

ELDERSHIRE PROGRAMS: SPIRITUALITY

(This conceptual model is based, in part, on the one developed by Dene Peterson and associates for the ElderSpirit Community in Abingdon, Virginia)

I. Definition: Spirituality is the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non-human environment, and, for some, God. [from Drew Leder, *Spiritual Passages* (Tarcher-Putnam, New York 1997) as interpreted by Dene Peterson]

II. Context: What allows you to feel your life has purpose and meaning? What allows you to feel your life has purpose and meaning? How do you relate to the mystery of life? What offers you inspiration and hope? What allows you to feel deep joy? Do you feel connected to a higher power and intelligence? These questions require us to go deep within ourselves for the answers.

Spirituality is a highly personal and intimate experience of our deeper nature. It should not be confused with the dogma and doctrine of religion. Discovering what allows the deeper parts of yourself to be fulfilled has nothing to do with other people's ideas about God. Your relationship to your deeper nature determines your spiritual path. It is unlike anyone else's path. It is uniquely personal and evolves out of finding, uncovering, and nurturing your inner truth.

Each of us comes into life to learn and do certain things – this is often referred to as our higher purpose. Our spiritual path can be designed around learning and expressing this higher purpose. When we create our lives in alignment with our higher purpose, we have an extraordinary asset available to motivate us. Our higher purpose is not meant to be mysterious. In fact, it is the most desired thing our soul wishes us to know. Most spiritual sciences are designed to assist a person in learning their purpose. The key is to pay attention and trust your intuition.

Some examples of a higher purpose include:

- To raise a family and learn how to love
- To learn that you are not a victim of circumstances but rather the creator of your own fate
- To learn the lessons of manifesting a particular gift or talent
- To trust that there is a benevolent and supporting higher intelligence – call it God or whatever word or words work for you – one that cares about your well-being and with whom you can have a personal relationship
- To learn the lessons of caring for people in need of help
- To learn how to unconditionally love yourself
- To learn to create financial abundance
- To help the Earth and our human family through this challenging time in our evolution
- To learn how to cooperate with others

- To learn how to play and be joyful.

As we travel along our spiritual paths, we move from a dependent relationship with something outside ourselves to a trust in our own inner knowing. We move from being an instrument of some higher power to a co-creator with this higher power. We move from being a victim of circumstances on Earth to being a co-creator of its evolution. A wonderful story about this process is called: “*Partners*” (by Marc Gellman):

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a gigantic spinning, swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go.

The Angels said to God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So God took all the rocks out of the swirling glob, put them in one place, and said: “I will call this place the universe. Some of the rocks will be planets, some will be stars, and some will be just rocks.”

Then God took all the water from the swirling glob and spread it around the universe, saying: “Some of this water will be oceans, some will be clouds, and some will be just water.”

Then the Angels asked God: “Is the world finished?”

God answered: “NOPE!”

On some of the rocks God placed growing things – and creeping things – and things which only God knows what they are! And when God had done all this, the Angels looked around the universe and said: “Well, its neater, but is it finished?”

God answered: “NOPE!”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said:

“Look, I’ll give you the whole world, but you have to finish it.”

“Now you look,” they said, “we can’t finish the world without your help – so maybe – we could be partners?”

God warned them: “If we’re going to be partners, sometimes you might get angry at me, and sometimes I might get angry at you, but even so, none of us can stop finishing the world – that’s the deal.” And they all agreed to the deal.

Then the Angels asked God: “Is the world finished?”

God smiled and answered: “I don’t know. Go ask my partners!”

Co-creating the future of the Earth with God is the best game in town! No spiritual path should be without it.

III. Discussion: Western models of “successful” aging can be broken into the following:

1. *The Socio-medical Model:* As we age, we decline. Life is a litany of diminishment relating to health, attractiveness, cognition, income, involvement, and community. This is the current focus of the medical profession, gerontologists, and the government.

2. *The Consumer Model*: Build it and put a gate around it. Offer nice housing, fun activities, golf outings, and lots of trips to the mall. The emphasis is on consuming, not producing. Pleasant living can give way to triviality, boredom, loneliness, and disconnection. The call to social contribution and psycho-spiritual growth is missing.
3. *The Productive Model*: This model puts aside declinism and the idea that to be older is to be dysfunctional. It looks at the ways that elders contribute and be productive. The organization Civic Ventures has been collecting information and the inspirational stories of elders. It is rewarding them for the many contributions they are making. See: www.civicventures.org. A good old age is busy and engaged. Retirement is being redefined. There are many important benefits that come from countering the perceived and actual incapacities of old-age. What is often missing from this model is the component relating to the support needed for the “losses” that are perceived and/or occur in the later stages of life’s journey.

IV. CONCEPTUAL MODEL FACETS:

1. The dimensions of the Later Life Spirituality Program put forth by ElderSpirit include:
 - a. The inner work for each person
 - b. Caring for one’s self
 - c. Mutual support within the community
 - d. Service to the larger community
 - e. Reverence for creation
 - f. The creative life
2. The elements within each of these dimensions include:
 - a. *The Inner Work* involves having an interactive relationship with a higher power; having a spiritual practice; seeking meaning in life; seeking Spirit in one’s existence; a willingness to face the mystery of death; and freedom of religion. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include: learning lessons from life; a regular spiritual practice (prayer, meditation, yoga, etc.); and a respect for the practices of others.
 - b. *Caring for One’s Self* involves working on your physical and mental health; being kind to yourself; taking yourself with lightness and laughter; connecting to your neighbors, family, and friends; and speaking your truth. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include: aerobic, strengthening and stretching exercises; outdoor activities including gardening, walking, biking; mental exercises such as reading, puzzles, games; lifelong learning programs; and the willingness to ask for help when needed and graciously accept such help.
 - c. *Mutual Support Within the Community* involves direct dealings with neighbors; celebrations; helping with the care of neighbors; and

getting to know each other and having respect for each other's history and traditions. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include: shared meals; birthday and holiday celebrations; providing respite for caregivers; being a good listener; accepting your share of the work and responsibilities agreed to by the community.

- d. *Service to the Larger Community* involves social awareness and action outside of limits of the resident's community; having compassion for those in need; and willingness to share your knowledge, talent, and abilities with others. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include volunteer work; civic engagement; getting and staying informed with the issues; and acting as a good neighbor with the greater community.
- e. *Reverence for Creation* involves a respectful relationship with nature; awareness of the earth's beauty; caring for animals, plants, and trees; and less emphasis on consumerism. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include: taking the effect on the environment for each action taken; simplifying lifestyle; less reliance on cars; recycling; organic gardening; and supporting local producers.
- f. *The Creative Life* involves developing your special gifts and talents; understanding your ancestors; being open to change; affirming you have a legacy to give to others; and addressing the "unlived" aspects of life – the paths not yet taken. Examples of ways to work on and achieve these elements include: artistic activities; telling your story; adapting to the limitations that may come with aging and/or illness; doing something new; and pursuing your dreams.

V. A Draft Belief System:

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
2. We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.
3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
4. We believe in the never-ending search for truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.
5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice. No idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.
8. We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.
9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to all, elections are open to all, and ideas are open to criticism. All these so that the members of the community can govern themselves.
10. We believe in the importance of a spiritual community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.