

Spiritual Dimensions in Living with Disabilities

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the role of spirituality in the lives of two individuals with disabilities through in-depth interviews. Each participant's portrait represented his spiritual path and growth as well as an understanding of his disability. Findings suggested that disability as part of each participant's life experiences offered him an opportunity to search for a spiritual path. Spirituality provided participants great meanings to their disabilities as well as their lives. They transcended their disability. Future research possibilities were also discussed.

Spirituality plays a powerful role in the lives of people with disabilities. A glimpse into the impact of spirituality in the lives of individuals with disabilities can be found in biographies and qualitative studies. Revealing from stories and experiences of people with disabilities, spirituality offers meanings of their disability and their lives. Spirituality is also a source to meet challenges in living with disabilities as well as a coping strategy.

Deeper questions with meaning and purpose in life are imbued in people with disabilities' daily existence (do Rozario, 1997). Spirituality offers available answers to these questions. Helen Keller, for example, could not have imagined herself without spiritual practice (Keller, 1927), stating, "The inner, or 'mystic' sense ... give me vision of unseen" (Keller, 1927, p. 206). Helen Keller had never believed that her disabilities were

punishment by God. Instead, she viewed her disabilities as training, discipline, and refinement of the soul. Margaret Nosek was a professor in rehabilitation research. She was born with a progressive neuromuscular disorder. Her spiritual practice, Vedanta, provided her view on disability. She believed that “disability was present in my life so that I could grow in new ways and progress along the path to God – consciousness” (Nosek, 1995, p.174). She said, “This life [was] riddled with physical frustrations but wealthy with opportunities for spiritual growth” (Nosek, 1995, pp. 174-175). The disability experience became an opportunity for Margaret’s spiritual growth.

In a case study on investigating the effects of a spinal cord injury on perceptions of adjustment (Povolny, Kaplan, Marme, & Roldan 1993), a woman turned to spirituality after her spinal cord injury. She believed that there was a purpose for her becoming disabled. She thought that God helped her to overcome the consequences of foolish choices she had made before the injury through the accident. God provided her a challenge with which to live her life. Mayer and Andrews (1981) also interviewed 10 people who had a spinal cord injury after an accident. Four of them who had spiritual beliefs before the accident all experienced increased spiritual feelings and experienced new purposes in their lives. The purposes were to “learn patience, to accept self and others the way they are, to help others, and to fully utilize their abilities” (Mayer & Andrews, 1981, p. 136).

Spirituality has been a source of strength for many individuals who were born with a disability or who acquired a disability at a very young age to meet challenges of living with disabilities and to endure the physical and emotional pain. Margaret, the professional woman mentioned earlier in this paper, described many times that the frustrations of living as a woman with a severe disability put her in total desperation. Without the spiritual foundation she had built in her life, she would not be able to handle the challenges posed by her disability (Nosek, 1995).

In her biography, Kremetz (1992) portrayed 12 children who had disabilities. Melissa Medrano and Francis Smith were among them. They both had strong spiritual beliefs.

Melissa was a 13-year-old girl who was born with a rare bone disease called osteogenesis imperfecta. The disease made her bones very brittle. She broke about 20 bones before she was seven years old. Since she was a baby, Melissa had been in the hospital more than 40 times. Being a Christian enabled her to face the difficulties. Melissa said that her spiritual belief “does make me feel stronger. ...I pray for God to give me courage to stand the operations and everything that’s ahead of me” (Krementz, p.134). Indeed, spirituality was a source of Melissa’s strength.

Like Melissa, Francis’ belief was his source to get through difficulties. Francis was a sixteen-year-old young man born with a genetic disorder called Treacher Collins. When he was born, he had no chin, no cheekbones, and no outer ears. He was 90% blind in one eye. He also had a severe speech impairment and eating impairment. Although Francis had numerous operations to repair his face, he still looked quite different. Before he switched to Canterbury school, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, his life at school was “a living hell” (Krementz, 1992, p. 161). He said, “no matter how mean and violent the kids were to me, God kept me sane” (Krementz, p. 162). Francis’ belief enabled him to get him through those trials. He didn’t care what other people thought about his appearance, stating that “I think people in our society pay too much attention to the Hollywood look. What’s important is what’s inside your heart” (Krementz, p. 166).

Spirituality seems to be a coping strategy particularly for people who acquired physical disabilities later in their lives (Houston, 1999). Houston studied 17 people who acquired physical disabilities at age of 18 or older. She concluded that spirituality facilitated the adaptation process for people who incorporated spiritual beliefs in their lives before the disability. Thirteen of 17 participants stated that spirituality was a common way of coping. Spiritual beliefs offered a sense of purpose, mental support, and the ability to accept their disability.

Rossiter (1992) interviewed 30 people who had a spinal cord injury for at least 20 years to examine factors contributed the quality of life. These 30 people were nominated as “effective survivors” and “productive citizens in society” (Rossiter, 1992, p. 92). The

findings indicated that spirituality was one of the four attributes to high quality of life. In addition, 26 of the participants had a strong belief in God and asserted that their spiritual beliefs assisted them emotionally in coping with the disability.

Even with this emerging literature of the impact of spirituality on living with disabilities, still little was known of richness of the spiritual dimensions in living with disabilities (Selway & Ashman, 1998), and the journey of spiritual transformation and growth (do Rozario, 1997). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore holistically the role of spirituality in the lives of two individuals with disabilities, one who was born blind and one who acquired a physical disability later in his life. Using portraiture, an arising social science method that capture the richness and essence of human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), this study attempted to represent wholeness and the essential nature of spiritual dimensions in living with disabilities. Particular attention was paid to how people with disabilities understood the meaning of their disabilities and their lives through their spiritual beliefs.

This study was important because it blended emerging portraiture method with a relatively new area of study, i.e., people with disabilities. Very little was known about the lives of people with disabilities who had strong spiritual beliefs. This study attempted to generate new questions related to our deeper understanding of spirituality and disabilities moving beyond the surface image that spirituality was just a way of coping with difficult situations.

Method

Participants

As is typical in qualitative inquiry, my personal impression and judgment was relied on to identify participants whose spiritual beliefs played an important role in their lives. My experience of practicing Falun Dafa (Li, 2001) has shaped my understanding on spirituality. Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, is a way to holistically improve the body, mind, and spirit through teachings and exercises. The practice includes five sets of gentle relaxing exercises which are powerful in improving health. At the core of the

teachings are three principles of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance that are considered to be the nature of the universe (Li, 2001). Falun Dafa was first introduced to the public in 1992 in China, and since has been taken up by millions of people in over 50 different countries (“What is Falun Dafa,” 2002).

In this study, spirituality was defined as a deep seeking for true meaning and purpose of life as well as a genuine belief and veneration of power and wisdom of enlightened beings in the universe. Spiritual practices, either traditional religious practices such as Buddhism and Christianity, or non-religious self-cultivating practices such as Falun Dafa, guide people toward this genuine understanding of purpose of being human and returning to one’s true self (Li, 2001).

For clarity, it is helpful to differentiate spirituality from religion, because people often understand spirituality to be something religious (Helminiak, 1996). Spirituality is an individual attribute (Miller & Thoresen, 1999). It is the essence in one’s human nature that seeking meanings and purposes to existence, whether or not it is expressed through religion (Burkhardt, 1989). Religion is “an organized social entity” (Miller & Thoresen, 1999, p.6). One of the major purposes of religious practice is to explore spirituality (Smith, 1994). Traditional religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Taoism are believed to facilitate spiritual experiences and growth by following the teaching of God, Buddha or Tao and by involving oneself in an organized system of rules and rituals that shape the practice.

Participants in this study were two individuals with disabilities. Griffith and Tim (both pseudonyms) were Caucasians. Griffith was born blind; Tim had a below knee amputation after a car accident when he was 26 years old. I met Griffith in a class and found Tim through the Internet. Both of them met the sampling criterion of participants because they both had a strong spiritual belief. It could be seen from Griffith and Tim’s statement on their spirituality (addressed in their story section). Griffith was a Christian and Tim practiced of Falun Dafa, a non-religious spiritual practice refining both mind and body (Li, 2001).

