



# Spirituality in narratives of meaning

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This article forms part of a study which was inspired by the ever-growing need for significance expressed both by my life coaching and pastoral therapy clients as well as the need for existential meaning reported both in the lay press and academic literature. The study reflected on a life that matters with a group of co-researchers in a participatory action research relationship. The study has been positioned within pastoral theology and invited the theological discourse into a reflection of existential meaning. Adopting a critical relational constructionist epistemology, the research was positioned within a postmodern paradigm. The implications for meaning and research were explored and described. This article tells the story of how spirituality was positioned in the narratives of meaning by my fellow researchers.

*Spirituality is theology on two feet.*  
(Bowe 2003)

## Introduction

This article forms part of a study which was inspired by the ever-growing need for significance expressed both by my life coaching and pastoral therapy clients as well as the need for existential meaning reported both in the lay press and academic literature. The study reflected on a life that matters with a group of co-researchers<sup>1</sup> in a participatory action research relationship. The study has been positioned within pastoral theology and invited the theological discourse into a reflection of existential meaning.

One of the themes that were identified by the research community, was that meaning in life is often associated with the Divine. This was languaged in different ways. The web page of the company where the research was conducted declares that God is always in control, thus creating a context within which, I believe, my fellow researchers felt more at ease to introduce the sacred and the Divine into our conversations.

Some participants referred to religion and many mentioned Christianity. One of the co-researchers indicated that she wanted to 'be like Christ', thus suggesting a practical Christo-centric spirituality.

'God' was positioned as central to most of the meaningfulness conversations. One of the co-researchers referred to God in the context of his unchanging nature, whilst another, on more than one occasion, attributed her purpose in life to God, suggesting that she believed He 'pre-destined' her for a specific task. She also said that she believed we 'need to acknowledge God in everything we do' in our pursuit of meaningfulness. Justin, one of the participants to the study, mentioned how he committed himself to God as the centre of his life. His understanding of success and meaningfulness was often closely related to his relationship with God.

Although these narratives of God varied in the way God was portrayed, most of the fellow researchers associated meaningfulness with the Divine or numinous. Seeing that these stories differed so much in terms of how God was 'storied', we decided to group the 'God stories' under the theme of spirituality. Spirituality according to the relational understanding of the discourse (see Carlson, Erickson & Seewald-Marquardt 2002:216–236; Griffith & Griffith 2003:15 in this regard) is also better aligned with the postmodern position which we have adopted in our research.

## Overview of this article

In this article we will journey in relationship with spirituality. On our journey, we will start from the base of our exploratory conversations on meaningful living, positioning this discussion within the bigger dialogue on meaning or a 'life that matters'.

1. In the course of this article, the terms co-researchers, fellow researchers, research panel and research community will be used interchangeably.



The next section of the article will endeavour to link spirituality and meaningful living.

Next, the journey through this article will stop at the research panel's understanding of spirituality. Other perspectives of the discourse will be described and our choice of an understanding specific to the study or relevant to the study will be explained. Once this context has been established, the spirituality narratives of the research group will be related. We will then revisit the topic of spirituality, reflecting on how our understanding of spirituality worked for us in the process of working towards a 'life that matters'.

I will introduce a discussion on the ethics of including spirituality in a process like coaching or therapy.

The article will be concluded by reflecting on the learning about a 'life that matters' through the lens of spirituality.

## Spirituality and meaning

Before we continue with our discussion of spirituality we may want to find out whether other voices share our proposition that a 'life that matters' and spirituality are in a close relationship with each other. In this regard we consulted the literature to determine what was written about spirituality and meaningfulness.

Frankl (2004:115) posits that the meaning in life is to be found in what he calls 'the self-transcendence of human existence' – a discourse which is often associated with spirituality (see for instance Louw 2007:x). Although Frankl does not use the term spirituality, his understanding of a meaningful life is positioned within discourses which are closely related to some of the perspectives of spirituality described later in this article.

