

U N T A P P E D A N C H O R

A Monograph Exploring the Role of Spirituality in the Lives of Foster Youth

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It is not the case that these young people reject spirituality. Rather, they are interested; some searching quietly and others more intensely for meaning and hope and yearning for relationships that are “real.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Introduction–Purpose and Scope + Paul DiLorenzo	1–3
Focus Group Summary + Dr. Vivian Nix-Early	3–5
New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services + Melanie Wilson	6–8
Fostering Spiritual Development + Sue Badeau	9–12
Literature Review	12–14
Conclusion & Next Steps	15
Focus Group Protocol	16
Workgroup Participants	17

“ABOUT A THIRD OF MY CASES are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. It seems to me that this can be defined as the general neurosis of our times.”
Carl Jung- Modern Man in Search of a Soul

INTRODUCTION- PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT
PAUL DiLORENZO

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN recently about the challenges facing young people who are transitioning out of the foster care system. There is significant documentation highlighting the poor outcomes facing many of these youth as they prepare for their adult lives. They experience significant educational problems, chronic health care concerns, a lack of permanent housing, and teen pregnancies in disproportionate numbers. Often, one problem leads to another, increasing the likelihood of a downward spiral. The prospects for adult success dim quickly; for some young people, the cycles of despair and family disruption continue on to the next generation.

For the past two decades, child welfare professionals have utilized an asset-building model of service delivery with this population. The emphasis has been on enhancing life skills and independent-living capacity, as well as engaging youth in more active partnerships. Modest but steady increases of federal and state funding as well as private, philanthropic dollars have helped to create a fairly impressive set of services for young people preparing to exit the foster care system. Still, in spite of their best efforts, many agencies find themselves frustrated with the inconsistent results.

In the beginning of 2004, with a small grant from the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, co-investigators Vivian Nix-Early, Ph.D. and Paul DiLorenzo, ACSW, MLSP created a project to examine the spiritual lives of youth in foster care. The authors wanted to know how important spirituality was in the lives of these young people and to what extent the professional helping system paid any attention to it. The emphasis was on young people 16 years of age and over preparing to exit the child welfare system. Dr. Nix- Early, psychologist and Dean of

the Campolo School for Social Change at Eastern University-Philadelphia and Paul DiLorenzo, a consultant in the areas of child welfare and youth development, along with several colleagues, believed that the failure being experienced by a number of these young people was a combination of several concurrent factors. Included among them was the fact many of these youth found themselves at a spiritual dead-end at an early age. It was this factor that appeared to be the least examined by the field, and yet one with great potential to influence a young person's management of life's routine tasks and its inevitable challenges. For young people who might be pre-disposed to addictive diseases or mental health problems (with all of the incumbent problems related to despair, dishonesty and family dissolution), this spiritual void diminishes their capacity for resilience.

In developing the project, the investigators became aware of a similar project being conducted by the New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services (NEN). As a part of their work, the NEN has examined youth development programs around the country that have utilized spiritually-oriented activities as a part of their work. (See article by Melanie Wilson in this monograph.) The array of services offered across these programs is diverse and, in many cases, there is credible information that supports the effectiveness of these spiritual activities. The authors worked closely with the NEN expecting that each of the projects could benefit from the other's findings.

With a grant from the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and in-kind support from Eastern University's Campolo School, the investigators and their Philadelphia colleagues articulated three purposes for the project:

1. To explore what difference spirituality and faith make in the lives of foster youth. How are faith and spirituality helpful? How do they relate to the natural developmental tasks of adolescence? How do they enhance the resilience of foster youth and their chances for success upon transition to independence?
2. To explore the existence and importance of spiritual development activities as a part of the caseworker's "tool kit."
3. To develop a set of guidelines for working with foster youth on issues related to spiritual development and religious exploration.

Over the course of six months, the team of part-time investigators, graduate interns, and volunteers accomplished the following tasks:

1. Completed a brief literature and best practices search;
2. Consulted with the project at the NEN and other similar research projects across the country;
3. Formed a local work group to explore the topic;
4. Conducted six focus groups, some with diverse populations and some client specific populations, e.g., gay youth, teen parents;
5. Facilitated a roundtable on the topic of spirituality in the lives of foster youth attended by approximately 50 professionals serving in a variety of roles within human services – artists, educators, psychologists, social workers, administrators and clergy;
5. Formulated preliminary observations about the role spirituality plays in the lives of young people transitioning from foster care;
6. Formulated preliminary observations about the implications for caseworker and supervisor training.

DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

DISTINGUISHING THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY from religion was a constant and integral part of the project. The social work profession in particular has always been skittish about any service delivery strategies that are guided by a specific religious belief or faith structure. There is not much public discussion regarding the broader role that spirituality plays in the lives of clients. This project has not been immune from those concerns.

Further complicating the work on this project was the current conversation about the role of faith-based organizations within the social service arena. It was not always clear how or why people made an association between the project and the efforts by the administration in Washington, DC. Nonetheless, many people saw this project as a way to build an argument for or against the role of faith-based organizations in social services. This project to examine the spiritual lives of foster youth was not intended to make the case either way. There was no specific religious or denominational agenda as a part of the original concept, or as a part of the ongoing work.

The investigators and the assembled work group examined several definitions of spirituality, all of which were distinguished from religion. They spoke with professionals around the country who have already explored this issue. In the end, the investigators applied that best thinking to the specific population of young people who were at the center of this project. **Spirituality was defined as one or all of the following: having a belief in a higher power; developing the capacity to form meaningful**

relationships; developing a moral compass; enhancing one's personal capacity one for going forward in spite of major challenges (overcoming); affiliating one's self with a set of rituals and beliefs that take the young person out of his or her daily routine; and possessing a personal hope for the future. It includes the ability of a person to achieve another level of intimacy, contemplate ways to improve one's self and to think about the long-term implications of one's behavior and actions.

The work group confirmed the conclusion of other investigators that this topic could have significant implications for both the young people and the professionals who were in a position to help support their transition to independent living. The study involved six months of observations and conversations with youth and the adults working with them. This yielded a number of important conclusions about logical next steps for staff training and professional support for transitioning youth. First, it highlighted the absolute necessity for all children to have permanent relationships that are caring and affirming, and that, in turn, provide youth with a spiritual foundation. In the child welfare arena, the work is ultimately about safety and permanency of family ties. Children who are under assault and who are then cut loose from their families of origin are especially vulnerable to losing their spirit, their empathy, and their hope for the future. Further, the priority of permanency should not stop when youth reach a certain age. Young children, adolescents, and teens all need family connections to help them maintain a spiritual core. Second, the investigators concluded that addressing the spiritual growth of young people in foster care should be an intentional process. This will require staff to consider the delicate issues related to separating denominational beliefs from this broader life process. We realize that public and private child welfare agencies cannot be fully responsible for creating spiritual venues for children and youth. Providing access to spiritual outlets for young people is a responsibility that should be shared by community organizations, foster parents, cultural, and faith-based organizations. However, the investigators agreed with many of the young people and professionals who were interviewed about the need to prepare front-line staff and their supervisors more effectively on this issue. The responsibility to “create space” for youth who wish to look beyond themselves for personal meaning, security and strength is not one to be taken lightly; nor should it be done by those unprepared to support youth in their personal spiritual journeys.

