

The Spiritual Struggles of College Students: Illuminating a Critical Developmental Phenomenon

By Alyssa N. Bryant

In this article, Bryant highlights the common phenomenon of spiritual struggles as a part of the natural developmental process. Through presenting findings from quantitative and qualitative research studies, she illuminates overall trends, shares student voices, and advocates for faculty and staff to support struggling students.

“What is the meaning of life? Why are we put here? Is there a purpose? And what will happen to us after we die? Is there something bigger that’s going to happen? [I’m] struggling with whether or not that’s a real thing or if we die and nothing happens, and I think that’s scary.”

“I have a hard time believing in God or a higher power because you see so much suffering everywhere. You wonder if someone is in charge or why would He or She do this to other people. Why are some people suffering while other people have all the riches in the world?”

“I feel like sometimes my struggles are just so powerful; and I can’t get over them...I just feel so defeated...I have felt so lost. I felt like I had nowhere to go.”

RECOGNIZING STUDENTS’ STRUGGLES

These sentiments shared by college students in focus groups and interviews bring to light the wide range of difficult spiritual realizations and experiences that are often concealed by students and overlooked by educators. In fact, spiritual struggle is an experience with which many students are familiar, particularly those who concern themselves with deep reflection on faith, purpose, and life meaning.

Many students find themselves perplexed by the notion of reconciling the preponderance of social injustice and suffering in the world with the promises of their religious traditions. Recent estimates suggest that spiritual struggles are not uncommon aspects of college students’ lives.

According to the 2003 College Students' Beliefs and Values survey of college juniors, upwards of one-fifth of students (21%) reported that they *frequently* "struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death," while nearly the same number (18%) had *frequently* questioned their religious/spiritual beliefs.

Scholars of psychology, medicine, and nursing have explored notions of spiritual and religious struggle in studies of the general population, and their insight provides context for considering how spiritual struggles unfold and impact college students in particular (Smucker, 1996). These studies suggest that psychological traits that leave one vulnerable to struggle include spiritual orientations that are not able to adequately address the problems of evil and suffering in the world, are insufficiently integrated into an individual's life, and are based on insecure religious attachments to an unpredictable or distant God (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005).

According to Pargament (2008), the trajectory and ultimate outcome of spiritual struggle depends heavily upon whether a person is able to come to a timely resolution. For this reason, struggles represent a "fork in the road" with one path leading to refinement of the self and faith and the other leading to chronic struggle and disillusionment. Though Pargament and colleagues' (2005) assessment indicates that negative outcomes are likely with chronic struggle, and despite the fact that the literature to date indicates that spiritual struggle appears to bode poorly for psychological well-being and physical health (Hill & Pargament, 2003), others frame spiritual struggle as a point of "crisis" or transition that may not necessarily result in maladjustment among college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1986).

Based on this research, "crisis" does not entail catastrophe, but rather marks a point of transition and signifies a critical developmental opportunity. Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000), whose work collectively traces patterns in spiritual development across the lifespan, both note the central role of struggle and crisis in spiritual growth. Fowler affirms the significance of disequilibrium in stimulating changes in faith and belief. Likewise, Parks focuses expressly on the experience of traditional-age college students and speaks metaphorically of "Shipwreck" as the initial step in the young adult life toward "Gladness," "Amazement," and ultimately a sense of meaning and faith that exhibits greater depth and complexity. Thus, in theoretical terms, "spiritual struggle" has been framed by scholars as an important developmental event or process, especially during the college years.

UNDERSTANDING STRUGGLE: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

To extend what we know about the way in which college students experience spiritual struggle, I worked with colleagues to examine this phenomenon using two distinct methodological approaches. Helen Astin and I initiated the first study¹, which employed a quantitative framework and considered the following questions:

¹ Bryant, A. N., & Astin, H. S. (2008). *The correlates of spiritual struggle during the college years*. *Journal of Higher Education*, 79, 1-27.

- What are the personal characteristics, orientations, and beliefs; environmental influences; and college experiences that predispose students to spiritual struggles?
- What are the potential consequences of spiritual struggles for students' self-rated physical well-being, self-esteem, psychological distress, growth in religious/spiritual tolerance, and growth in religiousness and spirituality?

The data for our study were derived from two national college student surveys developed by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. The 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey was administered to a representative sample of entering college students at 434 baccalaureate colleges and universities across the country; the CIRP questionnaire measures a wide range of constructs associated with first-year students' behaviors, attitudes, values, self-assessments, and expectations. A subset of students who had participated in the 2000 CIRP administration was surveyed three years later using the 2003 College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey, which was the initial student survey developed as part of the *Spirituality in Higher Education* project funded by the John Templeton Foundation.²

We defined spiritual struggle as *intrapsychic concerns about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning in life*. The construct was comprised of five items from the survey that included questioning one's religious/spiritual beliefs; feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling angry at God; and feeling disillusioned with one's religious upbringing.