Introduction to Portraiture

Portraiture was an emerging method of qualitative inquiry in social and human science. It was the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and her book The Art and Science of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that brought this method into attention. Portraiture seeks to capture the wholeness and expression of the essential nature of goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). A portrait represents the central story and is a convincing and authentic narrative. Portraitists believe that capturing the specifics and uniqueness is “a way of illuminating more universal patterns” and “the reader will discover resonant universal themes” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). Portraiture speaks to a broader audience beyond the small circle of the academy. Portraiture informs as well as inspires.

Data-collection

In this study, data-collection was primarily through in-depth interviews. In order to represent an authentic and convincing portrait of the participant, Witz and his colleagues developed an interviewing approach called an essentialist methodological approach (Witz, Goodwin, Hart, & Thomas, 2001) that was used in this research. This approach emphasized “unique empathetic insight into the individual participant’s nature, consciousness and experience” (Witz et al., 2001, p. 197). Through intuitive understanding the essence of the participant’s feeling, state of mind and past experience, Witz et al. (2001) argued that this approach was ideally appropriate to explore deep subjective experience such as spirituality.

During the initial interview, I opened up to the participants, shared the purpose of the study, and build mutual trust. After one or two interviews during which participants freely told me their stories, I identified important issues and life events particular to each participant for better understanding the role of spirituality in their lives. General topics on exploring spirituality included participants growing up experience and major life events that enabled them to search meanings of their life as well as meanings of their disability.

My interviews with Griffith were face to face and interviews with Tim were mainly through telephone conversations. Based on re-listening to tapes and reading the transcription of the previous interview, I identified the areas that I wanted to know more and composed questions for the next interview. Interviews continued until I felt that I grasped the essence of participants' understanding of their spirituality and its relation to their disability.

Data-analysis

Data-analysis started after the first interview with each participant. Feeling and seeing an essence in a phenomenon was a fundamental feature of "human cognition and understanding, indeed, of the state of being human" (Witz et al., 2001, p.214). The process of data-analysis of this study was involved in many rehearsings of the tapes and reading of the transcripts from in-depth interviews. Particularly, by immersing into re-listening and a microanalysis of very important passages, the nature and an essential part of the participants could be felt (Witz et al., 2001).

Communicating this essence of participants with readers was through portraits. Insights on the essence of participants' spiritual dimensions in living with disabilities were conveyed by a portrait for each case. Each participant's spirituality and its relation to disability was understood in the context of life experience. Therefore, each portrait included a biographical sketch, major life experiences and/or realizations towards a spiritual path and growth, as well as understandings of disability through spirituality. More insights and new understanding of the nature and essence of this human phenomenon were provided by looking across the two cases that were included in the discussion.

Verification

The data collection and analysis procedures used in this research required the student investigator's intuitive understanding of the participant's consciousness, state of mind, and experiences. The essence of each participant's subjective experience were

approached with an attempt to identify and understand their experiences with feeling (Witz et al., 2001). As Witz et al. (2001) argued,

In both the humanities and human sciences, seeing the nature and essence of a phenomenon or condition is the royal road to more universal knowing and understanding. . . . The phenomenon of feeling and seeing an essence is at the heart of the problem of how a statement about human nature can have universal validity, how insights obtained in qualitative research can be generalizable. p. 214

The entire process of this research, from designing research questions, designing interviewing questions in each interview, transcribing interviewing tapes, analyzing data, and writing the research report, was under Dr. Witz's supervision. Another verification procedure I used in this study was member check (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I gave the portraits to the participants. Both Griffith and Tim provided direct written feedback on the specific places where were not accurate in the portraits. I made revisions based on their feedback. For a general impression, Tim commented that my portrait of him was "authentic." Griffith provided comments on sections of the portrait. The following were some of his comments,

The Austrian section is really very good, I think. It captures much of my feelings, sense of groping for God, dealing for the first time with sexual immorality, and the feelings of aloneness! . . . I think the whole section on France is very good, accurate, and clear. It allows the reader to feel what I went through, and to understand it well. . . . The last part [Understanding Griffith's Disability], even for me, quite incredible; you capture so well what I wanted to communicate, and such an important lesson about life.

Griffith's Story

I met Griffith in a class in which he was invited to give a lecture on technology for people with disabilities. In front of about 200 college students, he shared his experience of living with his disability. He said, "My personal beliefs are integral to my life experience." Griffith continued to address that if he were not allowed to bring out spiritual areas

during his lectures, he would not agree to be a guest lecturer for the class. I was deeply moved by his courage and sincerity and felt something in my heart was touched.

Also at that period of time, the beginning of my doctoral program, I was seriously thinking about my research direction. I shared my observation and feelings with Dr. Witz after meeting Griffith. Dr. Witz introduced to me the Western term, “spirituality,” to describe a deep seeking of purposes and meanings in life. I then started to explore spiritual dimensions in living with disabilities as my research direction. Griffith became the first participant in my study. During the following one and a half years after we met, we had total six interviews in his office. The length of each interview varied from one hour to two hours.

The following was a story of a journey of Griffith’s spiritual growth. It started from a sketch of his life, followed by a detailed analysis of keystone life experiences that led to a spiritual path and a deep understanding of life. The next section was a further representation of the role of spirituality in understanding his disability.

Biographical Sketch

Born in 1953, except for the fact that he was blind, Griffith grew up in “a pretty typical family” with three brothers in Chicago. His father was a carpenter and his mother stayed at home. Although his father didn’t make much money, the family “always had food.” Griffith didn’t think that his parents were Christian people, even though they went to church. “They would use God’s name in a wrong way, swearing, saying bad things.”

Griffith was treated just like his brothers, to be independent, strong, and tough. “I was not a little weak blind kid who sat at the corner in a rocking chair and did nothing.” When he was ten years old, Griffith started swimming and became a competitive swimmer. Later he wanted to do something more than swimming. He then wrestled. Wrestling became his favorite sports throughout high school, college and graduate school. Besides wrestling, Griffith’s other big interest was girls during his youth. Like many other American young people during 1970s, “I certainly had a free morality in terms of sexual things.”

In 1970, Griffith went to a large mid-western university. In his junior year, when he was 19 years old, he studied in Austria for one and a half years. In 1974, Griffith went to France for a semester where he met an 18-year-old Canadian girl called Joan. Joan used a wheelchair and was described by Griffith as “sweet,” “calm,” and “strong.” Griffith liked her very much. Joan and Griffith became good friends and she shared her Christian belief with him. After struggling for months, Griffith accepted Jesus into his life after the lecture given by Robi who talked about his own journey of being a Christian. Robi was a member of the highest caste of Brahman and worshipped by his people, but later became a Christian.

Coming back to the U.S., Griffith finished his last semester of study and obtained double degrees in Sociology and German in 1975. He then found a job as a public relation officer in the lighthouse for the blind in Chicago. He stayed at home on the first day of his job because he was confused if having a job and earning money was God’s plan for him. “I couldn’t go to the work. In my heart, I felt confusion and upheaval.” He said “there were a lot of influences that were pulling [me] of the world.” It would be too hard to live a Christian life if he stayed in Chicago. He called a gentleman who had come to the campus and preached the gospel and asked his advice. This man lived in Houston, Texas. He told Griffith three verses from the Bible and let himself make the decision. The three verses were, “do not walk as unwise man, but walk as a wise man; making the most of your time because the days are evil; do not be foolish but understand what is the will of God.”

So Griffith prayed and felt very strongly that he should not take the job. In two days, Griffith left Illinois with two big bags and moved in the gentleman’s home in Houston, Texas temporarily. He stayed in Houston for two years. Most of the time, he didn’t work. With many young Christians together, he helped to start campus’ churches “all over the south.” In 1978, with a group of young Christians, he moved to Austin, a growing town at that time, to start a church. Also in Austin, he started thinking about having a vocation so that he would move with a clearer direction. After doing some research and talking to

people, he decided to apply to the master degree program in foreign language's education.

In January 1979, Griffith started his graduate study majoring in teaching English as a second language at the University of Texas – Austin. He still stayed close with Joan, the girl he met in France. In wintertime, Joan would come to Texas and lived in the churches where Griffith was working. At the same time, another girl, Kinwyn came into Griffith's life. She was a student in Pharmacy who became actively involved in Griffith's church. Griffith started to like Kinwyn, which he described as "a conflict of interest."

