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**SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION
IN WOMEN WHO WERE PARENTALLY BEREAVED
AS ADOLESCENTS**

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a larger research study that focused on how an adolescent girl's identity development is influenced by the death of a parent. A sample of 18 women was recruited for the study. This article highlights the transformation of these women's spiritual and religious beliefs as part of their identity development following the death of their parents. The different pathways the women took with respect to their views on religion and spirituality are exemplified in what follows, highlighting themes of struggle and connection.

The death of a parent during adolescence often forces an adolescent to reflect on and restructure his or her meaning-making system, world view, and sense of self. During a time of cognitive restructuring, adolescents can turn to religious beliefs held or previously discarded as a way of meaning-making. These beliefs also provide support and help them cope with the unsettled feelings created by the loss (Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Marrone, 1999). Spiritual transformation can be a central part of a person's grieving process (Marrone, 1999). Marrone contends that spiritual growth goes to the inner-workings of identity development as it challenges belief systems and perceptions about life, relationships, death, and our overall worldview.

Religion and spirituality have not been widely considered in adolescent bereavement research, especially with respect to identity development (Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Donnelson, 1999). This article is

based on findings from a study that focused on how an adolescent girl's identity development is influenced by the death of a parent (Cait, 2001). Analysis of the interviews revealed that the respondents were struggling with their spiritual and religious beliefs as a part of their evolving identity development process.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity, Religion, and Spirituality

As a starting point, it is important to clarify the main concepts discussed in this article: identity development, religion, and spirituality. Identity development is understood as a lifelong process. Identity as Josselson (1987) defines it is "a dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world" (p. 11). Our identity encompasses the choices we make, our priorities and the basic tenets that guide our life (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987; Kohut, 1977). It becomes a way to organize our experiences, to understand ourselves and others in relation to us.

Theorists studying women's development outline the centrality of interconnectedness and interpersonal relationships for identity development (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Lyons, 1990; Mahoney, 1996; Miller, 1976; Surrey, 1991). Intersubjectivity, interpersonal and relational theory, consider how the self develops in relationship to other selves and is based on patterns from this interactive process (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Benjamin, 1988; Mitchell, 1988; Sullivan, 1953). Some infant research suggests the our sense of self is based on both "mutual and self-regulation." This means that central to self-development is both an individual ability to control internal and external experiences (stimuli) and also a relational ability developed through our interactions with caretakers (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994; Beebe, Lachmann, & Jaffe, 1997). Shapiro (2001) discusses research by Horowitz and colleagues that addresses self-schemas (representations), based on relational interaction and used to adjust to and control our environments. These schemas are tested in stressful situations such as death. Applying these theories and empirical work to grief and loss Shapiro says, "Grief as a human experience powerfully exposes the interpersonal construction of what only appears to be an isolated, individual self" (p. 301).

Religion can be defined as an external set of guidelines that help us characterize and structure our faith and belief systems; whereas, spirituality is a more abstract subjective set of practices that governs our faith (Walsh, 1999; Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). Spirituality is something that can be innately "felt" without having to be articulated.

Spirituality and religion can be an important piece in identity development, providing a variety of functions for growing children and adolescents in the

process (Balk, 1999; Donnelson, 1999; Lovinger, Miller, & Lovinger, 1999; Marcia, 1980; Marrone, 1999; Rice, 1999). Fowler (1981, 1991) delineates a developmental process for faith development. He contends that faith provides a way for us to order our worlds and help us in understanding and meaning making. Rice (1999) explains that children take the certainty of parents for granted negating the need to question God. Older adolescents can begin to question what has always been taken for granted and purposefully take oppositional religious views to their parents. Developing one's own values and beliefs can be part of the differentiation process and for some forming a negative identity (Erikson, 1968; Rice, 1999). If an adolescent's parent dies, this struggle and questioning can intensify. After a parent's death an adolescent may cling more closely to religion and spirituality as comfort, or may disassociate themselves from a "heartless," powerless God who could not protect the parent. Overall, changes in religiosity can be seen during times of stress and crisis (Donnelson, 1999, James, 1902).

