has experienced the paradoxes of life and is open to all truths of other cultural and religious traditions will cultivate more nuanced spiritual expressions. Consequently, though each quality is found in each stage, as people are capable of equally expressing them, it is the nature of their expression in each stage that would be more nuanced.
According to George and Venkatapathy (2018), spiritual intelligence has three components:

- The ability to create meaning based on deep understanding of existential questions;
- The awareness of and the ability to use multiple levels of consciousness in problem solving;
- The awareness of the interconnection of all beings to each other and to the transcendent.

Based on the definition, the ability to create meaning is a characteristic that can be found in all latter stages of faith development and in the individuative faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006) because a person in this stage is making personal meaning of beliefs and emerging into their own spiritual identity. However, as the multiple levels of consciousness suggests an appreciation of paradoxes that involve the contrast of other belief traditions, then the second component of the definition as well as the first is reflective of both the conjunctive and universalizing faith stage (Fowler, 1981). Finally, the last component of the definition is similar to the universalizable stage owing to its concern for humanity as a whole (Fowler & Dell, 2006).

The arrows below the table represent the things that enable a person to transition from one stage to the next. Here we first of all find self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Gibbs, 1988; Grossman, 2009) that is a process of making meaning from experiences. Self-reflection and meditation was found to be among the most helpful tools for enhancing students’ spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Next there is spiritual motivation that
comprises influences (personal and educational) and stressors (positive and negative; Yocum, 2014). These influences and stressors are what creates an environment that inspires or directly compels a person to seek some aspect of spiritual development. Spiritual quest (Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002) is another impetus for the development into a further stage of spirituality through the constant search for meaning in experiences and answers to big questions of life.

Finally, spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008) is another source of motivation that is practically synonymous with negative stressors (Yocum, 2014), for it is the inner tension that characterizes the difficulty to make sense of some life experiences. These challenging moments compel us to ask questions and search for answers that, in the absence of the struggle, we might not seek. And in the process of this effort, we are able to make progress in our spiritual development and thus advance to a higher stage.

The above explanation of the relationship of spiritual theories and concepts gives a context for this research study by showing how I applied them to my life experiences in Chapter Four. The literature describes different spiritual theories and qualities, as well as explains what spirituality is presumed to be, but it does not directly address and demonstrate the process a student uses to create meaning in life experiences. Consequently, it gives the “what,” but does not demonstrate “how.” Therefore, this research study used this gap to demonstrate the interplay of the spiritual theories and concepts, by showing the process I used in my spiritual quest and inner struggle to make meaning of experiences through a process of self-reflection.
Summary

This chapter explored the literature related to spiritual quest, its relation to spiritual struggle, and the role of self-reflection as a tool to make meaning of experiences as it relates to the spiritual development of college students. Furthermore, faith, religion, and spirituality were defined in order to show how they differ from one another. Characteristics of spirituality were also discussed, in order to better understand the qualities that college students are seeking who have an interest in spirituality. In addition, in order to neatly position the relevance and need of spirituality, previous foundational theories were explored in the literature.

Faith development theory is the closest theory related to spirituality. In terms of this study, faith development theory provided a step toward the examination of spirituality among college students. Research shows that spirituality is important to college students (Astin, et al., 2011; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Love & Talbot, 2009) so this spiritual quest for meaning needs to be nurtured. The literature showed the important role that self-reflection plays in clarifying the meaning of experiences (Boyd & Fales, 1983), and the process of becoming a self-directed and lifelong learner (Toole & Toole, 1995). Boud et al. (2013) also emphasized the active process of questioning as keys to gaining the most value from experiences. Finally, this chapter concluded by explaining the relationship of the various spiritual theories and concepts via table, in order to show the dynamic nature of how they were applied in the subsequent chapters.

In view of the literature, this study aimed to extend the value of self-reflection to process making spiritual meaning of experiences, and also how spiritual quest can be
nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through this same process of self-reflection. By using scholarly personal narrative, I applied the concepts of the literature within the context of my own spiritual quest for meaning. I aimed to add to the body of knowledge about spirituality by demonstrating the role self-reflection plays in the process of spiritual development.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Defining Scholarly Personal Narrative

In this chapter, I examine the methodology of scholarly personal narrative (SPN), compare and contrast it with other closely related methodologies, discuss my data sources and process of analysis, examine its elements, provide a context for my research questions and how they were addressed, and thus how I structured my study using self-reflection as a tool to support the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences. In summary, I explain the process of how I used the methodology of SPN to spiritually examine my personal experiences, in order to hopefully provide a template that can be used to support college students in their spiritual exploration.

Research Design

In the Spring of my freshman year in college, I decided to make a spiritual change. The intensity of the experiences in my personal life compelled me to seek answers, to look within myself, and to find a spiritual anchor that would steady me with deeper understanding. This was the beginning of my spiritual quest. To this end, I needed a practice of self-reflection that would assist in this endeavor. Thus, that summer, I purchased a notebook I began using as a book of poetry and a tool of self-reflection, to document the thoughts and intuitions that stirred within me during experiences, in order to discover patterns and principles to aid my spiritual path.

My writings mirrored my inner change, both in form and focus. Initially I wrote poems that described the experiences and my feelings, then it focused more on my thoughts, then more on concepts that frame thinking, and with time it included the
principles governing how the concepts form and influence thoughts to dictate feelings. So as the years progressed, my writing became less externally focused, more inwardly conceptually oriented, and the forms of their expressions evolved to include proses, short stories, and essays. I filled many pages of the poetry book, then started a “poem of the week” distribution list that later developed into essays. Next I created a blog to capture my regular self-reflections, and then I reinvented my blog (Foundation for Ascent) to its current form. Seeking for a different outlet, I even joined Reddit and participated in Q & A exchanges in which I shared insights I have gained from the self-reflections of my ongoing spiritual quest for knowledge. In addition, I was part of a fledgling talk show on YouTube called “Crack the code” that lasted all but three episodes. The talk show was about sharing our insights on contemporary topics.

During the coursework section of my PhD program, I took a class called “College Teaching,” and the final project was to develop a course we would like to see offered in universities. Based on my interest, I built a course entitled “Foundations of Spirituality” that integrated spiritual pursuit and self-reflective practices. The course Foundations of Spirituality is an exploration into the foundations of establishing a spiritual identity in daily life, and promotes the recognition and application of universal principles, for the purpose of personally discovering the relationship between the soul’s condition and daily life experiences.

Against this backdrop, when I began this dissertation process, I struggled to find a spark of enthusiasm for most methodologies. Why? I needed something different, something consistent with the practice I had already been using in my spiritual quest.
And one day in class, through a colleague of mine, I was introduced to that “something” called scholarly personal narrative. I resonated strongly with this methodology because, in my writings, I had already championed the SPN approach that “what simply happens to the writer is not what truly matters. What matters is the ‘larger sense’ of meaning that the writer is able to convey both to self and to readers about what simply happens” (Nash, 2004, p. 28). This discovery excited me, as it presented a way I could use my dissertation to document the extracted meanings of my experiences through self-reflections.

Looking back, it appears I have always been engaged in some process of self-reflection and elements of SPN by working hard to make personal meaning of the raw material of my day-to-day experiences in a way that readers believe it (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Using my writings to focus on concepts and principles within an experience has enabled me to frame my writings in a universalizable way. Writing as a tool of self-reflection has greatly helped in the spiritual quest to find insights in my daily experiences to further my spiritual development, and later in this chapter I explain the approach I used to guide this narrative study.

**Positionality**

“What are you willing to explore?” For years I asked this question about my dissertation topic, and found only lukewarm answers that failed to elicit any burning enthusiasm. I was trapped in the academic doldrums because I struggled to find what I truly loved to explore in my program. But this changed during a student development theory summer class. One chapter in the text was about spirituality in higher education, and the different theories that researchers had developed about the topic. Instantly a
nexus was formed between my academic pursuits and the spiritual quest for inner development in my personal life. This moment was profound, and a fire was ignited, for it gave me a way to formally frame the contents and themes of my personal writings in an academic setting.

In my interactions, I often perceive the search for meaning and longing for a greater development of the soul within others (like myself), but it became apparent that there was a gap between this desire and the processing of daily experiences. As a result, despite the inner longing, what feels missing in academia is the opportunity for the individual to engage in the process of self-reflection to draw insights from experiences that aid spiritual development. Whenever I needed to process experiences to serve my inner development, I would create moments to engage in earnest self-reflection, and then capture these thoughts in essays that would sometimes be posted on my blog. Commitment to this vigorous process in my own life equipped me with the insight to recognize these themes in the experiences of others. Consequently, since I recognized this missing component in higher education, I knew I had to explore it in my dissertation through my own experiences.

**The Journey**

On any journey, a person has a current location. In the spiritual quest for meaning, that current location is my conceptual framework. Since SPN places the content of my experiences at the center of this dissertation (Heidelberger & Uecker, 2009), and puts the self at the front and center (Nash, 2004), stating my positionality and constructs gives the reader a better understanding of my approach. Knowing this position might help clarify
the reason for my introspective inquiries, the direction my thoughts took during the course of experiences, and the insights I drew.

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria, among the predominantly Christian Igbo people. However, since my parents were not particularly religious, I was raised in a secular environment. When I moved to the United States, I continued this approach to life, until great trials began assailing me. Staggering to find inner balance, I then decided in my freshman year of college to reach for Christianity, hoping to find the answers to questions about life that would steady me. For a time, this helped, but my hunger to understand deeper questions revealed gaps that the teachings could not fill, despite their high moral value. And then that summer, just several months into my spiritual journey, I was introduced to “In the Light of Truth”—The Grail Message by Abd-ru-shin, the main work of the Alexander Bernhardt Publishing Company. Since then, this work has been the torch along my spiritual path and the foundation stone of my life, for it fills all the gaps that were hitherto unanswered deep in my soul.

I believe in God, and thus the existence of a singular Truth unifying the spiritual and physical worlds, and that both are comprised of fixed immutable laws. This implies there is no variation of Truth, but only a variation in the understanding of Truth. I see our earth lives as a school, our experiences as teachers, and relationships as classrooms, that give us the opportunity to “learn” spiritual lessons in order to spiritually develop. Implied in this concept is the idea that we are spiritual beings in a physical experience. Through my experiences, I use self-reflection to search for universal principles that arise from this unchangeable Truth. Although there are numerous definitions of spirituality, I see it as
the activity of the human spirit, or the way the nature of the human spirit animates and interacts with its inner and outer environment.

Periodically I scroll through the archives of my writings accumulated over the years and can often vividly recall the experiences that elicited the sentences. A pattern emerges whereby the different works can be grouped into themes, subjects, and concepts. The different categories might be different ships, but the underlying water carrying these ships is the spiritual quest for inner development. Nash (2004) stated that, “SPN writers intentionally organize their essays around themes, issues, constructs, and concepts that carry larger, more universalizable meaning for readers” (p. 30). The experiences that inform all my writings are unique to me (like everyone else), thus in the process of my self-reflections I always carry the thought: “What knowledge can I draw from this experience that will benefit me and be useful to my neighbor?” This inquiry was an endeavor of universality.

The challenge many students face is that they have been educated to examine and absorb the concepts drawn from the experiences of others but are unaccustomed with the self-reflective process of examining their own. Consequently, in a sort of paradoxical irony, the student often becomes an expert in the thoughts of others but a stranger to their own. At the graduate level, SPN aims to remedy this situation by encouraging researchers to use their life experiences as the study from which to draw the data (called “perspectives” in SPN). This results in personal insights and perspectives that express how the author interprets the world (Nash & Viray, 2013). As I further position SPN, I
will start by distinguishing it from other related qualitative methodologies, in order to explain what makes it the best fit for my study.

**Autoethnography.** Autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autobiographies are an account of a person’s life written by that person, and a review of events from a moment in time. It is about epiphanies that are recalled to have a major effect on the trajectory of a person’s life, times of an existential crisis that compelled a person to face a lived experience, and events after which life does not feel the same (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Zaner, 2004). However, ethnography is when a person becomes an observer of a culture for the purpose of studying its common values and beliefs, practices, and shared experience with the intention of helping insiders and outsiders better the culture (Ellis et al., 2011; Maso, 2011). Ethno means culture, so ethnography is always about a person’s experience in relation to a broader culture. Therefore, autoethnography is about recalling meaningful experiences using them to reflect on the relationship between the self and the broader culture (Holman-Jones, 2007). In autoethnography, the epiphanies of personal experiences that stem from and relate to a broader culture are the focus.

Autoethnography is about using person experience to illustrate facets of a cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011), whereby the main focus is a cultural phenomenon and the reciprocal influence between person experience and culture. However, SPN puts the experiences of the self at the front and center, and uses a narrative style to make meaning of experiences (Nash & Viray, 2013). Thus, autoethnography is about making sense of experience within a cultural context, while SPN is about making sense of an experience
in the context of personal growth. In SPN, the themes are individualized, and the reader is able to consider the personal impacts of the said themes.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is rooted in early 20-century European philosophy and according to Starks and Brown (2007) “involves the use of thick description and close analysis of lived experienced to understand how meaning is created through embodied perception (p. 1374). It is the study of a phenomena, the appearance of things, and the goal of this research to describe a happening as it is experienced by the participants of an inquiry in order to discover common meanings (Omery, 1983). Phenomenology does not focus on the objective nature of things, but rather on the subjective nature of experience as a way to seek understanding of the lives of human beings in relation to phenomena (Donalek, 2004). In contrast, SPN is about reflecting on a series of experiences and drawing meaning that can be universalized. If phenomenology is about the lived experience, SPN is concerned with using lived experiences to draw universalizable meanings through a process of self-reflection.

**Memoir.** A memoir is a personal and selective form of writing that crafts some narrative order out of a group of events, in order to arrive at understanding that is the authors alone, and is distinct from anyone else present at the same event (Baker, 1998). A memoir focuses on the inner life and personal stories, and the personal meanings the author derives. Therefore, a big distinction between a memoir and SPN is whether the author has made the effort to identify broader themes and meanings that can be universalized and applied by others (Nash & Bradley, 2011). If memoirs are about identifying the unique elements of a personal experience, SPN is about identifying the
generalizable principles *within* the unique elements of a personal experience. Moreover, SPN writers wish to connect their ideas to both non-academic and academic writings of others in order to expand the understanding of the said idea.

**Research Questions**

Part of my desire for spirituality is the recognition of an existing inner gap in my understanding that, if attained, will bring a sense of order and meaning to experiences. Questions provide me a direction for seeking. Consequently, to spiritually seek through a process of self-reflection in order to discover answers that will order experiences is what I wish to achieve. Since questions guide the direction of a search, what questions are going to scaffold my spiritual quest throughout this research study? In my research and deliberations, two questions emerged:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?
2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?

The main idea is about spiritual quest through self-reflection, but the second research question introduces a new dynamic. The research, as suggested in my literature review, separates spirituality in higher education into two broad categories: spiritual quest and spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle is about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning of life. It is composed of five elements: questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; feeling unsettled about spiritual/religious matters; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling angry at life; and feeling disillusioned by with one’s religious upbringing.
(Bryant & Astin, 2008). Meanwhile, spiritual quest is a person’s journey toward answering questions such as “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose in life?” (Patton et al., 2016).

Spiritual struggle presupposes the existence of challenges and difficulties that compel a person to find meaning and answers, while spiritual quest is just the consistent questioning within the soul whether or not confounding challenges are present. Through the second question, I aimed to explore how spiritual struggles can operate within spiritual struggles through the process of questioning how the experiences of a particular challenge serve the broader meaning and purpose of one’s life.

**Elements of Scholarly Personal Narrative**

Nash and Bradley (2011) separated SPN into four stages that include pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search. Pre-search is the stage of brainstorming the central theme the writer wishes to address. Me-search is about searching the self to identify what has been experienced about the central theme. Re-search is the stage of adopting a structure that integrates formal literature into the story the author is telling. Finally, we-search is the process of communicating universal themes that the readers can adopt.

**Pre-Search**

According to Nash and Bradley (2011), the pre-search stage is defined as “the internal and external actions of an SPN writer before even one word is put on the page” (p. 36). In this stage, the writer brainstorms the central theme and idea they wish to address, similar to choosing a dissertation topic. This stage is about asking questions, identifying one’s passion, and identifying meaningful ideas the individual wishes to
explore and address through their personal experiences. It is the preliminary stage when the writer seeks to isolate what is truly important for them.

**Me-Search**

During my professional and academic journey, I discovered a pattern: whenever I completed an assignment and/or a work project, a burdensome feeling of emptiness would assail me. For despite the effort and “doing something,” I could not find *myself* in my work, because the assignment was usually about processing the thoughts and ideas of others. Hence, whenever this feeling stirred, I would contend with it by engaging in a creative process of self-reflection and personal writing, in order to feed the spirit and ensure I was always acquainted with *its* voice. The me-search stage of SPN reflects this endeavor because it is about finding one’s own voice. Scholarly personal narrative researchers, according to Heidelberger and Uecker (2009), study, frame, and share their personal experiences in clear, contextual, first-personal language.

