To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Dent C. Davis, III entitled *Conversations with the Unseen: Spiritual Growth and Adult Learning in the Human Experience.* I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Psychology.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH THE UNSEEN: SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND ADULT LEARNING IN THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education Degree
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Dent C. Davis, III

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Mary Frances Ziegler, my spouse and partner, who encouraged me to study adult education and continues to be my closest colleague on the journey of lifelong learning.

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual growth is widely attested in the literature of world religions and increasingly recognized in the business, health care, mental health, and self-help literature. However, this phenomenon is rarely addressed in the adult learning literature, especially from a perspective that attempts to understand the nature and meaning of the experience. The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of spiritual growth and its relationship to adult learning and the theory and practice of adult education.

Twelve adult volunteers participated in this study, documenting their experiences of spiritual growth over the course of a year through the qualitative methods of journal writing, reflection, and individual and group interviews. Findings show that spiritual growth is a unique form of adult learning with six fluid components including experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity/relationships, and attribution. The broad range of learning experiences that were attributed to the spiritual domain suggests four distinct types of spiritual growth - practical, emotional, ideological, or essential. Because individual cognitive experiences of spiritual growth were inseparably bound to their social context, they imply a form of situated learning. Participants identified spiritual growth as a "deep" experience, associating it with the human soul, and describing it in ways that are similar to descriptions of dialogue in the literature.

If the intention of adult education is to address the entire human experience of adult learning, then the findings from this study suggest the need to expand theory and

practice to intentionally include spiritual approaches. Because narrow definitions of adult learning have inhibited research, spiritual growth is rarely addressed in the literature or acknowledged as an ontological reality in people's lives. Methods that foster spiritual growth such as silence, bracketing, meditation, and journal writing offer promise in expanding adult education practice. The distinctive nature of spiritual growth suggests the need for training for adult educators in this area of learning. A better understanding of spiritual growth has the potential to strengthen the dialogue between the historic traditions of spiritual growth, more current "new age" approaches, and the growing research and literature of adult education and learning.

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What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of logically concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon a mass of concrete religious experiences, connecting themselves with feeling and conduct that renew themselves in *saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men [sic]. If you ask what these experiences are, **they are conversations with the unseen** [emphasis mine], voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support, whenever certain persons set their own internal attitude in certain appropriate ways. (James, 1920, pp. 427-8)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual growth has been a recognized phenomenon for centuries and is widely attested in the literature of world religions, although the practice of spiritual growth varies widely. "Even within the Christian tradition, there is a bewildering abundance of spiritual offerings" (Charry, 1999, p. 2). We are living in a time when people are recognizing that spiritual growth is important for their lives, work and learning (Tickle, 1995; Roof, 1993; Greeley, 1993). Spiritual growth and spiritual matters are receiving increased attention in the business literature (Mirvis, 1997; Vaill, 1996, 1998; Briskin, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 1995, Conger & Associates, 1994, Fox, 1994), health care (Ross, 1997; Dossey, 1993), psychology and self-help (Peck, 1978, 1987, 1993; Moore, 1992; Dishington, 1996; Slife, Hope & Nebeker, 1999; Hart, 1998), transpersonal psychology (Elkins, 1995; Wilbur, 1995; Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996), social work (Canda, 1998), cultural studies (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992; Inglis, 1993; Connor, 1989), education (Mott-Thornton, 1998; Palmer, 1983; 1998; Lauzon, 1998), New Age writings (Ferguson, 1980; Toolan, 1987) and feminist studies (Nicholson, 1990).

Spiritual growth is described in various ways. James' (1994/1902) classic description of the spiritual life, although written using the term "religion" rather than spiritual growth, is instructive: "Wherever . . . interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the

absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion" (p. 352). In James' description, interior prayer refers to the experience of the spiritual without which there can be no authentic, exterior expression of religious practice. The distinction between the more subjective experience of spiritual growth, or as James (1994/1902) describes it, "interior prayer" (p. 352), and the description of the nature of spiritual practices is important, not only for a more complete understanding of spiritual growth, but also for locating the spiritual growth phenomenon within the theory and practice of adult education. Both the more subjective experience of spiritual growth, and the description of its practices will be addressed as a part of this study.

Most western approaches to spiritual growth are descriptive in nature and focus on the practice of spiritual growth where the emphasis is practical. Many authors describe specific, often measurable spiritual activities rather than trying to understand the spiritual growth experience. This is one reason why descriptive data on spiritual growth tends to answer questions such as "How much?" and "How many?" rather than "Why?" and "What?" For example, a recent Gallup poll (1996) reports that many Americans affirm their faith in God, report personal encounters with God, and pray regularly. A 1994 *Life* article asserts that 93% of adults believe in God and pray "frequently and earnestly" (*Life*, 1994; also *Newsweek*, 1992). Both Greely's (1993) study on religious practice, and Wuthnow's (1998) study of spirituality in America describe spiritual growth in descriptive terms, focusing on specific activities such as prayer (Wheat, 1991).

In *Megatrends 2000*, Naisbitt & Aburdene (1988) identified an "increased interest in spirituality" as one of the ten key "megatrends" in American society. Wuthnow's (1999) study where over two hundred participants were interviewed highlighted an

increased interest in spiritual experience, as well as the varieties of its expression and practice, a point also emphasized by Cunningham (1999). Wuthnow (1999) from the perspective of an experienced sociologist of religion, focused his study on understanding the larger sociological issues related to the practice of American spirituality, rather than on understanding the experience of spiritual growth.

Authors who write specifically about spiritual growth tend to emphasize activity and advocate specific changes in behavior and attitude, such as accepting responsibility and delaying gratification (Howard & Howard, 1985). Research focuses on such elements as prayer (Leech, 1980), spiritual guidance (Yungblut, 1988), and the keeping of a spiritual journal (Adams, 1990), specific educational programs (Foster, 1994; Cully, 1984) or spiritual retreats (Kelsey, 1977). Activity is central, and the focus is on activities that are measurable, such as how often one reads the Bible or prays the rosary. As Wuthnow (1998) says, "A practice oriented spirituality has been a part of all religious traditions . . . daily practices aimed at transcending ordinary life and putting the believer in touch with the sacred" (p. 169). The vast majority of Western writings in spiritual growth emphasize this perspective. These approaches do little to further the understanding of the phenomenon of spiritual growth itself.

The study of spiritual growth in adult education is rare. Where spiritual matters are addressed, they are often addressed functionally, by describing activities, or theologically, by addressing beliefs (Jarvis & Walters, 1993). Elias (1993) and the "religious education" sub-group in the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education are typical of more functional or pragmatic approaches. Similar approaches are also readily observable in denominational educational literature. Those who address

spiritual growth in more functional ways assume that the goals, outcomes and techniques of the religious education process are objective, measurable and basically known. Thus, the focus of spiritual growth is on implementation and adaptation to changing circumstances. Almost half of Elias' (1993) book addresses the organization, management, evaluation, design and planning of adult religious education programs. Even where spiritual growth is addressed it is often conceptualized as the practice of specific technique, such as prayer (Murphy, 1998).

Jarvis & Walters' (1993) focus on adult education from a theological perspective represents a different approach. In their book, eighteen contributors discuss theoretical issues involved in religious approaches to adult education. In one chapter, Hart & Horton (1993) discuss the spiritual dimension involved in educational settings. They describe this process of learning as "moving the individual toward self and community integration" (p. 241). Hart & Horton (1993) view spiritual growth as providing a critical ingredient in effective social action (p. 254). As Lauzon (1998) says: without the "soulful and spiritual dimension, the world becomes alienating and violent" (p. 325). For both Hart & Horton (1993) and Lauzon (1998), spiritual growth is functional and focused on behavioral outcomes. The phenomenon of spiritual growth itself, foundational to all adult religious education practice, is not addressed.

Whether from an adult education or a religious perspective, it is rare for authors to examine the phenomenon of spiritual growth. As Lauzon (1998) says, describing adult learning and education: "We are in the business of people, and people are complex creatures. This requires that we be willing to engage them in their fullness acknowledging both the agonic and the joyful nature of the learning process" (p. 324). A better

understanding of the phenomenon and meaning of spiritual growth, as well as its expression in practice would enable those involved in adult learning and education to more effectively assist people in addressing the complexities of their lives.

There is also a need to understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth itself, from both an individual and a cultural perspective. With few exceptions, for example, Hart & Horton (1993), most authors either within religious circles or beyond write about spiritual growth as an individual experience. Many groups practicing spiritual growth use a "special vocabulary." This common language, different in many ways from the languages of other groups, suggests the possibility of a strong cultural influence on the individual (Schein, 1992, pp. 70-75; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). Such culturally specific vocabulary also limits understanding across perspectives and thus limits the possibility of developing a grounded theory of spiritual growth and adult learning.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is that the phenomenon of spiritual growth and learning is widely recognized in traditional religious circles, and is increasingly recognized in business, health care, mental health, self-help and feminist literature, but is rarely addressed in the adult learning literature or among adult educators, especially from a perspective that attempts to understand the nature and meaning of the experience. If the intention of adult education and learning is to encompass the breadth of the adult learning experience, this omission is significant. Spiritual growth is mentioned

only rarely, and there is little research describing spiritual growth experiences and the ways those experiences do or do not correspond to other experiences of adult learning that are described in the adult education literature. In addition the impact of culture on spiritual growth has not been described. Most authors who focus on the experience of spiritual growth assume that it is an individual experience.

This lack of research, attention and focus is a problem because many people claim to have spiritual growth experiences, yet the adult learning literature commonly cited in the field of adult education includes little research focused on this issue. While spiritual growth experiences are difficult to quantify and therefore are difficult to study from a positivist perspective, they can nevertheless be described and can therefore be studied from an interpretivist perspective. The study of spiritual growth as an adult learning phenomenon holds the promise of leading to a more complete description of the adult learning experience, a more comprehensive theoretical description of adult education, and a broader adult education practice that should help adults better understand their experiences of spiritual growth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of spiritual growth and its relationship to adult learning and the theory and practice of adult education. The experiences of twelve adults in the Particular Presbyterian Church were examined in order to discover what spiritual growth means to people in their life

experience and to better understand the relationship of the phenomenon of spiritual growth to adult education and learning.

Research Questions

In order to address the problem of this study, several research questions were identified. These questions served as basic guides for the inquiry process.

1. What is the phenomenon of spiritual growth as perceived by adult learners?
2. How is adult learning a part of the spiritual growth process?
3. How are individuals' experiences of spiritual growth affected by the culture of which they are a part?
4. How does spiritual growth relate to adult education theory and practice?

These questions were addressed through the process of data collection outlined in Chapter 2, the findings from the study described in Chapters 3 and 4, and in Chapters 5 and 6, where the findings were compared to the literature of adult education.

Rationale for Study

One reason why spiritual growth is not ordinarily studied in adult education has to do with the nature of the phenomenon. Modern adult education scholars, for the most part, use the scientific method, based on the philosophical principles of rationalism, with

its authority of logic, and empiricism, with its emphasis on observation and sense experience (Slife, 1993; Slife & Williams, 1995; Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1990), both of which leave little room for consideration of the spiritual realm (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). Spiritual growth, traditionally conceived, assumes the primacy of transcendence over material data as a source for data and truth. According to *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, transcendence is a term describing the spiritual dimension as being "beyond the limits of ordinary experience or material existence" (Webster's, 1981, p. 1230). Transcendence is a concept that cannot be measured using traditional empirical means and is rarely, if ever, studied in science. In spiritual growth, the transcendent, in whatever way the transcendent is named, is beyond empirical analysis. In religion, the transcendent or spiritual experience is a more meaningful data source than measurable, empirical data (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). Spiritual growth focuses on spiritual reality, such as God, and expressions of that reality, such as prayer. The traditional scientific method has no way to research the spiritual reality of God, because God is not verifiable, rationally or empirically.

Changes in traditional scientific understanding and theory have opened the door to different research perspectives. Thomas Kuhn (1970) identified a change in philosophical paradigm from that of a detached, individual researcher objectively examining reality "out there" to that of a researcher functioning within a broadly held set of assumptions that are a part of a social process (Allender, 1987). Modern physics has moved to a worldview of interconnectedness (Dennis, 1995; Harman, 1995). Psychology has moved from an emphasis on the empirical and rational study of behavior (Dennis, 1995), and an antagonism to spirituality (Watson, 1930, pp. 2-3) to depth psychology,

with its emphasis on an expanded sense of consciousness (Elkins, 1995). This emphasis leads to a deeper sense of the spiritual (Jung, 1933; Elkins, 1995; Wilbur, 1995), resulting, for example, in research studies on the nature of inspiration (Hart, 1998; Wilbur, 1995).

The study of spiritual growth is rare in adult education. While humanistic concerns (Brockett, 1997); Elias & Merriam, 1994; Giroux, 1988; Boshier, 1994a) are studied, the spiritual dimension of the human being is rarely addressed. Other authors who emphasize measurement and concrete changes in behavior (Elias & Merriam, 1994) rarely acknowledge or examine the phenomenon of spiritual growth. Some researchers writing from the perspective of depth psychology (Dirkx, 1997; Lauzon, 1998; Heron, 1992), or ecological spirituality (Skolimowski, 1992, 1994), or ecolologically based social action (O'Sullivan, 1999), are beginning to focus on spiritual growth. In addition spiritual growth itself is now being studied by a number of adult education authors such as English & Gillen (2000), Zeph (2000), Tisdell (1999), MacKeracher (1996), and Schauffele & Baptiste (2000). These studies will be examined in Chapter 5.

In the field of adult education, the modernist, objectivist perspective with its emphasis on the scientific method and its attendant rationalism and empiricism (Lauzon, 1998; Allender, 1987; Slife & Williams, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1990) has dominated research and theory. Religious or spiritual matters, when studied as a part of adult education, are examined from the perspective of modernism. Spiritual growth is rarely mentioned in the adult education literature. The study of spiritual growth is important because a better understanding of this phenomenon and its relationship to adult education theory and practice would help broaden the perspective of adult education.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The basic theoretical framework for this study was four-fold: subjective, interpretivist, hermeneutical, and postmodern. The epistemological perspective of the study was subjective. In the study, participants' perceptions of their spiritual growth were interpreted through a hermeneutical process. The interpretive context of the study was the individual's experience rather than a pre-existing "meta-narrative" of spiritual growth. In understanding the phenomenon of spiritual growth, the key word is "understanding." Understanding in this study implies "standing under the phenomenon until its meaning becomes clear" (Ayto, 1990, p. 549; Palmer, 1983). As Dilthey said when distinguishing between explanation and understanding: "We explain nature, but we understand human beings" (quoted in Allport, 1981, p. 65). Understanding in this study involved a subjective process of interpretation using a postmodern, hermeneutical approach. These terms as well as the rationale and theoretical framework of this study will be described below under the headings: subjective, interpretivist, hermeneutical, and postmodern.

Subjective

The goal of this study is to allow the experiences of the participants and the reality from which they came to convey their meaning. The focus is on the experience of the participant, because "experience is an indispensable clue to the understanding of nature, even though it does not determine its understanding" (Polanyi, 1962, p 150). In

this study, subjectivity involves an ontological assumption that essential reality is not external to the individual but rather a product of individual consciousness; an epistemological assumption that the process of knowing itself is experiential; an assumption concerning human nature that the human subject actively participates in the process of knowledge identification and that knowledge is not a pre-determined "given;" and a postmodern assumption that the methods of study involve understanding that which is particular to the individual without favoring, *a priori*, a more general understanding (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Lather, 1991). This study assumes that a particular understanding is always affected by its context and is therefore susceptible to revision (Burrell & Morgan, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1989, 1990; Elias & Merriam, 1994). This study also assumes that research itself is a personal process (Moustakas, 1995) with "subjective involvement in all phases of the process" (Allender, 1987).

The study is subjective in another sense. Since the experience of the participant mediates the meaning of the experience, a person's experience is not a solitary event. As Palmer (1983) wrote, understanding implies "submitting ourselves to something larger than any one of us" (p. 67). Palmer elaborates on the meaning of subjective, suggesting that a part of it involves subjecting ourselves to "the other" in contrast to the objective approach where we are placed in an adversarial relationship to "the other." Objectivism as a research philosophy places the researcher "in an adversary relation to" what is being studied (Palmer, 1983, p. 68). An objective stance separates the researcher from the subject. The subjective perspective used in this study asserts that the subject becomes our teacher and we seek to understand it, to "stand under" it until it's meaning becomes clear. A subjective sense of understanding was a part of the research process itself. From a

subjective perspective, it is assumed that the meaning of the phenomenon of spiritual growth is to be found in the process of reflecting on and interpreting the experiences of participants. The individual's voice, the meaning or interpretation of that voice, and the context of the meaning, whether the individual's or the researcher's all are fundamental to understanding. As Polanyi (1962) said, "Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is known, and . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of this knowledge" (p. 6). In this sense those who participate in the research process co-construct new knowledge (Slife & Williams, 1995; Gobbell, 1980).

Interpretivist

Interpretivist perspectives focus on understanding "the world as it is" (Burrell & Morgan, 1978). From the interpretivist perspective, understanding is subjective and involves the experience of individual consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1978). Meaning is made as understanding is shared between subjects (Slife & Williams, 1995). Interpretivist approaches to research often focus on an individual's experience and seek to identify the "fundamental meanings that underlie social life" (Burrell & Morgan, 1978, p. 31), including the spiritual. With its origins in the German idealist tradition and in particular, the work of Kant who emphasized the essentially spiritual nature of the social world, the interpretivist perspective is reflected in the hermeneutical approach of Dilthey (Slife & Williams, 1995; Dilthey,1976/1900).

Hermeneutical

Hermeneutics is a process for discovering the meaning of a text or experience. Derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, meaning, "to interpret," hermeneutics was developed by Biblical scholars interested in discovering the original meaning of various Bible texts (Dilthey, 1976/1900). For Dilthey, the key word was *verstehen*, or understanding:

> Understanding rests on special, personal inspiration. Understanding depends on historical consciousness. Methodological understanding we call exegesis ... which through its expression in language... culminates in the interpretation of the written records of human existence. This method is the basis of philology. The science of this method is hermeneutics. (Dilthey, 1976/1900, p. 228)

Modern hermeneutics, an outgrowth of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970; Malik, 1996), was developed by Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1976) as a philosophy of human understanding and interpretation (Rowan & Reason, 1981).

Hermeneutics assumes that humans are historical beings and our understanding can never be separate from our culture and experience (Slife & Williams, 1995). Hermeneutics searches for an "intersubjective truth" lying between the individual's subjective experience and the objective understanding that is impossible because it is always conditioned by historical realities. This "truth" is discovered and validated by shared subjective experience, and a dialectic of discovery and understanding involving the phenomenon being studied, the researcher and the wider contexts of the research

(Kockelmans, 1975, p. 85). Termed the "hermeneutic circle," this dialectical process assumes the autonomy of the subject under study (Rowan & Reason, 1981; Kockelmans, 1975, p. 84).

In the study of a phenomenon like spiritual growth, traditionally described in transcendent terms, this suggests that the phenomenon of spiritual growth be considered on its own terms with a goal of minimal interference from other interpretations (Faulconer, 1990, p. 120). A hermeneutical approach also assumes a broad understanding of the history and experience of the phenomenon (Slife & Williams, 1995), and a willingness to explore the meaning of the phenomenon for the present situation (Heron, 1981). In hermeneutical approaches, truth is found in subjective, interpersonal engagement with the text or reality to be understood (Slife & Williams, 1995). This study included a subjective examination of the "texts" of participants' experience of spiritual growth using a dialectical process of engagement and interpretation in order to better understand the meaning of their experience.

Postmodern

In a dramatic way, postmodernism signifies the "death of reason" (Power, 1990), challenging methodological unity or "metatheory" (Lyotard, 1984; Hay, 1991; Young, 1997). Using the method of "deconstruction" (Derrida, 1978), the canons of reason and the unity of method in science are turned back on themselves, demonstrating their fundamental un-reasonableness (Gergen, 1991). In postmodern perspectives there is no

absolute correspondence between the object, the name, the observer or the observation process. Postmodernism suggests that the "world is constituted by our shared language and that we can only 'know the world' through the particular forms of discourse our language creates" (Hassard & Parker, 1993, p. 3).

Postmodern research uncovers the "messy edges of mythical structure, the places where the process becomes confused and defies definition" (Parker, 1992a, p. 10). Postmodernism utilizes the process of "writing" as a method to try to define the social context (Cooper, 1989). Unlike modernist writing where language corresponds to objectively measurable reality, postmodern writing is a representation signifying a process (Gergen, 1992; Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992). When the intellectual assumptions of language are turned back on themselves, that is, seen reflexively (Lawson, 1985), they disclose a sense of "*differance*," the place between the two identified "realities" of subject and object (Derrida, 1982, p. 11; Gergen, 1991). Because this difference itself changes and can never be grasped in the present, the notion of certainty or objectivity is untendable. The emphasis moves from the subject and the object to the notion of "agency as a system of relations" (Hassard & Parker, 1993, p. 15). In the postmodern world, subjectivity becomes a "weave, a texture, fragmented but intertwined rather than hierarchical and integrated, a process and a paradox having neither beginning or end." (Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992, p. 39). This study was a form of postmodern spiritual inquiry (Griffin, 1988; Astell, 1994). The examination and the description of the process of spiritual growth focused on the "place" between the person or subject, and the spiritual or object. From this research process a description of the experience of spiritual growth emerged as well as the identification of important

elements in a theoretical understanding of spiritual growth grounded (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in the experience of participants and the research process itself.

If "the breakdown between objective knowledge and subjective knowledge [is] the classic dualism of modernism. . . ." (Lauzon, 1998, p. 323), postmodern perspectives offer the possibility of constructively reframing old dichotomies in ways that might lead to new understanding (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). As Sinnott (1994a) said:

> Philosophy has always juxtaposed the worldview of objective, mechanical reality against the romantic [or subjective, as Gergen (1991) suggests] worldview of reality that is moved by emotion and mystery. It seems that the postmodern period in which we now live is a time to unite these worldviews in a fresh union of mind and heart, objectivist and romantic, self and society. The individual as a member of the culture constructs– together with the culture– a shared reality. (p. 97)

As will be shown later in this study, findings from this research suggest that the experience of spiritual growth is neither subjective nor objective, but instead an intersubjective (Jackson, 1998) "real experience" affecting the meaning of life (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999, p. 75).

The rationale and theoretical framework for this study is subjective, interpretivist, hermeneutical and postmodern. The study represents a personal synthesis of different theoretical perspectives. Although based on the work of many recent authors, in a real sense, the approach proposed in this study is not new, but has a long history that extends at least to the work of William James (1994/1902; Niebuhr, 1997). James' research was unique to its time, but it also shares some critical assumptions with later work and with

this study. Focusing on the subjective experiences of individual spiritual growth, James examined the experiences of individuals on their own merit rather than generalizing them to a universal truth. He also focused holistically in his research, examining life experience as a whole rather than dissecting it into specific parts (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999).

Significance of the Study

A more complete understanding of adult experiences of spiritual growth could assist in comparing that experience to the theoretical understandings and practices of adult learning and adult education. This comparison could contribute to the development of adult learning theory by incorporating insights from those experiencing and researching the spiritual dimension of reality. An integrated theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of spiritual growth and adult education should help to foster the development of relevant educational programming, especially in the church. A fuller understanding of spiritual growth has the potential to strengthen the dialogue between the historic traditions of spiritual growth, more current "new age" approaches, and the growing research and literature of adult education and learning.

Limitations of Study

A major limitation has to do with the particular culture represented by the research sample and setting for the study. The sample included twelve adults. The setting for the study was the Particular Presbyterian Church where the researcher and study participants were involved. The nature of the sample and the setting led to important findings, but the specificity of the sample is also a limitation of the study.

This study assumes that all research is a product of the specific culture within which it takes place. Because of that limitation, the findings of this study will also need to be tested and qualified to determine potential applicability for other cultural contexts. With twelve participants, findings cannot be generalized even within the specific cultural context of the study.

The environment of the Particular Presbyterian Church was the context of this study. Church activities represent an important context where people gather to focus on spiritual concerns. People participate in churches in part because they have an interest in spiritual growth (Wuthnow, 1998). For these reasons, the Particular Presbyterian Church was a very appropriate site for this research topic. A strong organizational culture itself, the environment of the Particular Presbyterian Church was useful as a backdrop in understanding the different experiences of study participants. Although the church provided an excellent context within which to study the phenomenon of spiritual growth, another study conducted within a different cultural context would produce different results.

All the participants involved in this study come from a similar cultural and socioeconomic background. This background is helpful in that it serves as a screen or mirror to help reflect and identify participants' experiences of spiritual growth. From a more global perspective though, it is a limitation in that this relatively homogenous voice is but one of a multitude of other voices that could be heard regarding the phenomenon of spiritual growth (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). The stories of these participants may have limited value in assisting individuals from other cultural contexts in understanding their experiences of spiritual growth.

The subjective nature of this study is also a limitation in any attempt to generalize the findings. There was no attempt to place participant responses into traditional categories used by the church to describe spiritual growth or by adult educators to describe adult learning. This could make it difficult to connect elements of the study with tradition, history and scientific inquiry.

The study places a greater emphasis on the individual responses of participants than it does on the traditional conceptualizations of spiritual growth found in various religious and philosophical traditions. Participants were a part of the culture of the Presbyterian church and the traditions of the church should find expression in their spiritual growth experiences, but this study treats their personal experience of spiritual growth as primary and the tradition as secondary. By giving the experience of the individual a primary voice, this study is open to the criticism of those involved in traditional Western Christian practices of spiritual growth that it is (or could be) "disconnected from the historic resources of Christian spiritual practice" (Cunningham, 1999, p. 111). In traditional Christian practice the role of the community of faith and the

spiritual director is important in spiritual growth (Conn, 1999; Edwards, 1980; Rice, 1991). While the research process, especially through the interview and group interview processes, mirrors to a degree the importance of the community and other people in understanding spiritual growth, and as researcher I am an ordained minister within the tradition of the church, the goal of the study was to accurately identify and describe the participants' experiences of spiritual growth from their perspective. The primary "voice" of this study is the participant, not the traditions, regardless of their relationship to any spiritual tradition.

Definitions

Terms are defined in the context of the study. Because of their special significance for the study, spirituality and spiritual growth as well as adult education and learning will be defined below. As Yeaxlee (1925) wrote decades ago:

> Soul and spirit are elusive terms. The remarkable fact about them is that they persistently reappear at each great creative epoch of the world's life. They are then used with a frequency, which shows how men and women regard whatever these words stand for to them as an ultimate reality in each human being. (p. 9)

A critical aspect of this study involved defining the meaning of spiritual growth. The literature of adult education, spirituality and religion contain many different terms and definitions used to describe spiritual growth. Often the terms spirituality, soul and spiritual growth are used interchangeably. There are also different definitions of adult

education and adult learning. In the sections below, I will define each of these terms.

Adult Education and Adult Learning

According to Merriam & Brockett (1997), adult education includes "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self perception define them as adults" (p. 8). Adult learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p.2). Jarvis (1987), critical of Kolb, says that skills and attitudes are also acquired. Merriam & Clark (1993) add the notion of "transforming" experience, by asserting that learning is "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills" (p.131). Making meaning of experience and reflecting on experience are key components of the learning process (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Mezirow, 1991).

For the purpose of this study, adult learning is defined as a process of understanding whereby knowledge, meaning or change occurs through the transformation of experience by increased consciousness, reflection, memory and activity. Adult learning takes place in a variety of contexts. In adult education, intentional learning often takes place in a formal classroom. Learning can also happen in less formal settings and less intentional settings, as in the case of informal or incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), or formats involving self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Soul

Since classical times authors have associated soul with the human experience of the spiritual. Some authors view soul as an animating principle of life, others as an essential element of the human being, and others as a metaphor (Moore, 1992). Classically the term soul has been used to help understand spiritual growth in both western and eastern traditions (Miller, 2000). Many authors speak of the difficulty in defining soul (Murphy & Malony, 1998; Cousineau, 1994). In western thought derived from Plato the soul was conceived as a distinct and eternal aspect of the human being (Miller, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), almost like a "body part." Aristotle viewed the soul as a life principle that reflects the basic powers or attributes of the person and not a separate entity (Murphy, 1998). In this study soul refers to the deeper aspects of human life such as ethical and spiritual dimensions. Soul describes the core unity of the personal and spiritual dimensions of the person, which in western religious terms is rooted in a relationship with God (Anderson, 1998). Butler (1922) described the role of the soul in this classic statement: "Behind intellection and understanding and reason and will and emotion and imagination, is the soul itself, the spiritual principle that is at the root of all the faculties" (p. 304). For the purposes of this study, soul in whatever way it is distinguished, is the human door to the world of spirit.

Spirituality

Defining spirituality is difficult. The use of the word spirit or words that are similar is widespread, occurring in virtually every language and culture (Spong, 1998, p. 100; McCasland, 1962). The root meaning of the word spirit is from the Latin *spirare,* to breathe or blow, which refers to the breath of life, a vapor that animates the body, and is associated with God (McCasland, 1962; Davis, 1989). "Spirituality" by definition is "that which is not material" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language,* 1996/1998). The spiritual "refers to what transcends materialism or exceeds preoccupation with self maintenance" (Conn, 1999, p. 86). It points to an essence that goes beyond the obviously physical and material dimensions of reality. In this sense, everyone has a spirituality. As Brennan & Brewi (1988) put it: "One's spirituality is the way one lives one's life" (p. 55).

> What is spirituality? It is the spilling out of an inner reality. It is the incarnation of a spirit. . . . our spirituality flowed from how we perceived ourself and other things. It flowed out of our ego, our consciousness. If we look at where we put our psychic energy we discover our values, what is of prime importance to us, what sets our spirits on fire, and how we enact or incarnate that spirit. We discover our spirituality. (Brennan & Brewi, 1988, p. 55)

The spiritual, according to William James (1920) is:

> . . . the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we thence receive help us to

> live, they found invincible assurance of a world beyond the sense, they . . . communicate significance and value to everything. (pp. 149-150)

Spiritual traditions are universal in attesting the power of the spiritual dimensions of life to affect human experience.

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is the process of becoming conscious of, reflecting on, remembering and acting on "those private experiences that contain, in some form, a contact with a realm that is greater than the self" (Spencer, 1992, p. 4). In a similar way James (1994/1902) describes spiritual growth as the "feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (p. 42). Spiritual growth can take different forms. As will be shown later in this study, participants' experiences of spiritual growth were not simply events involving one individual. Contextual factors were very important in understanding the nature of the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

Outline of the Study

This chapter is the introduction and included the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, rationale and

theoretical framework for the study, significance and limitations of the study, and definitions. The second chapter describes the research method and sample used in the study. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the findings related to the personal and contextual elements of participants' experiences of spiritual growth. The literature of adult education and adult development is compared to the findings in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 includes a conceptual interpretation of the findings identifying a culture of spiritual growth. The study concludes with Chapter 7, which summarizes the findings in relation to the research questions, as well as the implications of the study for the practice of adult education, the identification of additional research questions, and recommendations for adult education practice.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHOD AND RATIONALE

The preceding chapter introduced the study, provided a rationale, and theoretical framework for the study. As described in the last chapter, much of the literature on spiritual growth and adult learning is functional and descriptive in nature. The literature on spiritual growth tends to be interpretive, describing little if any empirical evidence. Adult learning literature rarely focuses on spiritual growth and the little that does seems to lack a clear empirical foundation. This investigation is based on reported experiences of spiritual growth from twelve participants using four data gathering methods over a twelve-month period. The study began in April of 2000 and continued through June 2001. Chapter 2 describes the study site, participants, research method and process, data collection, and data analysis procedures used in the study.

Study Site and Participants

In the literature, spiritual growth is most often reported as an individual phenomenon. This study of spiritual growth involved the examination of the spiritual growth experiences of twelve individuals over a twelve-month period. Since spiritual growth is often associated with religious experiences and these are often associated with religious organizations, the context for this study involved a specific Protestant

congregation. This section will describe the site for the study and the participants in the study.

Study Site

The Particular Presbyterian Church was the site for this study. A congregation of approximately 1300 members, located in a suburban, upper middle class neighborhood, the church has been in existence for over 50 years. The site was selected because it was the church where the researcher served as Associate Pastor. Members are extensively involved in a wide variety of ministries both inside and outside the church. Known as a congregation that supports ministries designed to help other people both locally and worldwide, the congregation supports ten missionaries worldwide, annually builds a house for Habitat for Humanity, collects food for local charities on a monthly basis, and is directly involved in the work of over a dozen local charities.

Members of the congregation have a higher level of education and income than the population as a whole. Over 85% of the members of the congregation have received a college degree. This compares to the local community where 14% describe themselves as college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990, 2000). Each of the twelve participants in this study had a Bachelors degree and eight of the twelve (66%) also had a Masters degree or a professional degree.

The Particular Presbyterian Church is an example of a strong culture with well-defined customs, language, and symbols (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman,

1982). Weekly worship is a central part of the church's program with an average of 500 in attendance. In worship, long time members describe the rituals and vocabulary as comfortable and understandable. "Traditional" is a word that is often used to describe the worship rituals of the Particular Presbyterian Church. Although significant new changes are being considered as a part of a yearlong study by a task force, these are "slow in coming" according to some members.

Educational programs for adults in the Particular Presbyterian Church are also considered traditional. Most take place in classrooms, using published curriculum that is presented by a teacher. As one participant noted, "Most of our classes are pretty much the same. The only difference is the book [curriculum]." Many of these classes take place as a part of Sunday school. Sunday school is an educational phenomenon of the American Protestant church involving hour-long Sunday morning classes taught by lay volunteers focused on some aspect of Bible study (Lynn & Wright, 1971). The congregation has a history of strong adult Sunday school classes as well as other adult learning experiences. In addition to a weekly Sunday school program involving seven classes, the church offers at least ten other weekly learning opportunities for adults. Over 250 adults participate in these learning programs. Of the seventeen formal learning programs offered each week, all but two might be classified as "traditional Bible studies," where the learning format involves the reading, explanation, discussion, and application of a Bible passage. A teacher leads these classes and the participants participate in relatively passive ways, occasionally offering a comment or asking a question. As one member said referring to his class, "The class hasn't changed much in the ten years I have attended."

In addition to formal learning experiences in the Particular Presbyterian Church, members also engage in individually focused self-directed learning experiences. The church has a library including print, audio, and video resources. Many members utilize these resources frequently. Some members also report participation in learning experiences beyond the Particular Presbyterian Church, such as retreats, and classes offered at other churches and local colleges. A growing number of church members also utilize the computer and Internet for spiritual and religious learning.

Although contemporary in design, the building is traditional in form. It is comprised of a sanctuary, a fellowship hall, classrooms, music area and offices. Many traditional symbols of the faith have been incorporated into the structure. The symbol of the cross is commonly observed. Beautiful stained glass windows symbolically depicting traditional stories of the faith are prominent.

Members of the Particular Presbyterian Church take their commitments to the church seriously. The average membership for Presbyterian churches in the state for 1997 is 180 (Presbyterian Distribution Services, 1997). With a membership of over 1300, the Particular Presbyterian Church is one of the larger Presbyterian churches in the state. The strength of the Particular Presbyterian Church is also evidenced by an individual annual average financial contribution of over $1300 in 2000. This is over twice the average for members of American Protestant churches in 2000 (Barna Research Group, 2000). Weekly church participation of over 40% of the membership is also at or above the norm for similar churches (Gallup, 1996).

Members, especially new members, observe that there seem to be many "unspoken customs" that guide a person's behavior. Learning these customs is a part of

"fitting in" to the church and is often done in informal ways such as conversations with friends. Another example of the church's strong culture is the assumption, shared by many participants, that members of the church share many beliefs. This is further confirmed by the surprise that individuals express when they find out that another member's particular religious belief is very different from their belief. Following the group interview, one participant in this study reported "This [the group interaction] was really great. I had no idea of the different kinds of [spiritual growth] experiences just in this group."

Study Participants

The study sample was made up of twelve members of the Particular Presbyterian Church who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants had been members of the Particular Presbyterian Church for an average of 22 years (N=12) and involved as a participant in some type of Christian church for an average of 41 years (N=12). Each participant was also a participant in one of the church's programs focusing on some aspect of spiritual growth. Participants noted and reflected on a variety of life experiences they termed as "spiritual."

Study participants included eight females and four males. Six of the eight females who participated in the study classified themselves as "middle adults" in age. Of the six Ellie, an Asian American is a practicing MD who is married to a doctor and has two school age children. Ellie grew up in a traditional Asian Christian family and has been a

part of the church for most of her life. Ginny is a widow with two grown daughters and a business owner. Ginny did not grow up in the Presbyterian Church, and did not attend any church for years, but found herself drawn to the church after her husband's death. Sarah is self employed, married to a doctor and has three children, two of whom are in college. Sarah and her family became very active in the church during her young adult years and she has developed a strong personal interest in spiritual growth during the last five years. Angela's second marriage is to a doctor and occurred after a difficult divorce. By training and professional experience, she is as a music teacher. Angela has been very active in various churches during her adult years. She has two grown children and is presently not employed outside the home. Joy also experienced a very difficult divorce and is happily re-married. Joy grew up in the Episcopal Church but became active in the Presbyterian Church when she remarried. Joy participates in the church but not "too often." She is very interested in spiritual growth but finds that her preferred setting for that growth is in nature and other retreat type setting such as visiting the monastery, rather than the institutional church. She is not employed outside the home but is involved in the management of property and investments. Polly previously worked in an office but she is not presently employed outside the home. Polly is very active in the church and has been since she was a young mother. Polly has two children still in school.

The two remaining females in the study classified themselves as "older adults." Jennifer is a trained church educator with a Masters Degree who presently is not employed outside the home. Jennifer has been a member of the Particular Presbyterian Church for over 40 years. She describes herself as a life-long Presbyterian. Her children grown, she is focused on the "joys of grandchildren." June, also a member and leader in

the Particular Presbyterian Church for over 40 years, is an experienced educator whose children are grown. She is not employed outside the home. Both Jennifer and June are very involved in a number of different service activities, both as a part of the church's ministry and in the community at large.

