AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF


Title: Spirituality and Aging Among Women

Abstract approved:

The term, spirituality, as used in this study, refers to that part of our lives that has the deepest meaning, that which nurtures each of us and moves us toward wholeness. It is the basis for which we live out our lives, following our own truths with honesty and commitment. Hopefully, in the process of aging we mature spiritually, using experiences collected and processed over a lifetime and learning from them what is most important in leading a fulfilling life.

For this study, a group of 10 women aged 60-87 years was examined, using in-depth interviews to determine those aspects of their lives that contributed to their spiritual growth and to see how they found meaning as they matured over their lifetimes. Furthermore, each woman was asked to discuss what gives her life the most meaning and purpose today.
The women were selected for their apparent spiritual maturity, as observed by those who know them. The results of the study are organized around themes as they relate to different periods of the life span, starting with childhood and ending in elderhood. Early memories of the women were centered around family and friends, then expanded to include school, career, and in most cases marriage and children. Some have grandchildren.

The family of origin was a critical beginning for each woman. Most recalled a happy and loving childhood, and those that did not, seem to have worked through those parts of their childhood relationships and experiences that have troubled them. Over their life spans, the women faced turning points or crises that caused them to grow in new ways, not only to survive, but to find new strength, courage, and meaning. As the women became older adults, their losses became more numerous. They have developed ways to grow spiritually despite these multiple losses and diminishments that continue into the present.

Role models have played a meaningful part in each woman's life. Throughout childhood, adulthood, and old age, the women have looked to others who taught them various social and coping skills which contributed to the fullness in their lives. They developed such traits as loving others, caring for those in need, and helping friends and family. The role models fostered independence and development of strengths and guided the women to become who they
are today. These women in turn serve as role models for others.

The acceptance of death as a part of life lends a peacefulness in old age for the women. Their families and friends continue to play a key role in their everyday lives, along with faith and religious practices, God or a Supreme Being, prayer, meditation, reading, writing, learning new things, helping and listening to others, and service to community.

Giving and receiving love is basic in their lives. The women also feel that love and helping others are essential components for a healthy humanity.

The women are grateful for life's many gifts. Although old age brings hardships, losses, and diminishments, they find that life has been generous to them, and they continue to have hope for the future. Their spiritual strength continues to grow and expand, accompanied by a new sense of freedom that was not present in their younger years. Contrary to messages received from society, these women have found that there are benefits in growing old.
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Spirituality and Aging Among Women

by

Nancy Wilson Orcutt

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First I would like to express the gratitude and admiration I feel for the ten women who shared their very personal spiritual journeys with me. Their love for others was evident as they spoke of their joys and sorrows, families and friends, their connectedness to what gives their lives meaning. Their courage and strength are among the gifts they give to all that are fortunate enough to know them.

Second, I would like to thank my committee members for their interest, support, and encouragement in my work, including Marcus Borg, Chris Anderson, Clara Pratt, and Lucy Skjelstad. Their patience and inspiration are now part of my life.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the constant love of my faithful family and friends, which is the basis of all that I am and do, where I find meaning in my own life.

Each is my teacher and my friend.
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The purpose of this study was to examine the spiritual lives of a group of older women and see how these individuals have matured over their lifetimes and how each one finds a sense of meaning in her later years.

Spirituality is a difficult term to define in a word, phrase, or even a sentence. Some people equate it with religion while others see it in a much broader sense. Therefore, I feel it is important to present the definitions of some writers on the subject of spirituality and also the definition that I use in this study.

The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA), a unit of the National Council on the Aging, has defined spiritual well-being as "the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (Moberg, 1989, p.12). This definition is used by many Jews and Christians, each group interpreting it according to its own beliefs.

By spirituality Kathleen Fischer (1985) is referring to "the deepest dimension of all of life. The spiritual is the ultimate ground of all our questions, hopes, fears, and loves" (p. 9). Spiritual concerns include "questions of
self-worth" as well as "fear of reaching out to make new friendships, the discovery of new talents, deeper peace, wider boundaries of love." Fischer states that our spiritual life includes "our struggles with the loss of a spouse or the move from a home of many years," and "our efforts to deal creatively with retirement and to find a purpose for our lives after our family has been raised."

Eugene Bianchi (1982) equates spirituality with religiousness. In his view, spirituality means to "confront the boundaries of life and death, grapple with hope and despair, puzzle over decisions of good, evil, and the mixtures of both" (p. 177). He adds that it means "walking to the edges of the mystery at the heart of existence." The challenges of aging "open a person to transcendent experiences, to the numinous, with its wonder, blessing, and terror."

Spirituality in this paper refers to our relationship with that sacred center out of which each of our lives flows. It is the work of the soul as we go about our daily living. It is found in the meaning of life, the experiences that have made an impression on us, our faith in a Higher Power, and our center of value, the purpose in being which accompanies us through life. Spirituality is very personal, both subtle and powerful. It deals with life's issues, ranging from learning basic trust to healing ourselves from pain and suffering. Spirituality is an ongoing
process of growth and discovery, realized only through our personal experiences.

There are many spiritual questions that come with aging. What does my life mean? What is the significance of aging for me and for society? What are the tasks of old age, and in particular what are the tasks I have left to do? What is my role in society? What is death? How can I live well in old age? How can I deepen my spiritual life and move closer to God and the universe? These and other questions are ones that elders might ask themselves as part of the process of becoming old and embracing the latter part of life.

I see religion as only a small part of the spiritual realm. By religion I am referring to an organized system of beliefs, worship, and rituals centered on a Higher Being and using a set of sacred writings as set down by the leaders of that particular denomination. Those who belong to a religious institution accept the creed of that organized body of believers. One's spiritual life can include a religious faith, but spirituality encompasses a much broader and more personal scope. Some religions encourage personal spiritual growth while others do not.

With the many losses and transitions that occur as we grow older, it is important to find and build on those strengths that are available to us in old age. Spiritual growth is one possible benefit of growing old. Even burdens and losses can become a means for spiritual gain. In
old age there is time to explore the spiritual realm, to discover how to make sense out of life with all its ups and downs, joys and sorrows, pleasures and hardships. "Spiritual growth usually includes reviewing and reinterpreting the past, constructively mourning present losses, and ordering one's view of the future" (Moberg, 1989, p. 14). We do not simply need to mark time until death.

Elders can share their wisdom and give back to others what they have experienced, including their understanding of what is true, right, and lasting, and their common sense and good judgment. Their gifts to others can include their spiritual insight. They can help others understand aging as a positive force, a time to which they can look forward.

My study uncovers some of the strengths that ten older women have developed through their life experiences. They described to me their journeys, their process of growth, and how they cultivate their spiritual lives to find meaning as elders. I believe that the way to understand human spirituality is to hear and study the stories of those who appear to have a rich spiritual life. We learn from narrative, from examples of real people, from what others share about what gives meaning to their lives.

By working within the self to build deeper meaning and purpose, and with a strong spiritual base to build on, one can make productive use of the later years of life. Spiritual services that older people can provide are nonmaterial gifts, such as cheer, counsel, prayer, thankfulness, and
simple but active listening to others. Also, telling one's life story (sometimes called reminiscence or life review) benefits both the narrator and others (Kaminsky, 1984).

This study is organized around themes, or different topics, as the various women responded to them. Each topic consists of a sub-heading under Parts I, II, and III, beginning with childhood and concluding with the present. Through the themes, each woman shares her spiritual journey and how she finds meaning in her life today. Sometimes I refer to the women as narrators.

In the three parts of the body of the paper I will present and discuss what gave meaning to the lives of the women and, where appropriate, quote from their narratives to preserve the flavor of their stories. So as not to interrupt the narratives, I will usually analyze the similarities and differences among the women's responses in the conclusion, using only limited remarks in the body of the paper.

It is difficult to delineate the sections of this paper exactly. Because the material is all part of continuous life stories, many topics blend from one to another. For example, some anecdotes start in early life and overlap with later incidents. So, by necessity, those anecdotes flow from one to another. In some sections it seems appropriate to blend the stories of the women together as a forward movement of people, but in others I tell each story
separately in order to express the flow of a particular life.

One of the women referred to life as seeds that are planted, growing and maturing until they reach fruition. Then the cycle begins again. Another woman who is an avid gardener described life as a flower. You plant the seed, see it grow and bloom, then it wilts and dies. There is wisdom in the natural process. These women seem to know that the spiritual energy of life never ends. It brings newness and energy into the world, pouring over us just as sunlight energizes the earth. It is an ongoing process.

Procedure

Why did I choose to study women in particular? In many ways aging is different for women than for men. For every 100 women over the age of 85, there are only 36 men. Older women are less likely to be married than older men. Seventy-five per cent of all nursing home residents are women. Eighty per cent of older people who live alone are women. Older women are five times as likely to be poor as elderly couples. Women have more chronic health problems than men (Feinberg, 1991).

The ten women who participated in this study were selected for the apparent depth of spirituality they display to those around them in their everyday lives. I wanted to learn from women with observably rich spiritual lives what
makes their lives meaningful today. What wisdom have they accumulated from their past experiences? How do their spiritual lives connect with what they do on a daily basis? How do they find meaning in their lives?

I selected women 60 years and older, believing that those in their later years have lives that are seasoned by time and many experiences. I had no upper limit in age, but it was important that the women could express themselves clearly.

Possible participants were suggested to me by my committee members at Oregon State University and by friends with an interest in spirituality. I also contacted others I personally felt had wisdom to share in my area of study.

I used a tape recorder for the interviews so that I would be free to listen carefully. A few women I contacted did not feel comfortable using a tape recorder, so I did not interview them. When I sensed this would be difficult for them I gave them the opportunity to decline. Since this area of study is a deeply personal one, I wanted the women to feel comfortable and open to sharing.

First, I called each woman to see if she would be interested in participating in the study. I discussed the open-ended interview process and explained what I meant by spirituality (see Introduction and the Appendix.) In most cases the women were very willing to be interviewed and share their spiritual lives. Some indicated that they had been interviewed before about other aspects of their lives.
One was interested in clarifying her spiritual development for personal reasons. Another had completed interviews with elders about their sources of inspiration.

If a woman expressed interest in being part of the study, I sent her a letter explaining what I meant by spirituality and introducing myself to her (see Appendix). Also included was the list of discussion questions, "Reviewing Your Life" (see Appendix). I wanted the narrators to be familiar with the topics they would discuss. Some of the women made notes for themselves to include in the interview, while others preferred to speak more spontaneously. The choice was theirs. It was my aim to help each one feel at ease.

The questions I compiled came from my own ideas plus adaptations from Sharon Kaufman's book, The Ageless Self (1986), and James Fowler's Stages of Faith (1981). These two authors included interview questions in their respective appendices. Also, I referred to the interview questions that Ann Schneider (1988) used in her doctoral thesis. Another resource was Barbara Haight's "Life Review and Experiencing Form," intended for use in research on life review (1989). I grouped my questions in chronological order by age, beginning with date of birth and leading up to the present and old age.

The duration of the interview depended on the narrator. I had anticipated that some might become tired early in the interview, but talking about their spiritual lives
seemed to give them more energy, not less. Each was free to talk for as long or as short a time as she wished. The shortest was about 45 minutes, and the longest was close to 2 1/2 hours with two sessions. Most were close to 1 1/2 hours.

The transcripts of each tape-recorded session ran from 9 pages to 51 pages, double-spaced, with the average between 21 and 22 pages and the median 17 1/2 pages. Only three of the women wished to read their own transcripts. Two of these women added to or modified their transcripts, although not to any substantive degree.

The quotes I use from the transcripts are in their original spoken form, except for sentences, phrases, or words that I deleted because they detract from the narratives. Names of people and places are usually deleted.

The interview sessions were held either in the narrator's home or in my home. Most of the women preferred afternoons as our meeting time. The interviews took place from May, 1991 through January, 1992. Each was conducted in private with few interruptions.

The interview process was an open-ended one. Each woman could talk as much or as little about any question, or she could not respond if she chose. Most of the women spoke to each question. I guided them through the procedure with as little interference as possible, since I felt it was important to let each follow her own train of thought without interruption, even when the responses did
not proceed in order. I chose not to use a questionnaire requiring brief answers because it would be too confining. I made it clear there were no right or wrong answers.

This method of recording the women's inner lives and experiences provided very rich, detailed information. There were focal points around which each narrator spoke so that I could examine the material in themes.

The women have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. It is difficult to show on paper some aspects that came out in the personal interviews. Their expressions, animation, gestures, voice inflections, pondering, enthusiasm, humor, and sadness are difficult to pass on to the reader in the same way I experienced them. It was a gift to be able to listen to these sacred stories.

Description of the Women

The 10 women interviewed for this study were born between 1904 and 1932, the oldest and youngest being a generation apart. Their ages at the time of the interviews were 87 to 60 years. The average age was between 75 and 74; the median age was 78 years. Five women were in their eighties, two were in their seventies, and three were in their sixties.

The oldest women in the group remembered World War I and The Great Depression in their early years. Most recalled World War II. Some of the women stated the effects
these historical events had on them as they were growing up.

Three of the 10 women were married at the time of the interviews, five were widowed, one was single, and one was divorced. Five appeared to be in good health, while three were in fair health, and two had limited mobility. Age was not an apparent factor in health. Of the five women in their eighties, three were in good health, while of the three in their sixties, only one was in good health.

Two of the women I interviewed have doctorate degrees, four have a master's or the equivalent, and the remaining four have bachelor's degrees. Obviously this group of women has been well educated. Seven of the women had been teachers at one time in their lives. All have been involved in helping others in some capacity. Six have raised their own children, while four had no children of their own.

Eight of the women are practicing Christians of various denominations (Presbyterian, Catholic, Congregational, or Episcopal) and come from Christian backgrounds. One has never been involved in religion of any kind in her lifetime. Another, although raised as a Christian, is exploring her own personal religious practices.

Jane was 61 years of age and was born in Seattle. She and her husband have six grown children. She grew up in rural Washington with her parents and a brother ten years younger than she. Her father was a logger and worked in
the shipyards. Their family never had much money, but there was enough for their needs. Her parents were not churchgoers, although Jane went to church with friends as she got older. Married to a Catholic man, she has practiced that religion in adulthood. When her children were grown Jane went back to school and earned a Ph. D. in Education. Besides teaching, she has been active in various capacities, including Catholic Charities, the local park board, and a refugee program. She has also worked in an office on aging. Her good health allows her to continue her activities and professional interests.

Nettie was 85 years old, born in a city in Iowa, and has lived there her whole life. She was the second of four children. Her father worked in a local department store. Nettie has three daughters. Married 54 years, she was widowed seven years ago and has lived alone since that time in her home of over 50 years. Her early religious training took place in the Congregational church where she sang in the choir and was active in youth groups, but from the time of her marriage she adopted her husband's Presbyterian affiliation.

Nettie earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics and taught high school math before she married. She was a substitute teacher when her children reached school age. She held various community volunteer positions in organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the hospital auxiliary. She spent many years directing church school, teaching music
and classes for children. Nettie enjoys good health and remains active with community activities and her friends.

Elva is 86 years old, born and raised on a farm in rural Maine, the youngest of five children. All but Elva were born in Canada. Her mother died when she was eight, so Elva took over many of the household responsibilities. There were no churches near Elva's home, but evangelicals came through the area to preach at the local schoolhouse. Her mother would often invite them to dinner. Her father taught her the basic tenets of Christianity through Bible readings, prayers at breakfast, and his own example.

Elva is a widow, married for 8 1/2 years with no children. Besides a bachelor's degree, she has degrees in nursing, physical therapy, and public health. Elva worked with crippled children in Oregon (Easter Seals) and Las Vegas. She has taught children in her church school. The welfare of children has been central to her life. Despite her physical limitations, Elva still tries to get out of her apartment daily or have friends visit. In her adult life she has been active in the Congregational church.

Anna grew up in a family with two younger brothers. She was born in New York City 82 years ago, but has lived most of her life on the west coast. Her father was an editor and cartoonist for a newspaper for many years. She received a bachelor's degree in journalism, and worked as a secretary and a reporter. She came from a well educated
family with a strong Presbyterian background and went to church regularly.

Anna married a Presbyterian pastor who also taught in a seminary. Her husband had two grown sons at the time of their marriage. Anna had no children of her own. She is a published writer and has given many dramatic readings impersonating historical figures, an activity she calls "first person book reviews." Her interests still center around the Presbyterian church.

A widow for over 20 years, Anna recently made the transition from her own home to a retirement center where she has her own apartment. She is limited physically, but gets out in the community when her energy allows.

At 87 years, Joyce is the oldest woman in the study. She was born in Portland, Oregon, and has lived on the west coast all her life, mostly in Oregon. Her father was a medical doctor, and the family lived in logging communities where he practiced. She had three brothers and was the third of the four children. The family regularly attended the Episcopal church, and Joyce continues that strong affiliation today.

Joyce's mother graduated from college after her children were born, which enabled her to help Joyce's father with his medical work. Joyce graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in horticulture and married an educator in the public schools who later taught at a university. They had three children. Besides raising her family, Joyce
Joyce has been and continues to be active in the community and her church. Her husband died when he was 80, over 10 years ago. Joyce has lived in her same home for 54 years. She is in good health and goes walking daily.

Born in a small town in Idaho, Suzanne is 82 years of age. She was the eldest of five children. When her mother died of influenza, Suzanne at 12 years assumed many of the family responsibilities. At times the family was cared for by neighbors and relatives living in various small Idaho towns. Her father was a teacher, Bible student, and lay minister. The family regularly took part in the local community church, one often affiliated with Disciples of Christ (also called the Christian church). This involvement has continued throughout Suzanne's life.

Suzanne has graduated from a university, attended a Bible college, earned a master's degree in zoology, and has taken classes in social work and public health. She has held various positions, including teacher, office worker, secretary, housekeeper, and social worker in a community house and with migrant programs.

At one point, Suzanne was a cook for groups that hiked in the wilderness. Through this position she met her husband, who was a park ranger. At 50 she married, having no children. Since her marriage she has been active in the Congregational church. Suzanne enjoys good health and keeps active physically, walking and swimming.
Joanne was born in China 71 years ago, the eldest of three girls. After her father died when she was in her teens, her mother and sisters lived alone, unlike many Chinese families who lived with grandparents and great-grandparents. She has no religious background of any kind.

Joanne attended a primary school run by a teacher's college and a secondary school sponsored by an American Christian mission. At the mission school she did not take part in the optional religious activities. At the university where she earned a degree and took graduate classes she met her husband. After marriage they moved from China to Switzerland, where they had one son, then to Hong Kong where she taught for 30 years, and finally retired in Oregon. She enjoys good health and walks every day. Joanne and her husband live in their own home.

Diana is 60 years old, born and raised in Chicago. Her parents separated when she was an infant. She was the youngest of three children and has lived independently since she was 16, when her mother died.

Growing up, Diana attended church school at an African-Methodist-Episcopal (AME) church. From time to time she went to a Presbyterian church with a friend. At one point her family lived next door to a Baptist minister with whom she discussed theological questions. Later Diana joined the Catholic church when she intended to marry an African man, but the marriage never materialized. She was an atheist for much of her adult life. At present she is
exploring Eastern religions, goddess religions, and other spiritual approaches.

In her teens and early adulthood Diana's work experience was limited to domestic and other low paid work. Her breakthrough came when Commonwealth Edison began hiring blacks and also helped finance their employees' schooling. She took accounting classes and worked at a jewelry store. After college Diana taught young children in a special education program. Since earning a Ph.D. in Oregon she has been a teacher and researcher, retiring this year due to health problems.

Sarah is also 60 years, born and raised in Iowa. She was the middle of three daughters. Her father owned his own business, working as a hog salesman, and her mother was a math teacher before marriage. Sarah was raised in Congregational and Presbyterian churches. As a young adult she was not active in church life, but after her three children were in elementary school, she joined first a Unitarian and then a Congregational church. The latter affiliation has been strong for over 20 years.

