"I Came Here to Heal": Narratives of Graduate Theology Students' Spiritual Identities

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Abstract

Spirituality addresses how inner lives inform individuals’ sense of self and their relation to the world. Little research has been conducted on the ways in which graduate divinity students experience their spiritual identity formation. To that end, this constructivist narrative case study expands the existing scholarly literature on spiritual development to explore how graduate theology students make meaning of their spiritual identity development and how their graduate theological preparation informs their sense of spiritual development. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis, then analyzed using McAdams’s (2008) work on personal narratives and life stories. Three women students who were enrolled in one Master of Divinity program at one institution in the Western United States shared their narratives as part of this study. Emergent themes, or meta-narratives, include integrating early life religious beliefs and challenging life experiences into current spiritual understandings, a desire to heal during the process of study through deep spiritual engagement, and the impact of contemplative practice on spiritual understanding.

Keywords: spirituality, theology graduate students, narrative inquiry, student development

Spirituality as a phenomenon addresses how individuals’ inner lives – their consciousness - impact their sense of self and how they interface with the world. Spirituality is about contextualizing values, how individuals make meaning of lived experiences, and what they believe about their connection to the world by answering questions such as “why are we here?” and “what is my purpose?” It also speaks to the ways in which we address the mysterious, the unknown and the unknowable (Astin, 2004). Spiritual identity development – how humans develop a sense of spirituality and how that becomes part of our identity – and the processes that foster it have received substantial attention in the scholarly community (Poll & Smith, 2003), particularly in the fields of religion, student development, and psychology.
Part of this body of literature addresses the intersection of spiritual identity with other facets of lived identity, such as LGBT identities (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005), race (Patton & McClure, 2009; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Watt, 2003), and gender (Soet & Martin, 2007). Some literature speaks to the ways in which institutions of higher education impact students’ spiritual identity development (Astin & Keen, 2006; Bowman & Small, 2010; Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Hartley, 2004), as well as the spiritual identity process of graduate counseling students (Kleppe, 2011). However, there appears to be minimal literature pertaining to the lives of graduate theology students (e.g. those pursuing Master of Divinity or Master of Theological Studies degrees). What literature does exist on this particular student population seems to focus on other aspects of their lives, specifically clergy education and vocational discernment (Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2006) or epistemology (Kaartinen-Koutaniemi & Lindblom-Yläne, 2008). Additionally, much of the literature on spiritual identity development used quantitative survey research methods.

This study sought to address this dearth of scholarly literature by sharing the inner lives of graduate theology students. The purpose of this study was to explore the spiritual identity development of graduate theology students. Specifically, I answer these research questions: (1) how do graduate theology students make meaning of their spiritual identity development? and (2) how does their graduate theological preparation inform their sense of spiritual identity? In answering these questions, this study shares a deeper, more nuanced understanding of spiritual identity and informs the ways that practitioners can support graduate theology students in cultivating their spiritual identities.

**Literature Review**

There is substantial interest among incoming college students in spirituality and involvement with campus spiritual organizations. In a national study of college students, a majority of students expressed “having an interest in spirituality,” “believing in the sacredness of life,” and “spirituality [as] a source of joy” (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003, p. 4). However, there is no singular definition of spirituality, which makes the subject challenging to research. Often, spirituality is understood in connection to religion (Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, & Johnson, 2010). However, religiosity is associated with ritual and requirement while spirituality is “an inner process of connectedness with the sacred” (Friedman et al., 2010, p. 80). Lindholm, Goldberg, and Calderone (2006) asserted that while the college years are pivotal for the development of cognitive and social skills, spiritual dimensions of students’ lives are often left unaddressed. Spiritual development is often ignored as a factor of student identity and development, which seems to fall short of the holistic aims of the student development profession (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004).
Crisis and Suffering in Spiritual Development

Various researchers have explored spiritual development. Friedman et al. (2010) discussed barriers to spiritual development, such as the “microsocial (as in conformity pressures from other individuals), macrosocial (as in pressures from collective structures such as laws), or individual, as in character flaws” (p. 89). Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000), in their respective works on faith development, recognized the importance of challenge and suffering to spiritual development. Decker (1993) discussed the role of trauma in spiritual development. Using alchemy as a metaphor, he asserted that human beings must undergo a breaking down of their personal barriers in order to re-form spiritually. Trauma serves as the catalyst for this change, and results in increased search for more meaningful perspective on existence as well as expansion of notions of existence (Decker, 1993). This notion of trauma could be generalized to major life events that propel or hinder spiritual identity development and may be important to note as students are sharing their spiritual identity narratives.