Some years went by, Griffith prayed and became very clear about whom he would get married. In the summer of 1983, Griffith told Joan that he felt that God was telling his heart that he should marry Kinwyn. Joan accepted it very well. In November, 1983, Griffith and Kinwyn got married. Kinwyn quit her study in pharmacy. Griffith was writing his thesis, at the same time, teaching English as a second language at a school. "We didn't have much money, but we were really happy." In 1986, their first girl, Brianna was born at home. Griffith was able to catch her first daughter in his hands. Two years later, their son, Gwillem was born. And a year and a half later, their second daughter, Bronwyn was born. Like Brianna, Gwillem and Brrowyn were both born at home.

Six months after Bronwyn, their younger daughter was born, with no warning, Kinwyn was very sick. Finally, she was found to have a malignant brain tumor that was as big as a baseball. Griffith believed that "God really shows his great strengths" during this time in his life. The new job Griffith got after he graduated provided him very good medical insurance. It covered all of Kinwyn's surgery, therapies, and the drugs. People in their church were wonderful. They would bring meals and help clean the house and take care of the children. A girl from Hong Kong, after learning about Griffith's family situation from a friend, sent them a gift of a thousand dollars. She wrote Griffith that God told her that his family should have it. Griffith never met this girl and never heard from her again. Two years later, Kinwyn's tumor came back and she died in March 1993. Griffith

said that he would not want to walk through such a hard time in life without his faith in God.

Griffith hadn't contacted Joan after he got married with Kinwyn. But after Kinwyn's death, Griffith started calling her. They talked on the phone for hours and hours. Griffith believed that they still had a strong spiritual bond. In August 1993, Griffith and children went to see Joan in Canada. In December of that year, Joan came to visit Griffith. Griffith asked Joan to marry him two days after Joan's arrival. Joan said yes.

In May 1994, Griffith and Joan got married. Children started to call Joan, mama Joan. So the girl who told Griffith about God, about Jesus Christ, who was called "a little Puritan" by Griffith, became Griffith's second wife. In June, the whole family moved to Illinois and Griffith started his new job as a technology consultant for people with disabilities in the big mid-western university where he had his undergraduate study. Griffith has been working on this job for eight years since then.

Griffith's Spiritual Growth

Griffith now understood that there was a sense of eternal existence that was placed in man's heart by God. But he chose not to think about it until when he was 21 years old. At that time, he began to question his independence and the meaning of life. His blindness gave him an opportunity to be aware of and then search for something beyond himself. He became a Christian after months of struggling. The following was a detailed representation of Griffith's spiritual path unfolded by four keystone experiences in his life.

Experience in Austria

In his junior year of college, Griffith went to Austria and studied there for a year. His experience in Austria offered him his first spiritual insights on life and himself. He recalled this experience in general,

That was a good time but very hard. I was away from what I was familiar with. ... It was very hard. And I think that it was one of things that helped me begin to think of God, think about spirituality. I was away from what I was comfortable with, away from what I was used to. I had to begin to cope and to begin to think about life in a different way. Is there really a God are watching out for me? I began to think about the subject for the first time.

Griffith then provided insights into his life from his experience in Austria. One was in an Austrian airport, and another was a skiing trip.

One time in an Austrian airport, Griffith met his then girlfriend who came to stay with him for three weeks from the U. S. They were very happy and “kissing” and “hugging” and “talking very fast” at the airport. The Austrian policemen arrested them both because they were so “affectionate” and “wild” and suspected them of having drugs. In the police station, their luggage was checked. In his girlfriend’s luggage, the policemen found birth control pills she brought, and they then commented, “Oh, you’re having sex, bad.” The policemen also threatened to send them to jail. After five hours’ interrogation, however, no drugs were found and they were released. But the policemen warned them that they would keep an eye on them all the time. Griffith and his girlfriend “were scared.”

Reflecting on this experience, Griffith said,

Nothing else happened from that experience. But, but ..., that made us begin to think about God. And we both said we were so lucky not to go to the prison. Maybe God is there. Maybe He is helping us. So that was my first time to think like that.

I further asked Griffith what was going on in his mind and heart when he thought about God for this first time in his life. Griffith carefully chose his words, speaking slowly,

I think, to begin with, it was the sense that I was in a situation that was completely out of my control, completely beyond my control, a situation that ... in which anything could happen. It could go any direction. And I realized that these men ... could do anything they wanted and really, I ... I felt helpless to stop them. I think that you probably understand well that you feel more vulnerable and more

difficult when it's not your own language. You're more at their mercy. And you don't understand everything that they say. ... So I think it was that feeling. I don't know that I consciously knew about praying or anything like that.

It was the sense of not being in control, the sense of vulnerability connected Griffith's heart with a higher power, and the result of being released from the police station confirmed to some degree that maybe God was helping him. Not everybody would have this sense in that kind of situation, but somehow Griffith did.

Another important spiritual insight Griffith obtained from this airport experience was about morality. He said,

I think there is another issue here I have to tell you. It was about our relationship together. We were having a physical relationship together. If you had asked me, I would have said, of course, this is not wrong. This is great. We love each other. ... I think, for the first time, quite honestly, I began to have a feeling in my heart that maybe this was not morally right. They [policemen] were very angry [that] we were physically affection. ... It was the sense, a little bit, oh, maybe we are doing something wrong.

Griffith reflected further on his life after this airport experience. He started to question if their relationship was morally right. Although Griffith thought about God and morality, he and his girlfriend talked about their feelings after this airport experience, however, he "push[ed] them [these feelings] away." Those thoughts and feelings were not strong enough to stop him and his girlfriend from having physical relationship together in Austria.

Another experience in Austria that offered Griffith a spiritual insight was his alone time. He recalled those times were "very, very lonely, sad, and hard hours, days, weeks, and months." Because of his blindness, Griffith couldn't take trips around the countryside in Austria by bicycle like other American students in his dorm. Austrian students in the campus would go home for weekends. So Griffith had to spend lots of time being alone. "I'm not the kind of person who usually likes to be alone. I would prefer to be with people."

Griffith particularly mentioned a ski trip during his time in Austria. In this ski week, Griffith needed some help such as being accompanied up and down the mountain. Only a few times, his friends took him to the mountain, but much of the time, other people in the ski trip would ski themselves and leave Griffith alone. Griffith felt angry and frustrated, he said,

I remember I felt alone a lot during that week. And I wanted to do everything, but I couldn't. I didn't know the area very well. So I remember standing by the window, and opened the window, just yelling, just feeling angry. You know, I wasn't used to ... I was used to being in control and involved in everything, but this week, it just broke down my resistance. I remember I said I hate this situation. For the first time in my life, I remember feeling angry that I was blind and not in control. Usually I didn't feel that. And I was normally happy, but this week, because I wanted to be so much like everybody else. My resistance, my control was breaking down.

Griffith experienced not being in control during this ski trip, much like what he experienced in the Austrian airport. This time, his independence and strength began to be broken down. I asked Griffith if he had built up an independence and strength in his life before these experiences. He admitted, "It was a defense mechanism, to be self-reliant in my life. Because I was always taught [that] I needed to be independent. I needed to take care of myself. I needed to be strong." But after Griffith experienced the situations that were out of his control, he began to question himself, "Am I really so strong? Really so able to live in this world by myself?"

Griffith's experiences in Austria were a very important part in his life in terms of his spiritual growth. What was more remarkable was that he could reflect on those experiences. Those experiences cause inner ferment in him. He started to think about his independence, about moral issues, and about the existence of God; these are all central components of a spiritual quest. Although Griffith pushed those feelings and reflections away and was still "living my life and having fun," those reflections planted seeds for Griffith's later "spiritual awakening" in France.