Seifert (2002) suggests that spirituality recently has started to become very prominent in meaning studies, taking precedence over other discourses like religiousness and religiosity. She relates this to what she calls 'the internal struggles in the search for meaning' (2002:61). Harris and Purrone (2003) confirm this and add a relational dimension to spirituality. They quote May (1982) who suggested that meaning of life is an element of spirituality.

Valtners Painter (2007:1) boldly states that spirituality can be considered a search for meaning in life in her very interesting article on spirituality and creativity.

A scholar of management, Lips-Wiersma (2002a:385), quotes Neck and Milliman (1994) linking spirituality and the search for meaning in life even in their 'definition' of spirituality. Following Vaill (quoted by Lips-Wiersma 1996:218) she then proceeds to propose that spirituality is intimately involved in individuals' fundamental perceptions about 'who they are, what they are doing, the contributions they are making.' This also suggests that spirituality and identity may be closely related. This is confirmed by Thomas West (2001:38) who associates this spiritual identity with *particular meanings*.

In another paper Lips-Wiersma (2002b) describes the influence of spiritual 'meaning-making' on career behaviour, once again confirming the position of spirituality as a meaning-making construct (2002b:500). Spirituality is also said to be involved in 'existentialist questions' in the workplace such as 'What is the meaning of my work?' and 'Why am I doing this work?' according to Krishnakumar and Neck (2002:154). With reference to the work done by Burack (1999), they also suggest that spirituality is associated with an enhanced sense of personal fulfilment amongst employees (2002:153).

Another author who positioned spirituality in a meaning context was Canale (1993). Adopting a relational approach, he suggested that spirituality is a search for connection in two dimensions, namely with one's self and what he refers to as 'a core reality'. This is a quest for *value and meaning in life*. A Christian understanding of this description of spirituality would position God – as Father, Son and Spirit – as 'core reality'.

Uncertainty and meaningful living share a tension-filled relationship. The educationist, Webster (2002:1), describes how the significance of human existence has become more uncertain, despite advancing standards of living which have improved quantitative aspects of our lives like material wealth and longevity. Quality of life does not follow as a natural consequence of this improvement. In this context he then posits that spirituality is often understood as the search for meaning. In a discussion of uncertainty, Nolan (2006:7) suggests that spirituality may even be an attempt to escape the uncertainties and insecurity of the postmodern era.

Louw (2007:xi) links meaningfulness and the question about a meaningful life to spirituality. Joining Frankl, he refers to the meaning of life as *logos*, suggesting that *soul* and hence spirituality (see the next section of this article), is concerned with the meaning of life. According to him (2007:x) soul is a function of existence (*bestaansfunksie*) describing how we live meaningfully every day.

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996:462) describe how Tillich (1953) *perceived the loss of an ultimate concern (God) in the modern world as the 'decisive event underlying the search for meaning and the despair of it.'*

When I think about spirituality in such practical terms, I am reminded of Michael White's conversation with Hoyt and Combs (1998:33–59) regarding spirituality. In this interview White distinguished between three versions of spirituality, namely *immanent spirituality*, *ascendant spirituality* and *immanent-ascendant spirituality*. *Ascendant spirituality* in this context is explained to refer to forms of spirituality which are 'achieved at planes that are imagined at an altitude above everyday life' (1998:35). This conforms to an understanding of spirituality as concerned with the Divine, the Sacred. According to White, *immanent forms of spirituality* refer to a process of reflecting on one's true self, who one really is.<sup>2</sup> In very elaborate terms he describes this as being engaged by

.....  
2. In this context spirituality is therefore related to identity.