WHAT FOLLOWS is a summary of the observations from the young people who participated in one of six focus groups; highlights of NEN's work by lead investigator Melanie Wilson; suggestions on the importance of fostering spiritual development from researcher and foster and adoptive parent, Sue Badeau; and a literature and best practices review.

FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY: WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THEIR LIVES.

DR. VIVIAN NIX-EARLY¹

SIXTY-SEVEN YOUTH ranging in age from 11 to 21 years from six different agencies (see listing on page 5) participated in the project's focus groups. Of the sixty-seven, 46 were male and 21 female; 30 were Sudanese, 2 were Euro-American and 35 were African-American. The groups served as the primary source of initial data for understanding 1) how youth transitioning from foster care defined spirituality, 2) how and whether spirituality was an important part of their daily lives, 3) whether or not their spirituality was useful in tough times and for problem-solving, 4) how they express their spirituality, and 5) how best to integrate spiritual development into the foster care experience.

While we defined spirituality broadly for this project (i.e., distinguishing it from religion or specific denominational affiliations and practices), we were curious about whether the youth would define it. We developed questions that would explore components of spirituality; we asked about the practice of rituals, how they learned right from wrong, what motivates or inspires them. These were in addition to direct questions about spirituality. (See the full protocol on page 16.)

Most of the young people had experiences of traditional religion (mostly Christian) in their younger years and identified these experiences as part of their spirituality. A significant number considered these early experiences as mostly positive. However, with the exception of one group (the Sudanese group referred to as the "Lost Boys from Sudan"), most of the young people questioned the value of traditional faith practices for their lives currently; the gay/lesbian youth held some contempt for organized or traditional religions that reject them. That most of the youth find early religious practice irrelevant at this point

in their lives is not unexpected since this age period is developmentally the time when young people begin to question their childhood faith and beliefs. However, this means it is also the time when adults with a mature spirituality and an open approach can be most helpful to them. Several of the focus group participants echoed resentment over forced to participation in a particular brand of spiritual expression: "Some families make you go to church, so if you have been in many foster families, you have been involved in many different religions... Foster families should ask if you want to go to church, they shouldn't make you go" (CSS). When asked about the ways foster care agencies (and foster families) could address spirituality, one group responded, "create a website with information... have forums on spirituality, group meetings in which you bring in different spiritual leaders...offer counseling and give advice" (TCS). Another group said that if a spiritual component was added to the group home, they would want to have someone available to talk to at their leisure instead of mandatory meditation services; or group homes might vary the leadership of such services—having a minister come, then a priest, etc. (SV). These responses are in keeping with a stage of development calling for critical examination and questioning of prior held beliefs, and should guide the manner in which spirituality is introduced and planned.

Notwithstanding their response to childhood and organized religions, most of the youth considered themselves as possessing at least a moderate degree of spirituality and several of them said they do go to church. They defined spirituality as we did – broadly – and included traditional items like going to church and praying as well as giving to others, especially those who have wronged you (forgiveness); belief in a higher power; knowing right from wrong; faith in yourself; and having morals. For us and for the group of foster care professionals that advised the project, spirituality implies belief in a higher power, developing the capacity to form relationships, developing a moral compass, enhancing the personal capacity one has for going forward in spite of major challenges (overcoming), affiliating one's self with a set of rituals or beliefs that take the person out of his or her daily routine, and possessing a personal hope for the future. Thus, there appears to be a high degree of consistency between our (adult) and their (young adult) understanding of spirituality. There was also agreement with how we believe spirituality is expressed.

¹Special thanks to Stephanie Scott for her assistance in summarizing the focus group data in this article.

There was a consensus among one group that faith is expressed through prayer (CSS). However, other groups included things that obviously reflect their recognition of an ordered and wondrous universe influenced by an intelligence beyond ourselves – things like giving birth and falling in love. Others described as spiritual activities like walking the same route every day – a ritual that allows time to think, reflect, and be peaceful; or doing something you love (e.g., writing); following your heart; gaining and then losing something important; rites of passage like moving out and living on your own.

The one activity mentioned by just about every group as inherently spiritual was engaging in the arts or the act of creating something (music, poetry, drawing). Several students felt that artistic activities provided an important outlet for their emotions – especially for dispelling fears and anger. Both Paul and I work with an arts education and social service nonprofit organization called BuildaBridge International (BI). This organization uses the arts as an intervention to bring about holistic development in youth. BI's direct service and research activities have raised awareness of the power of the arts to foster spiritual development. For one agency, an outgrowth of the focus groups is an open arts studio pilot project developed by BuildaBridge to assist their effort to foster spiritual and emotional development. The arts are unique in their ability to touch our souls and spirits – the intangible aspects of humanity. As well, the act of creating mimics the God or Creator of every faith tradition. Arts-integrated experiences therefore provide an excellent starting point for intentional attention to the spiritual development of young people in our care.

Whatever the method used for such development, it must also address the connection between spirituality and daily living, healthy relationships, and problem solving. According to the responses from our focus group youth, spirituality is not currently a strong resource in their adult lives. In a crisis, they “sleep, write, talk to friends, smoke marijuana, work, or talk to someone wise.” Some say they do pray, get therapy, and seek help from parents or someone they trust. Few say they experience trusting and positive relationships on a consistent basis. Few report helpful relationships with their social workers and hardly mentioned them as people who cared about them. One teen mother said that she would even go back to her baby's father, with whom she had much trouble in the past, before seeking out foster home staff. The teen mothers' talk about their babies was the most significant “attachment”

discussion among all focus groups; a recurring theme was the fact that their children seemed to be their primary motivation and inspiration in life. Payday, bills, jobs, and school are things that youth in other groups say motivate them to get up each morning – rather than a deeper sense of their special purposes for living or anticipation and hope of a fulfilling future.

The young people's responses to how they learned right from wrong are equally telling about the minimal degree of lasting influence spirituality seems to have had in their lives. Most pointed to trial and error experience, American culture, the media, friends, siblings, and parents. It is not the case that these young people reject spirituality. Rather, they are interested; some searching quietly and others more intensely for meaning and hope and yearning for relationships that are “real.”