A battle between good and evil

Griffith came back to the U. S. from Austria and stayed about half a year. Before continuing Griffith's story in France, it was helpful to gain some background information about him during that time. Griffith was a good student in college. "I've got pretty good grades, not all As, but fairly good grades." Two things that really had his attention during his college were girls and wrestling. But before he went to France, that was his fourth year in college, he started to honestly think about his future. "What do I do when I leave college? What do I do in my life?" He knew he wanted to have an affect on people. "I cared about people. I wanted to live a useful life." He cared about civil rights. He was thinking about going to Peace Corp or VISTA (a governmental program called Volunteers in Service to America). I could see that Griffith was a person who had a good nature. His goal was more altruistic. In some sense, Griffith had already started thinking about purposes and meanings in his life.

Griffith's experiences in Austria -- his frustration of not being in control, his questioning on his independence etc. -- these feelings and thoughts all came to "total fruition" in France in 1975. In retrospect, Griffith thought that his life was ready for spirituality. But he didn't know it at that time. "I was a little bit wild and kind of acting crazy. But I wasn't happy inside." Two weeks after he was in France, Griffith met a Canadian girl called Joan who was "sweet" and "calm." She seemed to be very strong though she used a wheelchair. Joan told him that she was happy inside because she was a Christian. Griffith's first reaction was that he "got kind of scared, angry, and didn't want to talk." He said, "Oh, no, I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it. That is too easy."

Griffith then talked about his general observation and thoughts on why most people were not comfortable talking about spiritual things as he was 25 years ago in France. He addressed two points. One was that people were threatened. Because they didn't know themselves, they were not comfortable with someone else being so clear and strong about their beliefs. Another point was that people's minds were controlled too much by modern science. They would be against all spiritual things and would say that spirituality was not scientific nor intellectual. Griffith did not indicate what was in his mind when he heard

about Christian belief at that time. I assumed that he was struggling with both perspectives.

Griffith started to make fun of Joan in front of other people. He called her, “Jesus freak,” “a little puritan.” One time, Joan was telling Griffith about creation verses evolution. In front of a group of people, Griffith said, “Hey, you guys, she thinks we don’t come from monkeys. But she is a monkey.” Joan was very patient and was still very kind to Griffith and continued to show Griffith God was really there.

Griffith was very negative to what Joan told him about God at the beginning, but in his heart, he liked Joan very much, but he did not want to admit it. Griffith began to think that he was not being truthful. Gradually, Joan’s words started having an effect on Griffith’s heart. “Maybe she had a good answer to life. I began to search in my heart.” In the following several months, Griffith experienced much struggle in his heart. His struggle “was very deep and sincere.” He said,

My room faced a balcony on the second floor. Sometimes I walked out on to my balcony because I thought about the thing she [Joan] was telling me. She was talking about God and about the Bible. I opened the door, I went out the balcony, and knew there were stars. I couldn’t see the stars but I knew they were there. And I said, ‘God, I don’t know if you are there. Leave me alone, stop bothering me.’ Because I knew something was happening inside my heart. And I knew that I was very aware if God is really God, if He is really there, that he will want to change my life. He will want me to be a different person. I knew there is no way that God would just leave me alone, and let me just make all my decisions. He will have some moral standards to impart. He will want me to live a certain life. For example, the way I talk to people, He wants me to use a nice way of speaking, good manners. I told you about the whole idea of immoral relationship with girls. He would want that to be right and pure. And I knew those things in my heart. I knew it. So the big fight, the struggle, the war inside to really follow this way of thinking. No, I don’t want to follow it.

The “struggle,” the “fight,” the “war” Griffith experienced showed that his heart was touched by what Joan told him. He was aware of the moral standards that God wants him to follow if he chose this direction in his life. But at the same time, there was another force that was pulling him away from this direction. This force wanted him to go back to his old ways. I called it was a battle between good and evil. Griffith remembered one day, Joan told him that she would go to heaven when she died because of her faith in God, but he would not go. Griffith didn’t quite understand what Joan meant. But something in his heart was “very very affected.” Griffith now believed that it was the Holy Spirit of God touching him in his heart. But he didn’t know that at that time. He began to cry. A voice in his heart said very clear, “she is going to ask you to commit your life to something, don’t do it.” So Griffith got up and left.

Now Griffith more realized that it was the fight between God and Satan and it was really a battle for people’s lives, hearts, and souls. And he experienced it in 1975 in France. So back to France at that time, Griffith continued his struggle until one day Joan invited him to a lecture by Robi Maharaj, a gentleman from India who talked about his spiritual journey from a Hindu Brahmin to a Christian. The upheaval from his heart about his belief Robi went through when he was 21 years old was very much like what Griffith experienced at that time. Since Robi was a Brahmin, people believed that he would give God’s help to them. It allowed Robi to be better than other people and took their money. But Robi didn’t think it was right. He knew he had no power to help people. While he was struggling he met a young lady similar to the girl, Joan, whom Griffith met. This lady was a Christian and told Robi that people should have not worshipped him. In fact, his sins needed to be forgiven by God. Robi didn’t believe her at the beginning. But after many months of struggling and searching, one day, Robi cried out alone and said, “God, if you are really there, and Jesus, if you do really forgive me. Please show me. Come in my life and change me and I will follow you.” The next morning, Robi had such peace and joy in his heart. He followed Christian practice from that time on.

Griffith was deeply touched by Robi’s story. He said, “My heart was so affected, and stirred and I could see some of my life in that story.” Griffith walked up to Robi after the

speech and told him about his struggle and asked him if God would also help him. Robi told Griffith that God would help anyone who came to Him if you'll ask Him. Right then, with Robi, Griffith prayed and asked Jesus to come into his life. That day was Monday March 31, 1975.

The story of Griffith's becoming a Christian was rather a dramatic one. Griffith was very articulate. Probably he had told his story of becoming a Christian in many other occasions. I could still sense his sincerity and was drawn to his story. Looking back, Griffith thought that it was "a miracle" that in the midst of his youth, he began to question the meaning of life. During that time in his youth, when he wanted to have fun, to have sensorial pleasure, to have great time, but he could emerge the precious thought of finding something beyond himself, he could experience the big struggle, the battle in his heart, and then he was able to listen to the voice of God.

Changes inside after becoming a Christian

Genuine changes in Griffith's heart soon happened after he became a Christian. He gave us one distinct example, the change of his feelings towards his father, to show the power of Christian beliefs in his life.

During his childhood, Griffith's father evoked him both fear and love. His father would be very kind to Griffith sometimes, playing with him and being very supportive in his sports. But lots of times, when his father drank, he would be very mean to Griffith, hitting him. One time, his father picked him up and threw him across the room. "Even though I love my father, sometimes I have a lot of hatreds, bad feelings because he was so mean." Griffith's father would go with other women and sleep with them. His father and mother would often fight because of that. In Griffith's junior year of college, his father suddenly left the family with a young waitress without saying a word. He never contacted the family again. One of the reasons Griffith went to Austria in the year when his father left home was to escape such a difficult situation.

Griffith kept diary on his dreams throughout his college years. One major area of his dreams during those times was violence with his father. Every time he dreamed about his father, he was being violent towards Griffith. “It was scary, it was violent. I would wake up crying sometimes.” But this time, a few weeks after Griffith prayed with Robi, Griffith again dreamed about his father,

My father was in the dream. I went down into the basement of our house. He was waiting there. He was very mean, he said, ‘Griffith, Come here!’ So I knew I was in trouble. I could tell he was probably going to hit me. I said, ‘Dad, you know, I accept Jesus in my life, I’m a Christian. I just want you to know that I love you.’ And I put my arm around him. That was my dream. My heart was changed toward my father. ... I’ve never had bad feelings towards my father since that day. I only love him and care about him.

It was amazing to see that Griffith’s spiritual belief, Christianity, changed him from inside so quickly. And the change was solid and even happened in his dream. Unlike other external forces, spiritual beliefs change people from within. Griffith continued commenting that psychologists tried to change people with therapies, sociologists tried to change society, but they could not change people’s hearts.

This experience also let Griffith see the healing power of God. When his father left home, it created “a hole” in his heart. He tried for one and a half years to fill it up with other things, such as sports and girls. But the hole was still there. Shortly after he came to God, Griffith’s heart was healed of the “fear” and “bad feelings” to his father. Griffith admitted this was “a major event” in his life. I believed it brought Griffith more faith to his new belief.