Originally trained as a teacher, Sarah taught elementary school for five years before her children were born. Since that time she has been a substitute teacher and tutor, worked in a parent education program for 12 years, and held various community volunteer positions. After 30 years of marriage Sarah was recently divorced. She now lives in her own home and is completing a master's degree in inter-
disciplinary studies. Writing and spiritual growth are her main interests. Her health is fair, but she is still active physically.

*Doris* was born in Chicago 74 years ago. She grew up with four older brothers in a small town in Wisconsin where her father owned his own business manufacturing scientific laboratory furniture. She married at 19 before completing college and had two children. She also helped to raise a nephew.

Doris has traveled all over the world, first with her family of origin and then with her husband. She has made lifelong friends overseas and collected art works in various countries. Doris graduated from college when she was 42 and became a special education teacher. She has since taught a wide range of age groups (3 to 88 years).

Doris has attended church all her life and presently is a member of a Presbyterian church. After living many places, she and her husband retired in Oregon where he died this past year after a long illness. Despite health problems Doris is still active in her community. She lives alone in her own home.
Childhood is a time when the very beginnings of the inner life take shape. Infants and children are influenced by those around them, particularly their families. All of the women in this study told of family memories that made strong impressions on them.

James Fowler (1981) wrote of the "pilgrimage of faith as infants." In Fowler's first stage of faith development, "undifferentiated faith," "the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused...." (p. 121).

Erik Erikson (1986) calls his first stage of psychosocial development "Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust." According to Erikson, the psychologically healthy individual develops basic trust in a loving, supportive environment with his/her parents and is, therefore, able to establish a sense of hope. This remains important throughout the lifetime as a foundation for Erikson's other stages, culminating in an appreciation of interdependence and relatedness with others, a sense that we need each other. This becomes evident to elders when they are able to accept help from others.
Both Fowler (1981) and Erikson (1986) point out the importance of the early life in establishing the foundation of the child's perceptions of self and the world. Along with these impressions, each individual establishes what will be the beginnings of a spiritual life that will grow and develop during the life cycle.

The following memories show how the women in this study perceived themselves in their early childhood. Besides the impact of family and friends, most of them indicated that their early church experiences and their families' attitudes toward religious beliefs and practices had a strong influence upon them.

Early Memories: Events, Family, and Friends

All of the narrators recalled that their family atmospheres were very nurturing for them. The environments in which they grew up seemed happy and supportive, and they were given the message that they were special and important.

Doris told me that she had a "wonderful family" with four older brothers. The oldest was 14 years older than she, and the youngest six years older. She described her mother and father as "very caring." "We lived in a tiny town, and all the people were our aunts and uncles, not really, but courtesy." Doris remembered that her older brothers were married when she was small and had children
of their own. "That was a wonderful thing. I enjoyed my nieces and nephews so much. It really was an extended family and still is." Doris and her husband emphasized this family strength with their own children. "Our family hangs together," supporting one another, she said.

Sarah recalled that it was her mother who was nurturing. "My mother really enjoyed being with us, and we did lots of activities together." Sarah told of making a doll house and furniture with her mother and sisters and of traveling to Florida to visit her grandparents:

The cottage was on a beautiful fresh water lake where we learned to swim, row the boat, and enjoy the beautiful pine trees, birds, and orange trees. I loved the sound of the wind through the pine needles. It was so peaceful and yet powerful. We would sit in the orange and tangerine trees and eat the fruit. Many of my happiest childhood memories are of my visits there.

Sarah also recounted a childhood friendship with time spent in her friend's backyard playhouse, where the two of them spent hours after school, uninterrupted by outsiders.

Diana realized as she got older what a strong influence her mother had upon her life, as did Sarah. Diana told her story as follows:

The older I get the more I really appreciate what a totally fabulous mother she was and how much she gave to me. I have become my mother. I'm so pleased and so proud, because she didn't graduate from grade school, but she had an excellent vocabulary that exceeded mine by tenfold at this point. I used to make fun of her as a kid, reading with her dictionary. She made the point that there is a difference between education and sense. I thank her for that.
It was Suzanne's father that was very important in her life. She recalled, "I simply adored my dad. To me God and my father could have been the same person. I just worshipped him." Suzanne's mother died of influenza when she was 12, and her father was close to death too at that time. She wanted to do anything to "help my dad, make things easier for him." That was "really important to me." During the influenza epidemic and after her mother's death, neighbors and relatives helped to care for the children in Suzanne's family. Even though they were not always together, Suzanne developed a strong sense of belonging and caring from her extended family in her early life.

Jane also described her early family life in a very positive way. "I had good parents and grandparents," she said. Then she added:

I lived with very kind people. No one ever mistreated me, except if you want to call my mother very dictatorial. But that was fine with me most of the time. She was usually right.

Like Doris, Joyce said, "I had a wonderful family." Her parents "made each one of us feel that we were very special. And my brothers always treated me special, too." Joyce recalled childhood as "a very happy time when everybody was good to everybody else."

Joyce remembered when she went out to dinner with her father and they stopped at a flower stand. "My father stopped and bought a bunch of violets and pinned them over a gray muff I was wearing. The little thoughtful things
that my parents did for us made us feel really appreciate-
ed." Joyce's family went hiking and camping together. "It was a very happy child life."

Anna, too, appreciated her family beginnings and spoke of them as the strong "underpinnings of all my life." She described her family relationships as very good. "It has given me the courage to go ahead and do things with self-confidence. I felt I was worth something and had people on my side."

Like Suzanne, Elva's mother died when she was young, but Elva, as the youngest, was alone much of the time with her dad. The family lived on a farm where there was always work to do. "I don't remember my parents saying you have to do this or that. We knew the work had to be done." The older siblings were out of the home when Elva's mother died, so just her father and she were at home.

I was very, very close to my dad. He used to say that every step I took I was one right in back of him. I was an outdoors person like he was, and he taught me a lot of things. I became very independent.

Elva reported that all the members of her family had good relationships with one another. She went on to tell of a brother that was closest to her in age. "My youngest brother was my pet and my joy, and he used to do things for me and with me that no one else did."

These women did not have only idyllic memories of childhood. They also spoke of sibling rivalries, having little money for frills, and working long hours, but these
difficulties were part of the bonding and learning how to help each other. But their general impressions and attitudes about these times are the caring, loving, and nurturing that each narrator had, which built up a storehouse of memories to draw on at times that call for extra strength and courage in their lives today. Family members were dedicated to one another, disciplined with love and moral rules. The atmosphere built trust among them. In most cases they were deeply rooted in a church background.

The memories that endure in the minds of elders carry special weight for the meaning of life (Bianchi, 1982). We are our memories. They enable us to have an identity and shape as we change and become new over and over again during a lifetime (Fischer, 1985). We always know that somewhere inside is that little girl reading *Aesop's Fables* with her grandmother, helping her father plant corn seeds, reciting her multiplication tables to her mother, or talking to a lady bug on the lilac bush.

**Early Church Memories**

Most of the women reported that church life was very important in early childhood. Jane remembered that she went to sunrise services, even though her parents didn't attend church. When she was a sophomore in high school she decided to look for a church on her own.

I got the notion that I should have a little bit of religious background since my parents weren't
doing anything about it. The Presbyterians had a girl's choir, so that is where I gravitated.

Her parents came to hear her sing. Later she met her future husband who was Catholic. For Jane the Catholic church satisfied her needs more than the Protestant. "But I am not wholly Catholic either, because I will toss my head and say 'no' to the parts that don't fit me." She has continued to be active in the Catholic church since her marriage and finds it fulfilling.

Nettie went to a Congregational church with her family where she sang in the choir and attended a church school class. Of her experiences in the class she said:

We hated to miss church school. One of the things our teacher did was have a birthday cake for everyone. It became such a big class that she had a cake once a month for everybody whose birthday was in that month. We loved her and I think we learned a lot about the Bible.

Sarah remembered going regularly to the Presbyterian Sunday school, where her mother was active as a teacher.

As a child,

I went to church because I was expected to. Then as a young adult I continued to go out of habit, not because I felt a closeness to God. I enjoyed the music and the reverent quiet more than anything.

Diana also was expected to go to Sunday school unless she was sick. Her mother took her to an African-Methodist-Episcopal church.

My mother said, "You go to Sunday school or you go nowhere." When I was about ten I had a friend who was Presbyterian. I'd alternate going to my church and hers. I didn't see the difference.
When Diana's family moved next door to a Baptist minister, the two of them got into theology discussions. Diana told me:

When he was 65 he went to the University of Chicago to learn Hebrew so he could to read the Bible in its original form. He had this real old dictionary with thin paper, leather bound. He would let me use it. He told me not to lick my fingers when I touched it. He didn't have children and was quite indulgent. One day we were talking and I kept questioning him, asking him how do you know that. Finally he said, "go home you little heathen." I was pushing him beyond the point where you can rationally explain things.

For awhile Diana lost track of the minister, but after 20 years he called her. He asked what her religious affiliation was and when she said, "none," he replied, "I've thought about you a lot over the years." Diana went on to say:

He had decided that I was a humanist and that my problem had been that I approached religion on an intellectual basis. I said that I always thought I should be able to understand. You go so far and then you hit this wall. And he said, "No, that is where the mysteries are."

In Suzanne's family grace was said before meals and devotionals in the evening. "My dad would read from the Bible, and we'd all get down on our knees by our chairs. But we never did that again after my mother's death. We were separated as a family." Suzanne also recalls her first experiment with prayer. "I always said prayers before we went to bed. But when I knew that my mother was dying, I really prayed that she wouldn't die, but she did." Despite her mother's death, Suzanne has continued to pray
all her life and search for a closer relationship with God. There were community churches in the small towns where she lived. She said,

I've just been in the church all my life--Sunday school, Sunday school teaching, Christian endeavor work, helping groups, taking part in the work, not always happily, the way things go.

Other women expressed this feeling of always being "in the church." Joyce noted that her father was an Episcopalian clergyman in Canada. "If there wasn't an Episcopal church we went to other churches. I think my family and friends were what I paid most attention to, not the church."

Anna also has spent her whole life in the church. Her grandfather and several uncles were ministers. Her parents were active in church activities, including the choir, so it seemed "natural" to Anna that she would go too.

We were not forced to go to church, but we always went to Sunday school with a vacation in August. I went before the session all by myself when I was 10, and I was accepted into the church.

Anna married a minister of a large Presbyterian church when his wife died. She had been his secretary. The year after their marriage, he was called to the faculty of a Presbyterian seminary in California, where Anna was "a very young, inexperienced bride and faculty wife and had a wonderful time." She has been a member of eight Presbyterian churches.

Elva, too, grew up in a strong Christian family. She told me that the family got together for breakfast to read
the Bible and have prayers. Her father was English and felt very strongly that they had to gather as a family at least once a day.

In our rural area there were not many churches, so we had to depend on the evangelists that came through. They used to preach at the local schoolhouse, and different families would invite them home for dinner, which Elva's mother did.

It wasn't until I went away to high school that I went to a Baptist church with my classmates. I was baptized there and participated in their activities. But what my father taught me was the most important.

All of the women except Joanne received strong church and religious beginnings within their families. Most of Joanne's schooling was in secular schools, but for two years she attended a famous missionary school run by an American Christian mission. "They didn't force us to study religion. Some of the missionaries, usually women, tried to get us to go to evening prayer. There were some schoolmates who were very religious." In this school the students were pressured to study hard and be good. Even though Joanne did not receive any religious training, she received very strong moral and ethical values from her family and the schools she attended.

These strong beginnings have played a prominent role in the women's lives. They rely on these underpinnings and draw from their faith as they search for meaning today. Their families and early religious experiences are the
building blocks for what has developed in their spiritual lives since childhood.

**Lasting Impressions of Disturbing Events**

Memories can be both disturbing and joyful, painful and satisfying. Each person's memories are unique and sacred. They retrace our journey through time and our search for who we are. Particularly as we get older we ask ourselves questions about the significance of our lives. Does my life have meaning and purpose? Why was I born?Was it all worth the effort? Have I made a difference, a contribution? By remembering, we can see that our lives have a pattern, a shape, which we can put into perspective. It helps us to accept what was, what cannot be changed, and what we can do in the time remaining on this earth.

In addition to early family life and religious beginnings there were events that left lasting impressions on the lives of the narrators. These events gave meaning beyond their families. The women needed to stretch themselves and reach out into the world. They found new understandings and a wider perspective by which to value what is important. The stretching challenged them to grow, learn through experience, and to build on the spiritual dimension.

Before Joanne graduated from secondary school in China, the town was occupied by the Japanese. She told me
of her experiences, how they changed her life dramatically and called forth great strength and determination. The Japanese occupied the area where Joanne attended secondary school.

After that we had to go to college, but there were only two universities left which were not Japanese influenced, one Catholic and one Christian. Some students were forced to learn Japanese. Many universities moved to inland China.

The Pearl Harbor attack was the last year of Joanne's college. "They closed down our university, because it was American. So we had to move to inland China to finish our education. We were refugees in our own country." Joanne described this time in her life as very difficult.

There was a lot of hardship that the people here [in the United States] probably wouldn't understand. There was hatred and unhappiness. It was the first time that my fellow schoolmates and I actually left home.

Traveling was difficult during this period, too. Sometimes Joanne was forced to walk, take the train, or use "a land vehicle pulled by laborers." The roads were poor. It took her 40 days to climb mountains "much higher than the Cascades" on the journey to her university. When the Japanese surrendered, Joanne returned to her home town and was reunited with her family.

Joanne still values education highly and feels that one should go to great lengths to get it. Her determination to follow through despite great hardships makes her a stronger person today. She takes pride in her achievements.
Doris also spoke of World War II when she was a young mother with two small children. Her husband was stationed in Chicago before he was called for foreign duty. In preparation he was given a yellow fever vaccine.

Unfortunately they gave the men the wrong stuff and it was live. Several of the men in his unit died, and all of them were very ill. My husband had a reaction and that was the beginning of his death actually. He was never very well the rest of his life.

Even though Doris's husband didn't die at that point, the experience made a big impact upon her family. Doris said, "Wars are disturbing to me. I hate wars. I think I've been through five." She was widowed last year after a long and happy marriage. The strength that Doris found to carry her through this vivid experience made her a stronger person in later life. It was the beginning of her awareness of the tragedy of wars.

Joyce recalled that World War I ended on her 14th birthday. Her father was in the service in California for six months and her family moved there to be with him. When he went to Siberia the family moved back to Oregon so that her mother could attend college. "She thought she could keep our family together and also go to school. That was disruptive but not unhappy." Her mother had never been to college because Joyce's grandmother thought only her sons needed to go. "When mother was 16 she started teaching school and then at 18 she met and married my dad. She was as well educated and knowledgeable a person as I ever knew
because she constantly read." If a library didn't exist where they lived, Joyce's mother started one.

Joyce spoke of her mother's strength and determination during difficult times. Later her mother was able to help her husband, a doctor, in his laboratory. Because of her dedication to learning Joyce also values education, and she and her children all graduated from college.

Doris told of the Depression beginning in 1929 that had a lasting impression on her life.

In our little town we had so many people without food, and we ran a soup kitchen out of our house. My mother made huge kettles of soup that were always on the stove. Anyone was given as much hot soup as he wanted and as much bread and cheese as he could eat. It really impressed me that people were hungry. Also it was a period of stress for my father who was trying to keep a business going and not having any income. But he and mom fed everybody in the town who was hungry. Daddy would buy food by the carload. And then at night my parents would pack apple baskets of food, and after midnight they would go out and drop them on people's porches so there wouldn't be any thank yous.

Doris also remembered that her mother carried a tape measure in her pocket and whenever she saw a child who was ragged or needed shoes, she would go home and make up a set of clothing and put it on the porch along with the apple box. Daddy arranged with the school principal that no child would ever need shoes or glasses or school supplies.

When the Depression was over Doris's father was broke, too, but he had a business that held together and a loyal work force. "I didn't know that there were poor people before that."
Doris remembered laughing at a little girl in fourth grade who came to school one day in a pair of high heels. "The teacher just bent my ears in, and she explained to me that this child didn't have any shoes. And I was just heart-broken. That was when the shoe program started."

Doris went home and told her father about the incident. "I was told never to turn away anybody who was hungry and never to give them money unless there was real reason to, but to feed them."

Doris was impressed by the values of caring for others because of her parents' dedication during this difficult time. She has continued to care for others all her life. It is a part of what gives her life meaning and purpose.

Diana was very young during the Depression, but she felt the effect upon her family. She was born in 1931 after the banks had crashed. Her mother believed that education is "better than money in the bank, something no one can take from you. She planted the seed that we should get an education." Diana was the only one in her family who finished college. She described their situation:

There were a lot of homes better off financially than us, but my mother still had books. I loved our encyclopedias because they had colored plates in the back of different animals. They were probably the cheapest ones in the world, but I read them through, book by book. I think it has influenced me all of my life.

Diana still spends much of her time reading and does not consider books a luxury. In her teaching and contact with
young people she has helped others see the value of education, too.

Seven of the women talked of illness and death in their early lives and how it influenced them. I have already mentioned the deaths of two of the mothers and the sickness of a young husband, but there were additional cases that had a profound influence upon the narrators. Nettie's childhood was disrupted by her own experience with diphtheria when she was in kindergarten and her house was quarantined.

We had a big yellow sign on the house that said "diphtheria" so people wouldn't come in. My sister and younger brother had to stay in different houses with friends. My mother took care of me. I was in an upstairs room and had an angel from our Christmas tree bouncing on a rubber band above me. But we had to burn it when I was over the diphtheria, like everything else that had anything to do with me. I remember the painful shots I had in my back.

Although she was well cared for, Nettie lost many of her childhood possessions and had a sense of isolation during her illness.

Joyce recalled diphtheria in a different context. For her it was watching her parents care for others. Her mother had studied bacteriology in college, so she helped Joyce's father in his medical practice, using the microscope and identifying disease organisms.

Mother really helped save a lot of lives. My father had some patients that he thought had diphtheria, but he couldn't tell for sure without culturing throat specimens. The electricity went out at midnight in our town, since the mill that furnished it closed then. There wasn't an incu-
bator or any way to keep the sputum warm, so dad put it in a test tube under his arm. He kept it that way to develop the bacteria. When mother looked at the culture and found it was diphtheria, they ordered the antitoxin from Portland. It got there in time so nobody else died.

In 1922 there was an influenza epidemic that changed Suzanne's family life. They were living in a small town in Idaho at the time.

My mother became really ill with the flu. Then my dad who was a teacher came home from school and just went upstairs to bed. So I knew he was sick too. The neighbors and the doctor took charge, and the five of us were passed around among the neighbors. My mother and dad went to the hospital. Mother may have lived a week or so, and our dad wasn't expected to live either. But I heard him say many years later that he just kept telling himself, "I will not give up. I will not give up." He felt so responsible for the five of us. He was in the hospital from March until May.

Of her mother's death when Suzanne was 12, she went on to say:

Somebody made a phone call to the place where I was staying and asked me to round up all the others and bring them to the hospital. They had taken my dad's bed into my mother's room, and the kids were all lined up and told to give her a kiss. We gave her a kiss and went out, and she died shortly after that. The local doctor had brought a specialist from Spokane to see her, but there wasn't anything they could do for her.

Even though there was great stress on the family during the crisis, they helped one another and were supported by relatives and friends. Suzanne says that today the family is very close and continues to help one another even though they live far apart.
Suzanne also spoke of her own health difficulties when she was a young adult. At 19 she experienced "terrible chest pains." It was pleurisy which turned into pneumonia. "I lost a lot of weight, and I really looked horrible," she said. To aid in her recovery Suzanne went to Eugene to live with a good friend who taught Christian education in the public schools. Suzanne took classes at a Bible college and slowly recovered. She worked as a housekeeper, as well as for her room and board.

This experience, along with the influenza, put great hardship on the family, but also helped to solidify Suzanne's need to build on her Christian faith. Her strong church background gave her strength and also helped her to grow during this time in her life.