No matter how impersonal we try to be, our inner lives always influence what we give in our writings. How we interpret the world, the subconscious concepts, the unexamined beliefs are influencing us whether or not we acknowledge and recognize them. Thus, the process of finding one’s voice is a process of understanding oneself. And this personal understanding is central to spirituality because, through the latter, the individual is trying to recognize the reciprocal relationship between experiences and the content of their inner life. Consequently, this cannot be successfully done without clearly recognizing one’s personal voice. In all subjects and instances, I ask: What are my personal convictions about this?; What concepts do I hold of this topic?; and Is this idea
consistent with my understanding of reality? Doing this helps me identify my voice and inwardly separate what I read from what I believe.

**Re-Search**

Scholarly personal narrative introduces a slight change to the traditional research and validation criteria, for there are times when SPN writers will need to draw from traditional research approaches, validation criteria, and methodologies. A SPN researcher will need to know when to be non-conventional and conventional, and how to skillfully and artistically weave both (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Traditional research is often about following the fixed rules and strict structure, so the personal voice is heard as little possible. But SPN intersperses the literature and traditional research within the ideas and themes around which the story is organized. In this way, the literature fits within the personal instead of the personal dissolving within the literature. The evolving and personalized structure of SPN allows the writer to follow a unique process to arrive at conclusions that are no less valid than those developed through a traditional research process. The key is balance, knowing when to use the more structured traditional approach and when to diverge and infuse artistic and creative elements.

**We-Search**

The last stage in SPN addresses the question: What are the universalizable implications for my profession? Our experiences and stories are all unique and differ drastically, so no matter how detailed and interesting our descriptions are, the reader will never be able to live it. Therefore, the reader will be unable to draw value for themselves unless there are insights they can draw and apply to their own lives. The notion of
drawing value for the enrichment of personal application is akin to the concept of universalizability (Ng & Carney, 2017).

Universalizability is making at connection between a personal experience and larger implications (Ng & Carney, 2017). With respect to we-search and universalizability, Brookfield (2013) suggested SPN includes “the continuous attempt to theorize generalizable elements of particular events, contradictions, and actions. The particular events in a narrative may be unique to the individual but they often contain universal elements” (p. 127). Therefore, despite their differences, traditional research and SPN converge because both often seek something that can transition from the personal to generalizable. Perhaps that is a reason for the stringent methods that characterizes tradition research—to ensure a replicable process that produces generalizable outcomes for the benefit of others. My experiences of using self-reflection to aid my inner quest for spiritual development are captured in the next chapter, but in the final chapter I discuss the universalizable implications and its relevance to different themes in education leadership.

**Collecting Perspectives/Data Collection**

In SPN, researchers use perspectives instead of data because the meaning ascribed to experiences is personally constructed (Krauss, 2005). Data is plural for datum, which is a Latin word meaning “something given.” Traditional research uses this word because information received is something collected from others, while SPN perspectives is the meaning we attribute to our own experiences. Over the years—being an avid writer and spiritual seeker—I have accumulated a library of writings that capture my self-
reflections. The library is my data, which consists of extensive journal entries, blog posts, and essays. As I have developed over the years, these writings have become more theoretical and conceptual. I deliberately developed in this direction because I am determined to focus primarily on the universal principles operating within my experiences. Doing this helps me to more objectively process the happening, and safeguards me from being carried too far by emotions.

Hence, instead of documenting the earthly experience, I mainly document the principles drawn from the experience (i.e., the transferable and universalizable extracts). For this study, I chose writings with complementary spiritual themes, reconstructed the experiences, and then analyzed it using a developed framework. Each writing is a library that stores and expresses experiences. So, when reading an essay, the experiences easily come to mind. Consequently, to guide my reflections, I reconstructed my experiences from select essays, and used the following process to guide my reflections:

1. Identify essay with relevant theme.
2. Reconstruct the experience (set the context).
3. Self-reflection (Feelings, inner reaction, thoughts, introspective questions).
4. Making sense: drawing insights that support spiritual development.

I aimed to take the reader through the vigorous processes I used to reflect on experiences to aid my spiritual quest for meaning and understanding. By being open and honest, yet objective and grounded, I wish to demonstrate the self-reflective process that students in higher education might model in the future, in order to address the spiritual quest for meaning and purpose.
Data Analysis Procedures

In the framework I used to analyze my experiences, the process of self-reflection has the following three stages that connects with existing reflective frameworks (Bassot, 2013; Gibbs, 1988).

- **Description of the experience**: What happened?
- **Assessing the reaction**: What feelings and thoughts were stirred?
- **Making sense**: What insights can be drawn the experience?

The above framework that connects to the work of Bassot (2013), Gibbs (1988), and Vaughan (2002) is a process I used to analyze my experiences for the purpose of this study. Owing to the objective literature connection, it addressed the concerns of subjectivity. Furthermore, as some of the assessment of SPN writing including “plausibility, honesty, coherence, and universalizability” (Nash & Bradley, 2011), the readers will be able to tell if my writing is plausible, coherent, and honest. In addition, despite the subjectivity of the conveyed experiences, the reader will be able to clearly recognize if the insights are universalizable. The concerns of subjectivity are further mitigated by the fact that the definition and use of key terms of spirituality connects with the existing literature. In conclusion, the process of my data collection and analysis, due to its connection with existing scholarship, is an objective component that will help address concerns about the more subjective aspects of the study.

Despite it being a spiritual inquiry, the framework used for my research study bears elements of a traditional scientific inquiry on one hand—Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle and Bassot’s (2013) integrated reflective cycle, and on the other, elements of
spiritual intelligence associated with spiritual inquiry (Vaughan, 2002). Table 1.2, provided previously in Chapter Two, shows the integrated side-by-side comparison of the self-reflective models and their various stages, and their relationship to one another. The comparable stages in each model are color coded and show how the framework of self-reflection I used for my experiences comprises elements of existing models in the literature.

Another component of the analysis were my reflections about the universalizable extracts. Not only did I examine it and provide an updated assessment based on my evolved outlook in the present, but I went further by using them to examine different theories related to spirituality in the literature. Doing analysis in this way allowed my findings to positively contribute to and extend the body of existing literature.

**Scholarly Personal Narrative Concerns**

One of the concerns around using SPN is whether or not it qualifies as scholarship. About this thought, Brookfield (2013) highlighted two elements that qualify SPN as scholarly: 1) “the frequent use of research and theoretical literature to illuminate the particularities of the narrative,” and 2) “the continuous attempt to theorize generalizable elements of particular events, contradictions, and actions” (p. 127). The first element moves back and forth between the individual narrative and theoretical concepts, and the second element is about making the insights universalizable. As a result, the immediate concerns about the methods and the subjectivity of it is dispelled since it operates within the elements that qualifies original scholarship.
Scholarly personal narrative interweaves a personal narrative with scholarly writing (Hyater-Adams, 2012), and its purpose is not to determine if something is true, but is about the process of investigating, presenting, and analyzing the inner life of the writer in order to draw universalizable insights (Nash and Bradley, 2011). Consequently, as the experiences I offered cannot be the subject of any traditional test owing to their subjectivity, the process I used to make meaning of the experiences had to be as “objective” as possible. I transparently explained this process of investigating (that connects to the existing body of literature) my experiences, and in so doing surface my subjectivity. Nevertheless, it should be understood that the subjective components of this research using SPN is not a weakness, but one of its main features, and thus a strength.

**Strength of Scholarly Personal Narrative**

Regarding the meaning making process of narrative identity, it is the stories people fashion to make meaning out of their lives that serve to situate them within modern adulthood and, through this process, a person shows their most important and intricate relations to society and culture (McAdams, 2006; Rosenwald, 1992). Putting it differently, McAdams (2008) stated:

The stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender social, and culture writ large. (p. 242-3)
Scholars have used narratives in their professions. Freud (1900, 1953) examined dream narratives. Adler (1927) studied narrative accounts of earliest memories. McAdams (1985) developed a life story model of identity using the narrative approach. Singer and Salovey (1993) identified self-defining memories (experiences that leave a vivid impression) as the key to narrative identity. Even Frankl (1985) used a form of personal narrative in his famous work “Man’s Search for Meaning.” The implications are that narrative is a powerful way to not only tell a story, but to also identify themes and relevant insights of the self in relation to the world. Therefore, SPN draws on the rich tradition already established by numerous scholars over the years, and is not just a narrative, but scholarship from a more personal angle (Nash, 2004). By now adding the personal element to traditional scholarship, SPN gives a context to existing theories, by showing how they can be applied and discovered within the context of our daily lives.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research projects, Shenton (2004) identified four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Of the four, SPN does meet three—credibility, transferability, and dependability. SPN’s concept of plausibility, honesty, and coherence is analogous to Shenton’s (2004) criteria of credibility that deals with the congruency between findings and reality. I demonstrated this by being transparent and honest in the descriptions of experiences, and coherently structured them so their meanings complemented each other. Scholarly personal narrative’s notion of universalizability is analogous to Shenton’s (2004) criteria of transferability; I achieved this by sharing details of experiences, the introspective
questions that aided my spiritual quest, and the perspectives I developed. These perspectives are universalizable extracts that will be transferable to the reader.

Finally, Shenton’s (2004) criteria of dependability is about reliability of a process, and I achieved this by using the reflective framework I previously explained to scaffold my meaning-making process. Throughout this process, I opened a window into my inner thoughts and intuitions, in order to show how I draw meaning from personal experiences to support my spiritual quest for inner development. Furthermore, the special role that writing played as a tool for self-reflection to help deepen my insights was evident.

Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are often guided by a view traditionally called “objective,” while narrative methodologies (e.g., phenomenological, SPN) are shaped by a subjective view called “constructivist” (Seale, 1999). The general principles of scientific research that serve as guidelines include (Shavelson & Towne, 2003):

- Pose significant questions that can be investigated empirically,
- Link research to relevant theory,
- Use methods that permit direct investigation of the questions,
- Provide a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning,
- Attempt to yield findings that replicate and generalize across studies, and
- Disclose research data and methods to enable and encourage professional scrutiny and critique.

These guidelines are a way to encourage “objectivity” and healthy scrutiny in traditional scientific research.
However, SPN has a different worldview that naturally changes the standard measurement, yet without upsetting the basic principles of research. In the process of my study, I posed significant questions, linked my content to existing theories in the literature, and then used the framework (that connects with literature) to directly investigate the questions. Furthermore, I provided a logical and structured chain of reasoning (with universalizable extracts), and in the process I described the experiences and writings from which the insights were derived. Therefore, even though I used a nonconventional methodology, my approach still accorded with the general principles of scientific research.

SPN is different than traditional research because it focuses on the themes that emerge from the lived experiences of the researcher (Louis et al., 2016). As a result, when the different aims of traditional scientific research and SPN are compared, their different purposes require a slightly different standard of assessment. Although SPN researchers do use traditional research to affirm many elements of their writings, it is the case that readers of SPN will have to adopt a different way of examining the content. The differences between SPN and traditional research inform the guidelines through which SPN should be evaluated. Consequently, the following research study using SPN to document the process of my spiritual quest is grounded in existing scientific approaches and literature, yet it diverges and charts a new course by examining personal experiences through a structured process in order to draw universalizable extracts. I hope this process added value to academe and expanded the previous understanding of spirituality.
Summary

This study featured the personal experiences of my spiritual quest for meaning during my journey through higher education. It highlighted how I created a space for personal spiritual inquiry on my blog, and thus used writing as a form of self-reflection to capture the perspectives garnered from this process of making sense of experiences to support my inner development. In the process, I explored the ways that spiritual struggles served and nurtured the broader spiritual quest for inner development. Using SPN, I painted a picture of my earnest attempt to address the spiritual void that many college students (even faculty and staff) might feel during the course of their own journeys. Through introspective questions, honest grappling with experiences, and the subsequent reflections on my developing perspectives over the years, I hope the readers will be inspired to explore and develop this essential part of themselves (i.e., who they really are). When enough people are encouraged to undertake this work of spiritual exploration, perhaps a larger interest would develop to support the realization of the course I once developed: “Foundations of Spirituality.”
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Insights from Life Experiences

“Life is a school, experiences are teachers, and relationships are classrooms.”
- Ikenna Ezealah

When I began my spiritual journey, I started noticing changes in my life, both big and small. My seeking seemed to increase along with opportunities and challenges. These experiences compelled me to apply the spiritual principles to my life, and in so doing to help transform me. Hence, the real growth and struggle started once I began this spiritual path. Some experiences I had along this journey are explained below in the style of eight interrelated quadrants—four themes and two spiritual categories. Doing this organized my experiences and showed the different ways the opportunities and challenges have manifested in my life. The following Table 1.4 shows the four themes of my life experiences I examined within the two categories of spiritual quest and spiritual struggle.

Table 1.4

Themes of Life Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spiritual Quest</th>
<th>Spiritual Struggle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>SQR</td>
<td>SSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>SQL</td>
<td>SSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>SQC</td>
<td>SSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>SQE</td>
<td>SSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Situating My Reflection

This section provides additional context to how I used “spiritual quest” and “spiritual struggle.” Given the different definitions of these terms and the personal nature of this study, it is important to clarify my use of language here.
Spiritual Quest

Spiritual quest is a “deep longing” to realize innate spiritual qualities and purpose through daily experiences. It is connected to broad questions about the nature of being. In spiritual quest, there is a hunger for more that the mundane can no longer satisfy, so this meant what I required from the different sections of my life (themes) changed. And with this inner change—aided by careful self-reflections—the dynamics of my experiences were correspondingly altered. There are a variety of examples of spiritual quest from which I have drawn for this study. Some of these examples include: the spiritual quest in relationships, leadership, career, and education. But more broadly, there is the spiritual quest for recognition of universal principles that govern human experiences. This is simply a summary of my own quests to provide an overview of the findings below. The specifics are explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Spiritual Struggle

Spiritual struggle is like the soreness experienced after intense exercise. For the soul, this exercise occurs in the form of challenging experiences it faces in life. Through this struggle, a person is compelled to exercise spiritual muscles that were dormant or weak, in order to grow stronger. When this happens within the context of experiences, there can be soreness and pain, since previously quiescent sections of the soul are now exerted. This soreness is a time of rejuvenation and rebuilding. Just as eating the right foods and getting adequate rest are necessary to rebuild and strengthen muscles, so are absorbing the right insights and careful reflection essential to strengthen the soul through the experience.
Some of my experiences of spiritual struggle, which I examined for the purpose of this study are fully examined later in this chapter in the aforementioned themes. They illustrate different types of spiritual soreness I faced throughout my growth process. Additionally, I share how I navigated the inner struggle in each of these experiences.

In the sections below, I share some experiences I had within the eight quadrants that highlight different aspects of my spiritual journey. To do this, I used a process of self-reflection to draw insights. Through the insights that emerged from this section, followed by further discussions and analysis in the subsequent chapter, I sought to add knowledge that will help to better understand the spiritual needs of students.

**Spiritual Quest: Relationships**

One day in the spring of 2019, I was driving in my car, just running errands, when my phone rang. I paused to looked at the number and to my surprise it was my relative, Osita. I was curious about the reason for the call because Osita typically did not call me. I picked up and we exchanged the usual greetings, but something was different this time. Usually, people make initial inquiries into your life just to “check the box” of social politeness before arriving at the point, but with Osita the sincerity was palpable.

At this point I thought, “There must be a point to this call.” And within a few seconds of this thought, he started discussing the reason. He expressed that he recently started feeling restless and was questioning the meaning of his life. The mundane things no longer seemed to satisfy him. In addition, he felt squeezed by circumstances, which prompted him to make meaning of it. The word he used that stuck to my mind was “directionless.” Feeling these sensations, he decided to return home and visit Nigeria,
hoping the environment would help him find equilibrium. He admitted it helped a little, but it failed to fill the void of his seeking.

As he expressed himself, I tried to understand what my role was. Then he mentioned how he has observed me from a distance and seen the growth in my spiritual journey. Initially he thought the zeal might wear off, but when it continued and even gained strength over the years, it affected him. But at this moment he was facing life pressures and felt the inner urge for meaning, so he just wanted to exchange reinforcing ideas and thoughts gained along the way of our individual journeys. He mentioned he had started questioning a lot of ideas he accepted about life in the past and was trying to develop his own understanding.

Osita explained he was sharing these thoughts because he felt very few people would understand these deeper thoughts or take them seriously. “I know you will you understand,” he stated. It was humbling and refreshing, and from this point the conversation was even more vibrant. We conversed like two travelers on a spiritual journey, and the minutes flew by. But then we had to end the conversation and attend to other responsibilities. However, this conversation marked the beginning of something new, of a complete change in our relationship.

**Reaction**

The conversation between Osita and I stirred many thoughts. Since it was too much to organize, I took a walk that evening around the neighborhood, before writing a few reflections in my journal. On March 11, 2019, I notated the following:
These words “I know you will understand” made such an impression on me.
 Beyond words, it was the intonation that carried a deeper meaning, that spoke to
 the inner comfort we feel with someone, which allows us to feel free with our
 thoughts. The deeper connection. But what causes this comfort? It must be similar
 aspirations. What then does this imply about how relationships are formed and
 sustained?

In this entry, I am trying to make sense of the spiritual implications of the statement my
 relative made. As the reflections suggest, it is more than just the words he used, but the
 meaning they expressed about a deeper sense of comfort. I am using this as a gateway to
 enter deeper contemplation about the decisive effect our inner aspirations have in the
 formation of relationships. Adding to this thought, I included further below in the same
 entry:

Does this mean that, years ago before this restlessness, our distant relationship
 was simply because we did not have the same spiritual goal? It must be because
 the connection I feel with him is different now that his goal is different.