Death of Kinwyn, Griffith’s first wife

“I believe everybody inside is afraid or wonders what will really be like when we have to die?” Witnessing how peacefully Kimwyn faced her death had a great impact on Griffith’s life. He told this moving story to show us “what spiritually Kimwyn was like.” Griffith’s voice became softer when talking about Kimwyn,

We knew she [Kinwyn] was going to die. I knew people that had died, my grandparents, and I love them a lot. But never so close. Never so intimate. And I was holding her one time, lying in bed. And I said, ‘Honey, you know sometimes I am afraid, because I’m afraid about dying. And I’m afraid what you have to go through.’ So I said, ‘Are you ever afraid? Sometimes are you afraid?’ She said, ‘Griffith, no.’ she said, ‘I’m never afraid. I know God will take care of me. I know Jesus is taking care of me. I’m not afraid at all. I only ... I’m sorry I have to leave you and children. That’s all.’

Kinwyn died at home after a coma. Before she went away, the last words she said was to children quietly, “nighty night” as what she said every night to the children.

That is incredible to me. That is an incredible comfort to me. And I don’t think I ever feel afraid anymore, all most anything. Because she was so strong, so amazing. I think before I went through that with Kinwyn, I would not have married Joan. Because she was so limited physically, needed much care and help herself. I didn’t think I would have felt strong enough or be able to take on all of the difficulties of Joan’s life. But after Kinwyn, it gave me the strength to know I could do it. There is a verse in the Bible, says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. That’s how Kinwyn lived her life. And that’s actually how she died her death.

Not many people would face death peacefully. Kinwyn did it. It showed the remarkable inner strength she had. And this strength came from an incredible strong faith in what she believed. Griffith’s faith in God was strengthened greatly through the experience of seeing how Kinwyn died.

Summary

The four experiences described in detailed above were four keystone experiences in Griffith’s spiritual journey and growth. They were his experiences in Austria, a battle between good and evil, changes inside after becoming a Christian, and death of his first wife, Kinwyn. His feeling of out of control and vulnerability in Austria made him question his independence and think about his life in a different way. That was the

starting point of his spiritual journey. In France, Griffith experienced a battle of believing in God or not in his heart. After months of struggling, he became a Christian. He soon found the changes in his heart and experienced the healing power of God. Witnessing his first wife, Kinwyn who peacefully died, Griffith's belief in God was much strengthened.

Understanding Griffith's Disability

What was the role of spirituality in Griffith's life and in understanding his disability? He said, "I don't need God because I'm blind. I need God, because I realize that it is the right answer to life." This statement captured the essential nature of the role of spirituality in Griffith's life. Spirituality was important to him because he found the right answer to life through it. From his story and detailed presentation of major experiences unfolded in the previous session, we could see that his blindness gave him an opportunity to question his independence, to search something that was greater than him. His spirituality offered him "great" meanings to his disability as well as his existence. The following part of this session was representations of Griffith's insights on his blindness and his life from his Christian belief.

During the first year of Griffith's becoming a Christian, "God taught me a lot" on understanding his disability. Griffith told me a story on the first time when he had a real insight on this issue. About six or seven months after Griffith came back from France, one day he walked across the center area of the campus, he heard a preacher speaking to a crowd. He had a very strong push in his heart that he wanted to say something to the students. So he went up to the preacher and asked if he could talk. The preacher said, "no" first. But Griffith was very persistent and told the preacher that he was a student and just became a Christian recently. The student would listen to him if he talked. The preacher was quiet for a while and then said, "you can talk." Griffith stood up. The crowd had been talking, laughing, yelling, but became quiet after he started talking. Griffith spoke about how he was the same way as the students here who did not believe in God and how he changed. Then all of the sudden, in the crowd, a loud voice yell out, "If God is so great, if God is really there, how come you're blind. Why you're blind? Why cannot you see?"

Griffith was a young Christian and didn't know very much about the Bible at that time. The question was really hard for him. He didn't know what to say. The group was quiet, and everybody was expecting what he would say. Griffith was quiet, standing there and saying to God in his mind,

God, I don't know what to say to this man, but I know there is an answer. I don't know what it is. But everybody is listening. If my purpose is to tell people about you, you help me. I'm going to count three. Then you tell me what to say, give me words.

Griffith started counting one, two ... as he said three in his mind, he began to talk.

It was "a wonderful, incredible" answer. Griffith said the following words slowly, clearly, and firmly.

Basically I said to this man, you know something, I said, if God wants, He can make me see right now (He snapped his fingers quickly). But that is not what is important. And I said, what is important in life is that ... that everyone has his or her eyes open to the reality of a living true God and to faith. And if you have your eyes open, you can do great things. You can have an incredible life, whether you can see or not with your physical eyes. But if you do not have your eyes open, you'll finish your life blind. ... I don't know what would happen in my life, but I do know that God opens my eyes.

Griffith got down after he said this. The audience clapped.

There was a level of transcending the disability at that time when Griffith was answering this challenging question, "Why you're blind?" Not long before that time in Austria, he was feeling angry and frustrated because he was blind. But at that moment, I believed that it was his spiritual belief that brought the sense of transcendence to an understanding of his blindness. The limits imposed by his physical conditions became less important or even irrelevant, and the spiritual renaissance took place.

In the following 26 years of his life as a Christian, Griffith had more understanding about his disability through his spirituality. One time during the interview, he read his favorite part of the Bible to me,

As Jesus past by, he saw a man who was blind from birth, and Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that this man was born blind.' (Griffith's comments) Very common question, who did wrong? Why this man is blind? Jesus answered them, his followers, 'it was not because this man sinned or because his parents sinned. But so that the works of God might be brought out in him.' (Griffith's comments) So that the works of God might be manifested, or brought out or done in this man.

Griffith further talked about there was a spiritual principle written in the New Testament, "When I am weak, then I am strong." He explained that when you were weak, then God had an opportunity to show He is there when nothing else can help you. "God uses every weakness to draw people to Himself."

Tim's Story

Falun Dafa has exposed to me this inner meaning of my life, and the way I fit into everything else in the universe. I have learned how to become a more kind and compassionate person, to discover the true meaning of things that happen in my life, and to be able to endure tribulations that come along, no matter how large or small they may be, by continually looking within myself.

The above excerpt was from Tim's paper which he read at the 2000 Florida Falun Dafa sharing conference. The paper was published at Clearwisdom Net, a website that publishes stories and experiences of Falun Dafa practitioners as well as news reports around the world. In this paper, Tim also mentioned that he was an alcoholic for 20 years and had a physical disability. When I read his paper, I realized that Tim might be a good participant for my study. I found his name and contact information posted on a website. He was willing to be contacted to introduce Falun Dafa to new people coming to the practice site. I called Tim and he agreed to participate in the study. Our first interview was conducted on May 26th, 2001, the 12th anniversary of Tim's car accident during which he lost his right leg. We had six additional telephone interviews thereafter.

In December, 2001, Tim and I met at the 2001 Florida Falun Dafa sharing conference at Tampa. At that time, he had just transferred to a new position at Disney World. The

following is the story of Tim's spiritual growth: from an addict who was "lost in a world of alcohol, drugs, and complete negativity" after losing his leg, to a Falun Dafa practitioner who had a meaningful life. The story starts with a sketch of Tim's life, followed by a detailed analysis of major realizations which determined his spiritual path. The next section is a further representation of the role of Falun Dafa, Tims' spiritual practice, in understanding his life and his disability.

Biographical Sketch

Tim grew up with two older brothers in a city in southern Florida. His Dad worked for a phone company and his mom worked for a bank before they retired. His family was not rich but they "always had food and clothes." Tim didn't have many problems in his childhood. He told me that he "had very good grades and was always at the top of the class" during elementary school. When he started middle school, the family moved to the suburb of a nearby city. Like many other teenagers at the time, Tim then started drinking and smoking marijuana. He described himself as being "really shy." Drinking and doing drugs helped him to overcome his shyness.

During his adolescence, Tim turned to Catholicism in his attempts to find something to believe in, but he failed. "We always went to church when we were little." At 14 years old, Tim went through his confirmation. Now he thought that "it was a formality." His parents didn't ask, but he wanted to do it. Tim said, "I mean I had the intent. I felt like going to church and maybe trying to learn something, or maybe trying to believe in something. But it didn't happen."