There were four males involved in the study. Jack and Will, both practicing attorneys, classified themselves as "young adults." Jack is recently married with no children. Jack and his spouse both grew up in the church and both were very involved in youth activities. Jack completed his Law degree and passed the Bar Exam during the time of this study. Will is married with two young children. Will came to the particular Presbyterian Church from a Baptist background after his marriage. He describes himself as an active church member, a person who loves to write and learn new things.

Dick and Milton classified themselves as "middle adults" in age. Dick is an Assistant Principal in a local Middle School. Dick has been very active in the life of the church as a teacher and small group leader. He describes his participation in the church as very important to him. He has two grown children. Milton is divorced and remarried with grown children. Milton serves as an officer of the church and has been a long time participant. Milton is also a practicing attorney.

Although four of the twelve participants allude to challenging financial experiences in their past, all describe themselves as comfortably middle or upper-middle class at the time of this study. As a whole the sample was Caucasian, predominantly middle age (66%), female (66%), and active church participants (58% participate weekly). At the time of the study, 67% of participants reported "regular" or "very common" experiences of spiritual growth. A little over half of the participants in the

study reported some prior experience in keeping a journal. Participants in this study represented a remarkable diversity even though they shared common church membership.

Researcher Involvement

As the researcher, my involvement in the research process probably affected the outcomes of the study. Not only did I serve as one of the three pastors of the church that was the site for the study, I also had an ongoing relationship with the participants in the study. One participant wrote in the journal that they felt comfortable writing about their experiences because of the relationship that we have developed over my six years at the church, and several noted that the group interview felt like a small group experience, noting a previous group experience where I was involved. Certainly the participants' perspectives affected the researcher's views on spiritual growth as a phenomenon. There may have been some conscious or unconscious editing of participant responses because of the relationship. When discussed in the second group interview, participants noted that researcher involvement did not significantly affect their responses. As Milton said, "You're there. We know you and you know us. But it's no big deal." As researcher, I also pointed out to the group that I was participating in the process as well and wanted to learn more about my own experience through the study. Throughout the study, I monitored some of my assumptions and observations using a reflective journal and engaging openly in conversation with participants in order to identify possible affects of my involvement.

The goal of the study was to better understand participants' perceptions of their

experiences of spiritual growth. The method of this study assumed that a clearer understanding and better quality of communication would be achieved because I shared the cultural context of the participants and because of the high quality of relationships that I had with them. Furthermore, understanding in this study was designed to be a collaborative process.

Research Method and Process

Selecting a research method to study the phenomenon of spiritual growth is challenging. How does one measure something – spiritual growth – that by its definition is not measurable by traditional scientific means? As Garrison & Shale (1994) point out, it is important that the researcher's methods and philosophy be congruent with the topic being addressed. Qualitative methods were used because they are consistent with the conceptual model of this study as well as the topic to be examined, spiritual growth. The conceptual framework for this study, as described in Chapter 1, is one of understanding derived through an approach that is subjective, interpretivist, hermeneutic, and postmodern. According to Brookfield (1990a), the origins of qualitative research can be traced to Max Weber who identified the "need to understand (*verstehen*) human actions from the point of view of those acting" (p. 2) as critical. Since the topic itself is highly subjective and experiential, qualitative methods were selected, in part, because these methods are:

- Exploratory in allowing discoveries to be made about the phenomenon being

examined (Kirk & Miller, 1986);

- Useful in eliciting people's perceptions, in understanding the way data are interpreted, and in developing theory out of the data (Brookfield, 1990a, p. 5) through the development of hypotheses, abstractions and/or concepts (Merriam 1988); and
- Useful in seeing beyond the raw data of the situation and making sense of a complex phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.19).

Research focused on the subject of spiritual growth as a learning phenomenon is very limited. There are few examples and no generally accepted method for researching the subject of spiritual growth (Braud & Anderson, 1998). The method of this study employed research procedures common in educational research, as well as practices that have been historically employed in the process of spiritual growth itself.

Data Collection Procedures

This section outlines the steps of the research process and the rationale for using them. The research process involved six steps, including a demographic questionnaire and initial interview, a written participant journal, an individual interview with each participant, a group interview and a final written reflection.

Demographic Questionnaire and Initial Interview

The study was announced in a letter sent to three groups within the church that were involved in intentional adult learning focused on spiritual growth in order to solicit participation (see Appendix A). The three groups were adult education classes, Lay Counseling Ministry, and a spiritual growth group. The combined membership of these groups involved about 80 individuals from a broad demographic spectrum. The selection of this sample assumed that individuals involved in church would have some interest in and sensitivity toward spiritual growth and would be able to identify spiritual growth experiences. In addition, because these groups focused on spiritual growth activities, their members were more likely to have an interest in spiritual growth.

Twelve volunteers responded to the letter indicating that they were interested in participating in the study. Each was sent a packet of information describing the study. I then conducted an initial interview with each potential participant. All agreed to participate in the study and each completed consent forms and a demographic survey (see Appendix B and Appendix C). The purpose of the initial interview was to provide an overall orientation to the study, and to go over the journal writing process, follow up interview and group interview, and answer questions. At the conclusion of the initial interview, participants signed a consent form describing the research purpose, researcher's and subject's roles, rights and feedback process. This form also included a statement on confidentiality signed by the participant explaining that each person will be assigned a pseudonym and that specific details of the data will be edited to preserve participant confidentiality.

Written Journal

Each participant was asked to complete a written journal for a period of three weeks, recording experiences they would describe as spiritual. There were several reasons to include journal writing as a part of the research process. Traditionally, spiritual growth experiences, whether Christian (McGinn & Meyendorff, 1986), Buddhist (Watt, 1957; Hahn, 1990), Native American (Brown, 1987; 1989), or modern practices of meditation (Goleman, 1988; Gendlin, 1981), quiet time or Sabbath (Edwards, 1982), have been solitary experiences (Palmer, 1983). Often these are recorded in a person's journal or diary. The journal is a common reflection tool used to help an individual in "naming" their life experiences, including those identified as spiritual growth experiences (Frager, 1989, p. 302; Adams, 1990; Kelsey, 1980).

The use of a journal is a traditional format in spiritual growth. Written documentation of a person's reflections on their experience of spiritual growth has been common over centuries in a number of religious traditions (Progoff, 1975). Journaling itself has been described as a spiritual growth process (Kelsey, 1980). Individuals such as Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley kept journals of their spiritual growth experiences (Lowenstein, 1987). Journals have also been a part of the Puritan, Quaker, Methodist, and Calvinist faith traditions, as well as Eastern faith traditions (Lowenstein, 1982). Long used in psychotherapy as a tool for growth (Martin, 1976), journals are also becoming more common in educational practice generally (Hallberg, 1987; Fulwiler, 1987), as well as educational research from a phenomenological perspective (Polkinghorne, 1989). Journals have been used in adult learning and reflection (Lukinsky,

1990; Progoff, 1975, 1983; Cranton, 1994). The research method of completing a written journal is congruent with the subject matter being researched. Since the completion of a journal is also an intensely individual process, it also helped to minimize the effect the interviewer had on participant responses (Oakley, 1981).

The journal, a qualitative research tool (Fulwiler, 1987; Lukinsky, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), is a "powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 421). Its usefulness varies with the quality of the actual process of collecting, recording and analyzing data. Strengthening memory and providing for association of multiple descriptions of experience (Martin, 1976), the journal is a "tool for connecting thought, feeling and action– a synthesizing tool" (Lukinsky, 1990, p. 214) that can be "used for critical reflection in the context of transformative learning" (Mezirow, 1990, p. xix).

The process of recording actions, observations, and feelings as well as the analysis of them is like blazing a trail through the wilderness of experience. The "trail markers" and reflections can be tracked and revisited over time, as one critically reflects on the data. Through analysis and reflection, the trail becomes clearer and perhaps widened or even changed, but the same data trail can be examined and followed by the writer or anyone else again and again. As a qualitative research tool, the journal is highly useful in complex and ambiguous situations, especially those involving human behavior and interaction. Journal writing and qualitative research methods have traditionally been seen as highly useful when looking at people's experiences. The use of a guided journal for recording spiritual growth experiences is actually a form of independent study (Elias, 1993). Although the process is guided, it is also basically self-directed (Tough, 1979;

Brookfield, 1990; Houle, 1992), assisting "adults [in] assuming control of their learning" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 137). In journal writing, even though the facilitator or researcher still plays a role, the process of keeping a journal is dependent on the participant's involvement and activity. Learner control is the key (Candy, 1991). In the field of adult religious education, independent learning and reflection have long been noted as effective methodologies. Wickett (1980) reported on adult learning projects focused on religious and spiritual growth and found numerous examples of independent learning with a broad focus. Gross (1977) recommends the keeping of a learning log to facilitate intentional independent adult learning.

The use of the written journals in this study was a form of document analysis where the written material was "interpreted" in order to determine its "meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 355). Since the meaning of the text recorded in the journal exists only in the writing and reading of it (Derrida, 1978), the opportunity to clarify and extend the meaning through the interview and group interview process was very important.

Guided Journal Process and Questions

The guided journal process for this study consisted of a printed information handout suggesting ways that the journal might be used. The handout, adapted from Gross (1977) and Elias (1993, p. 236), included guidelines for journal reflection and writing (see Appendix D). Participants were encouraged to note experiences they might identify as "spiritual" and write about them. The guidelines encouraged them to use their own judgment in identifying spiritual experiences: "If you think that an experience is

spiritual, it is, no matter what anyone else might think." In writing about their spiritual experiences in their journals, participants were asked to note the details of what happened, their feelings about the experience, what they learned and how the experience affected them.

Participant Journals

Each participant was asked to complete a written journal for a period of three weeks, recording experiences they would describe as spiritual. Two participants extended their journal writing process well beyond the three weeks that were required. The twelve participants made an average of 110 journal entries over the three-week period. Each wrote an average of 18 pages of text. One participant completed a total of five pages while another completed 85 pages. The twelve journals contained a total of 221 pages of text and a total of 1,314 individual entries. Frequency of journal entries for participants varied from once every 3-4 days to several times per day.

Interviews

Traditionally, spiritual growth has been reported to occur in the context individually oriented experiences such as keeping a journal. Spiritual growth has also been reported in the context of relationships, either one on one or in groups (Palmer, 1983; Edwards, 1980). Adult learning is also described as an individual and social

process (Jarvis, 1992). This study included two interactive research activities: an interview with participants using a semi-structured interview guide to better understand their experiences of spiritual growth, and a group interview involving the researcher and all participants. The use of the interview and group interview process allowed for the clarification and expansion of themes identified in the journal. Interviewing also provided a way to observe changes in participants' understandings of spiritual growth.

Individual Interviews

The individual interviews were designed to help the participant and the researcher better understand the experiences recorded in the written journal (Jarvis, 1999, p. 113). Interviews were used because the interview is a common method in qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Seidman, 1991), and is also similar to the long standing spiritual growth process of spiritual direction or guidance, where a participant and a mentor/guide engage in dialogue focused on the participant's experience of spiritual growth with a goal to understand its meaning (Edwards, 1980; McNeil, 1951; Leech, 1977). Assumed in this process is the notion that the relationship itself enhances spiritual growth (Vogel, 1991). This step in the research process also mirrored the historic practices of spiritual growth as well as the practice of qualitative research.

The method for the study included semi-structured interviews that encouraged respondents to share their perspectives more fully, even engaging in "fruitful digressions" (Patton, 1990) while still maintaining the key focus of the study. As Fingeret (1982) points out, semi-structured interviews are "flexible enough to allow new directions in the

researcher's pursuit of understanding," thus facilitating "the ability of the researcher to learn things that he/she had not identified previously as important to the issue under study" (p. 91). Since this study focused on practices that were not well described in the literature, the semi-structured interview approach supported the heuristic dimension of the study and provided an opportunity to explore these practices in some depth, while also providing necessary structure for focus and analysis (Patton, 1990; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Since an interview is essentially "a conversation with a purpose" (Dexter, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it offers "the ability to tap into the experience of others in their own natural language, while utilizing their value and belief frameworks" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 155). Interviews also allow the researcher to gain much more of an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of participants, as well as to gain a sense of how they organize and attach meaning to what goes on in their world (Patton, 1990). Brookfield (1990) observes that interviews are particularly suited to investigations concerned with "depicting the highly specific nature of an individual's experience rather than advancing broad generalizations concerning laws of human behavior" (p. 4). Such was the intent of this study.

The development of the interview guide (see Appendix E) began at the time of the initial interviews and was based on the research questions, rationale, and theoretical framework for the study, literature review, and participant journal entries. A key question in the interview involved the identification of a significant experience of spiritual growth occurring anytime in the participant's life. The descriptions of these experiences were like "critical incidents" (Brookfield, 1987), adding richness to the other descriptions of spiritual growth in the study. Critical incidents, according to Flanagan (1954) include " .

. . any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (p. 327). Since the descriptions of the spiritual growth experiences were almost totally in the words of the participant, they provided a good check on the bias of the researcher in the interpretive process (Brookfield, 1987). Participants' stories of spiritual growth were very valuable in the identification of key themes in the spiritual growth process.

Group Interview

Using the interview and group interview process allowed for clarification and expansion of themes identified in the journal. The group interview method was important because it allowed for the expansion of the individual learning process to include other individuals who were also a part of the study. As with the use of the written journal as a data collection method, the group interview method is also congruent with the practices of various spiritual growth traditions, as well as qualitative research in adult education.

Group learning has long been a part of the spiritual growth process, especially in monastic circles (Rasmussen, 1997). Group activities are also well documented as adult learning experiences (Brookfield, 1990; McCollom, 1990). The group represents an opportunity for reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Peters, 1990) where individuals can deepen their insights and clarify their perspectives (Dominicé, 1990; Peck, 1987; Isaacs, 1993; Bohm, D, 1989).

Collaborative, interpersonal methods in educational research are becoming more common (Torbert, 1981). Group interviews are often used to gather data and are

especially useful in phenomenological studies (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The process of adult learning through reflection is both individual and collaborative (Jarvis, 1992; Peters, 1990). Often group interviews provide "another level of data gathering" and a "perspective on the research problem not available through individual interviews" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 364). Focus groups, a structured form of group interview, are common (Krueger, 1988) and are often used as a form of triangulation, a method for comparing data responses (Denzin, 1989).

Confidentiality issues regarding the group interview were safeguarded through prior agreement among participants to maintain confidentiality of responses, a practice commonly used in the church and in group work (Brookfield, 1990; McCollom, 1990). Because participants had numerous opportunities to clarify any questions or concerns about the group interview before it occurred, there was an unusual openness in the group discussion (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956; McCollom, 1990). Participants were genuinely interested in learning from each other.

Participants who completed the journal and individual interviews met in two groups to discuss their experiences of spiritual growth. The two group interviews were a little over 90 minutes in length. The interview guide for the group interview was based on the research questions, conceptual framework, and data gathered through that point in the study (see Appendix F). As researcher, I conducted each group interview.

Written Reflection

The final step in the research process was the completion of a written reflection that asked participants to reflect on their understanding of spiritual growth and whether or not their participation in the study affected them. All participants completed the written reflection. Six participants volunteered to participate in a second group interview in addition to completing the written questionnaire. This group interview also asked participants to reflect on their understanding of spiritual growth and whether or not this study affected their lives. The group interview lasted 70 minutes. Participants completing the written reflection and those participating in the second group interview were asked to reflect on the initial findings and give feedback, a process that provided an opportunity to clarify as well as validate the findings.

Both the final participant written reflection and group interview mirrored the initial data gathering process of keeping a written journal and the interpersonal conversations of the interviews. One of the purposes of this step in the data gathering process was to provide opportunity for reflection. Both written journals and interview conversations are commonly used in reflective practice (Yungblut, 1988; Adams, 1990; Jarvis, 1992; Peters, 1990; Schön, 1983). Data from all sources were compared through analysis in order to achieve the best understanding possible (Hodder, 1994).

Data Analysis

All data from the journals, individual and group interviews and written reflections were electronically transcribed and entered into the QSR NVivo data analysis software program (version 1.2) designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data. QSR NVivo utilizes rich text format documents, which then can be linked, coded, analyzed for relationships and utilized in building conceptual models. The categorization of themes in the data or coding began almost at the start of the project. QSR NVivo uses the term "node" (Richards, 1999) to refer to what is often described as a "code" in other qualitative research processes (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The QSR NVivo software program facilitated the constant comparison of data across subjects and data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Nodes or codes were updated as the project progressed, allowing the coding scheme to emerge from the data. As a part of the study, a knowledgeable individual outside the project reviewed codes in order to ensure "inter-rater reliability" (Babbie, 1983; Trochim, 1999) strengthening the quality of the coding scheme and the reliability of the study.

Development of the Coding Scheme

QSR NVivo facilitated the process of organizing the data and understanding the relationships between data sources and coded passages. During the data analysis, a total of 110 nodes or codes were identified. Of these, 23 were NVivo codes (Bazeley &

Richards, 2000), utilizing the exact words participants used in their journal entries and interviews. Codes clustered into two major categories representing key areas in understanding spiritual growth: cognitive dimensions and context. Within each of these major categories, sub-categories were identified which included individual descriptors representing specific nodes of data.

I conducted an analysis of the data contained in the various nodes to identify the most frequently used codes and their location in the data. The QSR NVivo software generated lists of coded passages by theme allowing for comparison, analysis, and further coding of data. Using the software program, I developed matrices that helped to display the relationships between data. The analysis of data and comparison of individual cases and different data sources was "continuous throughout the research process," a method suggested by Glasser & Strauss (1967, p. 115). As relationships appeared from the analysis of data, I identified and clarified findings and developed models using the software. NVivo was very helpful in the management of the large amount of data gathered through this study. The flexibility afforded by the NVivo program and the degree of comprehensiveness and consistency that resulted from the data analysis process was invaluable.

Validity and Reliability

This study extended over twelve months and utilized four different data gathering methods. Comparison of the individual responses using different methods over time

provided a form triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Mathison, 1988; Rossman & Wilson, 1985; Patton, 1990), as well as a richer more complex source of data (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Campbell & Fiske, 1959). The major codes or nodes involved in the data analysis were consistent across method and time. Validity in a study such as this depends on the extent to which the researcher has presented the perspectives of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) and is much more likely to occur when data have been gathered through multiple methods over time (Janesick, 1994). The data retrieval capabilities of the NVivo software program helped to ensure that an accurate and reliable story was told by allowing for comparison of coded text and transcripts throughout the process of data analysis.

The NVivo program also allowed for efficient comparison of multiple participant responses, a process that helped to identify points of consistency as well as difference. In this study the written responses of participants were compared with the results of the individual and group interviews and similarities and differences noted. The capabilities of the QSR NVivo software used in the data analysis also offered the opportunity for continual checking of coding to strengthen consistency and accuracy.

The use of multiple data gathering procedures over time, a key aspect of qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 1994), was also a part of this study. The extended research process encouraged individual and interpersonal reflection for all involved, including the researcher who kept a written journal for reflection.

The nature of the data gathering process provided opportunity for the twelve participants to give input and feedback as a part of the research process. During the final group interview session I shared some initial thoughts on the findings emerging from the

study and received important feedback and validation from participants. Several participants also volunteered additional written reflections on the research process, especially their experience in keeping the journal.

Chapter Summary

Researching spiritual growth is difficult. From a traditional research perspective, the "object" of the study - experiences of spiritual growth - are both difficult to describe and impossible to quantify. The goal of this study was to better understand experiences that participants identified as experiences of spiritual growth. The conceptual framework for this study, described in Chapter 1, is one of understanding derived through an approach that is subjective, interpretivist, hermeneutic and postmodern. Qualitative methods were used because they were consistent with the goal of the study and the conceptual framework of the inquiry. The study employed qualitative research methods common in educational research as well as practices that have been historically employed in the process of spiritual growth itself.

The goal was to better understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth by analyzing a number of experiences participants identified as experiences of spiritual growth. Twelve participants were involved in the study, which extended over a one-year period. All participants were members of the Particular Presbyterian Church. During the study the researcher was serving as a pastor at the church. The nature of the research sample was both a strength and weakness. Study participants were sociologically similar

as a group. All were members of the same church. Spiritual growth activities were supported by the church's organization. As researcher, I was perceived as an involved facilitator. That perception both benefited and limited participant responses, in some cases providing the context for more disclosure and reflection, and in other cases limiting the interactive process.

Descriptions of spiritual growth were gathered using four methods: a written journal kept by each participant for a three month period, an individual interview, a group interview and a final written reflection. In addition to these methods over half the group voluntarily participated in a second group interview and two voluntarily kept the written journal for an extended period. The research process identified numerous spiritual growth experiences. These were coded and analyzed using the QSR NVivo qualitative research software. The result was a rich description of different experiences.

The resulting findings from these descriptions will be described in the next two chapters. Chapter 3 will report findings focused on the personal dimensions of the phenomenon of spiritual growth as reported by study participants. Chapter 4 will report findings on the contextual dimensions of the reported experiences of spiritual growth.

CHAPTER 3

PERSONAL DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Based on participants' perspectives, spiritual growth has two broad dimensions, the personal and the contextual. Because of this, interpretation of the data will be presented in two chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to describe – from the participants' perspective - individual processes that are associated with their descriptions of spiritual growth experiences. These individual processes include "mental operations and structures that are involved in language, meaning, perception, conceptual systems, and reason" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 12). In Chapter 4 findings on the context of spiritual growth are reported.

The Components of Spiritual Growth

Participants' descriptions of spiritual growth in this study seemed to reflect six basic elements: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity and relationships, and intentional attribution of their experience to a spiritual reality. These characteristics were found in virtually every spiritual growth experience that was reported as a part of this study. They occurred in different intensities and with different emphasis. They also occurred in a different order for different participants. These six characteristics represent key components of spiritual growth as reported by participants in this study. Because of

this commonality, the six key elements suggest a model of the personal dimensions of spiritual growth. This model is depicted in Figure 1.

The model graphically depicts some important findings from this study. The attribution of the experience to a spiritual reality was central. Some form of bracketing was important in many participant descriptions of their experiences. Spiritual growth occurred as a part of activities and relationships. Both reflection and awareness were important components of spiritual growth. In this study the occurrence of spiritual growth

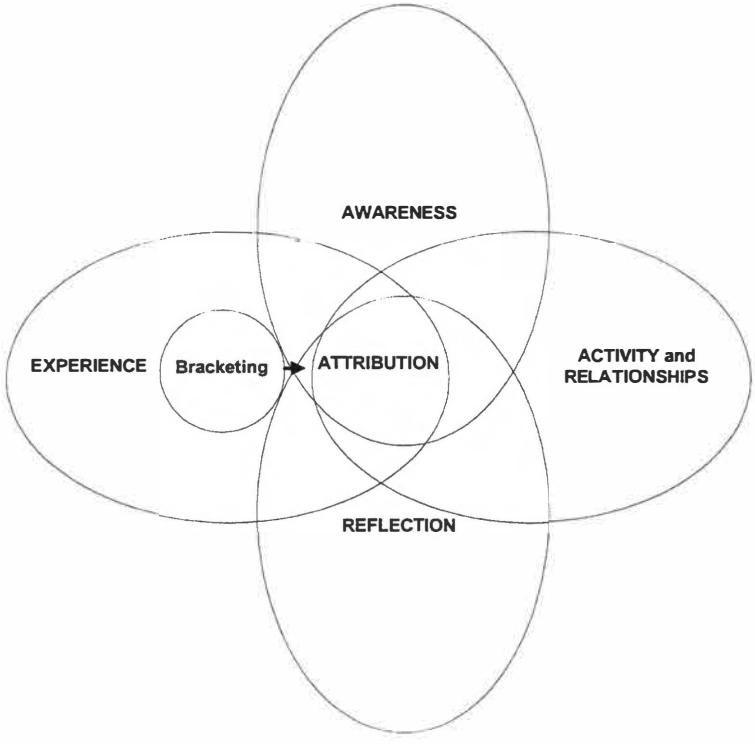

Figure 1: Personal Elements of Spiritual Growth

was often reported when these components seemed to intersect. As John, a male participant said, "Sometimes it just came together. Something happened. And sometimes I would just stop and think about it. And sometimes all of a sudden it would just dawn on me that God was trying to tell me something. It didn't happen often but when it did it was amazing." Spiritual growth was often reported when a participant, engaging in an activity, had an experience, and paused long enough to become aware of that experience and reflect on it, leading to an awareness causing the person to attribute the experience to the spiritual. In this study, components involved in spiritual growth included: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution. In this chapter findings related to each of these components will be described in turn.

Experience

Participants in the study described spiritual growth as an experience. Spiritual growth was an identifiable phenomenon that happened to a participant; something that they could be aware of, identify or feel. For these participants, spiritual growth involved activities, feelings or memories. These experiences were quite varied. In some cases they were described as positive or inspirational. In other cases they were described as negative and anxiety provoking. Participants described the phenomenon of experience in three ways: (1) as a part of the spiritual growth phenomenon itself, (2) as a result of spiritual growth, and (3) as something that triggered a spiritual growth experience. In this study spiritual growth was experienced as an intra-personal and extra-personal phenomenon.

Spiritual growth was intra-personal because it seemingly occurred within the person herself or himself. It was extra-personal in that participants associated it with experiences that were external to the individual.

Extra-personal Experience

Spiritual growth was experienced as an extra-personal phenomenon-- occurring in the context of numerous elements beyond the person, such as activities and relationships. Participants often reported that the experience of spiritual growth occurred in the context of an activity, and the nature of the activities associated with spiritual growth varied widely. Activity and social context are critical in the understanding of spiritual growth and will be discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter focuses on the intra-personal dimensions of the spiritual growth experience.

Intra-personal Experience

The experience of spiritual growth was intra-personal in that people described the phenomenon as coming from within. Spiritual growth included a perception extending beyond the observable activities involved. Participants described spiritual growth as a phenomenon of presence. As Jennifer reported, "I could sense God's presence… something very spiritual and real was a part of that experience. I knew it, even though you might not have seen anything different." Spiritual growth was experienced mentally as a perception, a thought or a feeling. Occasionally it was experienced as a physical

phenomenon. As Joy said, "I was walking and just felt something." Participants found the experience difficult to put into words. For many, the words used to describe the experience were much less important than the experience itself. As Ginny said, "I don't have words, I'm just there. It's just a wonderful feeling. The more I do that [spiritual activity], the more I grow. You just have to feel it. Experience it." In some cases, experiences were incidental, or unplanned. Often a personal crisis would trigger an experience of spiritual growth. "I didn't volunteer to have this experience," Angela remarked in her interview. Sometimes the experience was more intentional in the sense that the participants set out to better understand some question or topic. In all cases, no matter how intentional or incidental, participants experienced some unintended dimension to what they set out to do. Associated with that experience was a decision, consciously or unconsciously made, to be open to this unplanned phenomenon. Joy spoke of this openness when she said, "I think it has to happen to you, and I think you have to put yourself out there and be vulnerable and be willing to let it happen to you." When the experience of spiritual growth occurs, what happens and how does it happen? In addition to the notion of experience, participants' descriptions clustered into five interrelated factors that seemed to be a part of their experiences of spiritual growth: bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity and relationships, and attribution. Each will be examined in turn.

Bracketing

A key element associated with reported participant experiences of spiritual growth was bracketing. Bracketing involves pausing or stopping an activity either physically or psychologically, not in order to avoid the activity or experience, but rather to reflect on it or see it in a different way. Bracketing is similar to the phenomenological process of "epoche," a "deliberate suspension of the unquestioning acceptance of everyday, habitual interpretations" (Collins, 1995, p. 261). In this study, however, bracketing was not described in the sense that Husserl (1970) used the term, as a process of reduction, or peeling off layers representing different understandings of experience in order to uncover the pure phenomenon (Harre, 2000). Instead, bracketing served to help expand awareness through various forms of reflection. Bracketing in this study functioned as a "method for hermeneutic interpretation of existential phenomena" (Malik, 1996, p. 27).

Study participants reported experiences of stopping or pausing to "step back and listen." This process of stopping bracketed the experience psychologically and provided a psychic space for something to happen. One of the participants in the study, Milton, an attorney who described his life as very busy, spoke of the reflective pause: "Most of my spiritual growth comes when I pause to think. I don't realize I'm growing or recognize that I'm growing because my life is so busy. So, spiritual growth for me occurs every time I'm quiet." Sarah, a female who described herself as middle age echoed his words:

> But like I said, that takes a lot of discipline, and I forget it. I forget how important it is, so I just rush around going and doing. Then when I get so caught up in all kinds of situations that I could just tear my hair out, I say, "Oh, yes. Now, lets

step back and listen." But it takes a lot a lot of discipline to take the phone off the hook and not schedule your morning.

Numerous participants noted the process of bracketing as a part of their spiritual growth. Ellie, a physician, is an example: "When I pause and reflect on times when I feel God's presence more keenly, I realize that I grow spiritually." The process of bracketing or stopping to reflect was important.

Without the pause, participants reported that their lives were often too busy to learn or grow spiritually. The pause could be intentional, as in a regular time of quiet and meditation, or it could be unintentional, as when a change in health, marriage or other crisis seemed to force a person to stop and think. During the reflective pause a variety of personal activities took place, all of which were associated with participants' experiences of spiritual growth. These activities might be clustered under four general headings: reflection, awareness, activity / relationship, and attribution. In the next sections Each will be examined in turn.

Reflection

One of the key components of spiritual growth as identified in this study was reflection. Study participants reported engaging in an activity or have an experience, and pausing to reflect on that experience. That experience of reflection often led to an awareness they described as "spiritual." Of the major clusters of themes identified as a part of the data analysis process, reflection was the most common, identified by all study

participants and occurring in all project documents. Reflection accounted for over 10% of all coded passages.

Participants described the reflective process in different ways. The following journal entry from a male participant summarizes some key dimensions of the reflective process. Reflecting on the value of keeping a spiritual journal, Dick, who had never kept a journal before said:

> The value in putting it on paper from my standpoint is that I could reflect upon it . . . and really focus on that issue. You have to think. It makes you focus. It crystallized, I guess, if that's a proper term, it crystallized my thinking in that particular issue. It wasn't something where you're your sitting there, "Oh well I had a tough day today. Let's talk about this and lets do this." You were really focusing, concentrating, and opening up your heart and your soul in that particular area without regard to anything else in the whole world.

For Dick, spiritual growth involved "opening your heart and soul," and doing that involved reflection. Participants in this study identified three key elements in the reflective process: thinking, contemplation and remembering.

Thinking

The process of reflection involves thinking. Thinking was described as a type of analysis. In describing the thinking process, participants used such phrases as "taking a look at something," "figuring it out," "working through it," and "trying to determine." Thinking also involved questioning. Milton spoke emphatically about the need to "ask

myself the question" as being a critical part of the reflective process. Sometimes participants reported that thinking also involved the process of feeling. Understood in this way, affect means more than the process of feeling. Affect is like feeling as understood in the Jungian sense (Jung, 1976), as a kind of rational, cognitive, and reflective process focused on subjective evaluation (Hillman, 1971). In this sense feeling is a form of thinking. Participants spoke of taking time to think and identify "how I feel about something." The key phrase is "about something." One of the women in the study June wrote in her journal, "Spiritual growth happens when I stop long enough to think, 'What did I learn from the day and how did the experience affect my life?'" Thinking involves a process focused on some experience that can have either analytical or affective dimensions. As Will said, "Sometimes I will go with a plan and I will know what I want to think about."

Participants reported thinking about a variety of things: "odd everyday situations," "specific problems," "people and what's going on in their lives." As Will, a male participant said, referring to an experience of spiritual growth, "It was a time of reflection. It was a good time for me to put into words my feelings, my thoughts." Milton commented on his experience of reflection saying, "I'm thinking a lot about how different each person experiences stuff [spiritual growth]."

Contemplation

Contemplation is related to thinking but is less analytical. There is an openness to contemplation that is not usually present in thinking. A part of this meaning is conveyed

in the dictionary definition of the term. *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1996, 1998) defines contemplation as "considering, attending, musing, looking forward to something that is yet to happen, seeking further information on a topic." There is an open and expectant dimension to contemplation. Sometimes participants will use the word "think" to describe what is actually contemplation. The comment of one participant is illustrative: "I have an opportunity to just think." When asked to explain, the participant added, "You know, just kind of mull it over."

Participants described experiences that were forms of contemplation using such terms as pondering, wondering, puzzling. Sarah described reflective contemplation in this way: "It's mainly knowing who God is and just thinking and pondering on who he is." Ginny described contemplation as a way of "processing." To contemplate is to "wonder" about something and "to ask innocent questions." Contemplation is a form of reflection that requires an "inquiring mind," as Will described it. Some also spoke of meditation on a concern as a type of contemplation. Joy wrote in her journal, "My purpose was to meditate and to reflect on my life's journey spiritually."

Contemplation in this study is often a way to reflect on the bigger questions of life. Jennifer, one of the older women in the study described this kind of contemplation: "Since I have had this overriding feeling for at least 10 years that God had something left in mind for me, I now ponder could this be it?" Sometimes the experience of contemplative reflection can be life changing, as Joy, a middle age woman in the study reported:

> I began to withdraw a lot just simply because I was reading a lot about solitude and being quiet and listening to God. I was living alone. My daughter chose to

> live with her dad and not come to live with me. I had many months of thoughtful, prayerful opportunities to contemplate God. I felt like I had an epiphany, like I finally woke up and had a way of making space for God.

Even though participants seem to report contemplation as a less specific form of reflection than thinking, both are related. As a form of questioning, contemplation may not be as pointed as thinking, and the outcome might be more general, but both are forms of reflection. Whatever the form of reflection, it is a process of focusing, or as Will described it, "a creative organized discipline." Reflection is "like centering," Ellie said, "a focus or pause before you have to move on to the work at hand." Often, both thinking and contemplation are related to the third element in the reflective process: remembering.

Remembering

The process of remembering was an important part of the reflective process for all of the participants in this study. Remembering involves having a notion or idea come into the mind again. To remember is to have a "renewed apprehension of something" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language,* 1996, 1998). The process of remembering in this study took several forms.

For some remembering was an intentional act of re-call, of looking back, of hindsight. Ginny spoke of the experience of her husband's death, for her a powerful experience of spiritual growth, recalling that at the time she just tried to survive.

> Probably the most devastating thing that ever happened in my life was the death of my husband. The time of his death, and maybe three years after, was probably

> my greatest time of spiritual growth. At the time I didn't know it, but as I reflect back now, I know that God was with me. He was carrying me through that horrible time.

For Ginny, remembering involved looking back over that experience many times. Remembering was a part of the reflective process for her.

Journal writing was especially helpful in the process of remembering. Milton, reflecting on his experiences of spiritual growth in his journal, pointed to the importance of remembering for him: "I noticed many important events that I had just forgotten. Reading about them brings them back." June, one of the female participants in the study reflected on her experience keeping a journal:

> It set up a process of thinking for me, and I just begin to write down that process. Sometimes it led me to something I remembered, a quote or something from someone or something I had read that I felt was pertinent and that could help me get through that particular situation.

For some participants the process of remembering was unintentional, as "something that just popped into my mind." For others it was more intentional. Participants spoke of the importance of using the journal to review the events in their lives, both present and past. One talked of re-reading journal entries as a way "to remember things." Jack said it this way, "The value of journaling is to look back over the day...." At times, a specific activity and experience in the present would be a kind of catalyst for remembering other events. One participant referred to writing in the journal as a way to "jog my memory." Sometimes remembering was very specific, as when Sarah spoke of remembering

important Bible verses: "As I reflected I heard over and over again in my mind the passage from Psalms, 'Be still and know that I am God.'"

Summary of Reflection

Reflection literally means: "A part reflected, or turned back, at an angle; as, the reflection of a membrane; the result of meditation; thought or opinion after attentive consideration or contemplation" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language,* 1996, 1998). One participant, Jennifer, likened the process of reflection to holding up a mirror: "You stand up in front of the mirror and say, 'Um, golly. Things don't look the same as they did before.'"

The reflective process took different forms and the activities of thinking, remembering, and contemplation occurred in different sequences and intensities for different participants. Milton, reflecting on his experience of keeping the journal during his interview, talked about his experience of reflection:

> I think what it all boils down to is it's a way of learning from your mistakes, I guess. Nobody wants to run into a brick wall more times than they have too, and if you can go back, I guess that's the selfish way of looking at it, if you can go back and figure out how to do something better based on your past experiences. If recording them, writing them down as they happen, and then reflecting on them later helps you out, that's a great way to beat the system.

Reflection occurs over time. The actual reflective process was often anything but peaceful and calm. Sometimes reflection was described as a process of struggle or

grappling with an experience, issue, or feeling. One female participant, June, wrote in her journal, "I have been struggling in vain, trying to determine why it feels so hard." Another female participant, Joy, spoke of learning to "grapple once again with my own mother's death." For some the struggle itself was a catalyst for reflection. Joy, writing in her journal, asked, "Where does this struggle to do something worthwhile that has been mine since childhood come from?"

Participants spoke of reflecting in order to understand something or see what it means. Sometimes the meaning of the experience becomes clear long after the experience itself. Will talked about the reflective process:

> You can go at it all different kinds of ways, but they're connected. But they're also connected over time so that the experience of my grandmothers death becomes an experience of learning over, and over, and over again in a different way. Or the experience of reading the Bible or reading Psalm 23 becomes another activity leading to further connections over and over and over again.

Jack, one of the younger men said, "For me what spiritual growth has meant is coming to different challenges or forks in the road and then either seeking or prodded to seek the meaning and understanding that is greater than basic instincts and reaches far higher." Sometimes understanding involves remembering "things we've just forgot." Sometimes understanding is a product of the contemplative process. "As I reflect," one participant said, "sometimes things just gel. They get clearer" Another participant spoke of the process of discovering meaning and understanding as learning to be able "to see a pattern."

The participants in this study described their reflective activities in terms of thinking, contemplation and remembering. These three aspects of reflection actually occurred in a variety of ways. Sometimes, a person reported remembering something and then thinking about it. Sometimes they contemplated and then remembered. In whatever ways participants reported experiences of reflection as a part of their spiritual growth, very often these were also associated with the experience of awareness.