The analyses we conducted reveal that spiritual struggle is a phenomenon that significantly affects a considerable minority of college students and moderately affects nearly half of all students. Moreover, spiritual struggle is associated with a number of student characteristics and perceptions, college environments, and college experiences. Students identifying with groups that are underrepresented or at risk of mistreatment in society face higher levels of spiritual struggle. Additionally, women report struggling spiritually more often than men. Along the same lines, students affiliating with non-majority faiths (i.e., Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Unitarian Universalism) demonstrate greater spiritual struggle than students of majority faiths.

Another of our key findings is that varying perceptions of God relate to spiritual struggle. That is, students whose conception of God is "Teacher," "Divine Mystery," or "Universal Spirit" are more likely to struggle, whereas those perceiving God as "Beloved," "Protector," or "Part of Me," experience less struggle. For those who perceive God as "Teacher," "Universal Spirit," and "Divine Mystery," struggles may emerge from feeling that God's identity and purposes are elusive. "Beloved," "Protector," and "Part of Me," on the other hand, connote an unconditionally loving, secure, and intimate relationship with a divine force that is known and dependable.

² The study's Co-Principal Investigators are Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, and the project is directed by Jennifer A. Lindholm.

We also learned that students who are religiously engaged experience less spiritual struggle than the average student, likely because religious practice and community have positive implications for general well-being, including stability in one's spiritual life (Hill & Pargament, 2003). On the contrary, destabilizing experiences that may disrupt one's spiritual or religious status quo lead to more pronounced struggling, including converting to another religion, being on a spiritual quest, and discussing religion/spirituality with friends.

One surprising finding is the positive association we identified between attending a religious college (i.e. Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical) and increases in struggling spiritually. Perhaps such environments prompt spiritual questioning because religious topics become salient as students in religious institutions encounter, debate, and even critique religious concepts as part of their academic experience. Alternatively, religious institutions may have well-defined ideologies and expectations for students – some of whom may hold dissenting perspectives; therefore, being the “other” voice in a relatively homogeneous religious environment may lead to spiritual struggles for some students attending religious colleges.

Regarding the consequences of spiritual struggle, we found that struggling relates to lower levels of psychological well-being, physical health, and self-esteem. More surprising, however, is the fact that spiritual struggle is *not* associated with self-perceived religious and spiritual growth, as we had expected. In fact, the only positive relationship uncovered is that which exists between struggling and acceptance of others with different religious faiths. Apparently, students do not envision their heightened sense of questioning, critical reflection, and questing as ultimately beneficial for spiritual and religious growth as they have come to define it. However, these experiences do help them to become more open to others whose worldviews differ from their own, enhancing their overall pluralistic orientation.

UNCOVERING STUDENT VOICES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

The initial study identified the correlates of spiritual struggle, but did not explore the nuances and lived experiences of students engaged in struggle. In an effort to build upon the quantitative findings, Coretta Roseboro, Jordan Luzader, and I approached the problem qualitatively to uncover the meaning of spiritual struggle, the dimensions that characterize struggle, and the processes of struggle in college students' lives³. Undergraduates who had experienced a spiritual struggle in their life were invited to participate. In total, 12 participants comprised the sample for the study.

Participation involved two one-on-one interviews with an opportunity for reflection on spiritual struggle through photography and journaling in the time between the two interviews. The first interview focused on the meaning of spiritual struggle for participants, the nature and experience of their particular struggle, and the ways in

³ Bryant, A. N., Roseboro, C., & Luzader, J. (2008). *A phenomenological analysis of college students' spiritual struggles*. Unpublished manuscript.

which spiritual struggle had shaped them. At the end of the first interview, participants were provided with a disposable camera and asked to further reflect on their experience of spiritual struggle through photography and a written, two-page reflection on the meaning of their photographs. The second interview took place approximately three weeks after the first interview and involved discussion of the photographs, written reflections, thematic patterns, and further insights regarding the participants' spiritual struggle.

Participant narratives illuminate the essence – both the structure and process – of the spiritual struggle phenomenon. Although each participant's struggle was uniquely experienced and described, the essential dimension underlying spiritual struggle can be summarized in a word: *contrast*. At their core, spiritual struggles were steeped in the conflictual, contradictory, and paradoxical aspects of life. This notion of contrast was evident in participant's struggles in several ways.

Self-Concealment/Self-Revelation. Many participants' struggles were replete with the contrast between the self they disclosed to others and the self they concealed. For those who were religious or sexual minorities, the identity markers that distinguished them from the majority were hidden from view so as to avoid the scrutiny and potential disparagement they risked with full self-revelation. Sexual minority participants struggled to unveil their identities to their peers and family members just as participants identifying with worldviews and faith traditions other than Christianity feared exposing their religious/ideological identities.

Others were not minorities in terms of identity, but in terms of specific beliefs and behaviors. In particular, one participant maintained her Christian faith, but came to a less absolutist and dogmatic expression of her faith than her friends, while another participant redefined his views on "moral" behavior in such a way that differentiated his views from his parents' conservative perspectives on morality. Though self-concealment provided a protective barrier, participants struggled with the fragmentation that followed from representations of the self that were incomplete and seemingly inauthentic.

