

RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY AND TRANSFORMATION: RISKING INTIMACY AND ALTERITY



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*Abstract: We extend a relational model of spirituality and transformation based on Shults' and Sandage's previous interdisciplinary work in *Transforming Spirituality*. Spirituality is conceptualized based on a relational framework, and transformation is understood as emerging through an intensification of relational anxiety. Spiritual maturity is related to differentiation of self, based on theology and social science. The risks and challenges of relational intimacy and alterity are proposed as two relational pathways toward differentiation and spiritual transformation. Practical relational strategies to enhance spiritual formation based on this model within a seminary training context are described with particular attention to intercultural development and relational justice.*

Amidst the sea of current literature on spirituality, we see a need for theoretically- and empirically-grounded models of spirituality and transformation that intentionally integrate social science, theology, and praxis. Every model of spirituality carries at least an implicit view of both theology and social science, and our preference is for an integration of relational approaches within these disciplines. In this article, we are extending the relational integration model first described in the book *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* to specify two relational pathways toward spiritual transformation: intimacy and alterity.¹ By intimacy, we mean “the process of being in touch with or knowing oneself in the presence of a partner,” and we would add that relational partner can include

¹ F. L. Shults and S. J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). This project was supported by a grant (#10987) from the John Templeton Foundation. Also see S. J. Sandage, and F. L. Shults, “Relational Spirituality and Transformation: A Relational Integration Model,” *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 26 (2007): 261–269.

God and that intimacy involves knowing self and other.² By “alterity,” we mean the developmental forms of relating to the *differentness* of others. This relational model of spirituality and transformation has emerged through interdisciplinary integration in collaboration with theologian F. LeRon Shults and others and has been supported through ongoing empirical research with students at Bethel Seminary. At the practical level, our model has been shaped in the seminary’s Center for Spiritual and Personal Formation through more than a decade of working with students who are preparing for leadership vocations in ministry and therapy. We recognize that many schools and training programs have been developing approaches to facilitate the spiritual formation of students, and we are eager to participate in the dialogue fostered by this journal. Our primary thesis in this article is that *spirituality can be transformed by embracing the risks of relational intimacy and alterity*. We will unpack this thesis further along with practical relational strategies from our model, but we want to start with an example of the relational spirituality of Jesus.

JESUS, A SAMARITAN WOMAN, AND RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4: 7–10)³

This famous gospel narrative revolves around a man (who is the Messiah) and a woman alone at Jacob’s well having a transformative conversation about water, relationships, ethnic difference, and spirituality. The meeting of a man and a woman at a well and the specific allusion to Jacob’s well forms a betrothal type-scene, although the narrative moves toward spiritual rather than romantic union.⁴ Significantly, the Samaritan woman is initially depicted as a stranger, an *other* in multiple ways (i.e., ethnicity, ambiguous marital status, not formally schooled in theology), but that

² D. M. Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 109.

³ New International Version is used here and throughout this article.

⁴ J. S. Webster, “Transcending Alterity: Strange Woman to Samaritan Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. 1, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 126–142.

strange otherness or symbolic alterity proves to be no barrier to spiritual intimacy with Jesus. In fact, alterity and intimacy are shown to be pathways toward spiritual transformation as Jesus takes a radical “border-crossing” initiative by asking this marginalized Samaritan woman to give him a drink. This relational move by Jesus would have been scandalous with respect to both the gender and ethnic norms of that context. The courageous woman shows the agency of engaging herself in this transformative relational encounter with Jesus and leaving her jar behind as she moves into the missionary witness that follows.⁵

Jesus intensifies the relational process at two points in the conversation by asking this woman provocative questions related to these two transformative pathways of alterity and intimacy. First, he asks, “Will you give me a drink?” (v. 7). This immediately raises a dilemma for her about cross-ethnic or intercultural relations. How can a Jew invite a Samaritan into relationship that bridges the exclusionary divide of *otherness*? Then, Jesus further intensifies their encounter by responding to her request for living water so she will not get thirsty again by telling her to “Go, call your husband and come back” (v. 16) even though he knows she does not currently have a sixth husband. It seems he is either trying to shame her (implausible) or he is prophetically turning up the heat under another key dimension of relational spirituality—the quest for intimacy. By activating her relational template in the finite realm of human intimacy, Jesus can then engage her in deeper dialogue about intimately knowing the Infinite Other. This woman’s testimony of transformation highlights her new understanding of herself in the presence of the Messiah. The larger narrative interweaves these dimensions of spiritual intimacy and alterity as Jesus talks of knowing God and worshipping a God who seeks relationship even across the barriers of gender and ethnic difference.

STUDENT NARRATIVES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Given our indebtedness to our student sojourners at Bethel Seminary, we want to also engage in the phenomenology of considering quotes from reflection papers by two students which illustrate these two relational pathways toward spiritual transformation. The first reflection is on the challenges and possibilities of relational intimacy by a male student graduating from our marriage and family therapy program:

“For years I have wondered at how tirelessly humans search for love . . . Such musing began for me as a child. Typically, I was jolted from sleep by my parents shouting in an alcohol-fueled quarrel. Spats would

⁵ S. Nelavala, “Jesus Asks the Samaritan Woman for a Drink: A Dalit Feminist Reading of John 4,” *Lectio Difficilior* 1 (2007): 1–25.

conclude with someone walking out the door and driving away. In the morning, none of us children knew who would actually be there. It was hardly a secure base or safe haven. Yet, some of my earliest childhood memories are running into my backyard ‘sanctuary’ and staring up at the sky wondering ‘why is love so hard?’ . . .

Maybe God has intentionally allowed life’s twists and turns to emerge in a way that provokes us to faith and relational interdependence. My heart tells me that is so. As a result, I find myself less inclined to rescue families but rather offer my presence and trust process a whole lot more. Much of this has come about through my time at the seminary. There I continually witnessed the power of a good question . . . I greatly rejoiced in the miracles I observed in our theological reflection groups. One evening after observing such a moment I remember walking along the woods there. As I hiked, I thought about how love and care happened so naturally in those group gatherings. It was work but not wearisome work. Instead, our presence and wonderings enveloped friends in a manner that liberated their spirits. Then it hit me. I flashed back to those years as a distressed kid staring up into the sky wondering, ‘Why is love so hard?’ Fast forward to that evening’s revelation—maybe love is not so hard. Maybe love is mostly a matter of learning to be. To be yourself. To be there for another. To be in God. Imagine if we could just do that as individuals, couples, families, and churches.”

There are many valuable insights in this reflection, but we would like to point out two things. First, there is a *relational intertextuality* or weaving together of different narrative threads from relationships in childhood, in the present, and with God. Second, there is a description of the transforming power of a corrective relational experience or what Daniel Stern calls “a moment of meeting” or a *kairos* moment.⁶ The presence of others moves from anxiety-provoking and insecure to caring and more secure, and this relational shift impacts the student’s hopefulness about love. Lament gives way to liberated wondering and trust.