'descending the caverns that are imagined deep below the surface of one's life.' Lastly *immanent-ascending spirituality* combines elements of the first two forms of spiritualities, describing a relationship both with something which is bigger than oneself and with oneself as a relational being. In his own words White (in Hoyt and Combs 1998) describes this as the process of:

being in touch with or having an experience of a soul or the Divine that is deep within oneself and that is manifest through one's relationship with a god who is transcendent. (p. 36)

These three forms of spirituality he calls non-material or intangible and then proceeds to describe what he calls 'spiritualities of the surface'. This is a *material* spirituality which he relates to people's 'identity projects' and which he explains as follows:

when I talk of spirituality I am not appealing to the Divine or the holy ... or human nature ... The notion of spirituality that I am relating to is one that assists us to attend to the material options for breaking from many of the received ways of life – to attend to those events of people's lives that provide the basis for the constitution of identities that are other than those which are given. And in this sense it is a spirituality that has to do with relating to one's material options in a way that one becomes more conscious of one's own knowing. (quoted by Hoyt & Combs 1996:36)

A later section of this article will discuss the ways that my fellow researchers experienced spirituality in their own lives. I will also try to apply the discussion above to indicate how some of the stories of spirituality related to an *ascendant spirituality* (in White's words) and some stories suggested a more *material spirituality* (once again White's terminology).

## Our understanding of spirituality

Any discussion of spirituality usually starts with a definition of the concept. Once again we will not attempt to 'define' spirituality – thereby suggesting that we can delimit the meaning of the concept or implying ambitiously that we can have the final word on spirituality. We would rather describe and share our relationally agreed understanding of spirituality. We will, however, invite some other perspectives on spirituality into this conversation.

Within the scope and limitations of this article I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive historical account of the construct of spirituality, including the history of the use of the term and the breadth of different understandings of spirituality. The paper by Principe (1983:127–141) provides an insightful narrative of spirituality and is well worth reading as it bases spirituality within the Trinity discourse. It also provides a broad historical overview of understandings of spirituality over the ages.

Spirituality is derived from the Latin word *spiritus* meaning breath or the 'animating or vital principle of a person' (Emmons 2006:63). Rolheiser (2004:125) says that we and the whole universe are moment by moment *actively breathed into existence and held by God*. Briskin (1998:17) introduces the Hebrew terms *ruach* and *nephesh*, describing the life-

giving process through which 'breath of life' was literally breathed into the 'dust of the ground' or *adamah* (compare Adam in this regard). *Nephesh* then refers to a 'living soul' or a human being animated by breath. Spirituality is therefore often understood as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in humans. Louw (2007:x) relates *nephesh* (or *nefesj*) as a metaphorical inspiration or gasping for wind to the intuitive human focus on 'that which is more than experience, transcendence, the quality of our relationship with God.' Similar to Briskin's (1998:17, 139) linking of soul, spirituality and meaningfulness, Louw discusses soul as an existential relational matter. In this regard he posits that we are our souls and that we reveal who we are through our attitude within our relational networks, through the way in which we interpret our lives as being meaningful. This is important for our discussion because it creates a relational context not only for spirituality, but also for identity and meaningful living. These constructs are therefore connected in the process. This positions spirituality and meaningfulness within the epistemology adopted in this study.

Nolan (2006:xviii) differentiates between spirituality and theology, suggesting that spirituality concerns itself with experience and practice, whereas theology is focused on doctrines and dogma. This prepares the space to introduce spirituality into the discussion of practical and meaningful living. This provides us with a link to the study topic under discussion in this article, namely meaningful lives.

## Our stories of spirituality

All co-researchers will be referenced in their own words, but by pseudonyms. Although I have paraphrased some of our conversations, where possible the co-researchers will present their stories in their own words; this is done to be true to the ethic of participation which we have adopted throughout the research process. Even when I am reporting their stories, my re-telling of their stories will have been confirmed by my fellow-researchers.

In our discussion on spirituality we agreed to adopt Rolheiser's proposed understanding of spirituality as what we do about our passions in life. Referring to ontological passions, Rolheiser uses the terms longings, fire, desires, energy and eros (1998:6–12, 2004:79). He proposes that we 'define' spirituality as being 'about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros' (1998:11, 2004:79).