Lovinger, Miller, and Lovinger (1999) use attachment theory and self psychology as a framework to explore the relationship adolescents have with God and their identity development. Kohut (1977), a self-psychologist, discusses the use of "self-objects"—which can be a person, object or experiences—that provide a variety of functions, consistently for the self and are then internalized. These functions can include validation of one's potential, emotional support and soothing. Self-objects help in the creation of a cohesive self-structure and a self that is full of vigor, initiative, ambition and ideals. While parents often provide self-object functions, religion can also provide these important functions and serve as a parent surrogate (Lovinger et al., 1999). The disruption of the parent-child relationship, especially through death, can influence an adolescent's ability to have faith in a higher power. It is also true; however, that when a parent dies, religion as a parental replacement can become particularly meaningful when the consistency of needs met by the parent is disrupted. In fact, a continuing attachment with the deceased can be attained through a connection with God (Donnelson, 1999; Lovinger et al., 1999). In contrast, for those who are angry with their parents for dying and feel abandoned, they might distance themselves from God and religion. As such, religion can be a tool for expressing various attachment styles (Donnelson, 1999; Lovinger et al., 1999).

New bereavement research challenges old conceptions of what is useful in the grieving process by presenting data that supports the ways in which children construct inner representations and connections to the dead parents (Klass, 1987-88, 1988; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Nickman, Silverman, & Normand, 1998; Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990; Rubin, 1985; Silverman, 2000; Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992) These connections can allow children and adolescents to accommodate to living without the parent. A number of writers (Baker, 2001; Klass & Walter, 2001; Normand, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Silverman et al., 1992) have discussed a variety of strategies that children, adolescents, and adults use to maintain connections with the deceased. These range

from talking about and to the deceased, using the deceased as a moral referent to experiencing the deceased's presence, keeping objects of the deceased, and becoming a "living legacy." Theories on maintaining attachments and "continuing bonds" with the deceased acknowledge the interconnected part of ourselves.

Klass and Walter (2001) trace the religious movement from Catholicism to the Protestant reformation and with it "the rejection of human bonds that continued after death" (p. 434). Catholicism allowed for more direct contact between the deceased and the living. Klass and Walter argue that in a social and historical context where the church and state are tied, the government can maintain its control over people through the church. The church became the portal to God negating the importance of maintaining connections to the souls of the deceased. When the church/state felt secure, new strains of Protestantism allowed for a more individual and direct connect with God and the supernatural. More freedom of expression follows as a natural result.

The middle part of the 19th century saw the rise of "Spiritualism" with its séances, "spirit circles," and the use of Ouija boards to facilitate connection with the deceased. Women became the conduits for communication with the deceased. Spiritualism, and through it a continuing bond with the deceased, became an antidote for grieving (Goldsmith, 1998; Rosenblatt, 1983, 1996; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1996).

Women, particularly adolescent females, were integrally connected to and dominated Spiritualism (Goldsmith, 1998). It is not surprising that a number of the leading pioneers in the women's suffrage and equality movement in the United States were deeply involved with spiritualism. Women who were relegated to domestic life suddenly saw other women attaining power and status supposedly with the help of the supernatural. Individual women felt empowered by new leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Victoria Woodhall to fight for rights they never imagined were possible. "Spiritualism and woman's rights drew from the same well: Both were responses to the control, subjugation, and repression of women by church and state" (p. 49).

Recent research studies support the belief that women are somewhat more religious than men (Anderson, 1988; Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Benson, Donahue, & Erikson, 1989; King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997; Ozorak, 1996; Tamminen, 1994). For women, the relational connection to God as healer seems to be important, whereas men gravitate to the "all-powerful knower" imagery of God (Ozorak, 1996). Women seem to be more religious than men; however, contrary to their roots in "Spiritualism," their role in organized religion is usually secondary to that of men. This paradox can leave some feeling like outsiders, can create tension for them and can ultimately influence their views (Donnelson, 1999).

