



**a part of you so deep**

**What Vulnerable Adolescents Have to Say  
About Spirituality**

**by  
Melanie Wilson**

# a part of you so deep

## What Vulnerable Adolescents Have to Say About Spirituality

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# Introduction

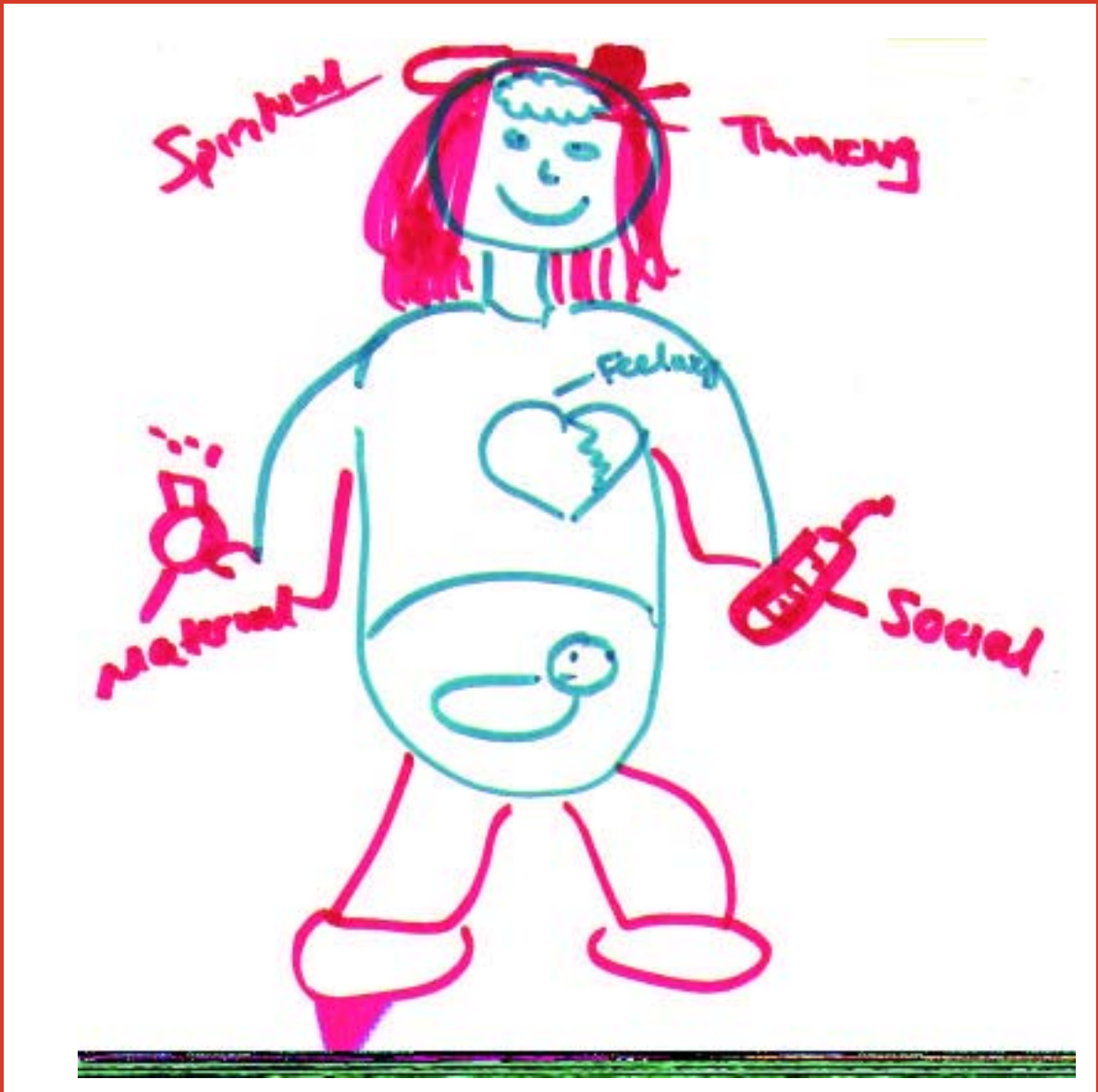
In 2002, New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services published *Practice Unbound: A Study of Secular Spiritual and Religious Activities in Work with Adolescents*. The study investigated the use of spiritual activities, both religious and secular, in agencies that work with troubled youth. The findings were unequivocal: use of spirituality in agency settings was widespread and growing. Meditation, guided visualization, martial arts, prayer groups and other spiritually oriented activities were being routinely offered to clients as both therapy and recreation, and though agencies rarely evaluated the activities in order to document their benefits, program directors believed – most quite strongly – that the activities did indeed help their teenage clients in observable and significant ways. Further, agencies reported that they planned to offer more spiritual programming in the future, particularly if training and funding were made available, and – in the case of religious activities – if legal issues relating to church-state regulations could be clarified.

Having found that agencies are increasingly committed to offering such activities, we found ourselves confronted by a series of questions: What did adolescents themselves have to say about spirituality? Was spirituality an important part of their lives – a part that they could name and describe? What sort of spiritual exploration had they already done, and what kind did they wish to do? Were social service agencies doing a good job of anticipating and meeting the spiritual needs and interests of the young people they serve?

Most people, adolescents included, have difficulty expressing their spiritual ideas, or fully describing the intricate contours of their spiritual lives. We believed, though, that if we framed the discussion properly, adolescents would be able to articulate their feelings; at the very least, they would be able to tell us how they defined spirituality, and talk about some of the spiritual experiences that had been meaningful to them. It was important that they express themselves on the topic, we thought, because agencies needed to hear from them. Indeed, we felt that such input was crucial if agencies were to shape spiritual programs that teens would use, enjoy, and find worthwhile, and that furthermore would have the therapeutic outcomes that the agencies sought.

With the help of seven social service agencies around New England, we arranged focus groups with teens. The groups varied in size and setting, but five of the seven took place in programs that work with runaway and homeless youth. We also administered two written surveys to youth. One was completed by adolescents at two major youth conferences; the other by both teens in the focus groups and at the conferences. Altogether, we heard from 149 adolescents. Often what they had to say was remarkable and poignant. Always, though, it was revealing. Do adolescents care about spirituality? We discovered that, without question, they do. Beyond that, their attitudes and experiences varied sharply. We heard from devoutly religious youth, from atheists, from adherents of Native American spirituality, from those who found spiritual meaning in nature, in family, in friends, and in therapy groups. Some were adamant in their opinions, some quietly philosophical, some tentative and confused. Many expressed the conviction that traditional religious institutions had let them down, yet two-thirds considered themselves religious or somewhat religious. Eighty-six percent considered themselves spiritual or somewhat spiritual, and almost all believed that spirituality and religion were so distinct that a person could be one without being the other.

No matter what their views or interests, the topic of spirituality was intriguing to the majority of young people we met. Their feelings are captured in their language. “Spirituality is that extra friend you don’t have,” one girl said. “It’s a relief,” another said. “It’s something that makes you feel better, helps you accomplish things.” A third, summing up what seemed to be a general view, said: “Spirituality is definitely interesting, whether religious or not, because that’s who someone *is*.”



In research conducted for this report, 58 young people throughout New England participated in focus groups on spirituality. In the context of those groups, the teens were asked to take part in a drawing exercise exploring the “five dimensions of the self” – a model that suggests that each individual has five distinct but overlapping “selves”: the material self, the thinking self, the social self, the feeling self, and the spiritual self (Perkins, 1990, 1991). The teens talked about the construct, and then were encouraged to draw an illustration – a chart, an image from nature, a figure of a person, or whatever else appealed to them – that described their own five “selves” and how they appear in relation to each other. Samples of the teens’ work are reprinted throughout this report.

# A Review of the Literature

Researchers have long been interested in identifying factors that can help adolescents successfully transition into adulthood. Over the last few decades, religion has emerged as one area particularly worthy of study. With very few exceptions, studies have demonstrated positive associations between religion and adolescent well-being.

Weaver, Samford, Morgan, Lighton, Larson and Garbarino (2000) reviewed research studies published between 1992 and 1996 in five major adolescent journals that included a measure of religion. The researchers found that overall, religious involvement was associated with lower levels of depression, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and delinquent behaviors, as well as with later onset of sexual activity.

Research has also shown that the majority of American adolescents consider religion a significant part of their lives. Results from a national survey conducted by the Gallup organization indicate that 95% of American adolescents believe in God or a universal spirit (Gallup and Bezilla, 1992), while 42% of adolescents pray alone frequently. Indeed, 27% of the teens reported that religious faith was more important to them than it was to their parents and that they were more likely to attend religious services than adults.

But the literature increasingly recognizes that religion is only one type of spiritual expression. Spirituality as a general attribute or capacity is also of growing interest to researchers. Like religiosity, spirituality can be defined and measured, and its impact on well-being studied. Although research examining the relationship between forms of secular spirituality and adolescent well-being is only now emerging, Holder, DuRant, Harris, Henderson, Obeidallah and Goodman (2000) have found that spiritual interconnectedness with friends is associated with delayed voluntary sexual activity. There is also evidence that introspective activities such as yoga, meditation, guided visualization, and martial arts are correlated with positive outcomes among adolescents. For example, Briscoe (1990) found the use of guided visualization

to be an effective treatment with clinically depressed adolescents; another study demonstrated that participation in yoga classes improved the attitude and behavior of adolescent inpatients at a mental health center (Zipkin, 1985). More research is needed to understand the role of secular spirituality in the lives of adolescents in general, and the potential benefits of spiritual activities for troubled adolescents in particular.

A few researchers have attempted to tease apart adolescents' attitudes toward religion from their attitudes toward secular spirituality. Benson (1997) asked 12,000 adolescents in grades 6-12 about the importance of being "religious or spiritual." He found that 65% of teenagers rated religion or spirituality as being highly important or somewhat important in their lives. Although the levels of participation in religious institutions declined between grades 6 and 12 (consistent with previous findings about the decline in the levels of religiosity from early to late adolescence), Benson found that the importance teenagers placed on religion or spirituality remained stable across age, a departure from other studies that looked only at religion. The author attributes this finding to the inclusion of the word "spirituality" in the question item. Thus, while some adolescents may lose interest in participating in religious activities as they get older, it appears that issues of spirituality in general remain important to them throughout adolescence.

Despite the interest in research on spirituality and religion, there nonetheless remains considerable controversy about what the terms actually mean. King (2003) proposes viewing spirituality and religion as distinct but overlapping constructs, where religion refers to an institutional experience and spirituality to a personal experi-

ence or set of beliefs. Beck (1986) agrees, suggesting that “there is a difference between spirituality and religion in that religion describes a formal institution whereas spirituality describes an inner state of being.” Benson (1997) sees religion as a subset of spirituality, writing that “religion is to spirituality as schooling is to learning: it is one way, but not the only way.”

*Religious involvement is associated with lower levels of depression, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and delinquent behaviors, as well as with later onset of sexual activity.*

While researchers continue to debate the relationship of religion to spirituality, for the purposes of this study we defined spiritual activities as those activities explicitly intended to enhance adolescents’ sense of awareness, wholeness and well-being, and help them tap into sources of inner strength. We propose that spirituality can manifest itself through religiosity – that is, through connection to an institutionalized system of beliefs and practices – or through secular activities not rooted in traditional religion. Examples of secular spiritual activities include, but are not limited to, such practices as yoga, meditation, traditional martial arts, guided visualization, artistic expression, and rites-of-passage programs.

Though social scientists have yet to reach consensus on the impact of various forms of spiritual practice on troubled adolescents, it is evident that social service agencies working with troubled young people are increasingly interested in using spiritual activities as therapeutic interventions. A 2002 study asked social service providers about the number and kinds of spiritually oriented activities they used in their work with adolescents (Wilson, 2002). Of the 191 agencies interviewed, more than half reported using one or more secular activities with their clients, while a little over a third offered religious activities. Although few agencies conducted formal evaluations of spiritual activities they offered to clients, agency staff nonetheless reported that such activities had distinct, discernable benefits for clients, helping them, for instance, relax, manage their anger, and think constructively about their lives. A majority of service providers expressed an interest in developing or expanding their spiritual programming, but cited a need for more training, and for assurances that offering spiritual activities, especially religious ones, was legally permissible for agencies that receive public money.