The second reflection comes from a Euro-American female student reflecting on her volunteer work at a Christian homeless shelter for mothers, most of who were persons of color and were also receiving substance abuse counseling through the shelter:

“One of the biggest things I learned by hanging out with these women was how much they wanted to do the right thing and were willing to make choices to get better. I think I had some kind of stereotype about addicts that they were somehow not as capable of making good choices or were too selfish to do the right thing for their kids. These women

⁶ D. N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), xv.

were working hard to do right by their kids in the best ways they knew
 . . .

There was only one other white woman there besides me and at times I felt like I was at an African-American church. I think the spiritual roots of the predominant culture in that group were a part of the recovery process . . . As far as my own multicultural formation, I learned that I do have some ‘us and them’ mentality. I have not recognized my white privilege until recently and I am starting to see how that affects how I see things. I have always been comfortable with people of other races but now I am questioning whether that is because I see myself in a position of power or privilege. I’m uncomfortable with that kind of comfort.”

Such constructive relational experiences of cultural and spiritual alterity can reverse figure and ground and increase awareness of the systemic dynamics of social power and justice. These two students voice the profound relational risks involved in the anxiety of the transformation process. The first student describes the risk of accepting that God allows “life’s twist and turns” to “provoke faith and relational interdependence,” which he discovered through the intimacy of a theological reflection group. And the second student risked alterity by venturing into unfamiliar cultural territory and becoming “uncomfortable with that kind of comfort,” that is the socially and racially privileged kind of comfort. Certainly, not all students report positive spiritual transformation during their seminary experience. There are a variety of spiritual narratives that emerge in our context, and we have found a relational spirituality framework helpful for seeking to understand these different experiences and narratives.

DEFINITION AND CONTOURS OF RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

As we stated above, there are a myriad of definitions of spirituality. We have utilized the work of Peter Hill and his colleagues who defined spirituality as related to *a search for the sacred*.⁷ They use the term “sacred” to signify “a person, object, principle, or concept that transcends the self.”⁸ The sacred can include “a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth” that is “set apart” as *holy* and beyond the ordinary.⁹ In the Christian tradition, the sacred ultimately refers to God as Trinity, but the term “sacred” can also be inclusive of the Bible, sacraments, church com-

⁷ P. C. Hill, K. L. Pargament, R. W. Hood, Jr., M. E. McCullough, J. P. Swyers, D. B. Larson, and B. J. Zinnbauer, “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30 (2000): 51–77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

munity, covenantal relationships, and other sacralized spiritual practices or holy spaces. We have adapted the definition of spirituality offered by Hill and colleagues to fit our relational theoretical orientation by defining *relational spirituality* as “ways of relating to the sacred.”¹⁰ Spirituality emerges as we each *relate* to the developmental and existential challenges of discovering and making meaning in the midst of the ambiguity of life. Since God, as Trinity, always exists and acts in relationship, a relational ontology and spirituality makes sense theologically.¹¹

Some have responded to us with the question, “Isn’t all spirituality relational?” Our answer is, “From a relational framework, the answer is ‘yes.’ All human spirituality involves ways of relating to the sacred.” There are, however, many different ways of relating to the sacred, including avoidance, trust, questioning, idealization, surrender, hostility, service, contemplation, compulsivity, and many more. A relational model of spirituality opens conceptual space for considering the wide variety of ways different people relate to the sacred, as well as the ways a given individual might relate to God and others out of similar relational templates. Our relational approach also differs from what we would call “evangelical behaviorism” or models of evangelical spirituality that focus on behaviors (e.g., having a devotional “quiet” time). Behaviors or spiritual disciplines are important, but the same discipline could be practiced for different relational motivations (e.g., earning God’s favor versus seeking closeness with God). Some other models of spirituality in this general category might be described as conveying an implicit cognitive-behavioral psychology, sometimes framing spiritual formation as involving “thinking, being, and doing” as though these are separate dimensions of personhood. Although cognitive-behavioral theory has made a valuable contribution in psychology, our theoretical preference is for a more relational and less-individualistic framework because we believe relationality and community are so central to a Trinitarian anthropology. Dividing thinking, being, and doing also seems more Cartesian or modernist than the more holistic and integrated biblical view of personhood. We find that exploring relational dynamics in spirituality can deepen our understanding of the complex and conflicting motivations we bring to relating to the sacred, including both healthy and destructive motivations.

¹⁰ Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*, 161. See also, T. W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Theoretical Framework for Integrating Rational and Experiential Processes in Spirituality*; Margaret Gorman Early Career Award Address in the annual convention of the American Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, Aug 2002).

¹¹ G. G. Scorgie, *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality: Three Dimensions of Life With God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007); F. L. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

There are four key assumptions that shape our model of relational spirituality:

First, relational spirituality is embodied. All human spiritual experience is mediated neurobiologically. We believe that God exists metaphysically, that is God transcends our human experience. However, human spiritual experience involves our brains and our physiology. It is surprising to us to see so many Evangelicals who unintentionally hold to a kind of extreme Gnostic dualism that views certain activities as spiritual (e.g., reading the Bible, attending a church-based small group) while other potentially formative, embodied activities (e.g., exercising, eating nutritiously, practicing deep breathing, communicating with a spouse about sexuality, or talking with a therapist) are considered non-spiritual.¹² Based on an incarnational theology, we believe Christian spirituality involves attending to how we relate to our bodies as sacred temples. While embodied health can become an idol, neglect of embodiment is also not spiritually responsible. The vast empirical literature on religion, spirituality, and health that has emerged in the past two decades offers valuable resources for understanding health-conducive ways of relating to the sacred. Spiritual practices like prayer and Bible reading can be theologically and psychologically integrated with practices such as deep breathing, which can enhance relational capacities for spiritual intimacy through regulating anxiety.

A relational approach to spirituality also finds rapprochement with the emerging field of interpersonal neuroscience, which suggests that relational experiences of attachment with caregivers begin to imprint schemas or templates about relationships within the limbic brain.¹³ These templates will shape self-other relational configurations and God images. Relational templates can be transformed but not without relational experience. As Lewis, Amini, and Lannon explain, “When a limbic connection has established a neural pattern, it takes a limbic connection to revise it.”¹⁴ Recognition of the role of human neurobiology and subjectivity in spiritual experience can raise the anxieties of spiritual intimacy and otherness in relation to God. However, we have found interpersonal neuroscience to deepen our appreciation of the Evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus.