There is a gap in research that explores how an adolescent's religious views and/or spirituality is influenced as a part of identity development after a parent's death. The following report on this study of adolescent grief highlights the

variety of ways the girls' relationship to religion and spirituality changed after the death of their parents.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study reported on in this article used a single sample, cross-sectional approach (flexible-method descriptive research) to gather in-depth data about the impact of the death of a parent on the evolving identity of adolescent girls (Anastas, 1999). Eligibility criteria were that the participants were female and had a parent die between the ages of 11 and 18. A sample of 18 female students (one was a former student) was selected from two all-female colleges in western Massachusetts. The age range of the women when they were interviewed was from 19-45 years with a mean age of 24 years and the age range at time of parent's death was from 11-17 years with a mean age of 14.5 years. Eight women had fathers die and ten women experienced the death of their mothers. The age of the parents at the time of their deaths ranged from 39 to 76 with a mean age of 50 years. The leading cause of death was cancer at 55.6% followed by heart-related illnesses at 16.7%. The subjects were primarily Caucasian at 83.8 %. One woman identified as Caucasian and Puerto Rican. One subject identified as Latina and one person identified as Egyptian and Iraqi. The time that had elapsed from the parent's death until the interview was 2-27 years.

While data was not collected on socioeconomic status of the women or their families for the study, it is important to comment on the culture of the institutions from where the sample was collected. Both colleges were established to promote higher education for women and to support their intellectual development. The school environments encourage the exploration of a variety of ideas from different fields of study. The women are educated to "lead and change the world," to think for themselves and develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and conviction. See Table 1 for further sample demographics.

An original semi-structured interview was used to gather data on the main areas of question in the study. Information collected from the respondents focused on the nature of the relationship with the deceased parent as characterized by the surviving daughter. This included the relationship at the time of the loss and the revised relationship after the death. For example one question asked "Can you tell me what your mother and father are (were) like? Has this changed since the death? Since you entered college? How so?" One of the areas in the interview guide focused on identity and, as a part of this, the subjects were asked about friendships, intimate/love relationships, religious beliefs, occupation/education and worldview (Josselson, 1987). For example one question asked, "How do you think your parent's death affected you in the following areas?" One area asked about was religious beliefs.

The data in this study was analyzed according to the principles of the "general method of comparative analysis" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1) and was

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Name	Age at death	Age when interviewed	Years elapsed since death	Race	Sex of parent	Parent's age at death	Cause of death
Celia	12	20	8	Caucasian	Father	45	Heart attack
Alysa	16	21	5	Caucasian	Mother	52	Stroke/Aneurysm
Zulaiika	13	19	6	Egyptian/Iraqi	Mother	40	Cancer
Emily	12	29	17	Caucasian	Mother	52	Cancer
Ruth	17	19	2	Caucasian	Mother	52	Blood clot in lung
Jackie	16	19	3	Caucasian	Mother	45	Cancer
Mattie	13	22	9	Caucasian	Father	46	Cancer
Susan	14	45	31	Caucasian	Mother	45	Cancer
Janet	15	19	4	Latina	Father	76	Heart attack
Julie	17	20	3	Latina	Mother	40	Blood disorder
Luanne	14	35	21	Caucasian	Mother	43	Cancer
Sophie	15	42	27	Caucasian	Father	56	Blood clot in lung
Toby	17	23	6	Caucasian	Mother	39	Heart failure
Michelle	15	21	6	Caucasian	Father	41	Liver disease
Caitlin	15	30	15	Caucasian	Father	46	Cancer
Marjorie	17	22	5	Caucasian	Father	62	Cancer
Eleni	13	21	8	Caucasian	Father	76	Cancer
Sally	11	20	9	Caucasian	Mother	43	Cancer

guided by the method of grounded theory as explicated in Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1978), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). In using the method of “constant comparison” to analyze the data, categories were created where similar concepts were grouped together through the process of comparison. The categories created—higher-level abstract umbrella concepts—consisted of both properties and dimensions as defining elements of the grieving process for the women. The “constant comparison” method used involved a variety of specific coding/analysis procedures—open, axial, and selective coding—to consistently generate theory that has its roots in the data.