Soon after, Tim started losing interests in studying when he was in middle school. He skipped classes and his grades "were terrible." Finally, Tim quit school in 1979 at the age of 16, 10th grade. During the next ten years, he worked mostly in construction although this was only one among many hard labor jobs he had. One day he sat down for a lunch break and could not stand up because his back was in terrible pain. He found out later in the hospital that he had nerve damage. Because Tim always drank beer at work, he did

not feel the pain until when it got so strong that he could not walk. “I wasn’t sober, probably I was always drunk.”

Recovering from back pain, Tim worked as a security guard for half a year. One month before the accident, his older brother helped him get a job on a garbage truck. On the early morning of May 26th, 1989, when he was working, Tim was hit by a car driven by a drunk young man. That night in the hospital, Tim lost his right leg.

In August of 1989, the insurance company sent Tim to Boston for rehabilitation for his leg where Tim “really started drinking pretty hard again.” During the six months of staying in hospital, Tim had a new prosthesis and could walk again. The insurance company encouraged Tim to get a higher education. After coming back, Tim then started preparing GED test. Tim was too nervous so that he went drinking before the test and rushed through it. He passed the test and got his high school diploma at the age of 26. He was told if he had three points higher, he would have been eligible for a scholarship. Tim felt good about his graduating from high school. “That was something good [that] happened during that time.”

A year after the accident, Tim received a lot of money from the insurance settlement. Tim’s drinking and using drugs were intensified afterwards. For the following eight years, from 1989 to 1997, Tim didn’t work, and just drank and did drugs. Tim said that his life “totally went to the bottom.” In 1997, when he was about 34 years old, Tim realized that he was running out of money that he had obtained from the insurance company. Tim started worrying about the fact that his money was disappearing. His reaction to it was doing more cocaine, but cocaine made Tim hallucinate. “My mind was really cloudy. My thinking was messed up.” Through help from a woman called Lynn, whose husband usually drank together with Tim in a bar, Tim got into a detoxification program. His body was cleaned up during the two weeks of staying in the hospital.

Leaving the hospital, Tim moved to his parent’s place in the countryside of the Orlando area where his parents had a lot of land. Immediately, Tim went to Alcoholics

Anonymous (AA). Many times Tim's mother would drive him to two AA meetings a day. One month later, Tim took a train trip back home to see a rock music concert. As soon as he got on the train, he started drinking again. When he came back, Tim had bruises and cuts on his body and he had to go to the hospital again. "That was my last ... whatever ... I learned my lesson then. This time I really surrendered. After this, I was really dedicated to quit drinking. I knew it was my only ... only path."

Tim continued going to AA for two years. Later he took some responsibility and chaired some meetings. In 1999, he started to look for something to make his body "more healthy," but "not very strenuous." He started doing Yoga at home. Soon, a friend who was also looking for some relaxing exercises told him that a group of Falun Dafa people were offering free class in the town. Tim didn't pay attention to it at that time. Half a year later, when Tim saw this friend again he asked about Falun Dafa class. His friend immediately brought Tim the book, Zhuan Falun, the main teaching of Falun Dafa. "As soon as I start reading it, everything became really clear." Tim would read the book every chance he had during that period of time. He went to the Falun Dafa exercise site for first time several days later. After practicing the exercises on that day, "I had just a tremendous feeling come over me. I felt great. I had a smile on my face." He stopped going to AA shortly after Falun Dafa practice. Since then, Tim has been practicing Falun Dafa for three years. Now he is a volunteer assistant at one practice site, helping people who are interested in learning Falun Dafa.

Tim's Spiritual Growth

From a spiritual point of view, Tim's life was prepared for a spiritual path. Spirituality is within Tim, it manifested in his attending the confirmation at a Catholic church when he was 14, and in his acknowledging that "there was something bigger in this universe" before his accident. But Tim ignored it, and let alcohol and drugs control him for 20 years. His disability gave him another opportunity to look into his true self. Finally, after eight years of being a person with a physical disability, Tim embraced this opportunity that the universe was giving him. He found his spiritual path by practicing Falun Dafa. We could see four major realizations in Tim's life that led to the awareness of his

spiritual path. Tim's spiritual growth story was unfolded by a detailed analysis of these realizations.

Life and Death

Before the accident, Tim knew that "there was something bigger in this universe," but he "didn't try to find it." He chose a path of enjoying life by drinking and using drugs. The accident, the loss of his leg, confirmed him to continue this path. He said,

I think that my main philosophy after that [accident] was that my life... this was, just like a proof, that my life could, or anybody's life could end it in any time. ... I didn't care about saving money, or looking forward to any kind of future. So I kind of just live day to day, moment to moment, and try to, try to fill it up with ... make myself feel as good as I could. And the way I was doing was with drugs and

The accident convinced him that "there was no life after death." "That was it." If the purpose of life was just being busy with work and saving money, and then dying, it didn't motivate Tim to go on with his life. The car accident, the loss of his leg, brought him a lot of money. However, the thought that life could end it at any time and there was no life after death put Tim in a hopeless situation. He said, "I didn't have any place to.... I wasn't going anywhere. I didn't have any ideas to do anything, or any motivation to really do anything." After losing his leg, Tim chose to just enjoy the sensory pleasure by intensified drinking and doing drugs. "I can die at anytime. It doesn't matter what I'm doing and I can go anytime." Tim thought that one night he would die by taking too many drugs.

Tim's disability did seriously affect him. It forced him to reflect on the purpose of life, and about life and death. These reflections are strong indications of Tim's spiritual quest of Tim at that time. In other words, Tim was thinking about basic life questions: why we were here, and where we were going. However, the accident, the disability proved him to continue his choice of maximum enjoyment of life.

Surrendering and Survival

Eight years after his car accident, Tim was still alive. He was running out of the money that he gained from the insurance company and his health was “in a terrible shape.” Although he assumed that he would just die from overdoing drugs some night, it didn’t happen that way. Death seemed to come slowly and painfully. A lot of times Tim felt that he was really close to death. “My body was just shaking and sweating. I was throwing up blood all the time.” But death didn’t come. Tim felt tired both physically and mentally. He realized that if he wanted to survive he needed to give up alcohol and drugs. Tim said,

I was tired of..., either you’re going with the characteristic of the universe, or going against them, right? You’re going with Zhen – Shan - Ren ¹, or going the opposite way. I was going against the flow. I was just really tired. And I felt that I was just fighting a battle. I surrendered. I gave up. I could not fight anymore. So... I think it was pretty much in one or two week period, with the help from other people, especially Lynn, with her support, her guidance, and her companionship, I kind of surrendered, kind of giving up the fight. ... I knew that I didn’t really want to die. I had to quit drinking. I had to really change my life.

Alcohol and drugs freed Tim for transient moments, but in the long term caused him much suffering. After 8 years, Tim was tired of this cycle. He was “worn out.” Tim’s realization of “... going against Zhen – Shan – Ren” obviously was came from practicing Falun Dafa now. But at that time, his descriptions of “fighting a battle” indicated that there were some conflicts in his heart. He probably had a guilty conscience. Of course, the external factors, his running out of money and Lynn’s help, contributed to his surrender.

Tim later said that during the detoxification and a short period after it, he didn’t think that he “had any kind of awakening, or any great spiritual happening.” He said, “It was just more of a self-realization.” He realized that his life had to change. “Drinking was a major part of my life. If I was going to give up drinking, I would have given up this part of my life, which was a big part of my life.”

¹ Zhen – Shan - Ren means Truth – Compassion - Tolerance. From Falun Dafa point of view (Li, 2001), it is the characteristic of the universe.