Second, relational spirituality is developmental. Human spiritual experience emerges and develops in the relational context of community. Even Jesus submitted to the process of development and growing in wisdom in a community context (Luke 2:52). While our focus on this article is on adult

¹² We respect the fact that Christians can thoughtfully hold a range of positions on the mind-body relationship and our critique is aimed at extreme quasi-Gnostic forms of dualism that radically bifurcate the spiritual and the embodied in human experience.

¹³ L. Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

¹⁴ T. Lewis, F. Amini, and R. Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 177.

development, it is important to be cognizant of spiritual formation across the lifespan and developmental differences in working with children, adolescents, and adults. Psychoanalysts and attachment researchers have described the developmental dynamics through which interpersonal relationships, especially with parents or caregivers, form relational representations of the sacred.¹⁵ Relationships with people who serve as spiritual mentors, teachers, or admired role models can be deeply influential on psychosocial development and spiritual formation and can provide a sense of attachment that helps “hold” the anxiety and stress of developmental change. Recent empirical research has found that the attachment security of leaders is predictive of the mental health and performance of followers.¹⁶ This means it will be hard for leaders to be transformational, particularly over time, without a secure style of emotional and relational attachment.

A relational approach to spiritual development can also help overcome a common tendency to view spirituality in exclusively positive ways. An idealistic view of spirituality obscures efforts to understand spiritual pathology or forms of relating to the sacred that are maladaptive or developmentally-limited. Christian spirituality should lead to bearing relational fruit (Matthew 12:33). Yet John Ortberg has asked the probing question of why there are people who report being a Christian and attending church for decades but remain relationally toxic and seemingly immune to relational growth.¹⁷ A relational framework can also invite consideration of relational discrepancies even within fruitful spiritual leaders, such as A.W. Tozer’s capacity to write profound devotional literature while being relationally inaccessible to his family and others.¹⁸ Rather than diminishing the contributions of such leaders, a relational perspective can help us appreciate Divine grace amidst human imperfection while also being honest about the need for movement toward relational maturity in all Christians.

Third, relational spirituality is hermeneutical. Spiritual experience is interpreted through a worldview that is formed by cultural and often religious traditions. This is the case even if a person is interpreting their spiritual experience in a manner they intend to be distinct from a particular religious tradition. Spiritual experiences are translated into language and other symbols of representation. The human brain processes experience utilizing

¹⁵ P. C. Hill and T. W. Hall, “Relational Schemas in Processing One’s Image of God and Self,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21 (2002): 365–373; R. L. Sorenson, *Minding Spirituality* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2004).

¹⁶ R. Davidovitz, M. Mikulincer, P. R. Shaver, R. Izsak, and M. Popper, “Leaders as Attachment Figures: Leaders’ Attachment Orientations Predict Leadership-Related Mental Representations and Followers Performance and Mental Health,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93 (2007): 632–650.

¹⁷ J. Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

¹⁸ G. G. Scorgie, “A.W. Tozer (1897–1963): American Fundamentalist Mystic,” a paper presented at the Western Regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Pasadena, CA, March 2008).

the hermeneutical or referential activity of attempting to integrate verbal, symbolic, and subsymbolic levels of information processing.¹⁹ This is an attempt to integrate experiential and conceptual forms of knowledge, which is a process we take seriously in our model of relational spirituality. Implicit relational knowledge based on relational experience informs this process of interpretation. In philosophy, the school of ontological hermeneutics affirms these neuroscientific discoveries—who we are influences what we know and vice versa.²⁰ This is why it is potentially transformative to integrate conscious theological reflection with growing awareness of one's "unconscious theology" that is shaped by relational experiences with one's family-of-origin.²¹

Fourth, relational spirituality is intercultural. A relational dimension of spirituality is alterity or how one relates to the differentness of others. There is a natural stranger anxiety that can challenge spiritual hospitality and relationship across various cultural differences. Yet intercultural development or the capacity to relate competently across cultural differences is a key characteristic of spiritual maturity in the Christian tradition.²² Since hermeneutical understanding is always intercultural and contextual, cultural self-awareness is a prerequisite to responsibly interpreting Scripture and spiritual experience.²³ Deficits in intercultural development can result in forms of relational spirituality characterized by either exclusionary enclaves or missionary activity that is more rescuing and exploitive than empowering. We will return to these issues and implications for social justice below.

BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

The entire Bible is about spirituality, so any summary of biblical spirituality will be incomplete. However, we want to highlight two rich biblical constructs that are central to our relational model of spirituality—*shalom* and *teleios*. *Shalom* is often understood in a limited way as "peace," but

¹⁹ T. W. Hall and S. L. Porter, "Referential Integration: An Emotional Information Processing Perspective on the Process of Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 (2004): 167–180.

²⁰ S. J. Sandage, K. V. Cook, P. C. Hill, B. D. Strawn, and K. S. Reimer, "Hermeneutics and Psychology: A Review and Dialectical Model," *Review of General Psychology* (forthcoming).

²¹ Nancy Duvall, "Unconscious Theology and Spirituality," a presentation at the Institute for Spiritual Formation (Biola University, La Mirada, CA, October 17, 2000).

²² 1 Cor. 9:22b; S. J. Sandage, "Intercultural Development and Relational Integration: Translating Diverse Psychologies," *Edification* (forthcoming).

²³ J. K. Brown, *Scripture As Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

actually *shalom* is a multi-dimensional Hebrew concept that represents a vision of personal and communal well-being and wholeness or embodied human flourishing.²⁴ The Old Testament understanding of *shalom* was highly relational and covenantal involving harmony and completeness in relationship with God and neighbor. *Shalom* was also understood systemically or politically in the Old Testament as involving social justice and requiring concern for reducing inequity and marginalization among those with lesser social power. The prophets warned against a pseudo-*shalom* that meant peace and well-being for the powerful while systemic injustice was rampant (Jeremiah 6:13–14).

Teleios is the Greek word that was often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*. *Teleios* is related to the root *telos* which means “a goal” and is sometimes translated in English as “perfect” but actually means wholeness, completeness, or maturity.²⁵ Wholeness and maturity indicate a challenging goal for spirituality without connoting the unhealthy perfectionism that reinforces spiritual grandiosity.

While *shalom* and *teleios* both convey a vision of integrating relational wholeness and holiness, *shalom* is more closely tied to the notion of spiritual well-being and *teleios* with spiritual maturity. This forms a helpful relational dialectic as spiritual well-being and spiritual maturity are somewhat differing goals. A person who is reporting high spiritual well-being is not necessarily spiritually mature. Some people will report high spiritual well-being but be characterized by “illusory spiritual health,” that is using their spirituality as a relational defense against internal conflicts or injustice in the world.²⁶

The relationship between spiritual well-being and spiritual maturity is also complex in that those going through developmental transitions or “dark nights of the soul” might be moving toward maturity but experiencing temporary reductions in well-being as described in the Biblical books of Job and Hebrews (5:8–9; 11:1–40). We do believe that spiritual maturity includes a capacity to recover a sense of spiritual well-being following periods of stress and suffering, and this involves our central integrative maturity construct—*differentiation of self*.