A tension arises between the strict use of grounded theory as a methodology and the establishment of specific areas addressed in the interview guide, including the section on identity. Having said this there was no attempt to “confirm” or not confirm a particular theory or to analyze the data according to already established theories on identity statuses (Marcia, 1966). Rather, the categories were used as a guide for focusing the interview discussion.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The findings reflect the process the subjects went through after their parents’ deaths and how that was integrated into their sense of self. These findings are based on the participants’ memories of growing, their experiences and development after the death. I identified three major themes that were reflected in the subjects’ experience after their parent’s death: 1) constructing a relationship to the deceased; 2) shifting family dynamics; and 3) titrated grieving (Cait, 2001). These were all connected to identity development. I found that through an evolving process following the parental death, the respondents learned more about their deceased parents, their surviving parents and themselves. Different factors— a) development, b) meaning-making, and c) function—influenced the women’s process in each area. As each respondent developed, she viewed the death and the deceased differently, her relationships with family shifted, and her grieving process changed. Her way of making meaning of the death was altered. As the women’s grieving process evolved so did their choices for themselves and their guiding principles. Their choices around their education, profession, friendships, intimate relationships, and feelings about religion and spirituality were integrally connected and influenced by the process they moved through after the parent’s death. This article will specifically focus on the transformation of their religious beliefs and spirituality.

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS PATHWAYS

Before their parent’s death, some of the women had already started a process of questioning religion and thinking about it in a more abstract way. These women had to confront their questions in a much different way once their parents died.

The death of the parent marked the beginning of a struggle with their views on religion. This oscillation was characterized by feelings of anger at God for letting the parent die contrasted to the comfort that religion/spirituality provided.

The two main themes that captured the women's experience were *struggle* and *connection*. The struggle and connection were often complementary and diverging: while all of the young women went through an ongoing process in their struggle with their religion/spirituality, it was punctuated by wanting to maintain a connection with the deceased. Maintaining a bond to the deceased helped the women in identifying themselves in relation to the deceased. They were not clear how to do this without a link to some form of religion or spirituality. Hence, the struggle. If these women relinquished a tie to religion, were they forfeiting the continuing association to their parents? Some women attempted to detach themselves from religion and others did not adhere to any religious faith; however, when interviewed all of the young women had indicated they found some religious or spiritual way of maintaining a connection to the deceased. It was through religion and/or a sense of spirituality that the women located the deceased and believed that the parent continued to exist albeit not in a physical form. Whether through self-developed spirituality or more formalized religion, the women used this avenue to create some meaning around their parent's deaths.

The women in the study followed different paths with respect to their changing views on religion and spirituality. Of the women interviewed, four women both pushed religion away while simultaneously pulling it towards themselves. Five women attempted to detach themselves from religion and belief in God after the death; two women's religious beliefs were strengthened; five women were never religious before or after the death; one woman's core belief in God remained the same. The final subject started thinking more seriously about God's existence, though she connects this more to her development than to the death of her parent. The different pathways the women took with respect to their views on religion and spirituality are exemplified in what follows, highlighting themes of struggle and connection.

Push-Pull

Some women rejected structured religion but also desperately wanted to have faith in something that could help them understand the death of their parent. These women wanted to push religion away and pull it in at the same time. Emily, 12 at the time of her mother's death, discussed her internal conflict around religion and the stages she felt she had moved through. As a teenager she thought,

Anyone that believes in anything is stupid. But also at the same time desperately wanting to believe in something to give meaning because I was like struck with how can life be like this that the most important person in my life is gone . . . so it is a weird catch in-between . . . searching for a way to be spiritual but being unable to embrace any particular religion.

Emily, confused by the death of her mother, wanted to shut religion out of her life: "I had a whole lot of anger. I thought how can there be a spiritual entity in the world if this could happen." At the same time she thought that having some faith might help her create some meaning around this devastating event in her life and comfort her. Emily struggled, as seems developmentally appropriate, with holding both her need for and her uncertainty about religion and God. In high school Emily began to take a variety of courses, philosophy of religion, psychology, Eastern religions, as a way to help her understand her mother's death. In fact, she said that she was almost going to be a religion major in college.