Clearly, while researchers and service providers

are increasingly intrigued by the therapeutic potential of spirituality, many gaps in knowledge remain. For instance, although ample research documents the positive association between religious involvement and adolescent well-being, few studies attempt to understand the mechanisms through which religion benefits youth. Very few have looked at spirituality beyond religion, and even fewer have asked adolescents themselves about their own views of spirituality.

The goal of the current study is to investigate the spiritual histories and interests of adolescents from their own perspectives, allowing them to speak for themselves about their spiritual experiences and beliefs. We particularly set out to discover which spiritual practices youth find meaningful, what types of spiritual experience have disappointed or energized them, and which form of spiritual expression they are interested in pursuing. This information is vital, for if professionals are to create spirituality-based programming that both attracts young people and benefits them, they must first understand what teenagers say they want and need.

## Theoretical Approaches

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Anyone seeking to understand how and why adolescents are influenced by spirituality would benefit from viewing the issue through at least two lenses: adolescent development theory, which considers teenagers’ movement through predictable cognitive and emotional stages, and youth development theory, which sees adolescents primarily as players in communities, and asserts that, like all people, youth are engaged in a web of reciprocal relationships that profoundly influence their life chances and opportunities. In this study we focus on adolescent development theory because of what it may suggest about spiritual readiness in adolescents, and particularly the often fragile and emotionally traumatized adolescents with whom this study is mainly concerned. The development of external resources that may aid spiritual growth in adolescents is, of course, a critically important topic in itself, and will surely capture the attention of other researchers. We consider the subject briefly in the conclusion of this report, looking particularly at how communities and religious institutions might reframe their relationships with youth for the benefit of both young people and society as a whole.



## Spirituality Through the Lens of Adolescent Development Theory

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“Many of the issues of adolescence can be understood as spiritual issues,” writes Peter Benson in his 1997 article *Spirituality and the Adolescent Journey*. “The searches for identity, belonging, place, and purpose are but a few of the classic struggles of adolescence.” Adolescence is a time when teenagers begin to grapple with such questions as “Who am I?” and “What am I here for?” and to look for a place or community that they can call their own. Because many religious traditions and spiritual practices offer answers to these questions, they can help adolescents meet their developmental tasks and transition successfully into adulthood. Of particular interest to this study is how spirituality – whether religious or secular – is related to four developmental tasks usually associated with adolescence: questioning of authority, meaning-making, identity formation, and search for connectedness or belonging.

*There is evidence that introspective activities such as yoga, meditation, guided visualization, and martial arts are correlated with positive outcomes for troubled adolescents.*

### Questioning of Authority

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Adolescence is a time when teenagers experience a growing need for autonomy and individuation (Damon, 1983). Because of this desire for independence and of the newly acquired ability to think critically, teens also begin to question their parents’ (or other authority figures’) view of spirituality and spiritual practices, and start to develop their own spiritual beliefs (Smithline, 2000). “Since criticizing is a characteristic trait of adolescence, it naturally moves young people to doubt certain religious teachings and concepts.... Critical thinking, combined with a need for independence, results in spiritual doubting among adolescents” (Carotta, 2002).

Smithline (2000) conducted a focus group with youth in early and late adolescence to explore their views of spirituality. The qualitative information she gathered indicated that young adolescents (ages 11 to 14) equated the term spirituality with religiosity and that their spiritual beliefs were likely to be strongly influenced by the beliefs of their parents and peers. By late

adolescence (age 16 to 18), teenagers started to conceptualize spirituality as unique from religion and were questioning their parents’ belief systems. This questioning may explain the decline in adolescent religiosity with age, noted earlier. It is perhaps during this time that adolescents would be more likely to become interested in secular spiritual activities – those activities unconnected to any institutionalized system of belief that teenagers might associate with authority.

Smithline concludes that “the abstract, increasingly personal, yet disjointed spiritual beliefs of late adolescence represents great transition, which, if successfully completed, will eventually leave the individual with a more solid, stable, integrated, and personalized spiritual belief system that is likely to continue to strengthen throughout adulthood.” Theorist James Fowler drew a similar conclusion, writing that with the support of the adult community, adolescent religious doubting can lead to a system of beliefs that the adolescent actually owns (Carotta, 2000).

### Meaning-making

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According to Piaget, adolescence is the period when teenagers enter into the formal operations stage of cognition. For the first time in their lives, they are able to think abstractly and to analyze their own thinking. They are starting to ask questions like “What am I here for? What is love? How can I achieve happiness?” (Kegan, 1982). Robert Coles, a leading theorist of spiritual development, considers these questions of meaning and purpose to be “the essence of spirituality” (Coles, 1995). Batten and Oltjenburns (1999) note that “it is likely that these developmental changes [in cognitive abilities] create the context whereby questions related to the meaning of life can even be asked” (Smithline, 2000).

The way in which adolescents resolve their questions of meaning is likely to influence their choices, their attitudes toward life, and their overall well-being. Wright, Frost and Wisecarver (1992) assessed the relationship between frequency of church attendance, the meaningfulness of one’s religion, and depression in 451 high school students. Meaningfulness of religion was assessed using a two-item questionnaire that solicited responses to the following statements: “Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of my life” and “I try hard to carry my religion into other dealings in life because my religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.” The results indicated that meaningfulness of religion was inversely related to depressive symptoms in both male and female



adolescents. The authors concluded that religious institutions may provide adolescents with “a purpose for living” and stressed the importance of finding a way to “nurture a sense of meaningfulness to life in adolescents for whom institutional religion is unimportant.”

### *Identity Formation*

Erikson (1968) theorized that identity development is a central task of adolescence. Studies indicated that involvement in religious organizations and participation in secular spiritual activities may help adolescents develop a positive sense of identity. In a study by Cook (2000), inner-city minority teenagers were interviewed about the role of church in their lives. Youth in the study indicated that church was important because it helped them develop positive sense of self. One 18-year-old Latino male remarked, “I feel that if I didn’t go to church that I’d probably be somebody else, smoking pot, selling drugs, stuff like that.”

King (2003) has identified three ways in which a religious tradition might foster positive development in adolescents. First, a religious tradition or a spiritual belief might affirm and celebrate the uniqueness of an individual. Christianity, for example, teaches that each believer is special in that he/she is a Child of God, while Judaism proclaims that Jews are the Chosen People. Secondly, spiritual practices can connect youth to the “past, present and future body of believers” or practitioners (King, 2003). Twemlow and Sacco (1998), who used martial arts in their work with violent adolescents, note that because the art form is hundreds of years old, the adolescents practicing it “can experience a sense

part of a naturally created order. Many wilderness programs designed for troubled adolescents are meant to instill a sense of connection to nature and to encourage feelings of caring and responsibility for the planet. Religious traditions such as Buddhism and Native American spirituality emphasize the interconnectedness of everything and everybody in the world.

Sometimes, because of experiences of abuse or severe family dysfunction, adolescents are not able to successfully negotiate the task of identity formation. Belitz and Schacht (1992), in an article on Satanic involvement in adolescent psychiatric patients, propose that “involvement in a Satanic group allows the adolescent to separate from the family of origin and adopt a different, albeit negative, identity.” Bucket et al. (1994) found that the diagnosis of identity disorder was more common among adolescent psychiatric patients involved in Satanism than in the psychiatric patients who did not hold the occult beliefs. “Many of these youths,” the authors conclude, “are vulnerable to group identity and structure as well as the ‘specialness’ offered by alliance with others involved in witchcraft and Satanism.” The treatment program suggested by Belitz and Schacht usually includes finding ways to help these adolescents form a more positive sense of self.

### *Search for Connectedness and Belonging*

Canda (1988) defines spirituality as the “human quest for meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and, for some, God.” Thus, the search for connection, so important for adolescents, should necessarily be at the core of our understanding of spirituality. Spiritual practice can satisfy adolescents’ need for belonging in two ways: first, both religious involvement and involvement in secular spiritual activities can offer teenagers access to a caring, accepting community; and second, a system of spiritual beliefs can offer a supportive relationship with God, a higher power, or some kind of universal spirit.

#### • Access to a caring community

The religiously involved adolescents interviewed by Cook (2000) emphasized that the church offered them a chance to be part of a stable and supportive community. One 17-year-old participant commented about his involvement in a religious youth group: “When I was young, especially when I was in New York, I always wanted to have a group that I could go to and have a bunch of kids and go there and be so cool with them. And that’s what they got there, so that’s why I like it.”

When adolescent sex offenders were asked to evaluate a yoga program that was offered to

*Spirituality and religion can be viewed as distinct but overlapping constructs, where religion refers to an institutional experience and spirituality to a personal experience or set of beliefs.*

of cross-generational, historical connectedness.” The authors concluded that “for violent adolescents, this [sense of connectedness] typically causes a shift from a narrow, narcissistic perspective to one that is broader and more compassionate.”

A third way that a religious or spiritual tradition can foster positive identity development in youth is by giving them a sense of being part of something greater than themselves, such as

them as part of their treatment plan, half of the boys stressed that they began caring more about others as a result of their yoga practice (Dezerotes, 2000). "I don't feel closer to God, but I do care more and am more considerate of others," stated one teenager. Another teen remarked, "Now I want to help more than hurt people. I am able to see myself as a person more than just a sex offender."

*The way in which adolescents resolve their questions of meaning is likely to influence their choices, their attitudes toward life, and their overall well-being.*

Involvement in a religious or secular spiritual activity not only gives adolescents a chance to interact with prosocial peers and develop attitudes of caring and compassion, but it also offers them the opportunity to develop intergenerational contacts and have adult role models in their lives. In the aforementioned study by Cook (2000), most of the adolescents who attended church on a regular basis mentioned the importance of mentoring by supportive adults that was provided to them by their religious organization. One participant remarked, "[When I need advice], I talk with my youth pastor. He's a really key person in my life. I have a really close relationship with him. I know I can be really open with him about anything." Benson (2002), in a lecture on creating youth-friendly communities, stressed the importance of access to intergenerational relationships for positive youth development.

• **Offering a supportive relationship with God, a higher power, or a universal spirit**

Maton (1989) conducted a study to assess the effects of spiritual support on a sample of college freshmen. Spiritual support was defined as "the perceived, personally supportive components of an individual's relationship with God." The measure of spiritual support used in the study included the following three items: 1) "I experience God's love and caring on a regular basis"; 2) "I experience a close personal relationship with God"; and 3) "Religious faith has been central to my coping."

At the end of their first semester in college, the participants completed questionnaires that assessed their levels of personal-emotional and social adjustment, as well as the level of their adaptation to college life. The results indicated that for college students who had experienced three or more uncontrollable negative life events prior to entering college, spiritual support was

positively and significantly related to healthy adjustment during the first semester of college. Maton concluded that the "perceptions of being valued, loved, and cared for by God lead directly to enhanced self-esteem and reduced negative affect for individuals psychologically vulnerable due to high levels of stress."

It appears that spiritual beliefs and practices may offer adolescents a sense of connection beyond friendships with their peers and teachers. In the qualitative study by Lindsey et al., (2000), one formerly runaway teenage girl who had made a successful transition into young adulthood said about her treatment program, which was based around Native American spirituality, "[It] really made me open my eyes and see different things and [I] got kind of interested in life again.... I guess it just helped me to see how I was connected so I wasn't as isolated as I thought I was."