Awareness

Awareness was identified as a key element in the spiritual growth process. Angela spoke of awareness as involving "special moments when I can be completely present with where I am and genuinely aware of the presence of a creator." Such moments are often found in times of solitude, in quiet moments, through observation and watching one's experience of life whether in relationships, nature or activities. Participants spoke of awareness as an outcome of reflection. One said, "I though about it for a long time and then it dawned on me." In other instances, the phenomenon of awareness initiated the process of reflection. As one participant said, "...it got me started thinking." Participants spoke of awareness as an unusual experience, a process of waking up, realizing, noticing, seeing some aspect of life in a different way.

An Unusual Occurrence

Awareness was associated with unusual experiences. Participants spoke of their awareness as uncommon or special, involving something that they had not experienced before, sometimes something almost accidental. Participants used such words as "a vivid moment," an "exciting" and "very moving experience," and more than one participant alluded to a "special experience, different . . . an unusual feeling." In his interview, Will said, "It was a special experience and I wasn't quite sure of what to make of it." Awareness was also associated with surprise. Angela told of her relationship with her father in her journal: "I remembered being surprised that I started to tell the story about my thoughts about my dad and I ended up writing in the first person. I remembered thinking that was almost like I was having a conversation." One of the reasons this experience was so startling to her was that he had been dead for 35 years. June described her surprise, "I was real embarrassed to tell anyone for the longest time and nobody was more surprised [at the experience] than me." Participants spoke of being excited, of being "very moved."

In many instances participants experienced awareness as associated with feelings. One participant spoke of it as "an overriding feeling." Ellie described her experience by saying, "my senses were heightened." Ginny said, "I could feel his [God's] presence." Sometimes feelings were less specific, although just as important, as when Joy said, "When I go there and start reflecting on things, I get a special feeling." Other participants described their awareness of feelings of "great joy," or "peace," or an "anxious and uncertain moment" as important in their spiritual growth. Ginny spoke about the death of a close family member as a profound experience of spiritual growth for her, saying, "I

think that I can feel his presence with me as much in my brain as in my heart. It's just that sometimes when you feel it with your heart you feel it in a special way." Awareness often involved an emotional response for participants in this study.

Awakening

A foundational image of awareness among participants in the study was awakening. Will spoke of "waking up." Awareness involved a process of becoming more conscious of a phenomenon, feeling or activity. Polly's experience reported in her journal is illustrative: "What seemed to start out as an ordinary hair appointment at the beauty shop ended up being a spiritual awakening!" Participants also spoke of awareness as a kind of spiritual awakening, different from other experiences. One said, "It was like I woke up." Will described one such experience in an interview, "I don't' know how to describe it. It's the kind of awake you'd feel if you heard a crash in your house like somebody's breaking in. Startling, like waking up." Another participant told of becoming more conscious or awake through the journal writing process. In a conversation about his spiritual growth experiences, Will said, "It [the experience of spiritual growth] makes me more conscious of what I do." For the participants in the study, the experience of awakening was associated with two types of mental activity: attending and discovery.

Attending

Attending is a conscious and intentional effort to focus the mind on something. Etymologically the word means, "to stretch to" (Ayto, 1990). It is related to the idea of "holding," from the Latin, *tenere, "to hold,"* and the English word, "container." In the process of attending the senses are heightened. In this study, participants spoke of attending as a process of recognizing and realizing. Recognizing is a conscious process of associating. The word is associated with the Latin re-cognize, or "re-know" (Ayoto, 1990, p. 42). Closely associated with remembering, recognition is often a dramatic and startling experience in which a person comes to know something that was previously not clear. In this study recognizing was often associated with a time of intense mental activity, struggle, questioning that often led to some resolution or answer. Participants spoke of "knowing" in a way that they were "absolutely sure." One participant reporting an experience of spiritual growth said, "I knew it [happened]. I was absolutely sure that God cared for me." Another said, "Sometimes you think you are having a spiritual experience. Sometimes you know it, and sometimes you figure it out later."

Realization is similar to recognition in that it has to do with a mental process where something, a thought or insight, becomes "real" (Ayoto, 1990). Often associated with observation and association, but in a less dramatic way than recognition (at least in this study), realization was described as a "vivid moment" by one participant who reported on her reflective process, "I'll start thinking about just kind of odd everyday situations. Then I will run into something and realize the God's put me there in a particular place, for a particular reason." Attending is an intentional mental process of becoming aware, or tuned to the spiritual aspects of life. As Milton said, "it helped me by

putting them in words. It made me more aware of my spiritual endeavors, more tuned-in; able to observe more...." For Milton the process of putting the experience into words was a process of attending, an active intentional process that led to awareness. Attending was a key aspect of the process of becoming aware of the spiritual. Attending is intentional. In this study participants also described awareness in more heuristic terms, as a process of discovery.

Discovery

In addition to attention, participants in this study also described the process of becoming aware as one of discovery. In contrast to attention, which has a more intentional quality to it, discovery has an unplanned and unintended quality. Participants spoke of "things just popping up." Jennifer told of a class where she was working with second graders and how one of the little boys made a contribution that was totally unexpected and extraordinarily helpful:

> I stressed learning to listen for God's guidance by being still and quiet for a few seconds every day. Out of the blue one of our most active out spoken second graders suggested that we practice during class. I was astonished. Each person chose a spot and we had a brief period of quiet. I felt that this was a little jewel handed to all of us. I felt God's spirit among us.

In her interview Ginny talked about her experience of using the written journal for reflection: "I'll be just talking, talking and all of a sudden something will just fly through my mind. It's almost a stream of consciousness, and you would think it is a stream of

consciousness." Milton spoke of a "light bulb experience," like a big "Ah Ha." Jennifer said, "It [the new insight] just jumped out at me." Two others spoke of insights in difficult situations coming to them as one said, "Off the top of my head."

Participants in this study associated the phenomenon of spiritual growth with experience. In describing the nature of their spiritual growth experiences, participants underscored the importance of bracketing as a pause in the normal routines of life, or as one participant described it, a time when the "normal rat race of life stops even if only for a minute." In the context of their experience, and through the opportunity afforded through bracketing, participants reported experiences that involved two cognitive dimensions: a process of reflection including thinking, contemplation and remembering, and an experience of awareness, or awakening through attending and discovery. In each case these cognitive dimensions of spiritual growth were associated with some activity or relationship.

Activity and Relationships

Study participants reported a strong link between spiritual growth, activity, and relationships. In many cases participants' spiritual growth experiences occurred in the context of activities and relationships, and were almost inseparable from them. Relationships were associated with many descriptions of spiritual growth. Activities were quite varied, ranging from participation in traditional church rituals or quiet walks in the woods, to listening to concerts, or awakening from sleep. At times, specific activities

served as a type of catalyst for spiritual growth, and at other times, experiences of spiritual growth led to new activities. Sometimes the experience of spiritual growth led to an insight that helped solve a business problem, an act of forgiveness, an increased sense of appreciation for a loved one, or a more attentive behavior toward children. Even the act of playing with children led to a deeper spiritual awareness that participants identified with spiritual growth. Chapter 4 will include a detailed discussion of the context of participants' spiritual growth experiences, including relationships and activities. What is important here is to note that relationships and activities were reported as an important component of the spiritual growth process. Participants associated their experiences of spiritual growth with their relationships and activities.

Attribution

What makes an experience spiritual? How do you know that a learning experience is an experience of spiritual growth? A critical aspect of the response of participants in this study was the attribution of their experience to spiritual phenomena. Attribution refers to the process of explaining, ascribing, imputing or associating in the sense of causing to belong to (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language,* 1996, 1998; Watts & Williams, 1988).

Attribution has long been a subject of research in social psychology where researchers have tried to understand why people interpret the same information differently (Jones, 1990). Kenny (1994) reports on research that describes three reasons

for different perceptions of the same phenomenon. These include different information, different meaning systems, and different unique impressions. Kenny (1994) asserts that attribution is essentially "idiosyncratic," that the "uniqueness of the perception is entirely in the mind of the perceiver" (p. 91). In other words, individuals perceive differences in a phenomenon and those perceptions affect their understanding, feelings and behaviors.

Participants in the study perceived a spiritual reality they described variously as God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the spiritual, a mystery, or spiritual growth. Although participants noted that spiritual growth was a phenomenon incapable of complete understanding or description, they asserted that their perception of the spiritual dimensions of an experience affected their understanding, feelings, and behaviors. The perception of the spiritual dimensions of an experience is termed attribution, although unlike the more common understandings of attribution common to the psychological literature (Jones, 1990), participants viewed the attribution of spiritual growth as a phenomenon mostly beyond their control.

For many participants in this study, the process of reflection led to the identification of an experience as spiritual. Speaking of reflection, Jack said: "What it [the reflection experience] did do was cause me to look at the spirituality of some of the things that I was doing." In reflecting on their experiences, participants came to realize that something occurred that they would later name as "spiritual." Milton reflected on his experience as he said:

> I wasn't sure whether that was actually a growth experience or whether it was merely a scared rat just trying to find it's way out of the maze. Now I reflect on it

> I know it was a spiritual growth experience. Only later could I say, "I think I was really in a time of spiritual growth and I really learned and I'm better for it."

Participants attributed a spiritual dimension to their experiences in a variety of ways. One participant spoke of her willingness to identify an experience as spiritual as she asked this rhetorical question during the group interview: "What did I allow to be spiritual, how did it affect me, and how did I grow from it?" Perceiving a spiritual dimension in an experience seemed to depend on a person's willingness to be open to that possibility. Closely associated with willingness is desire and expectation. Participants had an expectation that they would experience something spiritual. Spiritual growth occurs when a person "wants to relate to God" and is "willing to make an effort to try to understand and to seek that relationship," as Polly said in her interview. Willingness and desire by themselves however do not guarantee that an experience will be identified as spiritual. June lamented her lack of spiritual growth experiences when she said: "I can't say that every day I experience a spiritual experience. I have no doubt that God lives, but I don't feel his presence everyday. I try, but it doesn't happen."

Polly spoke of the ability to see the spiritual dimensions of experience. In this sense a person is able to attribute the experience to a spiritual phenomenon.

> That means… you have the ability to see God in all things… When you don't see God in something, "you roll up your sleeves and seek him out, because you know absolutely, that he is there."

This ability is developed through intentional effort and practice. Angela related her experience:

> I had been practicing, listening, trying to just sit quietly and say, "God give me some answers. Touch me let me know." Thomas Merton said, "It's when you can feel God's hand on your shoulder," as an analogy that you know he's there. I just felt it. I just knew God was with me, and that was the first time in my whole life I'd ever felt that way. It took a lot of work to get to that point. It took almost a year of really working trying to get to that point.

Through effort and practice, a person is better able to perceive the spiritual dimensions of an experience.

Participants described their attribution of spiritual growth in several ways. Ginny spoke for several others when she said: "When you have the experience, you know it." For other participants, attribution involved a more rational judgment. June spoke of reading as a key part of her experience of spiritual growth when she said, "I read a lot and I consider it very spiritual." For others, attribution was almost a faith experience. As Polly said, "I think we hear God speaking through so many avenues. I definitely believe that." Jennifer said, "I will trust that the Lord must have led me, so I'll just go with it." Will said that he identified an experience as spiritual because "it seemed to involve something supernatural." Ellie spoke of spiritual growth occurring even when one is not conscious of it. "I definitely think I grow without knowing it." Whatever the form of attribution, participants identified the process attributing a spiritual dimension to their life experiences as a learning process. As Will said:

> But my determination is rising and my spiritual growth is maturing. My understanding of God and my confidence in him makes me want to [grow spiritually].

In every case, participants made an informed, reflective decision concerning their experience, attributing these experiences to a spiritual reality.

Chapter Summary

Study participants reported numerous examples of spiritual growth in their written journals, as well as the individual interviews and group interviews. In examining these descriptions six key components were identified: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution. Experience was identified as foundational to spiritual growth. Sometimes experience served as a kind of trigger initiating spiritual growth. Participants identified various crisis events that functioned in this way. In a similar way, activity was both the context of spiritual growth and also sometimes the result. Reflection and awareness might occur separately or they might occur together as a part of spiritual growth. One participant reported, "It dawned on me [awareness] that.... And that gave me a lot to think about [reflection]." Each of these six components of spiritual growth is distinct; yet they often occur in relationship to one or more of the other elements.

Spiritual growth occurs at the point where experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution converge, as a participant named or attributed their experience to a spiritual reality. Depending on the nature of the experience, any one or more of the components in the model might be mentioned or emphasized to a greater or lesser degree. What seems to be widely characteristic of this

sample is that these elements are found in virtually all the experiences that participants reported, and they were important aspects of their spiritual growth.

This chapter described the personal dimensions of spiritual growth. In every case reported, spiritual growth was associated with activity occurring in a social context. Because the context of spiritual growth was so important in this study, Chapter 4 will examine distinctive elements of the contextual dimension of participants' spiritual growth experiences.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXTUAL DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Findings in Chapter 3 described participants' experiences of spiritual growth from a personal or individual perspective. Six components of the spiritual growth experience were identified: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution. In addition to the more personal components, participants also described various contextual elements of spiritual growth. This chapter will explore these contextual elements, describing participant experiences in relationship to time and place, relationships, activities and results. Together the personal components and the contextual elements comprise a conceptual model of the spiritual growth experience that will be outlined in this chapter. Closely related to the differences highlighted in describing the contextual elements of spiritual growth, the findings from the study suggest four distinct types of spiritual growth that will also be explored in the chapter.

The Context for Spiritual Growth

Individuals experience life in a particular context. Context involves actions, activities, results, and associated phenomena (Griffin, Belyaeva, Soldatova & the Velikhov-Hamburg Collective, 1993). Context in this study refers to authentic, real-life situations, the culture within which the individual lives and engages in activities.

Participants in the study experienced spiritual growth in a variety of contexts. Their experiences occurred within the broader context of time and place and clustered into three main contextual categories: relationships, activities and results. In this chapter I will first describe the findings of the study with regard to the role of time and place and then describe spiritual growth of the participants as it relates to the contextual categories of relationships, activities and results.

Time and Place

Time played a role for study participants in their spiritual growth. For some participants, spiritual growth occurred over a long period of time. As Milton said during the last group interview at the conclusion of the study, "I'm still trying to figure all this stuff out. [The group then laughed a hearty and knowing laugh]. I think maybe that's part of my whole spiritual growth experience and my learning experience." For other participants, reflection was associated with a compression of the experience of time. Dick described an important experience of spiritual growth as a moment "where time seemed to stand still." Whether viewed from a long-term perspective, or compressed into a moment, time was viewed as a type of catalyst for spiritual growth, heightening participants experiences of reflection, awareness and attribution.

In addition to time, participants also reported that place was an important part of the context of their spiritual growth. One participant underscored the importance of a particular monastery in her experience of spiritual growth. She said: "I love the church,

the music, the stately grounds, the beautiful gardens, the herbs, and even the eggs from the chickens they cultivate. It makes me aware that I am in a higher and deeper experience." Joy described her home as an important place for her spiritual growth. As she described it:

> My home itself provides a spiritual high. I love the beauty of the babbling stream, lovely garden, the hand-rubbed wooden beams on the inside, even the Oriental rugs. The artwork speaks to me. It's like a cathedral and a very spiritual place.

Participants described very different places that they associated with their spiritual growth, including the church sanctuary, places of retreat such as a vacation home and a favorite place to "just sit and think," as one participant said.

Interestingly, in this study, no reported experience of spiritual growth was associated with a formal educational setting, whether a classroom in the church or a school or college. When asked about this in the group interview, one participant simply said, "In school you do a different kind of learning." Milton commented on his experience of spiritual growth during the group interview: "For me spiritual growth is very personal. It's something I do by myself . . . well I do share it with Susan [his spouse], but its not something you can learn in a class."

The phenomena of time and place represent the context where experiences of spiritual growth occurred. The real-life situations that occurred in the context of time and place were relationships, activities and results. These experiences are described in the next section.

Relationships

Relationships were most often cited as a part of the context of spiritual growth, and were associated with approximately 75% of the passages coded. "Inspiration comes when I am with other people," one participant said. The following response, by a male participant, is typical: "For me communication is the key to spiritual growth, expressing your thoughts or your feelings to others. It can happen anywhere, especially where you least expect it. God touches me through other people." In the context of the group interview, June seemed to speak for many when she said:

> I've been struck by how, in a way, God seems to be a collaborative enterprise. Because a lot of what I've heard [through participating in the group interview experience used in this study] is that God shows up in these relationships and experiences with other human beings in a way that's pretty memorable.

Polly said: "I think God uses people to communicate with me." Spiritual growth experiences were often associated with relationships.

Relationships seem to contribute to spiritual growth in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, family relationships were mentioned the most often. Participants spoke of the important role family members played in their spiritual growth. A number of participants named their relationship with their spouse as being a very important context for their spiritual growth. Dick spoke of the importance of his relationship with his spouse for his spiritual growth:

> Mary and I feel closer in our marriage now than we ever have. We were trying to figure out why. Is it because our kids are older? Is it because we have more time

> together? We trace it back to our involvement in a small group. Because we both go and it's a time to talk about spiritual things. It probably sows that seed so you notice it and talk about it [spiritual growth] more often.

The small group that Dick mentioned was a group of adults who met together weekly for support, study, and prayer. It was an example of the importance of close friendships in spiritual growth. Participants pointed to increased "communication with others," and "caring" as critical elements in the spiritual growth process. "When I experience the caring and love of another person, it reminds me of God's love, and I feel closer to God," Jennifer said. Times of caring can happen as a part of simple conversations, prayer, or times when a person "bares their soul" – or shares deeply - about personal concerns.

Individuals in parent relationships as well as those who served as teachers of children in the church cited relationships with children as mediating experiences of spiritual growth. Two participants told of teaching in the church's religious education program and being surprised or moved by the response of a child to the extent that they identified the experience as an example of their spiritual growth. Jennifer told about her experience teaching a class of first and second graders and a time when a boy who was often a behavior problem actually became the catalyst for one of her experiences of spiritual growth. As a part of the class session, she was talking about using "quiet places" for prayer. The little boy said, "Why can't we do that right now." The class stopped, each of the children became quiet and they experienced a short period of silent prayer together. Jennifer found herself touched by this experience, "It was a moment in each of those first and second graders life [*sic*] that perhaps the Holy Spirit had chosen to work through this

little boy, who could be a handful if he wants to be." She was surprised at how a little boy could help turn an "ordinary circumstance… into a moment of 'Thank you God.'"

Work relationships also were named as contexts for spiritual growth. Polly commented, "I had no idea that she [work colleague] was going through that. Talking about it together was really powerful, and spiritual." Will also commended on how work was a context of spiritual growth for him: "Sometimes its really hectic and challenging, but then sometimes in a really strange way something will happen, often right in the middle of work, not even something religious, and I realize God, is there." Ginny spoke of an experience of the spirit in the midst of a difficult business meeting: "It was awful. I didn't really know what to say. Part of me felt really angry. We talked for a long time and then I just felt this strange peace come over me. I know it was God's spirit."

Although relationships were often positive contextual factors in participants' spiritual growth, at times they represented a kind of "negative catalyst" because they were difficult and unpleasant. Divorce represents one example. Two participants told of very difficult and painful relationships with former spouses and how these were contexts for spiritual growth in their lives. The relationship, a "miserable experience" in itself, was like a catalyst where a deep spiritual insight became clear. As Angela said:

> One of the most vivid moments for me when I really felt like God was literally speaking to me to give me a direct answer happened at the time when I realized my marriage was at a horrible state and that we would probably separate.

Two other participants in the study told of spiritual growth experiences that occurred at the time of the death of a spouse and close family member. Ginny was present when her husband died unexpectedly. Later she reflected on her experience:

> When Bill died, there was this big light around him. You could feel his [God's] presence, which is rare. But, that was the biggest single thing that's ever happened to me. I mean I've had a lot of little experiences. (Laugh). That was the only time I've ever heard a voice, but boy it grabbed me. This is so ridiculous, but it truly was spiritual growth for me.

Relationships, both positive and negative were an important context for participants' spiritual growth in this study. Three distinct aspects of relationships were identified in this study that serve to extend the understanding of this context: the intra-personal relationship, affect, and the catalytic role of relationships.

The Intra-personal Relationship

Although participants in this study often mentioned interpersonal relationships as an important context for spiritual growth, the intra-personal relationship, or relationship that is perceived to occur within the person himself or herself, was also viewed as important. Participants used descriptors such as "a mystery, something I don't understand," or "deep silence, special moments when I can be completely present to myself" in describing this intra-personal dimension. Others described their intra-personal experience as a feeling of emptiness. Ginny said: "I just sat there, totally empty and spent, doing nothing." Letting go, a kind of psychic turning loose of an assumption, was also mentioned as a part of this intra-personal dimension of spiritual growth: "I quit. I just turned my life over to God and said 'Show me.' Later he did." Participants sometimes reported both the interpersonal and intra-personal dimensions at the same time. Ginny

described a very moving experience of being with a good friend as her husband died: "While I was holding her and we were just quiet, I was silent on the outside, but I was crying on the inside."

Affect and Relationships

Many times, instances of feeling or affect were closely associated with descriptions of the relational context of spiritual growth. Sometimes affect or feeling seemed almost inseparable from the relational context. Dick's comment is an example:

> At a meeting today, Leslie White showed me the birth announcement for her grandson. Her daughter and son-in-law are in graduate school and the birth announcement included Bible verses for the new baby, chosen by the mother, father and the little brother. They have had such a challenge [with the pregnancy and birth]. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I could hardly read it. I get choked up writing about it now. I shared a copy of the announcement. We were all moved. I felt a deep spirit of thankfulness.

Dick identified this experience as an instance of spiritual growth. The spiritual dimension was associated with the relationship along with a deep sense of emotion. Both were a part of the context of his experience. In this study participants often reported an emotional or affective dimension as a part of the learning process. Jennifer, reporting an intra-personal experience involving a deep sense of spiritual acceptance of her failings said: "The experience brought out strong tearful emotions in me." Jack summarized his comments at the group interview when he said: "Spiritual growth is something you feel." Angela said:

"My experience came from the heart." For many participants, feelings often accompanied both interpersonal and intra-personal experiences of spiritual growth.

The Catalytic Function of Relationships

Whether interpersonal or intra-personal, relationships were a catalyst as well as context for participants' spiritual growth. A catalyst in this sense is something that causes an event to occur. Relationships themselves sometimes seemed to precipitate an experience of spiritual growth. Participants expressed their views of this effect differently. In once case God was the agent in the relationship that precipitated the growth: "I like to think that God has put the right people around me to help me out." In another case the participant played the main role and her initiative precipitated the resulting growth: "Connecting with other people gives you the opportunity to connect with God." In this instance it was the experience of "connecting" with the person that led to the spiritual growth. In another case the "other" person seemed to provide the catalytic effect leading to an experience of God. As one person said, "You can see God through other people." Here the other person seems function as a kind of metaphor who helps to make the reality of God clearer. Interestingly, however, the effectiveness of the relationship as a context for a participant's spiritual growth did not seem to depend on the values or perspectives of the other person involved in the relationship. As Polly said:

> I think we hear God speaking through so many avenues. I definitely believe that, because he uses everybody. He uses people who don't even love him or know

him to teach us as Christians how to live and how to learn. So, I try to be aware of all of God's workings.

Important as relationships were for participants' spiritual growth, not all relationships were seen as a context for spiritual growth. One participant said bluntly, "I experience God in relationships, but not all of them." This was especially true of the participants who reported going through a divorce. For these participants, spiritual growth had little or nothing to do with the relationship they had with their ex-spouse, even thought the experience of the divorce itself might be the context for much spiritual growth.

One context for spiritual growth was relationships. Another context involved activities. In the next section I will describe some of the key activities associated with spiritual growth.

Activity

Participants reported a variety of activities associated with spiritual growth, including activities in the church, in nature, at work, with family, and during recreation and service. This section describes each in turn.

Church Activities

Since the research sample involved in this study was made up of individuals who were long time active members in the church, and church is often thought of as a context where spiritual growth occurs, one would expect to find significant reports of spiritual

growth experiences associated with church experiences. An interesting finding to be described later in the study was that many experiences of spiritual growth occurred outside the context of the church and its programming. Nevertheless the church was an important context for participants' reported spiritual growth experiences. Of the total number of spiritual growth experiences reported by participants, the Church was the context for about 33%. Church-related spiritual growth activities involved such things as worship services, rituals, educational experiences, and service activities.

Participants reported church related spiritual growth activities in a variety of ways. For one participant the worship ritual was an important context for her spiritual growth: "I love the worship ritual of the Church, and I go just because I want to bring Christ into my life through that ritual." For another participant, it was the ritual of attending itself that was important: "I find that if I try to stay with a ritual or regimentation in my religious life, I become more aware of the spirit. It's kind of a reminder." Another said, "It's comforting to me to feel that today [Sunday] I did this and next week I will do the same thing essentially."

Ritual was also associated with memory, connecting one life experience with another. "The service transported me back to my past. It is something about the ancient habit of calling to God that fills me with reverence each time I participate in worship." For some participants, the rituals of the church such as the Sacrament of Communion were a primary context for spiritual growth. For others it was singing familiar hymns, as one person described: "I just think that God speaks to us though those hymns. I think they are inspired." The importance of church ritual also seemed to increase over time for many people. "I have spent a lot of time in this church. Church is an important experience,

through all the relationships and activities. Church is a very spiritual experience for me." The church provided a structured context where spiritual growth was experienced.

For others prayer was a key activity of spiritual growth. Sometimes prayer occurred in the context of a church activity while a person was alone or with a close friend or family member. "When we pray together," Dick said, reporting his routine of daily prayer with his spouse, "It always helps. We often feel closer to each other and sometimes we both feel the spirit's presence."

Some participants felt drawn to prayer. Angela said: "God is calling me to pray, and it feels good to be part of this work." Some participants pray daily. Dick said: "I prayed daily, as usual, but I also prayed one or two times extra today." Joy commented on the effects of prayer when she said, "When I do pray, I find myself more." Sarah said, "As we were praying, I felt God's presence."

Polly reflected on her experience of God when she said in the interview: "I tend to talk a lot, so I love the opportunity to be quiet and just kind of listen. I hear God speaking through so many avenues." Although affirming the value of prayer as a part of his spiritual growth, Milton expressed a concern to know whether he was actually "hearing God" during his prayers of "just talking." He said:

> It's hard for me to really know. My praying and my thinking seem to get mixed together. I can't really tell when the prayer stops and when I'm just thinking about what I should do. I don't know whether I'm asking or talking to God.

Whether it involved talking or listening, most participants said that prayer was an important context for their spiritual growth.

Some participants noted the importance of the sermon as a part of the worship service. Others highlighted the value of retreats, formal church educational events often held off-site and extending overnight. One said describing the results of one such experience, "I come home with a warm place in my heart like God is inside me."

For some participants, spiritual growth experiences strengthened an existing faith. For others the experience itself was transforming. Polly related her story of one such transformational experience:

> I was living in Pensacola in 1985. I was probably in my 20s. I'm 42 now, and it was specific. It happened in church. I was singing a hymn. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by feelings of sadness. Perhaps I felt that way because I was overwhelmed by my responsibilities as a mom and a wife in a brand new town away from old friends and family. As I was singing the words, the words just seemed to jump off the page and into my heart. They were addressing the innermost thoughts and feelings. Speaking directly to me as if a person was talking to me. It's kind of hard to explain, but I believe that God spoke those words of compassion and love and understanding to me in that place. His presence was so strong that I sat down and didn't hear another word. I went home, and I told my husband that I was going to join the church.

In the context of the church's worship service, while singing a hymn, Polly became aware of a strong spiritual presence in her life. She felt a compassion and love and understanding that changed her self-understanding to the degree that she decided to become a member of the church.

Not all participants in the study viewed the church and church activities as a positive context for spiritual growth. Sometimes the rituals of the church were seen as barriers in the spiritual growth process. One participant described her feelings about the church, "Worship to me is so personal, so intimate that the 'church' is almost a detractor."

Activities Outside the Church Context

Since the Particular Presbyterian Church represents a strong culture with well-defined customs, language and symbols (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1992), and participants in the study have been very heavily involved in the church for decades, one would also expect that the church's culture might have some influence on participants' experiences. What was striking among these participants was the number and diversity of reported spiritual growth experiences that occurred in the context of everyday life and outside the life of the church. Sixty-seven percent of the total number of spiritual growth experiences reported did not occur in the context of the church. Nowhere in their journals, or in their interviews or group interviews did participants associate these with their church experience.

In addition, participants were asked during the data gathering process to indicate the frequency of their participation in church activities and the frequency of spiritual growth experiences in their lives. One might expect participants who have been heavily involved in church activities to report a greater frequency of church-related spiritual growth experiences. This was not the case. The largest frequency of spiritual growth

experiences occurred for those who indicated monthly or occasional church attendance. This could be related to the uniqueness of this sample. One interpretation might be that church activities do not focus on spiritual growth. The data suggest that there is little opportunity in the context of the church and its activities to talk about spiritual growth experiences that occur outside the context of the church's life. Will's comment is suggestive of this. During the interview process he spoke of a "bizarre," "very curious," and "supernatural" experience occurring at the time of his grandmother's death. After describing it, he said, "I haven't talked about this with anyone and I haven't heard anybody talking about things like that [at church], and I haven't pursued it, but sometimes I do wonder."

Since the researcher was serving as a pastor of the church where the participants were long time members and leaders, and the "socially acceptable response" would have been to highlight the church related experiences of spiritual growth (Quigley, 1997; Quigley & Uhland, 2000), the response of the participants noting a large number of non-church-related experiences of spiritual growth is probably noteworthy. This response may be an indicator of rapport and trust with the researcher (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Fingeret & Danin, 1991). Because the response was unexpected, it may serve to help validate the non-church-related data. A more socially acceptable response for participants would be to mention the church related experiences and overlook the others.

Although church-related activities were a part of the context for participants' experiences of spiritual growth, a majority of their experiences did not occur in the context of church activities. Spiritual growth occurred in a variety of additional contexts that are described below.

Nature related activities. In this study activities related to nature accounted for approximately 33% of reported spiritual growth experiences. As Polly said, "I think God uses people; I think he uses scripture; I think he uses nature to just show who he is." Another said, "I recognize God's presence in nature." June was more specific: "I experience God's presence in nature and in weather and in animals." Another woman said, "I get inspired on mountaintops." In nature, one participant reported, it is like "I feel a slight tug, opening the door to another realm, ever so slightly and quietly." Angela, referring to the beauty of nature said, "The setting alone could call your soul." Recreational experiences having to do with nature were identified as important contexts for spiritual growth. Jennifer said: "The deck at the cabin where I can watch the sun set the sun rise, the birds, the wind going through it. God speaks to my life there." For Joy, the beach is important. "The water and sand and the way the waves come and go out all adds a rhythm to my soul."

Nature was also identified as a catalyst for spiritual growth. Will spoke of a unique experience he had at the beach, a metaphor of life where nature was the catalyst for his learning:

> At the ocean, I left the shore and walked out into the water. As I got deeper, I was comforted by my faith and knowledge of the beach and tides. I was also fascinated with my physical growth and ability to stand strong in the water. The waves didn't throw me. As I got further out there were larger swells. I kept going further and the water got deeper. The swells got larger and larger. Then, without

> realizing it, I was over my head. For the next long while, I was treading water in rough seas, taking breaths at the low points of the swells, and getting submerged and tossed about by the waves. Then I let go and floated, going with the energy of the waves, paddling toward shore. I learned again how important it is to let go and trust the spirit.

Will reflected on an experience in nature. He did not enter the water in order to reflect. He just wanted to enjoy the beach. The reflection occurred as a result of an unplanned experience. Sometimes participants reported a more intentional approach. Joy, who spoke of a decision she needed to make, wrote in her journal, "I'm going back outside to look at the lilies." The lilies represented a context for reflection that she found helpful. Caring for the world was also identified as an important act and a part of spiritual growth. June wrote: "I have a responsibility to protect the environment."

Recreational activities. Participants reported spiritual growth experiences in the context of various recreational activities. Gardening, for example, was reported as a spiritual context. One participant said: "Nurturing a sick plant and watch[ing] it revitalize makes me feel so much the part of the whole of the Universe." Another female participant expressed her feelings more directly, "The place where I feel the closest, to God is in my garden. I do spiritual growth when I dig."

Other recreational activities were also reported as important contexts for spiritual growth. Examples include reading, music, walking and other forms of exercise. Joy reported, "I experience God during quiet walks on the beach in the late evening watching

my dog smile as he sniffs his favorite smells of the sea. Observing the water and the birds. Watching the sun drop behind the horizon." Another participant said, "I hear God speak to me when I swim."

Participants reported reading as an activity and context for their experiences of spiritual growth. Reading takes place in many different contexts. In this study, participants reported experiences of spiritual growth as a part of informal, self-directed reading that they associated with recreational, or non work-related activity. Reading specific authors such as Thomas Merton, St. Francis, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer inspired some participants. Dick described his experience of reading: "We read things that were different, by great religious thinkers like St. Francis." Spiritual growth for Joy involved "the solitude of a morning cup of coffee in my favorite chair reading *Simple Abundance*." Angela reported having experiences of spiritual growth as she was reading a devotional book like *Day By Day* or a poet like Rilke.

Many participants in this study found reading the Bible to be a source of inspiration and spiritual growth. Polly said: "I feel the closest to being in God's presence when I study the Bible." Angela reported that reading the Bible led to a result- the answer to a question. "The verse was the answer to what I needed to think about doing. God gave me an answer." Another said, "Each time I read, no matter how familiar the passage or Bible version, the Holy Spirit reveals something fresh to me." Spiritual growth occurred in the context of reading.

Another recreational context for spiritual growth was rest. Will, a very busy professional, reported a very meaningful vacation experience: "This was the first time I did mainly nothing except kick back, eat and sleep." For others, resting was like

"catching a fresh breath" and resulted in "a new perspective" and "a lot more energy." "I came back a lot more in touch with the Spirit."

Service activities. Participants also reported experiences of spiritual growth in the context of specific acts of service for other people. June said, "In my life, my religious experiences happen when I give something with no thought of getting." For some participants, experiences like that occurred through participation in service activities, such as taking food to the hungry, or visits to a prison. For others, their experiences of spiritual growth were more informal and incidental, often associated with "random acts of kindness," as one participant said. Participants reported that they felt a spiritual presence when engaged in activities for others' benefit. Whether relating with children, the elderly, people who were ill, building a house for Habitat for Humanity, or working in the Rescue Mission, it was the act of "giving of yourself," as Jennifer said, that often brought her "close to God." Ellie summarized her view on the importance of service activities for her spiritual growth when she said: "Giving and receiving- that is a spiritual experience for me." Another said, "God needs to be seen in me by other people." Acts of service that focused on the needs of others represented an important part of the context for spiritual growth for the participants in this sample.

Family and work activities. Spiritual growth was more often associated with family activities than work activities, but both were seen as important contexts. Spiritual

growth that was associated with work usually involved solving a problem or dealing with a crisis, and was often associated with an unexpected insight. As one participant reported: "I had no idea what to do, and then it became clear." Family experiences were associated with spiritual growth. Participants described experiences of spiritual growth that occurred in the context of car-pooling, birthday parties, anniversaries, illness, death, conflict and reconciliation. They were associated with children, spouses and extended family. Sarah reported, "I was quickly reminded that my children are a gift from God. I am so grateful." Experiences with children were also reported as catalysts for spiritual growth. Will told of his experience:

> I was unloading the car after the trip. Annie was standing outside the garage, in the rain, saying a prayer to God with her arms out, thanking God for our vacation and for the rain. I asked her what she was doing. She said she was thanking God and wanted to stand in the rain so God would know she was sincere.

Later, Will wrote, "She reminded me how important sincerity is. I wasn't even thinking about God. I was tired and glad to be home. She gave me a whole different perspective."

Activities and relationships represent important contextual elements of the spiritual growth experiences reported in this study. Activities and relationships occur in the context of time and place and take a wide variety of forms. A third important contextual element reported as a part of participants' spiritual growth experiences has to do with the results of the activities and relationships that were reported. In the next section I will describe the results of participants' spiritual growth.

Results of Spiritual Growth

Study participants often associated specific results or outcomes with their experiences of spiritual growth. These results often had to do with their reported activities and relationships. In this study the results of spiritual growth were not easily separable from the context of the experience. In other words spiritual growth did not usually occur apart from some outcome or result that was reported by participants. These results were a part of the context of the experiences. The response of one male participant is an example, "God spoke to me. It was as if he pointed out areas of my life that needed to be changed. In that moment I was changed. In fact lots of things have changed since then." In this example, change is an outcome of spiritual growth, a result. Some results were very practical. Some involved deep insights. Some results included changes in perspective and behavior. Others were direct experiences of God. The sections below will describe the various kinds of results.

Practical Results

Participants often described the results of their experiences of spiritual growth in practical terms. Sometimes experiences of spiritual growth resulted in better relationships. Will spoke of a closer relationship with his spouse and children as a result of his spiritual growth experiences. Participants spoke of having experiences of forgiveness, appreciation for differences, and better communication. Angela told of her experience, "After a period of crying out to God, I had gotten my answer. I needed to

forgive. I did that. It has been a real lesson." Some spoke of the support of others as a result of their spiritual growth experiences. "As time went on," Sarah reported, "I felt held up by all these people."

Some participants reported that they solved problems as a result of their spiritual growth. Jack, one of the younger men in the study and a busy professional, reported that:

> By giving thought to it, it set up a process of thinking for me, and I just begin to write down that process. Sometimes it led me to something I remembered, a quote or something from someone, or something I had read; something that helped me through that particular situation.

Angela reflected on her experience of keeping the journal and noted that one result, surprising for her, was her ability to remember and concentrate: "I didn't expect to be able to remember as much. I mean my recall on things was much stronger than I would have thought." Increased discipline and focus characterized the result of spiritual growth for some. Will reported that as a result of his spiritual growth he "had a better focus on life and more confidence." Another told of a serious problem that took time to resolve. The result according to this male participant was that "God just took care of it." In this study of spiritual growth seemed to occur all at once, or more often in the form of smaller experiences, "building blocks" that contributed to an overall resolution "one step at a time." In whatever form that the result occurs, participants ascribed the result to a spiritual phenomenon, often named God, who in some way "lifted the burden."