Emily's mother's death influenced her choices of academic study in high school, which shaped her interests and a part of who she is. Emily used religion and spirituality to find meaning in her mother's death and to create a bond with her mother. Early in the interview talking about her mother she said, "my mom always said that she felt closer to God on a hilltop than in the church." Later in the interview when specifically asked about religion, Emily stated that her mother has really influenced her in this area and repeated the same words: "because of her I can feel just as close to God on a hilltop as I can in church." While still questioning her faith, it is clear that Emily has developed a sense of spirituality, similar to her mother's, to feel connected to her.

Ruth was 17 when her mother died. Ruth also discussed her struggle with religion: "I was always just questioning my whole life and when she died I felt like it was something that I had to confront. And so I did; I thought about it a lot more. I still don't know exactly what I believe. I believe in God and I believe in my mom and that's really all I need." While Ruth remembered always questioning religion and God's existence these questions became much more pertinent after the death. Ruth, older than Emily, was at a place in her development where she could deal with the ambiguities in her faith and belief system. She could think in an abstract manner, believing that there is more to existence even though she could not prove it. In talking about her religious views Ruth said:

I definitely doubted them . . . but at the same time that I pushed away the definite facts of Christianity, I pulled in Christianity itself and just embraced it. Like I do believe in God and I do believe in a lot of things that I can't put into words and I do believe that we don't know exactly what's going on, what's out there . . .

Ruth's words illustrate her struggle in pushing away a structured form of religion and embracing perhaps a more abstract self-defined religion. For Ruth, her dilemma is accentuated by a need to believe that there is "more out there than this": the transcendental nature of life. She needed to believe that there is life beyond death as a way of locating her mother somewhere and maintaining a connection to her.

Both Emily and Ruth have used spirituality and religion as a way to help organize and understand their new experience. Religion and spirituality provides

a bridge to the external reality of the loss while also enabling them to remain connected to the deceased. This helps in providing a sense of continuity for their sense of self.

From Detachment to Connection

Celia, 12 years old when her father died, always felt closest to him through religion. She was very angry at her father for dying and abandoning her. Celia was also angry at God for having taken her father. Like Ruth, Celia's struggle with religion and God is influenced by her development after her father's death. Celia, younger than Ruth at the time of her father's death, found it difficult to hold an image of both a negative and positive God. At first Celia attempted to detach herself from her faith, but by doing this she also found she had separated herself from her father and his death: She said:

When my dad died, I stopped going to church. It was like if I do believe in God, he took away my father. . . . Now I guess instead of not believing in God, I don't really know if God exists. And just in the last semester, I realized that this [religion] is really important to me and why have I ignored it for so long. I think that I kind of stopped being religious to sort of disassociate myself from him [her father] and I kind of feel that is how I am going to be close with him again.

Celia's views on religion shifted as she learned more about her father and understood her own feelings differently. As she worked through her feelings of anger and abandonment, she wanted to reconnect with her father. She realized that religion could create that bridge and help her have a continuing relationship with her father.

Jackie was 16 when her mother died. She said that she "wanted nothing to do with Catholicism" after her mother's death. She discussed her transformation:

Even though my religion is declining, my spirituality is building where I do have a very strong faith in God, where I do believe in heaven. I think a lot of those qualities were there before my mother's death but I didn't realize what they were. I didn't realize the bearing that they would have on my life. That they would carry me through and what that would mean for me. I mean just the very fact that I pray . . . I pray to God and to my mother interchangeably.

Before her mother's death, Jackie, in an attempt to differentiate from her very religious mother, started distancing herself from organized religion. After her mother's death, she no longer felt the same need to dis-identify with her mother. While initially wanting nothing to do with Catholicism, she began to realize the importance of faith and spirituality in her life. Spirituality helped her cope (its function) after her mother's death. Spirituality allowed her to place her mother in heaven and communicate with her through prayer.