Adolescents who have been severely traumatized often experience a lack of this kind of connection or supportive relationship and sometimes turn to other, less positive avenues of finding it. Belitz and Shacht (1992), in their interviews of youth who were involved in Satanic rituals, found that they often express their anger at God for not having been there for them. Upon admission to the hospital, one adolescent boy involved in Satanic practices said that "he had given God three chances to help him improve his life, but that God was uncaring and unavailable.... His mother's and grandmother's God was two-faced, accepted people only if they lived up to certain expectations, and punished [them] if [they] disappointed Him." This boy turned to Satan because he felt that Satan would accept him as he really was – someone wicked and destined to commit crimes. The therapy for these adolescents involves challenging the teens' assumptions that they are wicked and providing a context "in which the youth can safely explore issues related to God, the meaning of life, and the human capacity for good and evil."

# Methodology

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## Focus Group Sample and Survey Instrument

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This study involves two distinct but overlapping areas of investigation. For the first, we conducted seven focus groups throughout New England with adolescents on the topic of spirituality. The youth – there were 58 in all – ranged in age from 14 to 22, with a mean age of 17.5. Four groups were conducted with formerly homeless youth living in transitional housing programs. One was conducted with sexual minority youth, another with youth at an urban community teen center, and the last with teenage mothers in an enhanced GED program. Twenty-three of youth were white, 20 were Hispanic, eight were Asian, and seven were bi-racial. Thirty-four were female, 22 were male, and two described themselves as transgender. About half were enrolled in high school or in college; the rest had either graduated from high school, earned a GED, or dropped out of school. At least 15 of the girls were either pregnant or had children, and at least one of the boys had fathered a child.

The focus group discussions were tape-recorded. Each group session began with a short educational segment, led by a skilled facilitator, about spirituality as part of the larger self, and included exercises in which youth were asked to draw pictures and write lists expressing their spiritual lives. The facilitator then led the youth in a discussion of religion and spirituality, seeking to elicit both their general attitudes about the topics and their more personal experiences of them. Finally, each of the youth filled out a survey asking about their religious or spiritual histories and interests (see the Appendix).

## Conferences Sample and Survey Instruments

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In the second area of investigation, we surveyed an additional 91 youth, this time drawing samples from two large youth-oriented conferences, one national and one regional. The youth, who were recruited randomly to fill out the surveys, ranged in age from 14 to 22, with a mean age of 17.7. Fifty-eight percent were white, 23% black, 7% Hispanic, 9% bi-racial and 2% “other.” Respondents were almost evenly split between male and female. These youth filled out two questionnaires. One was identical to the survey that the focus group participants completed. The second questionnaire, the

Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), was administered to these 91 conference youth alone. The SWBS is a simple 20-item instrument designed to measure spiritual well-being in a variety of populations. It has been used widely in research on a range of populations, and has been shown to be a valid and reliable indicator of perceived psychological well-being. Studies show that scores on the SWBS correlate positively with purpose in life, self-esteem and self-confidence, and negatively with loneliness and primary personal orientations toward individualism, success and personal freedom (Ellison and Paloutzian, 1982).

The instrument consists of two subscales, one measuring religious well-being, and the other “existential” well-being, or life purpose and satisfaction. We chose a scale that included a religious dimension because of the amply demonstrated association between religious participation and various psycho-social indicators of well-being. The religious subscale consists of 10 questions that refer to God (i.e., “My relationship with God helps me feel less lonely”), but does not rely for meaning on any particular religious conception of a deity or higher being. The 10 questions in the existential subscale explore the individual’s relationship to self and community, and his or her views about the purpose and ultimate meaning of life (i.e., “I feel good about my future”).

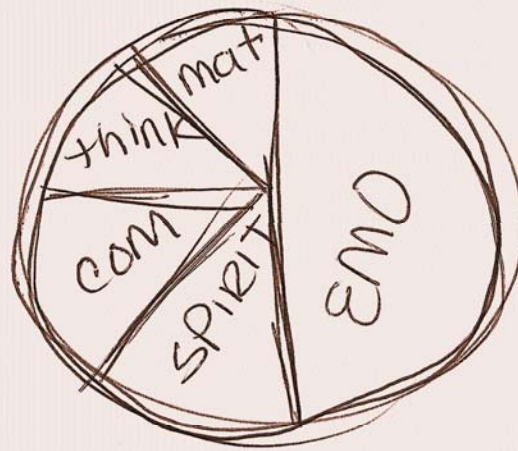
## Data Collection and Analysis

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Research was conducted between February and June 2003 at eight sites in New England and one in Washington, DC. One paid facilitator led the focus groups while two staff members assisted, one tape-recording the session and the other taking notes. Youth in the focus groups filled out one written survey. At each conference, a table was set up in a heavily trafficked communal area, and youth were recruited at random to fill out the two surveys described above.

The focus group tapes were transcribed and reviewed for themes and patterns. The written survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Overall, three sets of data emerged: the lengthy transcripts of each of the focus group discussions; survey findings on the spiritual experiences and interests of the 58 youth in our focus groups and the 91 youth from the conferences; and survey findings assessing the spiritual well-being scores of the 91 conference youth alone. This last set of data includes mean scores of spiritual well-being as well as scores for both subscales and each of the 20 SWBS questions. Comparisons of subscale and total scores were made between the youth in this study and subjects in previously published studies that also used the SWBS.

material - 10%  
emotional - 50%  
thinking - 10%  
community - 15%  
spiritual - 15%





5 DIMENSIONS  
OF SELF:



# Principal Findings

Almost two-thirds of the adolescents in this study said they were religious or somewhat religious, and many expressed an interest in trying religious activities.

Of the 149 youth surveyed in the focus groups and at the conferences, 23% considered themselves religious (by their own definition), and 44% somewhat religious. Most youth – 59% – had attended church<sup>1</sup> regularly as children, and 35% said they attended fairly regularly now. Fourteen percent expressed interest in attending a prayer group, 26% in attending religion classes, and 23% in discussing religion with an adult (see Figs. 1, 2 and 3). In the focus groups, a few teenagers credited religion with keeping them on track or even saving them from disaster. One girl in a Connecticut transitional living program said that her baptism in a river at age 15 had helped her “settle down” and stop doing “crazy stuff.” Many teens, however – even ones who said they would like to learn more about religion – expressed scorn for religious institutions.

Race was correlated with the likelihood of being religious. Sex was also a factor, but less so.

Seventy-eight percent of minority youth considered themselves religious or somewhat religious; 58% of white youth did. Girls and boys were equally likely to describe themselves as religious, but girls were more likely to say they were somewhat religious and less likely to say they were not religious.

Secular spirituality was attractive to a majority of youth.

Of the 149 adolescents who were surveyed, 41% considered themselves spiritual (again by their own definition) and 45% somewhat spiritual. Furthermore, 90% of youth said that a person could be spiritual without being religious – a finding consistent with research showing that while interest in organized religion may dwindle during adolescence, interest in spirituality itself does not. Thirty-two percent said they would like to try meditation, 30% guided visualization, 39% yoga, 50% martial arts, and 55% arts, drawing and painting. Twenty-nine percent said they would attend a class or group on spiritual education, and 28% said they would like to try drumming or chanting (see Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

The teenagers in the focus groups seemed to accept that spiritual pursuits are, almost by definition, supposed to feel good.

Though many adults would find this view reasonable, the sentiment nevertheless runs counter to traditional religious teachings, which attempt, to some degree at least, to shape and control behavior, and to induce feelings of guilt in those who break the rules.

<sup>1</sup> In all references that appear outside quotation marks, the word “church” in this report is intended to signify worship services of all religions.

While many teens railed against religious institutions, they also seemed to reserve judgment about the actual existence of a higher being.

One boy called Christ “a schmuck,” and another said that since God had allowed his mother to die, he obviously could not exist. But overall, most of the teens remained cautiously ambivalent about God. In their tentativeness, some seemed clearly to be hedging their bets. “There's so much stuff that goes around, you don't know what to believe,” one boy said, shrugging – and his comment seemed to sum up the general attitude of his peers.

Most of the activities that teens identified as spiritually meaningful were simple, everyday tasks and diversions: walking in the woods, talking with friends, listening to loud music, dancing, riding the bus, even washing dishes.

Most of the young people, however, were able to label these activities “spiritual” only after pondering such questions as “What do you do when you feel bad and need comfort?” and “Where do you go to be quiet and think about things?”

Youth also labeled some dangerous behaviors as spiritual.

Fighting, using drugs, firing guns and crashing cars were all mentioned as “spiritual” activities by youth in our groups, often – as the teens themselves seemed to recognize – because reckless behavior is thrilling and, for a moment anyway, results in feelings of transcendence. Similarly extreme experiences described by the teens as “spiritual” included jumping into icy ponds in winter, going to jail, and driving long distances with no destination in mind.

Youth who completed the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) scored in the moderate range in both religious and existential well-being.

In terms of existential well-being (life satisfaction and purpose), the youth in the current study were not significantly different from nursing students, “ethical Christian” college students (students who believe in the ethical values espoused by Christianity, but are otherwise not religiously observant) and evangelical college students. They did score significantly higher than non-Christian college students, sexually abused outpatients, and inpatients with eating disorders. Religious well-being scores, on the other hand, were significantly lower for the youth in this study than for some of the other groups (see Tables 1 and 2).

**TABLE 1**

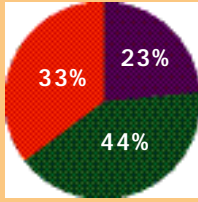
**Comparative SWB scores for current-study youth and selected other groups**

	NUMBER	EXISTENTIAL WELL-BEING**		RELIGIOUS WELL-BEING**		SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING***	
		MEAN	SD*	MEAN	SD*	MEAN	SD*
Youth in current study . . . . .	.91	47.7	9.5	41.2	14.5	89.2	19.3
Evangelical college students . . . . .	.50	49.5	5.5	53.7	6.3	104.3	9.5
Ethical Christian college students . . . . .	.50	47.5	6.7	43.9	9.5	91.6	13.2
Non-Christian college students . . . . .	.17	41.6	9.4	29.7	15.9	70.5	17.9
Nursing students . . . . .	.197	46.1	10.7	48.9	7.2	95.0	15.2
Sexually abused outpatients . . . . .	.50	39.3	10.6	46.5	11.5	85.8	19.6
Inpatients with eating disorders . . . . .	.35	35.8	8.2	41.7	9.5	77.8	15.1
Non-religious sociopathic convicts . . . . .	.25	40.7	9.2	35.6	9.2	76.3	16.3

\*Standard Deviation (suggests closeness of clustering around mean); \*\*Subscale Means: Samples with N>25 are significantly different if means differ by 3 or more points; \*\*\*Combined Scale Means: Samples with N>25 are significantly different if means differ by 5 or more points. (Chart adapted from Paloutzian & Ellison, 1991.)