This entry is going further into the thought started by the previous one about the
 connecting element of relationships. The thoughts transcended just our conversation, and
 made me examine the different relationships in my life to ascertain what the connecting
 element was.

**Insights**

A few days after the first journal entry, I wrote an essay on March 14, 2019,
 which reads in part:
Our lives are like a necklace beaded with our attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors. These leave an imprint on our environment and form our perceived character. The spiritual quest to further ourselves determine the type and color of beads we wear, which becomes the defining element in our lives. This necklace is a magnet that calls into our environment and attracts the people we define as friends.

In this entry I am drawing a universal theme from my experience with Osita that serves as guidance for my own life. The implications of this idea imply that, since it is mutual aspirations that define relationships, then a change in our goal will change who we relate to, and thus who we resonate with. Although we might have different types of relationships in our lives, there is a difference between unions formed based on a spiritual quest, and those formed based on transient outward association with an institution or group. In the case of my relative, the basis of our new relationship was solely the spiritual quest to make meaning of life.

As I reflected further on the broader implications, in the same essay quoted above, I expressed the following insight I drew from the experience:

Continue pursuing this spiritual path without looking left or right, but with a gaze focused upward on the luminous goal. Everything that exists produces an effect—seen and unseen, and this effect causes a change in the environment, no matter how small. Every grain of salt changes the composition of the entire ocean. So, we should never think our lives are not making a difference, just because people do not put it in words. People observe us, just like we observe them; and most of these observations are not expressed in words, but are carried as impressions in
the soul. Only the smallest part of these impressions can be put in words, just like
only the smallest part of an iceberg is seen on the surface. As we can never know
the full effect our lives have on others, we should not bother with it, for it would
only be a distraction. We should keep our gaze fixed heavenward, and be content
in the knowledge that every grain of change in our inner lives will change the
composition of the entire ocean of our relationships, no matter how small.
Besides, we should seek spirituality not with the hope of being recognized, but to
live a virtuous life of meaning that brings inner peace and spreads blessing.
The above excerpt is underscoring the necessity of remaining focused on a high spiritual
goal, not how others see us. In this connection, it uses the example of the grain of salt to
explain that our lives will always produce an effect, but that only the smallest part of this
effect (iceberg analogy) can be seen and expressed in words. The larger part of it,
existing beneath the surface in the soul, can over time produce the effect of a germinating
mustard seed. This was evident in the case of Osita who mentioned that, unbeknownst to
me, he had been observing me since the beginning of my spiritual journey. And how,
through the commitment and growth I demonstrated over time, he had drawn inspiration.
The latter part of the excerpt completes the picture and supplements the beginning
by explaining that our inner motive for spirituality determines the strength we draw. And
this strength is what enables us to be steadfast and resilient. Furthermore, as our motives
influence aspirations, they will also determine the type of friendships we form along this
spiritual path. Therefore, a gaze fixed heavenward motivated by a simple life of meaning
that brings peace, and wishes to help where help is needed, will enable us to connect with
other people who are similarly striving with the same intention. Through this natural process, some relationships will loosen and dissolve, while others will be formed and strengthened. Collectively, the excerpt addresses the power of a living example, the inevitable effect we have, and a simple motive for spirituality.

Through the spiritual quest, aided by a process of self-reflection, I was able to make meaning from the experience to support my spiritual development. Next, I share an experience of how this spiritual quest emerged within a struggle.

**Spiritual Struggle: Relationships**

In the Spring of 2005, my friend called me. I assumed it was just a regular check in, so we moved through the perfunctory greetings. Once achieved, he stated in a somber tone, “Do you know Kachi died?” My mind spun in circles before responding, “what do you mean Kachi died?” I was stunned at the news, and was trying to get a context that would help me make sense of this shocking development. He proceeded to explain that Kachi had been struggling for several years with an illness. The treatments appeared to be going well, but all of a sudden it took a turn for the worse, and he succumbed.

Kachi was a high school friend who was witty and funny by nature. His gregarious personality was also observant, as he could understand the tendencies of others and transform these observations into pointed jokes that would make you laugh until your stomach ached. For several years during high school we lived in nearby neighborhoods. I met his acquaintance during sophomore year through mutual friends, and soon our little group was building many memories together. We had many adventures and laughs. When placed in different environments, we were able to
experience different elements of his personality that left an indelible imprint on me. But after high school our contact was intermittent.

My mood became solemn and melancholic, my thoughts traveled far. By the end of the conversation I started imagining the pain his family must be experiencing. For me, I was filled with a burning desire to make sense of this for myself.

**Reaction**

When the emotions were still fresh, On March 22, 2005, I wrote the following journal entry about the recent news of my high school friends passing:

He is gone. Where is Kachi now and what could he be experiencing? He was such a comedic person who lit up the room. Who would have thought his life would end so soon? People normally say, “You have your whole life ahead of you!” But these are just assumptions because no one really knows. We think so much of the future and sometimes hinge our happiness on it, without any guarantees it will come and to the detriment of the present. The moment is really all we have. It is a gift, that is why it is called the present.

The above entry expressed my grappling with the death of my friend. The emotions also call into question the hackneyed phrases people use without any authoritative basis. Towards the end, the sullenness changes by trying to recognize the blessing of the present moment.

A few hours after this initial entry, other thoughts were notated in the same journal entry:
Why are we on earth? What is the purpose of life? Here one moment, gone the next. We accumulate all these material things, but in the end what happens to it? It stays behind. And us? We enter the beyond. What do we actually own if, in the end, we do not keep it?

This entry is a turn from the immediate emotions to the broader implications. It shows how a challenge is nurturing the spiritual quest by focusing on more existential themes that can be applied to change one’s life in the present moment. The question of what we own is not about asceticism, but about a potential change in perspective about how things are valued.

**Insights.**

I found myself focusing a lot on the qualities he expressed and the impression it made on me. I tried entering these impressions to recall the feeling they elicited, and I lived in this state for a while. What I drew from this is that it is the qualities we express that leave an impression on our environment, not really what we say. And it is how we make people feel deep within that they remember. Therefore, it encouraged me to examine my life and focus on refining my qualities, so the effect is spiritually uplifting.

Another insight from this experience was about valuing the present as a gift. Days after this experience, I wrote a blog post on March 25, 2005 that included the following:

When we put too much effort thinking about the future, our energy is diverted from the moment. As a result, we are not immersed enough to fully experience it, so we feel a void of discontent … a missing happiness. Unable to experience happiness in the present, we hope the future will bring it to us, but it hardly ever
does because happiness is not something a future time gives but what we make in the moment. And from the pressure of this expectation of the future, the seed of anxiety often develops. Children are so happy in part because their whole soul fills the moment, and they have little expectations of the future, so when anything comes they experience it like a miracle. Besides, what is the future? Yesterday, today was the future. So, the future is just a different present moment.

The above passage is not just reinforcing the concept of the present moment as a gift, but its inference goes further. It denotes that the spiritual values we are searching for are accessible in the moment. But to access it requires a full heart with undivided attention. And what often causes this fracturing of attention in my experience are three things:

1. Busy thoughts that hasten to the future and keep us rushing from one moment to the next, without fully being present.

2. The constant influx of external stimuli we allow to take root in our mind and occupy our attention, so we struggle to operate from our spiritual center in order to be fully present.

3. The endless wishes we foster that bring discontent since it always wants what it does not have. It mainly sees in the present everything it believes it lacks, so it is never satisfied, grateful or happy, but must take refuge in imagining ideal circumstances.

All three of the above contribute to the division of our attention that prevents us from fully being present to draw values in the moment. From the duo of fractured attention in the moment and constant occupation about something in the future, anxiousness develops
that never allows inner peace. For anxiousness is associated with the fear of potentially experiencing something unpleasant that a person feels he cannot control or change. On one hand, anxiousness is a future-based state that chooses to focus on presumed things it believes it cannot control or change, while on the other hand, it ignores everything in the present moment it does have the power to control and change. And what we can control through our volition are the type of thoughts we form and attune to, i.e. how we see and experience the moment. To enhance this thought, the following question emerged: if the present moment is a gift, what are we hoping to find by opening it?

I followed the preceding post with the following insight:

In life, the core of what we are seeking that can only be found in the moment, is happiness. Spiritual values are the path to it. If happiness is music, spiritual values are the instruments we play to experience it. Only when the instruments are mastered with a clarified understanding and pure efforts, can the right music be produced.

The above excerpt extends the concept of the moment by addressing the fundamental goal behind our action and wishes. It also positions spiritual values as an instrument that must be expressed in order to experience this happiness.

Finally, another insight that was reinforced through this experience was about the purpose of life in relation to material things. This was also expressed in the same blog post on March 25, 2005:

What is the purpose of life in relation to material things? If at the moment of passing we leave everything behind, then our purpose on earth must be about
developing the only thing that survives death: the human spirit. So, the soul in relation to material things is like a seed in relation to the soil: it is a tool through which it develops itself and its abilities. Just like the seed descends into the soil to draw nutrients that will help it germinate and become a full fruit bearing tree, is the same way as human spirits we enter the material world to gain experiences that will help us develop into a mature spiritual being. And just like the path of the seed as it matures lies above the surface of the ground, so does the path of the human spirit as it matures take it above the material world. Death then, is only a portal through which we can journey there.

The excerpt enters a different insight of the purpose of life on earth. The reasoning is based on the idea that, if nothing is kept after death, then it is what survives death that forms the basis of life itself. In a similar way, we can also say the purpose of attending college is to help us gain experiences and develop abilities that will help us thrive outside of college, once we graduate. The student in relation to college is the human spirit in relation to the earth, it is a training ground. Hence, the term, “school of life”. The passing of my friend reinforced this insight because he left everything material behind, and the only thing he could have taken is his own soul. So, the only legacy he will keep from his earth life is the condition of his soul. Therefore, the value of all material things is the extent to which we use it to mature our inner spiritual condition. In the process, we are also obliged to develop and improve our material environment as recompense for the opportunity we were granted to develop through it. And in this there is a balance between
giving and receiving. Through the spiritual quest of searching within the experience, many layers of insights emerged to complement the initial one.

After reflecting on all these collected insights, in the summer of 2005 I decided to synthesize them into a lyrical prose that I wrote and entitled “Eulogy: A tribute to the departed.” The following is an excerpt of the first paragraph:

We are stars, shooting stars from a distant galaxy that move through the space of time to brighten our light by shining it. To pour its abundance on the cosmic firmament of the human experience. In the process, our rays link up with other stars who become our friends and family, but only for a moment. Together, the united effulgence of many stars enhances our individual radiance, so we become a chorus that sparkles a melody of light. This is the sweet exchange of friendship, the endearing warmth of human communion, and the lasting legacy of earthly experiences. We drink from the light of others, as others, in turn, imbibe our light. Yet our unique hue adds a new color to this cosmic sky of human experiences.

We impact each other, and become teachers to each other in this wonderful school of life.

The above excerpt captures some of the different insights that were reinforced through this experience. The picture of the journey of the star captures the purpose of our journey through life, and death in this prose is not an end, but only a gateway to continue the spiritual journey of development toward the luminous goal. The experience provided an impetus to my spiritual quest to make meaning of it, but it was not until I reflected on the
different facets that I was able to absorb the many layers of insights to support my spiritual development.

In the experience above I was able examine how the spiritual struggle was nurtured within an existing challenge to make meaning of the experience through a process of self-reflection. Next, I share an experience of spiritual quest within the context of leadership.

**Spiritual Quest: Leadership**

In January 2006, I was new on the Bowling Green State University campus, having recently transferred from Southeast Missouri State University. After searching for employment, I found a job in the school cafeteria. Soon after I started, I met the acquaintance of Halima, who was a supervisor. Our West African commonality and jovial personalities facilitated a friendship. Speaking freely, we conversed about different topics. During one of these conversations, she informed me about APA (African People’s Association), an on-campus organization that connected people of African descent. Being the current president, she shared the mission and programs of the organization, and invited me to the meetings. Based on what she expressed and what I observed, I shared different ideas that could improve the organization.

One day, she recommended I pursue a leadership position in APA. I had not expressed such ambitions, so it came as a surprise. When I asked why, she cited numerous aspects of our conversation and some qualities she had observed while working with me. Being a graduating senior, she was looking for people to help move the organization forward, and it was in the process of this search that we met. I reflected on
it, decided to run for treasurer, and eventually won it. The following academic year, I served as treasurer in the cabinet of Kofi (the president) and tried to discharge my duties to the best of my ability.

The more energy I put in the organization, the more my affection grew for it. Kofi and I made a great team, and our partnership reaped programming success on all fronts. During my tenure, I successfully raised more funds than the organization had done in many years, and established new department relationships. Towards the end of Kofi’s presidency, I thought I was done with leadership office, but he suggested I should run for a higher office because he believed I possessed the leadership qualities that would take the organization forward. Like before, I never fostered such ambitions, but I eventually ran for the position. In the spring of 2007, I became the president-elect of APA.

Reaction

When Halima encouraged me to pursue the position of treasurer, I remember walking home on a cool night with different thoughts in my mind. When I returned home, I made the following notes on my journal, dated February 17, 2006:

Am I ready to assume such a big responsibility? I just arrived in BG [Bowling Green] and I am trying to find my way. I only know a few people. How can I serve and lead people I hardly even know? I am trying to focus on my spiritual development, so I was hoping to find a group with a similar interest. Does this really serve my spiritual goals? It is possible everything will come together in this APA opportunity. What do I have to lose? Yes, I’ll go for it!
In this entry, there is an attempt to make sense of the apparent contradictions of the situation, but within the context of my broader spiritual quest. The responsibility appeared daunting since I was new on the Bowling Green campus. The idea of representing people you are hardly familiar with was intimidating. But this challenge was subsumed within the larger concern for my spiritual development. In the end, I adopted a broad outlook that hoped all my concerns that seemed separated would come together through this opportunity.

During my tenure as treasurer, I felt tremendous satisfaction. After the APA Annual Dinner (our flagship program), I wrote the following in a journal entry on April 21, 2007:

I feel purpose and meaning in this organization. The satisfaction of working toward a goal, planning a program, and watching it materialize. Then as it unfolds, to step back and see other people happy from work you did … is simply amazing. It gives me so much joy and a spiritual fullness. I feel like doing it all over again.

The feeling described above is palpable, and shows the spiritual sense of purpose. During this time, seeing someone’s joy in response to our program caused my own joy to multiply. It also was during this time that elections approached for the next year and Kofi asked me to run for president. I was comfortable as a sidekick, but now I was asked to step forward into the limelight. The thought, “Am I able to do this?” crossed my mind. But when I reflected further, the thought became, “Am I willing to do this?” And the answer was a resounding “yes.”
Insights

In both cases, I was not pursuing a leadership position, yet doors seemed to open. In my relationship with others, I was just genuine and open, and tried to contribute to any effort that would move the organization forward. In the case of Halima, I offered some suggestions about improvements to the meetings and programs, and in the case of Kofi I was by his side all year and enjoyed supporting his endeavors and creating value for others to experience. All this was aided by my spiritual quest because, in this formative time of my life, I was trying to infuse every aspect of my life with spiritual values. Therefore, it was in the continuous process of applying these principles that Halima and Kofi encouraged me to pursue the leadership positions, as it would give me opportunity to serve and help more people.

An insight from this was captured in a blog post on June 20, 2007, the summer before the year I was president.

The qualities we express can attract or repel opportunities. How genuine we are in our convictions, how diligent we are in our work, leaves an imprint in our relationships. Based on this, people can open or close doors of opportunities, the same way we can do to others. In this way, we can become our own best friend or worst enemy. As the saying goes “as you call it into the woods, so it echoes.” Our inner qualities are the voice that calls into the woods of our relationships.

In the excerpt above I am expressing a helpful standard for self-evaluation, based on the experience. After the spiritual change in my life, I was filled with the urge to express it in my environment through a noble initiative, which is why I was initially seeking
spiritually themed organizations. But since I carried this aspiration for progress and service, it had an effect in my environment and relationships. Therefore, through my interactions with Halima and Kofi, they perceived this. In suggesting I pursue leadership, they were giving me an opportunity to assume the leadership role that fit the qualities I was expressing.

I had initial concerns about how my involvement in APA would serve my spiritual goals. At the time, these two things were separate, but as the year progressed my involvement and spiritual goals came together well. The insight here is that my spiritual goals can unite with almost any work, and it is sometimes just a matter of giving an activity a higher goal. The wish to find a group with a spiritual interest was based on the desire to not only connect with people of similar interest, but also to participate in an organization that imparted spiritual values to the community through its initiatives. In the end what I was looking for in a “spiritual organization,” I found in APA.

Another insight was about the sense of purpose and meaning I expressed in the second excerpt. My joy kept multiplying by observing people experience happiness through something I did, which made me realize that happiness in leadership is an effect, not a cause. I captured this thought in a journal entry on April 22, 2007, that supplemented the previous days entry:

The more we exhale, the more room we create to inhale. Happiness in leadership is this way: the more we give and serve, the more room we create in the soul to receive happiness. So, the more of this happiness we want, the more we have to give.
The entry alluded to the happiness I experienced as a consequence of the energy I was giving in my role. In this happiness, there was a “spiritual fullness” that satisfied my spiritual quest through the opportunity to bring value to others. Finally, as the path toward our spiritual goals can be presented by anyone as an opportunity, then another insight is the importance of being open to explore new ideas that might come to us through anyone in the present moment.