For Celia and Jackie, their religious and spiritual transition is marked by their development and a need at first to differentiate from parents for whom religion was very important. Both girls, by originally distancing themselves from religion and leading a life without it, were developing a “negative identity” (Erikson, 1959). While not being religious is not generally seen as “dangerous,” for these girls rejecting their parents religion could be seen as somewhat “deviant,” allowing them to identify as separate and different from the deceased.

Strengthening Beliefs

The young women discussed in the above two groups deliberated about their faith, questioning its importance in their life. Ultimately they came to recognize religion or a form of spirituality as a way of preserving a bond to the deceased, as a way of helping them to create some meaning and comfort for themselves around the death. The following examples are of young women who have not only maintained their faith in God and religion after their parent’s death but felt that the death strengthened their beliefs.

Zulaika, 13 when her mother died, struggled with the fact that her religion, Christianity, told her not to ask questions. She knew that dealing with her mother’s death was a process and that this process would strengthen her beliefs:

I think it has strengthened them definitely. It is really easy to say have faith and be good and do this and just believe that God is always there and don’t ask why. It’s really easy to say those things but you really have to experience it to know to get through it and deal with every single thing. Deal with the death, deal with the acceptance, deal with the design, deal with the thing that you’re accepting but not sure and have a really long way to go.

Zulaika’s faith helped her cope with the death; however, Zulaika found it difficult not to question her mother’s death. When interviewed as a 19 year old, Zulaika was able to balance what her religion told her and also respect her internal process. She understood that dealing with her mother’s death and accepting it would be a “life long process.” She did not need to sacrifice her religious faith to honor herself.

Janet was 15 when her father died and came from a non-religious home. Janet’s mother took her to church, but she thinks that was “more of a social thing” for her. Her father was Catholic but not an “active Catholic.” Janet became very religious after her father’s death, but she said she was never “zealous about it.” She said, “I found comfort in religion. I found comfort in the fact that he was in heaven.” Janet discussed the profound role of religion and spirituality in helping her cope with her father’s death.

. . . And I guess because of my faith in God and religion at the time, I saw his death as a good thing because he was so sick and suffering so much that he was finally relieved of all that. I used to have dreams of my father coming to me. I always saw that as his spirit coming to me in hard times.

Though Janet's family was never very religious, her father's death shifted her own values and beliefs. Janet's increasing religiosity allowed her to place her father in heaven. It also allowed her to maintain a bond with him, and provided a soothing haven from her grief.

Upon entering college, Janet said that she started to question her faith again. Her roommate in college identified herself as a "Christian," though Janet found her views very "conservative" and "critical." In discussing her roommate, Janet said, "she talks about how certain things are wrong and that bothers me." Janet said that she had started to look towards other religions not because she did not believe in God but "more so just to see what I can do to become a better person." Soon after her father's death Janet found religion and spirituality crucial in her grieving process. As the years passed, her needs changed. At first religion helped her to create meaning around her father's death. Once in college and exposed to people who are religious but whose values contradicted her own, she reassessed her religion. As Janet focused on her own self-development—"to become a better person"—she wanted religion to serve another purpose in her life.

Though Janet was questioning her religion, religion still allowed her to connect to her father. Janet really admired her father and his values: that he loved people and always wanted to help them. Her father was a doctor and would often work for very little compensation. Janet's search for a religion(s) that would allow her to become a better person parallels her image of her father. In this way Janet's identity can mirror that of her father's.

From Not Religious to Self-Created Spirituality

Some young women never considered themselves religious before or after the death; however, they found themselves developing their own spiritual beliefs after the death of their parent. This sense of spirituality allowed them to maintain a connection to the deceased and have faith in the continuing presence of the parent.

Caitlin, 15 when her father died, claimed that religion was never really a part of her life; and got no reassurance from it. She found herself very angry thinking that, "any God who was supposed to be merciful would not do such a thing." Caitlin explained her evolving process:

Spirituality now . . . I think that I believe that there is a presence; I believe that there are spirits. I got into a car accident and my car was totaled and I lucked out without a scratch and I remember thinking—that was Dad. And I think that there is a spiritual connection between people and maybe that's my way of comforting.