In contrast to the other focus groups, a unique picture of the value and integration of spirituality is given by the Sudanese young people who live in foster homes throughout the Philadelphia region. Their situation gives us valuable insight into an ideal context within which issues of spirituality might be intentionally addressed and fostered to assist youth in transition. The key is an integrated, holistic, relational approach. As one of their foster care agency administrators said of the Sudanese youth, “they gained a family structure instead of losing one.” Why is their spirituality a focus for their monthly gatherings? Why do they seem to have hope and optimism for the future? Their agency administrator believes that it has something to do with how they banded together as a family, taking care of each other while roaming homeless around their country. The people that picked them up in a refugee camp were religious, and their kindness and acceptance of “strangers” are inextricably connected to their faith imperative. Thus, spirituality and faith are now a part of the young people's life and character.

The young Sudanese's perceptions are that God is not black or white, male or female. Thinking of God as one race or gender leads to conflict. “I look in the mirror and I see God because I am in his image.” God is viewed as an all powerful energy or spirit. They pray regularly as well as sing hymns in their native language. Foster parents and mentors have made denominational religion available to them but no one is forced to go to church. Support from the community, their social workers and others has been significant and has had a profound impact on them. Christianity became an important part of their lives while they were in the refugee camps. When they arrived here, their faith commitment continued because social service

and relief workers made a conscious effort to support it. Their religion, faith, and cultural activities seem to be connected. Several of the youth commented that it would be helpful to have a spiritual leader and counselor of Sudanese background since they would understand their values. Currently, the young people “self-lead” the prayer service, the singing and the drumming activities at the church. Learning right from wrong is based in part on their reading of the Bible and their elders. Older youth expressed concern that the younger people were at risk of losing their value base to the temptations of the “street.” They have an amazing sense of community and resiliency, as well as a great deal of hope for the future. They believe that their future will be brighter though not trouble free. Many good things have happened for them as a result of strong community support and relationships with formal and informal helpers.

Their story reinforces what we already know. The question is, “how can we be intentional about structuring some aspects of their (the Sudanese) naturally occurring situation to support the positive development of all youth transitioning from foster care?” The salient elements of an intentional effort would seem to include the following:

- ✦ Creating a sense of shared responsibility for others in the group. (Other-directedness is an essential component of every faith tradition; each person gains strength from the group’s success. It fosters meaningful connectedness.)
- ✦ Forming communities around youth dealing with and having to solve the same kind of issue (common plight/overcoming together).
- ✦ Making an intentional effort to support, not force emerging spiritual expression (mentoring/coaching vs. authoritarian approach).
- ✦ Providing information about, exposure to, and opportunities to participate in a range of spiritual activities.
- ✦ Connecting spiritual leaders with backgrounds and cultural origins similar to those of youth (identity).
- ✦ Encouraging youth to develop their own faith/spirituality rituals and celebrations, and practice them regularly.
- ✦ Connecting spirituality with other positive cultural activities as identified by young people themselves.
- ✦ Ensuring that faith principles are visibly connected with and applied to real life situations (integration).
- ✦ Embracing an inclusive image of God, and helping students find the reflection of God’s character in them.

- ✦ Identifying and fostering formal and informal helper resources.
- ✦ Integrating the arts.

**PHILADELPHIA AGENCIES PROVIDING YOUTH FOR
FOCUS GROUPS:**

Catholic Social Services (CSS), 1 group of young men, all African American

The Attic Youth Center (AT), 1 group of gay and lesbian youth, one Anglo-American, remainder were African American

Lutheran Children and Family Services (LCFS), 1 group of young Sudanese (all from Sudan)

St. Vincent’s Group Home (SV), 1 group of teen mothers one Anglo-American, remainder were African American

Bethana (Be), 1 mixed group of young men and women, all African-American

Tabor Children’s Services (TCS), 1 mixed group of young men and women, all African-American



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Several students felt that
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NEW ENGLAND NETWORK FOR CHILD, YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES

BY MELANIE WILSON, MSW

DEPENDING ON WHO YOU TALK TO, spirituality and spiritual interventions are either an untapped resource of enormous potential benefit to youth in social service programs or an issue best left to individuals and families. Feelings on the issue have, of course, become heightened since the federal government announced its intention to fund faith-based social service programs, and dialogue about the value of faith-based services can at times sound more like a heated argument.

Despite the many opinions swirling around the issue, there is plenty of room for a clear-eyed look at what researchers really know about the impact of spiritual beliefs and practices on children. New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services is currently completing its fourth year of work on the topic. Our latest study, *A Part of You So Deep: What Vulnerable Adolescents Have to Say About Spirituality*, includes interviews with more than 60 youth and survey results from an additional 91. The purpose of the project was to gain greater understanding of adolescents' spiritual histories and interests, with an eye toward informing the field about what young clients say they want and need. What did we learn? Before we answer that, let's look at what we already knew.

The Research on Youth & Spirituality

DEVELOPING A SET OF SPIRITUAL BELIEFS, whether those beliefs are religious or secular, is one of the central developmental tasks of adolescence. Having a sense of spirituality means understanding one's place in the universe and feeling meaningfully connected to other people and things. It means feeling oriented in a continuum of belief or practice that links past generations to present and future ones. Adolescents with a personal spirituality know they are a link in an unbroken chain; they have faith that things will generally turn out well for them (if not immediately, then eventually).

Spiritual involvement has certain demonstrable positive effects on youth. With very few exceptions, studies consistently demonstrate positive associations between religion or spirituality and adolescent well-being. The effect of religion has been particularly well-studied. In a review of research on the topic between 1992 and 1996, Weaver et al. (2000) found religious involvement was associated with lower levels of depression, suicide, drug and alcohol

abuse, and delinquent behaviors, as well as with later onset of sexual activity.

Research has also shown that the majority of American adolescents see spirituality, and particularly religious experience, as a significant factor in their lives. The majority of American teenagers (95 percent) believe in God or a universal spirit, and 42 percent of adolescents say they pray alone "frequently." Somewhat surprisingly, 27 percent of teens report that religious faith is more important to them than it is to their parents and that they are more likely to attend religious services than adults (Gallup and Bezilla, 1992).

Although research examining the relationship between non-religious spirituality and adolescent well-being is still emerging, researchers have found that some activities – yoga, meditation, guided visualization, and martial arts, for instance – are associated with positive developmental outcomes among adolescents, particularly improvements in attitude, behavior, and depression (Briscoe, 1990 and Zipkin, 1985). Indeed, though secular spirituality has been only sketchily explored, it is of particular interest to those who work with adolescents; teenagers themselves tend to gravitate toward it and away from organized religion as they grow older (Benson, 1997). (For full citations, contact the author.)