Some of the narrators mentioned personal characteristics that influenced them. Nettie, Sarah, and Anna felt uncomfortable being shy as children, although each was given the impression that she could accomplish what she wanted in life. The sense of achievement was evident as each of the women talked. Their families allowed them to choose their own paths of development, and they had strong enough beginnings to do that. Doris, Joanne, Suzanne, Elva, and Jane said they were quite independent at an early age, making decisions for themselves in spite of what they felt they "should" do.

For instance, Jane was told by a high school counselor that she couldn't make it in college, but Jane said, "I'm
sorry, but I will." Her mother had raised her with the notion that she would go to college and she believed it. She was not influenced by the "professional" opinion, and she may have tried harder because of it. Jane worked in a music store and taught herself bass and played in the orchestra. She was determined to do what she felt was important.

Elva was not deterred at 8 1/2 years of age when her mother died and she took over the cooking. It never occurred to her that she couldn't do what was needed, and she had faith that she was equal to the task.

Four of the women mentioned becoming aware of race and poverty as they grew up. Diana spoke of being perceived differently because she was black.

I was amazed at how much people assumed they knew about me from looking at me--an ascribed status rather than achieved. It made no difference who or what, but they looked at me. I know nothing when I look at people. I know more by talking to someone on the phone. What is a face with eyes and nose? It's what's inside that comes across to me. But I have encountered people all my life who will assume all sorts of things from looking at me, primarily because I am black. That seems to override being a woman. Now getting old has overridden that!

Suzanne also experienced the narrowness of others when she was working with poor Mexicans and Blacks in Texas at a community house sponsored by a church women's group.

One of the church women said to me one day, "To most of us you are just one of the people that you are working with. We will never ask you to our homes." And they didn't. Because I worked with low income Mexicans and Negroes I was just one of that group. The church women sponsored the program, but they wanted somebody else to do
the work. So I rounded up volunteers, but there was never a volunteer from the board.

Jane said she learned an important lesson in junior high about what was important to her.

As a logger's daughter I was considered lowly by the natives, but it didn't bother me a whole lot. One of the girls that was particularly snobbish moved the same year I did to the big high school. She didn't know how to play ping pong and didn't have these rangy sort of interests and busyness that I did. We had learned to make our own play in the forest. I was very curious and loved trying out new things. She didn't and she relied on her special status. I became the one she learned from.

Having compassion for others is something Joyce learned from her family.

One of the things that bothered me was that a little girl used to come out at recess and meet me as I went down to the post office to get the mail. One day she said, "Did you miss me yesterday? I wasn't here." And I said, "Yes, I missed you, but I thought you were probably playing with somebody." And she said, "No, mother washed my dress and it didn't get dry." And I realized how some people had to live with as little as they had. That really bothered me.

It is still important to Joyce to help others in need. Even in her eighties she is able to do this through her church activities. She also takes care of a neighborhood child when his mother is working.

Sarah remembered being upset in junior high school when the girls got into "nitty gritty fights." "I didn't like all the peer pressure, chasing boys, parties, and talking about others behind their backs. That always bothered me." Sarah noticed at an early age how people could be unkind to one another. She has worked as a teach-
er with children and parents to help them learn good communication skills.

Dealing with broader issues, Anna described the world as "intractable."

We have this evil that keeps going on and problems rising up which we don't seem to be able to solve. I can remember the first time it occurred to me--I think it was someone speaking at the church who said we are coming to the point where we have problems that we are not going to be able to solve. In the first part of this century there was a very optimistic spirit. If we just work hard enough we are going to be able to lick all these problems. Then in the 1930s and during World War II people began to realize that the problems were much bigger and more deeply rooted than we ever imagined. We just couldn't solve them all.

This is a continuing concern to Anna. "There is no place to go that you don't have to struggle with something. You have to shut out some of the problems in order to survive." She sees that she can only do so much, but that doesn't mean she will ever stop trying to help others.

These varied experiences gave new meaning to the women when they were young. Their perspectives of their surroundings expanded, and they gained a broader view of themselves as members of their communities. These women were influenced by wars, sickness, death, the Depression, poverty, racism, narrow-mindedness, unkindness, and other social and personal problems.

Despite the hardships, or possibly because of them, they developed compassion, inner strength, caring for others, acceptance, perseverance, and a greater understand-
ing of the world. Their families and faiths played a large part in modeling these positive traits during stressful circumstances.

It is by looking back and accepting difficult times along with the satisfying ones that we can face the future. As a result, we are not only able to survive hardship, but we grow as a result of it. We realize that circumstances and people change. We can grow spiritually as a result.

A Sense of Meaning in Young Adulthood

Life is composed of flowing energy and experience. A sense of meaning begins at a very young age and hopefully is nurtured so that it expands and grows throughout the life span. The spiritual life is an ebb and flow, characterized by stops and spurts, sometimes contracting, other times expanding. What we experience as we travel through life becomes a part of us, if not in a conscious way, then as part of our attitudes, ideals, values and so on. It is difficult to pinpoint or recall the many influences that have contributed to the self at the end of a long life. But often we can look back and recall experiences that have molded our journey.

In early adulthood many people begin to look consciously for a sense of meaning for the first time, living away from families, continuing educations, making new friends, making career and marriage choices, and becoming
independent. As the narrators looked back on these times of transition they found their values grounded in early childhood, extending into old age, giving them strength and meaning today— all part of the tapestry of their lives.

Elva decided in young adulthood that she wanted to be a nurse. She felt that "one is given certain talents and expected to use them. I felt that nursing and helping others were my talents." These values are still very important to Elva. "I don't think that my values have changed, but I have added to them."

Suzanne became involved in social service work as a young adult. As part of her degree in graduate school she enrolled in a social service minor and began working in Texas at a community house that was similar to Hull House in Chicago. In Corpus Christi the community house was sponsored by the Council of Church Women.

The woman who was chairman of the committee turned out to be a lifesaver. Her house was open to me all the time. We did things with kids, like craft work and games. I'd be leaning over and helping them with something and water would be dripping off the end of my nose. It was so hot! My social service years at the University were just books, just reading. And there I was dumped into this. All that had been done at that house prior to the time I got there was distributing used clothing and bread for people who needed it. Bakeries left bread and people sent clothing.

Suzanne worked at a number of social service jobs after this initial experience. In each one it was the job that was important, not the pay.
On her own at 16 with both parents dead, Diana found survival the most important issue in her life. This was complicated by the problems of racial prejudice she experienced when looking for a job to support her college education.

We were poor but we were also taught that there was no such thing as "can't." "Can't died trying to chase couldn't," my mother used to say. So it never dawned on me that there was anything I couldn't do. So I started college with a grand inheritance of $1,000 from my mother. Even in 1948 that was nothing. I lived frugally on it for two years. Then I realized that the desire for an education was not enough. So I quit college and looked for a job. These were the early days of the fair employment practices. My mother had only one discussion with me about race when I was two. I had a white playmate and asked my mother what was wrong with her because she didn't look like me. My mother said, "When God made the world He made all things different--like flowers in a garden." So I've always thought of racial differences as flowers in a garden--no big deal. But I had no preparation for the realities of racial prejudice. It didn't bother me that I'm dark so why did it bother anyone else? It was only after unsuccessfully looking for a job that I worked as a maid. Then someone told me that Commonwealth Edison was in trouble with the feds for violating their employment practices. I was hired there as the third black person on the floor where I worked with about 150 people.

Diana spoke of the importance of hard work, education, honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, and compassion for others that she learned from her mother.

I got some inklings of compassion because while we were poor my mother would always manage to encounter someone who was more poor. I remember one particular occasion when I had two dress-up dresses for the winter--a red and green wool plaid dress and also a rust-colored velveteen dress with a faille collar with hand-crocheted lace. I loved those dresses. One day after school my mother said, "Oh Baby, I gave your wool
dress to a little kid on the street that had only a cotton dress on and no heavy coat." I was furious. Her logic was you can only wear one dress at a time.

Diana is concerned that we are "retarded socially" and do not care for one another. "We are so afraid of strangers that we kill other people's spirits in such subtle ways."

In young adulthood teaching was the most meaningful part of Sarah's life. "In first and second grades the children were so fresh and playful and interested in reading. I was always amazed at their sense of humor, cheerfulness, and eagerness about life." It was during those years that Sarah felt her creativity expanding. "Every day was different and challenging when I was working with children."

Giving birth and raising three children have been the most important part of Sarah's life so far.

The pregnancy and birth process were so mysterious and marvelous to me. As I look back on the experience I see it as a gift from God. Nursing my babies—-the closeness, reverence, and contentment of both of us was sacred.

Sarah found herself growing along with her children.

Sarah said that some of her values have changed and expanded as she has aged. "Life is not as simple as I once thought. A wider view has gradually replaced my narrow one of survival." When she was young Sarah didn't value her family as she does today. "The jealousies and disagreements I had with my sisters don't seem to matter much now."

There were
so many constrictions on who I could be and the pressure to conform was strong. I was so different from my family and early friends. Now that I am aware of that it is easier to choose friends that have the values I hold sacred.

These include "openness, caring, acceptance, forgiveness, listening, compassion, and playfulness." Sarah said love and friendship are "more precious to me now than they ever were when I was younger."

Doris also spoke of family as she recalled this period in her life. Her husband and children were at the center of her life. In particular her husband had an influence on her values.

My husband changed my values more than anybody else. If I ever was a snob, I've had it knocked out of me. I thought money was important, but it's not. After I was married and lived in Milwaukee and Chicago, I was in a tight little social circle. In a few years with my husband I could talk with anybody in the Orient, China, and all.

Like Doris, falling in love and family gave spiritual meaning to Joyce's life as a young adult.

I don't think that I had any renewed spiritual interest as a young adult until I had children. Then my spiritual values changed greatly, and I began to realize that I had to dig a little deeper.

Joyce found that she needed great strength to carry her through the death of her son when he was in his twenties.

I think when you reach the bottom in some area, you have to have someone to help you. You realize that you have to have a higher person. Strength within you doesn't come just from you.

As a young adult Jane became aware of her parents' dynamics and worked to change their model of parenting with
her own children. Her mother was very domineering, and her father "heroically" adapted himself to it. For Jane, however, the effect was hurtful. "Mom carried a tremendous amount of responsibility growing up with eight children under her, a father with the same dominant personality, and a mother who caved in completely and had heart attacks."

Jane resolved it would be different with her own children.

I wanted to foster independence and not influence my children to be what I wanted. With my children I had tremendous cooperation from my husband in this regard. He is diplomatic and it allowed me to be the nurturing one which I was naturally, following in my dad's footsteps instead of my mom's.

Joanne's values were derived from the Chinese culture. Working hard, getting a good education, and being useful in society are of prime importance, along with self-respect, self-esteem, and personal dignity. Racial and national dignity in the face of the Japanese invasion taught Joanne that Chinese people need to prove that they are good. She pointed out that it is different in America.

Here you welcome all sorts of people, and they make it their home. There is a feeling of freedom. But for the Chinese wherever you go, you are Chinese by race and you live up to those standards and traditions.

In contrast to Joanne, Anna learned from her family, not the culture, that she could accomplish what she chose to do in life. Anna felt that there were many choices and opportunities open for her.

I was rather shy in some ways, but also rambunctious. My eighth grade teacher asked us one day out of the blue sky, "What do you want to be when
you grow up?" I heard myself say, "I want to be a writer or an author." And I realized that's really what I wanted to do. I was impressed by the fact that my father had written a book, and it was in the book shelf with his name on it. So I felt it simply could be done.

While in college Anna got a job in journalism to support herself. She went on to publish her writing, first children's fiction and then publications for various church denominations. Writing is still important to Anna.

As the women matured they found "the outlines of their lives were a little more clear," as Anna said. They came to accept what they could and could not accomplish. Their tolerance for others made them "more forgiving and willing to accept differences." In some instances the women related specific times that caused them to rethink what was important in life, such as for Doris, Sarah, and Jane. For some (Joanne, Joyce, Anna, Elva, and Diana), young adulthood was a time to solidify and to expand on what was already important to them. They saw themselves as individuals with strong grounding on which to make choices and grow.
The responsibilities of middle adulthood bring changes and transitions that require adjustment, strength, and courage. Building on what has gone before and mitigating or discarding what does not fit our needs and the needs of those around us are important steps in successful adulthood. Our spiritual lives can be a vital part of this sifting process.

Sometimes it is easier to make changes when we are forced to do so through situations thrust upon us. Without the status quo to rely on, we must make decisions about new directions and find new meaning in our lives. Role models may be significant at these times, lending support and guidance as we make choices in our own personal context.

Midlife gives us an opportunity for new awareness. In his discussion of midlife, Bianchi (1982) writes of Beatrice L. Neugarten's "inner-orientation" as a "passive mastery of the environment in contrast to the active striving of youth" (p. 35). Midlife is a time to assess our inner needs through introspection and self-definition, looking toward the self for guidance rather than to others. Hopefully we don't look for approval from the outside as we did in our youth.
With the many demands of adulthood, that is, making a living, raising a family, and community responsibilities, it may be difficult to pursue the inner journey. We are deterred by a culture that is telling us to produce and be externally active, honoring social commitments. On the other hand, there is a natural tendency to move inward.

Bianchi (1982) states, "a first challenge on the inner road is confrontation with personal finitude." By that he is referring not only to our eventual physical death, but the "demise of meaning and value" (pp. 38-39). We must leave the dreams of youth behind and discover a new vision for our journey. The death of one part of life brings with it the birth of another. This may mean risking our faith as we have known it, coming to terms with our limitations and weaknesses, changing our attitudes, or letting go of the past.

Adulthood gives us the unique opportunity to enrich our inner lives and become more contemplative. This contemplation fosters alternate ways of experiencing the meaning of life. Aging, with its accompanying threats of decline and despair, can be "a timeless opportunity to enhance the basic worth of the self" (Bianchi, 1982, pp. 56-57).

Learning to develop and appreciate the value of the inner life in adulthood gives strength and purpose to the transition into old age. Those who wait until old age may be unable to muster the interest or strength to grow spiri-
tually, therefore missing the beauty and positive aspects of elderhood.

Part II includes some aspects that the women felt were important to their development in mid-life. In this study, middle adulthood refers to approximately ages 30 through 60 years, but does not rigidly adhere to these ages since turning points may happen at any age. Because events overlap with other periods in the life span, it is difficult to delineate exactly. Themes blend and spill over from one period to another and may begin in childhood and end in old age. They may flow from one point to another in the absence of abrupt beginnings and endings, and sometimes the personal impact of an event is not immediately felt.

Turning Points

I asked each woman about the people, places, and events which they considered turning points in their lives, points that were challenges, strong forces for change and/or growth. These can happen at any time in the life cycle, but they are included in middle adulthood because that is when many occurred.

Turning points generally call for new directions, requiring more energy than maintaining the status quo. Some events, such as leaving home, going to college, marriage, the birth of children and grandchildren, a new job, and travel, may be planned for and anticipated with joy. But
others, such as divorce, death of a loved one, moving to retirement housing, loss of mobility, and illness are losses viewed with sadness and may be very disruptive during the grieving process.

Regardless of the origin of turning points, the changes cause some stress and command our attention. What we do during these times determines what we learn about life and how we grow from the experiences. Our actions and reactions often facilitate the development of a deeper spiritual life in order to cope with the transitions. One of the women indicated that turning points were times when she needed more strength within and guidance from a higher power. Another said that she grew the most spiritually during the turning points in her life.

The narrators learned about the value of education at an early age and expected to attend college after high school. For most of the women going to college meant leaving home for the first time. It was a planned event, a time that was part of the individual growth pattern. The women went to college to expand their knowledge, learn about the wider world, and become independent of their families of origin, but it was also a time of personal tension. Diana and Suzanne needed to find jobs to cover expenses, stretching out their college years. Others worked too, but only part-time to supplement the family's contribution. For some, the family was able to pay the full amount. Eventually each woman obtained a degree.
The women who went to graduate school were independent by that time and were able to take care of their own expenses. In each of these cases it was a period of growth and achievement, leading to a desired job or attaining a goal. But the experiences were also stressful and difficult at times.

The transitions from being part of one's family of origin to college to marriage to continuing education had a strong effect on most of the women. For six of the narrators, marriage took place after college or soon after some job experience. But Doris married at 19, and Suzanne and Elva married in later adulthood. On the other hand, Diana had several relationships with men, but chose to remain single.

Elva described a series of turning points in her life, all involving education for her career and changing jobs. First she was a nurse in a Girl Scout camp, then a public health nurse, and finally a physical therapist. It was to the latter position that Elva felt she was called. In physical therapy she worked exclusively with children with cerebral palsy. Eventually, Elva came to Oregon and set up a school for "crippled children" in Eugene. "There was one lady I met in medical school who shoved me in the right direction. She planted the seed, although I didn't know it at the time." It wasn't until years later that Elva realized how she was guided into the specialty that was to be her life's calling.
Sarah was in her fifties when she returned to college after teaching and raising a family as a young woman. With her children grown and on their own, Sarah found herself unable to feel useful and find meaning in her life. She knew that something was lacking. It was through writing, religious studies, and gerontology classes that she discovered untapped creativity and direction. "My writing concerns spirituality and how I look at life. I write mainly from my own experiences, and have written a lot about my childhood and how it feels to grow old." Sarah finds that getting her thoughts down on paper is a good vehicle for thinking them through, clarifying and expanding them.

Sometimes I am surprised when I read what I have written. I wonder if this really came from me. That is the exciting part about writing. Maybe some day I can publish some of my work.

Sarah feels that her studies and writing have led her "in the direction that God intended."

Doris also went to college in middle adulthood. As a young woman she married before she finished college, and it wasn't until 23 years later at age 42 that she received her college degree.

Anna's husband was a Presbyterian minister who was a widower much older than she. As a result Anna had two stepchildren that were about her age. Marriage for Anna was a positive turning point and brought a special richness and meaning to her life. "My husband was a scholar and a
very wise person. His sermons and writings and seeing how he lived were a great influence on me."

Other narrators spoke of changing residences and traveling as points that changed the directions of their lives. Suzanne moved around the western U. S. most of her middle years, doing various social service jobs. Each position brought with it new insight and understanding of the way people live and work together, particularly the poor. But Suzanne became frustrated with her life. She related the following concerning her social service jobs:

Working with the migrants I was so uncomfortable with myself, this constant criticism of myself, the feeling that I was not doing enough. We should have been fighting for the rights of these workers. So I began to have difficulty speaking, and I was doing lots of public speaking. When my voice began to break I just gave up. My internal pressures had built up over time. When I felt unhappy about something, about a job, I just walked out of it. And then I walked into something else, became frustrated, a series like this. And all this time I was pleading with the Lord for something. I can't tell you now what I was pleading for, but probably for a better hold on myself and a little more imagination.

Suzanne was burned out from her social work. It was then that she lived with her sister and went to a therapist for several years. "To this day when I am under pressure and uneasy my voice still gives me away."

Suzanne described her relationship with God when she was switching jobs frequently. "I was asking for God's guidance all the way along. I can't say I ever was sure that I really felt it. It just seems to me that I had gone ahead and made up my own mind." Many of the jobs were ones
that people talked her into doing, not ones that she chose to do. "It was a crazy mix, a real mix," Suzanne said of her middle adult years.

Suzanne turned her back on her professional life. She met her future husband when she worked as a cook for a wilderness organization. "I got signed on with a man who had wilderness trips during the spring and summer. I was camping about nine months of the year, living, sleeping in a sleeping bag. My future husband signed on for one of the trips." They were both 50 when they married. "For 10 years we spent our summers in the high country, and in the winters we lived alone in a little town close to the park headquarters where my husband worked as a ranger." Marriage changed Suzanne's life, for which she has never been sorry. It seemed to bring stability and purpose that had been lacking before.

When she was about 32 Diana met a man who changed her life significantly. He was a wealthy man in the jewelry business who was considerably older than Diana.