The meaning Caitlin created from her safe escape from the car accident was that her father, his spirit, was watching over her. While she could not see God in this benevolent role because God allowed her father to die, it was easier for her to imagine that it was her father. Because of her self-developed spirituality

Caitlin located her father in a spirit world and in this way maintained an on-going attachment to him. This was her comfort.

Sophie, also 15 when her father died, asserted that she was “allergic to organized religion. . . . I never believed in Christianity. I never believed in God and all that stuff. . . . It didn’t mean anything to me. It didn’t then and doesn’t now.” While she emphasized her lack of identification with religion she still felt spiritual and this provided a way for her to connect to her father:

I feel spiritual and like have a spirituality, but it’s more individual and more connected to the earth. . . . I sort of have this sense that my connection with the ocean, which is very important to me really comes a lot from being a little kid in Hawaii and living across the street from the beach. And he loved the ocean too, so I have that connection with him . . .

Sophie’s sense of spirituality, her belief in something greater than herself involving earth and water, allowed her to connect to her father.

For Caitlin and Sophie it was important they maintain some attachment to their deceased parent. Both struggled with the extent to which any organized religion or spirituality could play a role in their lives and be helpful to them; both felt connected to their parents and felt their parent’s presence in an abstract intuitive manner.

Religion and a sense of spirituality can offer answers about death, it can help people make sense of their experience. As the young women struggled to understand who they were with out their parent, they also struggled with whether or not to be part of an organized religion. Some needed and were able to create their own spirituality that helped them understand their experience. The previous excerpts from the data highlight the transformation in these young women’s selves and in their beliefs about religion and spirituality.

LIMITATIONS

The sample on which the research is based was very homogeneous. It is important to explore how the death of a parent and their surviving children’s views about religion and spirituality can be influenced by culture, race, religion, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to name some contextual influences. The lack of diversity in the sample limits the extent of the research.

The data for this study was collected after the death of the parent. As such, all of the stories are told in retrospect. The women in this study were interviewed at distinct points in their lives and their answers reflected their views on religion and spirituality at the point in time when interviewed. The answers might shift if the women were interviewed a month, a year, five years, or 10 years later. As the women develop, they clearly reflect on their experiences differently and the point in their life cycle when they are reflecting on the death will influence their answers.

It was very important for these women to know that the deceased had a presence in their lives. Religion and/or spirituality helped these women know that the deceased was still connected to, cared about, and watched over them. Connection was an important theme. It is difficult to know whether religion and spirituality would have played a similar or different role in the lives of men.

DISCUSSION

This article has focused on religious and spiritual beliefs as part of identity development and how the death of a parent has affected transformation in this area. Our identity, in part, is related to how we comprehend and organize our experience. Walsh (1999) explains that spirituality can help, “predict the future and offer pathways toward understanding the ultimate meanings of life and existence” (p. 6) (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). In this way, spirituality can provide a sense of continuity for self and identity at a time when our sense of permanence and connection can be shattered.

While some argue that all adolescents begin to question religion and God, statistics presented in Walsh’s (1999) book debunk this myth. The statistics widely depict adolescents as a group of believers adhering to a set of religious principles in theory and action. Statistics also demonstrate that it is in college that later age adolescents begin to question religion and more actively disassociate themselves from it. While some of the women in this study began questioning their religious beliefs before the death, they more actively, regardless of age, started to question their faith following the parent’s death. The women in this study, after their parent’s death, reflect on existence, theirs and others, and their values to help them understand what happens when people die and what will happen to themselves after death. Spiritual transformation and consciousness can also shift parallel to emotional and cognitive development and with more intense reflection on our life and our values (Fowler, 1981, 1991).

Examples from this research data illustrate how the young women’s views on religion shift depending on development and experiences after the death. Religion and spirituality helped some of the young women in the study create some meaning around the parent’s death and understanding of where it fits in their life. Other young women originally distanced themselves from religion as a way of differentiating from the deceased parent for whom religion was very important. In time, when they were able to re-connect with the deceased, their understanding of the importance of religion and spirituality in their lives shifted.