In this section I explained how, within the context of leadership, the spiritual quest was used to make sense of an experience through a process of self-reflection. Next, I discuss a spiritual struggle within the context of leadership.

**Spiritual Struggle: Leadership**

In the fall of 2007, I started the semester as the new president of APA (African People’s Association). That summer, I spent days pondering over new ideas that could infuse something fresh into the organization. On August 5, 2007, I made the following notes in my journal:

Each meeting we can have a section called “country representation.” Organization member can prepare a presentation about their home country to educate others about its people and culture. They can do anything creative, the sky is the limit! I think this will make the meetings more interesting.

As the passage suggested, I was trying to envision new possibilities that could elevate the organization. As the start of the semester approached, I had high hopes for the executive team and big visions for the organization. After planning the year with my executive team, we prepared for the first meeting. Everything was elaborately arranged, and the
goal was to inspire confidence and excitement about the upcoming year. To ensure participation, I made attendance by all executive members mandatory. I felt it necessary to emphasize attendance because not all executives were always present during the planning meetings.

But on the day of the meeting, Namazi, the head of event planning, was missing. I was willing to accept an absence under only two conditions: 1) An emergency; or 2) advance notice for something urgent. I checked my phone and email, and did not see a message. I asked other executives if they conversed with Namazi, but no one had information. Over the course of the meeting, I became frustrated when it became apparent she would not show up.

After the meeting, I called her. I had determined if something extreme had not occurred, it was not an emergency. When she picked up, my interrogative tone dispelled all benefit of the doubt. I questioned her about her absence and lack of notification. But she instantly became defensive, she bristled, and was even smug about it, giving a reason that appeared weak to me. From here, everything went downhill, and our conversation became fireworks. A dial tone abruptly ended conversation. It was a disaster. The new semester beginning like this was terrible, and I was not sure how to salvage this situation and our professional relationship. I struggled to make sense of this, as I knew the disharmony was in conflict with my spiritual values. “Where did I go wrong? How should I correct this?” I asked myself throughout the struggle.
Reaction

I felt frustrated and slighted by her absence. This feeling meant I associated myself so closely with the organization that any apparent disregard for the organization became a disregard for me personally. After the row, as things were still quite heated, I made the following journal entry on August 28, 2007:

How could she miss the meeting and not have the respect to follow protocol? How does this make me look? If we are supposed to present a united front, is the organization a priority for her? Participation is voluntary, but by accepting the position, are we not all obliged to fulfill our duties? This is only the first meeting and already an absence! Is this going to be the trend all year?

My thoughts were prosecutorial, my feelings were conflicted and uneasy, and I lacked peace. Something was out of alignment that needed to be addressed. I felt a guilt weighing on me no matter how hard I tried to justify my reaction. My reaction was too controlling. I wished to control how events developed, and expected executives who wished to serve to follow along. In so doing, my thoughts and feelings became rigid, and the expectations and pressure I placed on everyone increased. The entry also showed a frustration of not getting one’s way, and reveals a focus too centered on “self.” What I wanted, what I wished to achieved, how I looked are all grounded in the “I.” There was a desire to be understood, instead of first seeking to understand.

There was also a sense of “how dare she speak to me this way?” When these words are used, there are typically elements of ego that is wounded by not being regarded with the same importance it accords itself. When this happens, the desire to assert our
sense of self-importance causes us to flare up and retaliate. Consequently, no matter how I tried to justify myself, deep down there was the lingering feeling of error that made me uncomfortable. As the emotions settled, my reason slowly took the wheel, which is reflected in the comments I later made in the same entry:

This does not feel good. Blaming is only making me upset, but is it solving the problem? I read countless times to always first seek the cause of any disharmony within you. But I don’t seem to be doing that, so I need to spiritually get back on track. It seemed easy theoretically, yet in this moment it is a struggle. But I have to search deep within.

The excerpt asks a pivotal question that helps me see the futility of the endpoint of my current accusatory thoughts. When this happens, realization of its detriment causes the spiritual quest within the struggle to stir and find a new direction to make meaning of the whole experience. In this process, it shows the emergence of reason as emotions subside. In this connection, it became evident that unsettled emotions are like storm clouds that reduce the visibility of spiritual insight, for only as I inwardly settled and sought genuine meaning did I find spiritually enriching insights.

**Insights**

After removing all benefit-of-the-doubt I gave myself, some things became apparent. One was about the difference between stated beliefs and *lived* beliefs. On August 29, 2007, I wrote a reflective essay about beliefs. An excerpt follows:

Stated and lived beliefs are different. Stated beliefs are ideas we accept with the mind and heart, but have yet to fully integrate into our lives as consistent deeds
(i.e., *lived* beliefs). To believe in something is not to know it. Only when we consistently apply something until it becomes second nature, and thus a part of us … only then do we know it. We know it because we live it.

I had accepted the qualities a leader should exemplify, as well the spiritual values I wished to express. But my original reaction showed me I had not mastered the *lived* dimension of the concept, and that to truly embody the leadership ideals, I had to consistently practice it. It would not take overnight to master but, like a muscle, it would become strong over time. Therefore, leadership is something we can possess the qualities for but, just like the human soul, it has to be developed through life experiences.

Another insight was about how our point of focus influences our reaction. I cared about the organization deeply, but I was too focused on “self” and what I wanted. Through this, I unwittingly put myself at the center of everything, and this close association became the cause of taking her absence *personally*. Once I did, every response she gave about the organization struck me, so I became both defensive and accusatory. Therefore, a lesson in this is not placing myself and my desires at the center of what should be a collaborative relationship, otherwise it will spawn disagreements and potential conflicts through one-sided expectations.

The other insight was about the benefit of the doubt. The lack of it meant I had a biased mind with fixed ideas before the facts were even presented. Through this attitude, I was already blaming her, and blame can trigger defensiveness, which is what happened. On August 29, 2007, I made the following journey entry:
Since what is alive within us is what we seek to awaken in others, how can I be surprised if my accusatory tone was met with defensiveness when I confronted her? If I wanted to change the dynamics of our relationship, then I needed to change my attitude toward her, which would awakened something different.

The spiritual quest is fully emerging from this struggle, through the effort to identify universal principles. The entry intimates that whatever I wished to experience from others, I had to first give. Therefore, if I wanted to ensure future harmony, I needed to clear my mind of biases and be gracious enough to extend people the benefit-of-the-doubt I wish for myself. Lastly, I learned that leadership is not about ruling or decreeing, but serving with grace. When we serve, we win confidence and voluntary compliance. In my case, the enthusiasm to transform APA was genuine, but I put too much pressure on myself and other executive members. The consequence was impatience and inflexibility.

To have high ideals is good, but I learned the importance of flexibility and conscientiousness in creating a harmonious environment.

A couple days after the argument, I picked up the phone and called Namazi. Since I had done a lot of reflection, I knew where I erred. I wanted healing and harmony in our relationship, and I wanted us to better understand each other. To achieve this, I first of all removed all defenses in the form of justifications, and I went through the entire timeline of events, and explained what I intended to achieve, but then admitted the different ways I went wrong along the way. I was sincere, and this had a disarming effect, for the genuineness I expressed awakened its counterpart in her. She opened up and also conceded ways she contributed to the debacle. We discussed our temperaments, the
organization, the school year, and much else. I made sure I emphasized her value to the organization, and how our activity requires many hands to accomplish. We ended the conversation on a high note, and the reconciliation was complete. Harmony was reinstated, and a feeling of inner calm suffused me.

On August 30, 2007, after reflecting more on the conversation, I made the following notes in my journal:

Sincerity and vulnerability are the paths to healing. Sincerity is the light that thaws the ice of hard feelings, and vulnerability is the courage to openly face the wounds it reveals. Sincerity allows us to see, and vulnerability allows us to accept. Once a wrong is seen and accepted, only then can the balm of contrition be applied to bring healing.

In this entry I addressed the overarching theme of my conversation with Namazi. Initially, there was the row that caused us to individually struggle, and this wounded our relationship. But amid this struggle, there was an emerging spiritual quest that sought to draw insights for the purpose of healing. Through sincerity and vulnerability, our individual contributions to the discord were seen and accepted. Once this happened, contrition entered, and this then facilitated healing and reconciliation.

Although the start to the year was challenging, the initial discord between Namazi and I was transformed into an opportunity for personal recognition. Through self-reflection, I was able to gain insights that gave me a better understanding of the situation, and thus recognized where I was wrong. Applying these insights, I then called Namazi
and, through an honest conversation, facilitated healing and reconciliation. We ended up having a successful year a productive relationship.

I have explained how I was able to take an instance of a spiritual struggle and, through nurturing the spiritual quest, draw insights from the experience through a process of self-reflection. But I also demonstrated how I operationalized these insights into an approach to solve an existing relationship problem within the context of leadership. In the next section I explore how spiritual quest was expressed in a career.

**Spiritual Quest: Career**

Soon after I began working at a financial services company in 2014, I enrolled at a local agency to become a volunteer at assisted living facilities. There were several reasons for this: 1) I felt a spiritual urge to always help and be a support to different members of the community, especially the most vulnerable; 2) I needed something to complement the technical nature of my work; and 3) I was not completely satisfied with my career direction, so I opened up to different experiences. At the time, I worked as a financial services team member, and there were some aspects of the job I appreciated.

One day, I was given an assignment by the agency to visit a certain assisted living facility. I arrived at the facility on a gloomy upstate New York day (which seemed like every day) and, after going through the check-in process, I walked toward the room where the elderly woman was. When I opened the door, my eyes met a somber scene. Carla was lying on her side, facing the wall. Before calling her attention, I glanced around at the personal items decorating the room. There were antiquated fineries, pictures from the past that bespoke her former place in the social aristocracy, aged expensive
perfumes, gaudy clothes, and much else. After I gently announced my presence, she leaned up and turned around, casting a dispassionate glance. If looks were seasons, her gaze was winter.

Carla was wearing an ostentatious garment unnecessary for someone isolated. I overlooked this and tried to break the ice, but she refused to reciprocate. I tried different methods I had learned, but she refused to reciprocate. I commented on her precious items, but she refused to reciprocate. I gave a quick background about myself, but she refused to reciprocate. Nothing I tried work, and the only thing she offered was coldness. But I also perceived something else. Beyond her mood, there was a sense of dissatisfaction and discontentment with her current lot. There was a hidden sorrow in her eyes and in her demeanor. She seemed to associate herself so closely with the extravagant items. Her sense of pride and identity was wrapped up in the antiquated fineries. I fell into silence and just sat there, offering to assist in any way I could. But the same iciness greeted me. After some time and further fruitless attempts, I took my leave.

**Reaction**

When I had the first opportunity, I captured the following impressions in my journal on July 4, 2012:

When I first entered the room, I felt a sense of loss. The loss of meaning and purpose. The loss of a sense of self in the present that needed to reach into past just to find itself. This loss so pervaded everything that even the fineries and pictures of the “glories days” felt like a loss in disguise. This lady has lost something! There was no sense of hope or life, just an aimless drifting, like a
rudderless boat on the ocean with no destination. So, though we were in the same room, I felt like I was the only one there.

It was an odd sensation I had never really experienced, which made me solemn and melancholic, and robbed of vitality. The atmosphere in the room was dull, so my thoughts seemed to move slowly. In the post, I was trying to capture the first impressions and slowly enter into the emotions of the space, in order for a deeper insight to emerge.

Even though I felt like I was the only one there (since she was occupied with the past), paradoxically I also felt invisible because the entire room was transported to a time before I was born. So, we existed in different periods while in the same room. As I wrote further, I made other observations I expressed:

Looking at the items, the thought “the transience of earthly life” stirred.

Observing the contrast between the pleasures of the past and the misery of her present moment, it was an eerie thought at how quickly things can change and how, no matter how much we wish to cling to it, even the dearest things will always pass. In this material world, only two things are constant: spiritual values and change. One expresses the other, for change is just the different forms unchangeable spiritual principles manifests itself. So paradoxically, even within change there is permanence through spiritual principles.

In this excerpt, there is a shift from the personal aspects of the experience to its larger implications for my spiritual quest. In connection with the above statement, there was also the notion of everyone being just travelers in this journey of life. Many things might have been delightful during its time and seemed like it would last forever. But only a few
short years later, everything changed. And in this change there were new opportunities to experience further spiritual values.

Based on her attachment to the past, I could feel the constant replay of memories in the ethereal environment of the room, and with each replay its luster diminished, which compounded the original sense of loss. My inner feeling was one of remorse, compassion, and a burning desire to help. Yet, I could not reach her, for though she was there, I asked myself, “Where is she?” But slowly I made the shift and started drawing lessons that I could apply to my life.

**Insights**

What I experienced and the background information I was privy to before the visit gave me much food for thought. She was a proud former social elite who now lived almost exclusively in past glories, and could not quite live in the present. Her sense of meaning and identity was wrapped in past memories and, despite the outward change of fate, the inner attitude remained the same. So, there was discontent and dissatisfaction.

Therefore, an insight was about how attachments and obsessions with the past can form if we are unable to find meaning in the present.

When I searched my heart, I realized though she was living in the past, at the time I tended to live too much in the future, since I was then at a stage where I was displeased with my career trajectory. In a way, she was a mirror into my own soul.

Based on the experience, I captured some insights in a blog post I wrote on July 6, 2012:
If we live too much in the past or future, it diminishes the meaning of the present and every day will seem to lack value, despite the opportunities it offers. So, we will struggle to connect with people and will live as an outsider in our own lives. In this way, a sense of meaning and joy will be lost to us, since they are jewels found in the present. The experiences of the present are food that nourishes the spirit with higher values, the same way only physical food eaten today can nourish the needs of the body. Past experiences are important for drawing lessons to apply to the present, but of themselves cannot mature the spirit. To truly grow, we have to apply the lessons of the past to the present moment. Hence, experiences in the present that help us spiritually grow are our “daily bread”.

The entry revealed the spiritual quest to find principles applicable to my life. The insight drawn from this experience encouraged me to not live in the past or think too much of the future. This meant, despite the general displeasure with my career, I had to live in the moment and draw the spiritual values it offers. The outlook motivated me to take action and set some career and educational changes in motion because, since the future arises from the present, I had to take bold action in the present to create my future.

The last insight I drew from this concerned the elderly in general. Through many experiences during numerous visits with the elderly, I realized that when some think of the future, the inevitability of death before them might awaken fear that causes them to reach for a time when death seemed “far off” (past). This underscores this importance of always having a sense of meaning and purpose in the present, but also to prepare for the “next life,” so when it slowly approaches, there is confidence instead of fear. During
these latter years of life, there is the natural urge to review earthly experiences and draw beneficial insights. But there is a fine line between drawing insights and being attached to the different forms of experiences. I noticed many crossed this line; Carla was one. At work, as this was coincidentally around the time my financial team was developing content for related topics about the elderly, I used the opportunity to capture some of these insights in an essay and video production entitled “Finding Hope” that was posted on July 25, 2012:

What gives us the will to live is hope and a sense of purpose. Hope is the confidence of something more and better in the future. The absence of hope leads to attachments in the present of what we think we will lose. In the parable of the good shepherd, he was only willing to leave his 99 sheep because he was hopeful and convinced he would find the lost one. Hope gave him the confidence to release attachments to the other 99 just to pursue the promise of one. So strong is the promise of hope within the human spirit that it is like a life elixir, because it gives us a higher goal to work toward that gives meaning to the present.

Our lives are like this. When we are young, we feel our whole lives are ahead of us. There is room to create the future we desire, and a perceived sense of time to achieve our goals. This sense of possibilities is the hope of something more. But as we enter old age, our future on earth shrinks, and with that our sense of what is possible to achieve given the decreasing years. As the portal of death approaches, our hope must now see beyond life on earth in order to survive. When we are unwilling or unable to do this, the future becomes an enigmatic realm hidden
behind impenetrable curtains. Our sense of hope then increasingly shrinks and gives rise to a subconscious fear. Hope in relation to the future is fire in relation to oxygen. Without confidence beyond this life (future), our hope (fire) is deprived of the oxygen it needs to survive. At this point, as many can no longer live with a sense of hope for the future, they start living in the past and become attached to the details there. But within this attachment is still the hidden fear born of a lack confidence of something more and better in the future, beyond the portals of death.

Though we must be grounded in the present, the future gives us hope of what to build toward in the present, and without this we feel directionless. Therefore, to find a real sense of hope in this stage requires embracing the immortal nature of the human spirit and cultivating a knowledge of what lies beyond this life that it is likely to face. When we do this, the curtain will slowly lift, the fear will shrink, confidence will awaken, and the hope we once felt will return in view of the possibilities we see opening before us.

In this excerpt there is an apparent paradox between living in the present and the importance of hope that lies in the future. But this is resolved in the passage when it mentioned that if hope gives us a goal to build toward in the present, then what we see as the future will actually help us focus more on the present.