FIG. 1

Percent of youth who consider themselves religious (n=149)



23% = Yes  
44% = Somewhat  
33% = No

FIG. 2

Percent of youth who report attending church regularly (n=149)

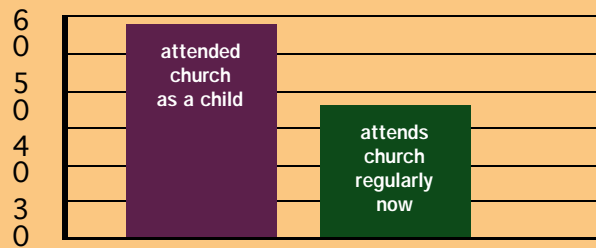


FIG. 3

Percent youth reporting interest in selected religious activities (n=149)

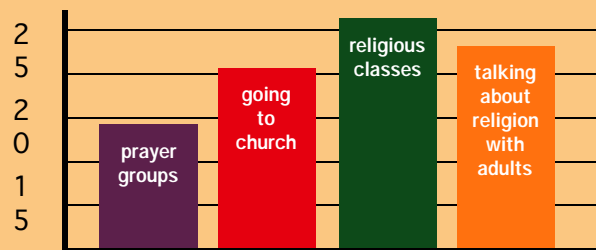
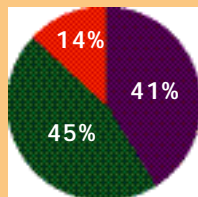


FIG. 4

Percent of youth who consider themselves spiritual (n=148)



41% = Yes  
45% = Somewhat  
14% = No

FIG. 5

Percent of youth reporting interest in selected secular spiritual activities (n=149)

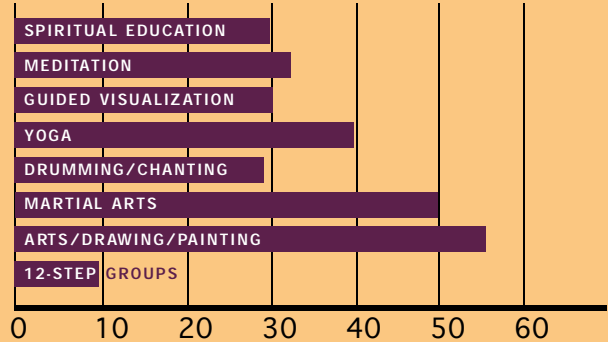
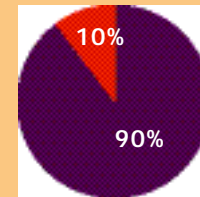


FIG. 6

Percent of youth who say a person can be spiritual without being religious (n=146)



90% = Yes  
10% = No

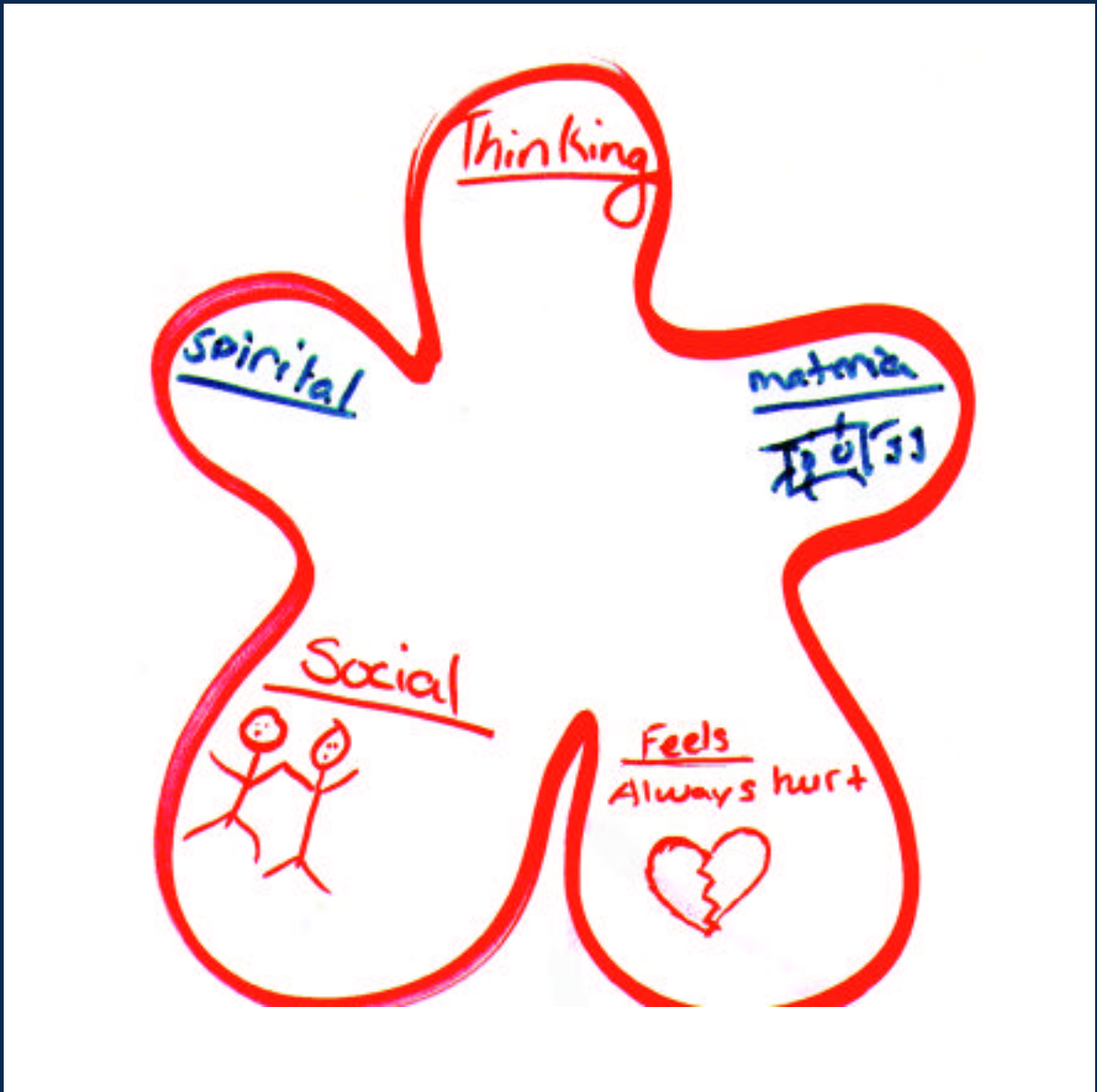
TABLE 2

Percent of youth who strongly agree with selected statements from SWB Scale (n=91)

I believe there is some real purpose for my life	.53*
I believe that life is a positive experience	.48
I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed in	.37
My relationship with God contributes to my sense of well-being	.27
I have a personally meaningful relationship with God	.26
I feel that life is full of conflict and unhappiness	.10
I feel unsettled about my future	.8
I don't know who I am, where I came from, or where I am going	.4

\*Figures are rounded. (Statements from *Spiritual Well-Being Scale*, Paloutzian and Ellison, 1982.)





# Speaking for Themselves

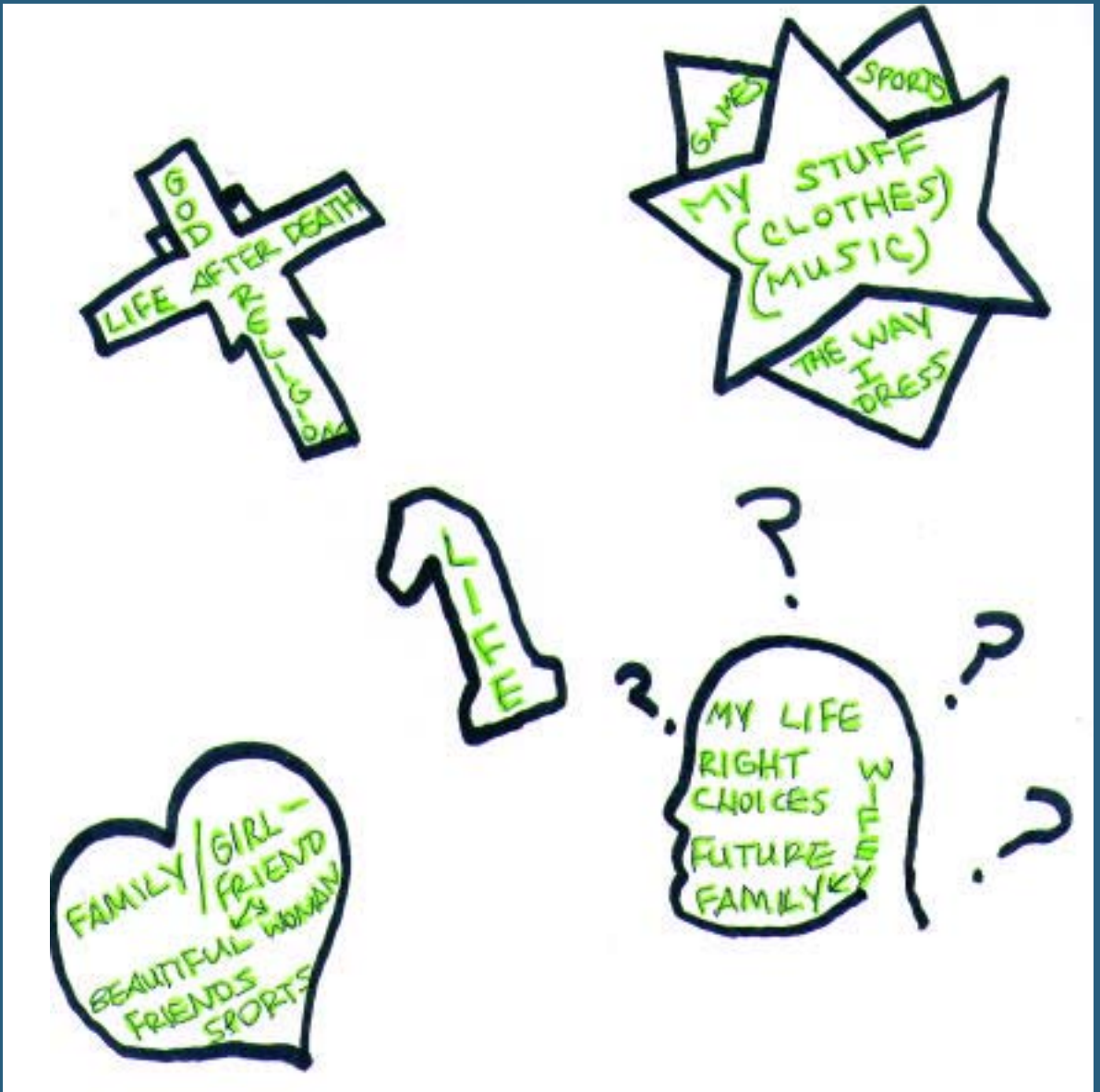
In early 2003, NEN convened seven focus groups of young people, ages 14 to 22, to discuss the topic of spirituality. Groups were arranged by social services agencies throughout New England, most of which run programs for homeless teens or teens in state custody. All participants were involved in one or more programs of these agencies.

The focus-group conversations were structured yet lively, with participants generally free to develop and build on ideas in any way they wished. Each group was tape-recorded and the tapes were then transcribed.

Following are quotes from those transcripts. They are categorized into four sections, each section corresponding to one of the four developmental tasks described in the literature review. A fifth section presents some of the activities that the teens considered spiritual.

1. The Search for Connection & Belonging
2. Questioning of Authority
3. Meaning-making
4. Identity Formation
5. What's Spiritual?

Though we have organized the teens' quotes in this way, our intention is not to force their comments into a strict system of classification. Rather, it is to convey the tone and scope of the discussions, and, more broadly, to illuminate the spiritual complexity of these particular young people, and perhaps young people in general.



# 1. The Search for Connection and Belonging

**“I had a lack of love.”**

The adolescents in our focus groups were looking for people, things and activities to care about and feel part of. Sometimes, the desire to connect had resulted in positive relationships and experiences, but often it had not. Several of the girls, for instance, described the deep insecurity that led them to pursue male attention at almost any cost.

Others, boys and girls alike, spoke about actively seeking help from other people, only to be ignored or rejected. One girl, recalling her experiences trying to survive as a 14-year-old on the street, said, “You meet up with people who are similar to you, and in that small group you can usually help each other out. But still you'll end up getting robbed or something, and you're still left on your own to figure everything out for yourself.”

“I never had a strong father figure, so every boyfriend that I've ever had, I've looked for strong qualities, like leadership, or [him being] controlling, because that's what I need, and I'll get it from one place or another.” – 19 / F<sup>1</sup>

“I was the youngest of five kids. I felt left out a lot, so I filled the void of love with bad relationships. I know better now, but looking back, I needed so much attention that I liked being argued with, I liked physicalness. I liked it but I didn't like it at the same time, because it was attention. It was the wrong kind of love, but it was love.” – 20 / F

“I've needed a lot of help with things, and I've gone to a lot of people for help, and like, all adults have done with me is basically said, ‘Well, you're not doing this, this and this – all our rules – so we're not going to help you.’ When my mom threw me out of my house, I was, ‘OK, what do I do now?’” – 17 / F

<sup>1</sup> Most quotes that appear in this report are followed by a number and a letter. The number denotes the speaker's age, and the letter his or her sex. On occasion, a speaker is identified as a “pregnant teen” or “teen mother” in order to establish context. In those cases, an age is not given.