²⁴ Our understanding of *Shalom* is based on W. Brueggemann, *Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes* (St. Louis, MO, Chalice, 2001); C. Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); C. Westermann, “Peace (*Shalom*) in the Old Testament,” in *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, eds. P. B. Yoder and W. M. Swartley, trans. W. Sawatsky (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 16–48.

²⁵ G. Delling, “*Teleios*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1974), 8:67–87.

²⁶ K. J. Edwards and T. W. Hall, “Illusory Spiritual Health: The Role of Defensiveness in Understanding and Assessing Spiritual Health,” in *Spiritual Formation, Counseling, and Psychotherapy*, eds. T. W. Hall and M. R. McMinn (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Sciences Publishers, 2003), 261–275.

DIFFERENTIATION-BASED SPIRITUALITY

Differentiation of self represents a mature, adult configuration of self-other relations characterized by the ability to balance (a) emotional and cognitive functioning and (b) intimacy and autonomy in relationships. People with a high degree of differentiation of self are less emotionally reactive to others and have greater flexibility and self-awareness than those with low self-differentiation. Schnarch describes differentiation of self as an ability to “hold onto oneself” in close proximity to others, which suggests a mature relational capacity to handle the anxiety of both closeness (intimacy) and difference (alterity).²⁷ While Murray Bowen was initially critiqued for sounding too individualistic in his conception of differentiation, it is now more widely understood in the family systems field that differentiation of self includes the ability to *both* connect with others (community) and be alone (solitude). In short, high differentiation of self represents a capacity for wholeness through balancing well-being and maturity.

While spiritual maturity is multi-dimensional and complex to define, we consider differentiation of self to be an excellent maturity construct based on the relational integration of theology and social science.²⁸ God as Trinity exists in *differentiated relationality*, that is three different persons relating in unity and love, and this forms a powerful model for human relational development. Social science research has shown that measures of differentiation of self are positively correlated with a variety of indices of both personal well-being and relational maturity.²⁹ Differentiation-based spirituality is growth-oriented without unhealthy grandiosity or dependence on other-validation. While ways of relating to God can often be driven by anxiety, more differentiated forms of relational spirituality characterize persons who are more motivated by the pursuit of love and integrity than the simple reduction of anxiety. In fact, highly differentiated leaders can tolerate the anxiety that is necessary for personal and corporate growth.³⁰ At low levels of differentiation, leaders are susceptible to over-use of rescuing or they tend to manage their own anxiety through relational disengagement and avoidance of both intimacy and conflict.

Low levels of differentiation involve too much anxiety and too little capacity for regulating anxiety to handle the rigors of mature intimacy and

²⁷ D. Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 14.

²⁸ Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*; J. O. Balswick, P. E. King, and K. S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

²⁹ E.A. Skowron, “Differentiation of Self and Attachment in Adulthood: Relational Correlates of Effortful Control,” *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 26 (2004): 337–357.

³⁰ E. H. Freidman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

alterity, so spiritual defenses are employed against relational closeness and diversity. This can be seen in some churches or small groups that focus exclusively on content to bypass relational process or that enforce extremes of homogeneity to control the anxiety related to differences. These systems often construe spiritual formation and maturity through legitimate themes of accountability and obedience, but this can result in the “ceiling effect” of spiritual conformity and dependence on other-validation that limits adult differentiation and the mature internalization of faith. We have found that understanding the goal or telos of relational spirituality as mature spiritual intimacy and alterity can pull for growth in differentiation of self. Since healthy families and effective intercultural missions are such central Evangelical concerns, we find the frequent emphasis on spiritual conformity and the limited emphasis on differentiation in many Evangelical subcultures to be concerning.

CRUCIBLES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Our relational spirituality model suggests that transformation always involves an intensification of anxiety. The risks of change increase arousal and existential anxiety about the unknown, and this is true even when moving into positive changes such as starting seminary, a new relationship, or a new vocation. By spiritual transformation, we mean profound, qualitative or *second-order* changes in the ways in which a person relates to God and the sacred. *First-order* change is limited to one’s current matrix of relational strategies, whereas second-order change involves a more complex systemic transformation that changes ways of relating altogether. Systems theorists suggest that transformation is an ongoing process across the life cycle as human systems (i.e., persons, families, communities) are continually challenged to adapt to their changing ecological contexts.³¹ This process of ongoing transformation can be confusing to those from Christian traditions that emphasize a single (e.g., conversion) or even secondary (e.g., Baptism in the Holy Spirit) spiritual transformation.

The crucible is a metaphor of the intensification process that is useful for integrating our relational model of spiritual transformation. A crucible is a container for holding the process of intense heat and pressure that can transform raw materials and catalytic agents into new forms. St. John of the Cross portrayed the dark night of the soul as a purifying “furnace, like gold in a crucible.”³² David Schnarch defines a crucible as a “resilient vessel in

³¹ J. W. Maddock and N. R. Larson, *Incestuous Families: An Ecological Approach to Understanding and Treatment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

³² Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, ed. and trans. E. A. Peers (New York: Image Books 1990), 107.

which metamorphic processes occur.”³³ Several clinical theorists, most notably Schnarch, have applied the crucible metaphor to the dynamics of relational transformation in couples, families, and communities by emphasizing the roles of stress and conflict in generating opportunities for growth. The Apostle Paul uses crucible-like “jars of clay” language, “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed” (2 Cor. 4:7–8). The crucible metaphor suggests the resiliency and non-reactivity of the container is essential to the transformative process. Crucibles or containers with melting points lower than the chemical reaction inside will crack under pressure and “spill out” the potential transformative process, which is why the differentiation or anxiety tolerance of a leader or therapist is so central to their capacity to contain and steward the process of transformation.³⁴

Schnarch has developed a crucible model of therapy with couples and theorized that intimate relationships involve a systemic balancing of cycles of stability and growth. Relational systems such as marriage maintain states of balance or stability through familiar forms of relating. The relationship may or may not be particularly satisfying, but a sense of safety and security can come from the stability and consistency of familiar relational patterns. At a certain point of systemic destabilization Schnarch calls “critical mass,” one or both partners become willing to risk the anxiety that is a necessary part of crucibles of change in a transforming growth cycle.³⁵ This relational crucible can involve a parallel to what the contemplatives called “dark nights of the soul” as anxiety intensifies and partners are challenged to stretch toward increased differentiation of self and a capacity for the risks of mature intimacy. Spiritual well-being may temporarily decline during the early phases of a growth cycle, but growth in differentiation of self can increase a person’s ability to integrate well-being and relational maturity. Schnarch’s differentiation-based theory of relational transformation in couples fits nicely with our interest in a relational spirituality that moves beyond conformity and dependence on other-validation to facilitate increased capacities for spiritual intimacy and alterity. The challenges of intimacy and alterity can shape crucibles for spiritual transformation that require a willingness to risk the possibilities of feeling disappointment,

³³ D. Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, xv. See also Schnarch’s books *Passionate Marriage* and *Resurrecting Sex: Resolving Sexual Problems and Rejuvenating Your Relationship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002). Other theorists using the crucible metaphor include D. B. Allender and T. Longman, III., *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995); V. T. Holeman, “Mutual Forgiveness: A Catalyst for Relationship Transformation in the Moral Crucible of Marriage,” *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal* 2 (1999): 147–158.; M. Mangis, *Signature Sins: Taming Our Wayward Hearts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008); A. Y. Napier and C. A. Whitaker, *The Family Crucible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

³⁴ Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*; R. L. Moore, *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation* (United States of America: Xlibris, 2001).