The other dimension to this passage is the idea that any real goal will motivate us to do something useful in the present, so the genuineness of a goal is directly related to how much action it requires from us in the present. In connection with death, the central
idea of having hope beyond this life will still inspire us to develop and further refine in the present moment what will survive death: the human spirit. In this process, we recognize that only in giving can we receive where lasting values are concerned. So, it is in helping others experience what we wish for ourselves that we attain the spiritual values we seek. Therefore, spiritual values is not only the purpose of life, but it is what gives a sense of hope about the afterlife.

The implication of all this is that spiritual quest is a continuous journey of discovery, and a permanent inner orientation in which we use self-reflection to draw insights from experiences in order to support our spiritual growth. I have demonstrated how I have achieved this in the context of spiritual quest within a career, next I examine a spiritual struggle within a career.

**Spiritual Struggle: Career**

Immediately following college graduation in 2008, I began employment at a rental car company. During this time, I struggled to find a sense of purpose and meaning in the sales-driven environment. One day, I helped a customer who had reserved one vehicle class, but was disappointed we did not have it when they showed up. My manager instructed me to offer a van (much bigger than they desired), and as an alternative vehicle for an upcharge. The presentation was designed to influence them into accepting the upcharge. I was uncomfortable, and then I suddenly remembered another vehicle I knew was available, but for some reason was not included as an option. I had cleaned this vehicle earlier, so I knew it was available. I offered it to the customer, they accepted, and I pulled it to the front for final checkouts.
While in the process of making notes, my manager Ross stormed out. Frustrated, he hollered how he did not want the customer to rent this car, so I should only offer the cars listed on the books. When I inquired further, he irritably hinted he was saving it for the following day. But the company practice was to first satisfy the needs of customers today! The next day was Friday and at that time, the company was running a weekend special on rates. I recalled Ross sometimes used the company’s weekend specials and set aside vehicles for himself based on his preferences. Reading between the lines, I realized he was trying to keep the vehicle for himself. To achieve this, he withdrew it from the books, and left the customer without an option that met their reservation.

As he placed his personal desires above the needs of the customer, I was vexed and felt it was wrong. As I was now overdue to call the client, Ross urged me to return and retract the vehicle option. Bothered by this, I decided to call him out. I revealed I knew what he was doing, and I chided him for it. Responding, Ross exploded like a volcano and cursed at me. I almost reacted physically, as I was livid by his response. Yet, I quickly got a hold of myself, as I did not want to make a scene. I decided to leave and go face the customer before my emotions got the best of me. When I changed vehicle options, the customer was disappointed and frustrated. After the transaction, I was silent for the rest of the day and refused to make eye contact with Ross, because I knew it might result in escalated conflict. My composure was on life support.

**Reaction**

When I returned home that evening, my thoughts were initially in shambles. It took time for me to organize them coherently. I left the apartment and went down into the
atrium of our apartment complex. As thoughts played in my head, I wrote the following in my journal on July 12, 2010:

How could he be so insensitive and rude? Just because you are an assistant manager does not mean you should disrespect others. There is a right and wrong way to talk to people. Besides, there is no moral justification for his shady actions. But I have work with him closely, so I need to find a way to guard myself from being disturbed every day.

In the above communication, there is the outburst of emotions arising from frustration, and the recognition of the rudeness and disrespect that was at play. But then it slowly shifts focus to the issue of moral justification, and highlights the emerging spiritual quest to make sense of the struggle. After these initial notes, I reflected further.

Later that day, I supplemented the earlier note with the following:

Why did I allow myself to get so upset? If it is easy for someone to upset me, then who is in control? I cannot afford to be so quick to anger if I supposed to be spiritually grounded. But besides this, how do I navigate this situation moving forward? The unethical things are disturbing, but I need to be more strategic.

The thoughts above were the beginning of a critical questioning that is seeking to make personal spiritual meaning from the struggle of the situation. The blame was changing to a self-reproach, as the realization slowly dawned about the relationship between how I reacted and how I was feeling. Furthermore, this thought grounds itself in the broader spiritual quest of my life, and then shifts to contemplate ways to navigate the situation by being more strategic even in the face of unethical behavior.
Insights

From these thoughts, I realized it is possible to be right in principle but wrong in approach. The situation was murky, but was openly chiding the manager the best approach? I was too forward with my approach, and did not try to find a more strategic and tactful course of action. I could have taken a mental note of the situation and recused myself. I could have made observations, reported my findings to human resources, and requested anonymity. But I did not do this, so it ended disastrously.

When you are dealing with different people who hold different moral standards, it is not everything you disagree with that you openly contend. I was still too zealous in my approach and needed to temper my response. When I reflected further, I made the following journal entry on July 13, 2010:

There is a silver lining in this challenging work culture. I am unhappy here, but perhaps the inner struggles I am exposed to are spiritually helpful to me. Through the different dynamics, I am forced to see how these principles can be applied to resolve challenging situations. After all, gold needs fire to be refined. All this helps me realize: often, what we struggle with is what we need, because it reveals what we lack. I lack mastery of certain principles, and this environment helps me recognize what needs to be inwardly refined.

In this notation there was an evident spiritual quest to find the meaning within the spiritual struggle of not only the experience, but the broader purpose of the work environment. There was also the insight of the difference between theory and practice,
and it is experiences (including trials) that offer the opportunity to apply and master these principles.

On a more fundamental level, my initial reaction when anger hissed up from within me revealed qualities within that needed purification. When I entered deeper into this concept, I eventually wrote a blog post several days later on July 19, 2010, and mentioned the following:

The human soul is magnetic, as is the thoughts we have. When interacting with other people, similar thoughts and qualities will be attracted. So, when someone says something to us and we are affected, their inner life will pull similar qualities from within us. Therefore, our reaction to others reveal what qualities and thoughts are within us.

The above excerpt from the blog post transcended mundane observations of feelings, but attempted to understand how spiritual principles operate in human dynamics. It highlighted the quest to use the struggle of the experience to gain spiritual insight. In considering further, it inferred that my initial reaction above in response to my manager meant there were similar qualities that connected us. Therefore, through him, I was offered a window into my soul to recognize characteristics that needed refinement. In this way, the spiritual struggle aided the inner quest to make meaning of my experience.

Ross and I never fully addressed the argument. Although, weeks later, he mentioned in passing that it probably accounted for the distance he had recently noticed in our association. I affirmed his assessment and would have liked to enter it more fully but, in a strange way, it ended there. Ross was not reflective, so there was no room to
enter deeper thoughts. However, to prevent this from permanently souring my attitude toward him, I implemented the following spiritual practice to overcome myself:

1. Instead of viewing him as the person who started the friction that triggered my suffering, I inwardly viewed him as a spiritual teacher through whom I was helped to recognize some of my faults. Therefore, he was a gift for my spiritual development.

2. If I felt sour feelings stirring within when I saw him, I would superimpose my own faults on his. As sour feelings are like a virus that needs to feed on a host to survive, instead of them feeding on the inner criticisms of his faults, they would instead be confronted with the image of my own. Through this mirror, and in the realization I am no better since we are equally flawed, then these feelings—like viruses—would be disarmed through the medicine of self-recognition. Through this, I experienced the sense of the words attributed to Jesus: “he who is without sin should cast the first stone.” My sour feelings were stones so, in the recognition of my own guilt, I had to drop them.

Through the following practices, my attitude was able to over time thaw towards him, which allowed something gentler and warmer to slowly take its place. However, the above practice does not mean I became blind to his faults and let them run riot to the detriment of everyone. On the contrary, my sharpened outlook and heighten recognition caused him to become more circumspect, since he knew there were knowing eyes that could not only read between inner and outer lines, but was even bold enough to purse recourse if the situation called for it. It just meant I was willing to be as inwardly critical
about my faults as I was about those he outwardly displayed. Hence, ensuring not only a balance between the improvement of the inner and outer world, but also reinforcing the awareness of their reciprocal relationship. This was an example of not only transforming a spiritual struggle into insights, but it also demonstrated the process of operationalizing the insights into a practice to address an existing problem. In this way, not only was the spiritual quest nurtured within the spiritual struggle to make meaning through self-reflection, but in the end, in view of all the treasures I received, I actually felt grateful for the whole experience, including Ross!

In this section I showed how, through a process of self-reflection, a spiritual quest for insights was able to emerge within a struggle in the context of a career. Next, I discuss an experience of spiritual quest within the context of education.

**Spiritual Quest: Education**

When my wife and I relocated to Greenville, SC, I was in a career transition. I left business and finance, and turned toward youth development because I had experience in several leadership organizations. But as I struggled to find inroads into many youth leadership organizations, I decided to pursue the education route, so I enrolled in Clemson’s youth development leadership (YDL) certificate program. During orientation, I met other members of my cohort. But since YDL was a program under PRTM (Parks, Recreation, & Tourism Management), I met many PhD students and professors. Then I met Tina, who suggested I pursue the PhD. She shared her journey with me, and to further encourage me she recommended I speak to Dr. Haminez.
The conversation with Dr. Haminez was a significant turning point in my educational journey. Dr. Haminez was not focused on herself, but on using her access to serve others who lacked a voice at the table of influence. When I inquired why she pursued a PhD, she responded simply, “to help communities in need.” The mantra of her vocation was “help,” and this made an impression on me. By end of our conversation, I decided to pursue a PhD. When the orientation was over, I began the application process and eventually received admission into PRTM. I was set to begin in the fall of 2016.

By the summer of 2016, just weeks before the program started, I was not inwardly settled about my academic direction. During conversation with Tina one day, I expressed my reservations and she suggested the College of Education might be a better fit. I was inspired, and immediately following the conversation I went to the graduate school and conversed with the assistant dean. I returned and was able to meet with the chair of the Education and Organization Leadership Development program. After being informed about the entire process and the next steps, I did everything I was asked. Soon enough, I earned admission into the higher education doctoral program. Only then did my journey begin.

Reaction

When Tina first suggested I pursue a PhD, I was not enthusiastic. The thought of at least four more years of school was unappealing, as I had almost foreclosed the thought of a PhD program after my two previous rejections by the University of Rochester. But this suggestion stirred someone deep in the soul. After the inspirational conversation with Dr. Haminez, I wrote the following blog post on August 21, 2015:
When you hear the call of opportunity, but you are weary to answer because it means traversing the desert of unpredictable challenges, then a small skirmish occurs between destiny and convenience. Convenience offers an immediate refuge, but it is temporal and leaves the aftertaste of regret. While destiny offers an activity that leaves an enduring legacy, and brings the feeling of happiness and satisfaction. In the choice between the two, I know what I must do. I see the way ahead.

The above excerpt captures my spiritual quest to make meaning of the experience that was developing. It positioned the YDL program as the convenience that will offer a sense of immediate gratification, but might leave an aftertaste of regret through the realization of a missed opportunity. In the post, the PhD program was seen as a destiny that held the promise of what I had been spiritually searching for professionally.

When I was approaching the start of the PRTM program, the feeling of the inner disquietude told me something was not right. I knew I needed to make a change, so when I spoke with Tina and she suggested the College of Education, it felt right. Moving with this enthusiasm, I sent a correspondence to the graduate coordinator of PRTM that announced my intention to change programs. The correspondence expressed the determination to pursue what I believed to be the best spiritual fit, and be willing to leave behind what does not. If the earlier blog post believed PRTM was the path, then the correspondence showed some growth that I was willing to make slight adjustments along the way just to find what was perceived to be my destiny.
When I initiated the process to transfer to the College of Education, as things started falling in place, I was filled with admiration and awe as I observed the palpable help of the invisible guidance that operated in my life. The more effort I made, the quicker things aligned to produce the miraculous outcome of the doctoral program admissions. Therefore, a sense of certainty and confidence filled me during this time.

Insights

What I envisioned for my future and what came to pass has always been different. Since visions about the future are often based on current interests and assumptions of outward developments, then our hopes of the future are usually wrong because it fails to account for changes that might occur within us and our environment. The road to the future might come to us in different ways, so to reach it we must open ourselves to different opportunities in the present. In my case, opportunities met me when I was focused on YDL, so to seize the opportunity for a PhD, I had to change my thoughts and open myself to new possibilities.

Another realization was the notion of timing. Earlier, I applied to two doctoral programs and, after being rejected, I all but foreclosed the thought. Reflecting on the notion of timing, I wrote a journal entry on August 25, 2016 that included the following excerpt:

Timing is everything. For a seed to achieve its highest potential, it needs to be planted in the right climate and at the right time. The aspirations we carry are similar. They need the right environment and the right time to align in order to
germinate. I feel the alignment and see the guidance along the way. I am one step closer to my goal!

The entry was making meaning of an aspect of the experience by discussing the notion of timing in relation to one’s spiritual journey. The idea that when the time is right for something, so long as we work diligently, things will naturally come together. In this concept is the belief that when we give our best effort for something and it does not work out, then it is not for us or the time is not right. Finally, there is a sensing of being led by a higher guidance in the spiritual quest of pursuing one’s destiny.

The insight that complements timing is the idea that help can come from anywhere. Life is like an organism to which everyone is some way connected. Therefore, when we need to take a step forward and find a solution, it is possible that the idea will suddenly strike us, but sometimes it can come from anywhere or through any of our neighbors. I was searching for a way to reach my future, and hints came in the form of suggestions for this program through a several people. I did not know the YDL certificate program would eventually lead to a PhD program, but the help I needed to realize this came through friendly suggestions.

The last insight I drew from the experience was the guiding effect that our deepest aspirations have on the development of outward circumstances. I captured this in an essay on October 15, 2016:

When we carry a strong aspiration, it will seem like nothing is happening. Weeks or even years might pass. Suddenly, it emerges before you in an experience, completely different from what you expected. The invisible world suddenly
comes to life, and the connections become more apparent. You then realize our
firm volition is like a spiritual seed that only needs time to bear physical fruit.

There is a spiritual quest to draw connections through the web of the different
experiences across time. In this post, there was a notion of holding firmly to a volition,
the operation of invisible guidance, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the
inner and outer world. Years ago, I pursued a doctoral program, and it did not fully
germinate then. Yet, I was driven by the inherent pursuit of knowledge within the arena
of leadership. Even when the initial path closed, the spiritual quest led me to continue
pursuing knowledge and leadership through the youth development leadership certificate
program. Eventually, when the time was right, it materialized in the opportunity for a
PhD in PRTM, before finally changing to the Higher Education Leadership doctoral
program.

I have shown how my spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences was
nurtured throughout the educational process. Next, I discuss the instance of spiritual
struggle within the context of education.

**Spiritual Struggle: Education**

In the summer of 2003, before I started college, I decided to study accounting. I
had two reasons: 1) I was raised in a family of business people; and 2) it seemed a safe
path in the field of business to secure employment. However, when I took my first
accounting class, I quickly realized it was not a good fit. So, I switched to business
marketing because it was the only other option within business that seemed to fit. Even
when presented with an opportunity to change, I was committed to business.
After graduation, I enrolled in the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) to earn my MBA. This coincided with the time I was working at the rental car company, and I pursued the degree because I wanted to achieve the highest education within business. I viewed business as a necessity, but not really a “calling.” As I was wedded to business, my sense of success meant thriving in it. But when I experienced about six years in business only to realize I needed a change, an inner struggle ensued. As education is linked with career, to change one you often have to change the other. When I went soul searching, there were three things that resonated: spirituality, knowledge, and the human mind. Therefore, I initially decided to apply for a PhD in psychology.

I devoted a lot of energy to the application, but I was rejected. Dazed and stunned, I gathered myself and took a different path of applying to a PhD in philosophy. If psychology was about making sense of the human mind, philosophy was about the pursuit of knowledge. I waited for the result, but again I was rejected. This last rejection was shattering. On one hand, I was dissatisfied with business and saw no future there, but on the other hand, the way forward seemed to be closed. I felt stuck, like I was in a career and education purgatory I could not make sense of, and the struggle was fierce.

**Reaction**

On October 5, 2010, I sent a personal communication to a faculty at the University of Rochester during the application process. An excerpt of this communication reads:

> My interest is human motivation … and I would like to venture into organizational psychology and teaching. In organizational psychology, I would
like to develop ways to help individuals and organizations work better and improve group dynamics. Also, I would also like to … publish writings that deals with the effect our concepts have on our motivations, behaviors, and relationships with others…

In the above communication there was a spiritual quest within the broader context of the educational-career struggle that was unfolding in my life. There was the desire to find an educational context that would allow me to pursue knowledge and constantly make meaning of life for myself.

However, when this door closed, I started pursuing the philosophy PhD program. When my application was in review, I sent a correspondence to a faculty in the program on February 8, 2011. An excerpt of this communication reads:

- It is my genuine desire to understand the purpose of my existence, and how this purpose is linked with … the universe … I wish to make the search for meaning the objective of my life. Through personal contributions, I hope to extend the current boundaries of knowledge.

In the correspondence, there was a palpable spiritual quest for meaning, as well as a struggle to find one’s purpose amid the current challenges in life. There was not only the quest for meaning, but also the pursuit of purpose to extend the current boundaries of knowledge. With such fervor, it is understandable why the denial to this program was so devastating. “Why is this happening to me?” replayed in the mind. But beneath the question was the grievance, “This should not be happening to me!”
When I started pursuing other employment options to change careers, the result was the same. I felt adrift and rudderless during this period, and I was just going through the motions without a feeling of meaning or purpose. About my difficulties in changing careers, I wrote a blog post on June 15, 2011 that included the following:

When you are searching to change careers, companies normally require experience in the job for which you are applying. So, the lack of experience causes them to reject you. The employment riddle is like the chicken and the egg. The job is the chicken, and the egg is the experience. They require experience (egg) before you can be hired (chicken), yet it is through this chicken (job) that you can have the experience (egg) … which comes first?