Affective Results

As noted earlier in this chapter, feelings or affect are a part of the context of spiritual growth, and are associated with relationships. Sometimes feelings and affect led to spiritual growth, but were not be associated with the results of that growth. At other times, participants in this study reported feelings or affect as the result of an experience of spiritual growth

Participants described the affective results of spiritual growth in different ways. They said that spiritual growth experiences resulted in feelings of love, thanksgiving, mystery, energy, and inspiration. Milton said, reporting on his experience of spiritual growth: "Immediately after recognizing this 'grace' I was calmer." The word peace was used a number of times to describe the result of an experience of spiritual growth. As Ginny said: "Talk about peace, that's what it was. I knew that God was just at the center of it. I wasn't sad at all." Sometimes the calm or peace is described in visual terms. Jennifer told of returning home from a church retreat:

> When I came back home, one of the Elders came up to me and said, "You really had a wonderful experience, didn't you?" I looked at him and he said, "Your face is glowing." I have always remembered that.

Sarah said, regarding her spiritual growth, "Sensing God in my life brings me an amazing amount of peace and joy." Others described a similar feeling using words like "support," "self confidence," and "safety." For Polly, spiritual growth resulted in "calmness, that wonderful calmness that only God could have given me." Several reported that it is difficult to sustain these feelings. "Only God can do it really," Jack said.

Some participants spoke of feelings of happiness occurring as a result of spiritual growth. Other participants, however, told of suffering and challenge. Ginny said: "My spiritual growth led to suffering. It was hard, but I learned a lot. I'm stronger now." A male participant spoke of being "confused" and "unsure." Another female participant describing her experience of spiritual growth, said her "heart was breaking." Another participant said, "I remember being scared."

Participants experienced the affective results of their spiritual growth experiences in different ways. Sometimes the affective dimension of spiritual growth was a result of the experience itself. Sometimes the experience of spiritual growth itself was deeply emotional, and sometimes a feeling seemed to initiate the experience later described as spiritual growth. Polly summed up her feeling, "When God comes into my life, I get stirred up and I can feel it."

Self Knowledge

Many participants reported a greater self-knowledge occurring as a result of their spiritual growth. Often this self-knowledge consisted of a heightened conscious awareness. Jennifer told her story of self-knowledge:

> It was the most profound thing that ever happened to me, a life changing experience. I finally got it that God can't enter your mind or your body if it is filled up with your ego. God can't enter your mind and your body if you're making excuses about yourself and other people. God can't enter your life if you are blaming others, carrying hate and being disrespectful. It was as if someone

took off a blindfold. Now I knew."

One result of spiritual growth was a greater sense of self-knowledge. Sometimes these insights into self led to significant changes in perspective and even to a change in a person's sense of identity.

Change in Perspective

One of the most common outcomes associated with spiritual growth was a change in perspective. Many reported experiences of spiritual growth involved changes in perspective. Participants characterized these as changes in understanding, changes in insight, and changes in attitude. Joy related her experience:

> Suddenly you have the ability to step outside yourself and turn around to look at yourself and say, "Yes! That's what I see, and I don't like that, and I am the only one who can change it." Then you go about trying to work to become a better person.

Ginny described her experience, "I felt like God was tapping me on the shoulder, literally. God's help put it into perspective and made me a better person." Will, speaking about the results of his experiences of spiritual growth said, "It made me more aware, more tuned in to observe. It affected my perspective… things were different, not the same."

Changes in Identity

Less frequently participants pointed to spiritual growth as having an effect on their sense of self-identity. Milton spoke of a result of his experience of spiritual growth, describing his life as "being more together." Sarah described herself as having a "stronger sense of self" as a result of a prayer experience. Experiencing God also was associated with a change in identity. Polly said, as a result of a spiritual experience in church years ago, "Since then I have been a different person." When asked to describe what that meant, she said, "I know that my life has a purpose. Whatever happens to me I am a part of God's plan." Her sense of identity was changed as a result of an experience of an experience of spiritual growth that happened years ago. Because of that experience, she describes herself as a Christian. Although that experience was in her words "life changing," she also told of other experiences that have helped to form, strengthen and develop her sense of identity over the years.

Knowledge or Experience of God

Some of the results or outcomes of spiritual growth involved changes in a person's perspective or feeling. Other results involved a greater awareness, knowledge, or experience of God. One participant reported, "I experienced God's love in a strange and wonderful way." Joy used the word "epiphany" to describe her experience. Epiphany refers to a festival of the Christian church that celebrates God becoming real in everyday life, as in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and celebration of the birth of Jesus. The idea of epiphany can also refer to a more general manifestation of the divine in

everyday life. "Epiphany," Joy said, "Is when you didn't know something and you see the light. It's understanding; [it's an experience] …when God becomes real." In this sense the result of the spiritual growth experience was an increased awareness of God.

Sometimes a greater awareness of God was the only outcome. At other times participants reported a greater awareness of God that was associated with other activities and outcomes, such as resolving a life problem. Angela, for example, wrote in her journal of a time when she was seeking direction for her life. She told of an experience of reading during her daily quiet time and getting an insight that made her profoundly aware of God.

> I am reminded again of Ann Patchett in *The Language of Faith*, 'What is writing after all but the ability to believe in what you cannot see, to believe in it so completely that you seek it everywhere.' I looked around and I thought, 'Things do look different.' And they did. I was at peace and had a profound sense of the Spirit.

When participants reported a greater awareness of God, often that awareness was unexpected. "I wasn't trying to experience God. It just happened," one participant said. Participants experienced God in different ways. The common thread in the various reports was their attribution of the result to an experience of God.

Reports of No Spiritual Growth

For all participants, context was important in understanding and describing their spiritual growth experiences, but context by itself was no guarantee of having a spiritual growth experience. In their journals, several participants wrote of having very full and

active lives, but no experiences of spiritual growth during that time period. Jennifer wrote, "Nothing involving spiritual growth affected me this day." Ellie wrote in her journal that the period of time she was reflecting on "was a really important time of growth but not a particularly spiritual time." June was quite blunt in her journal entry: "Today my spiritual growth is zilch."

Whether noting an experience of spiritual growth and activity, or the lack of such experience, the results often became the context for additional reflection, experience awareness, and activity. Sometimes it was difficult to determine whether the context triggered the experience of spiritual growth or whether the spiritual growth experience triggered a greater awareness of the context. For participants in this study, the experience and the social context within which the experience occurred were difficult to separate.

Data from this study suggest that the context for participants' spiritual growth occurred across a broad contextual spectrum of place and time, including diverse relationships and activities, and with varied results, even among a fairly homogenous group of people who describe themselves as committed Christians who are a part of a strong church culture.

Multiple Contextual Factors

Although specific contextual elements were highlighted in this chapter, it is important to note that individual experiences reported by participants often contained reference to multiple contextual dimensions, as in Polly's description of her singing a

hymn in church, being overcome with emotion and experiencing a significant change in perspective and belief. Another example would be Will's description of the incident with his children at the beach where he experienced a deep spiritual insight by swimming in the waves. For participants in this study context was a very important factor in describing spiritual growth and was not usually one-dimensional.

Participants sometimes reported that the meaning attributed to their experience of spiritual growth might not be directly related to the details of the context itself, especially as other people might describe that meaning. In other words there may not be a direct congruence between the facts of the context as seen by others and the meaning ascribed to it by the participant. Polly suggested this in her comment, cited earlier:

> I think we hear God speaking through so many avenues. I definitely believe that, cause he uses everybody. He's uses people who don't even love him to teach us as Christians how to live and how to learn. So, I try to be aware of all of God's workings, everywhere.

In this instance Polly might attribute the meaning of an experience to an awareness of God, while others involved may not recognize God's presence at all. The exact interpretation or meaning attributed to the experience might be different for other participants, but the context was a critical element in understanding the experience of spiritual growth, in whatever way it was interpreted. For participants in this study context was an inseparable part of the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

A Conceptual Model of Spiritual Growth

Findings from Chapter 3 identified a number of personal components in the spiritual growth experiences reported by study participants including experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity, and attribution. Findings from Chapter 4 elaborated on the contextual dimensions of spiritual growth, describing the types of relationships, activities, and results reported by participants. Together these components make up a conceptual model of the spiritual growth experience as reported by participants in this study. This model is depicted in Figure 2.

Although these components were found in almost every experience of spiritual growth reported in this study, they did not occur with the same frequency, or sequence or with the same intensity. In this sense the model is fluid rather than sequential. Participants discussed their experiences of spiritual growth in an almost paradoxical manner. They identified numerous similarities and connections between their individual experiences of spiritual growth. Participants reported spiritual growth as an individual experience, asserting that people experience the phenomenon of spiritual growth differently. The following comment, made by Milton in the group interview, is illustrative:

> How different everyone's [spiritual growth] experience really is. The words that are used to describe it are different. It's not like everybody lines up and says here's what it is and it's the same. It's actually different and different for people at different times of life.

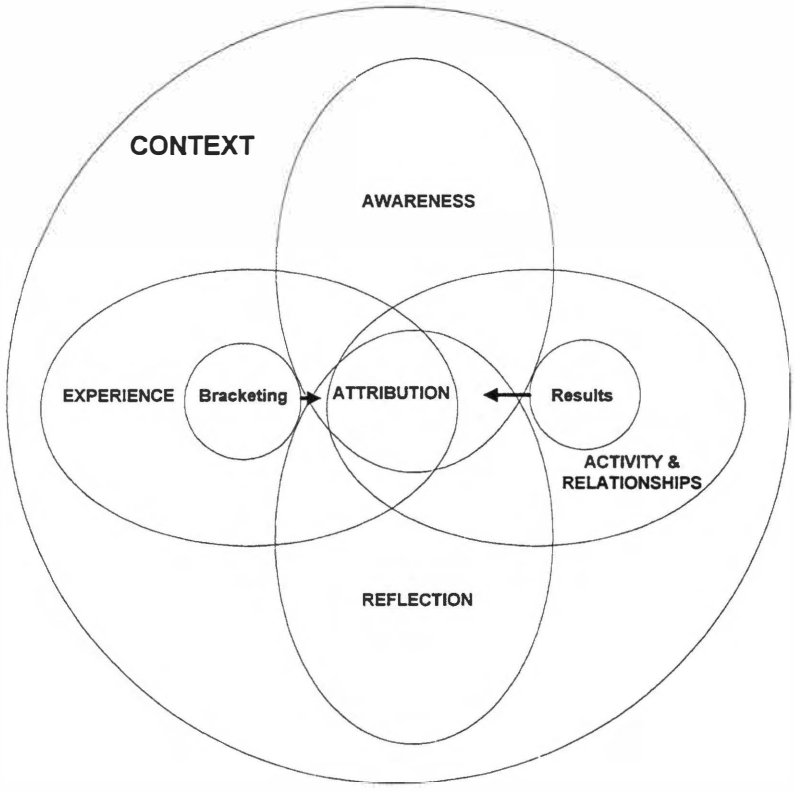

Figure 2: A Conceptual Model of the Spiritual Growth Experience

Dick, reflecting on the context for spiritual growth said that awareness of the context

> makes you become more aware of what's going on, the feelings you are having, and your emotional reactions. Any kind of spiritual connection you make can even be more powerful because it's something new and you realize you can actually have those experiences.

For participants in this study spiritual growth was an experience that affected their lives in many ways. Spiritual growth took many forms, and occurred in many contexts. In some ways this cacophony of voices is similar to the parable of the blind men and the elephant where several blind men, touching a part of the elephant attempt to identify the

phenomenon. One of the men holding the tail likens it to a rope. Another holding the leg likens it to a tree. The obvious point is that no one perspective is complete or accurate, although each is true and helpful in illuminating the nature of the phenomenon. So it is in the process of researching the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

Although the components identified in spiritual growth experiences in this study showed a marked similarity, they occurred in very different contexts. Participants underscored their belief that spiritual growth is not the same for everyone. In analyzing these similarities and differences, it became apparent that participant experiences seemed to cluster into four distinct types of spiritual growth. These distinctions provide a richer description and understanding of the phenomenon of spiritual growth and will be described in the next section.

A Typology of Spiritual Growth

Participants described spiritual growth in ways that suggest differences in the types of spiritual growth experienced. These differences were context-related, as were those described in the previous section, and tended to cluster into four general categories suggesting four types of spiritual growth. These four types include practical, emotional, ideological, and essential experiences of spiritual growth. In this section each will be described in turn.

Practical Spiritual Growth

Participants identified numerous experiences that could be described as examples of *practical spiritual growth*. In these experiences spiritual growth was often associated with something physical or material, and usually something very practical and ordinary. In this study practical forms of spiritual growth could involve personal reflection or clarification of values and beliefs. What seems to make them distinct is that the experience and the learning that participants identified could not be reduced to a cognitive reflective process. The practical, sensual, and physical elements of the experience were inseparably linked to the learning process. The physical dimension of the experience, for example, was not simply the context for a more significant cognitive learning process. The learning process itself was linked to the physical experience, activity and the results. In this sense, spiritual growth was a distinctively practical experience.

Examples include walking, gardening, eating, rest, experiencing beauty, playing and engaging in other activities directed toward the accomplishment of practical concerns such as problem solving and improvement of relationships. These experiences were often associated with physical or material concerns. Sometimes they were described in sensual ways. For example, when asked to describe what a meaningful spiritual growth experience might look like for her, Joy thought a minute and then simply said that spiritual growth was "a quiet walk on the beach in the late evening watching my dog smile as he sniffs his favorite smells of the sea." Another participant, commenting on an experience of spiritual growth involving nature while on vacation, called it "absolutely

beautiful… beyond words." Sarah, reflecting on an experience of illness said, "It was hard, just lying there. I was in pain. In a way it was like my body was speaking to me. The experience itself seemed sacred."

Will described a very important experience that he later associated with his spiritual growth as including making "pumpkin pie, riding bikes, and then going to the pool party" with his two young children. One of his children, anticipating the experience said, "This afternoon will be great." Writing in his journal, Will said, "It was really special." The experience itself was very ordinary. Upon reflection, Will noted a renewed energy inside and a new sense of priority that he described as "spiritual."

Angela's experience is an example of the practicality of this type of spiritual growth:

> One of the most vivid moments for me when I really felt like God was literally speaking to me to give me a direct answer happened when I met with my ex-husband. I was a little bit early, and I wandered into a bookstore. I picked up a book and just opened it up. There on the page from Ephesians was the verse, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted forgiving one another as God and Christ Jesus has forgiven you." After a long period of crying out, I had gotten my answer. What I needed to do was forgive.

Milton told of an experience that profoundly affected his practice of law. His experience also focused on a simple, practical concern of everyday life that took on a spiritual dimension and affected his life.

> This happened a couple of years ago when I was involved in estate, with lots of family. Just about any kind of relative you wanted. There was a provision in the

will that was tricky. I closed that transaction and everybody went home happy. Then [one of the family] said, "Well, were concerned because we think there are some people who should have signed who didn't." I looked at our documentation and began to be very fearful that we had just blown it in some way. It was like different voices spoke to me. One said, "You know you are right and don't be concerned about it." Another voice said, "No you don't want to do that. That's not the way you do it." I was going back and forth literally. One voice kept telling me, "Go back and read the will. Read the will again." It was a lengthy will, forty, fifty pages long. Another voice said, "Don't do it. Don't concede anything. Do whatever it takes." I was wondering what I was going to do. The voice said, "Go read the will again." I got up from my desk and went over to the courthouse. The will was there in the probate court. They have a room back there where all the wills are. You go back there and pull a will, so you're back there by yourself and I'm reading that will. I got down to the paragraph, the do or die paragraph. My chest was beating, because if I screwed it up, I screwed it up. But I had this voice telling me, "Cover it up, cover it up. You don't want admit anything. Just stone wall them and do whatever you have to do." But the other voice was saying, "No, No, No. We're not going to do it that way." I read the will and found the language. What we had done was absolutely correct, and what the other people were suggesting was not correct. It was a hard several days. It was a great lesson. I've always been told and I've always tried to do things right. You just don't cover it up. If you make a mistake, you make a mistake. You need to go back and

analyze what you've done. This was a great spiritual experience for me because I know, maybe people don't believe it, but I know that God was talking to me. Later Milton said that this experience was actually like a voice, not just a hunch or a feeling, but a voice saying, "Go back, and re-read the will." It was a clear communication concerning a practical everyday problem associated with the wording in a will. For Milton, it was a profound experience of spiritual growth: "As sure as I'm sitting right here," Milton said. While participants reporting spiritual growth associated with practical activity did not describe those experiences as life changing, they did identify the experiences as important examples of spiritual growth.

Practical and especially physical or material descriptions of spiritual growth experiences were also unusual because of participants' traditional church backgrounds. In traditional Protestant circles the association of the physical dimensions of life with spiritual growth is rare, and practical learning is typically less valued in spiritual growth than cognitive or mystical elements (Kelsey & Kelsey, 1986). It is unlikely that participants would have named physical or practical dimensions of spiritual growth unless they were clearly present. Participants associated experiences of spiritual growth with the practical dimensions of their lives.

Emotional Spiritual Growth

A second type of spiritual growth identified by participants in this study could be described as *emotional spiritual growth.* Emotional forms of spiritual growth were often

associated with relationships and involved becoming intensely aware of a profound reality in life. As Dick wrote, "When Billy talked about how God was with him and prayer sustained him through the rough time of the divorce, his feelings brought out strong tearful emotions within me." Another participant spoke of her emotional experience of spiritual growth this way, "Sometimes I just get all choked up and I don't know why. I think God is touching my life in a profound way." Feeling was critical in this type of spiritual growth. Sometimes experiences of emotional spiritual growth were reported associated with a crisis such as the death of a loved one. Sometimes participants reported experiences of emotional spiritual growth that seemed to be spontaneous. Only after some time and much reflection did some participants report a cognitive understanding of the feelings involved. Ginny wrote about the loss of her husband in her journal:

> I used to cry about [the loss] at the most inopportune times. Only later, much later, did I see how the tears were so important. Gosh it was hard, so hard. But it was also a blessing in disguise. God touched me.

The emotional form of spiritual growth was often associated with relationships but could also be associated with experiences, thoughts and memories. The feelings and emotions that participants reported might vary widely from joy to grief, anger to appreciation, but the common thread was the identification of an emotional experience associated with a spiritual phenomenon. Such experiences were often dramatic and had a powerful and memorable affect on the person who reported them.

Ideological Spiritual Growth

Participants in the study identified a third type of spiritual growth that could be termed *ideological*. This form of spiritual growth focuses on belief or ideology. Participants identified experiences of spiritual growth where their underlying beliefs and assumptions were changed by an experience of spiritual growth. Sometimes previous beliefs were confirmed, more than changed. Will's experience resulted in a clarification of several basic and important beliefs that were a part of his worldview. He tells of an experience that occurred shortly after the death of his grandmother:

> It was just so— I don't want to say bizarre, but it was like that. Very curious. I don't think about that often, but sometimes I do wonder. I was particularly close to my grandmother and when she passed away it was the first time someone I was close to died. We had a special relationship. It was three days after she passed away. I hadn't thought that much about death or the afterlife and what happens to the spirit after death.
>
> I woke up in the middle of the night wide-awake. More awake than I ever remember being before. I went downstairs and there was an odd…it was as if there was an awareness of something. I don't know if it was a dream or my imagination or what. I had this feeling, a kind of strange and comforting feeling about her, both disturbing and peaceful all at the same time. It was frightening in some ways and yet eerie in some ways. It was a calmer sort of peacefulness or presence, a special experience. I didn't quite know what to make of it. I imagine

different things, maybe that was a way to say goodbye or her way of trying to comfort me, or a signal that there is an afterlife.

It wasn't life changing, but it did give me a sense of how God works. It was like someone was saying, "Well, yes of course the life of the spirit goes on." For Will, this was a numinous experience characterized by a sense of a supernatural spiritual presence. His experience was a confirmation of a basic belief in the spiritual dimension to life. It also helped Will in the loss of a loved one and affirmed his own belief in afterlife. The experience strengthened some of Will's spiritual beliefs and assumptions. Will's experience of becoming more conscious of a spiritual reality and his sense of confirmation of a belief in afterlife represents a type of ideologically oriented spiritual growth. In his experience his beliefs and assumptions were raised to consciousness and examined as a result of his experience.

What makes ideological spiritual growth experiences distinct is that they are not reducible to emotional or practical experiences, although they might contain emotional and/or practical elements. Ideological experiences of spiritual growth were not simply identified as manifestations of some additional deeper, more important element of spiritual growth. The ideas and beliefs themselves "stand on their own two feet" and are important in participants' experiences of spiritual growth.

Essential Spiritual Growth

A fourth type of spiritual growth identified by participants in this study was *essential spiritual growth,* and had to do with experiences that affected a person's fundamental sense of identity. Because experiences of this type seemed to affect the very essence or identity of the people who reported them, such experiences might be termed essential spiritual growth. Participants in the study described essential spiritual growth experiences much less frequently than physical, emotional and ideological spiritual growth experiences. Although occurring much less frequently, this type of spiritual growth was described as transformational, having a significant and long-lasting impact on the basic self-identity of the person experiencing it. Essential spiritual growth was reported in a variety of contexts, but often seemed to accompany difficult decisions and transitions. Participants identified experiences of essential spiritual growth with a specific incident, and also spoke of the importance of time and reflection in making sense of such experiences. Joy's story is an example:

> I was beaten down. I was going through a divorce. I had been in analysis for seven years, and I just couldn't seem to get my life together. I just couldn't seem to hold on to something that was like hope, and I was suicidal. One day I was walking on the Baileytown road. I was walking in a prayerful, contemplative manner. I had an experience that was the most profound thing that ever happened to me, a life changing experience. I finally got it that God can't enter your mind or your body if it is filled up with your ego. Going through a divorce is not a loving time. Everyone I loved was blaming me. I wanted to say, "Wait!" Let me tell you

> the real situation." I wanted to make excuses. Then I realized that it wasn't those people out there making me.... It's me! I'm doing all this! And I want to stop. But it's not an easy process. I realized something about myself I never knew: how unimportant I was (my ego), and how important I am (my self) in God's scheme of things. It was a big change for me, like turning off a light and turning another one on. It was an amazing spiritual experience. Suddenly for the first time I had the ability to step outside myself and turn around to look at me and say, "Yes!"

Joy's spiritual growth experience was the context for a profound change in self-identity that changed and strengthened her sense of self. In describing her experience years afterward she confirmed how important it was, calling it "the defining moment in my religious life." In this study, Joy's experience of becoming more conscious of her life, its assumptions and her behaviors, as well as her awareness of another option, provided a catalyst for an essential change in her basic sense of identity.

Types and Focus of Spiritual Growth

Participants described experiences of spiritual growth that seemed to cluster into four distinct types based on content, context and results or outcomes. The four consisted of practical, emotional, ideological and essential experiences of spiritual growth. The four types of spiritual growth experiences and their foci are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Spiritual Growth

Type of Spiritual Growth	**Focus**
Practical	Everyday life issues, physical or material concerns, problem solving
Emotional	Affect or feelings, relationships and communication
Ideological	Beliefs, ideas or cognitive descriptions of values and concerns
Essential	Identity, self-perception

In this study more examples of practical and emotional experiences of spiritual growth were reported than those that were ideological or essential, yet all forms were reported.

Some reported experiences were more distinct than others. Milton's description of his practical struggle in solving a professional problem is one example. The outcome of that experience was practical and straightforward: "A voice kept telling me, 'Go back and read the will.'" Other descriptions were more complex and seemed to exhibit more than one type or form of spiritual growth. Joy's experience above, a dramatic example of essential spiritual growth, also included practical and emotional dimensions. She described the experience as "deeply spiritual," the "defining moment in my religious life." It was also a time when she was emotionally distraught, feeling "hopeless" and even suicidal. The experience occurred while walking on a road, a very practical activity. It involved a profound change in self-identity based on a new self-realization. The experience also had elements that were ideological. "It changed some of my beliefs about myself and my life," she said later. Her experience contained elements that were practical, emotional, ideological and essential, yet the outcome involved a change in self-

identity and that was the defining feature of the experience. Thus the experience would be identified as primarily and experience of essential spiritual growth.

Other participants reported experiences of a loved one's death that involved practical, emotional, ideological and perhaps essential elements of spiritual growth. Sarah described one experience saying:

> The experience was deeply spiritual. I was ill. I couldn't even get out of bed. I hurt. Sometimes I found myself crying for no reason. People were so good to me. It took a long time [to get well] and I came to realize what I really believe and what's important to me. I'm a different person because of the illness.

Each reported experience of spiritual growth often involved elements of more than one of the four reported types of spiritual growth.

Although descriptions of spiritual growth experiences often contained more than one of the four types of spiritual growth, it was rare for all four types to be reported as a part of a single experience. Reported experiences of spiritual growth were complex and not easily *reduced* to any one type, so this typology should be viewed as suggestive and not as a type of rigid definition. Each experience usually involved a distinct focus associated with contextual details and results but also contained elements of other types of spiritual growth. In the context of the group interview, study participants affirmed the importance of each of the four types of spiritual growth.

Chapter Summary

In this study, participant experiences of spiritual growth occurred in the context of authentic real-life situations, whether everyday activities or crisis events. This chapter described the nature of that context. Findings showed that spiritual growth occurred in a wide variety of contexts that clustered into three main categories: relationships, activities and results. Together with the personal components identified in Chapter 3, these contextual elements form a conceptual model of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth experiences share similarities as shown in the conceptual model, yet they also show marked differences. Analysis of those differences suggested four distinct types of spiritual growth: practical, emotional, ideological and essential. Even if it is suggestive, the identification of this spiritual growth typology has significant implications for both the understanding of spiritual growth from traditional religious perspectives, and perspectives on adult learning found in the literature. Both will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 described the personal components of the phenomenon of spiritual growth as identified by participants. Chapter 4 described the same phenomenon from the perspective of the social context within which it was identified. Chapter 5 will focus on comparing the phenomenon of spiritual growth as identified by the twelve participants in this study with descriptions of adult learning and adult development drawn from the literature.

CHAPTER 5

SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND ADULT LEARNING

Findings from this study describe the experience of spiritual growth of twelve adults active in the Particular Presbyterian Church. Chapter 3 summarizes participant descriptions of the personal components of spiritual growth, including experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution. Chapter 4 describes the social context of spiritual growth, including the contextual elements of relationships, activity, and results. The personal and contextual components suggest a typology of spiritual growth that was also described in Chapter 4.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationship between the findings from this study on spiritual growth as presented in Chapter 3 and 4 and adult learning theory described in the adult education literature on experiential learning, transformational learning, and adult development. The chapter will also compare study participants' understanding of spiritual growth with representative authors from the literature. The chapter will conclude by comparing the suggested typology of spiritual growth that emerged from the findings of the study to the descriptors of spiritual growth found in the adult education literature.

Spiritual Growth and Experiential Adult Learning

John Dewey (1938) wrote over fifty years ago, "All genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 13). As Merriam (1994) points out, though, Dewey was "careful to note that *not all experience educates*, by which he means that not all experiences lead to the growth of ever widening and deeper experiences" (Merriam, 1994, p. 81). As reported in Chapter 3, participants in this study also named experience as the foundation of their spiritual growth. In every instance participants described the phenomenon of spiritual growth as an experience-- an instance in which they were affected either consciously or unconsciously by a spiritual phenomenon described variously as God, Jesus, grace, spirit or Holy Spirit. "The spirit is something you have to experience," one participant said. Another said, describing her experience, "Something happened here… Its like God was present. Later the meaning of it became clear as I thought about it." The effect of this phenomenon was to change participants' perception, understanding, awareness and in some cases behavior. As one female participant wrote, "Immediately after recognizing this 'grace' I was calmer…." Participants also pointed out that not every learning experience was for them an experience of spiritual growth.

Adult learning has been understood in various ways. One area of emphasis concerns experiential learning. Adult educators have long identified the importance of experience as a resource and a context for learning. Lindeman's (1961) statement is representative: "The resource of highest value in adult education is the learners experience" (p. 6). Kolb (1984) described learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.2). Jarvis (1987), critical of Kolb,

said that skills and attitudes are also acquired. Merriam & Clark (1993) added the notion of "transforming" experience, by asserting that learning is "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills" (p.131). In this study, participants reported numerous experiences of attending to and reflecting on experience that also resulted in changes in perspective, belief, behavior or even identity. In this sense their experiences of spiritual growth were learning experiences that were distinguished by their focus on spiritual phenomena.

In adult learning theory there have been a variety of theoretical approaches focusing on how "adults learn as a part of their lives" (Merriam, 2001a, p. 3). Three important and related approaches to adult learning are andragogy, self-directed learning, and informal and incidental learning. Andragogy, an approach made popular by Knowles (1980), focuses on the "art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43), often in contrast with pedagogy that focuses on the distinctive ways children learn. Self-directed learning is learning that "occurs as a part of adults' everyday life, that is systematic yet does not depend on an instructor or classroom" (Merriam, 2001a, p. 8). Informal and incidental learning involves individual learning experiences that are often less intentional and systematic than those characterized as self-directed, and often associated with a learner's practical life experience. In the next section andragogy, self-directed learning, and informal and incidental learning will be compared to the findings on spiritual growth as identified in this study.

Andragogy

Knowles (1980) identified five underlying assumptions of andragogy in contrast to pedagogy:

- Adult learners are motivated internally,
- Have a rich resource for learning in their life experiences,
- Are focused on applying their learning to their lives,
- Have learning needs closely related their life experience, and
- Have independent self-concept and can direct their own learning.

Although participants in this study did not use the term andragogy, and were not concerned with adult learning theory, the assumptions of andragogy were strikingly similar to those underlying participants' spiritual growth experiences. Participants in the study reported a high level of motivation in their spiritual growth as evidenced by the quantity and quality of their journal entries, their willingness to engage in additional opportunities for reflection on their spiritual growth as a part of this study, and their personal struggles with a perceived need to be more focused and intentional in their spiritual growth. In writing and speaking about their spiritual growth, participants reflected on life experiences. As described in Chapter 4, most of the results of reported spiritual growth experience focused on applying what was learned in practical ways. Participants also directed their own experiences of spiritual growth. As in descriptions of andragogy, spiritual growth data from this study suggest that participants were "autonomous, free and growth oriented" (Merriam, 2001a, p 7). An important element in andragogy involves learner autonomy or self-direction, an area of adult learning that has

emerged as an important aspect of adult learning theory in its own right.

Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a process "where individuals take the initiative with or without the help of others" to understand their learning needs, determine their goals, identify learning resources, engage in learning activities and evaluate the worth of their learning experiences (Knowles, 1980, p. 46). Self-direction in learning depends on who is in charge of the learning process (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). In self-directed learning the individual learner controls the objectives and the means of learning. In this sense, every reported experience of spiritual growth in this study was self-directed. There were no instances of spiritual growth occurring in a formal learning situation, with the possible exception of Polly's experience, reported in Chapter 4 that occurred in worship as she sang a hymn. Self-directed learning and spiritual growth, as identified in this study, both occur "as a part of adult's everyday life," and are "systematic yet do not depend on an instructor or a classroom" (Merriam, 2001a, p. 8). Closely associated with self-directed learning and sharing some important assumptions with andragogy, is informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Informal and Incidental Learning

As with andragogy, informal and incidental learning theory involves a focus on the practical learning experiences of adult learners in specific life situations. Informal and incidental learning can be self-directed and focuses on the perceived learning needs of adults (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Informal learning is usually "highly intentional but not highly structured" (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 25). Incidental learning occurs as a "byproduct of some other activity" and occurs frequently "although people are not always conscious of it" (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 12). Learning that is informal and incidental is often associated with a "significant unplanned or unexpected event" (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 27). Informal and incidental learning also involve reflection and action.

As described in Chapter 3 and 4, spiritual growth experiences reported in this study were often similar to descriptions of informal and incidental learning in that they too were unplanned, occurred as a byproduct of another activity, were intentional but not structured, and involved reflection and activity. Through the process of bracketing, reflection and awareness, participants became conscious of a spiritual dimension of their experience and activity. Spiritual growth was often an informal or incidental experience that occurred in the context of everyday activity. Andragogy, self-directed learning, and informal and incidental learning all share a focus on the climate of learning, including the importance of relationships and the role of learner. A further aspect of adult experiential learning involves the nature of the learning process itself. Research in this area has

focused on the identification of distinct phases or stages of adult learning and will be considered in the next section.

Phases or Stages in Adult Learning

In adult learning the process of attending to and reflecting on experience is reported in different ways. Kolb (1984) identified a model of experiential learning that includes four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. According to Kolb, these four phases are experienced in a cyclical manner and are repeated in a spiral-like fashion. Jarvis (1992) elaborated on Kolb's model, suggesting nine phases in the learning cycle. Hunt (1987) also identified a cyclical model of learning based on the identification, testing, feedback, and revision of the learner's implicit theory. Taylor (1987) suggests a four-phase theory involving ten steps that is also cyclical in nature. Taylor's (1987) model identifies an important emotional dimension to learning that she identifies as confusion or anxiety.

Each of these theorists suggests that experiential learning has various phases and that these phases occur in a cyclical pattern (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 1987, 1992). In a similar type of construct, the experiences of participants in the current study suggest six phases of spiritual growth: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution. One difference between findings from this study and the assertions of Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1987, 1992), and other researchers in adult experiential learning is that the components of spiritual growth described in Chapter 3 did not occur as a cyclical

process. In this study the components of spiritual growth were present in participant descriptions of their spiritual growth experiences, but their occurrence was fluid rather than sequential. In addition, the degree of emphasis on one or more of these dimensions varied from one experience to another.

Boud, Keough, & Walker (1985) outline a description of adult learning linking experience, reflection and outcomes as well as the phenomenon of awareness that is both cognitive and affective, a point also emphasized by Boyd & Myers (1988). In ways similar to Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1987), and Boud, Keough, & Walker (1985), participants in this study affirmed experience, reflection and action as important in spiritual growth. As Milton said: "When I pause and reflect on times when I feel God's presence more keenly, I realize that I grow spiritually." In addition, participants placed a strong emphasis on the affective and rational dimensions of reflection. Ginny spoke of spiritual growth as involving "an overriding feeling." Describing an experience of spiritual growth, Will called it a "special experience, different... an unusual feeling." Participants in this study also emphasized the importance of awareness in the learning process. As Jennifer said: "When I started reflecting on it [the experience], I had a special feeling. Things were clearer, calmer." While the identification of awareness as a part of the adult learning process is not unknown in the literature (Moore, 1974; Boud, Keough, & Walker, 1985; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 1997), it is not commonly identified as a major phase of the adult learning process. Awareness in the spiritual growth experience also has a heuristic element as participants sometimes unexpectedly discovered a spiritual dimension of their lives. This is similar to the notion of incidental or unplanned learning,

a dimension of adult learning also not commonly addressed in the literature (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

Research in adult learning describes a number of theories on how adults learn from the experiences of their daily lives. In this section two aspects of that literature were reviewed and compared to the findings of this study. First, theories focusing on the climate of the learning experience, including andragogy (Knowles, 1980), self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), and informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins (2001) were described and compared to the findings from Chapter 3 of this study. Similarities to the findings from this study included an emphasis on the role of the individual learner, focus on practical life experience, and the unstructured nature of reported experiences of spiritual growth. Then findings from this study were compared with theories of experiential learning describing the process of learning, including the identification of phases or stages of learning. Findings from this study described six components involved in reported experiences of spiritual growth. Although the six components of spiritual growth identified in this study share similarities with elements of experiential learning identified in the literature, they do not occur sequentially. The combined experience of these elements led to changes that participants reported. Some of these changes were so profound that participants could speak of their lives being forever changed or transformed.

The adult learning literature also reports a variety of types of change associated with the learning experience. Sometimes the process of learning from experience involves changes that are so fundamental that researchers have described them as transformational. Transformational learning focuses on "learning that shapes people" (Clark, 1993, p. 47). Clark (1993) identifies three strands of adult transformational learning: Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation, Freire's (1971) critical pedagogy and Daloz's (1986) emphasis on the transforming developmental aspects of formal learning situations. Boyd (1991) represents a fourth strand emphasizing the role of the unconscious in the learning process. In this section each will be considered in turn and compared to the findings from this study.

Mezirow's Perspective Transformation

For Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is a rational, analytical and cognitive process whereby meaning systems are changed through critical reflection. It is often depicted as a linear process, beginning with a disorienting dilemma and progressing through specific steps such as critical reflection, exploration of new roles, relationship negotiation, the process of strengthening self consciousness, and developing a perspective that is more inclusive and discriminating (Taylor, 1997). Learning for Mezirow (1990) focuses on the individual and the process of personal development and involves a

reassessment of the ways that adults pose problems and how they know, believe, feel and act using the process of critical reflection. Mezirow (1991) views critical reflection as a process of seeing through "the habitual way that we have interpreted the experience of everyday life in order to reassess rationally the implicit claim of validity made by a previously unquestioned meaning scheme or perspective" (p. 102).

Several experiences of spiritual growth described in this study could be interpreted as forms of rational reassessment of previously held assumptions. Participants used terms such as "weighing options" and "thinking logically" about an issue, for example. Most descriptions of spiritual growth in this study involved cognitive elements, but also included reflective elements beyond the rational. For example, Will described the process of spiritual growth as involving "getting my thinking straight" [about an issue]." "Spiritual growth," he said is a way to "focus my attention" that is both "creative, organized and disciplined," and as an "awareness," "a deep appreciation," and a "feeling of warm peacefulness." For Will, both rational and non-rational elements were involved.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Freire (1970, 1973) viewed transformative learning as focused on the process of social change. For Freire the learning dynamic is one of "conscientization," occurring through a combination of action and reflection, or praxis. Although transformational learning oriented toward social change was for Freire (1997) spiritually rooted (see also, hooks, 1994), and a more explicit spiritual orientation is apparent for other authors

(Tisdell, 1999; Mackeracher, 1996), a spiritual orientation for transformative learning is not common in the literature. O'Sullivan (1999) identifies an "integral" goal for transformative learning, focusing on a holistic vision for learning including human development, ecological responsibility, social change and the education of the human spirit. O'Sullivan's (1999) description of transformative learning notes appreciatively the spiritual domain, but seems to be more focused on social, multi-cultural, psychological and ecological concerns.