He had a German accent, and we shared values that you could not believe. I assumed, because I grew up with World War II propaganda about Germans, that they were these horrible innately brutal, cruel people. So it never dawned on me that such a sweet, wonderful, compassionate person could be a German. And I assumed that he was Jewish. At one point I said something about being German and Jewish. I was shocked when he said that he had been raised Lutheran. I think what is significant in my getting to know him was that I learned about my own bigotry. It was a very freeing experience.
Being African-American, Diana had already experienced bi-
gotry, but from this man she learned that it isn't always
something that other people have. Diana was very close to
this man for eight years, and when he died he left her a
small trust fund so that she could go back to college and
earn her doctorate degree.

For Doris acceptance of others came through the opport-
tunity to travel. It affected how she looked at and ac-
cepted other people that she met around the world. Until
three years before her husband died, they traveled for 27
years around the world six months of every year.

We learned that people are people wherever they
are, whatever color, whatever their religious
beliefs. They are people like you and me, and
they are interested in having a good world for
their children, making friends, sharing customs,
having enough to eat, warm clothes, and a place
to sleep.

Doris' father taught her at a very early age that "it
doesn't matter how much money you have, you need three
meals a day, decent clothes on your back, and a place to
sleep." And he said, "If you are a multimillionaire or
poor you have these same needs and goals. But if you are
poor it is more difficult to obtain them."

Before Anna married she took the opportunity to travel
to Europe, which gave her the feeling of independence and
accomplishment. At 26 she went to England by herself,
which was most unusual at that time. "I went on board a
ship because there wasn't a route flying the Atlantic yet
[1935]. It was a great event. It established the fact that I could do it on my own." Anna rented a bicycle and went on day trips.

I had one perfect sunny day going over the hills in the countryside. The day couldn't have been better in any way. And when I get anxious or depressed about something I just sit down and go over that whole day in detail in my mind.

Anna finds this a comfort to her now that she has problems with mobility.

Another turning point for the narrators focused around health and the deaths of loved ones. Nettie, Elva, Doris, Diana, and Sarah mentioned these specifically as turning points. Anna, Joanne, Jane and Suzanne spoke of death as affecting them deeply.

Diana mentioned her mother's death at several points in her story and how important her mother's influence has been on her life. Her death meant Diana was all alone to support herself at 16 without the guidance of a parent. So it was not only the death of the primary person in Diana's life, it was also that Diana found herself unexpectedly and suddenly on her own.

Elva's husband died eight years after they were married and this brought about abrupt changes in her life. Although they were married a relatively short time, Elva said "we had more than most people have in a lifetime." It was after his death that Elva left Oregon for Las Vegas, where she worked with crippled children.
Joyce was deeply affected by her older son's death when he was only 28. It is still painful for her to talk about it, although it happened over 30 years ago.

A mill had hired my son to help settle a labor dispute in northern California. So they flew him down there. They got as far as Gold Beach and the fog became thick so they landed. And when it was clear again they started out for Eureka, and that's the last anybody ever heard from them. We held out hope for days that the plane would be found, but it never was. It was the worst time in my life.

Another turning point for Joyce was her husband's illness just before he died of Alzheimer's disease.

That made you reach, because you couldn't reach him. He stayed home until the last month. I couldn't even go to the bathroom without taking him. I had some part-time help, but once I left him just a minute to answer the phone and he fell. I had told him to sit still, but he didn't realize he couldn't. I wasn't strong enough to keep him from falling. The doctor said he really should be in a nursing home.

The decision to put her husband into a nursing home was difficult for Joyce. He died at age 80.

An incident in Doris' life helped her realize what she needed to do to help her family. During World War II her husband was very sick and Doris was told that he wouldn't recover. She had two young sons to care for and "not many skills to do it with." Doris had lunch with a woman who changed her outlook on life.

She was just an acquaintance with whom my husband did business on behalf of the army. She fed me a good lunch and absolutely lit into me and turned me up and down because she said I was feeling sorry for myself. She said, "You won't be able to take care of those boys. Nobody will like you when you get out and sing your Jobian song."
was greatly affronted until I got home and had a chance to think about it. I think she was one of the best friends I ever had. She helped me grow up.

The most significant turning points for Sarah were leaving home and going to college, marriage, having children, her father's death, divorce, graduate school, and health problems. When she first left her family of origin she was amazed that all families were not like hers. With the birth of her children she became interested in psychology and "what makes people tick." It was during those early days as a mother that she started to read the old classical novels and then contemporary ones. "I became more aware and tolerant of the differences among people. Novels really fascinated me and opened my eyes."

Sarah's father's death affected her profoundly. "I was not there when he died nor at his memorial service. My mother wanted to get it over quickly. She never liked dealing with sad or painful events." It took Sarah quite awhile, with the help of a counselor, to really move through her father's death and see him as a loving person. "I never really had a close personal relationship with my dad when I was growing up; in fact, I was afraid of him. He had a hard time showing he loved me. It feels good to have worked through that."

Divorce was "the most horrible and devastating experience in my life so far--a crucial turning point," said Sarah. "It was like a nightmare and I thought I wouldn't
survive. The feelings of rejection just invalidated me as a person, and I felt that my soul had actually died." It was when she was first living alone that Sarah had a series of mystical experiences. "They left me knowing absolutely that God is with me at all times and loves me, and that Her love is working through me. I know that God will always love and care for me." Sarah has not only survived, she has become a stronger person. "My spiritual life is very rich now and growing all the time."

Another turning point for Sarah involved her health. "Recently when my life was in such turmoil with the divorce, I developed chronic lymphocytic leukemia." Although it does not require treatment at this early stage, it is still constantly there in the back of her mind. "I do believe that God has more work for me to do in this life. In some ways I am just beginning. So I need to fight to keep as healthy as possible."

Fischer (1985) says that an older woman showed her "how beauty and new life can arise from a positive attitude toward loss" (p. 120). The woman had experienced a severe stroke that limited her mobility, but she was still able to reach out to others by listening and showing love. Opening to the spirit can turn aging into a joyful experience. It "enables us to admit that aging does involve some loss" (p. 121).

Bianchi (1982) notes that personal crises play an important part in the direction of our lives. Our values and
faith can change dramatically when we experience changes that affect us deeply, such as poor health, career disruptions, death of a loved one, and family and personal relationship problems. Bianchi states that the "sense of communication with and continuance with God" (pp. 128-129) were the two qualities that he found in those he interviewed. For this study, seven of the women mentioned that these same qualities sustained them and helped them grow spiritually as a result of crises.

Looking back at life gives a rich perspective to turning points. It is often difficult to tell what influence certain circumstances have on our life's direction when we are experiencing them. Depending on the attitude of the person, even the darkest situations may bring about results that would never have been possible otherwise. The painful and difficult parts of life as well as the peaceful, loving, and joyful parts are important in the creation of each person.

Role Models

People who are effective role models may be teachers, friends, mentors, trusted guides, or listeners. They may impart knowledge, common sense, attitudes, and values, helping others dream their dreams, develop their gifts, all the while holding others' spirits gently.

Dr. C. Rick Snyder is quoted in the University of California at Berkeley Wellness Letter (Where There's Hope,
There's Life, 1992) as saying that "a significant role model is of crucial importance" to children. They "seem to learn hopefulness from a caring adult" who "instructs the child in how to hope" (p. 3). He adds that in learning from mistakes, it is important to recognize that we are using the wrong strategy, not that we have something wrong with us.

Role models can support others in crisis, instruct them in the ways of living that become part of the recipient and, in turn, enrich the giver. Role models learn from their mistakes and can talk about them with others. They are not just people we admire. We admire many people. Role models teach us about life, give us strength and courage, and open new doors that we might not open otherwise. They help us know who we are, and they value us despite our imperfections.

In this section the narrators discuss people that they see as personal role models. The list is diverse—mother, father, brother, grandmother, aunt, daughter, husband, teacher, clergy, friend, co-worker, and doctor. There were over three times as many women mentioned as men. Some spoke of many, others only a few. The role models were often mentioned in other contexts as the narrators told their stories. For instance, a childhood memory, a disturbing event, or a turning point may have included a role model.
Role models were not people who fostered dependence. On the contrary, they were people who nurtured the women's growth toward independence through love, compassion, and understanding. Whatever their position—relative, friend, or professional—the role models were teaching, giving the women courage and strength. The role models were described as real people, not public figures or those just put on a pedestal for admiration. They empowered the women, gave them inspiration and new visions, helping them see new possibilities for themselves and the world.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993) describes her mother as her "spiritual mentor" (pp. 164-165). Her Catholicism was a "balance of serious spirituality and intellectual freedom." Her mother cultivated her "mind, heart and soul through prayer, thought and service." Ruether feels she is "fortunate to have been mothered by one who was touched by the spirit of wisdom." Ruether is a professor of theology and writes on religion and feminist issues.

For Anna family members stood out as role models. Her mother and father were the most influential in the early years. Anna appreciated and agreed with their values and admired the way they lived. "We had a very happy relationship," said Anna of her parents.

Anna described her maternal grandmother as a "strong person who made her own way." She was in the real estate business. As a college-educated woman, rare in those days, she made sure that her children all went to college. Her
grandmother was interested in writing and had quite a few pieces published. Anna has followed in her footsteps.

Like Anna, Sarah's maternal grandmother was an important role model. Having two of her names "gives me strength to not only get through hardships in life, but also to grow spiritually." Sarah remembered that her grandmother collected short sayings and words of wisdom and enjoyed reading books and poetry. "She had a very kind gentle spirit, and I loved her soft lyrical voice. Her laughter was like music to me. It made me feel that everything would work out alright." Sarah considered her grandmother a friend, and she treasured her visits to her grandmother's house in Florida.

She loved nature, especially the birds and majestic trees around her cottage. She used their long pine needles to weave mats. There was a reverence about her—a feeling for the sacredness of all living things.

On one visit Sarah came across a black snake and she was very frightened. But her grandmother explained that "it was her friend, like a pet, that lived under her cottage. I respected that snake and all snakes after that."

Sarah also spoke of her daughter as a role model.

She is a very strong person who does not follow social customs just because that is the way things have been in the past. She acts according to her own convictions.

Sarah feels that she is a real gift.

We have a very open and loving relationship, and she is both a support and encouragement for me. She has a very generous heart and a peaceful spirit.
When she sees something that needs to be done she takes initiative. "She is able to put herself in others' shoes to help them while preserving their dignity. She is my teacher and inspiration."

Anna said that her husband had more influence on her spiritual direction than anybody else. "He was really a very wise man, a wonderful teacher and a wonderful preacher." He was especially interested in psychology in its relation to religion and was one of the pioneers in that field. In his later life he did a lot of lecturing around the country on psychology and religion from a very practical and sensible point of view.

He said that Jesus was the greatest psychologist that ever lived. People used to say that if you were a psychologist you couldn't be a Christian, but he didn't believe that there was a problem between the two.

Joyce also saw family members as role models. Her mother and oldest brother made a big difference in her life.

I didn't ever know a more truly good person than my oldest brother. He always did things without people knowing about it—to help other people—and he was a really wonderful person.

Her brother was a pharmacist who owned a drug store. Whatever he did he did in a very quiet unassuming way, and usually people had no idea what he was doing.

If patients had no money for a prescription they could get one at my brother's pharmacy, because he would always let anybody have a prescription if they needed it and couldn't pay.
He would let children come into his pharmacy after school and read the comics without buying them, just so they could have a warm place to be until their parents came home from work. "My brother had been one of those little boys once, and he was just trying to show his appreciation. He was really an outstanding Christian human being."

Diana realizes today what a strong and positive influence her mother had on her. Also there was her mother's friend called Big Sister. "She was the aunt I never had that I cared about very deeply. She was a substitute mom after my mother died." Big Sister worked as a maid in a hotel. She didn't have much money, but she would sometimes give Diana five or ten dollars. When Diana protested that she didn't need it, Big Sister told her that "sometimes you need to have money for things you don't need." Diana learned compassion from her adopted aunt.

Besides these major role models when she was growing up, Diana spoke of two close friends. She met a woman in graduate school who taught her about dealing with people. She has helped Diana speak up for what she wants, to be explicit, and to talk through things. A couple of times I've had one of my rage attacks and hated everybody including her. I bawled my friend out and wanted to go home, but I couldn't see well enough to drive home at night. I was at her house and woke up at two or three o'clock in the morning and was still furious. I told her off which sounds awful. This used to be a threatening, frightening thing for me to even think of doing. But what has influenced me so much and contributed to my growth was that I can do this when I get really upset, and the world doesn't end. They don't hate me. They listen. I really
trust my friend, and I don't trust people easily.

Diana mentioned another woman who "has opened vistas to me in spiritual ways." Diana took a poetry class from this woman and became interested in tarot, symbolism, poetry, and journaling. "She is having an increasing influence in leading me in a spiritual direction. I believe that all this stuff happens by a divine plan."

Sarah remembered an older woman who became a close friend and role model. As a young woman when Sarah was teaching school, she lived with a woman who became her role model. "I really admired her strength and how she took care of herself and her two sons when her husband left." Despite the fact that she was Sarah's parents' age, the woman seemed more like a contemporary. "Her view of the world was very compassionate and loving. I value our friendship more and more each year and realize what a strong impact she made on my life." The woman died a few years ago at 88. Sarah keeps a picture of her on her desk to give her strength. Although these role models are very different from one another, they all have a good sense of humor.

Another role model for Sarah is a good friend who is a holistic physician. He has taught me reverence for my body, how to connect with the universe and respect it, and to accept myself as I am. He has helped me understand that we each do the best we can within our capabilities.
The doctor is a good listener, honest and patient, helping Sarah see situations more objectively.

A longtime friend has been a role model for Sarah since she met her over 30 years ago.

I admire the way she has developed her talents, been true to herself, and has the strength of her convictions, while respecting differences among people. I know that when common sense is needed my friend will be my guide.

There are a number of older women, mostly widows, in her church and community that Sarah sees as role models.

These women have dealt with very painful experiences in their lives and still have a positive outlook and are supportive of others. They are open to new learning and ideas. They see value in the simple things—nature, friendship, and love.

Sarah said she intentionally seeks out older women as role models and mentors so that she can grow and stretch herself in later life.

Nettie mentioned several role models. In addition to her mother, there was a high school friend with whom she still keeps in contact after more than 60 years. The friend was a leader without being overbearing and helped Nettie overcome her shyness. Others were an aunt whom she lived with while attending college, a church school teacher, and a choir director.

Doris named several teachers as good role models for her. One was a sixth grade teacher who was also her Girl Scout leader.

After school was over we could call her by her first name and that made quite a hit. She taught
us crafts and took us camping up in the northern woods. She was really a great influence in my childhood.

Another was her seventh grade teacher.

I fell in love with her when I had been quite naughty, and she smiled at me as I was about to be dressed down by the another teacher. She would come and stay with me when my parents were out of town, and we would keep house together.

Doris also recalled a college professor of theology that was a particular friend and mentor. "Every week she would gather a bunch of us together and take us into her beautiful room, and we would have tea and discuss things of import in the world. It was probably a therapy session." She had a big impact on Doris' life.

Besides the three teachers, Doris mentioned what Jesus has meant to her as a role model. There was a picture of Jesus over the altar at church when Doris was a child.

I remember looking up at the picture of Jesus with his arm around the children, and thinking that no matter how awful or mischievous I am I have a friend. And you know that feeling has been with me my whole life.

That same feeling still comes over Doris "when things are just rotten and when I have guilt feelings about something."

The main role models for Elva have been clergy. She especially noted one particular minister and his wife. "The wife was a social worker with us at the Easter Seals School where I worked, and we also belonged to the same women's Zonta Club. I felt very close to both of them."
Jane looks to a priest as a role model in her life.

I like his style of looking at the world. He helped me see that it was useful to listen better. My oldest child was needing me to shut up or I would do to her what mother had done to me by molding me so consciously.

Jane observed the priest to see how he drew people out and intentionally patterned herself after him. "Whenever I see him on his walks, I will go and walk right beside him. I feel quite a kinship with him."

Suzanne found role models through her social service career and in the ministry. One woman worked with migrants and "really saved my life over and over again." She also admired Jane Adams at Hull House in Chicago and read everything she wrote, "but I certainly wasn't prepared to walk in her footsteps." In Idaho Suzanne met a young woman who became a pioneer in Christian education work in the schools. Suzanne appreciated her sense of humor. These people have died, but as long as they lived she was in touch with them.

Despite the fact that some of these role models are no longer living or in contact with the narrators, they continue to live within the women's spiritual selves. It is these gifts that we have received from others that continue to hold a significant place in our hearts and have become a part of us.
The Women's Own Roles

"In describing role models we are describing our possible selves" (Thone, 1992, p. 101). One's own role and that of a role model are very closely linked, especially, it would seem, with older women who have had the time to experience various roles on their journeys to elderhood. By trying out these roles the women have been becoming who they are today.

To be a role model for others doesn't mean we have to be perfect. No one is perfect. We are humans after all. But to be comfortable seeing oneself as a role model for others requires a certain feeling of self-worth, believing in oneself and sharing oneself with others.

It is interesting to note that some of the women in this study viewed their own roles, not in the concrete sense of mother, teacher, writer, volunteer, etc., but as who they see themselves to be in a holistic sense. In the latter instances, the narrators named traits such as their values, helping others and self, and being a friend. The women's roles included being a mother, grandmother, wife, teacher, social worker, community volunteer, scientist, writer, and friend. Most of the roles had a component of helping others, caring for and about others in some way.

Although Elva had no children of her own she spent most of her adult life working with children, particularly disabled children in treatment centers. "When you work
with crippled children you get a halo around your head whether you deserve it or not," she said of her experiences. Elva worked in Las Vegas for 11 years, where she was overwhelmed by the generosity of show people who would offer supplies and equipment needed for the children, not expecting anything in return. She found them very spiritual people.

Elva described herself as a "very independent thinker. If there is something that I think is right for me to do, I'm going to do it," she said. And it was in helping children that she found her niche. Elva also worked with children in an Easter Seals school in Oregon, in her church school, and at a Girl Scout camp.

In contrast to Elva, Doris described her life as a traditional wife and mother, moving 30 times with her family. When she did work outside the home it was as a special education teacher of "exceptional people." She always has had a special love for children, although she has taught people from 3 to 88 years. She was one of the first three educational diagnosticians in the Bay area. Now her daughter-in-law has gone into special education. "We have long phone calls and talk about what you would do about this situation or that."

Diana was also a special education teacher before becoming a scientist. She taught educable mentally handicapped children in Chicago who had "limited or no pre-educational experiences doing things like turning a page,
holding a pencil, using sentences, a whole bunch of things that poor children do not get exposed to." At that time black teachers were assigned to black schools. She taught mentally retarded children, "because the classes were about a third or quarter of the number in the other classes, and I just wanted to do a good job. I learned a lot about communication."

Now that she has done graduate work, Diana is hesitant to tell people that she has a doctorate because she finds that people confuse it with "who I am. And this to me is what roles are. I make a big distinction between what I'm doing to earn a living, which is my academic stuff, and who is the real me." For Diana the labeling of roles can be deceptive. "They mistakenly make people think that's who they are, the core of their being."

Diana said that several women where she works have told her that she's a good role model for women. "These middle-aged women are giving me such a good feeling. I just do what I do for me, but it's nice to have people say this." One woman told Diana that knowing and talking to her has helped her see her own aging in a positive way.

Of her training and job as a scientist Diana said it interferes with her spirituality. "I think the nature of academia as it is structured on a patriarchal model does you harm. It really gets you more and more away from spirituality." Diana said that she learned through science classes that one of the ways to determine whether something
exists or not is if you are able to measure it. Conversely, if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist. Certain things cannot be measured scientifically.

Like Diana, Suzanne has had roles in academia as an undergraduate and graduate college student and part-time college teacher. During this time she worked at odd jobs as a secretary, cook, and domestic worker. Later at the Idaho Department of Public Health, Suzanne was a health education consultant for three years.

Social service work occupied a large part of Suzanne's adult life before marriage. Her work with migrants for the National Council of Churches in Colorado, Arizona, and Oregon had the biggest impact on her life.