³⁵ D. Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage*, 366.

rejection, engulfment, confusion, incompetence or other anxiety-provoking emotions. Even positive relational experiences, such as feeling known, understood, or loved can provoke crucibles of anxiety as the existential shadow of possible loss looms in the unconscious. Differentiation is necessary to mature through both pain and pleasure.

BALANCING SPIRITUAL DWELLING AND SEEKING

In *Transforming Spirituality*, Shults and I (Sandage) adapted Schnarch's crucible theory of transformation in couples' relationships to depict our intensification model of spiritual transformation (see Figure 1).³⁶ In our rela-

³⁶ Our figure is adapted with substantial changes from Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage*, 355; versions also appear in Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*, 33; and Sandage and Shults, "Relational Spirituality and Transformation," *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 26 (2007): 266. Schnarch credits couples educators Barbara and Don Fairfield of Lanham, MD, as originally developing the figure he used in his book. We also want to thank Barbara and Don for their creative contributions to our work.

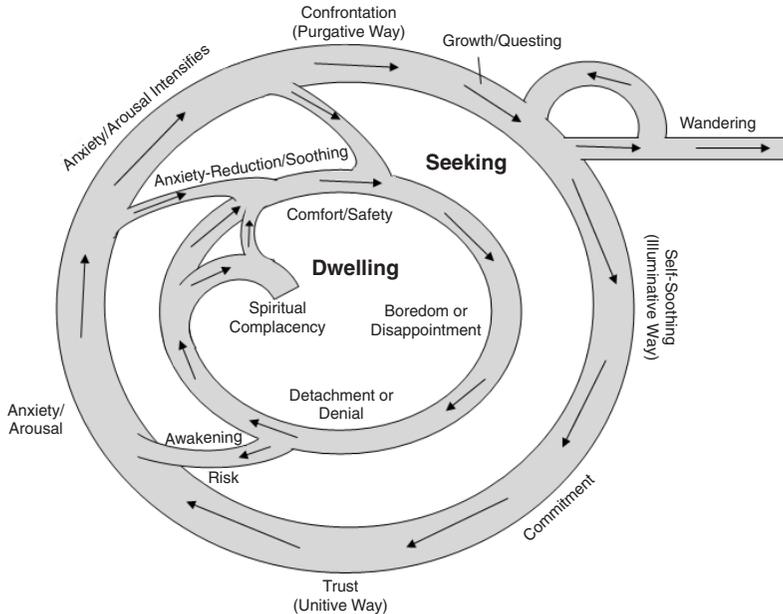


Figure 1: Balancing Spiritual Dwelling and Seeking

(Shults & Sandage, 2006; adated from Schnarch, 1997; developed by D. & B. Fairfield)

tional model, spirituality involves a systemic balancing of dwelling and seeking that roughly parallels the cycles of relational growth and stability in Schnarch's model. Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow has described the changing spiritual landscape in North America since the 1950s as a movement from primarily spiritualities of *dwelling* increasingly toward spiritualities of *seeking*.³⁷ Spiritual dwelling involves attaching to a particular sacred community and tradition, typically provided by a religious group. Spiritual seeking involves a process of existential questing and journeying toward new spiritual experiences and understandings, which can unfold both within and beyond the boundaries of religious institutions. While some people gravitate toward either spiritual dwelling or seeking, we believe the dynamic and dialectical tension between spiritual dwelling and seeking is an essential part of the overall process of spiritual transformation in our model.

The inner ring of Figure 1 represents the cycle of spiritual dwelling, which involves relating to the sacred in familiar ways (which might include avoiding the sacred). Spiritual dwelling can positively represent relating to a spiritual community and tradition that offers certain rituals and spiritual practices. But spiritual dwelling can also eventually lead to boredom and disappointment as spiritual practices and experiences become too routine or when certain developmental or diversity challenges press for more mature forms of spirituality. Spiritual detachment or denial can result as dwellers defend against the discomfort of boredom or disappointment or avoid facing the challenges of diversity and social injustice. From this relational or systemic perspective, sin can represent a stubborn refusal to face the anxiety involved in growth.

A spiritual awakening can occur if a person accepts the risk of intensified anxiety and arousal (depicted on the lower left side of Figure 1), which potentially moves a person into the growth cycle of spiritual seeking (outer ring). This is initially destabilizing and stressful but often focuses attention (purgation) and prompts searching, or a kind of "spiritual foraging" that Jesus promoted in saying, "seek and you will find" (Matt. 7:7). A person might start praying or worshipping in a new way, asking more authentic theological questions, or seeking to build relationships beyond one's cultural community. Seeking could also be prompted by questions from a spiritual leader or therapist that serve to intensify deep integrity dilemmas, similar to how Jesus often uses questions or parables instead of giving answers.

Seeking can be both exciting and scary, and if a person's desire for safety exceeds their motivation to tolerate the intensified anxiety of seeking they might opt for a return to familiar forms of spiritual dwelling. The contemplatives used the term "purgative way" for this dynamic of intensified spiritual confrontation that can include a focusing of attention or commitment, a willingness to simplify priorities and make sacrifices, or an open-

³⁷ R. Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

ness to facing painful realities about self and other. Gregory the Great described the dialectic of relational spirituality in this way:

“God moderates the words of Sacred Scripture mercifully, now terrifying us with harsh threats, now refreshing us with sweet consolations. He mixes terror with comfort and comfort with terror, so . . . we should not become carelessly secure or desperately fearful.”³⁸

Secure attachments with caring but non-rescuing relational figures can offer a secure relational container or holding environment for tolerating the anxiety of seeking with some measure of spiritual comfort, and this highlights the need for differentiated and securely attached leaders and therapists who have been through their own crucibles of transformation.³⁹

The questing of the purgative way can lead to transforming moments of illumination involving new, more differentiated understandings of self and other in relation to the sacred. This could be an initial conversion experience or a new form of spiritual commitment and trust within the ongoing process of sanctification. Schnarch describes an analogous differentiation process for couples where one or both go through intensified anxiety and confrontation with their own personal challenges potentially leading to deepened relational commitment, trust, and intimate union. In the Christian tradition, the result of this process is *union with Christ* or “Christ formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). The outer circular ring in Figure 1 of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways can cycle toward a return to the stability and comfort of spiritual dwelling, which can be healthy after an intense cycle of spiritual seeking. It would be spiritually grandiose to attempt to remain in a perpetual cycle of seeking and questing without dwelling. Spiritual dwelling after a growth cycle of seeking involves new levels of spiritual maturity with less use of rigid defenses against anxiety, diversity, and conflict.