“Sometimes your friends just kind of blow you off because they're doing something. You try to talk to them, and they're like, ‘Yep, uh-huh, yep, I gotcha.’ They just blow you right off.” – 16 / M

“I think there should be more places – some kind of place where you could feel comfortable, community places, so you're not always out on the street or front porch or whatever, talking to whoever walks by.” – 19 / F

“I had a lack of love before I had my son, a lack of attention. Now that I have my son, he's always there with me, calling me mommy. He's always, ‘Oh mommy, I love you, I love you.’ You want to hear it, often and a lot.” – 19 / F

“I was the oldest. I had three younger sisters and a shitty home life, and I don't know how many bad – physically abusive – relationships I went through. It's not like I loved the fighting, but it was attention. I hated it, but I needed it. It made me feel important: I had someone to argue with. I went through three of those relationships before I got pregnant, which I think I did on purpose anyway. Because I was in a shitty relationship, so hey, get pregnant, and that person will love me anyway, which sounds really juvenile, and it's a horrible thing to admit, because I think I was like 17 years old, but I think that's what I did. I'm pretty sure that's what I did.” – 21 / F

“I just think when my child is born, that will fill the void. Because I've come to the realization that [the baby's father] isn't there. It's more of inner peace for me to face reality. I am a single mom. That's my life and I accept it.” – *Pregnant teen*

“I go to a youth conference every year for people who are in foster care. We get together, and have orientation, and do workshops. It helps me realize that I'm not the only one going through these experiences; other people have been in my shoes.” – 15 / F

“Having a baby gave me a reason to live. It gave me a reason to survive. Black and white. If I hadn't had her, I probably wouldn't be here.” – 21 / F

“What I would teach my son is that God is the only one who is going to listen to everything, every problem you have. No one else will. Everyone else, they sit there and pretend like they're listening, but they're not.” – 18 / F

# Rebecca: Finding Peace on the Native American Path

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Rebecca, a spirited, dark-haired girl from Vermont, left her mother's house when she was 14. She had no money, no food, no place to live. She quickly realized, she said, that "no one gave a damn" about her, and that if she wanted to survive, she would have to fend for herself. Now 17, she sees that the crisis gave rise to something else: an almost desperate need to find a spirituality that could sustain her.

"When I was younger and I was out on my own, I wrote all the time, and writing was my praying," she said. "At that time I was drunk all the time, so I wasn't really conscious enough to be able to focus on my spirituality. I still have my old journals from that point in my life, and when you look at them, it's as if I am praying throughout the whole thing: 'I need help, I need some direction.' And in the end, that's just what my writing ended up doing – pointing me toward the Native American belief system, and my aunt, who really did help me out a lot."

Though Rebecca's mother encouraged her to explore various spiritual approaches – her mother gave her, as a child, both the Bible *and* a book on voodoo – it was through her aunt that Rebecca found the spiritual ideas that ultimately resonated with her.

"In the Native American religion, there is the Creator, who is like God. The religion focuses more on the fact that nature is pretty much the main thing. It just makes more sense to me, because the food that I eat grows out of the earth, the animals that I eat are here and they give themselves so that I can live. I don't think that God set all this stuff up for us to overpower and overcome. I think everyone was put here to guard the earth and help the animals. As lame as that sounds, that's what I believe in. And I think that somewhere along the way we got off track. We've lost that and started to destroy the earth, and all the bad stuff that's happening is from that."

Native spiritual practices relate to the natural world, and to her own emotional life, in ways that Rebecca believes are profound.

"Our camping ritual is that we go out in the woods and sleep in a teepee for about a week, with no facilities or anything. We don't even bring food. We have to, like, find it. And I really like going to powwows, and doing fire meditation. It's like you light the fire and sit there and meditate while looking at it, and it's supposed to cleanse you somehow.... If you do something that you feel really bad about that will give you really bad karma – like let's say you hit a deer, and it died, and you felt really bad – you could go meditate on it, hoping that its spirit gets to the other side, and that it forgives you. Then you can go do ritual bathing as a way to cleanse yourself of the guilty feelings, and it works."

She's also experimented with magic, which, done in the proper spirit and for the right reason, she says always leads to positive ends. "The magic is, like, pagan. Some of it can be Native American, like herbalism, where you use different herbs and mix them up in a potion or whatever. And then there's the Wiccan kind, which is like casting a spell, but all you're pretty much doing is building up energy for a cause. Like you could be building up energy to make it so that someone who is sick can get well. It's like intense meditation. There are other tools there to help you, like candles, like the whole altar thing."

If she could have any spiritual experience she'd like, she'd go to a Native American spa. She saw one on TV, and was impressed. "You go there, and first they have you meditate, then they cleanse your body with oil, then they give you a little massage. Then they take aloe vera and sand, and rub your whole body down with it. You wash that off yourself, and then they take other oils, and you get a full-body massage. And meanwhile, the person is chanting to you while they massage you, for you to – whatever you want, for you to heal, or be happier, more positive, or whatever. They're putting all their energy into you. I want to go *there*."



## 2. Questioning Authority, when the Authority is Religion

**“There is no proof of it.”**

Children entering their teenage years begin for the first time to separate the notion of religion from spirituality. When the two topics become distinct, it is religion that tends to suffer. Many of the teens in our focus groups were either indifferent to religion or hostile toward it. For them, religion has obvious credibility problems, both in the factual likelihood of the stories it tells and in the hypocrisy sometimes evident in its institutions. It promotes a morality that seems old-fashioned and irrelevant, with rules and ceremonies that many teens find hollow.

Ironically, though, the teens’ search for answers led them to invoke religious ideas – “it’s not God’s fault” – almost in spite of themselves. And in fact some of the teens did identify themselves as believers, though most said they preferred to bypass the church and commune directly with God. Such anti-authority attitudes are, of course, consistent with the healthy adolescent desire to reject tradition in favor of beliefs that seem more personal and genuine. But it is hard to avoid the impression that many of these young people are engaged in a dance with religion, and will advance and retreat from it as they grow older and their emotional needs change.

“I grew up Catholic, and now, being an adult with my own daughter, I think it’s a crock. I just think it’s a joke that you can go and have premarital sex and do bad things to other people and then you can, whatever, have your penance, and then you’re off the hook. At the same time, I went and had my daughter baptized Catholic, so I’m kind of in conflict. Because she deserves a chance, because if you’re not baptized [you go to hell].” – 21 / F

“I always go to church when I have problems. Then, when I feel relief, I don’t go anymore. But I always come back.” – 17 / F



“I believe in God, because, if you don't believe in God, how do you think you were born, or your mother was born, or your mother's mother was born? How do you think Adam and Eve was there?” – 16 / F

“I read the Bible when I was 11, and I didn't really understand it. I read it again when I was 12, and I did understand it. I got the message. I thought it was really cool.” – 14 / F

“You feel something come over you. It's not people acting. Something comes over you, and you can't help yourself. You just fall, you faint or something. We say it's the Holy Spirit.” – *Pregnant Pentecostal teen, explaining “speaking in tongues”*

“The thing I never liked about religion – my mom's been pushing this on me recently – is that there is all these boundaries. It's like, if you do this, then that thing will happen. And it's like, because it's written in some book? There is no proof of it. She stays with my father because supposedly in the Bible somewhere it says you shouldn't divorce your husband. I don't know, but that to me just seems like an excuse about why you shouldn't leave.” – 18 / M

“I think a lot of people don't believe in a higher power because they don't want to be held morally accountable. If I could be sure there was some kind of greater power that had a code I was supposed to follow, I would definitely follow it.” – 22 / M

“I just want to shove [religion] out of the way so I can do the things I want to do, live my life the way I want to live it. [But] I been a Christian for all my life. It's your pride. If you're gonna get rid of your religion, that's like getting rid of your pride. You're putting it behind your back when you should be putting it in front of your chest.” – 16 / M

“I was baptized, I was confessed, I was everything, and I still ended up the way I ended up. It depends on how they raise you, and how they teach you, because you can't just go to church and they tell you this and tell you that, because you come out and you're doing something else. Cause a lot of people do that, you know. There are people that sell drugs, and you go to their house and their room is full of saints and candles.” – 18 / F

“For a while I tried witchcraft, but I don't do it anymore. For one thing, it didn't really work. You, like, cast a spell, and it doesn't work. It's also not practical. One thing about it is you're not supposed to ever put out any negative energy. Never, in your whole life. That's absurd. Everybody puts out negative energy some time in their lives.” – 14 / F

“What's the point of praying to all these fake things and stuff, and lighting candles? What's the point? You're looking stupid. You're kneeling down and looking at something that can't talk, or look at you, or say anything back.” – *Teen mother*

“I got torn between my parents – one was like, ‘go to this church,’ and the other was, ‘go to that church,’ so I got confused, and I sort of studied it for a while, and wanted to know which one was telling me the truth. I never really found out.” – *17 / F*

“My grandmother is, like, really religious. She goes through life preaching how you should be nice to people, and she's the biggest bitch you could ever encounter.” – *19 / M*

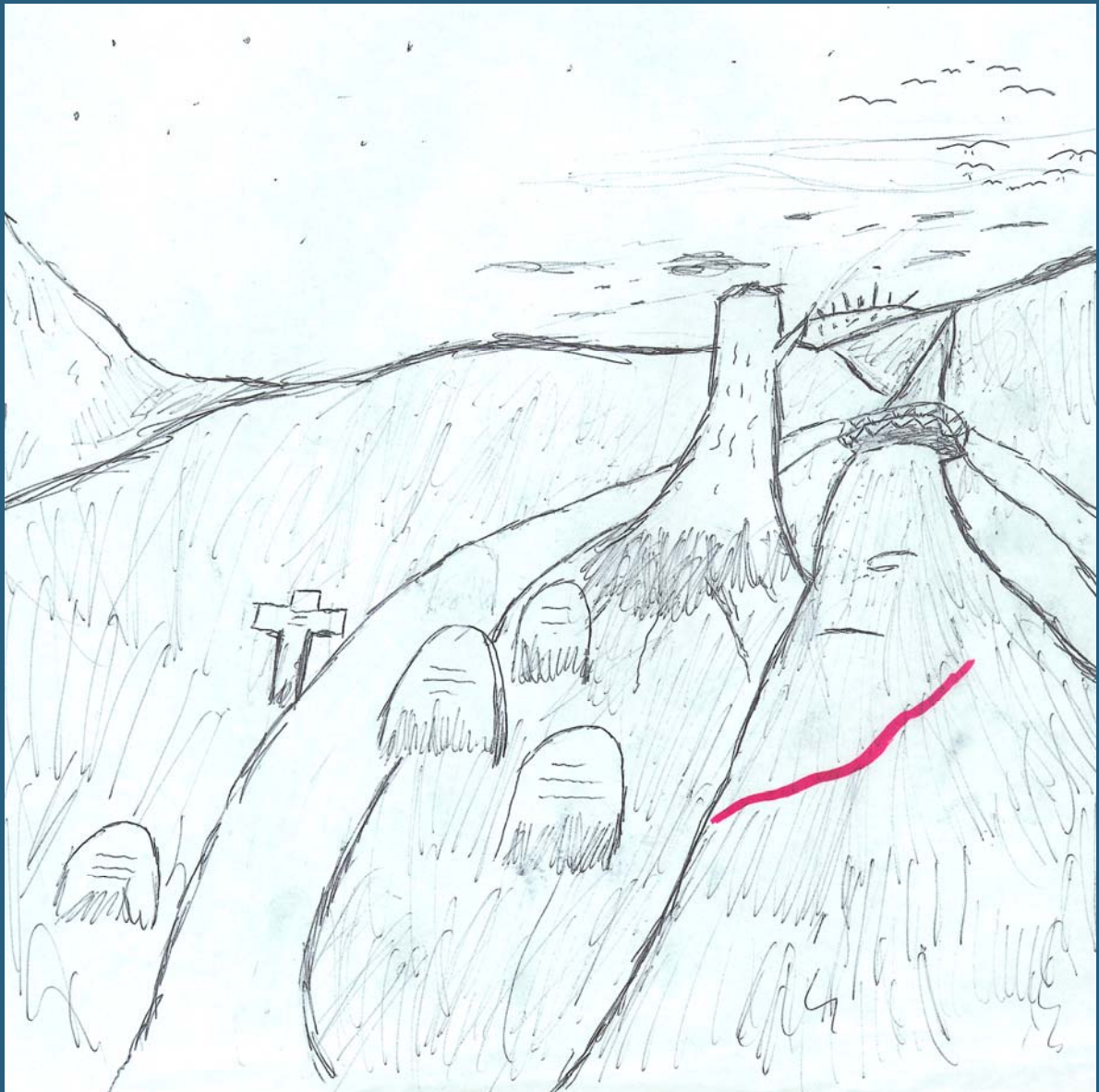
“I wouldn't go to no preacher, because they just be telling us what they be reading. Whatever they read out of the Bible, they try to tell us how God is. How would you know? You just readin' it. Churches say many different things – go to one church they tell you one thing, go to another church, they tell you a different thing. I'd rather be on my knees and talk to God myself.” – *16 / F*