While we have learned a good deal about religion and a bit about secular spirituality, it is important to acknowledge what we don't yet know. It is one thing, for instance, to demonstrate statistically that children who are actively involved in religion are more likely to avoid problems such as delinquency, drug use, and pregnancy in adolescence. It is another thing altogether to say that religion itself prevented those problems from occurring. Other factors associated with religion may have independent effects on youth. For instance, youth who are religious may not be affected by religious messages per se, but by the positive attention of adults and involvement in peer activities that participation in organized religion offers. It may be that youth who are religious tend toward social conformity, and thus would be unlikely to engage in anti-social or self-destructive behaviors in any case. It is worth reminding ourselves that causal relationships are easily assumed but almost impossible to prove. Hence no brand of spirituality – religious or otherwise – should be considered a programmatic cure-all for youth, especially for those who haven't grown up with it or are uninterested in pursuing it.

WHAT YOUTH SAY ABOUT SPIRITUALITY

IN 2002, IN AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND the scope of spiritual and religious work underway with adolescent clients, NEN interviewed 191 randomly selected youth-serving agencies throughout the United States. Our findings, reported in *Practice Unbound: A Study of Secular Spiritual and Religious Activities in Work with Adolescents*, indicated that a majority of youth-serving agencies offer some sort of spiritual opportunity to clients, and that most wanted to do more in the future. We recognized, though, that we also needed to know what youth themselves had to say about spirituality – about what it means to them, how they have experienced it in the past and what kind of spiritual activities they are interested in exploring. Those are the questions we asked the youth in our focus groups, and, in more cursory fashion, the 91 additional adolescents who filled out surveys at two large conferences. (One conference, in Boston, was for foster youth, while the other, in Washington, was primarily for non-system youth and service providers.)

“I don’t think you need to go to church to be religious. You don’t have to go and talk to a priest. You can go to your room and just lie there and just talk, cause [GOD] hears you no matter what. It can just be talking in your mind, talking to yourself. He hears everything you’re saying.”

The focus groups were located in both urban and suburban settings and included community youth centers, residential transitional living programs, and an enhanced GED program. One group consisted mostly of youth who identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or transgender; one almost exclusively of Hispanic teen mothers; and one mostly of second- and third-generation Asian youth. Some of the groups included youth in foster care, and one included youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The youth ranged from age 14 to 22, with a mean age of 18. While not a random sampling of youth, we believe the mix is diverse enough to be generally representative of adolescents involved with youth-serving agencies.

The study’s findings illustrated that adolescents are indeed interested – sometimes deeply so – in spiritual issues,

though their preferred spiritual expression varies. Of the 149 youth we surveyed in the groups and at the conferences, 23 percent considered themselves “religious” (by their own definition), and 43 percent “somewhat religious.” Fourteen percent expressed interest in attending a prayer group, 26 percent in attending church, and 23 percent in discussing religion with an adult. In the focus groups, a few teenagers credited religion with keeping them on track or even saving them from disaster. One girl in a Connecticut transitional living program said her baptism in a river at age 15 had helped her “settle down” and stop doing “crazy things.” “I changed a lot with going to church and believing that [GOD] was right there,” she said. “For me, He is like my second father. He is in front of me, behind me, next to me, everywhere I am.”

Not surprisingly, however, many of the adolescents were either indifferent to organized religion or hostile toward it. Many seized on the hypocrisy of religious leaders and the perceived hollowness of church rules. This comment, from a girl in Vermont, was typical: “I believe [religion is] something that someone made up one day. I believe that yeah, there might be someone out there who once lived and did great things – I’m not doubting that, but just telling me every day of my life that some guy, or some thing, made the Earth out of all the planets to be the one to live on and have all of us here, just – I don’t know. I’ve never seen him, I’ve never had him come and talk to me.” Others accepted the idea of God, but had come to reject the importance of religious institutions and the clergy. (Indeed, very few youth in our groups, even those who considered themselves religious, said they would turn to clergy for help or advice.) Said a teen mother in Rhode Island: “I don’t think you need to go to church to be religious. You don’t have to go and talk to a priest. You can go to your room and just lie there and just talk, cause [God] hears you no matter what. It can just be talking in your mind, talking to yourself. He hears everything you’re saying.” And still other teenagers were simply conflicted, hanging onto the remnants of their faith, but just barely. One Asian youth clung to his Catholicism as a matter of “pride,” but also saw it, and its moral strictures, as a distinct disadvantage: “Every time there’s an opportunity, my religion is holding me back from succeeding in life, where I should be at,” he said. “You could say business-wise, school-wise, just making a living on the street, it holds you back.”

A few teenagers described their search for a religion that made sense to them, and expressed an almost poignant

desire to belong to a community of believers. “I don’t have a faith,” said one 14-year-old girl in Maine whose spiritual quest had taken her through the Bible and the Koran, and through visits to several churches. “I wish I did; I’m looking for that, but I just don’t have it right now.”

“Spirituality” as a concept distinct from “religion” was attractive to the majority of youth in our study. Of the 149 adolescents who were surveyed and/or who took part in groups, 43 percent considered themselves “spiritual” (again by their own definition) and 41 percent “somewhat spiritual.” Furthermore, 90 percent of youth said that a person could be spiritual without being religious – a finding that underscores research showing that while interest in organized religion may dwindle during adolescence, interest in spirituality itself does not. When we asked youth to check activities they would like to try, 32 percent were interested in meditation, 30 percent in guided visualization, 39 percent in yoga, 50 percent in martial arts and 55 percent in arts, drawing and painting. Twenty-nine percent said they would sit through a class or group on spiritual education, and 28 percent said they would like to try drumming or chanting.

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Though the adolescents in general expressed a strong interest in the topic, many teens clearly had found little structured opportunity for developing a personal spirituality. Perhaps for that reason, they had learned to find the spiritual significance in small, daily activities. In one focus group exercise, we asked youth to write lists of things they had done in their lives that they considered to be spiritual in nature. We then asked them to asterisk the activities that they actually found helpful. The lists make fascinating reading, and may ultimately help youth-service providers offer, or at least provide a spiritual frame for many activities that are already routine. Many of the lists referred to friendships, many to giving birth, some to sports, some to caring for others. Most of them mentioned nature. For her list, one teenager in Vermont wrote: “*music, listen-

ing to silence, taking walks, *dreaming, writing, watching fire, looking at the sky, swimming, singing, taking a bath, *snowboarding, *poetry.”

SPIRITUALITY IN YOUTH SERVICES

A THIRD STUDY ON SPIRITUALITY, conducted by ANEN in partnership with the National Resource Center for Youth Services, is due to be published in winter 2004. Tentatively titled *Spirituality in Youth Services*, it will describe promising spiritual practices – again both religious and secular – in seven agencies. The agencies are diverse geographically and culturally, and were chosen for study because their spirituality work is well-established and, in most key ways, replicable. One agency, In-Care Network in Billings, Montana, works almost entirely with Native American youth and heavily emphasizes rites of passage rituals and ceremonies. Another agency, Holy Cross Children’s Services in Clinton, Michigan, takes a traditional Christian approach but, unlike the vast majority of faith-based agencies, has conducted in-house research showing that the religious activities – in this case, the presence of chaplains – makes a real difference for clients, increasing, for instance, the likelihood that they will make a planned exit from the program and that they will be living at home (rather than in another program or in jail) 12 months later. Other agencies in the study rely on a mix of religious, Native and secular practices, or, in one case, on the extensive use of peace circles. The study will describe and reprint, when possible, the agencies’ spiritual assessments, spiritual treatment protocols, and curricula, and provide contacts and resources for youth organizations interested in investigating spiritual programming. The study does not seek to endorse any particular spiritual approach, but to illustrate what various approaches can look like when implemented with youth in an agency setting.