Spiritual seeking does not always lead to illumination and spiritual transformation. On the right side of Figure 1 there is a pathway toward spiritual wandering. There are several dynamics that might lead a person to prefer wandering to committed relationships. Some have been deeply hurt, abused, and even traumatized by past spiritual communities and feel a strong need for autonomy. Highly narcissistic seekers might feel a limited ability to attach to others or tolerate feedback and therefore gravitate to

³⁸ Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), *Moralia in Job* 33.7.14, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 143B, 1684–85 (Turnholti: Brepols, 1979). Quoted in C. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection and Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

³⁹ D. S. Hardy, “A Winnicottian Redescription of Christian Spiritual Direction Relationships: Illustrating the Potential Contribution of Psychology of Religion to Christian Spiritual Practice,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28 (2000): 263–275.

spiritual experiences that do not create relational discomfort. Others have experienced oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, or stigmatization) or simply communities unable to relate to their spiritual questions and have not found trustworthy relationships in which they can invest themselves and their developmental process. The pathway back to spiritual dwelling after wandering can require tremendous courage and may involve grieving disappointments. Differentiated leaders can facilitate the “return from exile” for some through patient and resilient relationship-building that tolerates the ambivalence and mistrust of the wanderer.

Theologically, we affirm Shults’ point that the capacities for spiritual confrontation, self-soothing, and trust indicated in the outer ring are relationally sustained by divine grace.⁴⁰ We are not implying a non-spiritual nor a Pelagian view of self-soothing but rather a relational participation in divine grace which results in mature, differentiated capacities for self-regulation and virtue. This emotional resilience can free a person to engage in the risks of intimacy and alterity with greater depth.

ALTERITY AND RELATIONAL JUSTICE

Schnarch’s model is particularly useful for understanding the constructive role of anxiety in promoting differentiated spiritual maturity within relational crucibles of intimacy. We believe that the anxiety of alterity or otherness can also be instrumental in constructing crucibles for developing a differentiation-based approach to relational justice. Within our evangelical context, we find that many of our students have been formed within the Word-centered stream of Christian spirituality that stresses biblically orthodox beliefs, personal piety, and evangelism. Justice is a word with a limited semantic range for some students, and the social justice stream of Christian spirituality is initially foreign to many (though not all) of our students. Some describe experiences with Christian communities of venturing out into the world of “the impoverished” to deliver needed meals or participate in other forms of mission or service. Often, these forays into the world of the other were accompanied by a great deal of anxiety as people encountered cultures and communities that were outside of their previous experience. Or, the interaction with “the other” was so limited and circumscribed (e.g., a two-week mission trip at a mission compound) that the deeper anxiety of otherness was minimized. Most students readily embrace the importance of social justice for Christian spirituality once exposed to a more systemic perspective about the challenges and formative possibilities even if that process raises anxiety.

Recently, a change has been developing in the broader evangelical community. Leaders like Jim Wallis have challenged Christians to reconnect

⁴⁰ Sandage and Shults, “Relational Spirituality and Transformation,” *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 26:3 (2007), 261–269.

with the social justice stream of Christian spirituality and to consider poverty and creation care to be moral issues that demand the spiritual attention of every believer.⁴¹ Many evangelicals have also been voicing an increased concern about valuing cultural diversity and becoming engaged in a wider range of social concerns that affect the well-being of our communities.⁴²

In spite of these developments, something still seems to be missing in the approach to social justice of many Christians. While evangelicals have arguably become more comfortable in recent years in talking about social justice, the implicit understanding of justice often seems more spiritually transactional than differentiated. By transactional, we mean that justice is acted out as an exchange of goods and services. Christians provide care or resources to people in need, and in exchange, they unconsciously expect spiritual satisfaction, gratitude, and transformation on the part of the recipients. This approach reflects low differentiation as (a) the giver is dependent on validation from the receiver and (b) there is little real intimacy or mutual knowing required. The hierarchical structure of the giver-receiver relationship is often unexamined and unquestioned. This can also represent the behavioral spirituality we discussed earlier in that the focus is on doing a behavior (e.g., having a quiet time, serving food at a homeless shelter) rather than the quality of the relational encounter.

As long as each player does her part, this transactional form of relational spirituality can function without a great deal of overt conflict. But anxiety and reactivity can increase in several ways. If a receiver of goods fails to express the desired amount of gratitude or if the expected forms of transformation do not happen in a certain time frame, the giver's "compassion" can quickly turn to bitterness, renewed stereotyping, and exclusion. Givers might also encounter the anxiety of facing painful social and existential realities, such as one's limited capacity to change an entire social system or the patronizing one-up/one-down dynamics of some efforts to help. Each of us authoring this article has previously participated in transactional social justice which led to difficult but necessary episodes of spiritual self-confrontation.

The problem is that transactional social justice fails to address the most critical component of authentic compassion—the "other." Transactional social justice approaches within evangelicalism are limited by what Kohut called the "vertical split."⁴³ In the case of Christians, the vertical

⁴¹ J. Wallis, *Faith Works: How to Live Your Beliefs and Ignite Positive Social Change* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁴² E. Conde-Frazier, S.S. Kang and G.A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); G.H. Stassen and D.P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁴³ H. Kohut, "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 60 (1979): 3–27.

split involves an idealized or encapsulated relationship between self and God paired with a very limited capacity for intimacy and empathy with other people. Although transactional acts of justice may target others, the focus of each act often rests on the vertical relationship between the actor and God. While this vertical component is both significant and valuable, viewing it as the central focus of justice may allow the actor to avoid truly facing the other and to avoid being transformed by that facing. As long as the vertical relationship with God serves as the sole focus of just acts, we run the risk of objectifying those who are served and our capacity to love or even see the other will be greatly diminished.

Ironically, these acts of transactional social justice, while offered with the best of intentions, have often resulted in further division and exclusion. They reminded both the actor and the recipient that there was a relational gulf that existed between them. Those who were being served were forced to face inescapable power differences and the result is often frustration and sometimes resistance to being objectified, which is interpreted by givers as ingratitude. This unbalanced form of justice stands in direct contrast to the principle of Shalom that was discussed previously. It allows the actor to act justly without ever addressing the larger systems of injustice and more importantly, allows her to ignore her possible complicity in those systems. In addition, it encourages the actor to adopt an undifferentiated stance in relation to the other, one in which he becomes dependent on other validation and thus dependent on the neediness of the one being served.