The women in this study found themselves in a paradoxical dilemma. The image construed of any higher/supreme being is often that of a benevolent person. How then can this benevolent person allow a parent to die, a cruel act indeed, and also be compassionate and trusted? Even if one believes this higher power has a reason for what happened, as Zulaika says, it is enormously complicated to deal with the “acceptance” and the “design.”

Melanie Klein, an object relations theorist, helps us understand the complexity of the situation. She suggests that when a person is able to accept and hold both the negative and positive aspects of an individual, a person's complexity, they have reached the "depressive position." She explains that often it is far less complicated to believe that a person is either "all loving" or "all-bad" (Klein, 1948). It seems that for those young women in the study who have been believers in God or a higher power, maintaining their belief means still holding God as all loving or having to face the complexity of sustaining their belief in a God that is both good and bad. For the young women in the study who maintained their faith in God, for those whose faith was strengthened, for those who distanced themselves from religion, and for those who developed a sense of spirituality, they struggled with preserving an image of a higher power that could be both benevolent and malevolent.

Experiencing the death of a parent upsets our existence and challenges our expectations about mortality and immortality. Death is difficult to control, almost impossible to explain and understand especially when it happens "off-time" and evokes feelings of helplessness (Neugarten, 1979). It disturbs our sense of mastery over life. Fleming and Adolph (1986) discuss mastery and control as one of the issues of adolescent bereavement that interfaces with adolescent development. For adolescents already struggling with mastery issues, parental death can intensify their need for control. The women in this study attempted to use religion and, when this was not possible, spirituality, not only as a way to understand their parents' deaths but also to have some control over their circumstances. Religion and spirituality can offer answers to questions asked about death and can also be shaped to fit the individual needs of those asking the questions. Since self-schemas are developed as a means of control and these schemas are disrupted after the death of a parent (Shapiro, 2001), the construction of new schemas for re-developing that sense of control seem very important.

Other women in the study derived a sense of control through being able to "locate" the deceased parent. Knowing that there is a place where the parent "lives" or belongs can provide the survivors with a sense of mastery. Silverman, Nickman, and Worden (1992) discuss different strategies that the children in their study used to maintain a connection to the deceased parent. One approach the children used was placing their parents somewhere after the death. Locating the deceased parent as a way to maintain an ongoing connection with him or her seemed very important to the women in this study. For some women, locating the parent was done through religion and for others it happened through a sense of spirituality.

In the 19th century, the new "Spiritualism" was a form of self-defined religion by women. By communicating with the dead, these women were provided with a sense of power and control that they had hitherto not experienced. Spiritualism provided the women of these times a form of self-expression (Goldsmith, 1998). This study reveals both the individualistic and relational nature of both religion

and spirituality. For the women who maintained their belief in religion, they shaped it to fit their individual belief systems. For those who relinquished belief in formalized religion, they created a spirituality that could help connect them to the deceased. The women use religion and spirituality as both an individualistic tool for self-expression and as a relational tool to connect to the deceased parent. The women spoke about religion and spirituality with strong conviction. They used religion and spirituality as a way of expressing their views on the world, the people in it, and on relationships. For the women in this study, by virtue of their choice of educational institutions, knowledge, self-exploration, and expression are very important values. The schools from which the sample was derived espouse these values. In light of infant research that conceptualizes self-development in terms of both self and mutual regulation, it makes sense that these women use religion and spirituality to express individuality and to connect to the deceased (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994; Beebe, Lachmann, & Jaffe, 1997).

This study highlights the women's adherence to some form of religion or the creation of an inwardly derived spirituality, to preserve a connection with the deceased parent. This was even important for women who had little or no religious beliefs.

At times the connection meant being able to locate or place the deceased, believing that s/he continued on in a spiritual sense. Or at times the connection came through feeling similarly toward religion or spirituality as the parent did. The link to the deceased was important for the women's identity. That is, feeling connected to the deceased meant that the women could say who I am is in part tied to you (the deceased) through what you did, how you lead your life, and what was important to you. It seems, then, that it is the continued bond with the deceased that is reassuring, and that religion or spirituality provides a conduit for sustaining the relationship.

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