In moving toward resolution of the contrasting concealed/revealed selves, participants found themselves at a crossroads. Pictorially, one participant depicted the crossroads in a photograph of an intersection that illustrated the choice to follow the road to the left or to the right – toward self-revelation or continued self-concealment. Another participant expressed her intentions to veer toward self-revelation in the future: "I have been asked on campus about my religion before, and I lied. I refuse to do that again."

The Self/The Other. Whereas the self-concealment/self-revelation contrast involved internal tensions between authentic and false depictions of self, the self/other contrast reflected participants' struggle to reconcile disconnections between the individual and his or her external environment. In seeking to identify with the "other" in community or relational contexts, participants recognized the ways in which they were different from and, thereby, incompatible with others to varying degrees.

Illustrating this dynamic, one participant described her ongoing search for spiritual community: her lesbian identity made it difficult to find acceptance within her particular religious denomination, but her religious denominational identity made it difficult to identify with a church expressly intended to serve the LGBT community. One neo-pagan participant felt at odds with the Christian ethos permeating her university and the surrounding local community. Likewise, the small pagan community to which she belonged was mainly comprised of older adults, instead of her peers. In short, finding space for spiritual connection and community was complicated by the contrast between self and others.

The Good/The Bad. The third dimension of contrast that defined the meaning of spiritual struggle in the lives of participants was in their perception of the simultaneous existence of “evil and ugliness in the world, but...also beauty and goodness.” One participant noted, “Life is so complex, but the complexity is what makes it amazingly amazing and amazingly difficult.” Another participant understood the contrast in terms of the challenging choices she faced to do the “right thing” rather than “the easy thing.”

Several of participants’ photographs illustrated the dual presence of “good” and “bad” in their immediate experience and in the world more generally. In one photograph, a red bird is depicted on a barren tree branch on a gray morning shrouded by clouds. The participant who took the photograph explained that the red bird is a symbol of hope and God’s presence when life is dark and uncertain.

Several students observed that such contrasting elements in nature enabled them to appreciate the “naturalness” of their spiritual struggles: “I view spiritual struggles and doubts as a necessary and inevitable part of life, particularly spiritual life...these struggles are natural and necessary, but also painful and challenging.”

SUPPORTING STUDENTS’ STRUGGLES: IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

As a whole, the findings from these two studies suggest several implications for higher education. First, it’s evident that struggles of a spiritual nature are a reality for college students. The spiritual realm and the deeper life questions it brings to light *do* play a role in the young adult journey, making attention to these issues on the part of practitioners, administrators, and faculty a clear necessity. Indeed, there are critical implications of struggling spiritually that are intimately tied to students’ sense of well-being and adjustment to the adult world. Failure to recognize the seriousness of these facets of students’ lives is to leave them quite alone on their quest. Thus, the initial step for us as educators is to take note of and seek to appreciate the varieties and implications of spiritual struggle.

Second, the findings from these studies lead those of us in the higher education arena to ask difficult questions regarding our role in supporting students whose lives are complicated by existential dilemmas. The fact that the quantitative findings point to poorer outcomes for students who struggle spiritually may implicate the college

environment as a site that is not entirely conducive to resolving spiritual struggles. Are students lacking resources in college, and as a result becoming chronically “stuck” in the midst of their struggle? Pargament (2008) suggests that chronic struggling is inexorably linked to declines in physical and mental health. As such, interventions to curb prolonged struggling are in order.

Our first response to a student who seeks guidance or mentorship in the midst of spiritual difficulty should be to *communicate legitimacy*. Students need reassurance that their struggles are a justified and legitimate part of their developmental process. So often these personal battles are waged alone, divorced from daily routines, classes, and work schedules. For fear of being misunderstood or stigmatized, students may attempt to conceal their troubled feelings – a practice that may overwhelm them even more.

Regrettably, the pain of struggling may be amplified in environments that either refuse to acknowledge the existence of struggles or that call for premature and unsatisfactory resolutions to struggling for the sake of maintaining commitment to one’s faith tradition. Ironically, students may experience these types of environments in both secular college contexts (which may be guilty of the former) *and* in devoutly religious college cultures or subcultures (which may be guilty of the latter).

As mentors, counselors, and educators, we can be supportive by listening, conceding the significance of struggles, and providing space for contemplation. Establishing a climate that validates and encourages self-expression begins with willingness on our part to be candid and open about our own struggles while we invite students to share theirs. An openness to existential and spiritual concerns should exist more globally across the campus – in residence life, in counseling and student health centers, and in advising relationships that students formulate with faculty and mentors, just to name a few examples – so that students do not have to artificially compartmentalize their struggle from other aspects of their lives.

Surely, there is a delicate balance between support and interference – a necessary tension in allowing the struggle to persist and providing encouragement without pushing for resolution. In the end, students must actively seek their own answers and come to accept that which is unanswerable. While they do that, we can make available the “hearth” Parks (2000) illustrates so vividly – a place to find solace and reflective pause in times of shipwreck and storm.

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