At Bethel Seminary, we are attempting to help our students move beyond ethnocentric understandings of alterity and beyond transactional models of justice. While we believe that it is important to continue to participate in just acts such as volunteering at shelters and prisons or donating to food shelves, we desire that our students also move beyond these “drive-by” expressions of justice and begin to engage more relational models. Relational justice is justice that is lived out with a goal of relating to others in mutual recognition—knowing and being known. Relational justice is born out of the act of choosing to bind ourselves to the other. It involves reaching across boundaries of race, gender, and economics in order to live in community with those who are not like us and to learn from them. From within these communities, justice takes on a more organic look as individuals serve and support each other. This joining with the other in order to form just communities lies at the heart of what it means to be kingdom builders and has become a central dimension of our spiritual formation efforts at Bethel. It is not easy to prepare people to enter into relationships with others who are different and to leave the security and safety of more familiar relationships, and this creates anxiety that can be useful for spiritual formation. While it is clear that transformational change can not be achieved through programming alone, we have adopted a strategy that is intended to increase our students’ capacity to bridge the gap and embrace the other. This strategy, which consists of three components, can only be effective if students can be convinced to set aside the more traditional postures of helper or

server and instead choose to adopt a learning posture and to see the other as teacher.

The foundation of this developmental approach lies in self-awareness. It is impossible to accurately know the other without first knowing one's self. Without self-awareness, the other is often reduced to a projection of the self and is inevitably forced to minimize real differences in order to maintain relationship. For the past several years, all students at Bethel seminary have been required to take a class entitled "Self in Community." The class examines the ways that our relational experiences shape our God images and influence the way we interact in community. Students practice listening to others in small groups and paying attention to their own reactions and assumptions. They are asked to consider their family of origin and to explore the ways that they have been formed by their early attachments and family interactions. In addition, students study models of human development in order to locate themselves on the developmental continuum and to enable them to create a plan for personal and relational growth. In our setting, we most often utilize the developmental model created by Robert Kegan.⁴⁴ Kegan's model is particularly helpful in that it connects development to consciousness of self and others. Movement toward Kegan's fourth order of consciousness allows students to reflect on their relationships and to examine the larger cultural systems that shape them. It is this skill that will enable them to develop more differentiated and interculturally-competent relationships, relationships that are not based on an ethnocentric view of cultural traditions and values. Students who wish to continue developing self-awareness beyond the required class can take advantage of a number of advanced classes on the subject.

The second component in increasing student capacity to engage in relational models of justice involves teaching students to recognize the systemic nature of injustice. Ethnocentric perspectives on alterity promote the notion that people generally get what they deserve when it comes to issues of health and wealth. This principle of meritocracy stands in opposition to Jesus' teachings and the communal justice vision of the Hebrew Bible, as well as reducing justice to acts of charity rather than Shalom.⁴⁵ If wealth and poverty are, in themselves, acts of direct justice on God's part, then there is no need to challenge the structures that assign wealth and poverty to individuals and societies. At Bethel, we are working to provide students with an understanding of the complexity of poverty and oppression and the history of injustice in our world, including the role that religious systems have sometimes played in perpetuating injustice.

The third component in increasing student capacity to engage in relational justice involves increasing intercultural competency. If we expect our

⁴⁴ R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ P. T. Vogt, "Social Justice and the Vision of Deuteronomy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008): 35–44.

students to build relationships with those who do not share their values or worldview, we must help them develop the relational capacities to make that possible. At Bethel, we are committed to improving intercultural competency through assessment, training, and opportunities for experience. All students who enter a degree program are given an initial assessment using the Intercultural Development Inventory. Individual feedback is provided along with guidance in creating a plan for development. Further training is provided in a required course on culture. In this course, students are instructed in the basic building blocks of culture and are taught to recognize and adapt to cultural difference. Further training in intercultural competence is available in a number of advanced classes. Some students are initially surprised to have cultural diversity framed as part of spiritual formation, but most respond to a biblical rationale focused on Jesus. Our Dean of Intercultural Relations, Dr. Mark Harden, has quantitative program evaluation data indicating it is possible to move our students along the developmental continuum as described in Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.⁴⁶

Finally, as students are learning about culture and growing in their capacity to relate to the other, they are given a variety of opportunities to experience cultural difference and to practice using their new skills. Many classes include an experiential component that gets students out into the community and asks them to apply what they have learned in a practical setting. It is our intention to use this combination of training, assessment, and experience to build student capacity to live out justice in community.

As students enter this intentional crucible, it is critical to pay attention to the container that will hold them through the process. Students must have access to multiple support systems that will provide assistance in managing the inevitable anxiety that will arise. At Bethel, we have chosen a support system that contains numerous entry points. Students are provided with coordinated support through the office of student life, the office of the Dean of Intercultural Relations, the office of spiritual formation, the office of supervised ministry, and the on-campus counseling center.

RELATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The Center for Spiritual and Personal Formation at Bethel Seminary has included many people working on strategies to enhance spiritual formation for nearly fifteen years, though our own experience is deepest in the marriage and family therapy (MFT) department. In the MFT program, we have developed an integrative approach to formation based on the princi-

⁴⁶ M. J. Bennett, "Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity," in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, ed. M. Paige (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993), 21–71.

ples of relational spirituality described in this article. The specific relational strategies bridge curricular and para-curricular applications and include context-setting guidelines regarding expectations for intra- and interpersonal patterns of human interaction. Our strategies emerge from our educational setting, but these relational strategies can be adapted for use within church and other community settings. We utilize Parker Palmer's relational view of formation as "soul work done in community" and from the operational assumption that a community which can support and encourage authentic seeking will not happen without intentionality.⁴⁷ Diana Chapman Walsh's description of the transformational crucible in the leadership literature (which resonates with Schnarch's therapy model) as the "very intentional and specific holding space where people can get on with doing difficult adaptive work" guides our view that transformational crucibles are shaped and maintained by the relational expectations and example of community leaders.⁴⁸

The first of these relational expectations is communicated during new student orientation when the anxiety inherent in encountering both self and "otherness" is explicitly acknowledged. This anxiety is likened to a small rock that each student is responsible to hold and manage; it is not to be handed off to faculty members, fellow students, or family members nor is it permissible to fling one's "rock" at members of one's community. We believe that developing an increasing capacity to self-soothe, thereby reducing anxiety, is integral to an individual's willingness to enter and ability to tolerate the crucible of transformation and so we encourage students to identify and implement self-soothing techniques. Forms of contemplative prayer can be helpful for self-soothing, although we also try to encourage differentiation by inviting students to take the lead in discovering their own self-soothing strategies.