I then posed the questions to my co-researchers whether they could tell me a story about their aspirations, ambitions or passions in life, what they did about this and what the outcome of these actions were. Verbatim, my introduction and questions were as follows:

'Let us adopt Rolheiser's understanding of spirituality. Just to refresh your memories: Rolheiser says that we all have a certain longing, a desire, an uneasiness, a passion (ambition, a need for meaning, to be successful, sexuality, to be a good parent, to do something for people in need, to name but a few). What we do with this or the way that we channel this then, he calls our spirituality:



- Tell me about your longings, passions, desires, quests, dreams.
- What do you do about these? How do you live them or channel them?
- What is the effect this has on you? Does this leave you more peaceful, dissatisfied, liberated, entrapped ...?'

In this way I invited my co-researchers to reflect on how spirituality enhances or detracts from their concept of a 'life that matters'. In their responses, the fellow researchers oscillated between White's ascendant spirituality and his *spirituality-of-surface*. In this regard, consult the section on 'Spirituality and Meaning' above. Most of my fellow researchers recounted their spirituality in terms of their relationship with the Divine or God, while a few related spirituality and their passions to relationships with valued others (like family).

I will now report some of the responses to the invitation and questions above.

Ellen, one of my fellow researchers, responded to the questions indicating that personal growth is a passion in her life. She made value statements in this regard, relating the helping of people to personal growth and indicating that it assisted in making her feel more complete.

Ellen said:

'My passion in life is helping people and through that enabling myself to become a richer person. I have a passion to grow as a person and to reach success – especially personal success. Not only having a good work but to feel complete.'

This reminds one of what may perhaps be considered at the *heart of Biblical spirituality*, which is to love each other like ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen was rather vague in relating this to a practical spirituality and I had to inquire about this in more detail:

'It's something that you always keep in mind – your passion drives you. I try to grow as a person as much as I possibly can and to learn as many things as possible.'

Her (Ellen) assessment of her methodology was that it was fulfilling and contributed to bringing her closer to living her passion:

'It gives me a sense of satisfaction – knowing that the things I fight for in life along with the difficult situations I am in, all contribute towards my personal growth which brings me closer to reach my goals (passion).'

Justin, another researcher, indicated that his longing is to serve God 'with all his heart, soul and being' and live the dreams and desires He has put into his heart. He then indicated that he believes that he tries to live these passions by being in a loving relationship with God and listening to what He would like him to be, do and achieve. He concluded by saying that when he has done the things he believes God has asked him to do, he feels peaceful and happy. In some *re-membering questions* (White 1997:ch. 2), Justin referred to significant

3. See for instance Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31 and Luke 10:27 in this regard.

relationships in his life, indicating that relationships are very important to him in living a meaningful life.

Justin indicated that his passion was to lead people to the Lord. He referred to people whose hearts were not always 'in the right place'. His spirituality as expressed in living his passion is to be sensitive to guidance from God about the right place and right moment at work and wherever he goes to indicate the opportunities for witnessing. He trusts the Lord for guidance about when he should approach people and talk to them. The result, as he experiences it, is that he is blessed and this encourages him to be available to this passion. At his workplace, he often has opportunities to practise his passion. He believes that these opportunities happen for a reason. Quite often, the result is that of being '*shaken out of your comfort zone*'!

Mary, a co-researcher, had a more immanent perspective on spirituality, relating how she desires to see herself being a powerful, humble and joyful woman. She continued to indicate that her passion is to help others and in return, learn from their stories.

Her colleague, Lyra, leaned more towards the *spirituality-of-the-surface* perspective of spirituality as she was telling how important her family was in her life. She told stories about how she wanted them to know that she loved them deeply, that she delighted in them, treasured them and that they could rely on her. She continued to suggest that she wanted to see them happy, fulfilled, saved and serving God. She longed for them to be wise, make the right decisions, use their talents and learn from their mistakes. She also wanted to live in a way that they would feel the same about her.

However, she also reverted back to an ascendant approach to spirituality. She added that another passion of hers was that she longed to nurture an intimate relationship with God. She described how she longed to enjoy His creation and appreciate His gifts. She wanted to be thankful for His blessings, acknowledge Him in everything she does, concluding that He must always be everything to her.