Things Happened for a Reason

Three months after quitting drinking, just by picking a name out of the yellow pages, Tim found a doctor who later made a new prosthesis that fit him very well. He said, “I put it on. I discovered that I could run. I could do things. I could do a lot of other things that I couldn’t do before.” I asked Tim if he meant that he couldn’t do those things with his old prosthesis. He answered, “Right. But you know. This was like a sign. It wasn’t just the old leg. It was the old me. It was the whole, the whole being.” Tim soon started a part-time job at a local gas station. Tim began to have some hope after these good things happened in his life. He then had such a remarkable realization that “those things happened for a reason.” He said,

This is maybe ... I think ... it would be an important part of the interview. ... It was a very important part because I, I now understood that this was a part of it ... And I looked at that like this. These things won’t happen for no reason. You know, I moved up here for a reason. I found this guy to make this leg. I was ... able to stay sober, and me getting a new leg [prosthesis]. And all these things started happening ... and especially how the leg fit me. I started to lose weight.

Tim told me later that our fifth interview was the first time that he really looked back on that period of his life. He can now put those things that happened to him at that time into “a big picture.” But back then, Tim had already realized that those things didn’t just happen randomly. He seemed to connect these things with something within him, maybe one of his old notions. He said, “I started to get a little ... glimpse of something was showing me, if you do good, you’ll be rewarded with good.”

I asked Tim if he thought that the good thing he did was to give up drinking. Tim answered, “It wasn’t just quitting drinking.” He also changed the whole way of looking at things from “completely negative” to being positive. Tim now believed that the realization of things happening for a reason was “a key point” in his life. Somehow the universe was able to reveal some truth to Tim through these experiences at this time in his life. This realization gave Tim some confidence and helped him “so much to move on.”

Needing help from a Higher Power

Although Tim thought that getting a new prosthesis was a sign for “a new life,” he still really didn’t know what to do and what his life was going to be. By then, Tim got over the physical suffering stage of fighting the need to drink, his mind was clear, and he “could think straight and clearly.” Tim started to look for some answers for his life and realized that he “needed help from a higher power.” Tim said,

You know at this time, my mind was becoming clearer. And I knew that I couldn’t go back to the way I lived before. I didn’t want to go back. But I didn’t know how. I really didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know the way. I knew ... there was a way, but I don’t know what it is. The way I thought before was totally wrong. So ... so that kind of ... letting me to ... to start like a search.

It was quite amazing that Tim, who planned a path of “self-destruction,” came to such an understanding that “there was a way” out there and that he needed to find it. I asked Tim if this understanding was influenced by AA, because he still went to AA meetings at that time. Tim told me that although he was told he needed to find “a higher power” at AA, “it [the realization] had to come from inside [him] ... I think, in the back, in my mind, I always knew there was something.” Probably all the good things happening at that time also gave Tim a sense of the power of a higher being.

At about the same time when Tim got his new prosthesis, he started to read the Bible, because “somebody at AA recommended me to read the Bible.” Tim tried hard. “I prayed. I asked for help. I asked for forgiveness.” But he “couldn’t get anything spiritually” from the Bible. “I really did try, because I knew I needed help from a higher power.” Tim continued his search. In a bookstore, he found a book of Native American Cherokee teaching and “grabbed the whole of” this book.

It talked things about ... the way of life. What they believed. Where they came from. Where they are going. It didn’t mean just specially them, but the world, the people of the world. ... The book talked, the principles, some of the principles that I know now, too, the basic principles of truth and compassion.

At that time, Tim not only searched meanings for things in his own life, but also he was also searching for the meanings of thought about purposes of humanity in general.

Later Tim read some Buddhist teaching he found on the Internet. Tim continued his search until one day his friend showed him the book, Zhuan Falun.

Summary

The four realizations presented in detail above were the four major realizations in Tim's spiritual journey and growth. These realizations were life and death, surrendering and survival, things happening for a reason, and needing help from a higher power. The car accident, and the loss of his leg forced Tim to reflect on the basic questions about existence such as life and death, and it also confirmed to him his wrong path, the maximum enjoyment of life through alcohol and drugs. Eight years of the car accident, he was tired both physically and mentally. He hadn't died from drugs and alcohol as he assumed he would. Tim realized that if he wanted to survive he had to give up drinking and using drugs. Shortly after he quit drinking, several good things happened in his life. Tim then realized that these things happened for a reason. Later when he started to search for some answers for his life, he realized that he needed help from a higher power.

Understanding Tim's Disability

At the beginning of reading Zhuan Falun (Li, 2001), the main teaching of Falun Dafa, Tim had already felt that Falun Dafa was something for which he was meant. He said, "It was something that just touched my heart, just opened me up to so many things ... It answered a lot of questions that I had." In this section, how Tim changed after practicing Falun Dafa is first presented, and then Tim's new understandings of himself and his life with a disability are discussed.

Changes from both outside and inside

Soon after Tim started practicing Falun Dafa, Tim felt a physical change. He felt lighter. He said, "When I was at work. There were times when I just felt that I was floating." Enormous and deeper changes happened inside of. Tim said,

There were other things that were changed. The fact that now when I was around people, they use fau language, they were cursing. I can feel it. It was just like a

pain in my heart. I can feel it physically when people use this language. I knew something was changing inside me that I had this feeling. Because I've been around people [who are] cursing and talking and yelling, they never bothered me before. ... I started working on changing myself naturally, just by ... when I read the principles [in Zhuan Falun], I knew what I needed to do.

We could see that the power of Falun Dafa lied in making Tim to be willing to change to be good from his heart. From the teaching, Tim knew that how to raise himself through a process of giving up attachments², those negative thoughts and behaviors and assimilating with the cosmic characteristic of Zhen-Shan-Ren. Tim felt that his life became much easier to deal with after applying these principles.

I learned the only way to gain something, is to give something up, and the things that I would be giving up would be the negative things that were keeping me down. The thing that I would gain is virtue. I didn't really have to search for my attachments, as once you start practicing cultivation they show themselves very easily.

The principle in Zhuan Falun sounded simple, assimilating to “Zhen-San-Ren” by “giving up attachments”, but it was penetrating to Tim. He gave us an example,

One of my major problems was letting myself be controlled by anger. During the course of any given day, I would let little insignificant things get me angry. I began, through learning some of the principles of Falun Dafa, to honestly look inside myself for the cause of this anger. There were two basic things I identified, I worried too much about what others were doing, saying, or how they were behaving. The other was that I felt that my personal interests were being infringed upon. Once identified, I began working diligently on changing this negative part of my life. As this happened the Compassion naturally came forth, and I would see life from a New/higher level. I still get a little uneasy sometimes but I have not shown or felt anger at anytime in the last two years. If that were the only thing I got out of reading Zhuan Falun, I would have already become a much, much better person. But Falun Dafa is always emphasizing Truthfulness - Compassion -

² From Falun Dafa's point of view, attachments refer to a person's negative thoughts and behaviors.

Forbearance. Practitioners are continually looking and finding ways to improve themselves.

Through this example, we could see that Falun Dafa taught Tim to search within and Tim changed from inside without depending on any external forces.

New Insights on His Disability and his life

As we knew from Tim's story, after he lost his leg in a car accident, he "lost in a world of alcohol, drugs, and complete negativity." He did not think about what happened to him. "The physiological changes, the physical changes, the emotional changes, all of that were ... were just buried. ... This was the way I dealt with it, by staying high or staying in drunk." Tim totally neglected his disability during the eight years after he lost one leg. "I just never ... never address those feelings. If there were any feelings came up, I didn't think about it."

After he quit drinking before practicing Falun Dafa, Tim still held a "negative" view on those eight years of his life. "I thought I had lost everything, my health, my wealth, my mind and especially my will." After practicing Falun Dafa, Tim started to think about those times "in a positive way." I asked him how he saw his life and his physical disability at this point of time. Tim said,

I can understand. ... I mean I look at it in the whole big picture is that this happened like this, ... I think that this happened, and ... I went through a lot of tribulations. I got all the tribulations or a lot of the ones out of the way in this eight-year span, and I just could be ... I could be set on this ... my path ... my true path. And this time that between I quit drinking and clear up, and the time I started practicing Falun Dafa ... was just a time for me to really just to wake up and maybe prepare me for you know, when the time was right.

Tim now believed that his life "was planned" this way for his true path, practicing Falun Dafa. His disability, as a part of his life experience, was set for him to go through tribulations in his life. The following was an excellent statement Tim wrote about understanding his disability.