“I believe that there is something that created us, but if it was so much as they say it is, why are we in the position we are now?” – *Teen mother*

“I went to the Unitarian church for a while. But it was so, I don't know. With the Unitarians, everybody's trying so hard not to offend anyone else, everyone's being so politically correct, that you can't talk about *anything*.” – *14 / F*

“I've done lots of research, and I find things like paganism and Wiccanism interesting. There are a lot of my friends who are into healing through potions and stuff like that. They consider themselves witches or warlocks. They go by the Wiccan calendars, and holidays, and all this stuff. I have a friend who's into necromancy. Necromancy is, like, dealing with the dead. He has the *Necronomicon*; it's, like, the Book of the Dead.” – *19 / F*

“My religion [Catholicism], I'm not really strong in it, but [even so] it keeps me from doing the things I want to do. Every time there's an opportunity, my religion is holding me back from succeeding in life, where I should be at. You could say business-wise, school-wise, just making a living on the street, it holds you back.” – *16 / M*



# 3. Pondering the Meaning of Life and Death

**“I am only on this earth for a short period of time.”**

The quest to find meaning in life is not confined to the adolescent years, but adolescents, discovering existential questions for the first time, can be particularly fervent in their search for answers. What am I here for? Am I supposed to do something special with my life? Who cares if I'm good or bad?

Some teens in our groups claimed to have discovered successful formulas for living. Several young men, for instance, expressed a newfound appreciation for cause-and-effect that they said made the world seem predictable and logical. They had discovered, sometimes painfully, that certain ways of acting lead to certain kinds of outcomes, and, consequently, that success lay in doing the “right” thing.

Doing the right thing, of course, can pose challenges for any teen, and some of the focus group participants could look back at costly errors in judgment. But a few of the adolescents had come to think that the problems themselves were helpful. As one 18-year-old said, “Whatever is difficult in life seems to be spiritual in nature.”

Death, as a counterpoint to life, invariably came up in the discussions, and in contemplating it, youth expressed a variety of feelings: fear, indifference, perplexity, denial. In their cautious approach to the topic, they may not be very different from adults.

**“Whenever I learn something new, that means there's a higher power. Whenever I'm humble – because I'm someone who's close-minded, I guess – and I find out something new that's true, it makes me realize that there's something out there.” – 18/M**

“The whole purpose for us being alive is to learn, reproduce and teach. We pass on a legacy, and so on and so forth, until that day comes when humans no longer exist.” – 18 / M

“I don’t think you die; I think you come back as another being. My mom told me that. I don’t know. I believe everything she says is true, because she’s real religious. Half the day, she’s reading runes or reading tarot cards, so everything she says, I believe it.” – 20 / M

“I believe everyone has a certain amount of energy and they're meant to do something with that energy, and that's why people do different things. I [also] believe that everyone in general, humans, are all meant to do the same thing, and nobody's figured it out yet, and we're all just stuck, and everyone's lost it – lost the sense of what we were supposed to do on this earth in the first place.” – 17 / F

“I went to CCD [Catholic catechism classes] when I was little. I had a lot of pain and family problems, and I blamed it on God because they told me I was God’s little child, and if I was good, everything would be taken care of. Things weren’t taken care of, and it just left me in the dark. And now, obviously, because of my own personal experience, I question whether there is anything out there. What I do know is that when I live my life a certain way, it improves. I get different results. I get better results. Like asking for help. Like being honest. For instance, today I went to the writing center to write my paper. What I did by doing that is, I surrendered. I said, I am going to ask for help because I don’t know everything there is to know about writing. In my view, that’s a spiritual principle.” – 18 / M

“I think there is something after death. What are you going to do, sit in a black box through eternity? Something has to be there, obviously. Because even if you sleep, you dream or whatever. You can’t just sit there and be in a black room, not being able to breathe or see or hear anything. That’s impossible. Completely impossible, or else we wouldn’t have thoughts or feelings. It’s impossible for us to just die and be worm-food. You can’t just not be. It’s impossible. I don’t care what anybody says.” – 19 / F

“I believe anything is possible. I believe there’s *aliens*. I see people all different shapes and sizes, plants, animals, everything growing – you think there isn’t anything out there?” – 20 / M

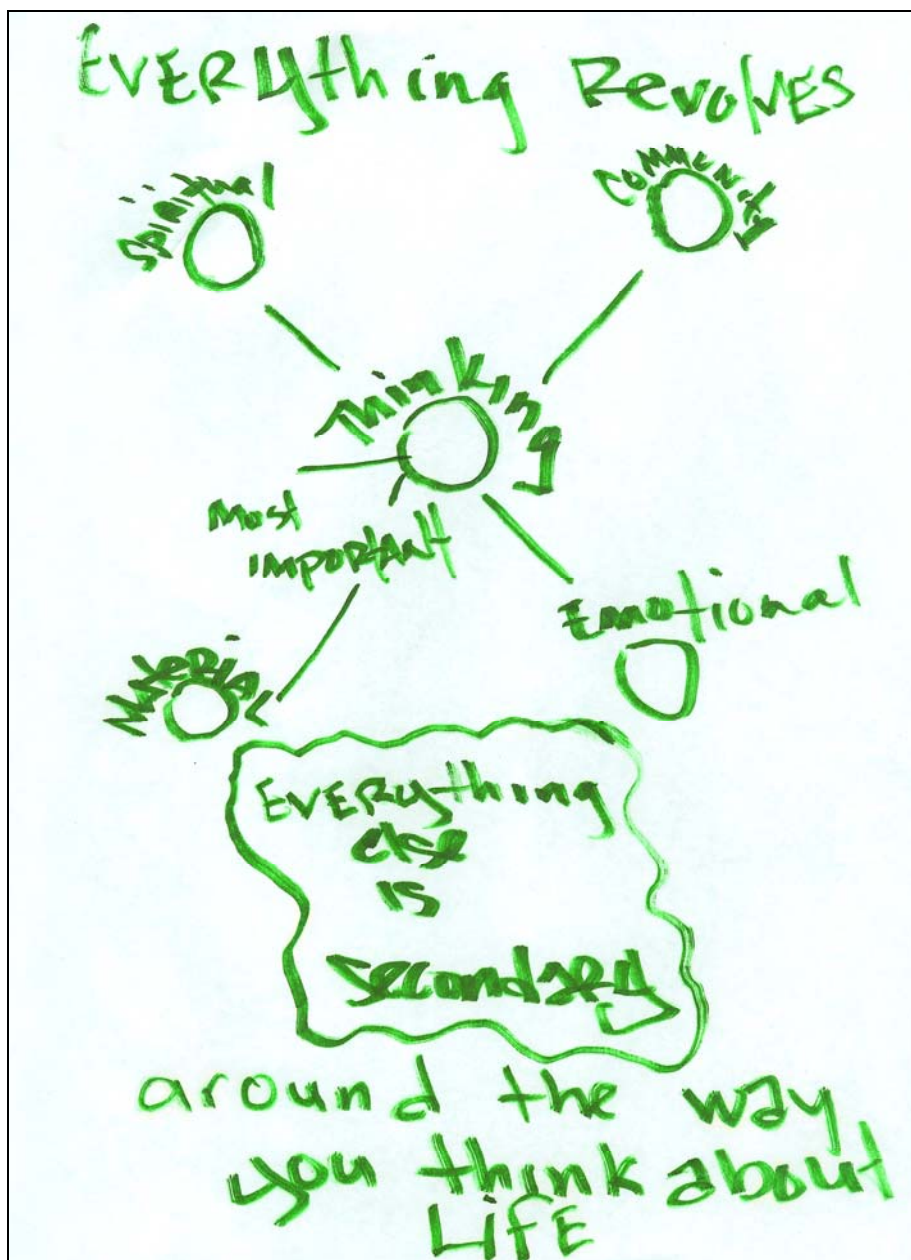
“I don't really like my life, but I do like being alive, and the idea that after all I've put into my life I'm just going to be nothing, is really, really frightening to me.” – 14 / F

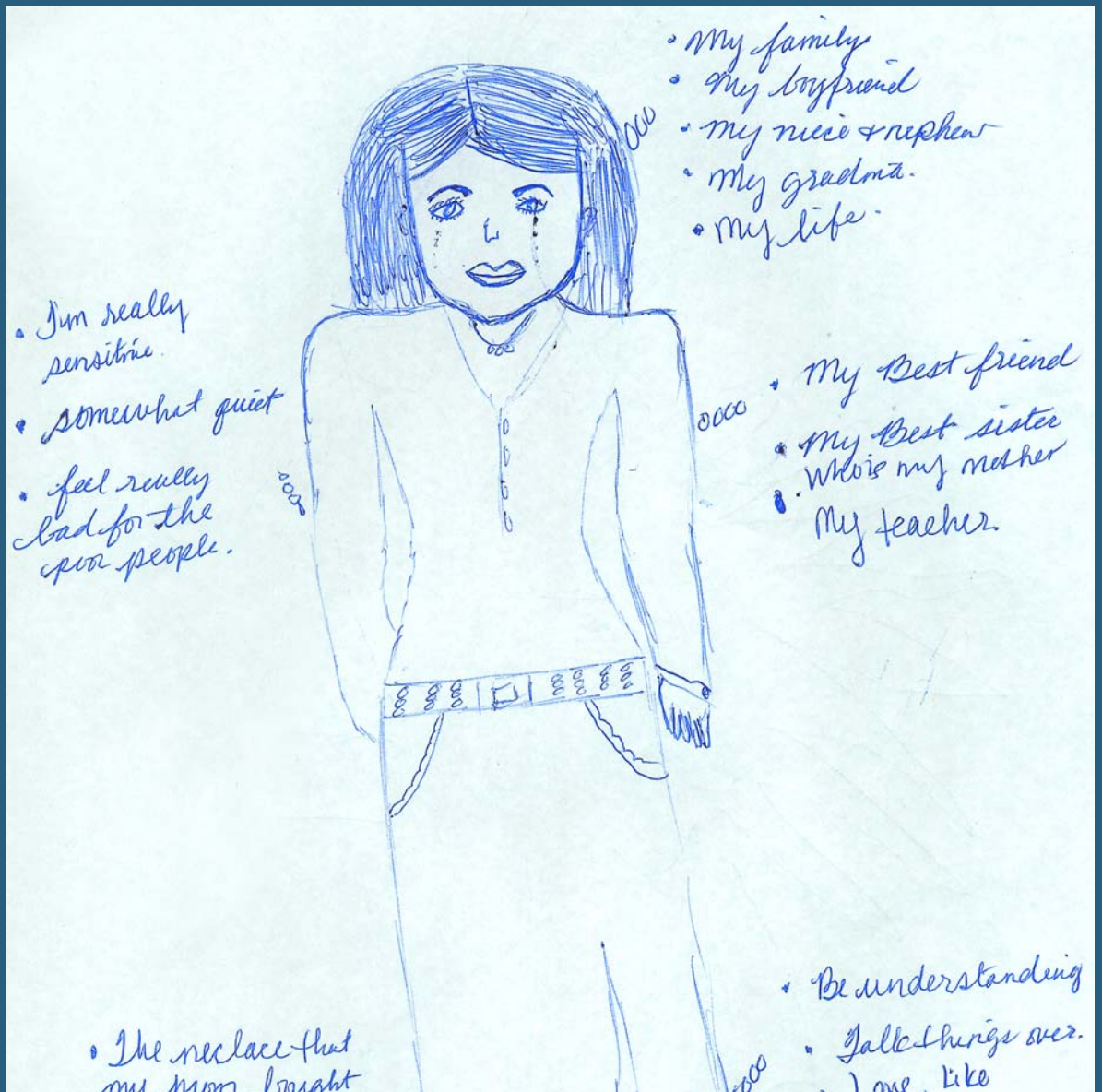


“I am only on this earth for a short period of time. If I can make somebody smile, even if my life is feeling like it’s hell, at least I made somebody feel good about themselves.” – 18/M

“I’m trying to figure that out right now – what it is we’re living for. Like, why? It’s really a hard thing for me, because it doesn’t make any sense why people live for the things they do.” – 17/F

“You have to believe in something. You don’t know if it’s really there or not. You can’t see it or touch it, but you just have to believe.” – Pregnant teen





# 4. Finding an Identity that Fits

**“Believe in who you are. You’re your best thing.”**

Teenagers are actively, and sometimes quite consciously, engaged in the act of self-creation. They want to know who they are, what they’re good at, and what others think of them.