As humor is the strongest antidote to darkness, this post revealed an attempt to make light of the difficulties I was experiencing during this trying period, by calling into question the job-experience dynamic. The spiritual quest for meaning was expressed in the sarcasm, and the spiritual struggle surfaced in the subtle chastisement. But the central message of this statement was the question: What is the meaning of all this?

**Insights**

What did this experience teach me? First, disappointment is linked with expectations, and expectations are framed by concepts. The concept of business as a standard was what I accepted, so this caused me to struggle when it became increasingly apparent it was not the right fit. When I needed a change, my connection to this idea made me feel like I was not successful, instead of embracing the discontent as a signpost
pointing me toward a better fit. Therefore, my initial struggle was precipitated by a sense of attachment to a fixed idea.

The other insight I drew from this was based on the following question: “how do I know what is best for me?” In this question, there is a realization of the relationship between assumptions and aspirations. My disappointment at the rejection assumed that these programs to which I aspired would be a good educational fit. Yet it is possible I would eventually feel the same way about the program like I did other things. Throughout the course of my life I noticed many instances when I believed something would be better in the moment and was disappointed it did not happen, only to look back years later and be thankful it did not. In the moment our desires cannot forecast different realities and even future environmental, social, personal, and spiritual changes might alter the experience and potentially make what we desire detrimental for us. In view of this, the question “how do I know what is best for me?” is a valid one. The insight here is to cultivate enough humility to realize that rejections, disappointments, and what is misinterpreted as misfortunes are invariably unrecognized gifts, and that we do not know for sure that a path we are pursuing will turn out the way we think it will. Therefore, through lived experiences I cannot say I know what is best for me.

When my struggles are assessed closely, there is a difficulty initially accepting changes. There is a sense that events would be ideal if they develop the way I envision it, but this is not true of life. Living in a network of relationships means we will constantly face different circumstances, so it is not what happens to us that is important, but how we react, learn from it, and adapt to it. Adaptation is a characteristic of nature and is
therefore a quality of a maturing human being. In November 20, 2011, I wrote a blog post with the following excerpt:

A plant that finds itself in the desert might evolve into cactus. Similarly, when different experiences come, instead of complaining, we should ask, “what qualities is this meant to help me develop?” This question puts me in the driving seat of life and focuses my energy on the changes I need to make in order to evolve into a more spiritually wholesome person.

In this post there was a shift to the necessity of adaptation in the face of challenges. It showed a way to continue the spiritual quest to find meaning through any struggles, and positioned adaptation as the tool the spirit uses to achieve this purpose.

A couple years after this episode, I wrote an essay on May 7, 2013, expressing insights I had drawn from aspects of my education and career journey:

Our life is a journey of constant evolution. Just like the climate changes as it passes through different seasons, so are different qualities and interests of the soul expressed in different stages of our lives. What appeals to us at one time might lose appeal in the next moment, just like a tree might enthusiastically hold its leaves in summer only to drop them in autumn. Experiences might seem like a misfortune, but could just be preparing us for the emergence of something new; just like the cold winter might seem like a misfortune for the tree, but is only a quiet period of gathering forces for a breakthrough and rebirth in spring. Hence, in the journey of our lives, each season brings something new and prepares us for the next one.
The excerpt showed the spiritual quest to make meaning of the struggles of the previous years. It highlighted that the interests in business, philosophy, and psychology might have belonged to a season of my life that is no longer fit for a future one. Yet, the analogy of seasons in the way they complement each other is to demonstrate that these experiences were not wasted, but were necessary in one stage of my life to prepare me for the next. Viewed this way, past experiences help position the future in a new light of unlimited possibilities. I have shown how, through inner struggles during my educational journey, the spiritual quest for meaning was able to emerge and draw insights from the experience through a process of self-reflection.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I explored the concept of spiritual quest and struggle by sharing some experiences that showed how they manifested in my life during the course of my spiritual journey. To do this, I organized my experiences into four themes: Relationship, Leadership, Career, and Education. These four themes became subdivided into eight quadrants when spiritual quest and spiritual struggle were explored in each theme. The exploration of each theme happened through a process of self-reflection in which I sought to make meaning of experiences in a way that would support my spiritual development. The structure of the self-reflection assumed the form of three simple questions: 1) Describe the experience: what happened?; 2) Assess the reaction: what thoughts and feelings were stirred?; and 3) Making sense: what insights can be drawn? Through this self-reflection, experiences were processed in a way that enabled me to draw insights for the spiritual enhancement of my daily life.
In the following chapter I further examine these experiences, try to synthesis the insights, make conclusions, offer recommendations, and discuss their collective implications for the present spiritual needs of college students, and well as offer suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

So far, my dissertation has chronicled my spiritual journey that started with the recognition of the unaddressed spiritual needs of college students, and thus the void that exists on campuses in the search for meaning. To address a need, it must be clearly understood beyond theory and numbers, but rather through insight derived from personal experience. Therefore, I began with two fundamental questions that I used my own life experiences to answer. My research questions were:

1. How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?

2. How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?

I covered related concepts in the literature, explained the scholarly personal narrative method, and then detailed my experiences in the form of various themes. With this chapter, I aimed to directly answer each research question with the main themes from my findings, connect the findings with literature, share universalizable themes, make broader connections, discuss implications for practice, and make recommendations for future research. After revisiting the concept of self-reflection and spirituality to frame the discussion, I will move into the discussion of the research questions.
Discussion of Research Questions

Self-reflection as a tool

At the heart of this study is spirituality and self-reflection. Spirituality is defined by Mayhew (2004) as the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world, while self-reflection is the process of clarifying the meaning of experiences in relation to the self (Boyd & Fales, 1983). Taken together, a spiritual reflection is the process by which the human spirit attempts to clarify the meaning of experiences in order to make sense of self in connection to the external world.

Throughout this study, I have used self-reflection as an important instrument in the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences. Self-reflection is an instrument that gives people the freedom, power, and responsibility to continually adjust the direction of their lives (Toole & Toole, 1995); and it is a focused, explicit, goal-directed activity that must be pursued with intent (Boud, 1985).

The process of self-reflection I used had three stages: describe the experience, assess the reaction, and make sense of the experience. This model was an integration of other self-reflection models in the literature (Bassot, 2013, Gibbs, 1988; Grossman, 2009). Each stage and its counterpart in other models are depicted in the Table 1.2 in Chapter Two. To achieve the desired analysis for each experience, I used a combination of journal entries, essays, blog posts, and personal communications I have gathered over the years. In so doing, I was able to not only recreate the experience, but also enter the thoughts and feelings that were engendered, and then finally to draw insights to be used for the future that would enhance my spirituality.
Hearth is the ideal setting for positive change and is defined as a place of equilibrium that offers a balance of stability and motion (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Parks, 2000). Throughout this research, I used hearth spaces to help attain equilibrium, which allowed me to self-reflect and draw meaning from experiences. Self-reflection allowed me to look into the different layers of an experience and make meaning in a structured way. Hence, the reflective process gave me a scaffold that allowed the spiritual quest to emerge within the struggle, and thereby make meaning of the experience.

**Relationships**

**RQ1: How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to making meaning of experiences?** As shown in Table 2.1 (see Appendix C), the experience with Osita was reminiscent of the individuative-reflective faith of Fowler’s faith development (Fowler & Dell, 2006), in which a person reflects critically on the values, beliefs, and commitments they subscribed to, and ask who they are beyond the commonly accepted identifications. In his experiences, as well as in my reflections afterwards, there was a spiritual quest for meaning and purpose, and a focus on the search for enlightenment and the realization of one’s nature (Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002).

Osita’s seeking was captured by the spiritual needs/motivation framework (Yocum, 2014) in which there were stressors in the form of life events that motivated a spiritual search and triggered a spiritual awakening. Furthermore, his awakening spirituality was also motivated by personal influences, which is under the spiritual motivation section (Yocum, 2014). Both parents are spiritually-oriented, so this had an effect on him that now materializes during his adult years in his own search. In addition,
the return to Nigeria during this time was also a part of the personal influences section of the framework in which he sought the corrective influence of the right environment and people to help in his search for answers. In addition, the trip was also him seeking a hearth space (Bryant & Astin, 2008) that would provide inner equilibrium.

For me, the reflections and subsequent implications was based on the spiritual connectedness of the spiritual needs (Yocum, 2014). In this stage, after the spiritual awakening, the spiritual need is a desire to connect with others of similar aspirations. The insights I drew focused on how similar goals causes intimacy in a relationship to develop, and in the case with Osita that is what happened. Although we were friendly growing up, it is only now that our inner goals became aligned that a deeper friendship developed. The insights from the essay with the analogy showed elements of the universalizing faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006) through its holistic picture of spirituality, but it also showed a transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988) as well as a relationship to humanity (Mayhew, 2004). Finally, this experience showed spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002), because in the process of my search to make meaning, I was concerned about the inner life of the spirit and its relationship to the world. Therefore, through self-reflection, aided by my journal entry and essay, I was able to support the spiritual quest to make meaning of this experience.

**RQ2: How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?** As depicted in Table 2.2 (see Appendix C), the experience about news of my high school friend’s passing was a challenge and stressor (Yocum, 2014). But almost immediately there was an emerging spiritual quest
(Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002) that sought to make meaning of the experience. My reflections were reminiscent of conjunctive faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006) in which one seeks to make sense of paradoxes. There is the idea of “you have your whole life ahead of you” juxtaposed with the reality that no one really knows, then there is the idea of working so hard to accumulate earthly things, juxtaposed with the reality that we will not keep it after death.

The reaction, as well as the insights, showed an equanimity (Astin et al., 2011) that is characterized by the ability to find meaning and purpose in times of hardship. The insight about the present moment being a gift was reminiscent of two spiritual themes that emerged in a research study about spirituality: local moment (being present in the moment), and internal process of making meaning (making sense of oneself in relation to the world; Mayhew, 2004). The internal process of making meaning is like a spiritual quest, and in this experience it was about a shift in attitude about how we live.

Another concept in the literature to be found in this experience were several dimensions of spirituality: transcendent dimension (belief in a transcendent dimension to life), meaning and purpose in life, sacredness of life, and material values (material things are tools to be used for a spiritual purpose; Elkins et al., 1988). In some of the analogies given, there was also a sense of the external process of meaning making (understanding the outside world; Mayhew, 2004). In addition, the descriptions reflected a universalizing faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006) and self-actualization on the spiritual needs framework (Yocum, 2014). My collective insights reflect those stated dimensions. Furthermore, this was also a spiritual intelligence, because it was about the search for enlightenment of
one’s true nature within the experience (Vaughan, 2002). Therefore, through this process of self-reflection, the spiritual quest was able to emerge from the struggle and frame the experience in a way that drew deeper spiritual meaning.

**Leadership**

**RQ1: How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences?** As shown in Table 3.1 (see Appendix C), at the core of this experience is the concept of “skyhooks”—an opportunity to serve a worthy objective that will integrate life experiences and give it greater meaning (Fry, 2009; Singh, 2005). In this search, there is naturally a spiritual quest for greater meaning and purpose (Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002). When I came to campus, I was seeking organizations (though with spiritual themes) in the hope of serving a worthy objective. But the encouragement to join APA unexpectedly changed the course of my search, and gave me an opportunity to direct my energy toward a more cultural aim, which is still one of the eight descriptors of spirituality (Torskanaes et al., 2015). In my contemplations and consequent acceptance of both opportunities to serve in APA leadership, I was exhibiting “fruits of spirituality” (Elkins et al., 1988) that seek the tangible manifestation of spiritual values in one’s life.

There was also the relationship to humanity—deeper connection and love for others, and local moment—being present in the moment (Mayhew, 2004) that was evident in my relationship with Halima and Kofi as well as the members, which inspired them to encourage me into APA leadership. While in the leadership position in APA, feelings of purpose and meaning, of hope and joy, and of focusing the attention of the members towards a higher goal was reflective of ethical leadership (Johnson, 2009).
Furthermore, the activities and their joyful effect on others was reminiscent of some components of spiritual leadership (Afsar et al., 2016) that seek meaningful work and motivate toward higher purpose and meaning, encourage others to think beyond themselves, and integrate organizational values with the aspiration of individuals.

The insights I drew follow the same line, for at this time of my life I was just seeking to infuse spiritual values into every aspect of my life, which is reflective of fruits of spirituality and meaning and purpose of components of spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988). Through this aspiration, doors started opening that gave me an opportunity to actualize this deeper spiritual quest. Furthermore, my experience in APA shows aspects of the spiritual needs/motivation/volition framework (Yocum, 2014). The organization presented a “positive stressor” that provided a drive for my spiritual development. But it also reflected the “personal expression” and “service & sacrifice” aspects of spiritual volition in which a person feels the urge to express their spiritual abilities through some activity, and devote time through a voluntary endeavor for the benefit of others.

Taken together, these experiences in APA revealed a spiritual quest not only for meaning and purpose, but also to express one’s spiritual volition through an activity. The opportunity was presented through my leadership involvement in APA, which added the layer of spiritual leadership. However, it was through the process of my journal entries and essay writing during this time that I was able to find the connections, and thus make deeper meaning of my experiences to support my spiritual development.
**RQ2: How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?**  
As depicted in Table 3.2 (see Appendix C), I began my tenure as president determined to be a good leader who would project spiritual values. The journal entry showed me pondering ideas that would help foster a type of organizational spirituality that Johnson (2009) said consists of an “organizational culture and climate that fosters shared meaning and connection” (p. 76-7). Furthermore, I was searching for skyhooks that would give members an opportunity to serve a worthy objective that would integrate their life experiences within the framework of our programs, and thus give it greater meaning (Fry 2009; Singh, 2005). Besides this, the different programs I had planned for the year which involved a visit to an elderly home by executive members, was reflective of the different components of spiritual volition (Yocum, 2014); ethic of caring and charitable involvement (Astin et al., 2011).

If spiritual leadership inspires positive moods and a sense of satisfaction (Kaya 2015), and encourages a sense of community (Hudson, 2014), then my initial reaction to Namazi’s absence as well as the subsequent row deviated from it. But within the precipitated struggle caused by rigidity, there was a spiritual quest (Astin et al., 2011) that emerged and was reflected in my journal entry. The tension was a crisis and shipwreck (Bryant & Astin, 2008) and a negative stressor (Yocum, 2014) that motivate a spiritual quest (Vaughan, 2002) to find enlightenment and make sense of it. The journal entries and essay were equivalent to “hearth spaces” (Bryant & Astin, 2008) that served as opportunities for positive change through attaining inner equilibrium.
The insights derived from this experience showed spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002) that transcending beyond the feelings and emotions to understand the relationship of the inner life of the spirit to the world. The recognition of this, as well as its subsequent implementation through reconciliation with Namazi, showed two major themes of spirituality; relationship to humanity and internal process of meaning making (Mayhew, 2004), as well as fruits of the spirit and tangible manifestation of spiritual values (Elkins et al., 1988), which involves healing and harmony with others.

These insights of where I went wrong reflected a journey toward internalizing and expressing the ideals of spiritual leadership that first and foremost focused on one’s inner life and fortifies it with altruistic values (Fry, 2009). Furthermore, the reconciliation with Namazi reflected the relationship component of spiritual inquiry in which spiritual intelligence contributed to healing in relationships. Another aspect of the reconciliation was the conjunctive faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006), because there was the ability to make sense of the paradox of a leader not only setting the standard for excellence, but also setting the example of how to reconcile and heal in the case of error. But the specific insights about vulnerability and sincerity also reflect relationship with humanity spiritual dimension (Mayhew, 2004), because they deal with qualities that influence the dynamic of human relationships. When the total experience was considered, the tension provided a great opportunity to look within and to identify flaws in my approach. This search was the beginning of a spiritual quest that ended up making meaning of the experience, through the process of self-reflection.
Career

**RQ1: How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experience?** As shown in Table 4.1 (see Appendix C), enrolling as an assistant living volunteer was a spiritual quest for meaning and purpose (Astin et al., 2011; Elkins, 1988; Vaughan, 2002), and reflected two qualities of spirituality: ethic of caring and charitable involvement (Astin et al., 2011). The initial observations I made of Carla and the room being in the past, as well as the potential reasons that precipitated it was an internal process of meaning making (Mayhew, 2004). Through my presence, I sought to offer her companionship, a sense of connection, and joy. However, the attachment to the past as well as other unknown factors made this unfeasible.