Spirituality and Spiritual Questing

Lindholm et al. (2006) explored the spirituality of students who aspired to careers in professional fields, such as law or medicine. The authors defined spiritual quest as the means by which individuals tackle transcendent questions of self and of others through intentional existential questioning, religious doubt, and being presented with and engaging in opportunities for change. Spiritual questing is “an active disposition toward existential engagement that includes openness to tackling the perplexing issues that many individuals face when trying to find themselves in the world” (Lindholm et al., 2006, p. 512). This sense of openness to addressing existential questions seems paramount, not just to the spiritual quest but also to how higher education institutions support students in developing that openness. The Higher Education Research Institute’s (2003) report on the spiritual lives of college students (Spirituality in Higher Education) found that many students who are enmeshed in spiritual quests are more readily able to make meaning out of hardship. Attending divinity school can be seen as a form of spiritual questing, and thus may allow students to engage in meaning-making processes around the hardships experienced in their lives so they can serve in their professional roles those experiencing hardship.

Research Design

Methodology

Narrative inquiry uses both story and storytelling to better understand a phenomenon. Acknowledging that human beings live storied lives (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), I have chosen narrative inquiry to explore the spiritual lives of graduate theology students. This selection was, in part, due to my own interest in the stories that we all carry that inform how we see and interact with the world. Additionally, I am curious how the stories we construct about our lives inform
how we make meaning of our spiritual identities. It seemed only natural to select narrative inquiry for this analysis. Furthermore, this study is bounded by time, space, and context. I selected participants from one theological program who were all enrolled as students or recently graduated at the time of this study. Thus, this narrative study can also be described as a case study (Merriam, 1998).

This study used a constructivist approach. In constructivism, knowledge is created in the interaction between the researcher and the researched (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach seeks to understand the complexity of lived experience rather than attempt to create a generalizable truth. Individuals make subjective meaning of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), so the dialogue between the researcher and participant in a constructivist study helps to illuminate and clarify the nature of the phenomenon. Meaning-making occurs in the interplay of the participants’ narrative sharing and my own.

Theoretical Framework

While many approaches to narrative research exist, the theoretical perspective that seemed most relevant to this endeavor was McAdams’s (2008) work on personal narratives and life story. He posited that the stories we tell about ourselves are a way that we make meaning of lived experience while also trying to “reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, social class, and culture writ large” (McAdams, 2008, pp. 242-243). In this way, we make meaning of how we experience ourselves against what society aspires for us, and we create a narrative identity in the telling of that story. This framework also accounts for the impact that culture, family, and other external factors have on our sense of self and how we construct our narratives to respond to others’ sense of who we are.

Data Collection

I recruited participants from one graduate theology program in the Western United States. This program was situated in a small, private institution that grants both bachelor’s and master’s degrees. While the sole focus of this institution is not theology, the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program has long been a fixture of the institution. Using convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I selected a gatekeeper, the chair of the academic program that houses the M.Div. degree with whom I had an existing professional relationship, who helped identify participants. Each of the participants was asked to submit a written text which captured some of their reflections on the divinity program, such as an admissions essay, class assignment, or personal reflective writing prior to participating in the interview. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview, which was partially informed by the writing sample provided. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. During the interview, participants responded to a series of questions, including: What does spirituality mean to you? How has that
changed over your life? Tell me a story about your experiences with spirituality during your graduate program. How does spirituality impact your life as a graduate theology student? Participants were encouraged to tell stories and engage with me in conversation. This narrative interviewing strategy allowed the participants to share personal anecdotes about their experiences that were more fruitful than simply defining terms or engaging in call-and-response (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Participants also self-identified pseudonyms for use in the study.

The treatment of data as narratives and narratives as data is a central theme of narrative inquiry (Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2002). I used descriptive narrative analysis, the goal of which is to describe the lived experiences of participants (Polkinghorne, 1988). During analysis, I sought to understand how the narratives follow a narrative form, with identified plots and subplots (comprising a beginning, middle, and end) becoming salient themes for analysis (Priest et al., 2002). Both data in a clear narrative form and data which were less structured were used in analysis to account for different approaches to storytelling. Subplots were identified within the transcripts, following the generally accepted form of a story (exposition, complicating action, climax, resolution, and coda). The subplots of each participant’s narrative were entered into a spreadsheet side-by-side, which allowed me to analyze the individual story elements with more ease. Similar themes began emerging from these subplots, which became the results of this study. Trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used to ensure the quality of the study.