“Spirituality” as a concept distinct from “religion” was attractive to the majority of youth in our study.

FOSTERING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT: TEN REASONS WHY

BY: SUE BADEAU

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE need safe, stable, and healing families in within which every aspect of their development and well-being is nurtured, encouraged, and honored.

Foster care agencies routinely provide instruction and guidance through manuals, classes, home-visits, and support groups for foster parents related to meeting children's physical, medical, social, emotional, and educational needs. I have never known a foster parent who would neglect to provide nutritional meals and snacks, comfortable, seasonally-appropriate clothing, help with homework, and attention to school attendance, a safe and quiet sleeping environment, opportunities for recreation, and social interaction, and access to medical care for their foster child.

However, attending to children's spiritual needs is frequently given less attention. Foster parent handbooks typically include a sentence or two like the following example:

RELIGION - Opportunity for child's spiritual development is encouraged. If the foster child indicates a preference for a particular denomination, the foster parent should make arrangements for the child to attend a church of that faith.

Foster parents are typically given little guidance about their role as spiritual mentors to the children in their care. A child's religion may or may not be considered as part of their placement needs. And the difference between religion and spiritual development is rarely found on foster parent training agendas.

Foster parents may not understand the importance of spiritual development in children's lives, or they may be uncertain about the role they can play. Reluctant to be seen as indoctrinating a child in their own religious or spiritual values, they may end up offering the child none at all.

In my experience as a foster parent and child welfare professional, I have come to believe that attention to children's spiritual development is as important, if not more so, as attention to their physical health and education. While in recent years I have seen suitcases become popular as symbols for children in foster care (better to

move from home to home with your belongings in a suitcase than a garbage bag), I would prefer to see two other symbols rise to the forefront – anchors and compasses. Helping children grow and develop spiritually can provide them with both an anchor to help keep them safe and stable during the storms they experience during and after foster care, as well as a compass to guide them towards a future characterized by stability, hope, and fulfillment of dreams.

WHY IS SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT IN THE LIFE OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE?

SPIRITUALITY MAY OR MAY NOT BE ROOTED in religious experience. Far from being a uniquely personal experience, spirituality is frequently not recognized until it is shared and expressed in the context of community – whether communities of faith, or of people with shared interests in particular activities likely to produce spiritual awareness (hiking, yoga, poetry-reading, etc).

I believe spiritual development is of particular value to children in foster care for the following ten reasons:

BUILDS IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

Robert Coles (1990) acknowledges that all children reach a stage where they will begin to ask the age-old questions “where do we come from?” and “who am I?” Fostering spiritual curiosity and responding to the spiritually-oriented questions of young people aides in both identity-development and an underlying sense of value for one's own self – regardless of what one has experienced in life. Both spiritual engagement and religious involvement typically include an empowering message of personal value and worth.

SUPPORTS A SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONNECTION

The National Study of Youth and Religion (1996) found that 12-14 year old youth involved in religious activities are more likely to enjoy stronger, positive relationships. Youth in foster care may feel isolated, alienated, estranged, and disconnected from the people and relationships that have been important in their lives. Spiritual development and involvement in communities of faith can be an anchor that provides a sense of belonging and connection for a young person even when moving about in foster care.

LINKS TO A HISTORY, A PAST

The rich traditions and histories that spiritual and faith communities offer can help a child whose past has been disrupted, chaotic, or confusing to have a sense

of being part of the whole history of the human family, of belonging to a larger whole than just the sum of the parts he or she has been acquainted with in early life experiences.

CONNECTS TO THE FUTURE

One of the most significant and important elements of a rich and active spiritual or faith life is the element of hope. Spirituality provides a young person with a genuine sense of hope, promise, and belief in a future that can be better than the difficulties of the present.

LEGITIMIZES GRIEF

All children in foster care have experienced profound losses – at the very least, the temporary loss of their parents in their daily lives, as well as siblings, extended family, foster families, friends, neighbors, and others. However, since these parents and others are in most cases still living, there is not the same opportunity to express grief that one would have when faced with a death. Tuning into the spiritual core allows the young person to legitimize, experience, and safely express the sadness and grief that are often part of foster care experience.

OFFERS A SENSE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

While all young people are likely to challenge themselves with questions of purpose and meaning in their lives, Larson & Brendtro (2000) point out that, “youth whose lives are in turmoil are more likely to wrestle with deeply spiritual questions such as ‘Why was I born?’ and ‘What is the reason for living?’” Spiritual exploration and connection to a community of faith can provide a framework for beginning to answer these questions in a way that makes sense. Again, although this is true for all young people, it is my view that it is even more important for young people who have experienced the traumas and turmoil that lead to and/or characterize foster care experiences.

PROVIDES A SAFE, STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITY TO MARK MAJOR LIFE PASSAGES

I once met a fifteen year old girl who had never had a birthday party – she had been moved so many times in foster care and no one had stopped to celebrate her birthday. Unfortunately, this is not atypical for children in foster care. The important life passages that we routinely acknowledge, honor, celebrate and, mark in family life are often missed, forgotten, or ignored. Once again, participation in a rich spiritual life and/or community of faith provides a place and opportunity for marking these special occasions.

CULTIVATES CAPACITY FOR SELF-ADVOCACY AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Many of the most successful foster youth I have known are those who have learned how to become self-advocates – insisting that their voice be heard by parents and foster parents, social workers, lawyers, judges, and others making decisions about their lives. Helping a young person to develop a well of spiritual strength provides them with a secure foundation from which to practice these self-advocacy skills.

PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIVING BACK

“Everyone needs to be needed” seems to be almost a cliché, and yet it is true – none of us can fully reach our own unique potential without the opportunity to feel needed, valued, or useful and without the opportunity to give as well as to receive. Yet, by its very nature, the child welfare system puts young people in the position of even greater dependency than most young people. While other youngsters depend on their families, youth in foster care must depend on systems staffed by changing faces of caseworkers, attorneys, judges, foster families, and others. Rarely is their need to be active participants in the life of the community a focus of case-planning! Participation in a community of faith or other spiritual activities can be one resource allowing youth to feel important, needed, and able to give back to others.