In understanding my disability, I believe that the biggest change is that I truly know myself now. Understanding where I came from and where I'm going. Since practicing Falun Dafa I no longer put limits on myself, trying to do all things with an open heart and mind. I no longer try to pass blame or judgment on to others as an excuse to justify my own actions. This is something that had become second nature to me. I have now been able to come to terms with the events of my past by learning that all things happen for a reason. Every trial and tribulation is placed in our path, to be experienced and to rise above.

This statement demonstrated the essential nature of his spiritual practice in his life. He had answers to his basic questions of life. He knew who he was and meanings of things happened in his life. His disability experience, as a part of trials and tribulations that placed in his life, helped him search for and find his spiritual path, his true path. From neglecting his disability, to view as a positive thing to be experienced and to rise above, Falun Dafa practice empowered Tim transcended his disability, and now he continued the transcending process and journey to return his true self. "As I put these principles [of Falun Dafa] into my daily life, most of the problems I had been dealing with became very easy to overcome. But now I am faced with new challenges."

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate holistically the role of spirituality in the lives of two individuals with disabilities. Adopting a portraiture method, the study presented portraits of Griffith and Tim. Each portrait included three parts. It started with a sketch of the individual's life, followed by a detailed analysis of major life experiences and/or realizations that led them to a spiritual path and spiritual growth. The next was a further representation on understanding their disability through their spirituality. This session first summarizes the findings of the study, then addresses how this study extended previous research. The third part of this session discusses limitations of the study. Finally, future research possibilities of studies on spirituality and disabilities are addressed.

There were two commonalities in Griffith's and Tim's spiritual growth stories that became major findings of this study. First, spirituality, a longing for an understanding of

their existence, seeking for larger meanings and purposes of lives resided in their nature. However, both of them ignored it for a long time. Disability, as an important part of their lives' experiences, offered them an opportunity to reflect on their lives, to sincerely search for meanings and purposes and answers to their basic questions of life. Griffith questioned his independence, asking, "Am I really so strong? Really so able to live in this world by myself?" Tim asked, "Why did things happen and what made certain people suffer. ...what are the reasons for being here?"

The second similarity of Griffith's and Tim's story was that spirituality provided "great" meaning to their lives as well as their disabilities. Thus, they "transcended" their disability. I interpreted transcendence as facing disability with a clearer perspective and rising above the limits and pain initially imposed by disability.

About six or seven months after Griffith became a Christian, he was asked by a person when he spoke to a crowd of students, if God was so great, why he was blind? The question did not create any pain in Griffith at that moment. From his answer to this person (Griffith believed that his answer was given by God), Griffith did not care if he did not see this world with his physical eyes, but what was important to him was that he knew God opened his eyes to "the reality of a living true God and to faith." Griffith believed that God drew his attention to Him through his weakness, his blindness.

Disability did seriously affect Tim. His initial reaction was drinking and using drugs more intensively. He hid all the physical, emotional, and psychological changes under artificial stimulants. His life dropped to the point that he did not care if he lived or died. After practicing Falun Dafa, he found the "inner meaning" of his life and discovered "the true meaning" that happens in his life. Tim believed that his disability, as a part of trials and tribulations in his life was placed in his path to experience and to rise above.

This research extended existing literature in two ways. First, as addressed in the literature review in this study, one major finding of current research on people with acquired physical disabilities was that spirituality was a way of coping emotionally and mentally

(see Houston, 1999; Rossiter, 1992). The term “coping” implies dealing with life in crisis or difficult situations. However, spirituality is not simply a way of coping or adjustment due to a phenomenon of difficult and stressful times (Pargament, Van Haitsma, & Ensing, 1995). It “has to do with the full range of life experiences” (Pargament et al., 1995, p. 51). As could be seen from Griffith’s and Tim’s growth story, spirituality played an essential role in living with their disability. They went beyond the search for comfort to search for genuine meanings and purposes of their lives. Therefore, they transcended their disabilities and experienced a deeper reality through their spirituality.

Second, using a portraiture method, this research represented the richness and wholeness of the spiritual aspects in living with disabilities. As is common in qualitative research in social science, studies reviewed in this paper used a data-reduction analysis method (Houston, 1999; Rossiter, 1992), which condensed responses from participants into categories and themes. In other words, similar responses from different participants related to one category were grouped together. One participant’s experiences of living with a disability were scattered in several categories. As Lawrence-Lightfoot stated, “Very few social science researchers have tried to seriously describe the process of creating the gestalt. Nor have they offered clear strategies for constructing the aesthetic whole” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 244). This study explored participants’ spirituality and disability in the overall context of their lives. Re-listening the interviewing tapes and a detailed analysis of very important passages from in-depth interviews allowed the research to capture the keystone life experiences and/or realizations that led participants towards a spiritual path and growth as well as an understanding of their disability. This study demonstrated that portraiture is an effective method to represent the wholeness and the essential nature of a human phenomenon.

Through portraits, this portraiture method offered a way to present richness and complexity of each participant’s spiritual dimensions in living with their disability, on the other hand, it limited the number of participants in this study. Griffith and Tim were both Caucasians. Griffith was a Christian and Tim practiced Falun Dafa, an ancient practice that refines both body and mind (Li, 2001). Finding appropriate participants who also had

disability and strong spiritual beliefs was a difficult task. No attempt was made to represent people who were from different cultural backgrounds and who practiced diverse spiritual practices. Therefore, conclusions of this study could not be generalized to other people with disabilities who have strong spiritual beliefs.

When searching literature on spirituality and disability, it was amazing to find out that spirituality had become an emerging research area in many fields such as counseling (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992), rehabilitation (McCarthy, 1995), nursing (Burkhardt, M., 1989), social work (Miller, 2001; Tolliver, 1997), psychotherapy (Miller, 1999), and medical science (Hiatt, 1986). Except a few studies on spiritual experiences of parents who had children with disabilities (Bennett, Deluca, & Allen, 1995; Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998; Rogers-Dulan, 1998; Weisner, Beizer, & Stolze, 1991), research on spiritual dimensions of individuals with disabilities is still a less explored area in special education, despite the fact that it was the Bible, instead of professional textbooks, informed the pioneer practitioners who worked with people with disabilities of their purposes and activities (Blatt, 1985).

If we special education professionals admit that we work with the whole person (Stainback & Stainback, 1984), young or old, we should not ignore spirituality, this essential aspect of human being. Since it is a less explored area, there are many directions for researchers to go. First, each individual with a disability who has a strong spiritual belief has his or her unique spiritual experience and an understanding of the disability. More cases needed be portrayed to provide a better understanding of the role of spirituality in the lives of people with disabilities. The reader will discover resonant universal themes embedded in each case (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Second, findings of this study suggested that spirituality was inherent in participants' nature. They both had a spiritual quest at a young age. Future studies can focus on understanding spiritual experience or spiritual quest of young people with disabilities in order to help more young people with disabilities understand that disability experience can be a positive experience for personal and/or spiritual growth. Third, some practitioners have acknowledged the importance of the spiritual dimensions in the lives of individuals and

families with children with disabilities and have incorporated this aspect into their work (Sosa-Ortiz, Y., personal communication, May 9, 2001; Trieschmann, 1999), researchers need to study how these practitioners work in this direction and their experiences of integrating spirituality into their professional work. Fourth, this research pointed to the possibility that people with disabilities who experienced spiritual growth may in fact transcend their disability as a result of their lives being enriched by their spirituality. They appeared to see their disability with a clearer perspective going beyond the initial limits and pain imposed by their disability. Future research is warranted that studies the transcending experiences of more people with disabilities who have strong spiritual beliefs. This area of research may bring a new level of understanding to the role of spirituality in living with a disability.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of spirituality in the lives of two individuals with disability. Findings indicated that disability, as an important part of life experiences offered participants an opportunity for spiritual growth. Spirituality framed new meaning and purpose for each participant's life as well as understanding of their disability. They both appeared to transcend their disability resulting in experiencing a deeper realm beyond mere physical dimensions. This research demonstrated the potential link between the significance of spirituality in the lives of individuals with disabilities. It contributed to an emerging research area that focused upon spirituality and disability by extending the current literature to represent the essential nature and richness of spiritual dimensions. This study also introduced the usefulness of a portraiture method as a viable way to understand a complex phenomenon such as spirituality.

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