Secondly, all course syllabi include a set of guidelines for group interaction designed to create a relational container in which students can safely and authentically experience seeking in all its complexity and can grow through it to greater maturity. Our expectation that each member of the community will *presume and extend welcome* speaks to the inclusive and reciprocal relationships we seek to engender. The injunction to *refrain from fixing, saving, or setting straight others in the group* acknowledges Palmer's notion that, "what we have before us is not a 'problem to be solved' but a mystery to be honored. As we find a way to stand respectfully on the edge of that mystery, we start to see that all of our relationships would be deepened if we could play the fixer role less frequently."⁴⁹ We trust that when the soul is welcomed, without a change agenda, the outcomes can be transformational.

⁴⁷ P. J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 57.

⁴⁸ D. C. Walsh, *Trustworthy Leadership* (Fetzer Institute, 2006), 21.

⁴⁹ Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 61.

We also value *dialogue*, which starts with a question, over debate, which begins with an answer. The growth cycle of seeking requires living into questions as a spiritual discipline, a process best supported by relationships in which individuals ask *open, honest questions* arising from a differentiated stance and embrace virtues that support authentic interactions and second-order change. Furthermore, mature alterity is more likely to be experienced when individuals are able to *both* advocate their principles, values, and beliefs in ways that invite inquiry and demonstrate self-reflection *and* to invite others to do the same.

Another core feature of our relational approach is a commitment on the part of the faculty of the marriage and family therapy program to attend to our own growth and competence as well as to our own relational dynamics. We want to live as trustworthy leaders who embody the guidelines we hold out to our students. We try to be leaders who are capable of questioning ourselves and who engage in nurturing mutual relationships that function as circles of support and which also invite candid feedback. When disputes emerge, we know it is important to explore them respectfully and to allow our differences to be valued as a source of creativity. We also found that spending two years together in group spiritual direction as an MFT department helped us gain new insights about the relational process we wanted to facilitate with students.

These contextual and relational commitments inform a curriculum designed to engage students in the adaptive work that may result in greater maturity. One of the fundamental relational boundaries all students (and all Christians) must learn to navigate is that of gender. In our foundational formation course, students are challenged to identify ways that gender has influenced their journey and how their experiences might be different from that of “the other.” Genogram analysis includes an invitation to reflect on what it meant to be male/female in one’s family of origin. Students are encouraged to examine the role of language, culture, and history in constructing gender identity while simultaneously holding the anxiety this exploration may provoke. Like other types of alterity, gender differences can raise anxiety, and we believe that part of spiritual maturity is developing a differentiated capacity to relate to both genders.

Theory courses expose students to diverse perspectives, inviting them to wrestle with making sense of a variety of frameworks and to listen for that which they can employ with integrity. Texts, videos, readings, and guest speakers are selected with the intention of including a broad spectrum of voices and viewpoints. Some courses require students to engage, outside of class, with families in contexts with which they are less familiar or comfortable. We recognize that, at the process-level, this diversity of perspectives will likely create anxiety and dissonance for students. All courses include reflective assignments that provide the opportunity for students to attend to how they are experiencing this educational process and, hopefully, contribute to an intersubjective sense that faculty and staff are attuned to their experiences as students. Formation reflection groups and an

annual formation retreat are also incorporated into the curriculum to offer support and connection during the growth process. Facilitated by skilled practitioners, these encounters serve as relational containers where students can explore their own stories and questions and where they can learn to hold the stories and questions of others in respectful, differentiated ways.

Para-curricular applications of the relational spirituality model afford significant opportunities to work with students developmentally and to focus on process over content. Integrated with curricular offerings and goals, these efforts are directed at helping students come to understand themselves and others better. Using aggregate data derived from formal assessment inventories, self- and peer-evaluation forms, and faculty observations, students receive feedback in the context of guided development conversations during which they are invited to take a look at themselves and how they relate to others as pathways to growth. Student-initiated personal and professional development plans serve as the basis for ongoing dialogue regarding the strengths and challenges relevant to each student's formation. The formal practicum readiness process focuses specifically on the degree to which students demonstrate (in the classroom and in their informal interactions with faculty and peers) appropriate personal and interpersonal boundaries, respect for diverse opinion, integrative conceptual capacities, and appropriate use of self. These formational/self-of-therapist emphases are equally critical to achieving successful training program outcomes as are the accumulation of theoretical knowledge and development of clinical skills. Again, we have learned as faculty and staff that being relationally-accessible and maintaining or cultivating a secure attachment with students is critically necessary as we ask them to tolerate the anxiety of facing difficult feedback.

We are obviously describing applications of our model from our graduate seminary context. However, our involvement in dialogue and consultation work has led us to find that these relational principles can be employed for spiritual formation in church and ministry contexts. We have found that communicating clear understandings of healthy boundaries, inviting awareness of relational dynamics, recognizing the formative value of attending to diversity, providing opportunities for relational feedback and support in community, and modeling differentiation as leaders represent formative relational strategies that can be adapted for many contexts.

Underpinning each of the strategies described above is the goal of promoting capacities for intimacy and alterity. Walsh (2006) observes that “we are not going to learn how to engage ‘the other’—that is, understand and bridge the profound differences that divide and define us—unless we are willing to bring our curiosity and our full selves into an unfamiliar meaning system—an alternative epistemology—and try as best we can to make our own sense of it.”⁵⁰ To this end, in our context, our relational strategies are integratively designed to create opportunities for experience and reflection

⁵⁰ Walsh, *Trustworthy Leadership*, 5–6

that serve to move people toward increasingly complex and differentiated ways of relating to self, others, and God.

CONCLUSION

We have described a Trinitarian and differentiation-based relational model of spirituality that suggests relationships can form containers or crucibles for potential transformation. Transformation requires an intensification of anxiety, and the risks and challenges of spiritual intimacy and alterity offer two relational pathways toward transformation. We have argued that a differentiated approach to relational spirituality can serve to integrate Christian theology and social science in pursuit of the biblical formation goals of *shalom* and *teleios*. Developing mature relational and intercultural capacities in emerging leaders is particularly important for the spiritual formation of the church and our wider communities. Hopefully, the interdisciplinary literature and dialogue on integrative models of spiritual formation in training contexts will continue to grow and contribute to this larger goal through this journal and other venues. As we stated at the outset, we recognize that a diversity of models of spiritual formation and training are being practiced in our various contexts around the world. We look forward to the relational growth and learning that can continue to emerge from differentiated dialogue among those of us engaged in the work of spiritual formation.⁵¹

⁵¹ We dedicate this article to our mentor Dr. Carla M. Dahl and are deeply grateful for her pioneering and generative work in spiritual formation at Bethel Seminary.

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