CULTIVATES RESILIENCE

In my mind, the number one most important reason to help youth in foster care develop spiritually is that spiritual strength cultivates resilience. Resilience is probably the single most important factor in whether or not a child who has experienced foster care will be able to move into a successful and satisfying adult life. Bernard (1995) states that resilience is manifested in having a sense of purpose and a belief in a bright future including spiritual connectedness. The “Resiliency Wheel” developed by Nan Henderson (1996) suggests six attributes of resilience: Caring and Support, High Expectations for Success, Opportunities for Meaningful Participation, Positive Bonds, Clear and Consistent Boundaries, and Life Skills. Her further work demonstrates how spiritual development contributes to all six of these attributes.

HOW CAN FOSTER PARENTS NURTURE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT?

SINCE ATTENTION TO THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT of youth is of critical importance, what can foster parents, in particular, do to nurture, encourage, and support spiritual development of the young people in their care?

Here are a few suggestions:

HONOR AND RESPECT THE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE/HERITAGE THE CHILD BRINGS WITH HIM TO YOUR HOME.

From legislation in Hawaii to lawsuits in Georgia, to cultural protocols for Muslim children in care in Niagara, New York, states and agencies are beginning to recognize the importance of paying attention to the religious identity a child brings with him into the foster care experience. An innovative program in Los Angeles, "Fostering Faith," is a collaboration of 57 churches and religious organizations dedicated to the cause of preserving religious identity and borne out of stories of Jewish children forced to eat non-kosher foods, Catholic children who miss out on First Communion, and Muslim children placed in homes with alcohol consumption.

Foster parents can and should ask about each child's religious and spiritual background and educate themselves in order to be culturally competent, sensitive, respectful, and genuine in their efforts to incorporate their child's spiritual and religious heritage into the foster family's home and life. They should seek "cultural guides," or mentors, from the specific faith community if a child from a tradition different from their own is placed in the home.

ENCOURAGE AND MODEL PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH.

National child welfare trainer, Deborah Hage, has identified a number of "non-religious" benefits to both parents and children of attendance at religious services – including benefit of music, positive messages, group participation, and a sense of being valued. Participation as a family in a community of faith can offer these benefits to a child even if the child professes no particular spiritual or religious affiliation.

EXPOSE CHILDREN TO A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES THAT ARE SPIRITUAL IN NATURE.

In *The Soul's Code*, James Hillman (1996) writes "Our task is to provide opportunities so children can discover their destiny and calling." Exposure to a wide range of activities that encourage spiritual questioning and reflection can assist in this process.

Remembering that many find spiritual nourishment outside of formal religion, some examples include deep personal connection with nature, music, art, yoga, and martial arts.

ENGAGE IN CEREMONIES AND RITUALS THAT EVOKE SPIRITUAL AWARENESS.

"Rituals and ceremonies facilitate passage through significant transitions and linkage with a larger community and common heritage" (Imber, Black and Roberts, 1992). Even small rituals of daily life can evoke spiritual awareness in children (and all of us!) Examples are listening to special music just before bed, or observing a moment of quiet reflection prior to eating a meal. Other types of rituals include planting a tree in honor of a person who has died, or setting an extra place at a table on a holiday to remember those family members not able to be present.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO LEARN FROM, NOT TO AVOID, PAIN.

Whether it is the physical pain associated with physical therapy, or the emotional pain associated with separation from parents or siblings, be present with a foster child as they experience the pain. Don't ignore it, don't deflect it, don't look for ways to avoid it – allow them and encourage them to embrace it and learn from it, while providing a safe and stable presence in their lives. Embracing and getting beyond pain is frequently the key to the door that opens to a well of spiritual strength.

POINT OUT BEAUTY, MYSTERY, MAGIC AND HOPE IN DAILY LIFE

Stop to smell the roses! Point out beauty, mystery, and magic in nature, music and art, human interactions – in short – *life*. Children who have had to focus on survival through difficult and traumatic circumstances may not have had the opportunity to enjoy nose kisses, or the smell of baking bread, the tickle of new grass on bare toes, or the haunting calls of night birds. Point out these moments and then allow time for silent reflection.

CREATE AND MAINTAIN A LIFEBOOK WITH AND FOR THE CHILD

Include mementos from religious activities in the child's lifebook – church bulletins, photos of a synagogue, the spiritual meaning of a name, etc.

ASK CHALLENGING QUESTIONS AND DISCUSS MORAL DILEMMAS

Kohlberg, the "father" of our knowledge of moral development, taught and believed that most moral development comes through social interaction; that the goal of moral education is to encourage individuals to develop to the next stage of moral reasoning. According to a youth development perspective on religion and spirituality, the appropriate role of concerned adults is to serve as a resource and facilitator of a process over which youth themselves have ultimate control (Ream and Witt 2003).

“If spiritual growth is to be nurtured in adolescents, it will be nurtured by adults who pose the right questions, listen to the answers, and act on what they hear” (NE-NET). The most important role foster parents can play is to stimulate a young person’s spiritual hunger by asking thought provoking questions, listening to the answers, and responding to the subsequent questions the young person will ask in return.

HELP CHILDREN TO ENVISION A FUTURE.

Children who have had to make day-to-day survival their focus are likely to draw a blank when asked what are their hopes and dreams for the future. Foster parents are uniquely situated to help young people begin to dream – think ahead, imagine a future filled with hope and possibilities. “It is important for families in problem-saturated situations to envision a better future through their efforts and for those whose hopes and dreams have been shattered to imagine new possibilities, and seize opportunities for invention, transformation, and growth” (Brendtro and Larson, 2000).

A fitting closing is a quote from John Seita, himself a former foster child and now a social worker, author and educator:

I personally challenge all of you to take the bold, brave steps to reclaim every child. My message to you is to use your hidden resources to summon courage, compassion, wisdom, strength, and tenacity so that all children of today may have a tomorrow. No longer should we expect children to navigate without a map, steer without a rudder, or seek without a friend.

Seeking, finding, nurturing and strengthening the spiritual core can become the map, the rudder, the anchor, the compass, that our children need and deserve.



LITERATURE REVIEW

PROMISING APPROACHES & RESOURCES

A CAREFUL SEARCH OF RELEVANT LITERATURE reveals few studies of programs for enhancing the spiritual lives of youth preparing to transition from the out-of-home care system. This does not necessarily imply the programs do not exist, but does speak to the level of topical interest. About 20,000 youth aged 16 and older make the transition from foster care to legal emancipation each year; our project sought to explore what difference spirituality and faith make in the lives of foster youth, why these elements are helpful, how they relate to the natural development tasks of adolescence, and how they enhance the resilience of foster youth and their chances for success upon transition to independence.