Participants

Three women participated in this study. Dorthy is a late-20s, White woman in her second year of graduate study, having switched from a religious studies program her first year to the divinity track her second year. She identifies as Buddhist. A very literal child, Dorthy had a difficult time relating to the spiritual aspects of the church she attended. She also experienced violence during her upbringing which led her to choose nonviolence as a path for her life. Prior to coming to divinity school, Dorthy was a case worker at a domestic violence program.

Dena is a mid-20s, White woman who recently completed the divinity program. She identifies as a BuJew, or Buddhist-Jew, who is learning what it might mean to integrate many different spiritual understandings into her life. She grew up in a secular Jewish home that felt more like a cultural experience than a religious or spiritual one. Prior to coming to divinity school, Dena was trying to make it in the art world of New York City before “hitting a brick wall” that catapulted her into exploring spiritual teachings.

Rebecca is a late-30s, Black and Italian woman who is in her fourth and final year of her divinity program. She identifies as a multiple religious belonger (MRB), combining Buddhism and Christianity as her theological framework. While she has always had a deeply spiritual and religious outlook, she grew up in a Christian
church that led her to rebel. She then experienced a period of spiritual depression. Prior to coming to divinity school, Rebecca was a bartender who always felt her bartending was a form of chaplaincy.

Findings
Participants delved into very personal stories of suffering and overcoming obstacles which led them to their pursuit of a divinity degree. Among these stories, there emerged three poignant themes, or meta-narratives. These themes include (1) the integration of early experiences and beliefs into current spiritual understandings and identity, (2) the desire to heal as a part of the divinity program, and (3) the importance of contemplative practice in deepening spiritual understanding.

Integration of Early Experiences into Present Understanding
Dorthy, Dena, and Rebecca each have profound histories that have informed where they are at in their life stories at the present. Their stories, while different, shared common elements, including that the spiritual understanding of their childhood was not the spiritual understanding that they hold today, and yet their present is deeply informed by their past. Though each started on a very different path, the theology program afforded them a container in which to integrate their life experiences into their current spiritual and religious identities.

Each spoke to a crisis point that escalated their decision to attend divinity school. They also stated that once they arrived at divinity school, they were able to make meaning of their past and integrate it into their present experience. In a course assignment, Rebecca reflected on the passing of her father, where she made connections to loving-kindness practice. She described the pain she experienced as a three-year-old grieving the loss of her father in a letter to her father, specifically integrating that into her exploration of her Buddhist identity:

“Years later the anger in me began to fester. In retrospect I see how restricted and conflicted that I was. I was mad that you had left me behind to cheer up my mother and the rest of the family . . . . And the more that I look at [the Buddha family] colors the more that they are asking me to forgive you. They are asking me to forgive my anger, my pride, my judgment, my pity, my passions, my manipulations, my avoidance, my vengeance, and my need to be right. As I forgive these parts of me, I can’t help but to forgive you, they arise simultaneously together.”

This exploration took place as part of a course assignment, and it was evident that the particular container of the assignment and the program allowed Rebecca to integrate her pain and anger in a way that was both informed by and informed her contemplative practice. Rebecca also noted that the program allowed her to integrate her previous Christian identity into an unfolding Buddhist identity,
leaving space for her to integrate both worldviews into her current spiritual sense of self.

For Dorothy, her divinity school experience was more about becoming embodied as a result of both her contemplative practice and how the contemplative ethos of her graduate program has allowed her to integrate her learning with her previous life experiences. She described entering the program distrusting of authority and disappointed in her previous academic experiences. She credited the mentorship of the faculty in the program with her ability to work through those issues to come to a more grounded sense of self. Dena noted that her spirituality and sense of self had been shaped by her current program and those who teach in it. She said that the fact that her faculty are dedicated practitioners modeled for her a way to live that was grounded in practice. She found space to integrate her Jewish upbringing into her current Buddhist practice, particularly under the mentorship of a faculty member who focuses on contemplative approaches to Judaism, similar to Rebecca’s experience. It is evident that faculty play a role in helping students make meaning of their previous life experiences and religious identities and integrating those experiences into current spiritual understandings.

**Finding Healing in the Program**

Across all three stories, participants shared a desire to find healing as part of the divinity program. Each participant had experienced some sort of adversity in their past. Dorothy discussed how her family history of violence led her down a path to nonviolent activism. However, she felt overwhelmed by the volume of issues present in the world and a great deal of anger as a result. Eventually, she came across a documentary about Tibet that prompted her to explore Buddhism and to connect her nonviolent approach to this religious tradition. She felt an expansion of the spirit in that exploration. While she originally came to graduate study wishing to be a Tibetan translator, she soon realized, after spending time as a domestic violence case worker, that her need to heal herself and her desire to be of service was taking her in another direction:

> And there was a lot of crisis in my family, and in my own life, and I was just, like, wanting to give myself to Buddhism. And in the course of the first semester, I realized that the divinity track was perfect for my healing process and to re-establish a relationship with my kind of activist tendencies and my tendencies to want to be in social work, and it has provided me a very constructive and healthy and clear way to relate to others that’s a lot healthier than what I was doing before.