The feeling came over me that there were so many things to do. The migrant people needed so much of everything. But instead of being more aggressive and going to the growers and pleading for things, we had Bible stories, taught songs and had recreation periods with crafts and things we could do together. But to me that was all just incidental.

Later, after coming under so much stress from her social service jobs, Suzanne did secretarial and domestic work to support herself. She then went to Mexico for a summer and joined wilderness trips.

Since marriage at 50, Suzanne has found fulfillment as a companion to her husband, participating in mutual concerns. They went to Europe to repair some of the damage done to houses during World War II and helped construct an ecumenical youth center in Italy. They returned in 1989
for a reunion with the volunteers that worked on these projects. "I was moved to tears being with these people whom my husband had spoken of with such admiration and feeling over the years. Those were precious, shared experiences," Suzanne said.

Jane, like Suzanne, Doris, Joanne, Nettie, Sarah, and Diana, has been a teacher. Besides teaching she has worked in her community in various paid and volunteer capacities. She was head of the Catholic charities aging program and in that position she developed programs for the elderly.

I worked with people between 75 and 85 and came to realize that I could make a difference. It helped me figure out that I needed to know more about them, that they are teachable, and to appreciate their insights.

But these people were "sucking the life out of me. They had more needs than what I could round up the programs and resources to meet."

Jane taught children for six years.

It would always hurt me when kids would call each other names. At home I would never let my kids call each other names. They learned to use names like Bunny, etc. and also to respect each other's privacy. Respect is important, she said.

Also as a teacher, then mother, grandmother, and now great-grandmother, Nettie still continues her church and community volunteer work at age 85. As a young woman she taught high school math and had the music group. She also taught kindergartners in church school, then first graders, and finally fourth graders in both Congregational and Pres-
byterian churches. Another long time interest for Nettie has been Planned Parenthood book sales in her community, where she has been a full time volunteer.

Joyce, who, like Nettie, has lived in the same home for nearly 55 years, described roles similar to those of Nettie.

As a mother I always tried to do what I could to help the children--4-H, Sunday school, or whatever it was. It was wonderful being able to have my grandchildren nearby as much as I could. I really enjoy children.

Joyce often cares for the son of a single mother in her neighborhood. "I'm able to be here when his mother isn't, and that's a help to her. I like having him." Joyce, like the other women in this study, mentioned that friends are important in her life, having friends and being a friend.

Friends have always been a big part of Sarah's life too, especially since her divorce.

With what I am able to do--my writing, making new friends, relating to long time friends in a new way, developing my spiritual interests--I am finding lots of ways to grow that I would never have thought possible before. It is a new freedom and challenge for me to be single. All of this would not be possible without the help of my friends, family, and support people. It has taught me how precious people are. As I get older I find it is easier to express and share my love and appreciation with other people. Friendships are very beautiful, where we stick together through the good and bad times and support each other. It makes the bonds stronger.

Anna learned from her parents at an early age that she could accomplish what she chose to do. "I came from a family that did not put women down. I'm sure there was a
lot of macho in my father, but he expected me to keep right up with my brothers and do anything that I set out to do."

Both Anna's mother and grandmother were professional women in business and teaching and her aunt had a Ph.D.

There was a feeling in my family that women had a right and could take part in that kind of life without criticism from the family. My parents never tried to push me one way or the other, but they gave me support.

After Anna married a minister, her new role came naturally and she didn't feel "hampered in any way. Actually I thought being a minister's wife was a great advantage."

Her husband taught for awhile in a seminary where some of the young student wives had "a real identity crisis. But I welcomed it and didn't feel that my freedom was constrained."

Anna's husband was a widower and had two sons about Anna's age, both married with children. His sons' children were her step-grandchildren, but actually more like her children. "I used to tell stories to the kids, and their mothers suggested that I write them up. So that was my beginning." Anna wrote for children's publications for about 25 years. Then her main effort went into writing a book, published in 1975, which is the story of her parents when they crossed the country in 1907.

We kept old letters that they had written to their parents, the drawings that they made in their journal, and photographs, so I had quite a good source of material put together for a story.
In her mother's last year, Anna had a chance to go over the whole trip with her and ask her about different episodes, getting more of an "emotional response" into the story.

Another important activity for Anna was giving "first person book reviews." She described the experience as follows:

I had been invited to talk to a women's group in California, and a professor friend suggested using an autobiography of the first woman doctor in Arabia. I found the book so dull, but I said to myself, "you know perfectly well she came in person." So I did the review as if she was telling it herself. I did it so well that somebody came up afterwards and said, "You look like a nurse in Arabia in 1912." So I began looking for books that would be adaptable that way. Once I told Marian Anderson's story. I sent for a large print of her and put it on an easel and had her record playing. If I told a man's story I told it from the viewpoint of his wife. I did quite a few missionary stories and Harriet Beecher Stowe. They began paying me for doing it, and later I did my own book. I took the part of my mother and I was in costume.

Anna continued giving her book reviews when she moved to Oregon but her voice began to break so she had to give it up.

Despite the variety of responses from the women concerning their own roles, there are some common threads running through their stories. In family relationships nine of the women were or are wives, seven are mothers, five are grandmothers, and two are great-grandmothers.

As to careers or vocations, seven were teachers and continue to enjoy teaching others. All of the women value learning and books. Eight of the women are or have been
church/community volunteers. Two were social workers and two writers, while one was a nurse and one a scientist. Each woman found herself in a number of roles throughout her adult life, changing, adding, and dropping roles as she grew older.

Another role that was mentioned in various contexts was that of friend. Each of the women value their friendships outside of their families and look to these people for companionship, love, and support as well as being a friend to them. In one case, it was stated that we can choose our friends, unlike our family, which makes true friendships very special.

Bianchi (1982) states that friendship and intimacy hold a special potential for growth in midlife.... Midlife transitions provide the opportunity to move intimate relationships and friendships to deeper levels.... As we accept our finitude in midlife, we are willing to lower our masks and allow more of our true selves to appear to the other. (pp. 75-76)

This group of women, each now past midlife, has found deep friendships in their maturity.

As older women we can share our wisdom, seek justice, share our sorrows and passions, and reveal our innermost treasures, that sacred part of our being that each of us possesses. We can help to prepare others for what lies ahead, showing them the joys and challenges that will be theirs some day. And in all of this sometimes peaceful, sometimes chaotic and painful, sometimes humorous, some-
times mysterious existence we call life, let us affirm one another, and know that we are each doing the best we can. Our lives are unfolding, our stories precious and powerful, and they need to be told. They are who we are.

Other Influences in Adulthood

When asked what influenced their spiritual lives during adulthood, most of the women cited one or more of the following: reading of specific books and publications, being a part of discussion groups, their relationship with God, and their interest in the arts and music. Seeds were planted for these interests in early life, and they have continued to give meaning to the narrators in elderhood.

Elva mentioned the reading that she has done and continues to do as important for her spiritual development. "When my husband died, the book, A Man Called Peter, by Catherine Marshall was the one thing that helped me get through that period. I read it over and over." Particular poems have been helpful to Elva on a regular basis (see Appendix).

Nettie regularly reads Unity magazine and Daily Word, both devotional publications. She says she calls or writes the publication office and receives prayer messages which are comforting. Nettie also shares books regularly in a reading group and enjoys the poetry her daughter writes. Poetry has been a great love of Nettie's since high school.
Doris also finds reading important in addition to music, art, and theater.

Anna finds a number of readings by spiritual leaders meaningful. George Guthrie's book on prayers has been helpful, along with Thomas Merton's writings and the Scriptures. She also uses her husband's sermons.

Suzanne describes herself as an avid reader, questioning, looking for answers. "Sometimes I think I don't need to read any more books. All I need to do is put into action some of what I have been reading." Like Elva, Suzanne has read Catherine Marshall's books.

If I spent the hours in meditation and study and devotion that Catherine Marshall did I might get some answers, but I'm not like that. I know that internal peace doesn't come out of activities. It has to be pursued.

Suzanne mentioned Rosalind Rinker, who writes in the evangelistic vein and is known as a more reserved, conservative person. Books by people who have survived the Holocaust, such as Viktor Frankel's *Man's Search for Meaning*, have been meaningful. Suzanne has found *The Valley of the Shadow* by Hanns Lilje and a devotional book by E. Stanley Jones, *Abundant Living*, helpful.

A very special book for Suzanne is Brother Lawrence's *The Practice and Presence of God*. He was a monk in the 1600s.

Brother Lawrence's main desire was to be in the presence of God, be a worker in God's presence, and somehow he got other things done too, like being in charge of the kitchen in the monastery.
That just touches the surface of her reading as she looks for answers. "I have spent many years reading and praying, trying to get some idea of what I'm supposed to be doing."

Of her husband's heart attack and cancer surgery

Suzanne said:

At first I could see all the bills piling up, but that hasn't bothered me or my husband either. It is all working out. I guess I can thank God for that. There was an article in a devotional booklet that my sister sent me about a woman who quit worrying and "let go and let God." I think of that over and over again. I give up my worries that way. Health problems--I can't do anything about those, so I give them to God. I keep thinking of another verse that comes to mind: "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace whose mind is staid on Thee." But I think, "Keep HER in perfect peace whose mind is staid on you." Another one comes from Philippians: "Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything with prayer and supplication make your requests known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will be with you."

Suzanne feels there has been a "steadying" force within her during all the hard times in her life. It remains with her still. Another influence on Suzanne's spiritual life has been a group that prayed, meditated, discussed the Bible and other topics together.

In adulthood, Sarah has felt strong connections with God and nature.

I sometimes write letters to God, which is very comforting. That also gives me a connection with our universe. They remind me of my place in the world and how important my contributions are.

Like Suzanne, Sarah finds meaning in three spiritual growth groups where the members discuss their faith.
Sarah finds many books and publications on spirituality valuable as sources of growth and inspiration. Some of those she mentioned are books by Morton Kelsey, John Sanford, Henri Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, and James Fowler; Life's Companion by Christina Baldwin; Winter Grace by Kathleen Fischer; Aging as a Spiritual Journey by Eugene Bianchi; and a number of anthologies of poems, essays, and short stories by older writers. Others include Mary Oliver's poetry, stories and poems by various African-American women, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce, A Passage to India by E. M. Forster, Four Quartets by T. S. Eliot, several books by Hermann Hesse, and two contemporary books by Rusty Berkus.

When asked what has influenced her spiritual life as she has matured, Diana responded that she finds adversity is the key to growth.

Nobody goes out pushing, probing, looking, being challenged. You've got to get a nudge which may seem like the worst thing in life. But it actually can end up being the best. I'm a much better person for the life I've had.

Someone once told Diana that she had such a difficult life. "It wasn't a storybook thing, but I never thought of it as difficult. I learned to cope and survive. You can look back afterwards and see that." Diana's mother was a very strong woman and did everything so well. But Diana was a shy child who learned to speak up after her mother died. Otherwise she knew she would "not only be chopped to the ground," she would be "scrunched in. I didn't want that,
so I learned to do what I had to do. You have to prepare yourself, because no one else will."

Other influences for these women include participation in the arts--music, literature, painting, nature or other forms of creativity. These have enriched the lives of the narrators, along with those sources already mentioned.

The women's reactions to influences in their lives in adulthood were each expressed in very different ways, which shows how much their own unique experiences affected them. Nevertheless, each learned to build inner strength. As Diana stated, it is adversity, the difficult times, that force us to look for answers, to search for ways to pull us through our suffering and tragedies. This allows us to grow, expand, and explore new ways to be in the world.

Hulme (1984) states that the losses that accompany aging are also gains. We become increasingly more wise as our experiences increase. When we become reconciled to our difficulties, we grow spiritually. This is a never-ending process.

For Young (1983), the meaning of pain has become part of learning, enlarging her "sense of being" (p. 43). Young wrote of her growing spiritual life when she was 79. Her experience with intense physical pain that immobilized her body became "an extension of the feeling of oneness with all life." We all suffer to some degree. It is the meaning we give to it that can expand our lives.
It is not so important what happens to an individual as how she perceives her experiences and acts on them. Memories give power to the present. Spiritual growth is influenced by the meaning we give to our experiences. Each of these women has developed resources that serve her well.
PART III, FRUITION:
LIFE TODAY

As we move through life, our experiences become a part of us. By the time we reach 60 years, hopefully we have learned from these experiences. With people living longer than ever before, it is important to realize that old age can be a time of spiritual growth, new beginnings, inspiration, and sharing of wisdom with others. Because of our depth of experiences and our maturity, we can grow in the spiritual dimension more than at any other time in our lives.

These possibilities come at a time in the life cycle when discrimination against elders is widespread. Our culture looks at this age as a time to stand still, stagnate, stay out of the way of "progress," and wait for death.

These situations challenge older persons to stretch themselves to their spiritual depths by recognizing and dealing with present issues and unresolved conflicts of the past. Becoming distracted by busyness is only the diversion of energies from the task of coming to terms with old age.

Besides discrimination and personal issues, elders are faced with the many losses and diminishments that increase
with age. Sometimes we haven't had time to finish grieving one loss before others add to the burden. We need strength to deal with these losses and limitations—the death of family and friends; the loss of a home and moving to an apartment, retirement center or nursing home; the inability to drive and get around without help; physical limitations of all kinds, including vision and hearing loss; the rapidly changing world around us which limits familiarity with the commonplace; loss of roles such as wife, mother, or a place in the work force; limited financial resources in an inflated economy; diminishment of personal social status; and the loss of past family structures. The list can go on and on. Of course the ultimate loss, one's own death, can be a source of fear and dread for elders.

These losses may be accompanied by loss of self-confidence if an individual has no resources left to find meaning in existence as an elder. Each loss can seem like a part of one's self slipping away. On the other hand, a rich spiritual life can turn despair into acceptance and even hopeful expectation, freedom, and peace.

Part III, Fruition, presents the lives of the 10 women today, noting how they deal with these complex issues that face all of us if we live to an old age. Fruition covers the difficulties they encounter, along with the ways they find grace in old age. The women discuss what death means to them and what role religion plays in their lives. To conclude this section on elderhood, the factors that the
narrators find most positive and important for themselves and for humanity as a whole are identified.

Disturbing and Difficult Circumstances

There are certain circumstances in our lives that cause distress. These may be personal and affect us in the dailiness of life, or they may be national or world-wide problems that affect us in a broader sense. Many we have no control over, feeling helpless to improve the situation. Others are problems that have been around as long as humans have existed.

These situations often deprecate what we see as human potential, taking energy from more constructive pursuits. Regardless of their origins, they need to be dealt with in some way when we become aware of them. They are difficult to push out of our consciousness. It is in dealing with disturbing situations that we need strength and wisdom to do what we can and accept what we cannot change. In each person's unique way of coping, it is possible to adapt to life as it is, not just in resignation, but in affirmative fulfillment of our inner reality, our spiritual lives, recognizing that life is not always as we might wish.

One of the tasks of old age is to come to terms with what one perceives as critical in order to build integrity and avoid despair (Erikson, 1986). In their stories, the women related a variety of disturbing issues that affect
them deeply. They recounted some issues that are very personal, some that are negative qualities of people, and others that are general social issues.

On a personal level Suzanne told me about a very moving experience she had during a time of anger and frustration that helps her deal with difficult situations. It was during the time that she was a church secretary. Suzanne had been asked to do something which she resented having to do, and she "built up a horrible head of steam." Suzanne was expected to attend a meeting of the council of churches where the ministers gathered. She described the meeting as follows:

By the time the program started I was shooting sparks. Then a minister, who was to play a piece at the beginning of the program, stood up with a violin. And you know with the first touch of his bow to that string something happened to me. With the first note I felt that I had been split away from my anger. The sparks were no longer flying out of my eyes. I was clean and weightless. There was brightness all around me. I often wish that I could get mad enough to get another experience like that ... that violin note.

Suzanne said that she is "no great fancier of violin," but that was what turned chaos into peacefulness for her. She said, "I can't imagine anything more perfect or beautiful than I felt then." "Now I can say that once I have known the peace of God that passes understanding, but that was just a moment." She had been looking for a "very real sense of God's presence" in her life and it came to her. That is not always possible, of course, but she said it
doesn't mean she ever gives up trying. Just recalling this experience gives her strength.

Anna is disturbed that the effects of aging have made it more difficult for her to be good to people. She attributes her difficulty mainly to her lack of energy and physical limitations which are increasing as she gets older.

It's hard to live at the level that I would like to. I'm sort of wearing out physically. I spend so much time just getting through the day that I don't have time left to be as caring for other people as I'd like to be.

When Anna walks with her walker, she can't look up and respond to others very easily. She is just trying not to fall down. She said that she's "always been the kind of person that when I was in a crowd, I was out talking to everybody and getting acquainted, watching out for what other people needed." It bothers Anna that she can't do that anymore. With her lower energy level she needs to stop and rest after doing one activity per day. Anna's physical disabilities limit her contact with others, but she still feels the importance of reaching out and does it as much as she is able, such as on the telephone. This is a frustration for many elders.

Physical disabilities also mean that Anna needs to depend on other people more than she used to. Giving up this independence is difficult, especially when she needs to stop driving soon. "The fact that I can't always do things for myself takes a lot of pleasure out of life. I
spend a lot of time trying to get things worked out." She mentioned as an example trying to get a package mailed, which entailed finding a box, wrapping it, putting it in the bag attached to her walker, and taking it down to the front door so her friend could mail it. These routine details become major projects.

Anna commented on the numerous items of sentimental value that she came across as she was clearing out her house.

They are valuable to me because of the memories that I associate with them, and I still have those memories of all the happy times. That's all you take into the next world anyway. It is what went on with you and other people that is important. It is the only way to make it bearable. You have put so much of yourself into what you leave behind--planning your home, working on it, friends and family.

Anna has found a positive way to cope with her recent losses. She said that she often closes her eyes and recalls beautiful memories, such as a bicycle ride that she once took through the English countryside.

Anna said that "becoming old is a lesson in learning how to relinquish and get reconciled to a different kind of life." Selling her home and moving to a retirement center was a "great watershed" in her life. The retirement center is filled with people "who have given things up. So I have to learn to live graciously." Anna sees this move as the biggest transition she's been through, because there is a finality about it. She noted that other transitions are going to something better. "You give up being single and
are married and have your own home. They were steps ahead." Anna is determined not to spend her last years "mad at the world." When she was preparing for her move someone told her, "if you love the world when you come here (the retirement center), you will be happy. But if you hate the world, you won't like it." Anna finds that the transition came more easily with a positive attitude.

Nettie finds it a great loss that her husband and so many of her friends aren't living anymore, a common loss that elders must deal with. At 85, Nettie is one of the few people in her narrowing circle of friends that doesn't have one or more serious chronic or terminal illnesses.

Whenever her daughters have major upheavals in their lives, Nettie finds it personally disturbing. Two of Nettie's three daughters are now divorced, something that is very unusual in Nettie's generation.

My life was fairly uneventful as far as getting along with my family and husband, because when I was young, women didn't want to be individuals and have their own opinions as they do now. Perhaps we did then, but not in the same way.

For Sarah peace and freedom have come with shedding the burdens of the past. In order to live a good old age, she feels it is important to make peace with painful relationships. Sarah said,

It takes lots of energy to carry around that extra baggage. By working through these hurtful times and gaining new insight, we can seek forgiveness and acceptance and let go of the pain.
Sarah used as examples her relationships with her father and ex-husband. Talking with trusted friends, relatives, a clergyperson, and a counselor has helped Sarah. To come to some sort of peace gives one a real freedom of spirit and the opportunity to put one's energies on growth. It gives one power over one's own life, instead of being a victim of the past.

Diana cited prejudice as devaluing her life. As a black woman she has experienced racial prejudice and people who "dehumanize" her.

It was very difficult coming to grips with the way things work and the way I thought they did. When people hit you in the head and kick you in the shins, they make you think of the world in a different way.

People like that make Diana very uncomfortable. "They can't make me be like them, but they can make me less like me." Prejudice has not only affected Diana personally, but she finds it a negative quality in others.