Spirituality, for the purposes of this project, is more broadly defined than religion or an affiliation with any specific denomination. However, it is implicit religion is included within the definition of spirituality. The term implies for us any or all of the following: belief in a higher power, developing a moral compass, enhancing the personal capacity one has for going forward in spite of major challenges (overcoming), affiliating oneself with a set of rituals or beliefs that take the person out of their daily routine, and processing a personal hope for the future. Because of the lack of substantial information on the spiritual lives of foster youth, we accounted for studies where the population had some similar characteristics. A study by Byron Johnson and Marc Siegel of the University of Pennsylvania’s Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society released findings that participation in religious activities lowers a teen’s likelihood of risk-filled behavior. After analyzing research on over 2000 young black males in poor areas of Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the study found that teens who attended church on a weekly basis had a significantly lower likelihood of participating in drug related crimes and non-drug-related crime and were 46% less likely to use drugs. Another study by University of Pennsylvania Fellow John Wallace, which looked at 4,000 high school seniors, found that those who considered religion very important in their lives were less likely to risk injury in ways that less religious peers often did, such as fighting and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The same finding applied to smoking, heavy drinking, and marijuana use.

special thanks to Ms. Joy Mackey for her assistance in reviewing the literature for this section

AS STATED EARLIER, for the purposes of this study, religion is not the only expression of spirituality. There are many other forms including rites of passage, music and the arts, symbolic expressions (i.e. paintings, sculpture, etc.), martial arts, oral and written literature, pilgrimages, and adventure/endurance experiences. The Balch Institute cites a case study entitled "Unyago" that chronicles an African-American rites of passage program in Philadelphia. The importance of rites of passage is that it develops a community process for considering what adulthood means and for welcoming young people to adult responsibilities and roles. It is a ceremonial expression that is usually considered a sacred journey from one place of understanding to another; it is a series of steps that includes the exploration of spirituality, politics, history, sexuality, personal finance, and interpersonal relationships. From our perspective, including a rites of passage element in the lives of youth transitioning from foster care could greatly heighten the success rate upon legal emancipation.

Kinark Child and Family Services offers outdoors experiences for high-need children and youth in Ontario, Canada. The program, called Weekend Quest, is for participants 8-16 years of age and from either the Children's Aid Society Foster Care System or other Children's Service agencies. Findings in the United States, Canada, and Australia show that adventure programs have a lasting positive impact on their participants. Students who participated in such programs showed significant improvement in their leadership skills, independence, and other attributes. Different formats of outdoor/environmental education can help youth develop new levels of maturity and confidence as well as practical skills and a different perspective on urban-based lifestyles. These are the types of outcomes desired for youth transitioning out of the foster care system and should be of special interest and importance for agencies operating from a strengths-based or asset-building perspective.

Much of the evidence concerning the benefit of arts programs has been anecdotal. However, in 1996 the Youth Arts Development Project conducted a study that revealed statistical evidence that arts programs enhance youth development. The findings of the controlled evaluations stated that at-risk youth given opportunities in the arts showed 1) increased ability to communicate effectively 2) improved ability to work on tasks from start to finish 3) improved attitudes toward school 4) decreased fre-

quency of delinquent behavior and court referrals. In their recent book (September 2003), *Taking it to the streets: Using the Arts to Transform Your Community*, authors Vivian Nix-Early and J. Nathan Corbitt, explore how churches, community agencies and leaders, educators, faith leaders, and individual artists are integrating the arts in education, human development and community development work. They summarize the decade of data now available on the positive effects involvement in the arts has had on holistic (spiritual, social, emotional, educational) youth development.

More broadly, recent studies have continued to show a positive connection between the expression of spirituality in various forms and the well being of youth. Below are abstracts of current research, literature and promising approaches in the areas considered by this project.

LITERATURE

Wilson, Melanie (2002). *Practice Unbound: A Study of Secular Spiritual and Religious Activities in Work with Adolescents* (Available from the New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services).

The author collected detailed information on each activity that interviewees named as spiritual, which encompassed both secular and religious practices, and explored how these activities are used in different agencies and/or programs. The secular activities measured were education about spirituality, meditation, guided relaxation/visualization, yoga, musical expression, martial arts, 12-step groups, and secular rites-of-passage programming. The religious activities measured were: prayer/Bible groups, clergy programs, religious counseling, religious instruction, religious rites-of-passage rituals. Their findings conclude that most agencies want to use spiritually oriented activities to help their clients and those that already do have remarkable testimonies of their benefit.

Wilson, Melanie (2004). *A Part of You So Deep: What Vulnerable Adolescents Have to Say About Spirituality* (Available from the New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services).

The goal of this study was to look into the spiritual histories and interests of adolescents from their own perspective, allowing them to speak for themselves about their spiritual experiences and beliefs. The information is vital to creating spirituality-based programming that will attract and benefit young people.

Silver, Judith A., Amster, Barbara J., and Haecker, Trude (Eds.) (1999). *Young Children and Foster Care: A Guide for Professionals*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

This book is a source of information about children in the child welfare system. It is unique in that it presents expert advice on aspects of care which are often overlooked in child welfare or relevant literature including "supporting the spirituality of children in foster care."

CURRENT RESEARCH

Faith and Spirituality. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. Retrieved May 17, 2004 from <http://cyd.aed.org/work.html>

A study focusing on developing a document which provides new information on roles, contributions and value of Native American and Muslim faith and spirituality to the development of youth, particularly those at risk in Native American and African American communities.

National Study of Youth and Religion. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved May 14, 2004 from <http://www.youthandreligion.org>

Four year sociological project that will continue through August 2005. The project is researching the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American adolescents ages 13-17.

Dai, Yong, Nolan, Rebecca F. and Zeng, Qing (2001). "Self-Esteem of Early Adolescents: A National Survey of 8th Graders." Paper presented at the American Psychological Association.

A sample of 8th graders was used to examine their self-esteem in relation to gender, race and religious involvement. Results indicated that the self-esteem of early adolescents was significantly related to religious involvement and race.

Cook, K.V. (2000). "You Have to Have Somebody Watching Your Back, and If That's God, Then That's Mighty Big": The Church's Role in the Resilience of Inner-City Youth." *Adolescence* vol. 35, pp. 717-730.

This study was designed to explore Freeman's (1986) finding that the institution that made the greatest contribution to male African-American youth's socioeconomic success was the church. Interviews were conducted with African-American, Haitian-American and Latino male and female teenagers. The interviews revealed that

"churched" teenagers were less stressed and less likely to have psychological problems than were teenagers in the comparison group.

Donahue, Michael J. (1995). "Religion and the Well-Being of Adolescents." *Journal of Social Issues* vol. 51, pp.145-160.

Reviews literature on the relationship between religiousness and adolescent well-being. The Study concluded that religiousness is positively associated with prosocial values and behavior and negatively related to suicidal ideas and attempts, substance abuse, premature sexual involvement and delinquency.