Dorothy’s story, and her desire to find a healing space in the divinity program, allowed her to not only begin her healing process but to integrate her previous activism into her current field of study. She felt that her career change into theology helped her to find balance and become a healthier individual.
Dorthy’s experience is not that dissimilar from Dena’s desire to heal through her studies. She had been living in New York City and trying to make it in the art world when she found herself feeling like she was losing her sense of self and her own mind and she began exploring the healing arts. First, she thought she wanted to study acupuncture, and visited an acupuncture school in the same town as the theology program. Since she had an undergraduate professor who had taught at the divinity school, she decided to visit, eventually enrolling in the religious studies master’s program before, like Dorthy, changing programs to divinity. While she acknowledged that the divinity program was nurturing, Dena’s deep healing happened as a result of her thesis:

Yeah, the thesis was really healing for me, to just have that much time to devote to thinking about what I had gone through and to make more, make meaning of it . . . . But a lot of people I’ve talked to, it's been a rite of passage to write the thesis, and it's normally so much harder than it needs to be. Like it's just a forty-page paper and it, like, it was really, really hard for me, because for me it was the culmination of everything I had been through [during] graduate school, and it represented like this gateway into a new chapter.

This rite of passage helped her integrate her own spiritual emergency prior to enrollment into a thesis project designed to help others experiencing spiritual emergencies.

Rebecca’s dad passed away when she was young, and this experience, paired with challenging experiences with Christianity as a young person, prompted her to move away from religion and rebel. She sought out spiritual understandings by accompanying a boyfriend to Spain to study Islam and tried various metaphysical practices which she felt were disorienting. She began to feel lost in her journey, describing a sense of “spiritual homelessness.” After she returned from Spain, she began bartending, which felt to her like counseling and chaplaincy. So, she decided to explore graduate programs in counseling, but eventually found this theology program:

I felt like counseling was great, and it could help with like the day-to-day, symptomatic things, but I was really feeling like a whole crisis of faith. Like, I felt like if I got in line with my spiritual side, that would take care of everything, like I could kind of do it in one fell swoop. So I ended up applying, and coming here, and then furthering my studies got deep into the Buddhist practice here, and really fell in love with it, and really felt like that's what I was waiting for and that was what really, really made the most sense to me.

For Rebecca, the answer to her sense of disintegrated spirituality was to study divinity, which simultaneously gave her permission to explore ways to integrate Buddhism and Christianity and also met her desire for vocational fulfillment. She shared that the deepening of these identities, eventually finding herself to be a
multiple religious belonger, was fueled not just by the program itself, but by her deepening sense of practice.

**Importance of Contemplative Practice**

The particular program in which these three participants enrolled focuses on contemplative practices, loosely defined as approaches to develop insight, awareness, and compassion through focused reflection (Haynes, 2005). Each of the participants spoke to the practice aspect as integral to their spiritual development, both in and out of the classroom. Though the practices varied, including yoga, meditation, and prayer, the experience of engaging in contemplative practice throughout the divinity program seemed to be a common source of spiritual enrichment for the participants.

Dena spoke about how her own spirituality moved from the extraordinary to the ordinary, partially informed by practice:

> I really appreciated this view of integrating life with spirituality because it usually didn't feel disjointed to have a ton of homework and to have my spiritual practice, you know? . . . . Like I more had the view of, I can use this work as fuel and, like, this can be my practice tonight, is writing this paper. I don't know if I would've thought that way if I wasn't in this environment, I think it could feel more disjointed if I were studying something else, and have a ton of work, and also wanted to be on a spiritual path.

She notes the particular environment of her graduate program impacted how she viewed practice and helped her to feel that each of the elements of her study were part of the spiritual practice. She also discussed how the practice of presence helped her when she was an intern chaplain, trying to stay present when a patient was dying. She noted that while she was “a little freaked out” inside, she was able to stay in the room with her own discomfort and provide support in part because of contemplative practice and in part because of her experience with a process lab course (an experiential course focused on small-group discussion about students’ journeys in the program) that allowed her to practice being in community with others in the program.