Most teenagers in our focus groups were inarticulate on the topic of creating an identity, probably because self-reflection is difficult when the self is in flux. But some participants – generally the older ones – were able to put themselves and their problems in perspective, describing themselves as individuals shaped by universal forces, or in some cases, by social forces particular to our time and place.

One transgendered 22-year-old explained that sexual-minority youth are forced early on to think about issues of identity, and to carefully consider how they fit into a world that can be hostile toward them. Other teens believed they had discovered, through experience and introspection, their own personal road to happiness.

But for all the teenagers, spiritual maturity seemed to be about personal responsibility – about finally recognizing their obligations to themselves and others.

“The soul is a part of you so deep that only certain things can reach it. And you can become separated from it. If you’ve had a lot of bad things happen in your life, and not a lot of good things, then that part of you can become damaged, and after a certain point, almost nothing can reach it.... One way to get at it is by doing things you really love – things that make you feel good about yourself, and optimistic. When I listen to music I really like, it just makes me feel great and uplifted and like I can be a positive influence in the world.” – 20 / F

“I believe in the process. I believe in myself – that things will generally be alright. I'm like, ‘Believe in who you are, you're your best thing.’” – 20 / M

“I believe that the only way to think about yourself better is to see what you're good at. I like my singing, and I'm always working on it. It's what I do best. That's my perfect job, right there. It's what I want as a job in life.” – 15 / F

“I grew up, I had pain all the time, so as kids we did whatever we had to do to take our minds off it. We caused trouble with pumpkin-smashing, we did graffiti, we caused fights in school, whatever worked to give you that instant escape. You become addicted to that. It's hard to see delayed gratification and trust the process, because you don't have any personal experience with it working. You basically need divine intervention. You need something to happen; you need to ask for help. Basically, you need to take personal responsibility. Whatever the laws of life are will be unfolded to me, but I'm the one who does it. If I don't make the right choices, it's me.” – 18 / M

“My whole life changed after I had my daughter. That's the point that I found out about myself, how I am, what I want, what responsibilities I got.” – 19 / F

“It would be hard and almost impossible to do – but [to have a truly spiritual experience] I'd have to travel the world and meet people who I'd never seen before or heard about before, and experience their way of life. Because here I am, and I know how to be me, but I don't know how I'd survive, or how I'd act, in any other culture.” – 17 / F

“Basically, when you stop using [drugs] after abusing for a long time, you realize how your standard of living was reduced to like an animal level. You realize that you don't have nothing around you that you care about, because anything that you did care about would cause you pain, so you've cut yourself off from all these things. But once you stop using, you start asking yourself questions. You can't just live your life with nothing being important to you.” – 18 / M

# Tanya: ‘God Came into My Life’

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For Tanya, a soft-spoken Hispanic girl living in a program for homeless teens in Connecticut, God is everything. “For me, He is like my second father. He is in front of me, behind me, next to me, everywhere I am,” she said.

As a little girl growing up in Costa Rica, Tanya went to church with her family every Sunday. For about two weeks every February or March, Tanya’s family also went to a Christian camp, where they read the Bible, prayed, and sat around the campfire and talked or sang.

When she turned 12 or 13, however, Tanya started spending a lot of time on the street, getting into fights with other kids, doing “crazy stuff.” Her mother advised Tanya to go to God for help. At first Tanya didn’t listen, but eventually she decided to try it. She went to the Christian camp where, along with several other teenagers, she was baptized. She and the other kids went to the river and submerged themselves in the water while the pastor said prayers. It was a turning point for her. “When I got baptized,” Tanya said, “God came into my life.”

Tanya, now 18, is in her last year at a public high school. She works as a cook at a fast-food restaurant, and plans to go on to college in another year. Since moving to the United States at age 17, Tanya hasn’t attended church as frequently as she did in Costa Rica, but she still goes regularly. Besides attending on Sunday, she goes on Thursday night, which is “teenage night” at her church. Some of Tanya’s friends go with her, and together the teenagers pray, read the Bible and sing. Later they watch a movie or go out for a bite to eat.

Tanya’s favorite part of church is the worship service, because she gets to sing, which she loves. In fact, singing used to be the only part of church that seemed worthwhile to her. As she got older, however, other aspects of the service began to interest her as well. Today, Tanya credits her pastor’s sermons with helping her stay on track. Going to church, she said, has helped her settle down.

Tanya became homeless after her mother kicked her out of the house for disobeying rules. When she is discharged from her transitional living program, Tanya plans to go back to live with her mother. They have both committed to family counseling. In the meantime, when she goes home to visit, she and her mother often read the Bible together. Tanya prays for her mother’s health, and for her sister and brother. She prays every morning, asking God to help her with the day, and then again at school, asking for help with whatever task is at hand. When she is stressed, she listens to Christian music or just thinks about God. It helps her feel more relaxed and at peace.

*“I changed a lot with going to church and believing that He was right there. I changed a lot when I got baptized.”*



Teenagers were asked: "What is 'spiritual' to you?"  
 Below are some of the lists they made.

Giving birtht Being pregnant  
 Sexual Experiences  
 Surviving car accident  
 myself being born

- Sleep
- Walk around
- \*Play games
- \*Fighting
- Watching movies
- \*Spend time with her
- a
- Dancing Salsa!!
- Chilling w/ friends!
- Taking care of lil kids
- a
- praying
- going to church
- weddings
- \*meditating
- doing drugs
- funerals
- \*going on the bus & just riding & staring at the world
- \*Christmas
- \*read books or research
- sayance
- candles lit & lying on the floor
- a
- a

- \*dance
- \*yoga
- church
- sayance
- wedding
- writing/poetry/kpm
- \*walks/hikes in woods
- \*message/reflexology
- a
- \*play sports
- theater
- \*poetry
- \*animal cards
- \*youth group
- \*community service
- \*playing with fire
- \*I Ching cards
- Hanging out with friends
- \*Teen discussion groups
- \*Study
- a
- baptised
- First communion
- Reconciliation
- Confirmation - replenished my good
- "Being with my girlfriend"
- a

- walking at night
- lying in bed
- being in love
- friendships
- dying/death
- having a child
- praying
- having helping hands
- a
- \*believe in GOD
- became a Christian
- \*baptice myself
- meditacion
- follower
- choir singer
- \*read the BIBLE
- \*go to Church
- writing
- listening to others
- sleeping
- a
- calling christ a schmuck
- going to Temple
- \*smoke
- the Mob
- a

- \*reading the Bible
- \*listening to music
- \*going to school
- a
- I USED TO GO TO CHURCH BUT GOD DOESN'T SEEM TO ANSWER MY PRAYERS!
- I LIKE TO LITE CANDLES AND RELAX!
- a
- \*Contemplating eternity
- \*Coming to this focus group
- \*Reading the Satanic Bible
- Getting baptized
- \*Getting disfellowshipped!
- \*Appreciating nature
- \*Reading the Bible
- a
- go to Church
- pray
- read the Bible
- \*relax
- a

- \*being Pregnant
- \*Praying
- \*going to church
- LOVE
- Family
- a
- going to church to Laugh at the pastor
- \*long walks in the woods all by my self
- \*swimming in a Lake Just before it freezes
- \*Taking a drive with no intentional destination
- \*Crashing my car into trees, rocks and other cars
- Talking to my computer
- Interacting with my computer
- a
- church
- praying on my own
- looking at the moon
- thinking on my own
- talking to my self
- a

CHURCH / HELP OUT PEOPLE  
 PRAY (THINK BY MYSELF)  
 CHANGE OF LIFE / (STAY FOCUSED)  
 (MENTALLY PHYSICALLY)

# 5.

## What's Spiritual?

**"It made me appreciate that my life is mine."**

Adolescents participating in the focus groups were asked to make lists of some of the things they had done in their lives that they considered spiritual. They were reminded that spirituality was, for our purposes, an expansive term that included religion but also transcended it. After making the lists, they were asked to put a check beside the activities that had actually turned out to be helpful in some way. (Most, but not all, of the young people complied with this request.)

At left are some of the lists, a few reproduced from the original, but most transcribed for reasons of space and readability. Original spellings were retained. We have also included comments that some of the young people made about their lists.

"I'm the kind of person who believes I need to do something before I judge it, so I've done every drug you can think of. I needed to find out, so I found out. I was trying to learn about my purpose, what I was doing and what I needed to do. Drugs kind of gave me a different look at life.... No experience you could ever do will amount to what you see and what you feel when you do certain drugs." – 17/F

"Watching my daughter be born, because that changed me. And being in jail, because it smartened my ass up. And when I stopped drinking and doing drugs, because I'm doing so much better now." – 19/M

"I like sports, like baseball and hockey – physical activity that posts me against another person, so basically I know that either he's going down or I'm going down. So it's kind of like a Neanderthal type of thinking, but it makes you feel good, especially if you prevail and kick the other guy's ass." – 18/M

"Last summer I went bungee jumping. I swear to God it took 10 minutes of my life falling there, thinking that if I die, this is worth it. And I thought all about what I'd done in my whole life, and I was a changed person. It made me such a better person. You realize right before you bounce right back up that you almost died. 'Wow. I almost hit that ground. That was me there. Splat.' It made me appreciate what I have. It made me appreciate that my life is mine and I control it. I feel it was kind of like a medicine for me, and it woke me up." – 17/F



# Conclusion

In the last few years, spirituality has outgrown its strictly religious associations and entered the secular realm. Private and public organizations alike have begun to incorporate spiritual ideas and practices into their work, and strategies for addressing the “whole person” (employee or

The debate about the role that spirituality should play in public life, particularly in services funded by the government, has at times been rancorous. Yet the issue can be separated from its cultural and political contexts. If we accept that spirituality in its many forms is important to individual and even public health – and most available research indicates that we should accept it – then, on that basis alone, spiritual development and sustenance would seem an appropriate issue for public discourse. Below we offer two sets of recommendations about spirituality and adolescents, one concerning religion, the other secular spirituality. Both recommendations are based primarily on our study of vulnerable, “at-risk” adolescents and the social service agencies with which they are associated, and thus are necessarily limited. We mean only to give initial shape to a dialogue that is already beginning, however tentatively, in youth-serving organizations around the country.