Spiritual growth in this study did not focus on changing the structures and practices of society. Participants did describe an increased consciousness that led to new behaviors and relationships at home and work. As one participant said, "My spiritual growth experiences, especially the prayer, quiet time and reading, have brought me closer to my family. In fact it has brought my family together in new ways." The lack of an emphasis on social change may be related to the different social context of participants in this study. Participants in this study, for the most part, seemed to be more satisfied with their social roles and activities and tended to focus more on issues of "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1971). Individual transformation in this study had the potential for social consequences, however the impetus for social change came from the expanded awareness of the individual. In this sense, Freire's (1970, 1973) approach was of limited value in helping to understand participant experiences of spiritual growth in this study.

Daloz's Formal Learning Relationships

Daloz (1986, 1999) focuses on the impact of education on adult learners in formal educational settings. Two dimensions are important to note in relation to this study: Daloz's emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, sometimes described as mentoring, and the importance of the formal educational setting in transformative learning. For Daloz, the quality of the relationship between teacher and student is critical and transformative changes are best facilitated through a caring mentoring relationship. One of the findings from this study was that the relationships among individuals participating in the study had a positive affect on their spiritual growth. This was also true for the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Jennifer described her reflections during an interchange with the researcher, "You have helped me to better understand spiritual growth. I mean this whole experience has helped, the groups, writing, talking, all of it." In contrast with Daloz, participants in this study did not associate their spiritual growth with formal learning experiences or the process of mentoring, limiting the value of this model for understanding spiritual growth in this study.

Boyd and the Unconscious in Transformative Learning

Boyd (1991; Boyd & Myers, 1998) represents a fourth type of transformative learning. Boyd emphasizes the role of the unconscious in shaping "thoughts, feeling and

actions on a day-to-day basis" (Dirkx, 2000). According to Boyd & Myers (1998), transformational learning "moves the person to psychic integration and active realization of their true being" through "critical insights, fundamental understandings and actions based on integrity" (p. 262). In contrast to Mezirow's use of critical reflectivity, which they view as focused on rational clarity, Boyd & Myers (1998) advocate the use of discernment, "a way of knowing" (p. 274) based not on understanding gained by "taking things apart, by analyzing and reducing them to their basic components" (p. 274), but on a process of "contemplative insight" gained through "putting things together and seeing them in their relational wholeness" (p. 274). Discernment is a process entailing "receptivity," a process of openness and listening, of "recognition," an opportunity for reflection, evaluation and choice, and a process of "grieving," which involves dealing with the losses that accompany change.

The phenomenon of spiritual growth identified by participants in this study and described in Chapters 3 and 4 also identified the importance of receptivity and recognition in spiritual growth. Participants' experiences represented a way of knowing, of seeing the spiritual dimension and meaning of life experience. Like discernment, spiritual growth involves openness and receptivity. "Writing in the journal," Jack said, "helped me to see things that I ordinarily would not pay attention to." After describing her experience of contemplating and reflecting on a difficult issue "for a long time," Jennifer said in an excited voice, "Suddenly it just dawned on me!"

Sometimes the phenomenon of awareness reported by participants also included an experience of negation, as when participants highlighted the importance of "letting go." An example of this was when Ginny reflected on a deep sense of loss in her life and

said, "Sometimes you just have to let it go and trust that the meaning will become clear some day." Grieving, a form of "letting go," was present in a number of participant spiritual growth experiences that were associated with difficult life changes such as the death of a loved one, the loss of a job or the ending of a marriage. Although significant in particular instances, overall grieving was not identified as a major element in participants' experiences of spiritual growth, and was not viewed with the same importance by participants in this study as it was by Boyd & Myers (1998).

In this study, the process of spiritual growth focused on understanding the *meaning* of an experience. Often it resulted in changes in perception, behavior and even identity. Participants viewed spiritual growth as an experience of individual learning within a context of activity, echoing the assertion of Clark & Wilson (1991) that transformational learning is linked to social context. Although both affect and rationality were involved in spiritual growth experiences described by participants in this study, they clearly identified the importance of affect in the learning process, a finding also identified by researchers in transformative learning (Sveinunggaard, 1994; Hunter, 1980; Taylor, 1993).

Clark (1993) identified the occurrence of a disorienting dilemma in experiences of transformative learning. In many instances a "disorienting dilemma" was also reported by participants in this study as a part of their experiences of spiritual growth. These experiences were often associated with times of crisis such as illness, death, or job change. These types of life experiences had a profound impact on participants' spiritual growth. Reflecting on the sudden death of her spouse, Ginny said, "It changed my life forever. It started changing my life the minute it happened." It should also be noted that

not all experiences of spiritual growth were associated with a crisis event, a finding similar to that of Pope (1996) and Taylor (1997) who noted that transformative learning often involves a series of experiences and a long cumulative process.

Transformational Learning Summary

In this study, not every identified experience of spiritual growth was perceived as transformative, but all reported experiences of spiritual growth were viewed as important. Spiritual growth in this study had some similarity with transformative learning experiences as identified in the literature. It is important to note however that the majority of spiritual growth experiences identified in this study were not transformative in the sense that Mezirow uses the term. Findings in Chapter 4 identified numerous spiritual growth experiences that were practical in nature, such as taking a walk for example, and included things that might be classified as "instrumental learning" by Mezirow (1991). Milton, for example, noted that a very important experience of spiritual growth for him had to do with finding an important text document. The experience was important, memorable and obviously had some affect on the individual, but it was not transformational. As Milton described it, the experience was "significant" but not "life changing." Participants also cited experiences that focused on communication and relationships, items that might be classified as "communicative learning" by Mezirow (1991). Angela said, "When I experience the caring and love of another person, it reminds me of God's love and I feel closer to God." Participants identified these

experiences as important instances of spiritual growth, but not as experiences that changed their identity or basic fundamental assumptions about life. In this study, participants did identify some experiences of spiritual growth that resulted in fundamental changes in perspective, identity and lifestyle, and were similar to descriptions of transformative learning in the literature. Of the theories of transformative learning presented in this section, Daloz (1999) and Freire (1970) were less useful in understanding the spiritual growth experiences described in this study. Boyd's (1991) and Boyd & Myers' (1998) emphasis on the unconscious as well as the process of discernment in transformative learning were similar to participant descriptions of their experiences of spiritual growth. A part of the similarity and the differences between the findings from this study as well as the literature, involved the use of terminology in describing learning experiences. In the next section four of these terms will be described and compared to the literature.

Comparison of Selected Spiritual Growth Components to the Adult Learning Literature

Comparing specific components of spiritual growth identified by participants in this study with elements of adult learning theory from the literature, similarities and differences can be noted. One similarity, for example, is the common emphasis on the importance of experience in learning, discussed earlier in this chapter. Experience was foundational to learning in both the spiritual growth reported by study participants, and a variety of adult learning models identified in the literature. In the following section, I will

compare findings related to four selected components of spiritual growth identified in this study, reflection, awareness, relationships, and attribution with descriptions of those elements in the adult learning literature.

Reflection

Numerous scholars point to the importance of reflection as a major component in the adult learning experience (Brookfield, 1987, 1991). Reflection has been described as a form of scientific problem solving (Dewey, 1938), reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Peters, 1991), an internal clarification of meaning (Boyd & Fales, 1983), a process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990, 1991), and conscientization (Freire 1971). Boyd & Fales (1983) describe reflection as a "process of internally examining and exploring issues of concern, triggered by an experience which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (p. 100). Common to many descriptions of reflection in adult learning is the assumption that reflection is a conscious, thoughtful and rational process.

Dewey's (1933) definition of reflection represents an example of this rational emphasis. Dewey defines reflection as:

> Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads... it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality. (1933, p. 9)

Mezirow (1991) advocates a form of reflection, derived from Habermas (1971) emphasizing a rational reflective process "of critically assessing the content, process or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (p. 104). Mezirow (1991) elaborates, stating that "content and process reflection are the dynamics by which our beliefs – meaning schemes – are changed, that is become reinforced, elaborated, created, negated, confirmed or identified as problems… or transformed" (p. 111). Cranton's (1994) view of transformation, although different from that of Mezirow, also relies primarily on reason, rationality and critical reflection (Dirkx, 2000). Mezirow's approach to reflection has been criticized for its emphasis on individual rationalism as a mechanism that mediates change (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

Despite this criticism, rationalism is the dominant form of reflection reported in the adult learning literature. As Brookfield (2000), commenting on the practice of critical reflection in adult education, says, "[In critical reflection] there is no attention to affect, to emotion, to spirituality, to holistic modes of being and knowing, and no consideration of how critical reflection can be triggered through aesthetic experiences, meditation and contemplation" (p. 43). The process of spiritual growth as identified by participants in this study differs from the dominant rational models of reflection identified by Mezirow (1991; 1998) and others in that important non-rational elements were also identified as a part of the reflective process. For example, a number of instances of spiritual growth reported in this study did not involve an intentional process of reflection. As one participant said, "I didn't plan it [the experience]. It just happened." Another distinction is that reflective spiritual growth as identified in this study also had an emotional element. Mackeracher (1996) and Dirkx (1997) note the importance of emotion in

learning, although the identification of emotion as a type of reflection is rare in adult learning (Brookfield, 2000). Commenting on a journal entry, Dick underscored the importance of emotion in the reflective process, saying that the experience "brought out tearful emotions within me." The reflective process in the reported experiences of spiritual growth was also associated with a broad range of changes in behavior, relationships, ideology and identity. For some participants, changes were identified as transforming. Other participants described the changes associated with their reflection as "inspiring, energizing or helpful." Reflection was a very important part of reported experiences of spiritual growth.

Some adult education researchers such as Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985b) place a greater emphasis on the non-rational elements of reflection such as "affective activities" and "attending to feelings," along with "returning to experience" and "reevaluating experience" (pp. 3, 21). Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985b) argue that it is important to focus on the emotions associated with experiences – whether positive or negative - in order to learn. Boucouvalas (1993) describes ways of knowing beyond the rational and analytical, and suggests more contemplative forms of reflection in order to better observe, understand and learn. Participants in this study also highlighted the importance of affective and extra-rational elements in the spiritual growth process. One participant talked of her experiences of spiritual growth. "It's not something you can think through or even describe with words. You just have to experience it."

A part of the reflective process in the spiritual growth experiences reported in this study is remembering. Remembering is also identified as a part of the reflective process in adult education. Jarvis (1987a), for example, notes the importance of accretion in the

learning process. Accretion is when a learner understands a new experience by comparing it to a past experience. For some authors remembering goes beyond the experience of accretion or recall of events. Miller (2000) views remembering in a more holistic way that seems to combine the notion of reflection and awareness. As shown in Chapter 3, participants in this study underscored the importance of reflection as a process of remembering. They especially emphasized the contemplative forms of memory and reflection in their experiences of spiritual growth. "In my quiet time I was reminded that I actually experienced God's love. I felt a special calm and peace," a female participant said, commenting on her journal entries.

Reflection as described by participants in this study has both an active and passive dimension that also makes it distinct from other adult learning models. Reflection, as it is often practiced in adult learning, is assumed to be intentional, active, rational and systematic (Miller, 2000; Loughran, 1996; Brookfield, 2000). In participants' reported experiences of spiritual growth, reflection is sometimes an active experience. Participants reported the experience of prayer or meditation, for example. At the same time, participants also reported experiences of spiritual growth that were more passive. Sometimes reflection in spiritual growth is described as "stepping back" from an experience in order to learn from it. Participants spoke of an experience of psychological bracketing, a "reflective pause," that often occurred in the context of prayer, silence, meditation, quiet time or journal writing. These more passive experiences were important factors in participants' spiritual growth, and represent a difference from the majority of reflective learning models used in adult education.

A further distinction between the process of reflection as identified in this study and that identified in the adult learning literature has to do with the understanding of the "subject" of reflection. The majority of adult learning authors assume that the person doing the reflection is the "subject" who acts upon some "object" of reflection using various reflective techniques. Wilson & Cervero (2001) for example, assert that all adult educators are social activists of one kind or another and have influence both on individual participants and the social systems within which their educational systems operate. For Wilson & Cervero (1994), adult educators function as a subject acting upon participants and social systems that are viewed as objects. In contrast, the reflective process in spiritual growth seems to be something the individual intentionally does and also something that happens to the individual, as his or her life becomes the object of interaction with the spiritual dimensions of life. The person, traditionally the subject who reflects on some object, also becomes the object of reflection. In this sense the reflective process in spiritual growth is intersubjective, involving both the person and the spirit. One participant described this experience when she said, "I was all wrapped up in my own thoughts… and then I felt the presence of God, almost like he was touching me on the shoulder."

Awareness

In Chapter 3 participants described the importance of awareness in spiritual growth, identifying awareness as an unusual experience that served as a catalyst for an

experience of awakening through a process of attention and discovery. Adult educators also note the importance of awareness in the learning process. Friere's (1971) notion of conscientization is an example. Most descriptions of awareness in the adult education literature assume that awareness is a cognitive and often rational process. The notion of becoming conscious of another reality is closely associated with the phenomenon of perception (Scott, 1997; Mackeracher, 1996, Cranton, 1994; Schauffele & Baptiste, 2000). Perception is often viewed as a rational process. Mackeracher's (1996) definition is illustrative: "Perception is the process by which sensory information is interpreted in light of one's previous experience and personal model of reality" (p. 99). Although most of the emphasis on awareness in the adult education literature is rational and cognitive, some authors affirm the importance of extra-rational influences (Taylor, 1997). Other authors have highlighted the affective dimensions of awareness as critical in the learning process (Scott, 1997; Clark, 1991a; Scott, 1991a; Sveinunggaard, 1993; Hunter, 1980;Taylor, 1987, 1994), and others have noted the importance of the physical dimensions of awareness (Sardello, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Mindfulness as a form of awareness is highlighted by a number of authors. Tremmel (1993) speaks of "mindfulness" as a process of "paying attention" and being aware "of the present moment" (p. 444). Cafarella & Merriam (2000) identify mindfulness as a part of the reflective learning process. Some authors identify the notion of the expansion of consciousness as a kind of mindfulness. For example, Boyd (1989), describing individual transformation, says it is a "fundamental change in one's personality involving conjointly the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion

of consciousness" (p. 459). This expansion of consciousness involves both reflection and awareness in ways similar to those described by participants in this study.

Boyd & Myers' (1988) emphasis on discernment is also a form of awareness. Discernment is a form of awakening incorporating both attention and discovery, and although understood and practiced in different ways, is widely identified as a critical element in traditional descriptions of spiritual growth (Barry & Connolly, 1982; Kelsey, 1978). Participant descriptions of awareness, such as "it dawned on me," and "all of a sudden something will just fly through my mind," and "…the issue became clear" all suggest experiences of awareness that are similar to examples of discernment in the literature. As noted in Chapter 3, participant descriptions of awareness were both active and passive. Awareness involves an openness to something different. A part of that openness often involves doing something, an activity like prayer, for example. Awareness also entails a passive, often unexpected dimension. As one participant said, "If I am not willing to look, I will never see anything spiritual. If I am not willing to see anything different, I probably won't."

Findings from Chapter 3 describe participants' experiences of awareness. In many cases participants described their experience of awareness as an "unusual" or "surprising" experience often associated with their affect or experience of feelings. Awareness was a kind of awakening associated with the more active experience of attending, recognizing or realizing, or the more heuristic experience of unplanned discovery. As Ellie said: "I'll start thinking about just kind of odd everyday situations. Then I will run into something and realize the God's put me there in a particular place, for a particular reason." Reflecting on his experience, Jack said: "It helped me by putting them [feelings

associated with an experience] in words. It made me more aware of my spiritual endeavors, more tuned-in; able to observe...." Awareness in this study is similar to notions of awareness found in the adult learning literature. Both seem to have rational and non-rational elements. Study participants noted experiences similar to those reported in the literature as mindfulness and discernment, although participants in this study did not use those words. Awareness and reflection, important elements in participant experiences of spiritual growth, were also identified as important in the adult learning process and occurred within a wide variety of social contexts. One important context as reported in Chapter 4 involved relationships. Relationships also have been identified as important in adult learning, especially humanistic models of learning and growth.

Relationships

The association of relationships with experiences of adult learning has long been identified as important in the field of adult education. Relationships are at the heart of humanistic forms of adult learning such as Knowles' (1970) notion of andragogy. The importance of relationships has also been noted in feminist approaches to adult learning (Lather, 1991; Tisdell, 1993, 1995, 1998; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Other forms of adult learning that emphasize the importance of relationships include: learning in the context of relationships (Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994), collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993), cooperative learning (Axlerod, 1984), social learning (Bandura, 1986), and organization development (Burke, 1994), as well as "T

Groups," laboratory experiences and conflict resolution (Mirvis, 1988). Interpersonal support (Morgan, 1987), common in andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and other humanistically oriented adult learning (Brockett, 1997), also assumes a strong relational emphasis.

As described in Chapter 4, participants in this study underscored the importance of the sincere and authentic caring that resulted from the sharing of stories and feelings that at times were deeply personal. As Dick said, "The hardest part is probably asking and sharing about experiences, baring your soul, enough to ask someone to pray for you. Sometimes the spirit really opens up communication between people." Cochrane (1981) echoed the same assertion regarding the adult learning experience, "It is in and through the disclosure of one's self to another that meaning develops and is enhanced" (p. 114). Difficulties with relationships such as death and divorce often had a spiritual component. In this study participants described spiritual growth that often involved people and relationships in ways that are similar to relational learning cited in the adult learning literature. In this study spiritual growth as a solitary mystical experience was reported rarely while spiritual growth as a relational experience was commonly reported.

Attribution

Theorists in adult experiential learning, including transformative learning, emphasize the importance of the process of learning how to make meaning of life experience. As Mezirow (1990) said, "No need is more fundamentally human than our

need to understand the meaning of our experience" (p. 11). Making meaning can result in changes in perspective, understanding and behavior. It can result in fundamental changes in self-consciousness and identity. Making meaning of experience happens through a cognitive process. Adult educators have generally understood the process of making meaning to be the interpretation of experience in light of assumptions about the reality of life. Adults attribute meaning to their experiences based on their assumptions and interpretations of reality (Watts & Williams, 1988). The process of attribution has been the subject of considerable psychological research (Jones, 1990) suggesting that people make attributions regarding their religious or spiritual perspectives (Harvey & Weary, 1981).

Attribution was a foundational element in the experiences of spiritual growth as reported in Chapter 3. Participants in the study attributed their experience to the spiritual dimensions of reality, describing spiritual growth, for example, as "communication with God." Attribution represents a fundamental difference between spiritual growth as identified in this study and the experiences of adult experiential learning, including transformative learning and meaning making as identified in the literature. In this study, spiritual growth is attributed to a transpersonal or spiritual phenomenon, usually God, spirit or Jesus. In the adult education literature, any discussion of this type of attribution is extremely rare. Where a spiritual attribution is made in adult learning, a closer examination usually reveals that the object of the attribution is psychological even if the word spiritual has been used. Dirkx (1997) for example, who uses the notion of soul to refer to the spiritual, asserts that "soul is more than a psychological attribute, more than attending to feelings in learning" (p. 82). But he describes the spiritual experience in

psychological terms as "emotional," having to do with relationships, values and heart. MacKeracher (1996) suggests a spiritual form of learning but limits her descriptions of spiritual learning to internal, cognitive elements that are a part of the process of making connections through relationships leading to a "higher consciousness" and "transcendent learning" (p. 164). She asserts the reality of a spiritual dimension of learning, but her conceptual framework, dependent on Jung (1933) and Wilbur (1995a), limits her description of the phenomenon to that which is essentially psychological. In spiritual growth, adults make meaning of their experiences by attributing them to a higher power.

In this section I compared four selected elements identified by study participants as important in their spiritual growth with representative descriptions from adult education authors. The similarities between these descriptions suggest that that the spiritual growth experience is related to the adult learning experience. Differences suggest that spiritual growth may be a distinct learning phenomenon. In the next section these similarities and differences will be explored further as the four types of spiritual growth identified in Chapter 4 are compared with types of learning identified in the adult learning literature.

Types of Spiritual Growth and Adult Learning

In Chapter 4 four distinct types of spiritual growth were identified from the findings of this study: practical, emotional, ideological and essential. The four types emerged from participants' descriptions of the activities and results of their spiritual

growth in a way reminiscent of James' (1994/1902) approach where he emphasized the importance of identifiable change in behavior as a clue to understanding religious or spiritual experience (Taylor, 1996; Perry, 1967). In the arena of adult learning, scholars have also identified different types of learning. The purpose of this section will be to compare the findings from this study with dimensions of adult learning identified in the literature, especially the three forms of learning identified by Mezirow (1991): instrumental, communicative and emancipatory.

Habermas (1971) in his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* identified three distinct "interests" that "guide and shape the constitution of knowledge." Derived from Aristotle's three forms of reason, these interests are called technical, practical and emancipatory. The technical interest is associated with instrumental knowledge that focuses on work, explanation and such things as day-to-day problem solving. The practical interest is associated with interpretations of social life and addresses issues of mutual understanding through language. The emancipatory interest is associated with critical knowledge and focuses on helping to free people from previously held and taken for granted assumptions that are often coercive and oppressive. Habermas (1971) termed these "knowledge-constitutive interests" and asserts that "knowledge and interest are one" (p. 314). The work of Habermas (1971) is foundational for understanding Mezirow's (1991) adult learning theory, where he differentiates three forms of learning: instrumental, communicative and emancipatory. In the following sections the four types of spiritual growth identified as a part of this study will be compared to the types of adult learning identified by Mezirow (1991) and other adult education authors.

Practical Spiritual Growth

Participants' experiences of spiritual growth focused first of all on practical concerns such as problem solving and improvement of relationships. This type of learning is similar to instrumental learning as identified by Mezirow (1991), physical learning as identified by MacKeracher (1996), and sensory learning (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). For MacKeracher (1996) physical learning involves the "coordination of sensory information and physical movement as well as body image" (p. 152). The emphasis is on practical activity. This could include walking, observing and engaging on other activity directed toward an end. In this study practical forms of spiritual growth are often associated with the physical and sensual dimensions of life. The use of the word practical to describe these experiences may be similar in some ways to Mezirow's (1991) use of the word instrumental in that both refer to activities involving skills and the process of engaging in specific activities with minimal intentional reflection.

In this study participant experiences of practical spiritual growth often seemed more complex than Mezirow's description of instrumental learning. One participant, for example, described an experience of illness as an example of spiritual growth, "It was hard, just lying there. I was in pain. In a way it was like my body was speaking to me. The experience itself seemed sacred." This experience of practical spiritual growth was described in a physical and sensual way and exhibited a "felt sense of self" (Grendlin, 1978-9) associated with the activity that was distinct from the cognitive reflective process. This "felt sense of self" is similar to Gendlin's (1981) concept of "focusing,"

where understanding is articulated in a physical sensation of change termed a "body shift" (p. 7). This physical form of learning and change cannot be reduced to a cognitive process. The spiritual experience is in fact "embodied" and embodied experience is often reflective, albeit in extra-cognitive ways (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 564). Participants in this study associated their spiritual growth experiences directly with physical and practical experiences such walking, breathing, and beauty. In this study, Joy described her experience in deceptively simple terms, "The beauty of the sunset spoke to me." While this form of learning was not transformational in the sense of changing basic assumptions and beliefs or personal sense of identity, participants did identify it as a form of spiritual growth.

Emotional Spiritual Growth

The second form of spiritual growth identified by participants in this study was emotional. Foundational to this type of learning is feeling and affect. Adult educators have long identified the affects of emotion on the learning experience (Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1980, 1990). Stress and anxiety, for example can both facilitate and impede learning (Knowles, 1990). Emotional learning concerns elements such as the activity of feeling, as for example in empathy, or feeling with another person (Hyde, 1955; Heron, 1992). The results of emotional forms of adult learning are often described using words such as "joy, love surprise, satisfaction, fear, grief and anger" (Heron, 1992, p. 16). Study participants named many of these same feelings in their descriptions of spiritual growth

experiences. A difference between references to emotions in the adult learning literature and experiences of emotional spiritual growth as described in this study is that emotional spiritual growth "stands on its own two feet." In much of the adult learning literature emotions represent an important backdrop to a more significant, usually cognitive learning experience (MacKeracher, 1996). In this study there were instances where emotions were also associated with cognitive and physical learning experiences. But there were also times when the emotional spiritual growth experience seemed to be distinctly emotional. An example from the Bible is found in the phrase "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10), where fear is directly associated with the divine and occurs prior to any cognitive reflection or wisdom. Polly, a female participant in this study, alluded to an example of emotional spiritual growth when she reported, "I felt God's presence as a great joy." In her experience spiritual growth and joy are linked and stand apart from any cognitive analysis as an example of emotional spiritual growth.

Emotional spiritual growth is often associated with human relationships, including language and communication. In this way emotional spiritual growth could be likened to what Mezirow (1991) terms communicative learning. Participants did identify numerous experiences of spiritual growth that were associated with relationships and communication. The quality of those relationships, the challenges and satisfactions of communication, and the feelings or affect attending them all characterized spiritual growth experiences reported in this study. Emotional spiritual growth as identified in this study was different from Mezirow's (1991) conception of communicative learning, which

is described as much more cognitive and rational (Clark & Wilson, 1991) than the experiences of spiritual growth in this study.

Ideological Spiritual Growth

Participants in the study also identified a third type of spiritual growth that could be termed ideological. Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) define ideology as "the cultural and cognitive residue of values, attitudes and beliefs that sustain a society" (p. 147). This form of spiritual growth focuses on belief or ideology, the ways that people understand their social context. Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) suggest that ideology shapes the reflective process. Participants identified experiences of spiritual growth where their underlying beliefs and assumptions were changed. Sometimes previous beliefs were confirmed rather than changed. Will's experience of becoming more conscious of a spiritual reality and his sense of confirmation of a belief in afterlife represents a type of ideologically oriented spiritual growth. In his experience his beliefs and assumptions were raised to consciousness and examined as a result of this experience. Ideological spiritual growth does not correspond to either instrumental, communicative or emancipatory learning as described by Mezirow (1991), although communicative learning, with its focus on "conditions for communication... using language... to increase insight" (Mexirow, 1991, p. 79-80) could lead to ideology.

Essential Spiritual Growth

A fourth type of spiritual growth had to do with changes in a person's basic sense of identity and is termed essential spiritual growth, since it focuses on the essence of the person's self identity. Essential spiritual growth is similar to Mezirow's (1991) transformative or emancipatory learning, where assumptions are raised to consciousness through a reflective process and fundamental changes are made that affect a person's sense of self. In this study, Joy's experience of becoming more conscious of her life, its assumptions and her behaviors, as well as her awareness of another option, provided the context for an essential change in her sense of self. In this study there were more examples of practical and emotional spiritual growth than there were of ideological and essential; yet participants in this study reported examples of all forms.

Summary of Types of Spiritual Growth

Although similar to Mezirow's typology of learning, the four types of spiritual growth differ in several ways, as is shown in Table 2. The ideological type of spiritual growth, focused on belief, assumptions and understanding of the sacred, represents a type of learning not specifically identified by Mezirow (1991) in his description of types of adult learning. Although related to personal transformation, participant descriptions of spiritual growth in this study seemed to distinguish between ideological and essential spiritual growth.

Table 2: Types of Spiritual Growth and Adult Learning

Spiritual Growth, Davis (2002)	**Mezirow (1991)**	**Habermas (1971)**
Practical Spiritual Growth, experiences of a sensory nature often including physical activities	Instrumental learning, technical, task oriented problem solving	Technical, work oriented
Emotional Spiritual Growth, experiences affecting feelings especially in relationships	Communicative learning, negotiation using language to increase insight	Practical, interactive, communication and understanding
Ideological Spiritual Growth, experiences affecting beliefs	None	None
Essential Spiritual Growth, experiences affecting basic identity	Emancipatory, reflection that challenges distorted meaning perspectives	Emancipatory, self knowledge emancipates a person from forces that limit options

Ideological spiritual growth focuses on the process of understanding the meaning of experience while essential spiritual growth focuses on changes in the basic identity of the person. In this study, Will's experience following his grandmother's death was ideological in that it affected his beliefs. For Joy, her dramatic awareness of her identity while walking on the Baileytown Road is an example of essential spiritual growth. It was an experience that fundamentally changed her perspective of herself. Participants in this study distinguished between these types of spiritual growth.

Although a corresponding type of learning is not found in Mezirow, the ideological type of spiritual growth is consistent with research on the practice of spiritual growth in American Protestantism. Wuthnow (1998) points to the importance of ideology or belief, especially descriptions of one's understanding of spiritual experiences as

important the history of American spirituality. Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) also identify ideology as a part of the reflective process.

Differentiating ideological spiritual growth, highlighting the importance of belief, from essential spiritual growth, with its focus on identity, is also consistent with practices in the study of culture (Schein, 1992). Culture has to do with "shared meanings… the ways people characterize themselves" (Schein, 1992, p. 10), as well as the "basic identity" or "root metaphor" that is then expressed in numerous activities (Smircich, 1983). The distinction between identity and ideology is not unusual, especially in the culture of American Protestantism that formed the basis for this study.

Participants in this study identified experiences of spiritual growth that clustered into four broad types: practical, emotional, ideological and essential. The types of spiritual growth identified in this study share some similarities with those identified by Mezirow (1991) although they seem to represent a distinctive typology. The differentiation of four types of spiritual growth leads to the question of possible relationships between the four types themselves. Such distinctions are commonly made in the literature of adult development where distinct types, stages or phases of learning and growth are identified and will be explored in the next section.

Spiritual Growth and Adult Development

Analysis of participants' experiences of spiritual growth in this study led to the identification of four types of spiritual growth: practical, emotional, ideological and

essential. In the literature of adult development and spiritual development, distinctions are also made between different types of spiritual and adult development. This often leads to a qualitative distinction between the types and the identification of a sequential, step by step development process involving stages or phases. Since the types of spiritual growth identified in this study bear some resemblance to the spiritual development stages identified by Fowler (1981), Peck (1987), and Wilbur (1995a, 1995b), it is important to clarify their meaning. In this section, the findings from the study will be examined in light of the adult development literature. Of particular interest are the works of Fowler (1981), Peck (1987), and Wilbur (1995a, 1995b), who each focus on aspects of spiritual development.

Adult Development

Adult development provides a continuum for understanding experience and change in adult life. Psychology and psychological development have provided a framework for understanding individual change, including spiritual growth and development (Fowler, 1981; Peck, 1987; Davis, 1989). Adult education has been influenced by psychology in general and developmental psychology in particular (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Rubenson, 1989). Piaget has been influential (Tennant, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991) because he emphasizes the qualitative structural changes in individual adult cognition that lead to higher levels of functioning within the social world (Piaget, 1970). It is no accident that many studies on spiritual growth utilize

a psychological framework (Lauzon, 1998; Moore, 1992; Dishington, 1996; Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999; Hart, 1998; Elkins, 1995; Wilbur, 1995).

Development and Change

"At its simplest level, the concept of development implies change" (Merriam, 1984, p. 1). One could argue that not all change is developmental, but virtually all development involves change. Change has been understood in various ways. For some theorists adult change is internally programmed (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1972; Piaget, 1954, 1970; Gould, 1978). Others see change as externally motivated by environmental factors (Sheey, 1976; Levinson, *et al,* 1978). Still other theorists view adult change as both internally and externally motivated (Neugarten, 1973). As noted in Chapter 4, participants in this study identified a wide variety of changes associated with their experiences of spiritual growth. Some of those changes were deeply intra-personal while others seemed to be affected by activities and relationships.

Changes in adulthood occur over time. As Merriam (1984) points out, time is viewed by some theorists chronologically, as age related (Sheehy, 1976; Levinson, *et al,* 1978; Gould, 1978), by others as a function of the expectations of society (Lowenthal, Thumher & Chiriboga, 1975), and still others as a function of historical time. Historical time "shapes the social system, and the social system in turn, creates a changing set of age norms and a changing age-grade system which shapes the individual life cycle" (Neugarten & Datan, 1973, p. 57). As noted in Chapter 4, time was an important element in the social context of reported experiences of spiritual growth.

Most adult development theories and models view development in a linear fashion. "Adult lives progress through predictable sequences: learning, loving, working, living, leading, and succeeding" (Hudson, 1991, p. 30). Freud is an example of this view of development, as is Erikson and Levinson, among others (Hudson, 1991). In spiritual growth this approach has led to hierarchical models depicting growth through qualitatively distinct stages (Wilbur, 1995; Peck, 1987; Fowler, 1981). Yet, as Hudson (1991) points out, many adults today do not experience life in a linear way. Participants in this study noted the importance of change in their experiences of spiritual growth. Change over time was also mentioned as important. However, there was no evidence in this study for viewing spiritual growth as a linear process of development or growth.

Phase and Stage Theories

Adult development models have commonly been distinguished in two ways. One group of approaches emphasizes the importance of chronological age in the development process. These are called phase theories. Phase theories hold that changes occur in progressive sequences during relatively fixed periods of an adult's life (Lasker & Moore, 1980). Within phase models, the exact changes may vary but they occur within a specific age period in the adult's life. Stage theories of development, by contrast, focus on changes in the adult life that occur apart from age considerations. Within stage theories, individuals will vary as to the level of development they achieve, even though the same people will experience similar events and be of similar ages (Lasker & Moore, 1980).

The field of adult development is based on the assumption that adult life experiences occur in some recognizable pattern over a lifetime (Lasker & Moore, 1980). Most adult development models do not primarily focus on change, rather they focus on the identification and facilitation of certain specific states of psychological equilibrium termed phases, stages, ego states, or universal principles (Riegel, 1976). As Levinson states, "It is now generally accepted that all lives are governed by common developmental principles... and go through a common sequence of developmental periods" (Levinson, *et al,* 1978, p. 3). Focusing on these states of equilibrium can result in an inadequate focus on the dynamics of change in adult development (Basseches, 1984; Riegel, 1976; Tennant, 1988). As Hudson (1991) states:

> We treat change as a problem, not an issue. Unfortunately, change is not only an issue; it is the dominant issue for our foreseeable future, and the empowerment of adults in our time depends on finding ways to be friends with change. (p. 21)

Models of adult development arising from the dialectical psychological approach attempt to address the reality of change, but are limited by their cognitive focus (Basseches, 1984; Riegel, 1976; Tennant, 1988; Young, 1997).

Theorists such as Favell (1982), Kagan (1980) and Kuhn (1983) are attempting to move beyond the traditional vision of adult development by questioning the notion that adults develop by moving through predictable stages based on shared internal cognitive structures. Broughton argues (in Blanchard-Fields, 1989, p. 128) that attempts to place adults in categorical stages based on fixed cognitive structures assumes that reasoning is separate from activity and represents an inadequate way to describe adult change. For Broughton development is based on predictable sequences of experiences rather than

shared internal mental structures. Some theorists deny that development leads toward maturity (Bee, 2000). Fiske & Chiriboga (1990) point out that all stages are meaningful in their own terms, and that change occurs as a result of cultural contact rather than an internal cognitive development from a lower to a higher stage. Although not a developmental theory, transformational learning theory also asserts that adults go through phases of change where meaning is clarified. Such change can lead toward "more inclusive, differentiated, permeable and integrated perspectives" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 155).

Situated Approaches to Development

Situated approaches to development differ from other approaches to adult development in that they emphasize the participation of the individual within a social context. Through participation in a community or culture, frameworks for participation arise from activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tennant, 1997). From a situated perspective, development is viewed as "progress along trajectories of participation and growth of identity" (Greeno, 1997, p. 9). Situated approaches to development seek "to explicate the interdependent, interactive, bidirectional, transactive relation between the individual and the surround, viewing neither as separate entities" (Young, 1997, p. 101; Valsiner & Winegar, 1992). Situated development approaches are constructivist, highlighting intersubjectivity (Taylor, 1995), "the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion or other culturally meaningful reality" (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995, p. 171; Young, 1997). They involve the

"emergent characteristic of the person-in-context" (Wozniak & Fischer, 1993, p. xv). Both mind and context are "reciprocally coextensive" (Mecham, 1993) and are actively - not passively- "conjoined" (Young, 1997).

Spiritual Development and Spiritual Growth

Fowler (1981), Peck (1987) and Wilbur (1995a, 1995b) are stage theorists who address adult development from a spiritual perspective focusing on the spiritual development of the individual. Because of this emphasis each will be examined in turn. Following a description of each theory, the three will be compared with the findings from this study.

Fowler's Theory of Faith Development

Fowler's (1981) goal is to identify a framework for the study and understanding faith, an area often overlooked because of its perceived subjective nature. Faith for Fowler (1981) is "a pattern of human relatedness, an apparently generic consequence of the universal human burden of finding or making meaning" (p. 33). It is a matter of experience, derived from "the ultimate conditions of existence" (p. 92), which gives a person a "sense of first importance and greatest profundity" in shaping the purpose and meaning of life (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 228). Faith development involves the progression from childhood conformity with its relatively simplistic images of God often

reinforced by family and society, through adolescent questioning and the formation of a more personally tailored faith to more mature, critically reflective, flexible and inclusive forms of adult faith. Fowler distinguishes six stages of faith. Individuals progress to a more advanced stage through a process of change or conversion that can be sudden and intense, sometimes causing a person to reorient his or her life (Fowler, 1981). Faith development for Fowler is "necessarily sequential, invariant and hierarchical, each stage building upon and incorporating into its more complex pattern the operations of the previous stages" (Craemer, 1996, p. 136).

Fowler (1981) insists that human development is, "always a product of a certain synergy between human potentials, given in creation, and the presence and activity of Spirit as mediated through many channels" (p. 293). For Fowler, growth to a higher stage of faith would be related to growth in understanding and experience of the spiritual, or spiritual growth. Although the data from this study are limited, no such relationship was identified. Individual experiences of spiritual growth simply occurred in the context of everyday life. In this study experiences of spiritual growth were not associated with participants' reports of a strong faith, frequent religious participation, or a clear sense of belief.

Peck's Theory Of Spiritual Growth And Development

Peck (1987) suggests a four-stage model of spiritual growth and development. Based on the developmental theories of Piaget (1970, 1954), Erikson (1997), and Kohlberg (1973), Peck developed his model through his work with psychotherapy clients.

Peck identified strong similarities between his model and Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development. According to Peck (1987) "there is a pattern of progression through identifiable stages in human spiritual life" (p. 188). He identified those stages as follows: Stage I: chaotic, antisocial; Stage II: formal, institutional; Stage III: skeptic, individual; Stage IV: mystic, communal.