Once again adopting a more material spirituality, she added four wishes to personal growth in her life. Thus she described how she wanted to be successful and apply excellence in everything she does. She also wanted to be able to say 'no' without feeling guilty – to be more bold, more daring, more brave, more assertive – indicating that she was working on it.

Lyra furthermore indicated that she wanted to be more organised – she hoped to achieve this by delegating more and developing people in the process. She finally added that she wanted to paint more often and be freer in her creativity – and less critical of her work!

The next participant to contribute some reflections on spirituality was Delia. She also introduced relationships into the discussion of spirituality, this time though, it referred to romantic relationships. Her approach to getting



involved in romantic relationships supported a discourse of being provided for: she suggested that she was not *actively pursuing ... getting married*. She immediately added that this did not represent her life philosophy as she did pursue some aspirations or ambitions *actively*, giving academic studies as an example.

Delia then added some diverse passions to her list, naming, animals and music and reading as more things which added meaning to her life.

Spirituality as a passion has also directed the discourses introduced by the fellow researchers. Following Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2002:217) – who consider spirituality to be an ethic or a lived way of being – an alternative to this line of enquiry might have been to ask questions of what about their relationship with God added meaning to their lives, giving recognition to stories of spirituality and spirituality-in-relationship in a re-membering process as we did.

The stories of spirituality which my fellow researchers told were varied and included authentic accounts of their personal religious experiences as well as a number of records of how spirituality and relationships (with God, but also with their significant others) and material aspirations are intertwined. This suggests that the spirituality story is not a totalitarian story as it refers to a 'life that matters'.

## The ethics of including the spirituality discourse in this study conversation

The reason for including this paragraph is an observation about the hesitation of professionals to include spirituality into social processes. Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2002:216, 219–220) discussed this at length in their paper. Harris and Purrone (2003:1) suggest that a certain discomfort was experienced by counsellors or professionals when they introduced spirituality into counselling conversations. Seifert (2002:62) describes how anyone who introduced religion (and I assume also spirituality) into a psychological discussion would be labelled as a meat-head; a mystic; an intuitive, touchy-feely sort of moron!

Heyman *et al.* (2006:3) on the other hand, acknowledge that social work practitioners recognise that religion and spirituality may play an important role in practice. Quoting Walsh (1999), Blanton (2002:292) suggests that increasingly, family therapists are embracing spirituality as an important dimension of and a powerful resource for family therapy.

Another very informative paper on the integration of spiritual experiences in counselling was written by Hinterkopf (1994). This paper introduces an experiential focusing method developed by Eugene Gendlin (1969, 1981). Hinterkopf (1994:165) suggests that spirituality is an integral part of psychotherapy, but that most counsellors lack the necessary training to include spiritual experiences in their work. Hinterkopf (1994) first presents an understanding of the

spiritual experience. It is reported here as it has certain implications for our study of meaning and meaningfulness. According to her, the spiritual experience can be described as:

- a presently felt phenomenon
- involving an awareness of the transcendent dimension
- *bringing new meanings (author's own emphasis)*
- that lead to growth. (Hinterkopf 1994:166)

The experiential method developed by Gendlin (1969, 1981) facilitates these elements in the client according to Hinterkopf. She then proceeds to describe and explain the experiential focusing method. Hinterkopf (1994:167) explains how Gendlin based his method on a finding that clients who were successful in therapy were those who *paid attention to their internal bodily awareness in a special way*. Gendlin outlines six steps of focusing. These are:

1. Clearing the space, a process through which the clients start by making an *inventory* of problems and issues, identifying the most pressing problem or issue as they do (this involves externalising some of these problems to a certain degree).
2. Next, the client is encouraged to *get a felt sense* of those issues which are attending to emotional qualities, body sensations and felt meanings as they do.
3. *Finding a handle* suggests that the client finds words or images to describe the emotional qualities of the *felt sense*.
4. Subsequently, in a step referred to as *resonating*, the client would reflect on the words used in the description of the *felt sense*, ensuring that this is indeed the best description.
5. Still pursuing an externalising process, the client would now be asked to *ask the felt sense* an open-ended question about the experienced feeling.
6. Usually this results in the emergence of a new meaning – a so-called *felt shift*. The client is now required to take time to integrate an answer that brings a *felt shift*. This step is referred to as *receiving*. (Hinterkopf 1994:167–168)

Hinterkopf (1994:171) applied this to explore spiritual experiences with her clients and suggests that this has the potential to become a non-judgemental way to create space for a discussion of spiritual experiences in counselling.

Another paper on the ethics of spirituality in counselling was written by Steen, Engels and Tweatt (2006). This paper explores the ethical implications of spirituality in the counselling practice according to rules of the American Counselling Association's (ACA 1995) *ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* and discusses the ethics with respect to the topics of (1) client welfare, (2) respecting diversity, (3) personal needs and values and (4) professional competence. Their conclusion was:

Our collective experiences, both as clients and counsellors, point toward spirituality as an integral part of personality development. Whether an individual finds himself or herself in *existential angst regarding meaning in life*, or in a spiritual realm of Jungian synchronicity, integration seems of primary importance for the person to continue to develop. It is not the counsellor's position to foster a particular direction for integration; it is of primary importance, however, that the counsellor helps clients integrate their beliefs. (Myers & Williard 2003, [author's emphasis])



Spirituality and stories about God in the meaning stories of my fellow researchers entered the discussion of a 'life that matters' spontaneously. Omitting spirituality from the conversation would therefore not honour the contributions of my co-researchers. On the contrary, it would not be ethical to exclude spirituality from the research conversation. Spirituality was not included in a deterministic way as described by Northcut (2000) in his paper in which he explores and discusses ways of creating space for religion and spirituality in psychodynamic processes. Rather, instead of carrying God into the discussion of meaning, I encountered God there amongst my fellow researchers.

## Spirituality and research

As an afterthought, we may want to reflect on the relationship between research and spirituality. Smith in Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997:189) suggests that the persistent quest for causal relationships so characteristic of many research projects and which is often associated with the need for measureable, objective and provable facts may actually *divorce* spirituality from research and science. Along the same line of thinking, Harris and Purrone (2003:3) quoting Dyson, Cobb, and Forman (1997) refer to how the *lack of definition of spirituality impedes research (author's emphasis)*. This is indicative of the quest to control meaning by means of definition which we so often encounter in modernist research.

Heyman *et al.* (2006:4) indicate that despite the recognition and attention that spirituality received in terms of training and education, there has been limited research that focuses on practitioners' attitudes towards religion and spirituality in practice.

## Conclusion

This article discussed the first meaning discourse identified by the research group, namely spirituality. First the article attempted to provide our own understanding of spirituality. Other perspectives of this discourse were subsequently described and our choice of an understanding specific to the study or relevant to the study, was explained. We elected to support an understanding of spirituality as being relationally constructed and embedded in experience and practice.

We then investigated the association of spirituality and meaningful living as reported in the literature and established that there exists a vast corpus of research linking spirituality to meaning. This derives from an interdisciplinary community of authors and aligns this study well with some current research.

Once this context had been established, our research community revisited the spirituality discourse, reflecting on how our understanding of spirituality worked for us in the process of working towards a 'life that matters'.

We concluded the article with a discussion on the ethics of including spirituality in a process such as coaching or

therapy to assess whether we were still congruent with the ethical position we adopted earlier in this text and the research process as a whole, and confirmed that spirituality was not imposed on the research group as an external or foreign discourse, but rather presented itself spontaneously in the dialogical research process.

Spirituality has been shown to be closely associated with most of the other discourses which presented themselves as associated with a 'life that matters' by the research group.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

F.W. (University of Pretoria) wrote the article as part of the requirements for a PhD degree and was supervised by J.C.M. (University of Pretoria).

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