## Religion

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Research has convincingly shown that religious involvement is linked to positive health and behavioral outcomes for young people. Thus religious institutions themselves must be considered powerful potential contributors to healthy development in youth. While few studies have attempted to tease out the explicit ways in which religious organizations benefit young people, one researcher makes the case that churches serve as conduits of moral instruction; builders of learned competencies; and providers of social and organizational ties (Smith, 2003). If this is even partly true, then society might rightly be concerned that so many youth – even those

who call themselves religious – have no connection to a faith community, and, if the adolescents we interviewed are to be believed, no interest in establishing one. This is true even for young people who retain an interest in the topic generally. Recall that in this study, relatively large percentages of young people with no active religious involvement reported an interest in talking to adults about religion, or attending classes on religion. In short, they seem finished with church, but not with the subject of religion itself.

Although teenagers may be eager, developmentally speaking, to cast off authority and tradition, developmental pressures alone cannot entirely explain the exodus of teens from formal religious life. Surely religious organizations should examine their own role in the disaffection of large numbers of adolescents, and seek new ways of engaging interested young people in the programs they offer. If they want to, churches can find ways to work more effectively with and for adolescents. Partnering with secular community-based youth programs may be a key to doing so. The idea is not so radical, given that relationships between religious institutions and youth agencies are already widespread. Those relationships, however, tend to take the most obvious forms (see *Practice Unbound*, 2002), with local religious communities giving – typically gifts of cash, meeting space, or volunteer time – and the agencies receiving. When agencies desire greater involvement, they may invite nearby faith institutions to lead on-site religious discussion or prayer groups for teenage clients, offer teens rides to worship services, or make clergy available for on-site pastoral counseling.

But regardless of the terms of the relationship, youth agencies are generally considered by both parties to be the primary beneficiary. The

one-way nature of these arrangements represents a missed opportunity for churches, since youth agencies themselves have something valuable to offer in return: expertise in working with adolescents. The benefits to religious institutions seem obvious. If churches, synagogues and other religious communities want to do a better job of engaging teenagers, then learning the principles of youth development would seem a crucial first step. But religious institutions should be forewarned: the most basic lesson of youth development may be the hardest for tradition-bound organizations to accept. The truth is that no program for youth will succeed short of a sincere and concerted effort to hear what young people want and need, and to honor them as experts on themselves and their own life experiences. Forming truly cooperative partnerships with teenagers can obviously be difficult for adults, but forcing teens to conform to institutional values and mandates is even more difficult, as churches struggling to retain adolescents know only too well.

*Although teenagers may be eager, developmentally speaking, to cast off authority and tradition, developmental pressures alone cannot entirely explain the exodus of teens from formal religious life.*

But religion-oriented spiritual development need not be the sole province of religious institutions. Though the idea may be slightly disconcerting to American sensibilities, secular institutions can, and almost certainly should, find ways to help young people discover and explore religious ideas and identity. Public schools, clubs and community organizations do not have – and should not have – religious agendas, but they shortchange teenagers by ignoring a facet of life that many teens yearn to discuss and learn about. In contemporary society, it cannot be assumed that opportunities for religious exploration are widely available to young people, especially those whose connections to family – a primary conduit of religious tradition – are strained or broken. The goal of secular organizations for youth must never be to proselytize. But offered as one option in a broad array of youth-development and educational activities, with care taken to respect diverse traditions and personal boundaries, structured religious exploration can yield positive results both for youth and the communities in which they live.

The authors of a 2003 report on the rising rates of mental illness and behavioral disorders among children in the United States assert that adolescents have a biologically driven need to connect with loving, spiritually centered communities, but face a paucity of opportunities for such connection. They conclude that young people's need to grow up within a healthy spiritual framework is so compelling that institutions of all kinds must find a way to help one, despite the difficulties of doing so. "[It] is a challenge to be embraced, not avoided," the authors write. "One of the many problems with the avoidance strategy is that denying or ignoring the spiritual needs of adolescents may end up creating a void in their lives that either devolves into depression or is filled by other forms of questing and challenge, such as drinking, unbridled consumerism, petty crime, sexual precocity, or flirtations with violence" (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003).

## Secular Spirituality

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Of course, religion is not the only form of spiritual expression, and for many youth it will not be the preferred form. Some nonreligious teenagers in this study have worked hard to develop secular belief systems, adopting world views that help them cope with lives that at times seem almost overwhelmingly difficult. For these youth, spirituality serves as an always-available inner compass that keeps them on course and helps them put their problems into perspective. But if some of the young people we interviewed had developed such an internal resource, it seemed apparent that many others had not. In a society with diminishing structural supports for spiritual development, these disconnected young people, cut adrift from the institutionalized belief systems and faith communities that might have once supported them, may well be on their own.

Yet spiritual resources can easily be made available to them. Secular institutions that serve adolescents – schools and community-based social service agencies, for instance – can choose to integrate spirituality education into their programs. There is no evidence that doing so is particularly costly or even requires great expenditures of time or effort. And there is evidence, offered over and over by youth in this study, that young people want such opportunities. Introspective disciplines such as yoga, martial arts, meditation, creative writing and guided visualization were continually noted by these adolescents as spiritual activities that intrigued them, and that they would eagerly try if made available.





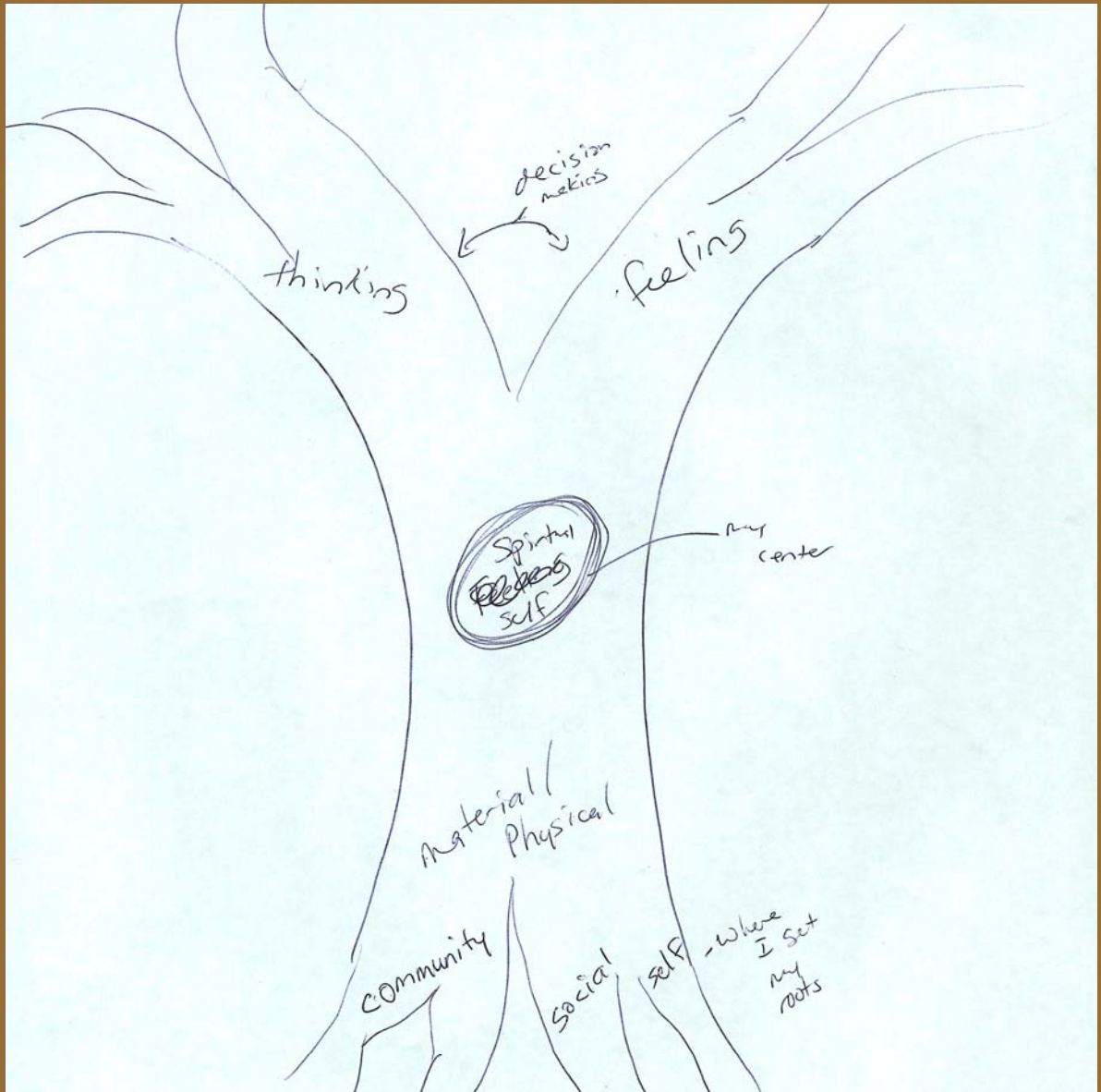
But moments of spiritual uplift can be found outside specially orchestrated activities. Indeed, adolescents in this study said they found spiritual resonance in the everyday tasks and diversions of life. Asked to name the activities that give them comfort, help them think clearly about their lives, and help them feel connected to others, youth repeatedly described watching the stars, listening to music, and talking with friends. For them, these activities were “spiritual” because they contributed to a sense of personal wholeness and well-being, and even feelings of transcendence and oneness with other people and the world at large. The good news is that these kinds of experiences are available to all teenagers all the time – they are the very stuff of life itself. Youthworkers and other adults can help adolescents see the spirituality in their lives by reframing these ordinary events as essentially spiritual in nature – as sources of soul-enriching support that are always available and that have real and lasting benefits.

*If spiritual growth is to be nurtured in adolescents, it will be nurtured by adults who pose the right questions, listen to the answers, and act on what they hear.*

It may also be instructive for youth-serving professionals to consider the activities that adolescents do not appear to consider spiritual. The teens in this study seemed to find no spiritual significance, for instance, in warm

relationships with teachers or mentors, or in the mastering of difficult, adult-level skills. The omissions are odd, given that the same young people found spiritual inspiration in so many more seemingly mundane moments. And they are doubly odd given that the concept of youth development – which after all promotes a framework for building youth competencies through adult-adolescent partnerships – has been endorsed by the federal government and national youth organizations for at least a decade. All of the youth in this study were associated with social service programs that to one extent or another embrace youth development principles, and had, in the contexts of those programs, been encouraged to build life skills with the help of caring adults. Given the limitations of this study, it is hard to say whether the absence of adults in the self-described spiritual lives of these youth is significant, or merely a reflection of the typical adolescent absorption in peers and youth culture. But a closer look at the way that adults factor into the lives of at-risk adolescents, even those presumably already receiving supportive adult attention, would seem to be warranted.

In any case, questions about what adolescents mean by “spirituality,” and where they find or hope to find spirituality in their lives, are well worth asking. If spiritual growth is to be nurtured in adolescents, it will be nurtured by adults who pose these questions, listen to the answers, and act on what they hear. The teens in this study expressed various and sometimes contradictory views, but most were surprised that they were asked to express their views on the topic at all. Though of fundamental importance to personal and even societal well-being, spirituality as a subject for discussion had simply never come up for them before, and certainly not in the form of a structured conversation involving interested adults. With the momentum gathering in the United States around spirituality and its role in public and private life, youth-serving professionals in all settings should commit themselves to beginning these conversations, and making sure they continue.





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*Inspiring innovation and advancing best practices in partnership with child- and youth-serving agencies.*

This groundbreaking report is the second in a series by New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services exploring spirituality in the lives of troubled adolescents. The first report, *Practice Unbound*, examined the therapeutic use of spiritually oriented activities by 200 youth-service agencies across the country. *A Part of You So Deep* focuses on teens themselves, using extensive focus group interviews, personal interviews and surveys to uncover their experiences of spirituality and their attitudes toward a variety of spiritual activities, both secular and religious. The findings, full of passion, confusion, disappointment, and yearning, illuminate the complicated inner world of our society's most vulnerable teenagers, and offer crucial insight to counselors, teachers and anyone else committed to nurturing the spiritual lives of young people.