Diana also sees power as a negative quality in people. She made the distinction between "power over" and "power with." "I don't want power over anybody or anything. I like to have 'power with' so whatever I say has some impact or at least is really heard. To me that is 'power with' other people." Diana feels that she is a "very lucky soul" to have a close friendship that operates on this "power with" principle.

Diana named busyness and materialism as problems in our society. "I'm at the point now that I can't keep up a
frantic treadmill existence." Diana sees us moving more and more toward materialism. When people get overly materialistic, they start fighting over possessions.

Money is not something to use for power or to impress people. Defining yourself by external things is demeaning, because if love, spirituality, and your inner being are what's really important, the rest doesn't seem to matter.

Joyce talked about materialism in the context of possessions. "Material things don't mean a lot to me. I'd rather have people be comfortable and not have to scrounge in garbage cans than have a new coat." She adds, "I think greed devalues life. Perfectly good people are not always thoughtful of others." She told about a situation during the Depression when it was proposed at the university that many of the faculty would be fired or everyone would take a 20 percent pay cut. The faculty decided they would take the cut and everybody would keep their jobs. Also no two people in the same family could be employed.

Now it would be almost impossible to get people to take a 20 percent cut and to have only one person working. People put too much value on the things they can buy with money and not enough on the people involved.

Diana said that she learned at a very early age that "you do not use people as a means to an end. People are an end in themselves. When you use people they become things." When she was 16, she wanted a particular boy she didn't know to take her to the prom. "I deliberately plotted how I would maneuver him into asking me, and I did it! It was so easy it scared me. That poor sucker had no
idea what I had done." It frightened Diana that it had worked so easily. Since then she has been very sensitive to using people. "This thingness, the sort of materialistic view of life, is what devalues us."

Sarah values least that which "does not contribute to the good of others--unkindness, lack of love and compassion for others, including power and control over others, and narrow-mindedness."

Anna, along with Sarah and Doris, mentioned lack of love as a disturbing presence they sometimes see around them. To Anna life is devalued by "things that make it difficult to love--people's mistrust of each other, putting one another down, and malice." Doris said, "Dissension and lack of love disturb me terribly."

Regarding more general social issues Sarah commented,

The breakdown of families is so sad. Many children grow up being treated badly and not learning to love. There are some people with so much, and then so many are in dire need, without love, jobs, food, or decent homes.

She said that it is very disturbing to see so many homeless people and those with no health insurance or health care and little food.

Elva voiced concern over the lack of money for the education of children.

We haven't put enough money into education, but we have money for things in other countries. I get very upset about that because I wish I had lots of money so I could provide a lot of scholarships for education.
Suzanne is disturbed by the influence of television. She doesn't watch it very often, but she is not impressed by what she sees.

The ads, the pictures of the movies that are coming up, the programs that are in the offing, they make me sick. Why is this stuff on the air for people to watch?! It is cheap, sensational, and demeaning.

Doris spoke of lack of care for other people which concerns all of us as inhabitants of the global community.

I think God gave us this great big beautiful planet and we have mismanaged it so badly. There are places for people to live and enough to eat if we just get off our chairs and do something.

Doris is disturbed by the recent debacles in government, citing the senators "who put on that terrible side show with Clarence Thomas. I simply could not imagine that they would act like a bunch of little kindergarten children who had never been taught manners."

Suzanne is ashamed of the way our government lies to us.

When a speaker at our church said, "your government lies to you," some people put the heat on the minister to apologize for the speaker's remarks. But nobody needed to apologize. The fact is that our government does lie to us all the time.

Suzanne feels that the government shows "scant concern for the homeless and hungry, to say nothing of the people all over the world who are starving to death daily, hourly." Sometimes she thinks she should give these concerns to God, but "we need to take responsibility for them."
Nettie expressed concern about government and world issues. Joanne finds that the Gulf War devalued life, even though it was so distant. "With TV you can see everything on the screen and sometimes it's shocking. We are aware of so much more now."

Although most of the women did not talk at length about issues that disturb them, they each had ready responses to the topic. They have seen and experienced a variety of difficult events over their lifetimes. They indicated that it is hard to put them out of their minds, but hopefully we can all learn from them.

Linn, Fabricant, and Linn (1988) state that it is important to heal our painful memories in order to find peace in the present. To forgive ourselves and others and accept the fact that we are each responsible for our own lives may be difficult, but it is a necessary task to accomplish in order to live with integrity in old age. The authors base their healing stages on Erikson's eight stages of life (1986). "The gift of meaning (is) buried deep within any tragedy or life experience" (p. 206). If we can come to terms with our pain, we will prepare ourselves for our ultimate reality, death. The healing process allows us to see the past in a new and clearer perspective.

It is vital to the spiritual well-being of elders to be able to come to some sort of peace and acceptance with issues that disturb them, whether the problems are personal or societal. This does not mean that they must approve of
the circumstances. But in the lives of elders there are undoubtedly difficulties, such as physical diminishments, broken relationships, or the loss of family and friends.

Yungblut (1990) writes that we cannot detach ourselves from our problems, but we can look on them as companions or challenges that need creative energy. This is important so that we do not carry resentment. We can learn to express our grief, forgive, ask for strength, and let go. We can live in the present while looking to the future by using our energy to further a new cause or interest. If you lose something you must replace it, writes Yungblut. As we learn to deal with the "little deaths" in life, we prepare ourselves for the final diminishment, death. The narrators are using their creative styles to cope with disturbing and difficult circumstances in old age.

The Meaning of Death

Most people begin to think seriously about their own death in middle age when faced with physical decline and role losses and after they have passed their youthful idealism (Bianchi, 1982). We are often confronted with our negative feelings toward death that are reinforced by our culture in the form of ageism (Maitland, 1991).

Bianchi (1982) states that many elderly persons have worked through the fear of their own death. Those who have a strong religious faith seem to approach death with more
peaceful acceptance. Through our spiritual lives we are able to counter the negative view of death held by society.

We live in a death-denying culture that wants to treat death as a curse and is afraid to speak about it openly and personally. These attitudes and feelings begin at a very early age. It takes courage and conviction to break these barriers and speak about death as a normal part of the life cycle.

The women that I interviewed generally have very positive attitudes toward death. A number of them mentioned not wanting to experience a long illness first and hoping not to be a burden on others. While their conceptions of death itself vary, all but one had thought about the subject, viewing it as another step in the life cycle.

In response to the question about the meaning of death, each woman gave her own unique perception. The tone was mainly one of optimism. With only one exception, all were willing to express their views.

When Elva was young her father taught her about death in a very simple, direct way. "See the trees? The leaves come down in the fall and they die. Then in the spring there is a rebirth. Death is like that. It isn't anything that one should be afraid of." This lesson has stayed with Elva all her life. She has never feared death as a result. "I think that probably impressed me more throughout my whole life than anything I can remember," she said.
This natural way of looking at death as part of the life cycle is reflected in the nature poetry of Mary Oliver (1983), who writes of humans and animals as part of all earth's creatures who begin and end as part of the whole. Oliver's poetry has made a deep impression on Sarah. "She writes of our connection with the universe and the sacredness of all living things. Animals, plants, and all of nature are given a sense of awe and respect." As humans we are only a part of the whole and as caretakers of the earth we need to be guided by the laws of nature. Humans live and die the same as all living things.

Some of the women prefaced their remarks by recalling the death of family members. Just before Doris was to leave for college, her little nephew died in her arms. He was four and ran out in front of a car. The doctor came and examined him and he seemed fine, but a few days later he suddenly died. Doris asked her college theology professor what she thought happened to people when they die.

She answered, "Heaven is a place you go to get to know God better," which is very satisfying to me. It would be horrible not to have that hope. I think death is a continuation of life on another plane.

Sarah's experiences and attitudes toward death in childhood have evolved dramatically over the years. Her first experience with death came when her grandfather died and she saw his body in an open casket.

He didn't look real to me. It was another world that he had entered. My parents didn't like to talk about sickness and death, so I got the im-
pression that it was something to fear and dread. It didn't make sense not to talk about the inevitable.

Ignoring death made it "scary" for Sarah.

Sarah has thought a lot about death recently.

I was obsessed with it a few years ago when my husband left. I thought that I was going to die because my soul had died. I was without hope as to how I would find my way out of the abyss.

The experience of feeling rejected by a person whom she had trusted and loved for so many years was overwhelming. "Life was just not part of my reality for awhile." Since that time and with the help of many people, Sarah feels she is stronger now in many ways than before. "I have no fear of death. I have faith that when it is my time to die, God will let me know, and my soul will enter a beautiful space."

Sarah said that during this time "in the pit of existence, the abyss, I had images of trying to climb up stone walls, but the walls continued to crumble and with every step I took I fell back down into the pit." Her counselor suggested that she try to visualize turning her back on the crumbling stones and climbing up another way. "I could finally do this with success and have been slowly, steadily climbing ever since." It was also during this period that Sarah had two mystical experiences "which ended with my knowing that God is always with me and guiding me through the hard times. I didn't have the sense that God was with me before that."
Another factor in Sarah's thoughts about the process of dying and death concerns her health. She was diagnosed with leukemia several years ago. "Every day seems more precious to me than it ever did before. I don't have the sense of a long life ahead of me, so I try to take advantage of what I have and be grateful." Sarah summed up her view on death.

It is closeness to the earth and the universe, a sort of blending with God's natural world and the world of spirit. What we have been and done is what lives after us—the gifts that we have given others, that part of ourselves.

Sarah said she feels that she is a part of her grandparents, parents, children, and friends that live within her. They have passed something on to her and she in turn passes something on to others. This is the way we share our love, hopes, dreams, and attitudes. No one ever entirely dies. We are more than our bodies and physical presence. For Sarah there is a quiet acceptance today, even a welcoming relief and freedom, knowing that we live on in others.

Jane said that she is looking forward to death.

I had an aunt and uncle die when I was eight. They gave dignity, purpose, and kindness to death, and my parents did the same thing. They were preparing me, every single detail, ahead of time.

So far, Jane has felt fortunate that none of her children have had "any terrible things happen to them." Since the interview Jane has cared for her father when he was dying from cancer, and she wrote this about their last weeks together:
The sun shown every day directly onto his face when he was in bed. He never wanted the shades lowered. He asked that the hanging baskets of flowers be put down so he could see the skyline. He loved looking out over the garden, at the horses in the pasture, and up the timbered hillside. He watched spiders working outside the window and I read him facts about their lives. A great blue heron which Dad said visited them five years before came back and stayed. It pecked at the windows and dad saw him fly by.

Her father's favorite song was "No Never Alone." He often told the family how his grandfather sang it when driving his horse and wagon through the dark lonely woods. Jane's brother arranged the music on a computer/synthesizer for the funeral service. "He made it fit for Westminster Abbey. Dad and I laughed when we heard its stupendous Bach-like embellishments." When the music wasn't quite like her father had remembered it, her brother rearranged it, and "dad sang it from his bed as it was supposed to be--like his grandfather sang it. Then my brother rearranged it and dad approved, enjoying the exercise exceedingly." Later the music was played at the funeral and cemetery.

It was during those care-giving days that Jane was able to listen to her father's concerns about forgiveness and help him work through a past event that troubled him. She also said prayers with him including the Lord's Prayer.

Elva said she was glad I asked her about death.

It is something rather beautiful. I don't dread death, but I'm not sure that I can explain it. Actually I look forward to it, because I feel it is something more beautiful than life on earth.
Elva showed me a clipping that will be used on the cards given out at her funeral that "says it all" (see Appendix). Elva has given it to the funeral director. (Since the interview Elva has died and her plans for the memorial service were carried out. I called her a few days before her death, and she was playing bridge with friends at her apartment.)

As some of the other women mentioned, Joyce said that she hopes not to be a "nuisance and linger on, being ill for a long time. It would be nice if you could choose how you die." To Joyce death means that "this body will no longer have me in it. I'm not afraid of death, but I will be reluctant to leave my friends and family."

There are medical doctors in Joyce's family, and she is concerned about the responsibility we put on them for decisions about death and dying. She referred to euthanasia and abortion.

I really don't know if we have the right to kill someone. I think we have to leave it to God to decide. Perhaps thinking about when is life and who can take life have caused people to think more about terminal illnesses.

The meaning of death has changed for Diana over time. Her mother died when she was 16, leaving Diana to think that God was "either stupid or worked at random" when he took her mother away from her. She was an atheist for most of her adult life and "the notion of God was very confusing." Then for awhile she was an agnostic. "I thought that with death you turn the light out and that's it--
you're gone." Her notion of death now is that it is just a beginning. "Being dead does not frighten me. I do get concerned about the process of dying. If you are going to die, be dead, and be done." To Diana the notion that at death we go through an opening to another existence, or we leave this body and then "the spirit is given a new outfit to wear is a whole different notion of death. I see death as part of the cycle of things, and that is very comfortable."

For Diana there is a connection between death and our purpose in life.

My purpose used to be to survive, but recently I have been thinking that life is purposeless unless there is reincarnation. I'm working through this life to improve or change something for my soul's next existence.

Anna expressed her thoughts on death from both a practical and a personal perspective. Practically speaking, death is the only way to keep the world going, she said. "If nobody died where would we be?--all standing shoulder to shoulder. I've always accepted it as part of the way the world operates."

From a personal standpoint Anna doesn't particularly look forward to death, but as she ages she finds life more difficult because "physical limitations crowd in on you. The idea of dying becomes sort of a happy thought. I shrink from the idea of a long illness and a period of being helpless." This same feeling was expressed by some of the other women. Anna said, "If I could just walk out
the front door and go into the next life that would be a nice way to do it." Concerning the "next world," she said, "I don't know what it will be like. The Bible very carefully doesn't tell us, but there are few hints. Anybody who wants to read certainty out of it can't do it." The most comforting part of death to Anna is the following:

God being who He is and knowing what we go through in this world, I know that something worthwhile is ahead of us. There is some reason we go through all this. Life is so hard here for everybody and work is so difficult, it's easy to understand heaven as eternal leisure. I think we would just get bored in the first 10 minutes with that. I'm not going to sit around on a cloud playing a harp. I'll probably be scrubbing sinks or something, I don't know!! But it's going to be something useful.

Suzanne sees death as a door. She has had so many friends that have died that she looks forward to going through it herself and being with them. She has no fear of death. "I think the process of dying would be something I wouldn't look forward to--a long protracted illness--but not death itself."

Joanne was the only woman in my study who said she had never really thought about death.

It is just the end of the world, that's all. When I was quite small my maternal grandmother died. I didn't quite know what I felt. She was lying there and she was dead. Then my father died suddenly of a stroke.

Joanne said she never saw "anything horrible" like the Japanese invasion of China when some friends of hers saw many dead corpses.
From the variety of responses of the narrators it is apparent how different their perceptions of death are. In the end we are each alone to make our own inner peace or not as we choose. But the one thing I do see from this group of women is that they have no real fear of death itself. For the most part it is even anticipated and accepted.

Fischer (1985) speaks of the difference between death and dying.

Death is the final moment of life, the end of life as we know it. Dying, on the other hand, is the journey a person must take in the last phase of life. It is the process leading to the end. The diminishments that we encounter in old age are "our outer self dying while our inner self is growing strong; the former identity is giving way, while a new existence is beginning to break through" (p. 136). This is the time for the spirit to be strong and "create something that transcends time" (p. 139). It is the time when our internal energy may turn to love as our physical energy declines. This is the meaning of death that I heard from the narrators.

The Role of Religion

As noted in the introduction, there is a relationship between spirituality and religion, but that relationship is not clearly defined. The two overlap, but spirituality has a much broader scope. One can be spiritual without being
part of a religious community or adhering to the principles of a particular religion. A person can belong to a certain church without being particularly spiritual.

According to Ernest Hall (1985), an elder's spirituality "may take the traditional religious expressions or it may not" (p. 116). Use of the spiritual dimension helps one "balance the crises" in later life. Hall finds it is beneficial for elders to participate in religious activities and experiences to aid their spiritual growth, social connectedness, and general well-being.

Sociologist Margaret Hall (1985) finds that religion can enhance the lives of older people and help them "understand and deal with their spirituality" (p. 74). Elders find "sustaining strength and inspiration" in their religion when they no longer are able physically to attend church. At this point their religion may become private, giving them strength through their spirituality combined with their religious beliefs.

My purpose in asking the women about the role of religion in their lives was to see how they view its importance. Furthermore, I wanted to find out if/how they find a connection between spirituality and religion. Before the interviews I had discussed with each woman how I saw religion and spirituality, since that was a primary question that was raised. During the interview I asked each woman what role religion played in her spiritual life and what
parts of her religion she found significant and meaningful on a daily basis.

Attending church has always been a part of Suzanne's life. Her friendships are centered around church activities. "We go to church, but sometimes I think it is just habit. I wonder if we are just going, expecting something." Although Suzanne goes to church regularly with her husband, she feels it is really his church and she would attend another church if he were willing. She grew up in another denomination where she feels more comfortable.

Sarah said, "My church is a place where I can go and feel loved. When I see my church friends in the community, or go places with them, I feel blessed." To Sarah, church includes the people, services, and related activities, not just the religious teachings. These strong underpinnings give Sarah a message that "life is very exciting. There are so many things out there waiting to be discovered--new things to learn, books to read, plays to see, and people to meet. I believe we all need to choose our own path."

Since Jane is in good health and still very active in her community she says,

I'm pushing the spiritual behind. It isn't that I don't go to church, but it is more in the background because I say to myself that I can contemplate later, but I won't always have good health.

Now Jane's concerns center around "things for other people." She is using her skills in community activities while she still has the physical strength.
I am interested in my spirituality, but right now I have not been hit with anything so devastating that it forces me to get wisdom in that area. I have the confidence that it is alright to be active now.

Joyce has a history of church involvement:

When I was busy with my young family I didn't do much helping in the church. The church means a great deal to me so I put in all the time I can now helping so that younger people can spend time with their children.

The week that I visited Joyce she had been busy baking for an upcoming sale. "I did all the baking of coffee cakes and it was a long chore. I can contribute by doing the menial day-by-day kitchen kind of things."

Religion and her church have always been important to Nettie, too. She says, "I go to church and that is a big part of my life. I always taught Sunday school and I have enjoyed church meetings. We have study books which are interesting." Both Nettie and Joyce view their spirituality as part of their church involvement. They both have a strong relationship with God and that gives them strength to deal with their many losses.

Elva said that religion has been "the greatest influence in my life from childhood on." Although she doesn't attend church as often as she would like due to physical limitations, she feels "very blessed to have so many wonderful friends" from church that visit her and take her places (Elva gave up her car several years ago.). "What gives my life meaning is being with people and sharing whatever I can." Elva feels she is in partnership with God
and that God will always be with her. "I can still talk to my God."

Doris sees herself as a reasonably religious person. I do pray every day for all my friends and for people I think need it, especially the 40,000 children who die in this world every day. I just can almost not say that, it's so painful.

Because of her strong faith in God, Doris doesn't "have fears about what is going to happen in the future. I know that my friend is up there, and I know I am going to be taken care of if I keep up my end of the bargain."

Religion is important to Sarah's spiritual life in that it helps her to gain insight, inspiration, assurance, and forgiveness.

I like the prayers in church, the communion, the sense of community, the symbols, and looking at issues and stories as people of faith. It is a reminder that there are ways we can care for each other and grow.

Sarah, like Elva and Nettie, has taught church school where she "can share the straightforward, simple ways of looking at Bible stories with children. It is refreshing to view the church teachings through the eyes of children." Sharing the sense of community within the church is important to Sarah, as it is to the other women who attend church services and activities.

In Anna's life religion has always played a "very basic role." She described religion's relationship to spirituality in a holistic way.
To me spirituality is the whole of life. You can be just as spiritual giving to somebody as you can praying. Your spiritual attitude is not just what you do with your solitude. It's what you do with your whole life and your whole attitude. I don't like to see the church divided between social activists and contemplatives. Neither one is possible without the other to have a well-rounded life. If you don't have a spiritual background, you aren't going to go out and do the active things. If you don't have the activity and concern for the community in your spiritual life, it is just going to be a dead end.