When I stepped aside from the personal elements of the experience and tried to find their universalizable extracts (Nash & Bradley, 2011), then I immediately started identifying insights that were relevant to my life. The idea of not forming attachments to previous experiences and not living exclusively in the past reflected the idea of the transience of material things and circumstances (Elkins et al., 1988). It also underscored the importance of being in the present moment in order to form healthy relationships, and thus find meaning and purpose (Mayhew, 2004) through the opportunities available in the present moment. The other idea was about the importance of cultivating a transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988) to life, which will allow us to have confidence about what awaits us through death. In the video summary there was also the element of stressors (Yocum, 2014) that someone feels through hope (positive stressor) of the future, or fear (negative stressor), that creates the impetus for a change.
On a personal level, this experience was a stressor that spiritually motivated me (Yocum, 2014) to seek changes in my life, and to be fully grounded in the present without getting attached to the past or living too much in the future. The collective process of self-reflection that utilized journal entries and essay writing was one of spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002) that sought an understanding into multiple levels of consciousness in relation to effect of our inner lives on daily experiences. Through this visit with Carla, and the subsequent reflections, the process of making meaning through a spiritual quest was demonstrated.

**RQ2: How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?** As depicted in Table 4.2 (see Appendix C), the experience between my manager and I had different layers, but it showed the absence of humility, integrity, and justice, and the lack of attention to the needs of others, both of which are characteristics of ethical leadership (Johnson, 2009). However, as positive moods and job satisfaction are related to spiritual leadership (Kaya, 2015), which is subsequently connected to ethical leadership, then the tense environment appears in a new light. When I tried to draw Ross’s attention to the unscrupulous nature of his request, it was an attempt by me to be altruistic and express spiritual values (Elkins et al., 1988). However, Ross’s explosive reaction caused a great struggle within me, through my inability to come to terms with such perceived disrespect.

The situation become an intense stressor (Yocum, 2014), as the rancor forced me out of my comfort zone. But within the inner struggle, there was a spiritual quest (Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002) that emerged to make meaning of the experience that would
support my spiritual development. To achieve this, the process of self-reflection marked by journal entries and a blogpost helped me navigate through the emotions to draw relevant insights. In the process of these reflections, I spent time in the Atrium area of my apartment complex, which served as the “hearth” that is an ideal setting for positive change and equilibrium (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

In the insights I drew, there was the idea of learning to navigate situations when people hold different concepts and practices. In a way this is reflective of the conjunctive stage (Fowler & Dell, 2006; Parker, 2009) in which a person learns to embrace the paradoxes of the world. Furthermore, the insight that our reactions to people are based on the similar qualities we have is reminiscent of spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002). In spiritual intelligence one seeks to enter different levels of consciousness to understand the deeper relationship between our inner life and circumstances. Also, this process was like the transformative stage of self-reflection (Grossman, 2009), whereby a person develops the awareness of why they think and act the way they do. Finally, the practice I developed to address the uneasiness reflected a self-actualization (Yocum, 2014), internal process of meaning making and relationship with humanity (Mayhew, 2004).

The experience was certainly a struggle to navigate, but it allowed the spiritual quest for a greater meaning of life to emerge and give purposeful direction to the situation. Through self-reflection, I was then able to make meaning of the experience in a way that benefited my spiritual development.
RQ1: How does self-reflection aid the spiritual quest to make meaning of experiences? As shown in Table 5.1 (see Appendix C), the initial pursuit of YDL was based on the spiritual quest for meaning and purpose (Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002). In this search, I was looking for a career that would give me the opportunity to express my spiritual volition and express the fruits of the spirit (Elkins et al., 1988; Yocum, 2014). However, the people I met in the orientation marked a turning point that is reflected in the spiritual motivation section of the spiritual needs framework (Yocum, 2014). In this environment, Dr. Haminez and Tina became personal influences, the environment filled with educators and students was the educational influence, and the positive stressor in the model was the inspiration and encouragement I received.

The misgivings that arose, which resulted in the change from PRTM to Education Leadership, was both a spiritual quest and a desire to find the right environment for the expression of a spiritual volition (Astin et al., 2011; Yocum, 2014). During the process of the change, the thought about the “invisble guidance” is reminiscent of the transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988) of spirituality that recognizes how the invisible affects the physical. Furthermore, it reflects the fifth proposition of spirituality that, according to Love & Talbot (2009) “involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power …” (p. 620).

The insights drawn from this experience are reflected in the literature. Being comfortable with the notion that what we envision for the future will always be different than what comes, and we should thereby keep ourselves open to opportunities, is to
always embrace the paradox of life (i.e., the conjunctive stage; Fowler & Dell, 2006). To embrace a transcendent dimension of life (Elkins et al., 1988) was reflected in the following three insights: the right timing brings the alignment of opportunities, solutions we inwardly seek can come to us through anyone in life (e.g. simple suggestion from stranger), and our inner aspirations have a guiding and formative effect on our life experiences. Through the connection with others, it also reflects a relationship with humanity (Mayhew, 2004). As all those insights are about the effect of the inner life of the spirit in relation to the outer world, it is also a part of spiritual intelligence and one of the descriptors of spirituality (Torskanaes et al., 2015; Vaughan, 2002).

The underlying spiritual quest that drove me to find a suitable career avenue for the expression of my spiritual volition led through personal relationships. As I received hints, I used the self-reflective process of journal entries and essays to not only find the connection, but to also examine their deeper meaning. This allowed me to recognize the College of Education doctoral program as the ideal fit for my spiritual aspirations within the context of a career. Therefore, through the commitment to a process of self-reflection, my spiritual quest was supported in the effort to make meaning of experiences.

**RQ2: How can spiritual quest be nurtured within experiences of spiritual struggle through a process of self-reflection?** As depicted in Table 5.2 (see Appendix C), my entire educational journey up to this point was reflected in the spiritual motivational section of the spiritual needs framework (Yocum, 2014). Within this column were stressors, educational influences, and personal influences. Personal influences comprised my childhood in which most people pursued business, which had an influence
on my career decision. Educational influences became the choice of business, and stressors became the distasteful experiences in the business field. Eventually realizing business was not a perfect fit precipitated an inner struggle and existential crisis because it became difficult to find meaning and purpose in my daily work.

But the spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008) of this situation stirred the spiritual quest to find meaning and purpose (Astin et al., 2011; Mayhew, 2004; Vaughan, 2002), and thus a direction in my life. To this effect, identifying themes that spiritually resonated opened the door to a potentially new career. Hence, the new career became a matter of spiritual volition (Yocum, 2014), in which I sought to personally express my spiritual qualities through a fitting career. But being denied by the two doctoral programs I applied to precipitated another crisis, because the door leading to my escape became the closed door of my entrapment. Therefore, this experience was unique in that there are two levels of spiritual struggle: the discontent with recognizing the improper fit of business, and then the denial by the two programs. Consequently, spiritual quest emerged for a second time to make meaning of the dilemma.

The insights I drew from this experience about the link between expectations and disappointment was an aspect of spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002) that enabled me to find deeper meaning, but it also captured the transformative reflective stage (Grossman, 2009) in which a person recognizes the motives behind their thoughts and actions. The second insight that asks, “how do I know what is best for me?” reflects conjunctive faith (Fowler & Dell, 2006; Parker, 2000), that is able to embrace paradoxes. In this question, there is a balance between the idea of planning toward something we
believe is best, while tempering it with the possibility that experiences might show it is not be the best. Finally, the other two insights about constant evolution of interests and adaptation is based on the internal and external process of meaning making in relation to the sacredness of nature (Mayhew, 2004). Here I am taking my observations of the principles of nature and applying it to the challenge of my life in order to find meaning.

Finally, the collection of insights reflects the concept of equanimity (Astin et al., 2011) in which one is able to find meaning in difficult times. But even amid the struggle, there was a sincere spiritual quest to make meaning of the experience in a way that would support my spiritual development. To achieve this, I utilized not only journal entries, blogs, and essays to process my thoughts, but spending time in nature made it a “hearth space” (Bryant & Astin, 2008) that gave me a sense of equilibrium and allowed me to enter more deeply into the experience. Thus, through a process of self-reflection, the spiritual quest was nurtured within the spiritual struggle to make meaning of the experience.

Implications for Practice

Throughout my spiritual journey, the work “In the Light of Truth”—The Grail Message by Abd-ru-shin, the main work of the Alexander Bernhardt Publishing Company, has been the rock upon which I have sought to build my life, and the main source from which I draw inspirations that frame my concepts. Furthermore, my belief in God and His Will as the origin from which the order of the entire Universe is derived and directed, has fortified and oriented my spirituality by giving it a larger frame of reference.
From the beginning, spending time examining and contemplating the words of the aforementioned work and other related writings, has given me a baseline to examine life experiences in order to draw spiritually relevant insights. Spirituality is a lifestyle and a way of being, so my approach from the beginning has been to try and seek in everything—big and small—the operating spiritual principles. Commitment to this practice allows me to build “inner reserves” of the soul so that, when a trial comes, I am able to get my inner bearings and successfully navigate it. Therefore, the aforementioned practice of seeking spiritual meaning during the mundane moments of life is what strengthens us to face more challenging ones, the same way the grain stored during harvest is what sustains people during winters.

The buildup of these “inner reserves” requires consistent practice to develop, as does the process of self-reflection. Consequently, the value of spirituality cannot be derived by intermittently pursuing it only in times of sorrow and joy when things are convenient, but it must be an endeavor to integrate it into the fabric of our lives as a natural way of being. As this requires consistent practice to attain, and as this has been my endeavor from the beginning, then it naturally follows I had to consistently occupy myself with it—day and night—and develop a practice that would support this volition.

Spirituality cannot be realized with minor effort, like proficiency in self-reflection cannot be attained overnight without good practice. Like anything else in life, both require a dedicated investment of energy. Initially it might be difficult to move past one’s thoughts and feelings, but the more familiar we become with the processes of the inner world and how this affects the outer one, and the more effort we put in this direction, the
more we will be able to distinguish our emotions and thoughts from the objective nature of universal principles operating in our experiences.

To help me achieve this goal, I have tried to build a spiritually nurturing environment in my personal life. I have established an intimate network of spiritually oriented friends, I regularly attend spiritual conferences and retreats, observe hours of worship, and engage in contemplative practices that involve different forms of journaling and writing. In my selective viewership of films and series, I even try to use these moments as opportunities to examine human decisions in light of spiritual principles, and then use the insights to draw parallels with my own life in order to discover ways to improve. I have even tried to examine and make academic and career decisions in accordance with the value they will bring to myself and others, in order to recognize and fulfill the place that I should occupy in world. Furthermore, as the depth of insights drawn from an experience is often equal to the extent of our willingness to recognize our inner flaws and/or misconceptions, then I have tried to embrace the “discomfort” of my inner limitations reflected in experiences as keys to spiritual insights.

These are just a few things I have tried to do in my personal life in order to create a spiritually nurturing environment that will support my inner quest for growth. It speaks to the necessity of constant efforts in all areas of our lives, in order for spiritual momentum to be generated. The descriptions of the efforts I have tried to make in my personal life is to give an inkling of the comprehensive efforts that should be made by higher education institutions if they wish to create a culture conducive for spiritual development.
**Constant Exposure**

The aforementioned points buttress why students need an environment in higher education that is not only supportive and encouraging, but also creates a culture that constantly exposes them to opportunities and resources to further their spirituality. In Chapter Two, I discussed a research study on catholic culture, and the findings that revealed a strong positive correlation between a student’s perception of the institution’s support for their spiritual development and the student’s reporting a deepened sense of spirituality (Ackerson, 2018). The findings inferred that, to have the greatest effect, an institution’s catholic culture and support for spiritual development must encompass all aspects of the student experience (Ackerson, 2018). Although the study is about catholic culture, and as I extensively distinguished the concept of spirituality and religion in Chapter Two, nevertheless the *principle* applies.

In the robust UCLA study on the spirituality of college students, two of the findings mentioned (Astin, et al., 2011):

- Students show the greatest degree of growth in the five spiritual qualities if they are actively engaged in “inner work” through self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation.

- Educational experiences and practices that promote spiritual development—especially service learning, interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, self-reflection, and meditation—have uniformly positive effects on traditional college outcomes.
In view of this, support for the spirituality of students must naturally include all aspects of higher education. Classes are an example, for they can provide a bounded environment of concentrated exposure to different thoughts and concepts, an opportunity to practice self-reflection, as well as a chance to practice applying the concepts to their lives, and thus equip them with tools to make meaning of their experiences.

**Foundations of spirituality.** As an example of a class, I created the course “Foundations of Spirituality” in which reflective practices are incorporated into all aspects of the course. It is an exploration into the foundations of developing a spiritual identity in daily life, and it promotes the application of universal principles through which students can recognize the reciprocal relationship between the soul and life experiences. But this is just one of many possible ideas in response to the spiritual needs of students. The exposure of students to different texts is an important aspect of spirituality because, just like students are exposed in college to the literature of people in their respective fields who are considered experts, so too should students be willing to engage with the documented insights of people much further along their journey. Naturally, while also being encouraged to weigh and examine everything to arrive at their own understanding, as well as to develop their own insights from their own experiences.

**Volunteerism.** Based on the research and my experiences, another way to integrate spirituality is through targeted volunteering initiatives. The spiritual qualities of ethic of caring and charitable involvement (Astin et al., 2011); the self-actualization in spiritual needs, and service & sacrifice in spiritual volition (Yocum, 2014); the universalizing stage (Fowler, 1981); the components of spiritual maturity (Vaughan,
2002); and the “transcending one’s current locus of centricity” as well as “developing a
greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with
community” (Love & Talbot, 2009, p. 618), all involve using our energy to support and
help others in the community. It denotes a commitment to focus on the welfare and needs
of our others beyond limits of our own desires.

To operationalize this, targeted volunteerism opportunities can be offered as a
complement to coursework. What I mean by targeted is for the student to get involved
with an organization that will allow them to give something according to their
experiences, interests, and talents. For example, if a student has struggled with isolation,
they could volunteer to help new students get adjusted to the college environment who
might initially feel overwhelmed and isolated. If a student has developed an ability, they
can seek volunteering opportunities that will allow them to express that ability in order to
serve the community and people in it.

Volunteerism in this sense does not just imply “people in need,” but opportunities
to be involved in creating experiences that help others and enhance their lives.
Organizations are also an example of volunteerism. Through organizations, we are able to
participate with others to create positive experiences that can serve the needs of the
community, while offering us a chance to express a unique ability.

Insights from films. Spirituality is a way of being that includes all aspects of our
life. Teasdale (1999) expressed a similar notion by suggesting it implies “a personal
commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality” (p. 17).
Such engagement that includes all aspects of our life also involves entertainment and the
arts. Life is about striking a healthy balance between things, and this includes the serious and the lighthearted. In this regard, spirituality is not about renunciation or ascetism, but about developing the right way to inwardly make use of all things in relation to our spiritual development. This idea is captured in the material values and fruits of spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988) of the spiritual dimensions in which material things are seen as tools to be used for a spiritual purpose. In my experiences, this was also evident, as I found the balance of my more serious self-reflections in my exploration of insightful films and series, among other things.

Over the years, I watched wholesome films and series to draw insights for living. Through reflections, I would then explore how the principles and themes not only related to my life, but also how they could enhance it. The exercise of uniting my interest in films with the pursuit of higher values is one way that has added a lighthearted fun to my spiritual journey. Therefore, “insights from films” can be an outside-of-class program similar to “book clubs” that would allow people with an interest in films and are pursuing higher values to engage in a structured discussion about the spiritual themes in wholesome films, and examine how the concepts and themes can be applied to their lives. Doing this would not only provide entertainment and a constructive outlet for the different pressures of life, but it would also give students a chance to practice making meaning of experiences in a way that supports their spiritual development.

Doing this over the years has provided me not only with the aforementioned practice of seeking higher values in all things, but it has also given me a wider and clearer
perspective with which to approach different experiences in my life, thus enabling me to make changes through greater understanding.

**Other initiatives.** In addition to different types of classes and “insights from films,” there can also be different faculty and student-initiated programs in the university. Events could include townhalls, speaker series, “translating values into deeds” action groups, and much more. All of these are examples of “hearth spaces” (Bryant & Astin, 2008) that enables people to gain inner equilibrium, perspective, and insight. There can also be “reflective rooms” throughout the campus that would have a space for stillness and mindfulness exercises, a mini library of inspirationally-themed books, sessions for open discussion, and other student-led programs. Some mindfulness initiatives can also be used to support student’s self-reflective practices by providing an environment that will help them reach an inner state from which insights can be drawn from experiences.

There is also spiritual conferences and retreats, and the possibility of a freshman or transfer onboarding experience that gives first year students the opportunity to get a well-rounded exposure to different initiatives. They can choose from a list of options, participate in the program, then write reflections. This would be within a more formalized structure of the onboarding initiative that could count as course credits. The possibilities are truly endless, but it requires a commitment to spirituality as a way of being in order to explore and realize. This implies that spirituality cannot be pursued as just a class or an initiative, but a way of being that pervades all aspects of the university community and environment.
Faculty Role

Faculty have a significant impact on the spirituality of students, and as they influence the overall culture of the university community, their participation in the process cannot be overlooked. One of the findings of the UCLA study on the spirituality of college students was that students show increases in their spirituality when faculty encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose, or show support for their spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Consequently, faculty need to be involved. But faculty should not be seen merely as conduits to reach the students, but the spirituality of faculty should be supported as an end in itself, which can then bring the collateral benefit of the improved spirituality of students. Faculty also need institutional support in order to help them develop and subsequently have a positive effect on students.