These stages move from the chaotic stage, where people are largely "unprincipled," through the formal stage with its emphasis on structure, forms and belonging, to the skeptic stage characterized by cognitive reflection and questioning, a time when "people make up their own minds about spiritual matters" (Peck, 1987, p. 191), to the mystical stage where people, sensing more of the vast mystery of life often feel a need to "connect" their life experiences with a greater whole. Peck's (1987) use of the word "stage" in describing spiritual growth implies a hierarchy of spiritual growth. This hierarchy, common in many traditions of spiritual growth, tends to downplay the importance of "lower" stages and promote an individualistic, intra-personal conception of spiritual growth.

Wilbur's Theory Of Adult Development

Wilbur (1995a, 1995b), like Fowler (1981) and Peck (1987), draws heavily from cognitive / structural development theory. Unlike Fowler, who bases his assumptions on the Christian faith, Wilbur's theory is influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism (Wilbur 1995a, 1995b). Wilbur views development as a process of human evolution toward unitary consciousness. Development then consists of movement through different levels

of consciousness toward a more complex, comprehensive and inclusive mode of spirituality toward what Wilbur terms "trans-egoic" levels of development. Wilbur terms his model a "holarchy" an ordering of increasingly comprehensive wholes, each containing the less mature reality that has then been gathered up into a greater sense of consciousness increasingly moving beyond the confines of self, ego and body and toward a universal unity.

Critique of Spiritual Development Theories

Participants in this study identified four types of spiritual growth: physical, emotional, ideological and essential. Since these spiritual growth types could be interpreted to move from simpler, more practical experiences, through the emotional, and cognitive, to experiences focusing on a person's basic identity, the question of the relationship of these four types of spiritual growth to the literature on adult development and spiritual development is an important one. Do these types represent a hierarchy of spiritual growth experiences? This question is also important because of the larger number of instances of spiritual growth identified as practical or emotional as compared to those identified as ideological or essential, paralleling the finding in Fowler (1981) for example, of fewer instances of the highest levels of spiritual development. In Protestant religious literature the issue of identity, in this study is termed essential spiritual growth, and the process of identity formation is often associated with "conversion" (Wuthnow, 1998). The religious experience of conversion is often viewed as a qualitatively higher

and more important form of growth than more practical spiritual experiences (Rambo, 1993).

Many adult development theorists as well as researchers in spiritual development identify distinct hierarchical phases or stages of development. Participants in this study did not qualitatively differentiate between the four types of spiritual growth identified from the findings. Each was viewed as important in its own right. In the present study no sequential hierarchy among the four different types of spiritual growth was identified. The four types of spiritual growth seem to represent different foci, or types of learning, and each is characterized by a different way of knowing. This is shown in Table 3. Findings from this study do not support the notion of spiritual growth as a separate cognitive-developmental stage as Wilbur (1995), Fowler (1981) and Peck (1987) assert. Participants repeatedly identified a wide variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive experiences as forms of spiritual growth. Although mystical experiences are important in Wilbur's (1995a) developmental schema, they were not identified by study participants as a part of their spiritual growth. This could be because of the small number of participants or the cultural background of participants (Labouvie-Vief, 1994). Mysticism, for example, has not been a common emphasis within the Presbyterian tradition (Rice, 1991). Another reason, based on the stage theories of Wilbur (1995), Fowler (1981) and Peck (1987) could be because the participants in this study are not sufficiently evolved spiritually to reflect the higher stages of spiritual development. Although possible, such an interpretation presupposes the validity of stage theories in spiritual development.

Table 3: Types of Spiritual Growth and Ways of Knowing

Type of Spiritual Growth	**Epistemology or Way of Knowing**
Practical	Activity or physical experience
Emotional	Feeling or affect
Ideological	Cognition
Esstential	Intuitive awareness

The validity of stage theories in spiritual development is itself questionable, especially the "higher" stages (Courtenay, 1994). Walsh (1991) points out that shamans consistently report higher-level spiritual experiences without any indication that they have addressed the intermediate stages of development Wilbur suggests are critical for spiritual development. Coles (1990) and Stevenson (1987) report numerous higher-level spiritual experiences in the lives of children who also have not progressed through the prescribed stages of development. Even though the assumption of a hierarchical progression through distinct stages of spiritual development has a long history and occurs in multiple religious traditions (Huxley, 1944; Wilbur, 1995a), recent insights on the role of power and authority in adult education (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2001; Tisdell, 1993) raise questions about this assumption since historical descriptions often privilege unique experiences of an elite and may not reflect common practice.

Further, theories of adult spiritual development such as those of Wilbur (1995), Fowler (1981) and Peck (1987) are based on a modernist vision of change inherited from Darwin. Most adult development approaches are influenced by this vision, some more (Kohlberg, 1973) or less (Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975). Adult development approaches are derived from Freud, Jung, Piaget, Watson, and Dewey, all of whom were

strongly influenced by social Darwinism (Corsini, 1979; Kegan, 1982). The emergence of the postmodern critique questions the validity of meta-narratives of development as well as the assumptions of social Darwinism that underlie them (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). From a postmodern perspective traditional theories of development are limited by their narrowness of focus, tendencies toward reductionism and inability to adequately reflect differences in the development process (Gergen, 1991).

Experiences such as those described by Wilbur (1995a) and others are important, but not necessarily normative. If development is unique for each individual, as Canda & Furman (1999) and others assert, the identification of different types or stages of spiritual growth is important in helping to understand that uniqueness. Qualitative or hierarchical distinctions however actually obscure the unique developmental story of each person. Although data from this study are limited, findings suggest that spiritual growth experiences share certain similarities such as were described in Chapters 3 and 4, but that each person's journey of spiritual development seems to be distinct. Evidence from this study seems to support what William James (1994/1902) termed the "educational variety" of spiritual development with its many and varied experiences over a lifetime, rather than the notion of a journey through a series of hierarchical stages as suggested by Wilbur (1995a, 1995b), Fowler (1981) and Peck (1987).

Spiritual growth occurs within the experience of adult development. The key word is experience. Although mention of spiritual growth specifically in the adult education literature is rare, there are several instances where it is addressed directly. In the next section, the findings from this study will be compared to specific understandings of spiritual growth found in the literature of adult education.

Spiritual Growth Discussed by Adult Education Authors

Increasingly, adult educators mention the importance of the spiritual dimensions of adult learning. Although references to spiritual growth and spirituality are more common today than even a few years ago, they are still rare (Tisdell, 1999). In this section I will compare the findings from this study with specific descriptions of spiritual growth in the adult learning literature.

When spiritual growth is mentioned it is often simply named without any significant description or explanation. The Group for Collaborative Inquiry (1994), for example, underscored the significance of whole person learning, citing the importance of "awareness and use of all the functions we have available for knowing, including our cognitive, affective, somatic, intuitive and spiritual dimensions" (p. 171). Although the spiritual dimensions of adult learning were mentioned, nowhere was this phenomenon described or defined.

Some authors describe spirituality and adult education in terms of religious education (Zeph, 2000). English & Gillen (2000) represent an example. They describe spirituality as "an awareness of something greater than ourselves, a sense that we are connected to all human beings and to all of creation . . . authentic spirituality moves one outward to others as an expression of one's spiritual experiences" (English & Gillen, 2000, p. 258). Zeph (2000), as well as English & Gillen (2000), identify links between religious education and adult education, citing the concepts of meaning making, the expansion of awareness, and consciousness and social responsibilities as common themes. Both meaning making and the expansion of awareness and consciousness are

spiritual growth themes that were also identified by participants in this study. Participants did not identify social responsibilities as a major theme of spiritual growth. Zeph's (2000) emphasis on critical reflection (Brookfield, 1987, 1991) and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991), as well as her use of Groome (1980) with his emphasis on critical reflection, are indicative of a more rational approach to religious education than that identified by study participants in Chapter 3. Zeph's (2000) emphasis on the importance of community in adult religious learning does echo participants' emphasis on the importance of authentic relationships in the spiritual growth experiences that they reported.

In addition to these authors, several theorists describe spiritual growth from an adult learning perspective, among them: Dirkx (1997), O'Sullivan (1999), Tisdell (1999), MacKeracher (1996), and Schauffele & Baptiste (2000). In the sections that follow the findings from this study will be compared with the descriptions of each author in turn.

John Dirkx

Other authors describe the spiritual dimensions of adult learning from a depth psychology perspective. Dirkx (1997) asserts that attention to the soul in adult learning is important. For Dirkx, this does not involve the phenomenon of spiritual growth itself as much as the process of nurturing soul, learning "to recognize what is already inherent within our relationships and experiences, to acknowledge its presence with the teaching and learning environment, to respect its sacred message" (p. 83). Soul, for Dirkx (1997),

is more than psychological attention to feelings; it is "seeing the world and its suffering though our own experiences of emotions" (p. 82). It involves authentic lived experience that changes life. Soul is a connection between "mind and heart" (p. 83), an experience of "conjoining" the subjectivity of the person and the world through an experience of learning. Spiritual growth for Dirkx involves the use of images and symbols in a critically reflective process lived in the context and relationships of life.

The notion of soul was also mentioned by participants in this study in describing their experiences of spiritual growth. In a way similar to Dirkx, participants in this study spoke of soul as involving a process of "looking deeper" into one's life experience. Dick spoke of "baring your soul" as a way to describe in depth sharing of personal experience with others. The term "soul searching" was also used as a way to describe the reflective process. Values like truth and honesty were associated with the concept of soul by study participants. Participants seemed to speak of a deeper meaning than that described by Dirkx in their use of the word soul. Joy summarized the views of others in the group interview when she characterized spiritual growth as "something you hear in your soul." Soul was also described as gentle and peaceful and identified as something that could be refreshed and nurtured. In fact participants stated that the experience of spiritual growth nurtured the soul. As Jennifer said, "Spiritual growth is a way to nurture my soul." For participants in this study, soul was a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) for the deepest aspects of human identity and consciousness. Drikx (1997) also identified soul with the deeper aspects of human existence, but from a more psychological and less metaphysical perspective. Participants viewed the soul as having to do with the fundamental nature of human reality that was connected in some way to a greater spiritual reality. Because of

this understanding, soul had more of an ontological status for participants in this study than is apparent in Dirkx's (1997) description.

Edmund O'Sullivan

O'Sullivan (1999) identifies an "integral" goal for transformative learning, focusing on a holistic vision for learning including human development, ecological responsibility, social change and the education of the human spirit. For O'Sullivan (1999) the spiritual dimensions of learning address the "non physical, immaterial dimensions of our being; the energies, essences and part of us that existed before and will exist after the disintegration of the body" (p. 260). The spiritual world for O'Sullivan (1999) is "beyond our everyday physical, mental, and emotional experiences... beyond the five senses" and "different from imagination" (p. 263). It is a "grand mystery" (p. 264). O'Sullivan seems to liken spiritual growth to what has classically be termed the "mystical experience" (James, 1994/1902). Mysticism might be described as a form of "unmediated awareness" (Miller, 1994, p. 25) of a spiritual dimension of reality. Mysticism locates the spiritual dimensions of learning apart from the physical dimension of existence, everyday activities of life, and even the psychological dimensions of the person. This emphasis on mystical or inexpressible experience is also found in other authors (Weibust & Thomas, 1994), and has been described variously as transpersonal experience (Wilbur, 1995a, 1995b), peak experience (Maslow, 1971), cosmic consciousness (Bucke, 1901), fifth order consciousness (Flier, 1995), and spiritual consciousness (Huxley, 1944).

O'Sullivan's (1999) emphasis on spiritual growth as a mystical experience, also echoed in the authors just cited, is quite different from the findings of this study where participants located spiritual growth primarily within everyday physical, mental and emotional experiences, making almost no mention of spiritual growth as a mystical experience. Despite references to spirituality and learning, most of O'Sullivan's vision of education actually focuses on the multi-cultural, ecological and psychological elements of learning, elements that were infrequently mentioned by participants in this study. O'Sullivan's (1999) vision for transformative learning is quite broad, but the links between the spiritual growth experience as identified by participants in this study and adult transformational learning as identified by O'Sullivan are not strong.

Elizabeth Tisdell

Tisdell (1999) focuses on spirituality in adult learning as a process of "constructing knowledge through image and symbol" and "attempting to live or act in the world in accordance with one's spiritual path" (p. 91). Attention to spirituality takes place in the context of memory, meaning, insight and human connectedness. As shown in Chapter 3, these elements were also a part of participant descriptions of their experiences of spiritual growth in this study. Tisdell (1999) asserts that spirituality contributes to the coherence and meaning of life as "it informs our knowing in ways that are beyond our consciousness" (p. 94). Study participants also spoke of spiritual growth as an experience that was beyond the conscious, and even at times "beyond words," but they also spoke of

their experiences of spiritual growth in very concrete terms. Tisdell's (1999) description of spiritual development also echoes the findings from this study that the individual process of making meaning cannot be separated from the sociocultural context within which it occurs. Tisdell affirms the value and importance of spirituality in adult learning and development. A significant difference between her views and the findings of this study involves her emphasis on the word spirituality. She seems to view spirituality as something that informs an already existing phenomenon of adult learning and development. Findings from this study support the identification of a distinct learning process that might be termed spiritual growth. Spiritual growth has significant similarities with elements of adult learning identified by a number of authors, but also refers to a distinct type of adult learning with its own elements and process.

Dorothy MacKeracher

In *Making Sense of Adult Learning,* MacKeracher (1996) identifies a theory of spiritual learning. Her theory, developed subjectively through the examination of her own experience, bears similarity to the process first used by James (1994/1902) as well as the process used in this study. Three authors form the basis of the conceptual framework for MacKeracher's (1996) theory of spiritual learning: Jung's (1933) emphasis on extending and amplifying the unconscious elements of life, Wilbur's (1995) transpersonal notion of spiritual development as a hierarchical ascent through different levels of consciousness, and Mezirow's (1991) understanding of transformational learning through perspective

transformation. MacKeracher (1996) views spiritual learning as a process of openness, reflection and sharing:

> . . . becoming aware of these submerged parts of the psyche; bringing them into consciousness through altered states, particularly through dreaming; examining their meaning and implications; integrating those parts found acceptable and useful; and as a result, expanding the self . . . . (p. 177)

As a subjective interpretation focused on spiritual learning, MacKeracher's (1996) description is noteworthy because it is rare in the adult learning literature. At the same time, however, her description of spiritual learning has notable limitations. Even though she cites authors such as Mezirow (1991) and Denis & Richter (1987), a closer examination of those citations reveals that neither Mezirow (1991) nor Denis & Richter (1987 use any terminology suggesting spiritual growth. Taylor (1997), for example, cites Mezirow's lack of attention to the "spiritual dimensions" of learning (The Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994, p. 171). Like much of the literature focused on spiritual growth, of which James (1994/1902) represents and early example and Brussat & Brussat (1996) a more current one, MacKeracher's work is primarily based on the interpretation of her own experience. In that sense it is similar to the approach used in this study. This study differs, however, in that it utilizes four diverse data gathering methods with twelve participants over a period of one year, rather than a very limited number of anecdotal experiences. MacKeracher's observations bear some similarities to those of this study, especially her emphasis on consciousness, awareness, and changes in perspective, but her data and method limit their value in theory building. MacKeracher's approach to spiritual

growth or learning also focuses on the individual and is psychological in its interpretation, ignoring a key finding from this study that spiritual growth is inseparably tied to social, contextual dimensions of spiritual growth and learning. The limitations of MacKeracher's chapter on spiritual aspects of learning are more telling since her book purports to be an introduction to adult learning, and by implication, spiritual learning as it relates to the field of adult education.

Susan Schauffele & Ian Baptiste

Schauffele & Baptiste (2000) write of a "Judeo-Christian theory of learning." Utilizing a social cognitivist perspective linked largely to Bandura (1986), Schauffele & Baptiste identify four realms associated with the adult learning process: physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. Schauffele & Baptiste (2000) then link these to the four elements of the Biblical "Great Commandment" found in Mark 12:30, based on their acceptance of the "Judeo-Christian Bible as a truth source whose information has been corroborated by history, rational thought, and both personal and vicarious experience" (p. 453). Although the authors "leap of faith" from adult learning to Biblical truth represents a weak development of the relationship between the traditions of Christian spiritual growth and the adult learning process, their identification of the four realms of adult learning is significant. In Chapter 4 of this study, participants identified four types of spiritual growth described as practical, emotional, ideological and essential. Practical spiritual growth certainly includes physical dimensions. Ideological spiritual growth is

cognitive, and emotional learning as identified by Schauffele & Baptiste (2000) is similar to the notion of emotional spiritual growth identified in this study. A major difference is that Schauffele & Baptiste identify the spiritual realm as distinct from the other three. Certainly this is in keeping with traditional Christian theology, based on Augustine and derived from Plato where a strong distinction is made between the spiritual and the material (Fox, 1988). Participants in this study did not describe such a distinction. They emphasized the value of practical, physical, emotional and ideological or cognitive aspects of spiritual growth experiences. Findings from participant experiences of spiritual growth in this study did echo Schauffele & Baptiste's (2000) assertion of the importance of perception in the learning process, as can be seen in the identification in Chapter 3 of the importance of reflection, awareness and attribution as components of participants' spiritual growth experiences.

Summary of Adult Educators' Views

Although relatively small in number, adult education authors increasingly refer to the importance of spiritual dimensions of adult learning. Even though the number of references to spirituality, spiritual development and spiritual growth has increased, many of these references actually concern psychological dimensions of adult learning. References that do address the phenomenon of spiritual growth or learning are often based on a small number of anecdotal experiences. The scarcity of reported research on spiritual growth in the adult learning literature is a limitation in developing a broad

conception of the phenomenon of spiritual growth and its relationship to adult learning. Where adult education authors did refer to the spiritual dimensions of adult learning they also tended to define the phenomenon of spiritual growth in a more mystical way in contrast to study participants who often viewed spiritual growth in broader more practical ways. Participants in this study also viewed spiritual growth as ontologically real, a learning process that stands on its own two feet contributing to their fundamental identity as human beings and not simply as an adjunct to another more important and usually cognitive learning process.

Despite these limitations there were a number of common themes among these authors and the participants in this study. Examples include an emphasis on reflection, an expansion of consciousness, awareness or insight, identification of the meaning of an experience, the importance of human connections, and the use of soul as a metaphor for understanding the deeper aspects of human consciousness. These common elements further strengthen the significance of the findings in this study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the findings from this study were compared to the adult learning and adult development literature. Specific comparisons were made to the literature on adult experiential learning and transformational learning. Four selected elements of the spiritual growth process as identified in Chapter 3 (reflection, awareness, relationship and attribution) were compared to their descriptions in the adult education literature. The four

types of spiritual growth, identified in the findings from Chapter 4 of this study, practical, emotional, ideological and essential, were compared to the adult learning literature as well as the literature on adult development and spiritual development. Finally, the findings from this study were compared to several adult learning authors who specifically discuss spiritual growth and learning.

Merriam & Clark (1993) defined adult learning as "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills" (p.131). In this study, participants reported spiritual growth experiences that also involved attending to and reflecting on experience, and they reported changes in perspective, belief, behavior or even identity. Spiritual growth shares much in common with the phenomenon of adult learning as identified in the literature, but also represents a distinct form of adult learning.

In this study participants attributed a broad range of experiences to the spiritual, some of them very practical. Attribution represents a key component of spiritual growth. Although similar to the notion of meaning making, which is highlighted as an important part of the adult learning process by many authors, an important difference has to do with the type of meaning that is attributed. In the adult learning literature authors often describe meaning making in psychological terms. While the phenomenon of attribution in spiritual growth often contains important psychological elements, it also focuses on spiritual phenomena that are viewed by participants as extending beyond the person. Often study participants used the word "deeper" to describe this phenomenon.

Some adult education authors who mention spiritual growth or learning also use the word "deep" to describe those learning experiences. For some adult educators that

depth refers to a mystical experience. Others view depth in psychological terms. A part of the uniqueness and the "depth" of spiritual growth in this study is to be found in the examination of the boundaries between the individual self, his or her experience of spiritual growth, and the social context of that experience. In adult learning, researchers have long debated the relationship of the individual and the social context in the learning process. In understanding the phenomenon of spiritual growth, one of the major findings of this study was that spiritual growth experiences are individual experiences inseparably bound to social context. In the next chapter I will compare the findings of this study to the literature that addresses the role of the individual and the social context in the learning process in order to more clearly describe the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

CHAPTER 6

THE CULTURE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH: A CONCEPTUAL INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings described in Chapters 3 and 4 focused on two dimensions of spiritual growth, the personal and the contextual. Chapter 5 compared these dimensions to the literature on adult learning and development. The purpose of this chapter is to explore another dimension of spiritual growth, one that generally lies outside the traditional literature of adult education. This dimension is characterized by "going deeper," a term used by study participants and scholars alike. The exploration of this dimension leads to a definition of spiritual growth and an expanded understanding of adult learning.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the metaphor "going deeper," which occurs at the intersection of one's individual cognitive experience and the social context of that experience. In the literature learning that takes place at that intersection is termed situated learning. Both the individual and the context have equal importance in situated learning. The next section includes a discussion of the link between situated learning and spiritual growth. In situated learning, culture is foundational to the learning process. Using the literature, culture is described next from two perspectives, a descriptive perspective, the most typical way of viewing culture, including such items as activities, norms, and customs, and a "deeper" perspective that points to the heart of the experience of spiritual growth and has to do with the essence of one's identity. Using the concept of metaphor, this "deeper" perspective is linked to the findings, suggesting a situated

learning culture that includes the notion of soul as the locus of spiritual growth and dialogue as its language. Concluding the chapter is a definition of spiritual growth and an integration of the spiritual dimension into adult learning.

Going Deeper

Both the adult education authors who mention spiritual growth and participants in this study use the word "deep" as a descriptive metaphor for spiritual growth. For some participants, depth referred to a deeper experience of reflection, of asking "deep questions" or "thinking deeply" about something. Jack, a male participant in the study, wrote of "going deeper within myself to whatever is going on." Sometimes this process led to the discovery of "deep feelings and emotions." Other participants described spiritual growth as involving deeper relationships with loved ones or the process of deeper more intimate sharing of their personal lives, or as Dick said, "baring your soul." Sometimes participants spoke of a depth of meaning, as in "the meaning of the experience continues to deepen within me." Participants linked their experiences of depth with spiritual growth. As Polly said, "The more intimate my relationship with God is, the deeper my spiritual growth." Another spoke of spiritual growth as "deepening my faith." A female participant spoke of her spiritual growth as a time when "I am drawn into a deeper mystery." One participant summed up this perspective when he said, "The process of going deeper is spiritual."

Adult learning authors who write of spiritual dimensions of the learning experience also refer to depth as a part of the learning process. For most depth is viewed as an intra-psychic phenomenon. Dirkx (1997) for example speaks of "nurturing soul in adult learning" through a process of "looking deeper into one's life experience" (p 81). MacKeracher (1996) views spiritual learning as a process of "becoming aware of these submerged parts of the psyche" (p. 177). Other authors, such as Freire (1971), associate depth with qualities of social interaction.

This study confirms and expands the idea that learning has a "depth" component because the findings identified that in spiritual growth, individual cognitive experiences are inseparably bound to their social context. Part of the uniqueness and the "depth" of spiritual growth is found at the boundary between the individual, his or her experience of spiritual growth, and the social context, which in this instance includes a spiritual dimension.

Individual and Context in Spiritual Growth and Adult Learning

One of the fundamental debates in adult learning theory is the role of the individual and the context in the adult learning experience (Galbraith & Sisco, 1992). Much of the adult education literature, based on psychological assumptions, locates the adult learning experience in the individual learner as a cognitive process, while other authors place the emphasis on social context. This difference concerns assumptions about both the primary location of the learning experience and its desired outcome. For those

emphasizing the importance of the individual, the location is the individual learner and his or her cognitive processes. The primary outcome of learning is often identified as some form of individual change. For those emphasizing the importance of the social context in the learning experience, learning is located in the context at the place where the individual interacts with contextual elements. Outcomes associated with contextually based learning are often associated with changes in social structures. Dirkx & Lavin (1991) describe these two basic approaches to experiential adult learning: as a "focus on the individual learner, the subjective meaning of his or her experiences and how this meaning is derived through the learning process" and a focus on the "learners socio-political context and grounded in a more sociological view of the learning process" (p. 2).

The Individual Focus

Those who focus on learning from an individual perspective tend to view learning as a cognitive, reflective activity that often takes place as a part of a process consisting of phases or stages (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Researchers typifying this approach to learning include: Kolb (1984), Cell (1987), Boud, Keough, & Walker (1985a), Boyd & Fales (1983), and Mezirow (Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Mezirow, 1991). As Jacobson (1996) said, referring to Kolb, "In this model, learning begins and ends with experience, but it remains an internal, individual process" (p. 21). The outcome and goal might differ depending on the author, but the focus of the learning experience is primarily on the individual.

Schon (1983, 1987) and Argyris (1985) are also examples of this approach. Both emphasize the importance of individual reflection in the learning process and understand the reflective process as a rational process (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). A focus on individual learning from the perspective of depth psychology is characteristic of Torbert (1972), Daloz (1986), Boyd & Myers (1988), Boyd (1991), and Boud & Walker, (1990).

The Contextual Focus

A second basic approach to experiential adult learning identified by Dirkx & Lavin (1991) includes scholars who focus on the social context of the learner. This contextual focus can take different forms: learning within a social context (Bateson, 1994; Jarvis, 1987), learning mediated through the social context (Wilson, 1993), relationally oriented cognitive development (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996), and learning that focuses on reflective practice (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997), as well as on changing the social context such as Freire (1971), Cunningham (1983), Carr & Kemmis (1986), Usher (1985, 1986, 1989), and Weedon (1987). Dirkx & Lavin (1991) point out that experiential learning involves diverse perspectives and different learning assumptions whether viewed from an individual or contextual perspective. While some authors view the individual and the context as distinct, others view them as compatible. In the literature, one conceptual approach that links the individual and the context is situated learning.

Situated Approaches

Adult education scholars (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Heaney, 1995; Jarvis, 1987; Kegan, 1994; Tennant & Pogson, 1995) note the importance of both the individual and the social context in learning. Building on the work of scholars such as Mead (1934) and Ashworth (1979), Jarvis (1987), for example, identified a view of adult learning focused on the social context of the learner while also honoring the experience of the individual learner (Usher, 1989). Bandura's (1986) social learning theory also emphasizes the importance of the individual as well as culture in learning.

Situated learning, which is also termed variously in the literature as situated cognition, the situated perspective, activity theory, situated action model and distributed cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Greeno, 1997), represents an approach to adult learning that emphasizes the importance of both the individual and the context in learning. In situated learning, the process of knowing and making sense of a situation, traditionally viewed as a part of cognitive learning, is "fundamentally situated" (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 32) or "inextricably linked to that situation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). In situated learning "cognition observed in everyday practice is distributed- stretched over, not divided among- mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings" (Lave, 1988, p. 1). The content for learning is a part of the learner's daily experience (Shor, 1996). The learning context does not simply provide useful information for the individual, but is actually "inseparable from the cognitive process" (Jacobson, 1996, p. 16). As Wilson (1993) asserts, knowledge is not learned <u>from</u> experience but <u>in</u> experience. From a situated learning perspective, the learner interacts with the

environment in a variety of ways: rationally, verbally, symbolically, through physical experience or in transpersonal or spiritual ways. This interaction leads to new meaning or learning (Stein, 1998). The conceptual framework of situated learning is useful for understanding the deeper dimensions of spiritual growth.

Spiritual Growth as a Type of Situated Learning

Findings from this study identified both the individual and context as important dimensions of the phenomenon of spiritual growth. Participants' experiences of spiritual growth were identified as individual experiences and at the same time they were closely associated with contextual elements such as activities, relationships and results. The importance of both the individual experience and the contextual or social elements suggest that spiritual growth is a form of situated learning (Stein, 1998).

Situated learning can occur in a variety of ways. Heaney (1995) echoes the importance of the situated relationship between the individual and the context in learning: "Learning is an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice" (p. 148). In this study, Dick's experience in the group interview is an example of a "negotiation" with others that helped him to deepen his understanding of spiritual growth. The following interchange occurred between Dick and two other participants during the first group interview. The group interview itself occurred after individuals completed the journal writing process and individual interviews and was a part of the reflective process. The following exchange is

an illustration of situated learning that shows how meaning is negotiated in the context of a reflective interchange.

> Participant: "It sounds like part of what you're saying is that your experience of God or the Spiritual is facilitated through relationships with people. Is that true for you?
>
> Dick: No, I think what I'm saying was the other way around, that Ann and I became closer through the relationship with God.
>
> Participant: Okay.
>
> Dick: As opposed to my relationship . . . [Short period of silence]. Well maybe it is a two way street. I never thought of it that way before.
>
> Participant: Say more about what you're thinking.
>
> Dick: I'm not sure. I do have spiritual growth experiences in small groups. My faith grows . . . I guess the group does make a difference. [short pause]. You're right, it grows because of the relationship with those people. But when those relationships ended [group disbanded], my spiritual growth continued. So it wasn't just the relationships with the people.

> Participant: I see. There's more to spiritual growth than the relationships, but in that group experience, the growth happened through the relationships.
>
> Dick: Right.

In this example, Dick reflected on his experience with two other participants and through that reflection became aware of a different meaning, changing his perspective. His experience is an example of situated learning pointing to the importance of the intersection of the individual and the context in spiritual growth. Findings from this study suggest that spiritual growth is a form of situated learning because the individual and context are both important, however, spiritual growth is unique because the context includes the spiritual, a dimension rarely mentioned and almost never discussed in the literature of situated learning or adult education. The idea that context can be not only material, but also spiritual suggests new ways to understand adult learning. An exploration of the literature on culture, a key concept in situated learning, extends this understanding through an examination of the descriptive elements of the culture of spiritual growth, as well as the deeper, more metaphorical understanding of its culture.

In situated learning, culture is an important concept in understanding the learning process. From a situated perspective, learning does not occur in the human mind in isolation from its sociocultural context; learning is embedded in the context. Culture is perhaps the foundational concept of social context (Cole & Wertsch, 1997). Culture is the place where the individual and the social meet (Resnick, 1991, p. 18). A learning culture is a shared and interconnected system of descriptors that defines the meaning of

experience. Learning is the process of "entering a cultural meaning system" (Jacobson, 1996, p. 21; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Spiritual growth involves a distinct cultural meaning system. To better understand this cultural meaning system, the next section of this chapter will explore the notion of culture from both the literature and the findings from this study, leading to the identification of distinctive elements of a culture of spiritual growth.

The Culture of Spiritual Growth

In North American adult education, a field that has historically been strongly influenced by psychology, culture is often viewed as a secondary variable, while the cognitive dimensions of learning are seen as primary (Cole, 1985, 1990). In situated learning, culture is foundational to the learning process. Because the findings from this study suggest that spiritual growth is a form of situated learning, an understanding of culture is important in order to better understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

The Nature of Culture

Originally derived from cultural anthropology (Pettigrew, 1979; Geertz, 1973) and sociology (Parsons, 1973; Harris 1981), culture has been defined in various ways (Smirchich, 1983). The most common way to understand culture is descriptively, since

culture is "first and foremost a shared way of making sense of experience" Jacobson, 1996, p. 16) and description is important in understanding. Culture mediates reality (Leontiev, 1978; Luria, 1928) through cognitive and linguistic activity (Cole, 1991; Resnick, 1987) such as description. Cultural descriptors have been identified as important elements in the adult learning process (Courtney, Speck & Holtorf, 1996). As Erickson (1986) says, "Through culture humans share learned systems for defining meaning and in given situations of practical action, humans often seem to have created similar interpretations" (p. 126). Authors who identify spiritual growth in the literature usually do so in a descriptive manner, including descriptions of customs, vocabulary and activity. Wuthnow's (1998) study, for example, which focuses on spiritual practice in America, describes "the things people talk about and the things they do" (p. vii). Culture, viewed from the descriptive perspective, might be defined as a:

> . . . pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel .... (Schein, 1992, p. 12)

Key elements involved in a descriptive definition of culture that were a part of participant descriptions of spiritual growth in this study include values, basic underlying assumptions, philosophy, norms, and customs (Schein, 1992). Descriptive elements are important in understanding the nature of a culture. In situated learning, a clearer understanding of the culture of spiritual growth should lead to a better understanding of

the phenomenon of spiritual growth. In the next section descriptive elements of the culture of spiritual growth in this study will be identified.

Cultural Elements Described in the Study

Examples of cultural elements reflected in this study include church hymns, music and religious vocabulary noted in the description of Polly's experience of spiritual growth in Chapter 5. Polly reported her spiritual growth using these cultural descriptors. Her decision to become a member of that church also reflected cultural norms and customs. Her experience included a profound and long lasting change in perspective and identity that she associated with God. Other examples include use of the Bible and specific verses noted by Angela, experiences of prayer, as in the case of Jack and Sarah, meditation as referred to by Joy, quiet times of silence as Ellie noted, a felt sense of the spiritual in a time of crisis as Ginny described, and the inspiration of hearing about the spiritual experiences of others noted by Jennifer. Shared assumptions also define culture. The example of Dick's short conversation with other participants during the group interview also contains the shared assumption that a person can in fact have a relationship with God. The conversational interchange is itself an example of reflection, noted elsewhere in the findings as an important element in spiritual growth. Study specific cultural descriptors associated with spiritual growth were quite varied, but also shared some common elements, such as the assumption that a spiritual reality exists.

In this study the culture of spiritual growth is also mirrored through participant

descriptions of the results of their experiences. Findings from Chapters 4 described the results of spiritual growth. Although the exact nature of the results varied, there were common elements such as new perspectives, feelings such as peace, and an increased level of energy. The wide occurrence of results reported in spiritual growth experiences suggests that the notion of a result may be a part of the culture of spiritual growth.

The culture of spiritual growth identified in this study incorporates many descriptive elements common in the literature (Schein, 1992; Cole, 1990). Findings from this study also report an additional cultural descriptor rarely reported in the literature. Study participants reported encounters with a spiritual dimension of life that affected their lives. These encounters, although described in the terminology of individual experiences, were themselves a "social activity incorporating the mind, the body, the activity and the ingredients of the setting in a complex interactive and recursive manner" (Cole, 1991, p. 72). In this study spiritual experience was a part of the cultural context. The spiritual dimension of the culture of spiritual growth points to additional aspects of culture that are important in understanding the findings of this study.

A Deeper Dimension of Culture

Culture is a phenomenon that can be described. In this sense a culture reflects some things that a person, group or experience "has" (Smirchich, 1983a). Culture is also a phenomenon that reflects the essential identity of a phenomenon, or what it "is" (Smirchich, 1983a). Researchers have found that culture is a complex concept involving

both an outward manifestation of values, assumptions, philosophy, norms and customs, as well as a deeper reality that gives the entity its identity (Smircich, 1983a). An individual contributes to forming the culture in which they live and the culture forms the individual. Not only can cultural elements of spiritual growth be described, dimensions of the culture of spiritual growth form the individual. In this way culture functions as a "root metaphor" (Smircich, 1983b). A root metaphor is "a social construction, symbolically constituted and reproduced through interaction" (Smircich, 1983b, p. 58). As a root metaphor, culture both reflects the deeper realities of the individual, group or entity, and also affects or changes that reality. In the next section of this chapter, the findings from this study are used to suggest elements of the deeper dimensions of the culture of spiritual growth in order to better understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth.

The Distinctiveness of Spiritual Culture

The spiritual context represents a distinctive part of the culture of spiritual growth. A part of that distinction is the powerful yet mysterious nature of spiritual reality, literally "beyond words." Although an important part of the findings of this study, the spiritual dimension of culture is seldom if ever mentioned in adult education research that addresses cultural aspects of learning.

Spiritual growth seems to touch something much deeper than cultural elements commonly associated with adult learning. All spiritual growth experiences in this study included a strong attribution of the experience to a spiritual phenomenon. Spiritual

growth is transpersonal; that is, it includes but extends beyond the person and normal consciousness, adding "those deeper or higher aspects of human experience that transcend the ordinary and the average" (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996, p. xviii). At the same time, spiritual growth in this study involves a broader range of experience than is often reported in the transpersonal psychology literature where mystical states of consciousness are held up as the highest level and goal of spiritual experience (Walsh & Vaughan, 1996) and some authors depend almost exclusively on Eastern spiritual constructs and language (Elkins, 1995). Study participants used a more Western Christian language of attribution than found in much of the transpersonal literature (Scotton, 1996), describing spiritual growth using traditional religious vocabulary including God and Jesus, the Bible and favorite hymns, as well as common everyday experiences like walking, eating and talking with friends. The participants made numerous references to the reality of spiritual phenomena in their descriptions of their spiritual growth, yet included little description, in large measure because of the nature of spiritual phenomena as being unseen and in some ways indescribable. That is why James (1920) described it as "a conversation with the unseen" (p. 420). The culture of spiritual growth includes the assertion of the reality of a spiritual phenomenon and at the same time an inability to describe it. Understanding the culture of spiritual growth requires a deeper process than description. It also requires a different perception.

With a few exceptions already noted in Chapter 5, the attribution of a spiritual reality found in this study is not present in descriptions of adult learning found in the literature. One reason may involve perception. Cranton (1994) pointed out that learning is dependent on perception. James (1950/1890) was even more emphatic, "The only things

which we commonly see are those which we perceive" (James, 1950/1890, Vol. 1, p. 444). Perception is a foundational concept in psychology (Casey, 1991). According to May (1982), willingness is an important part of the spiritual growth experience. May suggests that our over emphasis on willful control often excludes the possibility for perceiving the spiritual. Worldview and basic scientific assumptions often block the perception of spiritual growth. Merleau-Ponty (1962 / 1945) linked spiritual growth with perception, saying that, "We are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how we see, hear, and generally speaking, feel" (p. 229). Focused on sensing only a limited spectrum of data, we simply do not see the spiritual realities before us. As Blake (1986) wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man [sic] as it is, infinite. For man [sic] has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (p. 101).