Anna's concern for separating spirituality and religion comes from a lifetime of studying these issues. She appears to live her life in a spiritual way whether or not she is participating in a religious activity.

Diana's religious affiliations have ranged from AME to Catholic to eastern religions. Most of her adult life she has had no church affiliations and no interest in spirituality. But for the last five years or so she has been drawn to alternatives to the mainstream religions in our country, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. Her ongoing search includes music, art, meditation, yoga, philosophy, metaphysics, multiple realities, quantum physics, the mystics, goddesses and other aspects of spirituality. This is mainly a private endeavor. She described it as a "very involved journey." Diana finds that the eternal, everlasting oneness of all things is the only thing that has "endurance and permanence" to her. "It is what people usually call God. With Brahman you have the over soul, the sort of enduring life force, the oneness." She went on to describe
God as a metaphor, not a reality. "Neither male nor female, God stands for what lies beyond."

Diana's spiritual life is growing today. She feels she is only beginning "to come to grips with it because it's new to me. To go from being an atheist to knowing I'm a spiritual being is a quantum leap. And it was not made easily." When Diana was unable to find work in her field she took a job as a receptionist. "I felt like I'd failed. Then my interest in philosophy led me to Hinduism and the everlasting one. Finally I realized that the only thing that has permanence is a Supreme Being." She was in her mid-fifties when this happened. "I am really a babe in it," she said. For eight of the women in this study, their strong faith began much earlier.

Diana sees a oneness of all people, places, and times. "Next week I may be off on another track. I'm learning to become more comfortable and confident in it, and that's a delicious feeling," she said. Diana feels that many possibilities are opening to her and she finds that very exciting. She is unique in this group of women in that she is still exploring the possibilities of different religions and spiritual approaches.

Of the 10 women I interviewed, eight are presently active members of their local churches, associations that are a major part of their lives. They attend services regularly and take part in various programs within their churches. Many of their friends and support people are
members of these same churches, giving their lives continuity. Of the two women who do not have a church affiliation, Diana is exploring eastern religions and other dimensions of spirituality, and Joanne has never had any church or religious training or interest. However, Joanne does have strong values that were developed in her childhood. These seem to sustain her and make her strong, despite the fact that she does not have any religious or spiritual practices, including no relationship with God.

The three narrators in their sixties (Diana, Sarah, and Jane), each in her own way, indicated that they have more searching to do, looking toward the future, and exploring the role religion plays in their lives. Sarah and Jane have strong church affiliations, while Diana does not. Diana and Sarah are very actively and intentionally exploring their personal spirituality, while Jane prefers to be active in her community. I believe they are each living out their spirituality in different ways.

The six remaining women, five in their eighties (Nettie, Elva, Anna, Joyce, and Suzanne) and one in her seventies (Doris), have always had a strong commitment to their particular religion. Today they are grateful for the strength it gives them in elderhood. Anna's view of the wholeness she finds in religion and spirituality strengthens her, particularly now that she cannot be very active physically.
I was impressed with the strong sense of knowing the presence of God that eight of the women mentioned. It wasn't just that they know there is a God, but that they know that God is always with them to love, comfort, and guide them. I could feel this, too, when I was interviewing the narrators. Although their religious practices and beliefs are very important to them they are only part of this overall sense that God is present.

Meaningful Experiences Today

I asked the women how they find meaning and purpose in their lives today. A common theme with this group of women was helping others. Eight chose professional work in the helping fields, such as teaching, nursing, and social work. Eight worked in that capacity as volunteers in their communities. Four of the women are still active volunteering. Six of the women raised their own children, four have grandchildren, and two have great-grandchildren.

To find meaning with others, through give and take, sharing, loving, and connecting on a deeper level are important aspects of spirituality. That meaning is also found in a personal connection to a Supreme Being, usually called God. Activities, such as reading, learning, helping, writing, service to community, finding beauty in simple things, listening to others, praying, having faith,
finding new freedom, all give purpose to life in elderhood for these narrators.

These are areas in which we can grow as we age, areas that are open to us more than at any other time. The notion of expansion at a time of loss, diminishment, and limitation in many areas is an awareness that I see enhancing the lives of elders. Uncovering this expansion and the freedom it allows is a benefit not only to the individual, but to all of society.

In Jane's case, she is healthy and active, working for the betterment of her community. When she was raising her six children she didn't have time for outside activities. But now the focus of her life is outward, and she feels the responsibility to help others. "It is not that I am so special, but I have the privilege of not having to work full-time." Jane volunteers for a refugee program writing grants. "If no one is interested in the public good, society will degenerate. We need people knitting society back together again." Jane helped develop a large refugee program and also was head of a Catholic Charities aging program. She now serves on the local park board.

The time Suzanne spends as a volunteer at a local agency distributing clothing and food to the needy is a continuation of the social work she did as a young woman. Throughout her adult life, Nettie has been active helping others through organizations in her community. Today, in
her eighties, Nettie helps at a hospital and also with an organization assisting young women.

Elva said that she finds meaning by helping others. When one of her friends was afraid of dying alone, Elva told her that no one ever walks alone. Elva also told their pastor about her friend's fears and he talked with her, too. At 86, Elva mainly helps people on an individual basis when she finds that "a person needs a little shoulder." The song, "Let There Be Peace on Earth and Let It Begin With Me," is one of Elva's favorites. She told about the time she heard Pearl Bailey sing it on the radio for the first time in Las Vegas.

I thought she was a wonderful person and very spiritual too. When we sang that song at church recently I got very emotional, because she is gone now and I liked her message so much.

Since Anna finds it is hard on other people when she is discouraged, she tries to "set an example of hopefulness and not giving up." Also she likes to give others the feeling that they are worth something by having hope for them and doing things that show them they are worthwhile.

I have a feeling that no matter what happens to me I must not let the world down. This is probably sort of an egotistical way of looking at it, but it makes a difference in the way I act. I think those expectations hold a lot of us up through life. What kind of an image of yourself do you have and are you able to live up to it?

"The goals for my spiritual development include helping people and staying on an even keel," states Doris. "I want to be accessible to others and spend some time coun-
Doris makes a conscious effort to do this in a noninvasive way. She spoke of the importance of listening. "There are so few people who listen anymore."

Jane said she uses listening as a way of helping others look at their concerns. "It is like going on their journeys with them, trying to see it through their eyes so that they can sort things out." Jane said she does that with her parents and wants to do it with others later when she is not so busy with active endeavors.

Sarah also values listening and sharing experiences with others. "I think taking time to listen to others and really caring about how they feel is very important. It takes time to be friends." Sarah hopes she can be a role model and share her experiences with people who are interested. She noted the importance of sharing history with her family and encouraging them in their endeavors. "I see old age as an opportunity for spiritual growth and a time to celebrate life. I hope I can pass that on so that others will embrace old age and not fear or dread it."

There is a new kind of freedom in old age that some of the narrators discussed, a letting go of concerns that were formerly worrisome. This liberating transition gives elders a chance to use their energies more productively. Suzanne felt this freedom when she gave her worries to God (Part II, "Other Influences in Adulthood"). "Let go and let God," she said.
Diana finds that old age gives her a very positive opportunity to grow. "As you showed me in your chart (about stages of spiritual development), the heart grows and increases." She mentioned that women in particular are influenced by negativity in old age. "We need to get out of the habit of thinking that we are supposed to be stuck at being 25 for three generations." Diana dyed her hair for awhile. "I got tired of living in the dye bottle. Of course anyone who knew me knew I dyed my hair, because half the time there was this white band on my head." She prefers to accept old age as a stage of growing and be free from the dictates of society.

Long ago Diana wanted to be a physician, but she didn't have the money to pursue that goal. Her interest in health and aging led her to teaching. More recently Diana became interested in Hinduism. She sees now that the intuitive part of her had been "bricked over." During a crisis concerning her health, she felt herself "going back to my source." It was at this point that Diana felt she needed to meet with me.

After we talked the first day I slept very few hours, wondering about my purpose in life. And then it came to me--my purpose is to be a healer. That is a spiritual expression, being a healer and health educator.

To do that she had "to tune into the totality of my being, body and spirit, part of the Hindu tradition." Diana sees physical healing as part of the healing process, with spirituality at the center. "So it just came together. It was
not in my conscious awareness until after we talked. When I woke up I knew my purpose!"

Today, Diana is discovering things she never knew existed. She spoke about how she thought through the questions I had asked her. "I love to meditate. When I read your questions I got in such a mellow meditative state. It was a feeling kind of like food, an almost delicious state." Diana said she felt a sense of peace and connection with what I was asking.

Another aspect of spirituality that some narrators mentioned was the significance of prayer in their lives. Doris stated that prayer is comforting to her. During World War II when her husband was so terribly ill and her mother had just died, she found prayer very effective.

Somebody called me when my mother was so sick and said she was praying for my mother, and my thought was what good is that. But then when my husband was sick I had a friend who just prayed for him night and day, and he got better in spite of all the predictions.

After these crises, Doris began to believe in the power of prayer.

Sarah also named prayer as a comfort to her. She finds that it gives her the feeling of "reverence and love." The moon gives her that same feeling, one of "being held in the moon's embrace and being part of her spirit." Sarah and Diana are interested in tarot cards that are called "Daughters of the Moon." Sarah commented, "I like to use the cards and color in the pictures with col-
ored pens. I also use colored pens with my index cards on which I print quotes and sayings, some of which I write myself." Sarah said they give her strength through their affirmative messages, nurturing her spirit.

Learning new things and sharing them with others come through reading, journaling, hearing speakers, and writing letters, poetry, and stories. All the women find that lifelong learning is vital to their lives. Joy comes in discussing new ideas with others. It helps in understanding people, showing compassion, and having empathy for others. Nettie said, "In old age we can do things that we didn't have time for when we were younger--writing letters, reading books, and showing support for friends and family. These are big things in my life." Besides Nettie, Anna, Doris, Suzanne, and Sarah write letters to show support and caring for those they love.

Sarah told me about her priorities following the diagnosis of a serious illness.

I am developing parts of myself that I did not know existed. I am very grateful that I have discovered writing (poetry, letters, journals, and essays). I like to spend time alone to think through things and gain strength and energy. This time cleanses my body and thoughts, part of the healing process. I know that I can express my feelings and thoughts to God or myself. There is always someone to listen who takes me seriously.

Suzanne writes letters as a way of supporting her brother who cares for his wife, who has Alzheimer's dis-
ease. She also writes to a friend whose husband died of cancer recently.

There is always someone who has some catastrophe happen. I just try to reach out and let them know I'm concerned and caring. I keep in touch with relatives who are ill and with friends whom I know to be in need.

Joyce values the letters that she writes and receives. She finds writing is helpful to keep up friendships and support friends and family. She writes three times a week to her sister-in-law who is confined to a wheelchair, "so that there will always be some mail and she can have something to look forward to."

Anna finds that reading broadens her experiences. "I can go all over the world with people of all ages and see what their lives have been like." She includes all kinds of reading--fiction, non-fiction, plays, and poetry. Reflection is an important part of reading for Anna. Sometimes this takes the form of journaling.

Learning is of lifelong value to Diana. At present, she is studying ancient spiritual systems, primarily those that were close to nature. The goddess tradition is of special interest to her because it was a nurturing, matriarchal society. "I have come to appreciate the difference between matriarchy and patriarchy. I think what's real is what came before patriarchy. It has been as devastating for males as for females."

Reading, sharing, hearing speakers, writing, and praying are all part of Sarah's spiritual development. "I set
aside at least four short times for prayer each day so I can be quiet." Talking with God gives her a "sense of peace and being cared for and loved." She reads spiritual books, periodicals, and articles at least twice a day. "It is important to continue reading inspirational things to find comfort and help me think through my beliefs. I like to search out new authors so that I can expand my ideas." Sarah values input from workshops, speakers, sermons, discussion groups, and friends. Writing is helpful for Sarah, too, including autobiography, poetry, and anything that provides an opportunity to reflect on the past and her place in the world.

Joanne has valued learning for many years. "You can still accumulate a lot of knowledge every day, learning and reading," she says of old age. She also finds hobbies, cooking, gardening, and hand work important to her daily life. "If I don't enjoy something, I don't do it. I'm a very practical person." The theme of freedom at this stage in life was echoed by all the other narrators. It no longer is necessary to conform to society's expectations (Bianchi, 1982).

Besides the prime importance of family and friends, Doris says that music, art, theater, reading books, and socializing are all significant. "As old as you are you can still learn. I think there's an awful lot of wisdom in old people. And I definitely count among them. I'm going to be 75 before long."
Five of the narrators spoke of poetry as being especially meaningful to them. I found that particularly interesting because poetry is not a popular form for reading or expression in our culture. But Sarah, Diana, Elva, Suzanne, and Nettie all enjoy poetry. Some of the women write poems too. (I have included some examples of poetry in the Appendix.)

Suzanne quoted parts of the poem, "Tomorrow's Bridge," to me (see Appendix). Of the poem she said, "it is about letting go and letting God. I have said that poem over a million times. I've had it for years and years." She added that she has

a thick collection of things that ring bells with me. Sometimes I think I'll cut this down and clear out the clutter, but I haven't been able to throw away a thing, because over the years every one of those has meant something to me.

One of her favorites begins, "there's magic all around us, deep hidden springs of magic in rocks and trees and in the hearts of men.... And he who strikes the rock aright, may find it where he will." She explained that if you touch the rock just right, there's magic. "I think about all these things that have really enriched my life, and realize I could be a whole lot poorer."

Nettie recited to me some of the poetry that she memorized in high school and college. She has many poetry books that she reads over and over. Diana and Sarah both write poetry and read some to me.
After college Anna was employed as a journalist. She has been a published writer for a number of years. Although she hasn't written recently, she hopes to get back to writing. This year Anna sold her home and car and moved to a retirement community. "I want to have something definite I can do in these surroundings. After I settle down I can get at it. It is hard for me to make much progress with my hand, so I work on the typewriter. I have a story that is pretty well worked out in my mind."

Some of the women mentioned financial stability as being important in old age. Jane put it this way:

Money is pretty much earned for the lifetime and that is a wonderful thing. It is working out. My mother laughs and says, "yes, it does work out." You save, do what you're supposed to. It's crazy but we may be able to live without earning a living. That leaves me pretty much free.

Joanne also mentioned freedom from financial worries as important. Without financial worries and with children raised, elders are relieved of worrying about where the next dollars will come from. Of course, many elders are not this fortunate, especially women. One of the women in this study has very few resources.

Anna said that she wants to continue developing her prayer life. "I would like to have a richer prayer life. I ask for specific things and give lots of thanks, but I would like to be able to contemplate more." Anna belongs to a spiritual growth group at her church where the focus
is on prayer and spiritual readings. "We try to be there for other people, not just ourselves."

Having a faith to live by is important to these women. Faith can be found in the simple things in life—listening to others, helping those in need, praying, loving others, being alone, caring for a friend, and having compassion for someone in pain. Overriding these serious parts of spirituality, a sense of humor is crucial, having a playful attitude and spirit. It is too easy to take ourselves too seriously and never see the humorous parts of life.

A sense of humor that these women possess came through to me on a number of occasions. Elva made this comment with a twinkle in her eye when I asked her about living a good old age, implying that how one lives is what counts, not how long: "I don't think it's important to live an old age!" This is from a woman of 86 who loves and is loved by others in the deepest sense of the word and is still contributing what she can to humankind.

Besides seeing the comical side of life, the narrators impressed me with their modesty and humility. Yet, their strength and courage to explore the deeper meaning of life and deal with hardships and losses was evident as they shared their sacred stories.

In a simple, direct way, Joyce expressed what many of the women implied. "I just try to be a good person and live day-by-day." And Diana summed up her feelings as follows:
What is important in living a good old age is important in living at any point, namely compassion, honesty, and integrity. I think that those, and of course having enough health so that the others can function, are really important in old age. Hopefully in becoming old we are able to say "old" and not think it's negative. To me old is neat!

Finding growth through meaningful experiences is something all of the narrators have developed, each in her unique way. After I heard the stories, it became evident to me that there is not one effective way. There is a creative path that each woman has developed on her own spiritual journey. Hope for the spirit is found in the freedom to be ourselves. That is the beauty of human nature.

Life's Gifts

Fischer (1985) says that only in the later years is there "time enough fully to discover ourselves and others in relationship, and to know those qualities of friendship which emerge with the passage of years" (p. 69). Fischer goes on to say that friends show God's love by their acts. The meaning of life is found in communion with others "as a journey into the heart of love" (p. 70).

Only by love can we develop caring communities. Friends that meet the needs of emotional and intellectual support and stimulation help elders feel less isolated and more a part of the community. Bianchi (1982) speaks of spiritual love as the most deeply immersed in and tempered by real encounters in the world. Elders are challenged to
teach others what it is to love in a society that focuses on doing over being.

It is in the later years that we can simply be who we are, free of the frantic doing that is so common in our culture in the earlier years. Being is a precious gift in elderhood and we need to recognize, honor, and celebrate it.

Asking the women what they valued most in life and what are life's greatest gifts brought very specific, direct answers. By this age it appeared that they had thought about their blessings and given thanks for the richness the gifts have brought to them.

All of the narrators mentioned the significance of love, along with family and friends, as being precious to them. There was no mention of material possessions, except to say that they weren't really important although they make life more comfortable. Jane said, "I am happiest when I am getting rid of stuff. I want a smaller environment as far as my possessions are concerned."

Friends play a significant role for the narrators, providing comfort, support and love. Some of the women, such as Elva, Diana, Nettie, and Sarah, have no family nearby so friends are even more important to them. Sarah said that just to know that she has friends nearby that care gives her strength and comfort.

The women in this study show love to friends and family by writing letters, making telephone calls, caring for
sick people, comforting, listening, and being faithful through the years. They also help with shopping, cleaning, offering a ride, holding a hand, and touching others' lives just by being there.

All of the women in the study stated that their families continued to be very important to them in old age, giving them hope, purpose, and support. Some, like Nettie, Doris, and Sarah, specifically mentioned their children, Suzanne her husband, and Jane, Doris, and Nettie their grandchildren. Nettie said that her sister gives her support as well. Just as their families of origin supported and nurtured the women when they were young, so do their families of today give their lives meaning and continue to be the mainstay.

Doris said that she is "very proud" of her family. Her two sons are professors. "Those boys are just wonderful, and their wives are the same, so loving and caring. I have to watch them because they want to do too much for me." Doris has four grandchildren. One is a TV writer for children's programs, doing a program to encourage literacy. "Another has a heart as big as outdoors," working as a fundraiser for an AIDS program. One granddaughter is a chef because she likes to "see the smiles on people's faces when they are served a beautiful plate of food. Her work is so beautiful, you can't imagine." Doris' granddaughter spent three days preparing for her grandparents' fifty-fifth wed-
ding anniversary celebration. A nephew helps Doris with financial matters.

Suzanne values most "family, people who love me, and people I love. I think love, being loved and loving," is a gift from God. Joyce values most "family and the fact that there is a Higher Being that will help me and love me when I don't have the resources within myself to give me strength." Health is also a great gift, she said.

Sarah is thankful for her children and feels that they are "the most significant and precious part" of her life today. "It has been a privilege to be a mother, and continues to be as I get older. I am looking forward to being a grandmother and having a close relationship with my grandchildren." Since Sarah spends much of her time far from family members, friends are very important to her. "My home is a place where I can be alone or with friends, a place where I can write, read, sew, and nurture myself." Sarah mentioned love, caring, and compassion as gifts humans have. Also such qualities as kindness, sensitivity, and sharing are special gifts. "The abundance in my life makes me feel blessed for all that God has given me."

Elva's loving friends include children, even though she had none of her own. She spent much of her life working with handicapped children and finds a bright future for all of us through our children. "When I see very special classroom teachers who give children an idea of what life
is all about and what their part in life is, it gives me hope."

In the past Diana saw friendships as "something other folks need." Recently, when she was very ill she learned an important lesson about the support of friends.

I can't continue to survive as a recluse. I have pushed people away, spending time sitting and reading. Now I realize I need people. I was so delighted and surprised this summer at how supportive and helpful people were.