In this regard, the recruiting of faculty can also involve this spiritual component. If the idea is to build a university environment supportive of spiritual development, then it would be helpful to also seek faculty who have such an inclination. In general, the idea is to ensure as much attention is invested in the spirituality of faculty not just for the sake of students, but for the benefit of faculty as human beings who are on their own spiritual journeys.

Leadership

When I reflect on the insights from my experiences over the years (two of which are represented in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 in the Appendix), examine the relevant concepts of leadership in the literature (Afsar et al., 2016; Fry, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Polat, 2011), and further contemplate the essence of leadership, the result is the emergence of a
personalized understanding of leadership. To lead is not to rule, but to completely give one’s life to serve and direct toward a higher goal that contains furthering values, and in the process motivate others to focus their abilities toward the same purpose. A leader does not focus on oneself, but on the cause they are assigned to serve. Constantly bearing in mind the knowledge of its responsibility, leadership will seek to ennoble and further all activities and people entrusted to it toward a higher aim. Leadership exemplifies commitment to a continual process of nurturing innate abilities with furthering values, and using this to illuminate all outward pursuits. Hence, leadership exemplifies the diligent balance and union between inner and outer development. Finally, genuine leadership serves as a connecting point between the present and future possibilities, and derives its legitimacy from its obedience to the inner conscience that stems from God’s universal order.

An implication of this concept in practice is the necessity for leadership in all levels to be guided by the pursuit of higher values, and thus be the foremost to exemplify the commitment to a process of inner development that expresses itself by giving greater meaning and lending a wider scope to all outward pursuits. By demonstrating service to a higher cause and the balance between inner and outer development, the changed concept of leadership will alter the standard of who can be classified a leader. The consequence is that occupying a position of influence alone (whether in a government, organization, institution, family, etc.) does not automatically qualify a person as a leader, but rather the degree to which they pursue and express the aforementioned qualities of leadership.
Another implication is the relationship between culture and leadership. As every outward action is only an expression of inner thoughts, so is the outward culture a leader forms only an expression of their own inner culture. Therefore, as something cannot be given which is not first inwardly developed, the organizational culture leaders wish to create must first be cultivated within them. In this way, the inner life of the leader becomes the standard-bearer of organizational culture. For educational leadership, it implies that the formation of a culture in higher education that is nourishing to the spirituality of students must involve a leadership that is committed to the inner pursuit and outward expression of spiritual values in all aspects of the institution.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the areas of future research is the exploration of the decision-making process that sparks an initial spiritual change. Yocum (2014) called experiences that prompt a change “stressors” (positive and negative), and throughout this study I examined the reflective process I used to make meaning in response to these experiences. However, this latter already assumes the acceptance and earnest pursuit of spiritual values. Therefore, what would be insightful and add a rich perspective to the literature on spirituality is research on the initial decision-making process of a spiritual change in response to stressors. In addition, the contributing personal and educational influences in their background.

Another area of research is to explore what people do to create a spiritually nurturing lifestyle that allows them to remain on their respective spiritual quests. The idea is that many people might start spirituality, but give up along the way or lose motivation
to continue. But a study that shows the different practices people develop to create a spiritually nurturing environment will be beneficial both to the individual and to the institutions of higher education.

Another area of research in connection to spirituality is the role of an example in people’s spirituality. An example is not necessarily a parent or a mentor, but could be anyone in our environment whose daily life might have inspired our own spirituality. By examining the experiences of people, these findings could not only support the spirituality of individuals, but also add more literature that will help in understanding the different factors influencing spirituality. I would also recommend future research on the effect that spirituality has on goal setting and career development. If someone is exposed to spirituality in the college environment through these different initiatives, and spends time contemplating the themes and applying them to their lives, what would be the effect in their goal setting and general career pursuits?

As I was a beneficiary of scholarly personal narrative, I would like more dissertations and research studies to be conducted this way across different fields. The personal experiences of many professionals in a bounded and unbounded setting, organized in themes, could provide rich content that would be beneficial for the purpose of gaining personal insight and even supplementing existing theories in the literature. For example, existing research studies reexamined using scholarly personal narrative would add greater context and richer details to various academic themes.

Another area of research is spiritual leadership within the context of higher education. How would a spiritual leader in different positions of a higher education
institution influence the culture and direction? More specifically, what process would a 
spiritual leader use to integrate spirituality into their various academic institutions? And 
how would this be affected by the different types of academic institutions? Such a study 
using scholarly personal narratives in addition to other methodologies would add great 
insight to the process integrating spirituality at the leadership level.

Complementing spiritual leadership and the aforementioned implications for 
practice, it would be helpful to explore the experiences of participants in the various 
recommended initiatives as well as other existing ones, in order to explore their effects on 
the spiritual development of the participants. Also, as faculty are a vital part of higher 
education who greatly influence the spirituality of students, I would like future research 
to examine the needs of professors regarding their own spirituality. There is also the 
effect that different types of institutions (public, private, religiously-affiliated) have on 
spirituality. How does the type of institution influence the support and integration of 
spirituality in the university community? Even the distinction between a research and 
teaching university would help to understand the potential differences in attitudes and 
approaches. Another area of potential research is the effect of spiritual practices on 
college experiences. How did spirituality influence the types of activities students 
engaged during their college experience? In this regard, there can also be the influence of 
socioeconomics, age, background, religious affiliation, nationality, and race on 
perceptions and practices of spirituality.

Another area of research is the effect that time spent in nature has on spirituality. 
In a modern society that spends less time outdoors than people in the past, how would the
increased exposure to the natural world influence a person’s spirituality? As opposed to someone who might spend more time indoors and thus does not get the frequent experience of seeing himself in relation to the world. Finally, it would be beneficial to assess the effect that silence and distractions (constant stimuli) have on spiritual resilience. All of these could add to the existing body of literature and expand our understanding of spirituality and the different factors that influence it so that, with this expanded awareness, higher education institutions can develop initiatives to better support and encourage the spirituality of the university community.

Concluding Statement

I began this journey many years ago with the desire to explore my spirituality, to make meaning of life experiences, and thus to experience greater meaning and purpose. As I did not find many programs and resources that would support this longing for spiritual development in higher education, I had to develop my own practice that included a self-reflective process, as well as form a personal environment that supports my spiritual development. In this regard, my experiences are like many college students who today might seek meaning and purpose and have an interest in spirituality. However, despite the urge, there is a void in college campuses today (Love & Talbot, 2009) in addressing this need. Yet to address this is to seek to restore the holistic student by putting their spirituality at the forefront. In this research, I have shown the meaning making process of my spiritual quest and struggle within different themes of my life experiences. Through the insights, I have added to the body of literature that will help educators better understand the spiritual needs of students, and I have also made some
recommendations of how to begin addressing it. In so doing, I hope the void that currently exists in higher education can begin to close.

The students who enter higher education are the future, and they will eventually occupy all fields and every level in society. So, if we wish to address the complexities and challenges facing society and the world today, we should help provide opportunities and resources for those people who will have to face it (i.e., the current students) to spiritually transform themselves. When a person is able to cultivate a healthy spiritual identity through self-recognition, and they are accustomed to a process of self-reflection that gives them the ability to draw insights from life experiences throughout their journey, they will always have the tools necessary to find a sense of meaning and purpose. In my spiritual journey, these opportunities in higher education have been missing, but I hope those of goodwill who carry the volition to help may find their purpose so that, through the union of many such hands, a joint activity might arise to fill the void in higher education. And as a consequence, help to usher future generations of spiritually holistic students.
Appendix A

Tables Comparing and Contrasting Key Concepts and Theories

Table 1.1

*Religion and Spirituality Compared*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 17)</td>
<td>“Suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Organized belief systems that include shared and institutionalized moral values, beliefs about God, and involvement in a religious community” (Walsh, 1998, p. 72)</td>
<td>“An internal set of values--a sense of meaning, inner wholeness, and connection with others” (Walsh, 1998, p. 72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-level experience (Miller &amp; Thoresen, 2003)</td>
<td>Individual-level experience (Miller &amp; Thoresen, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discreet and identifiable beliefs and practices (O’Hanlon, 2006)</td>
<td>“A sense that something bigger is going on in life” (O’Hanlon, 2006, p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A system that provides beauty, reason, and order to the world (Pargament, 1997)</td>
<td>“Meaning and purpose in one's life, a search for wholeness, and a relationship with a transcendent being” (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, &amp; DeFanti, 2006, p. 219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A pathway in the search for self and for self-growth” (Chickering et al., 2006, p. 42)</td>
<td>“Our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The means and methods such as practices other prescribed behaviors, through which the search for the sacred is validated by and reinforced from a recognized group (Hill et al., 2000)</td>
<td>“Consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (Wuthnow, 1998, p. viii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A corporate experience that provides an opportunity to practice a belief system with others who are like-minded, and seeks to codify the commonalities between beliefs - doctrinal, ecclesiastical, ritualistic. (Yocum,</td>
<td>“A phenomenon whereby individuals seek to find answers to life’s questions, to discover their own identity, to find a sense of purpose in life, to understand the difference between good and bad.” (Yocum, 2014, p. 81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1.2

**Integrated Model of Self-Reflection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe experience</td>
<td>Describe experience</td>
<td>Content-based (examine experience)</td>
<td>Description of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on actions, feelings and thoughts</td>
<td>Reflection on actions, feelings, and thoughts</td>
<td>Mega-cognitive (self-assessment; report one’s thoughts)</td>
<td>Assess the reaction (thoughts, feelings, assumptions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion (what you learned)</td>
<td>Theory (use concepts to interpret experience)</td>
<td>Self-authorship (transcending thought and feeling)</td>
<td>Making sense of experience (insights to be drawn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action plan (changes for future)</td>
<td>Preparations (use reflection to prepare for future)</td>
<td>Transformative (awareness of why one thinks, perceives, or acts as one does)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.3

**Relationship of Spiritual Dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Transcendent dimension</td>
<td>• Pervasiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meaning and purpose in life</td>
<td>• Internal process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• External process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sacredness of life</td>
<td>• Local moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Material values</td>
<td>• External process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fruits of spirituality</td>
<td>• Internal process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Idealism</td>
<td>• Relationship with humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Altruism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.4

*Themes of Life Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spiritual Quest</th>
<th>Spiritual Struggle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>SQR</td>
<td>SSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>SQL</td>
<td>SSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>SQC</td>
<td>SSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>SQE</td>
<td>SSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Relationship of Theories and Spiritual Development

Figure 1. Process of Spiritual Development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process of Spiritual Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individuative</strong> (Fowler, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UCLA Spiritual Qualities</strong> (Astin et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Equanimity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ethic of Caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Charitable Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ecumenical Worldview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual Framework</strong> (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Service &amp; Sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communal expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual awakening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Educational influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual self-actualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual Intelligence (1/3)</strong> (Vaughan, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Spiritual motivation — Influences and stressors (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Spiritual struggle (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C

Tables Connecting Findings to Literature

Table 2.1

*Relationship: How does Self-Reflection Aid in the Spiritual Quest to Make Meaning of Experiences?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Quest Relationship</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Osita’s seeking</strong></td>
<td>Individuative-reflective stage (Fowler &amp; Dell, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trigger for Osita’s seeking</strong></td>
<td>Stressors &amp; Personal influences from Spiritual Motivation, self-actualization (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trip to Nigeria</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connected by mutual aspirations</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual connection from Spiritual Needs (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Effect of inner change on relationships</strong></td>
<td>- Relationship to humanity (Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Everything leaves an impression</strong></td>
<td>- Transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Focus on a high spiritual goal</strong></td>
<td>- Universalizing faith (Fowler &amp; Dell, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.2

**Relationship: How can Spiritual Quest be Nurtured within Experiences of Spiritual Struggle through a Process of Self-Reflection?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Struggle Relationship</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News of death</td>
<td>Stressor (Yocum, 2014); struggle (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making peace in hard times</td>
<td>Equanimity (Astin &amp; Keen, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sense of paradox of time, universal ideas</td>
<td>Conjunctive stage; Universalizing (Fowler &amp; Dell, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making meaning (internal and external), being present, the search for happiness</td>
<td>Local moment (being present), internal and external meaning making, pervasiveness (Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of life, path of the human spirit, relationship to material things</td>
<td>Transcendent dimension, sacredness of life, material things as tools for a spiritual purpose (Elkins et al., 1988);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1

Leadership: How does Self-Reflection Aid in the Spiritual Quest to Make Meaning of Experiences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Quest Leadership</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunity to serve a worthy objective</strong></td>
<td>Sky-hooks (Singh, 2005; Fry, 2009); positive stressor (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural focus of spirituality</strong></td>
<td>Eight descriptors of spirituality (Torskanaes et al., 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acceptance of both opportunities to express values</strong></td>
<td>Material values (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deeper connection with others, being present, service of leadership</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual connection from Spiritual Needs (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feeling of purpose and meaning, hope and joy, focusing on a higher goal</strong></td>
<td>Ethical leadership (Johnson, 2009); spiritual leadership (Afsar, Badir &amp; Kiani, 2016); fruits of spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2

*Leadership: How can Spiritual Quest be Nurtured within Experiences of Spiritual Struggle through a Process of Self-Reflection?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Struggle Leadership</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster collective spirituality, more meaning programming</td>
<td>Organizational spirituality (Johnson, 2009); skyhooks (Fry, 2009; Singh, 2005); ethic of caring &amp; charitable involvement (Astin et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quarrel</td>
<td>Struggle (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); Stressor (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making peace in hard times</td>
<td>Equanimity (Astin &amp; Keen, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate created by reaction to Namazi</td>
<td>Lack of positive moods and satisfaction (Kaya, 2015), and sense of community (Hudson, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation, themes of insights</td>
<td>Relationship to humanity, internal process of meaning making, spiritual dimension (Mayhew, 2004); fruits of the spirit (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refining inner life as leader; paradox of standards</td>
<td>Altruistic values (Fry, 2009); conjunctive (Fowler, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1

_Career: How does Self-Reflection Aid the Spiritual Quest to make Meaning of Experiences?_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Quest Career</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrolling as a volunteer</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual quest (Vaughan, 2002; Elkins, 1988); ethic of caring and charitable involvement (Astin et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial observations of room</strong></td>
<td>Internal process of meaning making (Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Universalizable extracts</strong></td>
<td>• Universalizability (Nash &amp; Bradley, 2011);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• being present and finding meaning (Mayhew, 2004);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• transience of material things, transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conjunctive stage (Fowler, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Hope and fear, seeing beyond the portal of death;</td>
<td>Positive and Negative stressor; Spiritual Motivation (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes made to my life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.2

**Career: How can Spiritual Quest be Nurtured within Experiences of Spiritual Struggle through a Process of Self-Reflection?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Struggle Career</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Absence of humility, integrity, justice; positive moods and job satisfaction.</strong></td>
<td>Antithesis of ethical leadership (Johnson, 2009); spiritual leadership (Kaya, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drawing attention to unfairness of request</strong></td>
<td>Altruism and idealism (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The outburst and friction</strong></td>
<td>Intense stressor (Yocum, 2014); spiritual struggle (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning to navigate different concepts</strong></td>
<td>Conjunctive stage (Fowler, 1981; Parker, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making peace in hard time</strong></td>
<td>Equanimity (Astin &amp; Keen, 2006);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practice to overcome sour-feelings</strong></td>
<td>Self-actualization, (Yocum, 2014), Internal process of meaning making &amp; relationship with humanity (Mayhew, 2004), Universalizing (Fowler, 1981);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.1

*Education: How does Self-Reflection Aid the Spiritual Quest to make Meaning of Experiences?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Quest Education</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New career to express other abilities and internal qualities</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual volition (Yocum, 2014); fruits of spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encouragement to pursue PhD; misgivings that arose</strong></td>
<td>Influences and stressors of spiritual motivation (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Search for the right environment, internal meaning making</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual volition (Yocum, 2014; Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Invisible guidance insight, effect of aspirations on experiences, reciprocal relationship of the inner and outer world</strong></td>
<td>Transcendent dimension (Elkins et al., 1988); fifth proposition of spirituality (Love &amp; Talbot, 2009); descriptor of spirituality (Torsakanaes et al., 2015); pervasiveness (Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future always different from what we envision</strong></td>
<td>Paradox of conjunctive stage (Fowler &amp; Dell, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); self-reflection (Bassot, 2013, Grossman, 2009; Gibbs, 1988)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2

_Education: How can Spiritual Quest be Nurtured within Experiences of Spiritual Struggle through a Process of Self-Reflection?_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Struggle Education</th>
<th>Connection to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational journey</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual Motivation &amp; Volition (Yocum, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inner tension and search for meaning</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual struggle (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008; spiritual quest for meaning and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Astin et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making peace in hard times</strong></td>
<td>Equanimity (Astin et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linking expectations and disappointments</strong></td>
<td>Spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002); transformative reflection (Grossman, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do I know what is best for me?</strong></td>
<td>Conjunctive faith (Fowler &amp; Dell, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link between aspirations and assumptions</strong></td>
<td>Internal and external process of meaning making in relation to the sacredness of Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptation as a spiritual quality,</strong></td>
<td>(Mayhew, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life as a journey of constant evolution</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My process of making sense, writings, self-reflection</strong></td>
<td>Hearth (Bryant &amp; Astin, 2008); spiritual quest and intelligence (Vaughan, 2002);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