Spiritual growth involves a different way of knowing than is commonly used in adult education. Perception is a form of knowing (Flier, 1995). One reason that spiritual growth is not perceived – almost "un-known"- in the adult education literature is that it is difficult to measure. Measurable outcomes are increasingly important in adult education today, and the uncertain, unplanned and at times mystical outcomes of spiritual growth do not lend themselves to commonly used measurement methods. Typically, adult learning is often reported as a discrete experience occurring in a specific time and place by many authors in the adult learning literature. Spiritual growth as identified in the findings from this study was both a process occurring over time, and a moment of intense experience. Bracketing, pausing or slowing the routines of life is important for spiritual

growth and only occasionally mentioned in the adult education literature. In spiritual growth both reflection and awareness were described in less rational ways than they are often viewed in adult learning. Spiritual growth was also reported in the context and vocabulary of numerous activities. In comparison to many forms of adult learning, spiritual growth is difficult to define and sometimes difficult even to describe. As discussed in Chapter 4 spiritual growth experiences seem to share a number of common elements. At the same time, those experiences vary to the extent that one participant could assert that everyone's spiritual growth experience is different: different words, different activities and different kinds of experiences at different points in a person's life. These differences make it difficult to clearly describe spiritual growth, pointing to the limitations of descriptive approaches in understanding the culture of spiritual growth. The strong affirmation of the reality of spiritual growth, along with the differences in description of the phenomenon, suggests the reality of deeper dimensions of the culture of spiritual growth. Cultural metaphors provide a unique way of exploring this deeper dimension.

The Locus and Language of Spiritual Growth

Culture has been described as a "root metaphor" that forms the identity of those involved (Smircich, 1983a; 1983b). Culture has also been described as a linguistic metaphor (Mannen & Barley, 1985), linking perception and knowing, "allowing understanding of one domain of experience in terms of another" (Smircich, 1983, p. 340).

In this study, for example, participants used the metaphor "deep" to describe their experiences of spiritual growth. As a metaphor, deep was not intended to be understood literally, implying a specific location. Rather it was intended in a suggestive manner. Just as depth in describing a lake indicates that the bottom of the lake, although there, is hard to touch or see, the use of the word depth in spiritual growth points to the reality of the phenomenon and also to the difficulty involved in clearly visualizing or describing it. Metaphors can be especially helpful in describing complex reality and teasing out dimensions of meaning that may not be readily apparent (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A part of the depth and distinctiveness of the culture of spiritual growth identified in this study might best be understood by focusing on the locus of spiritual growth in the life of the human being and the distinctive language of spiritual growth.

Locus has to do with location, and refers to the scene of an activity and its focus or center point. It does not refer to location in the same way as a street address. Using the analogy of the home, locus is much more like a trailer, which is identifiable and is viewed as home wherever it is set up, but is not specific to a street address. The locus of spiritual growth implies the location of spiritual growth as a part of the human being, but not its identification with specific anatomy. Used in the context of spiritual growth, locus suggests the extension of the understanding of the culture of spiritual growth beyond specific cultural descriptors.

In this study, the use of the term language in relation to spiritual growth is also suggestive, and is intended metaphorically. Language is commonly used to describe a system of communication using common words, symbols and procedures. Its use here is not intended to suggest a specific form of communication that defines the occurrence of

spiritual growth. Rather, language is intended to suggest metaphorically, by analogy with the literature, the function of some of the deeper dimension of spiritual growth derived from the findings.

In this study, the locus of spiritual growth is the soul and the language of spiritual growth is dialogue. Although the term soul is commonly used in traditional descriptions of spiritual growth, and the term dialogue is described in collaborative forms of adult education, in this study both terms are used metaphorically in an effort to better understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth. Like all metaphors, each participates in the realities that it conjoins, but cannot be reduced to any one single reality. Together they contribute to a deeper understanding of spiritual growth as described by participants in this study.

Soul as the Locus

Modern thinkers are divided in their identification of the locus of spiritual growth. Among scholars committed to objectivist assumptions where knowledge and truth must be measurable, spiritual growth has no locus because it is assumed not to exist since it cannot be measured. Experiences such as those reported in this study would be viewed as constructions of the mind and would be explained by existing physical phenomena. For other scholars committed to more subjectivist assumptions, spiritual growth has a locus. Among these scholars, perceptions of the nature and locus of spiritual growth vary widely depending on their assumptions. James (1994/1902), for example, used the term religion

freely in talking about spiritual growth and associated spiritual growth with the soul, which he viewed as a part of the everyday activities of human beings:

> Wherever... interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion. (James, 1994/1902, p. 352)

Other authors such as Schauffele & Baptiste (2000), English & Gillen (2000) and Yeaxlee (1925) also used religious terminology in their discussions of spiritual growth, but did not emphasize the soul as the locus of spiritual growth.

Findings from this study indicate that an important way that participants described the metaphor of depth was through the use of the word soul. Angela, herself a musician, likened spiritual growth to the experience playing music, saying, "If you keep at it long enough, the music comes again. You begin to hear it in your soul, and then you can play it and live it." Joy described her soul as that "the deepest part of me that I have to be true to." For Milton spiritual growth involves a process of "opening up your heart and your soul," or as Dick said, "baring your soul." Jennifer reflecting on prayer said that it added "rhythm to my soul," describing soul as "the place I feel closest to God." For participants, soul was important in describing that part of the human being most closely associated with spiritual growth. The word soul was used to describe the personal locus or location of spiritual growth.

A number of adult educators who describe spiritual growth associate it with the human soul. As Scott (1997) says, "Engagement with the depth is at the soul level. It is when one dwells in the interior with the soul and goes down into the body (heart) that fundamental transformation occurs" (p. 49). Dirkx (1997) writes of "learning through

soul" (p. 80). Sardello (1992) links soul to the work of education, stating, "Education concerns the guidance of the soul into the world" (p. 49). Adult education, according to Lauzon (1998), needs a soulful psychology undergirded by a holistic "vision logic" that incorporates the spiritual, in contrast to the dominant "rational logic" that pervades much of present day education (p. 319). Sinnott (1994a) echoes this concern. Lauzon (1998) asserts that a soulful and spiritual adult education can assist in the breakdown of "objective knowledge and subjective knowledge, the classic dualism of modernism" leading to a better quality of life including greater justice and freedom (p. 323).

Classically the term soul has been used to describe spiritual growth in both Western and Eastern traditions (Miller, 2000). Many authors speak of the difficulty in defining soul (Murphy & Malony, 1998; Cousineau, 1994). In Western thought derived from Plato, the soul was conceived as a distinct and eternal aspect of the human being (Miller, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), almost like a "body part." Aristotle viewed the soul as a life principle that reflects the basic powers or attributes of the person and not a separate entity (Murphy, 1998). In Western Christian thought, Augustine developed his perspective from Plato, and Aquinas from Aristotle. The Platonic view that advocates a dualistic view of the person, including soul and body as two separate parts of the human, dominates most popular religious thinking. In contrast, many current religious scholars advocate a more holistic perspective in some ways similar to that of Aristotle (Murphy, 1998). Barth (1960) is an example of this perspective when he says, "We do not a body here and a soul there, but man himself [sic] as soul of his body is subject and object, active and passive...." (p. 429). In this more holistic perspective a person is a physical organism "whose complex functioning both in society and in relation to God gives rise to

'higher' human capacities such as morality and spirituality" (Murphy, 1998, p. 25). In this sense soul refers to the deeper aspects of human life such as ethical and spiritual dimensions. Thus soul would describe the core unity of the personal and spiritual dimensions of the person, which in Western religious terms is rooted in a relationship with God (Anderson, 1998). A classic Biblical text illustrating this point is found in Genesis 2:7: "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being." The word for soul in Hebrew, *nephesh* refers to that which makes a person a living human being and is rooted in relationship with God (Davis, 1989).

For the ancient Greeks "the soul itself was a reflection of the purpose, science and music of the spheres of the universe" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 56). Today one might say the soul is where the spirit is reflected in a person's life and is seen in a person's emotions, senses, gestures, instincts and activities as well as ideas, thoughts and ideals. As Lauzon (1995) says, "The soul embodies all that makes us human" (p. 322). Thus, "soul is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance" (Moore,1992, p. 5). Eliot (1959) described the soul as "the source of the longest river / the voice of the hidden waterfall" (p. 48). The soul is the spiritual self, which is the subjective essence of the individual. Soul is primarily something to be experienced (Hillman, 1975). Emerson (1990) describes the soul by saying that it is not

> ...an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of compassion, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect and the will, but the master of the

> intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, -- an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. (p. 174)

According to James (1950/1890), the soul is "the most enduring and intimate part of the self" (p. 296).

From a Jungian perspective, soul is a metaphor that speaks to the depth of human experience while spirit speaks of the heights (Hillman, 1975; Elkins, 1995). As Hillman (1975) said, "The soul is immeasurably deep and can only be illuminated by insights, flashes in a great cavern of incomprehension" (p. xvi). Soul is the human door to the world of spirit. To open that door requires a different way of knowing, a different perception, that includes "reverence, feeling and imagination- the world of I-Thou encounter, imagery, poetry, art, ritual, ceremony and symbol" (Elkins, 1995, p. 83). Lakoff & Johnson (1999) would add the notion of metaphor as an additional way of knowing, noting that metaphorical thinking "is the vehicle by which we are moved" (p. 568) in spiritual growth.

If soul represents the locus of spiritual growth, dialogue is its language. Dialogue is the process that best describes the way the soul functions in spiritual growth. As Jackson (1998) said, "Soul reveals itself not in the deep recesses of the psyche nor in the extra-personal world of history and culture, but in forms of encounter, interaction, exchange and dialogue in everyday life" (p. 207).

Dialogue as the Language

"Spiritual growth is like a conversation," Angela said. Pam termed it a "deep spirit filled conversation." Spiritual growth is fundamentally concerned with communication. Spiritual growth, as Ellie described it, is "when the Lord is interacting with me." Ginny added, "Communication is the key to spiritual growth.... God touches me through other people." Milton described one of his experiences, saying, "I know that God was talking to me." One of the foundational aspects of the culture of spiritual growth is language and communication. That is one reason why William James (1920) described spiritual growth as "a conversation with the unseen" (p. 420).

Spiritual growth in this study involved a particular kind of conversation that included sharing and inquiry. As Dick said: "To go deeper spiritually you have to bare your soul." Ginny described her conversation with God as a time when she "just shared what was on my heart honestly and openly and then just listened. Sometimes it was deep." Although study participants did not use the word, the type of conversation they were describing might best be described as dialogue.

Etymologically speaking, dialogue comes from the Greek *dia*, "through" and *logos*, "meaning" and refers to the process of meaning flowing through an encounter (Bohm, 1996). Dialogue, according to Isaacs (1999), is a "living experience of inquiry within and between people" (p. 9). Findings from this study identify spiritual growth as an experience of inquiry that is intra-personal as well as interpersonal. Dialogue is characterized by "mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability" (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 19). Participants described their experiences of communicating with God in a similar way to Sidorkin's (1999) characterization of dialogue. The following is a

summary of some of the findings that were described in Chapters 3 and 4 using Sidorkin's (1999) categories:

- *Mutuality or the importance of relationships.* As one participant said, "Jesus is my friend." Ginny added, "The more intimate my relationship with God is, the deeper my spiritual growth."
- *Directness or honesty in communication.* Jennifer said spiritual growth is "telling it like it is." Dick described the experience as "baring your soul." Joy said, "You have to be honest."
- *Presentness or focus in spiritual growth.* As one participant said, "I've got to pay attention, wake up and notice what God is trying to tell me." Participants described spiritual growth as occurring when a person slows down and listens, or as Milton said, "when I turn my thoughts off and become more aware of God." Will added that "openness is important."
- *Intensity experienced through emotion and profound insight.* Angela's remark "I was overwhelmed by the experience," is an example. Ginny said describing one of her experiences, "When it happened I just broke down and cried." Experiences of insight were among the results described in Chapter 4.
- *Ineffability or the unknown dimensions of the spiritual experience.* More than one participant described spiritual growth as "a mystery" that is "beyond words."

Dialogue is an activity "directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight or sensitivity of its participants" (Burbules, 1993, p.

xii). Participants underscored the importance of spiritual growth as a way to better understand the mysterious elements of life. Results of spiritual growth reported in this study also included new perspectives, insights and ideas.

In the literature, dialogue is often viewed as a way to build and improve relationships (Yankelovich, 1999). When dialogue is used in adult education, it is usually seen as a form of interpersonal communication. Dialogue, although not common, is increasingly noted as a part of the adult learning process. Wiessner & Mezirow (2000) describe dialogue as a "connected way of knowing," and "a different way of talking" that bears strong similarities to the notion of dialogue described by Sidorkin (1999). Whether the "discourse communities" advocated by Kegan (1994, p. 288), or the process of "voicing self" in "trusting and respectful relationships" described by Hayes (2000, p. 100), or "the climate of mutual trust and respect" noted as an important element in the Action-Reason-Thematic research technique described by Peters (1990, p. 318), dialogue as a way human beings communicate with each other is increasingly noted as an important part of the adult learning experience.

While the experience of dialogue is often reported as a way to improve relationships (Palmer, 1998), manage conflict (Isaacs, 1999), and make decisions (Sheeran, 1983) in a more collaborative way (Bruffee, 1993), dialogue is more than a communication tool, and involves more than human interaction. Authors suggest that dialogue could involve a communion with nature, inanimate objects, and spiritual realities (Bohm, 1996). Language facilitates dialogue, but the language of dialogue includes more than words. As Collingwood (1958 / 1938) suggests, "Speech, music, art, all gestures, singing, dancing, laughing, crying, painting and sculpture are considered

language" (Clark, 1997, p. 17). Images also represent a powerful communication form (Moore, 1992; Dirkx 1997). Dialogue can occur between people and also within a single mind, "between perspectives and modalities within a single awareness" (Grudin, 1996, p. ix). It can take place in silence (Friedman, 1976, p. 87). Study participants spoke of spiritual growth as being intensely individual yet highly relational, an experience of profound insight, yet "beyond words." In a similar way Isaacs (1999), can describe dialogue as "a conversation with a center, not sides" (p. 19). Like spiritual growth, dialogue is "an unseen aspect of human life" that "does not have a material location." The totality of dialogue is neither "within nor without an individual," rather it is "between" (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 16).

Dialogue is not simply a verbal exchange of information. Often dialogue is an experience of engagement that leads to meaning and has an effect on those who participate. Dick's experience during the group interview, described earlier in this chapter is an example. Spiritual growth involves another dimension of dialogue, an intrapersonal dialogue, an experience leading to a realization of spirit. Angela spoke of "experiencing God's love." Another participant said she "felt God's presence." Joy said that spiritual growth "makes me aware that I am in a deeper experience. Regardless of how slight the tug, it is like opening a door to another realm, every so slightly and quietly." Buber also asserts that the dialogical experience has a spiritual dimension. Buber (1987/1958) asserts that when a person, an "I," meets another with authenticity and compassion, they encounter a "Thou." For Buber (1987/1958) "every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou" (p. 6). In this study, participants reported that in the context of encountering another person, issue, place or thing with respect and understanding, they

also encountered God. This spiritual dimension is called by various names. Participants in this study named the spiritual dimension using the terms God, Jesus or spirit. Whatever form this unseen reality took for study participants, it represented the ground of their being, or as Pam said, "the center of my life."

Often a dialogic encounter leads to change. The type of change that occurs in dialogue is different from what occurs in traditional human communication. Dialectics, for example, involves three steps. A thesis encounters an antithesis and from that encounter emerges a synthesis of the two entities. Discussion or debate involves a process where one person offers and opinion and another responds with a different opinion until some sort of resolution is affected. In the process of dialogue there is no clearly defined subject that acts on an object. Dialogue consists of a relationship and an encounter that changes all parties. In dialogue "the subject" does not stand *over* "the object" measuring and evaluating differences; the subject stands *under* the object in a respectful and empathic way in order to understand (Palmer, 1983). Understanding transforms both parties. The object changes from an impersonal "it" to a sacred "Thou." Encountering "the Thou" in another person can also at times involve an encounter with the holy (Grudin, 1996). This type of dialogue is very similar to that described in Chapter 4 where participants engaged in an activity of spiritual growth, such as praying, and found themselves affected by the experience in dramatic and unexpected ways. In a dialogical experience the object becomes subject and both parties encounter each other inter-subjectively (Jackson, 1998). In the experience of dialogue the object disappears and two entities become subject to each other in an unmediated way (Sidorkin, 1999).

In dialogue, especially dialogue between an individual and the spiritual there is an ontological shift where traditional subject/object boundaries are transcended and the encounter leads to a different consciousness or sense of self. As Polanyi (1958) said, "Knowledge is neither subjective nor objective but a transcendence of both…." (p. 77). The person remains, as does the object, but in dialogue the emphasis is on the relationship, and that leads to changes in the individual. In spiritual growth, the initial focus might be the individual or the other, as when an individual prays to God, for example. The prayer relationship, in this study described as a relationship between the participant and God, often resulted in changes in participants' attitudes, feelings, behaviors and perceptions. Dialogue, like spiritual growth, can both change and strengthen a person's sense of identity, since identity in part is a product of a person's continual conversation and dialogue with others (Taylor, 1992). The dialogic relationship changes the human be-ing, the fundamental identity of the person, and thus, is ontological in nature (Vella, 2000; Oliver, 1989). Dialogue is the catalyst for human be-ing. As Bakhtin (1984) said: "In dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time what he is (pp. 251-252). Dialogue is a fundamental and essential part of the human being.

A part of the deeper dimension of the culture of spiritual growth involves a dialogical encounter between the subjective essence of a person, their soul, and the spiritual. In this sense, spiritual growth might be described as a dialogue of the soul. The dialogical experience forms and constitutes a relationship that changes the person, sometimes in dramatic ways. Through this dialogue of the soul an individual experiences a different reality, and that experience is a catalyst for change. In this sense spiritual

growth leads to change, for some "a freedom from self, a transcendence of confining individuality" (Grudin, 1996, p. 9). As Pam said, "I became a new person when I met Christ."

The heart of the spiritual relationship in the Western Christian tradition might itself be characterized as dialogical. Central to traditional understandings of Christian spiritual growth is a relationship between God and humankind based on mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability, a relationship where people love one another with a profound respect because they themselves have experienced love and respect. The Bible is replete with examples of this reality. The text from I John 4:12 is but one example: "No one has ever seen God but as long as we love one another God will live is us and his love will be complete in us."

By its nature, dialogue is a learning experience. Dialogue involves a different way of knowing similar to participant descriptions of spiritual growth. The dialogical nature of spiritual growth helps in understanding its deeper aspects. Dialogue is similar to language in that it is a way of communicating that is distinct. Linguistic but not solely verbal, dialogue involves conversation. In spiritual growth dialogue includes conversations with the unseen. Both dialogue and spiritual growth are intersubjective (Jackson, 1998) experiences focused on understanding differences. Although dialogue by itself is not spiritual growth, spiritual growth has a profound dialogical dimension. The dialogical reality of spiritual growth suggests, in a way similar to Buber (1987/1958) and Moustakas (1995), that engaging in dialogue might in fact lead to spiritual growth. An encounter with the spiritual is, in the words of Moustakas (1995), used in a different context "a subjective objectivity available to anyone who is courageous enough and

daring enough to enter into genuine dialogue and become attuned to meanings within words and beyond them" (p. 171).

Dialogue is fundamentally about inter-cultural learning. It involves an interaction with others who are different. The words of Bakhtin, quoted in Sidorkin (1999) are instructive:

> A culture discovers itself deeper and fuller only through the eyes of another culture. Meaning unveils its depths while meeting and touching another alien meaning: as if a dialogue began between them, a dialogue that overcomes isolation and lobsidedness of these meanings, these cultures. (p. 38)

In the dialogical process a new meaning is learned and individuals are changed through their encounter. In spiritual growth a person's encounter with the spirit is like the encounter of two different cultures. The spiritual encounter is an encounter with a very different reality, or in the words of one study participant "like opening a door to another realm." In a similar way James (1958/1902) wrote of spiritual growth as a stream of experience and a "conflux where the forces of two universes meet" (p. 385).

Although described as a deep experience, spiritual growth is not continuous. Just as dialogue is described in the literature of collaborative learning as a "brief relational event" involving "direct immediate meetings among individuals" that can change individuals, relationships and behaviors (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 15), spiritual growth is also described by study participants as infrequent although often powerful and memorable. As one participant said, reflecting on an experience of spiritual growth many years earlier, "It was just a few moments, but I've never forgotten."

Chapter Summary

The culture of spiritual growth includes both individual and contextual elements. These elements are inseparably connected and constitute a form of situated learning termed spiritual growth. Individual and contextual elements of spiritual growth, which include spiritual reality, interact in a deep process that bears significant resemblance to descriptions of dialogical learning from the literature. The locus of that deep process might be described as the human soul. The process of spiritual growth itself might be described as a dialogue of the soul. For participants in this study, spiritual growth is:

> A learning phenomenon attributed to the spiritual, rooted in the soul as the depth of human experience, involving a process of dialogue that includes but extends beyond the boundaries of time, place, activity and language, and results in changes in behavior, affect, assumptions, beliefs or identity.

Spiritual growth is a form of adult experiential learning that can be transformational. It is identified in experience, known by its results, and described as a relationship constituted through a dialogical process. Spiritual growth requires relationship. Relationship might include other people, spiritual phenomena, objects, symbols, and natural elements. The reality of the spiritual relationship is confirmed in the attribution of the experience to the spiritual. Understanding the meaning of the experience is a process that can take "a long time" as several participants said. In spiritual growth, the content of the experience is never fully known, described differently, and always containing elements of mystery. What is important is the encounter embedded in the relationship, and that is why spiritual growth can be described as a "conversation with the unseen," or a dialogue with the soul.

Chapter 7 will address the educational implications of this study, further identifying the importance of spiritual growth as an adult learning experience.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of spiritual growth and its relationship to adult learning and the theory and practice of adult education. The study involved twelve participants and took place over a twelve-month period. Participants in the study were asked to complete a written journal for a period of three weeks, recording experiences they identified as spiritual. Each person in the study also participated in an individual interview, a group interview, and a final written reflection on their experience. During the research process, participants documented numerous spiritual experiences through the use of journals and a written reflection at the conclusion of the study. Interviews and group interviews were documented using audiotape. All data were transcribed, coded and analyzed QSR NVivo. From this analysis findings were derived which included a model of spiritual growth as well as the identification of four types of spiritual growth. These findings were then compared to the literature of adult education and adult development.

In this final chapter, I will summarize the findings from this study with regard to the research questions identified in Chapter 1, discuss implications of the findings, suggest implications from findings for the practice of adult education, make recommendations for adult education research and practice, and engage in some personal reflection as researcher.

Research Questions

In this section I will summarize the findings from this study in relationship to each of the four research questions that were identified in Chapter 1. Each question will be considered in turn.

What Is The Phenomenon Of Spiritual Growth As Perceived By Adult Learners?

Analysis of participant descriptions of their spiritual growth experiences led to the identification of a model of spiritual growth comprised of eight elements: experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity and relationships, results, attribution and context. This model, which was initially described in Chapters 3 and 4, is again depicted in Figure 3.

Elements of the model did not occur sequentially. In some of the reported experiences of spiritual growth, specific elements were emphasized to a greater or lesser degree. For example, in Will's experience after his grandmother's death, described in Chapter 4, the emphasis was on the experience itself, and the process of awareness. In Joy's description of her experience on the Baileytown Road, also described in Chapter 4, there was a strong emphasis on reflection and results. Milton's experience of a work-related crisis, also described in Chapter 4, highlighted activity, reflection and results. Components of the model share similarities with various theories of adult education. The distinctive element was the spiritual attribution of the experience.

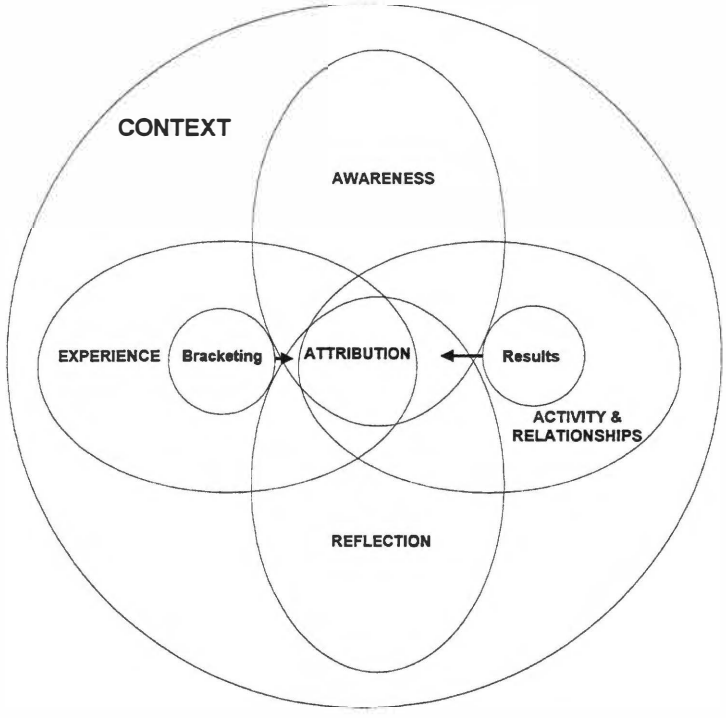

Figure 3: A Conceptual Model of Spiritual Growth

Contextual factors associated with participants' experiences of spiritual growth were quite varied and virtually inseparable from the experience of spiritual growth. Analysis of findings related to context and spiritual growth activity in Chapter 4 led to the identification of four distinct types of spiritual growth: practical, emotional, ideological and essential.

Findings were then compared with the adult education and adult development literature noting both similarities and differences. Interpretation of the findings and their comparison to the literature led to the identification of a learning culture of spiritual growth. Two major elements of this culture were identified. The first had to do with the locus of spiritual growth as the soul and the second was the identification of dialogue as the language of spiritual growth. In this sense spiritual growth might be described as a

dialogue of the soul and might be defined as: A learning phenomenon attributed to the spiritual, rooted in the soul as the depth of human experience, involving a process of dialogue that includes but extends beyond the boundaries of time, place, activity and language, resulting in changes in behavior, affect, assumptions, beliefs or identity.

How Is Adult Learning A Part Of The Spiritual Growth Process?

Adult learning has been defined and described in various ways. The relationship between spiritual growth and adult learning depends on the definitions of spiritual growth and adult learning. Findings from this study suggest that spiritual growth is a form of adult learning, experiential in nature, and situated in a social context. Comparison of the findings with the literature of adult education also suggests that spiritual growth shares some similarities with transformational learning (Baumgartner, 2001) and descriptions of adult learning that emphasize the importance of affect (Heron, 1992) and reflection (Brookfield, 2000; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985b). Other similarities include a shared emphasis on the importance of relationships as is found in forms of andragogy (Merriam, 2001a) and feminist perspectives (Tisdell, 1998), and the importance of context in learning as emphasized in situated learning (Hansman, 2001). Spiritual growth and reflective practice also share similarities, although spiritual growth in this study was much less systematic than reflective practice models in the literature (Schon, 1983, 1987; Peters, 1991). Participant experiences of spiritual growth in this study were largely self-directed (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Merriam, 2001a) and include significant elements

of informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Spiritual growth shares similarities with a variety of descriptions of adult learning but is not identifiable with any one theory. Spiritual growth is a distinct form of adult learning.

How Is An Individual's Experience Of Spiritual Growth Affected By The Culture Of Which They Are A Part?

Findings from this study suggest that spiritual growth is a form of situated learning (Hansman, 2001). As shown in Chapter 4, participants described their experiences of spiritual growth in the context of authentic, real-life situations, whether everyday activities or crisis events, and in the language of the culture within which they live. Spiritual growth is situated within and inseparable from its cultural context. Major areas of context included relationships, activities and results. The breadth of context of the reported experiences of spiritual growth was distinctive, including the broad range of relationships, many different activities and multiple results associated with spiritual growth.

For example, spiritual growth was often associated with the experience of prayer. Prayer as an activity took a variety of different forms, from silent individual meditation without words to spoken group prayer in a formal worship experience. When described by an individual participant, a particular experience of prayer was associated with specific persons and concerns, occurred at a particular place in the participant's life, and resulted in various changes in feeling, perspective or behavior. Angela's journal entry is

illustrative: "God is calling me to pray, and it feels good to be part of this work, but I am asking forgiveness for my thoughts and words when I made fun of the many pre-wedding events for William and Betty." No two reports of spiritual growth associated with prayer were the same. The same level of contextual specificity was also associated with other spiritual growth activities, relationships and results.

An important element in the cultural context of the participants in this study was their participation in the church. A surprising finding from this study was that two thirds of the spiritual growth experiences reported were not associated with the church. Although church-related activities represented an important context of spiritual growth, the majority of experiences reported were associated with everyday activities that were interpreted as spiritual by participants. This distinction represents an example of the complexity and the importance of culture in spiritual growth. Participant descriptions of spiritual growth were tied to their cultural experience, which was informed by their church experience along with many other life experiences. Even in the lives of these twelve active church members, the context of their experiences of spiritual growth was quite broad.

How Does Spiritual Growth Relate To Adult Education Theory And Practice?

Findings from this study suggest that spiritual growth represents a distinct form of adult experiential learning. In this section four aspects of the relationship of spiritual growth to adult education theory and practice will be discussed: (1) spiritual growth as a

form of adult learning, (2) epistemology, (3) ontology, and (4) the value and validity of spiritual growth for adult education. Since spiritual growth is rarely addressed in the adult education literature, and the theory of spiritual growth and learning is especially underdeveloped, the emphasis in this section is on important theoretical considerations.

Spiritual Growth as a Form of Adult Learning

Findings from this study suggest that humans experience a form of adult education and learning described in this study as spiritual growth. Adult education and adult education practices are quite varied and there are different understandings of adult learning. Findings from Chapter 5 described numerous similarities as well as differences between spiritual growth as identified in this study and particular practices and approaches to adult learning. Examples of those similarities include a common use of practices such as of reflection, the use of conversation in learning, and the use of a written journal in learning. Spiritual growth as described in this study also shares similarities with self-directed and informal approaches to adult learning, including the importance of the role of the learner, as well as an unstructured learning format. The focus of spiritual growth on everyday life situations and experiences, as well as the results of spiritual growth, is also similar to that of many adult education theorists and practitioners. This study suggests that spiritual growth is a form of adult learning. Descriptions of spiritual growth in this study are both similar to adult learning and at the same time distinct. Because of this, I am suggesting that this form of adult learning might be termed spiritual learning rather than spiritual growth.

Spiritual learning occurs when an experience affecting the life of a person is attributed to the spiritual. What makes spiritual learning or spiritual growth distinct is its epistemology, having to do with a way of knowing that includes openness to the spiritual, and its ontology, associated with a different sense of reality that is significant in forming the person who experiences it. Both will be discussed in the sections below.

Epistemology

A major theoretical distinction between adult learning and spiritual growth has to do with epistemology and ontology. Spiritual growth focuses on a broader or deeper reality. In the latest *Handbook on Adult and Continuing Education*, Hayes & Wilson (2000) point out, echoed by Brookfield (2000) and others, that even though the assumptions of adult education are becoming less objective, there is still considerable focus on structure, measurement, rationality and outcomes. In contrast, spiritual growth in essence is a "conversation with the unseen" (James, 1920, p. 420). Focusing on the unseen requires a different perception and a broader epistemology or way of knowing than is used in much of adult learning.

Epistemology has to do with how a phenomenon is known. With a few exceptions noted in Chapter 5, the epistemology of adult education is different from that which underlies experiences of spiritual growth described by participants in this study. For example, a specific reading activity might be described by those engaged in adult education and those engaged in spiritual growth. The same activity might be interpreted very differently depending on one's epistemological assumptions. Because the way of

knowing is different, the meaning of the activity would be viewed differently. At the heart of this distinction is a different epistemology or way of knowing. Participants in this study engaged in reading and spoke of a process of discovering a deeper meaning as they read the words. They became aware of a meaning beyond the text itself and attributed that meaning to a spiritual reality. Thus participants could speak of spiritual growth as an experience of mystery, sometimes beyond words and often difficult to describe, where new perspectives are discovered and where even a person's sense of identity can be changed. The experience of Angela, described in Chapter 4, represents an example. While facing a personal crisis, she picked up a book and began reading. During her experience of reading, as she described it, God spoke to her and gave her an answer to her problem. That answer involved forgiveness. Angela was convinced that her answer was a part of an encounter with God yet it came through a common act of reading. Another person who stopped to read the same book might have a very different experience. They might simply read the text and have no insights. Or they might read the same text and perceive its importance, but not attribute the insight to anything beyond their mental process or simple good fortune. In spiritual growth, participants in this study exhibited a desire to "look deeper" into their life experience. Looking deeper did not always lead to an experience of spiritual growth, but sometimes it did. What was distinct for participants in this study was their field of perception. Their perception was different. For participants, their epistemology or way of knowing extended beyond the realm of sight and sense (Kelsey, 1972). This different way of knowing offered the possibility of a different perception, and that perception, at times, led to the attribution of their experience to the spiritual.

Ontology

Closely related to the epistemology or way of knowing involved in spiritual growth is its distinct ontology. Ontology asks the question, "What is real?" Spiritual growth involves knowing something of "the unseen" (James, 1920, p. 420) or God, as participants described the spiritual in this study. The very act of knowing or encountering the spiritual led to a different reality or way of being for participants. Whether an experience like Joy's, the "defining moment of my life," as she described it, when she was walking along the road and realized that she did not have to be the way she had been, or Will's wading into the ocean and having a new realization of his place in the universe, or Polly's being moved by a hymn in church and finding herself forever changed, spiritual growth can affect a person's being, their deeply felt sense of identity, their activities and sense of importance. Although expressed in different contexts and directed toward different foci, participants described experiences of spiritual growth that entailed a profound experience of self-consciousness. In spiritual growth there is a "felt sense of self" involving a "sense of connection that is felt even if it is not articulated or interpreted" (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 62). Not every experience of spiritual growth reported in this study had such powerful ontological effects. It is also important to note that learning experiences reported in the literature of adult education describe powerful effects on a person's identity, sense of self. The distinction is that in spiritual growth, participants reported that it was a spiritual reality that was the catalyst for their formation. The spiritual dimension of life was a fundamental reality for these participants. In adult education and learning, the spiritual dimension is rarely mentioned.

Value and Validity

In this study participants described life experiences they identified as spiritual. As was pointed out in Chapter 1, many people today report religious, spiritual or transpersonal experiences. In modern Western culture value is often based on truth or validity, and often confirmed by measurement. Two important questions arise from the study: (1) How does one know that the experiences identified as spiritual growth are in fact experiences of spiritual growth, and (2) Are these experiences valuable enough that adult educators should address them in their practice? Determining the validity and value of spiritual growth for adult education is difficult. As Watts & Williams (1988) said, "A perennial problem for research on mystical experience is what criteria to use in determining whether such an experience actually took place" (p. 19). Perhaps the experiences were simply products of the individual ego and imagination. This is Charry's (1999) point when she writes from a Christian perspective: "Spirituality may look like little more than yet another celebration of self that further vitiates proper Christian confession and proclamation, dependent as those are on the ubiquity of sin" (p.1). Determining the value or validity of spiritual growth experiences is important (Frager & Fadiman, 1998).

The conceptualization of validity and value in a study such as this is different than that used, for example, in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988, 2001b; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The purpose of the study was not to verify, measure or prove the existence of spiritual growth in the sense of verifying the correspondence of described experiences of spiritual growth with reality (Chinen, 1996). The purpose of this study was to better understand learning experiences that participants identified as

spiritual. From a hermeneutic perspective this involves comparison of participant descriptions in order to more coherently describe the phenomenon of spiritual growth. From a pragmatic perspective the primary focus of the study was to understand the experiences of participants and their perceived value and results. In this sense the question of validity is better addressed in light of the participants' reported experiences and their perceived value.

Participants in the study reported experiences of spiritual growth. Although the quantity and nature of spiritual growth was not uniform for all participants, all participants reported spiritual growth that they identified as valuable. Data also suggest that spiritual growth experiences affected the lives of participants. In Chapter 4 the results, and by implication the value, of participants' spiritual growth experiences were identified. Participants described the value of spiritual growth in terms of its effects. This finding echoes the sentiments of James (1909): "Grant an idea or belief to be true... what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life" (p. v). If an idea or experience has practical results, it should be entertained or attended to. Perhaps the true test of spiritual growth for an adult educator is not logical or theoretical; it is practical.

Spiritual growth is a phenomenon that adult educators should address because it is a valuable and important part of the lives of adults. This was certainly true for participants in this study. As was pointed out in Chapter 1, spiritual growth is also an important part of the lives of many adults today. As Lauzon (1998) said: "As adult educators we are in the business of people and people are complex creatures. This requires that we be willing to engage them in their fullness" (p. 324). The fullness of the

human being, as described by participants in this study involves addressing the spiritual dimension of life, including the process of spiritual growth.

Summary of Key Findings from the Study

Findings from this study were described in Chapters 3 and 4 and compared with the literature of adult learning and adult development in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 a culture of spiritual growth was described. This research resulted in a number of key findings. These are based on reported experiences of spiritual growth by the twelve study participants and are summarized below:

- Participants reported that spiritual growth experiences were an important part of their lives.
- Experiences of spiritual growth involved six fluid components including experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity / relationships, and attribution.
- Participants seemed to identify the occurrence of spiritual growth at the intersection of two or more of the six components of experience, bracketing, reflection, awareness, activity and relationships, and attribution converged.
- Attribution was a key component of spiritual growth. Attribution contained important psychological elements, and focused on spiritual phenomena that extended beyond the person.
- This study identified four types of spiritual growth: practical, emotional,

ideological, and essential. Findings suggest that there is no qualitative hierarchy among the four types and that each is important in its own right.

- The context of spiritual growth consisted of authentic real-life situations, whether everyday activities or crisis events, clustering into three main categories: relationships, activities and results.
- Experiences of spiritual growth were individual experiences inseparably bound to their social context suggesting a form of situated learning.
- Spiritual growth was described as a "deep" experience, associated with the human soul, and sharing similarities with descriptions of dialogue in the literature.
- Comparison with the literature of adult learning suggests that spiritual growth is a distinctive form of adult experiential learning that has elements in common with transformative learning, reflective practice, self-directed learning, and informal and incidental learning.
- Spiritual growth is a distinct type of adult learning where the content of the experience is never fully known, and always contains an element of mystery.
- Although the role of the individual learner is critical, and spiritual growth is similar to self-directed learning, it also seems to involve a relationship, an encounter, a "conversation with the unseen," or a dialogue with the soul that can often be the catalyst for deep and long-lasting change.