Dorthy originally used her meditation practice as a way to manage the pain of her rheumatoid arthritis. She noted that she felt more mentally clear and less physical pain when she meditated than she did when she was on her medication. She deepened her practice of meditation as part of her graduate study, which allowed her to feel more embodied:

> I was always stuck in my head, and I remember someone told me that I was severed - my heart and my head were severed - and I acted on one or the other and there was no connection there. And actually practicing meditation has really helped me to feel more whole as a human, and not
just act from my thoughts or from my heart, but to be able to integrate those things.

This sense of embodiment has allowed her to be more open to and aware of her environment. This allowed her to work through the defensiveness she was carrying with her from her life before the program, as did the fact that her professors are practitioners who model effective Buddhist practice as well. She appreciated this integration of the intellectual learning that was taking place in class and the contemplative aspect that allowed her space to reflect on that learning and integrate it into her being.

Rebecca has a strong Buddhist sitting practice and explores other practices as well that allow her to deepen her spiritual connection. For her, regular practice in the environment of the graduate program has allowed her to find the integration that she was seeking:

And when I say regular [practice], I mean just I make the time personally to seek things out and do these things. . . . . It's usually shamatha sitting practice. And I do that because it just keeps me really in tune with myself and keeps me clear. It's like hygiene, almost, like brushing my teeth. And then the Christian aspect of it, I go to that more in times, I would say, in times of need... And so, perhaps, the sitting practice for me is a way to empty myself and then the Christian practice is a way for me to remember that I can also be filled with love.

This ability to integrate multiple practices as an MRB has had an impact on her ability to navigate challenging situations that arise, such as issues pertaining to campus racism that emerged while she was engaged in her academic program.

**Conclusion, Implications, and Future Directions**

This study sought to answer the question of how graduate theology students make meaning of their spiritual identities and how their graduate theological preparation informs their sense of spiritual development. While this narrative study wrestled with these questions through the experiences of three participants, more research is needed on these phenomena. The study itself, bound by a specific time, place, and context, and representing only those students to whom I had access, only provides insight into a limited portion of the experience of divinity school and its role in the preparation of spiritually developed practitioners. In particular, further research could address more deliberately the ways in which spiritual questing is engaged through and within divinity programs, and how that quest shapes students’ identities beyond the spiritual. Knowing that personal crises shape how and why students may matriculate into Master of Divinity programs may inform professional practice in student affairs. Specifically, there may be a need to create unique support structures for this student population to further foster the integration of past trauma with current spiritual identity in a positive way. Additionally, since there appears to be a positive impact on spiritual development
through participation in a Master of Divinity program, the broader profession of student affairs could engage collaboratively with divinity school colleagues on best practices for spiritual development for those students not enrolled in this type of program.

Clearly, the students in this study have spent substantial time and energy exploring their own spiritual quests and seeking spiritual answers. While they each experienced challenging life circumstances, they rooted their understanding and meaning making of those experiences in spirituality. They understood that their spiritual and personal hardships were catalysts for deepening their own understandings of themselves and they then connected those understandings into their theological study. They integrated their religious and spiritual pasts into their spiritual present, finding new ways to label their identities that seemed authentic to their experiences while possibly having that identity called into question. They also used their own spiritual awareness to connect to others, each desiring to pursue a career in chaplaincy so that they can be of spiritual service to others.

The graduate program itself seemed to have a substantive impact on the spiritual lives of these students. Each spoke to the importance of contemplative practice – a key pedagogical feature of this program – to their spiritual journeys. The graduate program augmented that aspect of their lives by combining academic knowledge with personal insight gained through practice. The graduate program also provided a container in which the participants could heal from their previous personal and spiritual hardships, which was the goal that each participant described as they were discerning what they needed out of graduate study. The students still faced adversities, such as they did when it came to how their social identities interacted with their environment and others around them. However, it was clear that the graduate program had a positive impact on their sense of themselves as spiritual beings. Additional research could explore the specific factors in graduate divinity programs that contribute to positive impacts on spiritual development and those that perhaps inhibit growth.

More broadly, these narratives spoke to interconnection, where personal healing aligned with vocational discernment, and the deeply spiritual met the academically rigorous to create a meaningful, educational experience for these students. As meaning and purpose become central to their lives and they are able to connect that purpose to vocation, they can use that seat of power – spiritual power – to impact the lives of others. As Rebecca observed:

When [power is] used in a humble way, how much of a difference you can make, and to also give just the opportunity for students to take a deeper, broader look, to be a representative of that “bigger thing” I was talking about… And I think [chaplaincy is] something that’s so needed that we’re thirsty for it, in a sense, and it’s the intersection of everything.
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References