"Environmental education in New Zealand schools: Research into current practice and future possibilities." New Zealand Council for Educational Research and Waikato University, 2004. Retrieved September 23, 2004 from <http://www.wilderdom.com/environment>

This project used a wide range of methods to look at current practice in environmental education in New Zealand schools. Findings included a positive relationship between environmental education and increased respect for the environment, an overall sense of satisfaction and empowerment and a general enjoyment of learning.

PROMISING APPROACHES

RAMSEY COUNTY FOSTER CARE SERVICES offers ongoing training for foster care parents on "Emotional Well-being and Spirituality" where they focus on the impact of values and personal mission on health, balance and the ability to maintain a high quality of life. Their goal is to nurture faith and hope in participants and in the children they care for.

<http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/hs/fostercare/calendar.asp>

KINARK CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES, a children's mental health center that offers services to children, youth & families in five regions across Ontario, offers group recreational experiences to youth participants who require a high degree of support around social interactions and behavioral issues. The program explores the participants' personal limits through endurance-based adventure challenges. The participants get to know themselves better and learn new personal skills.

<http://www.kinark.on.ca/>



CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

THE OBVIOUS CONCLUSION drawn from this review is that young people in the foster care system need to have an appropriate level of support for strengthening their spiritual lives. This kind of support is necessary for two reasons. First, spirituality helps them cope with the reality of their current situation which, even under the best of circumstances, can be alienating and stressful. Young people come in contact with social service agencies all over the country and find ways to manage their life situations through the arts, cultural activities, rites of passage, and religious ceremonies. All these activities serve as spiritual outlets for young people. These promising approaches should become the norm for agencies working with young people preparing to leave the foster care system. The young people think of this work as “keepin’ it real” or as attempts to heal and comfort themselves, and a way to provide meaning to their lives. Second, young people who spend a substantial portion of their early years in foster care are pre-disposed to problems later on in life. Having the capacity to see beyond one’s self to a higher power, maintaining trusting and caring relationships, delaying negative impulses, and enhancing the power of self-reflection are the essential elements of a deeply spiritual life. These elements will support the strength and resilience of a young person throughout his or her life’s journey, when inevitable challenges arise. Undoubtedly, like all human beings, these young people will experience the ebb and flow of joy and tragedy, temptation and affirmation, hope and despair well into their adult lives. But, in the parlance of 12-Step Programs, they will need to “keep coming back.” The reward of having a well-defined sense of spirituality is that it encourages the individual to keep his or her life in perspective, to seek out help when times are difficult, and to reach out to and help others.

FINALLY, AFTER CONVERSATIONS with foster youth and professional colleagues, the investigators arrived at what they consider to be their most compelling (and intuitive) conclusion: the spiritual lives of these young people are inexorably connected to their need and desire for a permanent family which is often lost after they enter the child welfare system. Permanency and a sense of belonging and “place” in the universe for children and youth, or the lack thereof, is a harbinger for how the young person will manage the important questions and challenges of their lives and their ability to cope with turmoil and success. The child welfare field needs to acknowledge this and, in turn, collaborate with young people, artists, teachers, religious leaders, and community elders who are

in a position to construct interesting and youth-centered approaches to spiritual development. Unfortunately, the field has drifted so far in the direction of program compliance and meeting bureaucratic mandates, that it has neglected its own roots in relationship building. Addressing the spiritual needs of young people will mean revisiting and training caseworkers on the social work principle of the use of self. Most people who participated in this project felt it was possible for caseworkers to simultaneously complete the mandated tasks and to increase the opportunities for significant relationship building with young people.

Helping to rebuild a child’s family of origin or finding another permanent home for a youngster are essential roles for social workers. However, establishing a framework of permanency for young people undoubtedly goes beyond the current role of providing casework services or recruiting and preparing adoptive homes. As one young person told the investigators, “all tasks should be accomplished within the context of our own life- long search for meaning and worth and our desire to find the reflection of a higher power within ourselves.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHILD WELFARE PROJECTS outside the ordinary course of study can be difficult to support and sustain. That was not the case with this project that examined the spiritual lives of foster youth. We found an exceptional level of interest in our work and we had a number of like-minded partners in other jurisdictions. Our project is admittedly limited but we found people asking for more on this topic and its relationship to family permanence and childhood resilience. Without the encouragement of our colleagues and their contributions of financial assistance and time, this report would not have been possible.

Specifically, we want to acknowledge: the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (who provided primary funding for the project); Eastern University (who hosted the project); our workgroup whose selected members spent a good deal of time providing their insights and ideas; Melanie Wilson from the New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services; Dr. J. Nathan Corbitt from Eastern University and BuildaBridge International; and our reliable and very competent graduate research assistants, Stephanie Scott and Joy Mackey. Mostly, we want to thank the young people who participated in the focus groups. Their honesty, courage, and wisdom provided a level of richness to this report which cannot be fully described. 🐾

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Welcome

Thank participants for coming

Introduce yourself and others with you

Provide a simple explanation of the project

“We’re listening to different groups of youth to hear what they have to say about where they gain their inner strength”

Explain the importance of their contribution to the study and the community

Icebreaker Introductions

Write on sticky notes 3 words that someone else would use to describe you

Write two words that you would use to describe yourself

Post your words on the chart

Tell the group your name and your words

Why Are We Here

Share the 3 main objectives of the focus group [these should be displayed in the room]:

To use the Five Dimensions of the Self to prepare you to think and talk about the meaning of spirituality

To name what spirituality means to you and to others

To give your ideas to this research project on the meaning and value of spirituality in various areas of your life

How A Focus Group Works

Explain that it is a group discussion built around certain questions

Let participants know the session lasts for 90 minutes

Explain that you will be using a tape recorder/scribe in order to remember what was said

Let the group devise guidelines needed to make this a safe, honest and effective session

[these should be displayed in the room]

Explore the Five Dimensions of Self

Use the Five Dimensions chart & handout

Use colorful posters with words & pictures to describe each dimension

[hold poster while speaking of the specific dimension, then post in the room]

Open Questions (these are in addition to questions from New England Network)

Word Association

Ask participants, “when I say this word, what is the first word that comes to your mind?”

Protection

Help

Need

Safe

Quiet

Singing

Introductory Questions

What makes you want to get up in the morning?

How do you motivate yourself?

What do you like to do when you are by yourself?

What makes you feel good on the inside?

What do you do when you are afraid?

What inspires you?

Transition Question: What does it mean to you to have inner strength?

Key Questions

Finish this sentence. “To me, spirituality is _____.”

Thinking back, what are some things that you have done in your life so far that you think might be spiritual in some way?

What are some things that you have seen other people do that you think are spiritual?

Of all these ways of being spiritual, which do you feel is most important?

If there were sessions on spirituality or spiritual growth here, what would make you want to attend?

Ending Question

We hope to put together a component for youth in foster care that deals with developing your spiritual self. What advice do you have for us as we plan this?

Demographic Information: Gather any age, race, gender, faith information at this time

Closing

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