For participants in this study, the identification of an experience as one of spiritual learning was valuable and was associated with results important to them. The identification of the phenomenon of spiritual learning in adult education has important

implications for the practice of adult education. In the next section these implications will be discussed.

Discussion of Implications for Adult Education

A key finding from this study underscored both the importance of a theoretical conceptualization in understanding spiritual growth, and its lack in the adult learning literature. As described in Chapter 1, much of the literature focusing on spiritual growth, especially in adult education, is functional, focusing on activities, or descriptive, focusing on the practice of spiritual growth. Where adult educators describe the phenomenon of spiritual growth, it is often described psychologically. Study findings suggest that adult educators need to go beyond the descriptive elements and practices of spiritual growth in order to address the phenomenon of spiritual growth comprehensively. Because of this need, the following section is more conceptual, and focuses on four specific implications of the findings from this study. The first has to do with the four types of spiritual growth. The second concerns the implications of the dialogical dimensions of spiritual growth and its potential for addressing differences among people. The third concerns the relationship of religion and spirituality. The fourth implication has to do with the facilitation of spiritual growth. Specific implications for the practice of adult education will be discussed later in the section focusing on recommendations. In addressing spiritual growth, educational theory and practice necessarily extends beyond the formal scope of adult education, and addresses issues involved in religious education, transpersonal

psychology, and the broader arena of spiritual practice. Because of the breadth of the issues involved, the discussion will necessarily be limited and suggestive.

The Four Types of Spiritual Growth

In Chapter 4 of this study four types of spiritual growth were identified: practical, emotional, ideological, and essential. Comparison of these types with the literature of adult education and adult development led to the identification of similarities between essential spiritual growth as described in this study and several descriptions of transformational learning from the literature. Essential spiritual growth also bears similarity to some descriptions of religious conversion with its emphasis on significant, long lasting change, occurrence of a triggering experience and presence of a powerfully experienced learning event (Rambo, 1993). Although practical spiritual growth is similar to forms of adult learning such as instrumental learning (Mezirow, 1991), and emotional learning also has some relationship to forms of adult learning described in the literature (MacKeracher, 1996), neither is usually identified as a type of spiritual growth in the religious literature on spiritual growth (McGinn, 1999), or the literature on transpersonal psychology (Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000). Ideological spiritual growth is not described in the adult education literature. In the literature associated with religion and spirituality ideological spiritual growth is usually associated with religious education or theological studies and not usually associated with spiritual growth.

The identification of these four types of spiritual growth has important

implications for adult education as well as areas of research involving religion and spiritual growth. As was shown in Chapter 5 in this study, and distinct from others found in both the adult development literature and literature focusing on spiritual development, there was no indication of a qualitative hierarchy among the four types of spiritual growth. Participants underscored the importance of all four types of spiritual growth. In the context of religious practice, for example, spiritual growth or spiritual learning may be a phenomenon that is more inclusive than is often portrayed, especially in popular religious practice where the emphasis is mostly cognitive. For example, practical spiritual growth, associated with the senses and including the active, physical aspects of living, "stands on its own two feet" and does not require cognitive framing for legitimacy. The same is true for emotional spiritual growth. To the extent that these findings have any broader application, they support suggestions among a minority of writers in the arena of spiritual growth that the epistemology of traditional Western models of spiritual growth be extended beyond the traditional Augustinian and Platonic forms that privilege the mind over the body and the emotions (McGinn, 1991; Fox, 1990). To the degree that adult educators may also tend to privilege the mental, cognitive and rational elements of adult learning, these findings also suggest that physical and emotional forms of learning are valuable and should be integrated into practice. This study suggests the possibility of broadening the scope of transformational learning to include not only the spiritual dimension, but also the practical, physical, emotional, and ideological forms of spiritual learning. Findings from this study suggest caution in privileging types of spiritual growth focused exclusively on cognitive processes as well as the need to better understand the nature of practical and emotional forms of spiritual growth.

Dialogue and Differences in Learning

One of the common goals of both religion and education is to deal with differences constructively (Sidorkin, 1999). A cursory glance at the recent history of civilization demonstrates a singular lack of success. Violence having to do with differences is all too common both in the educational system and among religions. In my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church, major differences in belief and practice, unhealthy conflict, and an inability to converse constructively about differences are common features of the church today (Haberer, 2001). A participant in this study expressed a version of this realization reflecting on his family's experience of Thanksgiving dinner saying, "When my family gets together there are two things we don't talk about, religion and politics." Just as religious and educational convictions often divide people, it is interesting to note that spiritual growth seems to bring people together often improving their relationships. The colloquialism, "the family that prays together stays together," although not statistically true, points to a deeper truth. As Sarah said in her interview, "Prayer does change things. When I really pray with a person something changes. Even if we disagree, I don't see them the same as I did before." In this study there was a powerful phenomenon experienced in the group interviews where differences between individuals were shared in an open and un-dogmatic way. Dick's reflection on the importance of relationships in spiritual growth described in Chapter 6 is an example. Milton's comment sums up the feeling of several participants when he said:

> This discussion has been a profound experience for me. I have really learned some things. Everybody here is different.... The differences don't seem to matter.

> It's what's inside. It's your heart and soul. Sharing that is profound . . . somehow I sense we are closer.

There is also a sense in the Western Christian tradition that the experience of spiritual growth focused on a loving relationship with God has a positive affect on human relations as well, including differences between people (McGinn, 1999). Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk and teacher and practitioner of spiritual growth, wrote of the meeting point between the spiritual and the relational:

> The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers [*sic*], we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. (Mott, 1984, p. 545)

In transpersonal literature there also is an emphasis on bringing together differences in a unitive spirit of consciousness, where differences are perceived as a part of a greater unity based on a single spiritual reality (Wade, 2000; Battista, 1996). In the Bible, Paul the Apostle also writes of a similar phenomenon when he says that "in Christ there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). In a mysterious way, Paul is asserting that the spiritual experience of the risen Christ transcends earthly distinctions of gender, class and race. Imagine such a statement in the present world of education where these issues are often quite contentious (Imel, Brockett, & James, 2000).

Dialogue and its relationship to the findings of this study were discussed in Chapter 6 of this study. Although limited in scope, study findings suggest that the dialogical dimension of spiritual growth has the potential to help reframe differences in constructive and instructive ways, underscoring the value of dialogue in spiritual growth

and by implication, other forms of adult learning. The findings support the educational practices of Isaacs (1999), English (2000) and others who utilize dialogue as a constructive way to engage differences, and echo the voices of writers like Palmer (1998) who sees dialogue as a way of learning that embraces the spiritual aspects of life.

Dialogue does not eliminate differences. Rather it leads to new understanding, new perception and new meaning in the differences. Differences do not merge into a seamless unity through dialogue, but there is a constructive engagement of differences through dialogue. Participants in the study perceived a difference between themselves and God. That is one reason why they noted a mysterious side to the phenomenon of spiritual growth. In spiritual growth some of the deep differences between the self and God are at times elegantly integrated through a dialogic process of engagement. The dialogical dimension of spiritual growth is like a psychic container where differences can be engaged in meaningful ways, whether those differences are between perspectives, individuals in conflict, or an individual and the spiritual dimension of life. Through dialogue, as Buber (1988) described it, "the word arises" in such a "substantial way" among individuals that they are "seized in their depths" and "opened out by the dynamic of an elemental togetherness" resulting in a "memorable common fruitfulness to be found nowhere else" (p. 76). The dialogical dimensions of spiritual growth have the potential, echoing the words of Oakeshott (1991) written in a different context, "not to deliver us from the polyphony of Babel but to accommodate disparate voices" (p. 488).

In the phenomenon of spiritual growth, touching as it does the wholeness of the self, the other, and God, one can see a glimpse of the power of this form of dialogical learning. In practice though, the process of spiritual growth is not easy. In this study

participants spoke of challenges involved in the practice of spiritual growth, citing the difficulty in maintaining focus, overcoming selfishness and being genuinely open to different perspectives, among others. The history of spiritual growth in the Western tradition also contains reference to experiences of violence and prejudice associated with the lives of those practicing spiritual growth (McGinn, 1999). Challenging as it may be however, spiritual growth through its dialogical elements, has the potential to strengthen the ability of very different individuals to live and learn together. The interpretation of the findings from this study suggests the importance of a dialogical dimension in spiritual growth, echoes the assertion of the importance of dialogical learning in adult education, and suggests the extension of such approaches to include the spiritual.

Religion and Spiritual Growth

The importance of cultural context in framing and describing spiritual growth experiences was described in Chapter 4 of this study. This finding has important implications for those who seek to distinguish between spiritual experience and the context of that experience as lived in religious beliefs and practices. For participants in this study spiritual growth experiences were inseparably tied to their cultural context including religious beliefs, vocabulary and practices.

Among some writers focusing on spiritual growth there is a tendency to separate the phenomenon of spiritual experience from the phenomenon of religious expression (Scotton, 1996). As Vogel (2000) points out, some adult educators find it easy to identify

religious faith with spirituality, and some view spirituality as separate from religious history, understanding and practice. Yeaxlee (1925) represents a classic example of an adult educator who was comfortable speaking of spirituality and religion together. More recently Schauffele & Baptiste (2000) also utilize religious terms in describing spiritual growth. Dirkx (1997), English & Gillen (2000), and Moore (1992) are representative of other authors who emphasize a broader, less religious context for spiritual growth. In some Christian religious circles there has also been a distrust of the spiritual experience and a tendency to emphasize the religious theology or practice (McGinn, 1999).

Study participants did not distinguish between the experience of the spiritual and its expression. In this study spiritual growth is a situated phenomenon, inseparably tied to the behavioral expressions that accompany it, religious and otherwise. Even in the descriptions of spiritual growth experiences among the small, relatively homogenous sample of participants in this study, the cultural artifacts of spiritual growth including vocabulary, image, symbol and ritual were quite varied. Findings from this study suggest that the religious and other cultural expressions of spiritual growth are critical in describing and understanding the phenomenon. In spiritual growth as described in this study, it is virtually impossible to separate the meaning of spiritual growth from the words, rituals, symbols, or images that describe it. Spiritual growth can be described in terms that are not particular to one religion, but if the findings from this study have any broader application, all descriptions of spiritual growth, religious and otherwise, are contextually bound. To the degree that spiritual growth is situated and findings of this study are applicable to a wider population, the distinction between religious and secular spirituality with its attendant assumption that secular descriptions are broader and more

inclusive, and therefore preferable is questionable. Findings from this study suggest that perspectives attempting to describe spiritual growth as distinct from its religious expression, or to imply that spiritual growth described in religious terms is qualitatively inferior are shortsighted. If the goal of adult education is to address the fullness and complexity of the human being (Lauzon, 1998), the separation of spirituality and religious practice could represent a serious omission.

The Facilitation of Spiritual Growth

In her study, English (2000) suggests three important strategies for fostering spiritual development: mentoring, self-direction, and dialogue. Findings from this study underscore her assertions. The data presented in Chapter 5 pointed out that many participant experiences of spiritual growth could be described as self-directed learning experiences. Study participants identified dialogue as an important element in the group interview experience and also a part of experiences of spiritual growth associated with significant relationships in their lives. Although not directly mentioned by participants in this study, mentoring has been identified as a valuable aspect of informal adult learning (Daloz, 1986, 1999). Mentoring is also similar to practices of spiritual direction that have long been a part of Western traditions of spiritual growth (Leech, 1977).

Whatever the method of facilitation, findings from this study suggest caution in any intervention and additional preparation for adult educators. As with other forms of adult learning, there are practical considerations that should be considered as a part of

any educational intervention. These are especially important in addressing experiences of spiritual growth, which are by their nature deeply personal, often powerful experiences where the outcome emerges from the process and is not known ahead of time. In this study participants noted mysterious dimensions, as well as various unplanned consequences of their experiences of spiritual growth.

Although not directly noted by participants in this study, theorists writing from traditional Western perspectives of spiritual growth also highlight the notion of mysterious and unplanned outcomes in identifying a "shadow side" of spiritual learning and growth including unintended negative spiritual experiences and consequences (Kelsey, 1978; Hillman, 1975; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1996). Finally, from a practical perspective it is also sobering to realize the number of religious wars that might be directly linked to a person's or group's experience of spiritual growth. Clearly caution is in order in any attempt to facilitate spiritual growth experiences, and further research on the understanding and practice of this form of adult learning is needed.

A further caution for adult educators desiring to facilitate spiritual learning experiences involves the level of skill, knowledge, and experience necessary to facilitate this type of adult learning. In Western traditions spiritual learning involves a field of practice variously called spiritual formation (Conn, 1999), spiritual guidance (Kelsey, 1983), spiritual direction (Barry & Connolly, 1982), and spiritual friendship (Leech, 1977; Edwards, 1980). The practice of facilitating spiritual formation involves a distinct body of knowledge and skills, as well as the practice of intentional self-reflection (Cully, 1984). Entire graduate programs are designed to help practitioners in acquiring and strengthening their skills in facilitating spiritual growth. Similar levels of preparation are

also characteristic of other religious traditions (Griffiths 1982), as well as the field of transpersonal psychology (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996). An important implication for adult educators emerging from a broader knowledge of the study and practice of spiritual growth is the need to provide opportunities to strengthen skills and knowledge in the area of spiritual growth for adult educators who desire to address this dimension in their practice. Among those who practice spiritual formation from a religious or spiritual perspective, there is also an opportunity to strengthen skills and knowledge in adult education, as these are not usually addressed in the arenas of traditional spiritual practice.

A final important implication for adult educators who desire to address spiritual growth as a part of their adult education practice has to do with the personal experience of the educator. As researcher in this study, I found that I became very personally involved in spiritual growth as a part of the process of conducting the study. As a pastor, the practice of spiritual growth was not new to me. I have also engaged in formal study of the topic through previous graduate work (Davis, 1989). Through my own experience of reflection, dialogue with participants, and my writing, I found myself affected by the topic, engaging in my own experience of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth by its nature is a subjective experience, and I found that it was not possible or appropriate to study the topic objectively, or at a distance. In the adult education literature Hunt (1998) reports a similar experience. My study of spiritual growth as a researcher itself contributed to my own spiritual growth. Many of the results reported by participants in this study were things that I also experienced at one time or another during the study: a powerful sense of the numinous, a deep and humbling experience of realizing my own connection with and dependence upon a mysterious and powerful spiritual dimension of life, and feelings of

challenge, peace and energy during the research and writing process. I also became involved in the lives of those participating in the study in a much more personal way than I have experienced in conducting other types of research. In a profound sense they became my teachers, and I theirs, even as we all sat at the feet of a source of wisdom, energy and grace that ultimately seemed to defy description. As I engaged in this research, my own spiritual experience of the mysterious side of spiritual growth at times seemed to echo the words of Frost (1942): "We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows." Discovering the meaning of that secret for myself, as well as the process of understanding and describing the spiritual growth experiences of others, involved many hours and much effort working, in the words of Joyce (1964), "in the smithy of my own soul" (p. 253).

Recommendations for Research

One of the limitations of this study involves the cultural setting of the participants and researcher. That cultural setting includes the organizational culture of the Particular Presbyterian Church, the relatively homogenous socio-economic background of participants, as well as the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among participants. A future research question involves the extent to which the findings of this study are applicable to individuals in other cultural contexts. Exploring other voices of spiritual growth represents a major concern for further research.

An additional question for further research is to more fully explore the nature of the four types of spiritual growth. To what extent do these four types of spiritual growth recur in other cultural contexts? What do they mean and how are they experienced? Specific research topics include:

- *Ideological spiritual growth*. Because of the infrequency of the mention of ideological spiritual growth in the literature that focuses on spiritual growth, further research is needed to better understand the nature and expanded applicability of this type of experience, both generally and in a religious setting. A better understanding of ideological spiritual growth should help extend the understanding of cognitive learning in adult education. In religious adult education, where the learning process is often viewed as cognitive but not necessarily spiritual, a better understanding of ideological spiritual growth offers the promise of extending the scope of adult religious education to include a fuller understanding of spiritual growth and adult religious education.
- *Practical spiritual growth*. Additional research focusing on practical spiritual growth is needed because of the frequency and importance attached to this type of spiritual growth by participants in this study, and the lack of attention devoted to this phenomenon in the literature of spiritual growth and religious adult education. Religious adult education rarely addresses the phenomenon of practical spiritual growth, although it is widely addressed in the self-help literature. Further research in this area offers the potential to extend the scope of practice for adult religious education, and better help adults understand this type of frequently experienced

spiritual growth that is rarely addressed in the literature of adult religious education.

- *Essential spiritual growth*. In religious adult education essential spiritual growth is often identified as conversion (Rambo, 1993). In popular religious practice this is sometimes termed "saving your soul." Often seen as the purview of the minister and not the religious adult educator, research on the conversion experience from the perspective its relationship to adult learning could prove useful in better understanding the nature of the phenomenon of conversion. This research could also suggest more effective ways to link essential spiritual growth with other, ongoing learning experiences of adults who participate in formal religious education. Such a linkage could improve practice by helping adults better understand their experiences in the broader context of their lives.
- *Emotional spiritual growth*. Emotional spiritual growth is usually addressed in the context of religious counseling or therapy, and almost never addressed in the context of religious adult education, or adult education generally. Research on emotional spiritual growth could help religious adult education practitioners better identify and understand this phenomenon and develop ways to support adults who experience this type of spiritual growth. This research might also help adult educators in identifying, understanding and helping program participants explore the emotional side of their spiritual life.

The suggestion of four types of spiritual growth is new in the field of adult education. Additional research will be important to determine if the four types exist outside the context of this study and to expand the implications for the practice of adult education.

Because narrow definitions of adult education have inhibited research, spiritual growth is rarely addressed in the literature or acknowledged as an ontological reality in people's lives. Findings from this study suggest that further research on spiritual growth could extend the understanding and practice of adult learning and adult education in important ways. Possible areas for further study include:

- *Experiential learning*. The identification of spiritual growth suggests a broader horizon of experience for research and practice. This study describes the experience of twelve adults. Additional studies involving other groups of participants should deepen the understanding of spiritual growth as a form of adult learning as well as potential affects of this understanding on the practice of adult education.
- *Transformative learning*. Additional research on the nature on the relationship of spiritual transformation and adult transformational learning is needed. Integration of these two areas of research could deepen the understanding and practice of both adult educators and those involved in religious adult education. Such research could contribute to the ongoing development of the knowledge base of transformative learning by addressing the implications of a spiritual reality in the transformative process, as well as practices commonly used in spiritual growth that could strengthen the practice of transformative learning, such as contemplation and prayer.
- *Self-directed learning*. Study findings highlighted similarities between spiritual growth and self-directed learning, suggesting the possibility of broadening the focus of self-directed learning to include the spiritual dimension. From the

perspective of those involved in self-directed learning, understanding human agency in relationship to spiritual reality represents an important topic for research that could suggest a potential new dimension of self directed learning. An additional area of potential research involves the relationship between spiritual growth, self-directed learning and the self-help literature. Research on self-direction and its relationship to the self-help literature is limited. Findings from this study indicated that the self-help literature was an important part of participants' reported spiritual growth experiences. The possible importance of this relationship should be explored.

- *Informal and incidental learning*. Research in the area of informal and incidental learning has focused on practical concerns. Much of it is work-based (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). Research on the relationship between spiritual growth and informal and incidental learning would help to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon, and could suggest elements of practice helpful to adult learners.
- *Reflective practice*. Study findings suggest that spiritual growth could extend the understanding and practice of reflection in adult education. The connection between reflection and practice, common in reflective practice (Peters, 1991; Schon, 1993), was common in participants' experiences of spiritual growth. In spiritual growth however, understanding of both reflection and practice include a spiritual dimension of reality. A better understanding of the interaction of reflection and action in spiritual growth could extend reflective practice by enlarging the scope of reflection. In this study, the inclusion of the spiritual dimension changed the nature of reflection by introducing an unseen reality into

the reflective process. Study findings also suggest the value of non-rational, contemplative elements of reflection such as silence and bracketing. Additional research should help deepen the understanding and practice of reflection as experienced in spiritual growth.

- *Dialogue.* Findings in this study suggest that spiritual growth includes a dialogical dimension. The study suggests that the dialogical dimension of spiritual growth may actually broaden the general understanding of dialogue in adult education to include an intrapersonal spiritual dimension, and that practices such as silence, as well as elements such as music and images have a role in the dialogical process. More research on the dialogical nature of spiritual growth is needed. This is especially important considering the potential of dialogue as a learning process that can transcend differences, and the need to more effectively bridge differences in both adult education as well as religious adult education.

Research focused on spiritual growth and adult learning has been very limited to date. Such research has the potential to continue to broaden the understanding of adult learning and also the practices of adult education. In the next section recommendations for practice will be addressed.

Recommendations for Practice

Some of the practices identified as a part of spiritual growth in this study have been a part of adult education for some time. For example, the use of journals for learning

has been well documented (Lowenstein, 1982, 1987; Fulwiler, 1987; Cranton, 1994; Progoff, 1975). Reflection has been the subject of considerable research in adult education (Brookfield, Peters, 1990, 1991). Non-rational elements of learning such as silence and images are also described (Dirkx, 1997). Although similar to adult education practice in many ways, the distinctive elements of spiritual growth identified in this study suggest important implications for practice.

Theory and Practice

The literature often appears to emphasize functional or practical approaches to learning (Boshier, 1994). In adult religious education as well as adult education the focus is often on learning activities. Although the link between practice and reflection has been well documented in adult education (Schon, 1993; Peters, 1991), it is not always practiced. Findings of this study underscore the importance of this linkage in the process of understanding a complex learning phenomenon like spiritual growth, because participants described numerous experiences that involved reflection. In the process of spiritual growth activities, reflection, and the theory that results from reflection on activities, all are important. Study findings showed that awareness or perception was critical, and that perception is related to reflection as well as epistemology, or a person's theory of knowing. In spiritual growth knowing and reflection were also linked to activity or practices such as silence, bracketing or prayer. In spiritual growth, activity or practice is linked to reflection or the development of theory. Participant descriptions of spiritual

growth represent examples of the importance of reflective practice in adult learning, the difficulties in practicing it, and its potential for significant learning in an adult's life. It is also interesting to note that the twelve participants in this study were not trained in reflective practice as described by Schon (1993), but they were highly motivated to understand their experience, underscoring the importance of motivation in learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Study findings also underscore the usefulness of a written journal in reflective practice. Participants highlighted the process of keeping the journal as especially helpful in their spiritual growth. In some instances the journal process itself led to experiences of spiritual growth. Findings from this study suggest the importance of reflective practice in as well as the usefulness of a written journal in adult learning.

Managing Differences Through Learning

In adult education today many different theories and practices vie for the attention of the adult educator and clash as their adherents seek to gain acceptance for their ideas. Sometimes this cacophony of voices can easily begin to sound like howling mob. How can adult practitioners both honor the integrity of an individual's perspective, and also facilitate learning when there are multiple perspectives, each held with great passion? Findings from this study offer three important clues, each appropriate for adult education practice.

In spiritual growth there is an assumption made, almost a way of knowing, that spiritual growth or spiritual learning is an endless process, that a person can never know

for sure, and that a part of spiritual growth involves learning to live with ambiguity. The uncertainty of a final outcome in the spiritual growth process is part of what participants alluded to when they described the process of "going deeper" in this study. Similar perspectives have long been a part of the traditions of spiritual growth. As Bonaventure, the great 13th Century Franciscan mystic, said: "God is the circle whose circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere" (quoted in McGinn, 1999, p. 286). Or in the words of the poet Frost (1942): "We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows" (p. 155). For Bonaventure and Frost, spiritual reality is beyond knowing. The notion that a person can never know all there is to know about the spiritual dimension implies that there is no absolute answer, an assumption that is echoed in the literature of social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). Even when different perspectives are held with passion, the simple assumption that we can never know all there is to know about a reality, spiritual growth or otherwise, helps to facilitate learning. This awareness is often forgotten in the heat of an argument, but continues to hold promise for the practice of adult education in a world of difference.

The dialogical dimensions of spiritual growth, identified through this study, also suggest the importance of the communication process in managing deeply held differences. In the sense that the dialogical aspects of spiritual growth helped in establishing a form of meaningful communication that seemed to transcend the difference between the person and the spiritual dimension of reality, dialogue may have promise in helping adults to learn through their differences. This study suggests the importance of dialogue in spiritual growth, and by implication adult learning. To the extent that this is

true, the practice of dialogue should be a part of the training of any adult educator who wishes to address different perspectives in spiritual growth in his or her practice.

Experiences of participants in this study suggest a further clue for managing passionately held differences in adult education. In this study spiritual growth was described in very different ways. Each individual experience, although different, was important and valid for that individual. As individuals in this study interacted in a respectful manner, sometimes they would change their perspectives. When such changes occurred they happened because the individual *learned* not because the other person proved anything, or argued effectively, or cited data. A person's experience of spiritual growth has validity because it is their experience. No one person's experience has validity for another person, unless it becomes a part of their experience. When individuals changed their perspective in this study, they did so because of a learning experience where the individual, in a sense, made the other person's experience a part of his or her experience through learning. To the extent that this is true for other forms of adult learning, it has important implications. Findings from this study support the notion that learning is important in any change of perspective. By implication, this insight also highlights the ineffectiveness of more combative attempts to change other people. As one participant in this study said: "I learn from the inside out, not when someone tries to convert me."

Importance of Religious Spiritual Traditions

The practice of spiritual growth has been a part of many religious traditions for centuries. Various elements of philosophy and understanding, as well as specific practices have developed as a part of these traditions. Adult educators who wish to address issues of spiritual growth in their practice should have some familiarity with these traditions. Especially important in the Christian tradition is the literature summarizing practice in spiritual formation (Conn, 1999), spiritual guidance (Kelsey, 1983), spiritual direction (Barry & Connolly, 1982), and spiritual friendship (Leech, 1977; Edwards, 1980), all of which address educational issues associated with spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth underscores the personal nature of all adult learning. If my experience as researcher in this study is a clue, adult educators wishing to address spiritual growth in their practice should also have some personal experience in spiritual growth, or at least be open to that possibility. Spiritual growth is experiential and in spiritual growth, learning and living are often closely linked.

Spiritual Growth Practices

Findings from this study suggest that specific practices such as silence, bracketing, contemplation, and other forms of non-verbal communication may have value for adult educators in their practice. Participants reported that these practices often helped

them to see reality in new ways. In the case of this study that vision involved a spiritual reality, but the value of a different perspective is important in all learning. To the extent that these practices help to encourage learning, they could be valuable practices for any adult educator.

Conclusion

This study of spiritual growth is a part of what might be identified as a missing voice in adult education. The stories of the spiritual growth experiences of the twelve participants in this study, as well as their interpretation as a part of the research process, represent a story describing spiritual growth, an important phenomenon in the lives of many adults. The story of this study stands along with many others as a contribution to the understanding and ongoing development of the theory and practice of adult education. As Lauzon (1998) said: "Meaning is made through the telling of our stories and out of stories we collectively theorize so that we may construct a common understanding of the world and act upon it to work for social justice and human freedom" (p. 324).

The practice of adult education in the 20th Century has been driven by two distinct and powerful visions for learning: Lindeman's (1961/1926) vision for adult learning and social change, and Knowles' (1980, 1990) vision of androgogy or the human potential for learning. Early in the 20th Century Lindeman (1961/1926) described a vision of a new frontier for adult education extending beyond the concerns of the

individual to include the social order. Lindeman's vision involved using adult education principles and skills to change society itself. As Lindeman (1961/1926) said:

> Adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-time goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-time, experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order . . . . Manifestly, these aims cannot be realized until adult educators evolve a method adequate to the purpose. (p. 105)

Lindeman's vision has been carried forward by such figures as Freire (1970, 1973, 1982), the work of educators such as Myles Horton at Highlander (Horton & Friere, 1990), and is echoed today by authors committed to extending the social vision to include ecological dimensions (O'Sullivan, 1999) and a global perspective (Finger & Asún, 2001). Characteristic of this vision is Brookfield's (1987) observation that there is no such thing as a "privatized life style . . . . Like it or not, as Lindeman observed, we are social creatures and in the creation and operation of our social forms, we can see the highest realization of our humanity" (p. 62).

In 1968 Malcolm Knowles published an article entitled, "Andragogy, Not Pedagogy," where he emphasized the unique learning needs of adults. Although influenced by Lindeman, the work of Knowles represents a vision of adult education that is distinct. Realizing the importance and complexity of human experience in learning and change, Knowles (1980, 1990) identified important principles of adult learning, including the involvement of adults in planning and evaluating their instruction, experience as the basis for learning, and the importance of relevance and problem orientation in adult learning. Scholars such as Rogers (1961), Buber (1987/1958), and Shotter (1993), among

others, stand in the same tradition of humanistic learning, and have carried the humanistic vision of adult learning forward.

The study of spiritual growth and adult learning represents a new frontier for adult education theory and practice. Spiritual growth or learning in its variety of forms, including religious, secular, humanistic, and scientific has the promise of deepening adult educators' understanding and practice of adult learning. Because spiritual growth is based the epistemological and ontological assumption of a spiritual reality that can be encountered by human beings, it has the potential of broadening both the social and humanistic visions of adult education. The implications and importance of spiritual learning are yet to be fully realized, but the recognition of the importance of its omission in adult education is becoming more apparent. As Lauzon (1995) states:

> The soulful and spiritual dimension of human existence has been lost and denigrated in much of our Western modernist thought. And when the soul and spirit are lost, so is love; the world becomes alienating and violent. (p. 325)

The study of spiritual growth holds significant promise for the future of adult education.

Whatever has been learned through this study and whatever remains to be learned, perhaps the worth of spiritual growth lies in its ability to help us understand a reality that is both within and beyond, to engage in a "conversation with the unseen" (James, 1920, p. 420), or to encounter "the secret sits in the middle and knows" (Frost, 1942, p. 79), thereby participating in a process of learning, a dialogue of the soul. Standing in that mysterious place, we may encounter one of those rare moments when we discover ourselves, or lose ourselves, but whatever happens we are constituted by the truth of the relationship itself, a truth that has the potential to lead us beyond violence and contempt

and toward a new life. When we have such an encounter, even if but for a moment, sometimes the cacophony of voices within and without become a harmony. Such harmony cannot be played. It can only be experienced. Learning cannot produce the harmony, but the harmony can be the context for incredible learning, for often, once a person hears this melody, life is forever different.

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Appendix A

Letter of Invitation

Dear Name:

As many of you know, I am working toward the completion of a doctorate in education at the University of Tennessee. As a part of that program I will be working on a dissertation during 2000. The subject of the dissertation is spiritual growth and adult learning.

I am looking for 8-12 adults who would like to participate in a research study that will form the basis of my dissertation. The study will focus on spiritual growth. Participants will be asked to record experiences that they believe could be spiritual growth experiences in a journal over a three week period. The study will also include a one hour interview and a group interview to be held following the initial three week period. These research elements would take place at intervals over a three month period.

The study hopes to better understand the phenomenon of spiritual growth as an adult learning experience. It is likely that participants also might better understand their own experiences of spiritual growth as a result of their participation in this study.

If you have an interest in participating in this study, please fill out and return the enclosed card or call Dent Davis at the church (522-9804) or home (450-5036). The first step involves the completion of a participant information form and a brief meeting to answer questions and go over the research process. At the conclusion of that meeting you will have the opportunity to volunteer to participate or to decline if necessary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a "consent form" indicating your willingness to participate. The actual study would begin in late January and conclude by May.

I hope you will consider participating in this study. I believe that you might find it interesting and useful for yourself, and I believe that the results will also be useful to others who work with adults, both in the church and beyond.

Sincerely,

Dent Davis

Appendix B

Consent Form

Understanding the Phenomenon of Spiritual Growth and its Relationship to Adult Learning
Dent C. Davis
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

I understand the purpose of this study is to learn more about the experience of adult spiritual growth. The study will examine what spiritual growth means to people in their everyday life experience. The study seeks to better understand the relationship of the phenomenon of spiritual growth to adult education and learning.

Through a three week process of occasional journal writing, I will be asked to record experiences that I would term "spiritual." I will also be asked to participate in one individual interview and one group interview as a follow up to the journal writing process. These interviews will provide an opportunity to clarify and better understand the experiences I recorded in my journal. The final written reflection, involving one page and approximately fifteen minutes to complete, will summarize my experience as a participant in this study.

I understand that my participation will include:

- An **initial interview** of approximately thirty minutes to clarify information on the participant information form, go over the journal writing process, as well as the process for the follow up interview and group interview, and answer questions.
- **Keeping an occasional written journal** recording my reflections on any spiritual growth experiences that I might have during the three week period of data collection. I understand that I will be provided with some written questions as a guide for my reflection, but am free to keep this journal in whatever way is appropriate for me.
- **An individual interview** with the researcher lasting approximately one hour.
- **A group interview** involving the researcher and approximately 8-10 adult participants and lasting approximately one hour.
- **The completion of a written reflection form** of approximately one page summarizing my experience in this study. This form will take approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

I understand and agree to keep confidential anything said as a part of the group interview that is a part of this study.

All the written records and transcripts from this study will be kept locked and eventually destroyed. My name will not be used in any reports or shared with any organization. I understand that this consent form will be stored in a locked facility for three years past the completion of the study.

I understand that a possible benefit of this study could involve a better

understanding of my experience of spiritual growth.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I can refuse to answer any questions. I understand that the researcher does not expect any risks to me as a participant in this study. I understand that I am free to contact Dent Davis at 450-5036 at any time if I have questions.

I understand the nature of the study and have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

Understanding the Phenomenon of Spiritual Growth and its Relationship to Adult Learning
Personal Information Form

Please answer the following questions. All responses will be strictly confidential. You will not be identified either by name or circumstances as a result of completing this form or your participation in this study.

Name: _____ Date:_____

Address: _____ Knoxville, TN Zip:_____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

Do you use a computer? _____ Yes _____ No _____ A little bit

How long have you been a member of Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church?_____

How often do you attend Sunday School?

Never		Occasionally		Once a month	Twice/ Mo	Weekly
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How common is the experience of spiritual growth in your life?

Don't know		Non-existent	Occasional	Regular	Very common	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Have you ever kept a journal? _____ Yes _____ No

If so, for approximately how long have you kept a journal? _____

Appendix D

Guidelines for Journal Writing

Understanding the Phenomenon of Spiritual Growth and its Relationship to Adult Learning
Guidelines for Journal Writing

Each participant will be asked to complete a written journal for a period of three weeks, recording experiences they would describe as spiritual. Participants will decide how and when to keep the journal. It is expected that this process will be occasional with the amount and nature of the written reflections varying widely among participants. Traditionally, spiritual growth experiences have been recorded in a person's journal or diary. The use of a journal is a traditional format in spiritual growth. The journal will be read by the researcher and all entries will be strictly confidential, the documents stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed at the conclusion of the study. No participant will be identified by name or circumstance as a part of the study. As you record your entries note the date of the entry and number the pages.

The following are questions and guidelines for use for reflection and writing.

There are many different ways to understand and describe spiritual growth experiences. If you think that an experience is spiritual, it is, no matter what anyone else might think.
As you identify experiences in your life that you think might be spiritual, write about them, describing the experience.
1. What happened?
2. What was the context of your experience?
3. How did you feel about the experience?
4. What did you learn?
5. How did the experience affect your life?
Be sure to note the details of the experience such as the time of day, day of the week and any other relevant details.

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Interview Guide
Dissertation Individual Interviews
Dent Davis
8/7/2000

1. Tell me what it was like to keep the journal for three weeks?
2. How did you decide what to put in your journal?
3. Did the experience of keeping the journal happen as you expected or were there unexpected surprises? What were some of those? Did anything that you wrote stand out as particularly noteworthy? Spiritual? What? Why?
4. Can you tell me about one experience of spiritual growth during the last ten years that was noteworthy? What happened?
5. What did it feel like? What did you think about it?
6. What makes the experience spiritual? How do you know?
7. How do you think that experience impacted your life?
8. Have you ever had other experiences that were similar?
9. Do you think that your experiences of spiritual growth are similar or different from others? How?

Appendix F

Group Interview Guide

1. What was it like to keep the journal for three weeks? What kinds of things did you learn? What made the journal a helpful experience? What were some challenges in keeping the journal? How did the process of keeping the journal affect your experience of spiritual growth?

2. In your practice of spiritual growth, do you have any special place that is important? Please describe. Is there a time that is important? An activity?

3. Think about your life experience over the last ten years or so and see if you can identify one experience of significant change. How did you get through the change? What behaviors, attitudes or relationships were important?

4. Keeping in mind the experience of change that you identified, was there any experience associated with it that you might identify as an experience of spiritual growth? Describe that experience. What made it spiritual? How did you know that it was spiritual? How would another person know that it was spiritual?

5. If you were having a conversation with another person and that person asked you what spiritual growth is like for you, what would you say? If they asked you what the term spiritual growth means, what would you say?

6. If someone you didn't know well asked you to give them some advice on how they could grow spiritually, what would you say?

7. Do you have some particular kind of activity that is especially helpful to you in your spiritual growth? What is it? Are there other activities that you associate with your spiritual growth that are particularly satisfying? Challenging?

VITA

Although I was born in Denver, Colorado in 1948, I grew up in Knoxville, TN and graduated from West High School in 1966. From 1966-1970, I attended the University of Tennessee and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in history and religious studies (With High Honors, Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Eta Sigma). Entering in 1970, I received my Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee in 1974 (Luke-Acts Prize, 1971, Honors, Senior Thesis, 1974). In 1983 I entered Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia and completed my Doctor of Ministry degree in 1989.

Having been ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1975, I served as pastor in seven churches. In addition to work in the ministry, I served for three years as Chief Operating Officer of the Foundation for Community Encouragement, an international education foundation. Since 1992, I have served as Director of the Institute for Work and Learning, an educational consulting firm, and in this capacity have worked extensively with private sector companies, government agencies, and not-for-profit groups in such areas as leadership development, educational research, and program design and evaluation. Presently I am serving as Director of Continuing Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

In May 2002 I received the Doctor of Education degree from the University of Tennessee in Educational Psychology.

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