She is now consciously building a support network, realizing it takes time and energy.

Family, faith, and friends are all vital to Anna's well-being. She said, "Of course I value people most, their relationship to me and their relationship to others. Love really does make the world go around, the ability to love and receive love." Concerning our purpose in being here Anna remarked, "we were put on earth for some reason, not somebody's whim. When we get over into the next world I hope what has been important will be made plain to us." She feels love will play a big part in the revelation.

Doris values human love and love for all creatures. "Life itself is the greatest gift, including our need for each other and caring for each other." A family that "hangs together is a tremendously important thing." She added that "some creaturely comforts are not to be disdained," but they aren't all important.

Love is what Sarah also values most, whether it's love for people, animals, or nature. "I feel at peace knowing
that God's love is always with me and over the whole earth." God's love extends beyond people to the arts, creativity, learning, books, and solitude.

Seven of the women spoke of God as an intimate friend and how they value that closeness. Sarah said, "I always know that God is with me and loves me and cares, despite what happens. My trust that God will care for my needs and that we are in partnership gives me hope in life." This hope not only sustains her during difficult times, but Sarah finds that God's presence is growing stronger as she gets older.

Anna, who has recently gone through several transitions and losses, expressed her feelings about God and love (she has given up driving and moved from her home to a retirement center):

The most comforting thing is that I really believe that God cares. I can't explain why bad things happen to good people. Even the people who try to explain it don't satisfy me. But I believe that He's there and there are purposes for the actions. God's love really does make the world go around. Without it you are in a pretty bad state.

Joyce expressed her trust in God when she said that "it is most comforting to know that I have someone outside of myself that I can reach to for help if I need it. I think that we have hope for grace that God has given to all of us."

Like each of the other women, Doris told me that she finds strength in her daily life through the love of family.
and/or friends. She also finds comfort in "the ultimate realization that God is love, and He lives, and we can all benefit and enjoy Him/Her/It. Love is comforting in any form."

Elva finds strength in this message from God: "I will never leave you or forsake you." And she said He never has, despite the hardships in her life. Since Elva is limited physically, she enjoys friends who come to her apartment to visit or talk with her on the telephone. "Just to be remembered is important."

Anna's complex relationship with God was expressed as a series of layers as follows:

On the surface I am a very optimistic person and cheerful and put on a good face. Underneath that layer there are quite a lot of doubts, sometimes almost depression. Underneath that is the bottom line that everything is going to come out all-right. I'm like an elevator, but no matter what happens I don't think God changes.

Joyce relies on God to give her support.

I think that knowing there is a Higher Being that can help you keeps you from feeling so distressed. If you have a shoulder to lean on and don't take your worries too seriously, you don't get so stressed.

Suzanne told of a comforting experience from her past concerning her awareness of the presence of God.

I often think of God, the Infinite Spirit, as being everywhere present. I sit, relax, my palms up, and try to imagine myself in the Spirit, with the Spirit all around me. And then I say, "Infinite Spirit within me," and I get a peculiar sensation, something surging a little bit, and this strange kind of prickly feeling in my palms. And then I run about me, "everywhere present." I've done it for years and years.
Suzanne finds it is important to have connectedness to others. She said she needs "something worthwhile to be doing, somebody to care for, somebody to care for me."

Sarah's sense of community comes from "seeing love in other people. I see beauty when I watch or talk with others or see works of art. Love spreads by noticing the beauties of the world." It is important to Sarah to take time every day to listen to others and show them her love. She said, "I can't separate the goals for my spiritual life from how I want to live on a daily basis. When I don't live up to that it helps to look at the humorous side of myself."

Diana feels that love is what is central to life. "The real sum and substance of life is love. Love and spirituality are the same to me. It's what you are inside that's important, not outside or what you own." After love, Diana values her mind.

I enjoy my mind, because it leads me into everything. It is the best toy you ever have. A friend says I notice things that no one else would because I have space in my mind to attend to things that others don't have time to.

Diana said that if you have an active and accepting mind so many things are open to you.

Anna values the mind along with a hopeful outlook.

We have some people here at the retirement home who are negative so much of the time that it is discouraging to associate with them. I just try to let it go by or focus on what's working better.

Joanne sees knowledge and learning along with family, friends, health, financial stability, and wisdom as our
most valuable assets. She gave this example from China about wisdom and aging. "If there is an old lady or man coming into the room, that person is the center of attention. You make room for her or him to sit down. Everyone stands up to welcome the old person." In China it is sometimes said, "seniority before beauty." Joanne notices that in the United States the attention goes to the young, while in China older people are more respected for their wisdom.

To Elva the greatest gift is "realizing that we were put on earth with talents and we are expected to use them. When we do use them we glorify the God that put us on earth." Jane's response to the question about life's greatest gifts includes being nurtured and giving back to others. "I've been given love, encouragement, and the freedom to develop myself. I want to give it back to others." Her interest in others' growth and development gives her pleasure and satisfaction, just like "watching a little plant grow. You have done your part to the best of your capabilities. It's a wonderful pattern. It takes the fear out of growing older."

The topic of life's greatest gifts, while bringing varied responses from the narrators, centered around the themes of love, family and friends, learning, God, spirituality, helping others, developing one's talents, and the appreciation of the beauties in the world around us. The sense of freedom that the women feel to be who they are and to contribute to the welfare of others was obvious to me as
I listened to their animated stories of those things in their lives which have the most meaning. It was a gift to hear and be touched by them.

Issues For Humanity

Toward the end of each narrator's story, each expressed what she saw as the most important issue for us as human beings. This was a summing up of how each one feels about humanity and was a logical ending for the interviews. These responses, although expressed in various ways, showed more similarities in content than the discussions of the other topics. The theme centered around concern for other people, specifically caring for other people, showing kindness, sharing skills and gifts, learning to get along, and helping others. Each of the participants cares deeply about other human beings.

Suzanne said that the most important issue is to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever." She explained that she means we must serve God by serving people, each other, and our fellow creatures. "We are part of God's creation where He is the Supreme Being. As we praise God and give thanks, we show our gratefulness to God for what we have."

In Nettie's words the most important issue is "being a help to friends, living a good life, and growing spiritually." Joanne said it was important "to be kind to people, helpful, and not be a burden to others."
Elva responded by saying,

I think it's important for every human being to use the talents they have to help each other and to try to make this world a little better so that when they go on (die) they can say "I have contributed a little bit to this world."

Elva died since I interviewed her, and I am sure she has left this world a better place by her contributions to society and by the part of her she leaves with those of us whose lives she touched.

Although Anna felt that focusing on one issue "is a big order," she said the following underlies others:

Being responsible along with being responsive is overwhelmingly important. Someone asked me not long ago to describe yourself in one word. I thought a long time and said I think I'm responsive. When somebody talks to me I like to answer. When I'm given a responsibility I like to accomplish it. I like to stay in touch with people and keep the channels open so that others don't feel that I have left them. It is not in itself a great virtue, but it keeps your relationships with people on a better level. There is a lot bound up in that too--integrity and caring.

Diana spoke of our strong influence on one another and the oneness of humanity.

What I do to you, I do to me. An older woman once said to me that when you point your finger at someone, you are pointing three at yourself. When we treat people as objects instead of people we are also doing it to ourselves. It is important not to make distinctions between us and them, which pushes people apart. Commonality reinforces the good things in us.

Diana said this is a central part of Hinduism.

"To know God and love Him, accept other people's feelings, and make other people as comfortable as you can,"
is crucial to Doris, "and certainly to share what you have, and get to know God."

Because we now communicate with people all over the world, Jane sees the need to learn to get along with each other.

The inequities between the haves and have-nots are not being corrected fast enough. But I see so many good signs. I think that God sends problems that always look bigger in our eyes than they are, and maybe it is all a grand scheme where we are on a stage and challenged to the utmost.

Joyce mentioned peace as the most important issue for us as human beings. "If everybody tried to get along with everybody else we wouldn't have as many deaths and murders, and as many starving people and wars."

For Sarah, the most important issue for humans is caring for each other and the universe in a loving, considerate way. We need to think of the total of God's creation and what the needs are. It is important to have peace in everyone's heart and in the world."

As these women have demonstrated, spiritual growth is one benefit of growing old. All is not lost or over, as our culture would have us believe. We do not need to mark time with idle activities while we wait for death. There is much to be done. It is up to each individual to discover what is important and meaningful to live a good old age, to be resourceful, feel useful, and pass on to others what we have gained in our years of living. Life may not be easy at times, but it can be productive and beautiful in new ways. Growing spiritually is one task that can last
the rest of our lives as long as we have at least some of our capabilities available.
CONCLUSION

One of the important tasks in the later years is to concentrate on the time remaining before death to do what we feel is important, freeing ourselves from the expectations of other people and society in general. It is time for spiritual growth and inner strength, to think about the future, and recall the past, giving it all a sense of wholeness. Old age is a time to work on unfinished conflicts within ourselves as we see that the time remaining is growing short. Each day counts as a gift, and many older people try to live one day at a time, treating each moment with reverence.

Erikson's (1986) work on the eight stages of the life cycle culminates with what he calls "integrity vs. despair" in old age. Here, he has drawn together those tasks that hopefully have been completed toward the end of life. Erikson and his wife are in their nineties and still enlarging on their concepts of what it means to grow old. In a separate article, Goleman (1990) cites Erikson's explanation of how each lesson in the eight stages can ripen into wisdom in old age. At this time, full wisdom develops to the extent that "a sense of integrity, a sense of completeness, of personal wholeness" are strong enough to counter-
act physical decline. In the women that I studied, I found that in most cases they have successfully completed those tasks that Erikson refers to and are living an old age with integrity.

Looking at Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development, I found that 8 of the 10 women in my study have reached Stage 5 (Conjunctive Faith) of Fowler's progression, but had not reached the highest stage (Stage 6: Universalizing Faith), attained by only a few, such as Mother Teresa and Ghandi. Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith, involves "a new reclaiming and reworking of one's past" and "the opening to the voices of one's 'deeper self'" (pp. 197-198). Here, one is conscious of the necessity of justice for all peoples and can examine the meaning of life.

Despite the diversity of issues that the women addressed when they discussed their spiritual lives, there were some similarities that I found in the stories of the narrators. These are listed below:

1) The families of origin of the women valued education and books and gave the women the feeling that they should have a good education. Each woman graduated from college, and half of them have done graduate study.

2) The family gave each woman the sense that she could make what she wanted out of life, set her own goals, and achieve them. Because of these messages she received from her family as a child, she did not feel limited because she was a female.
3) As a child, each had at least one person whom she could depend on to take care of her needs and who loved her unconditionally.

4) Nine of the women said they had a very happy childhood. It isn't so important that this is true, but that they perceive it to be so. Where this was not perceived as true, the individual seems to have made peace with her past and is not dwelling on it in old age. It seems that accepting childhood experiences may contribute to a rich spiritual life in later years, because these women are not spending their energies maintaining unhealthy behaviors or trying to change the past. Rather they are free to transcend into richer states where they can grow inwardly. Also this leaves them free to concentrate on helping others and to consider a broader view of the world. We know it takes energy to protect the ego. That energy can be put to more productive use, and it seems that the strength gained in early childhood contributes to this growth.

5) All the narrators value their families of origin and trust them. Strength and support come through their relationships with family members. Families created through marriage are similarly valued. Those who have children and stepchildren feel they are very important to their sense of meaning. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren bring a special pleasure and extension of
love and support. One woman with no family of her own values close friends and has adopted them as her family.

6) The women have a strong desire to help others and have compassion for all human beings. This is evident in the types of roles the women have chosen: college, public school and special education teachers; nurse, physical therapist, and social worker; mothers, homemakers, and a variety of community volunteer positions in the helping fields. Eight of the narrators have been teachers.

7) In old age all of the women take time to show love and support to their families and friends.

8) Four of the narrators are still actively volunteering in the community. Four others no longer volunteer for health reasons. The women all care deeply for humanity.

9) All except one of the women have a strong belief in God or a Supreme Being who can be relied upon when life becomes difficult. They mentioned a number of times how the strength of God helps them through their losses. God was described as a partner, a friend, and a constant in their lives. The nine narrators also mentioned their blessings and how they thank God for their abundance.

10) Prayer and/or meditation is important to nine of the women as a way of sharing their concerns, counting their blessings, and letting go of their stresses.
11) Each narrator experienced devastating turning points, such as the death of a child, illness and death of parents and husbands, and divorce.

12) Role models were readily identified as people who helped the women achieve their goals and pointed them in the right direction when they needed guidance. The narrators have learned useful coping strategies and hope from their role models.

13) This group of women came from various socio-economic backgrounds. They are not all financially secure today. (Two of the women have enough resources for the simple necessities of life, and one is barely getting by.) They feel that there are issues more important to concentrate on now, and they have accepted their circumstances. Material possessions don't mean a lot to these women in old age. Six of the women said that they are not interested in collecting "things" anymore, even though they did when they were younger. Four said they never valued possessions.

14) Each of the women has a strong religious, church, and/or moral background which appears to give them strength in later life. They all learned at an early age what was right and wrong, good and bad.

15) Poetry is meaningful for five of the women. Six find meaning in quotations and sayings from various authors. Each woman values reading, learning, information, and keeping up with world events. They are avid readers today. Six use the Bible often and can quote passages.
16) The women are all open-minded and eager to learn new things, accepting a variety of people and ideas.

17) I noted a zest for living, despite hardships, along with hope, courage, and patience at this stage of life.

18) The women realize that it is important to attend to both their inner and outer lives, time for self and time for others.

19) The freedom that old age offers is important to each of the women. They no longer feel bound by the roles and expectations of society that they experienced when they were younger.

20) Each of the nine women that commented on death feel a peaceful acceptance of it as part of life. They do not fear death; however, they hope they will not experience a long, painful dying process where they will be dependent on others.

21) The narrators see love as central to their lives and the world.

Future studies in spirituality and aging might address different cohorts and how each finds a sense of meaning. Looking at early childhood, it would be interesting to study how specific experiences from the early years relate to spirituality in later life and what factors promote spirituality in younger years. Another study might address the differences between men and women. A study might examine how people can intentionally learn to find meaning and
develop a strong faith as adults. Some of the sections in this paper could be studied separately, such as role models, turning points, or attitudes toward death.

As younger generations grow old there may be more interest in the spiritual life. It seems to me that this is beginning to happen as more people recognize the emptiness in their lives. Younger people are accepting counselors, therapists, and spiritual directors. Hopefully, they will have their energies freed from anxieties of the past and use them to search for deeper meaning in life. The present generation of elders did not have the opportunity to use these professionals. They were not readily available, much less accepted, as they are now by the under 50 cohorts.

I believe as women it is important to find role models among people who are aging well. We also need to support and encourage each other in our growth and daily living, reaching out to others to encourage them to make their later lives richer, while strengthening our own inner resources.

As we grow older we experience many losses. One loss often follows another so closely that we do not have time to finish grieving one before others follow. To become stronger in our old age and continue to grow spiritually becomes more important than ever. As we lose friends, family, health, our home, and our old ways of coping on the one hand, we can deepen our faith journeys and travel to new heights and depths. This usually does not happen with-
out effort, nor does it just happen because we age. A meaningful spiritual life rooted in positive early childhood experiences is desirable, but not always realistic. If we create an awareness and search for opportunities to grow by learning from our experiences, we not only survive, but are able to grow as we age.

The subject of death, losses, and old age was addressed in a recent production on public television. All Passions Spent was a play adapted from a novel by Vita Sackville-West (Masterpiece Theater, 1991). The main character was a woman who was living the final days of her life as she chose, not as her family wished for her. After her death, a friend remarked that death brings out "an astonishing beauty." He added, "We can be lonely in life, but beautiful in death. Beauty in life may come from good dressing, but for beauty in death you have to fall back on character." This friend said that to size someone up he pictured her dead. "It always gives them away, especially if they don't know you are doing it," he remarked.

When we look at old age as a positive time for growth, a time for new freedoms and new journeys, it becomes a time for spiritual awareness. Our lives can be viewed as a process, a spiritual journey, with particular details standing out and turning points that triggered change, growth, and openness.

Despite ageism, losses, and physical decline, these women are living a good old age. The body may be frail,
but the spirit is strong. To live in the moment, to give something back to the world, to feel that I can do it, gives one an opportunity to find meaning in elderhood. Older women can take time to reach out and greet other people, to love God, the self, and others, and to share love.

Spirituality is a way of being, a way of expressing ourselves in the world according to what we believe and what is in the common good. Spirituality is made up of our inner and outer worlds of expression joined as a nurturing, loving whole. I saw these qualities in the women I interviewed. They have each found special meaning in life.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Cover Letter to Participants (Sample)

Date

Dear Suzanne,

As an older graduate student at Oregon State University, I am studying women's spirituality as part of my thesis work. Because spiritual growth is so important in my own life, I chose this topic to explore with other women. Besides the satisfying moments, my journey has included a large amount of pain and suffering, particularly in recent years. Difficult though it has been, I believe it has forced me to grow in directions I would never have dreamed possible before.

There are many definitions of spirituality. I am referring to that sacred center in each of us out of which life flows. It is the work of the soul as we go about our daily living. It is found in the meaning of life, the experiences that have made an impression on us, our faith in a Higher Power, and our center of value, the purpose in being which accompanies us through life. Spirituality is very personal, both subtle and powerful. It deals with life's issues, ranging from learning basic trust to healing ourselves from pain and suffering. Spirituality is an ongoing process of growth and discovery, realized only through our personal experiences.

I would value your input by sharing the experiences and wisdom that you have gained through the years. I have asked you as one of a small number of women because I feel that you have a depth of experience and sensitivity that others can learn from. We have much to learn from each other, particularly from the gifts of older women who have had the chance to move through many of life's transitions.

Enclosed is a list of study questions for you to look over before we get together so that you will have a guide to follow as you tell your story. I hope to meet with you several times so that you will have a chance to say what seems important. I want to tape record our meetings so I
...can go over them and select the threads and themes that seem to stand out.

What we discuss will be confidential. The only way I will identify you in my paper is by pseudonym or number. I feel privileged to be a part of your life, and I am looking forward to sharing time with you.

May you travel in peace,

Nancy Orcutt
Appendix B

Interview Questionnaire: Reviewing Your Life

Where, when were you born? Where have you lived? Describe your family, your early memories. What made the strongest impression on you? What stands out for you as a child, adolescent, young adult? How did your particular religious background, or lack of one, influence your development?

As a young adult what gave meaning to your life? What disturbed you? Are these things still important to you? How have your values changed, if at all?

Describe people, places, events or turning points in your life that have influenced you.

Describe the people that have been role models and affected you spiritually during your lifetime. Describe your own roles that may have affected you.

What has influenced your spiritual life as you have matured?

What is most comforting, most disturbing to you?

What or who gives you hope, purpose, and support in life?

What role, if any, does religion play in your spiritual life?

What goals do you have, or have you had, for your spiritual development? What is the meaning of death to you?

What gives significance to your life today? What devalues life?

What do you value most and least in this world?

What do you feel are life's greatest gifts? What do you feel is important in living a good old age?

What do you consider the most important issue for us as human beings--the most basic question of which all others are only a part?
As you become older how are you able to help others find meaning and purpose in life and strengthen their inner beings?

Are there other comments about spirituality you would like to make? (for example, How did your career, hobbies, activities affect you? your children? What do you do to cultivate your spirituality? Any disciplines you follow?)

Nancy Orcutt
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Appendix C
Poems From Elva

The following poem was framed on Elva's wall:

The way is long,
   let us go together...
The way is difficult,
   let us help one another...
The way is joyful,
   let us share it...
The way is narrow,
   let us go with God...
The way is ours alone,
   let us go in love...
The way stretches before us,
   let us begin.

Elva gave me a copy of this poem when I visited her several months after the interview:

When good friends walk beside us
On the trails that we must keep
Our burdens seem less heavy
And the hills are not so steep.
The weary miles pass swiftly
Taken in joyous stride
And all the world seems brighter
When friends walk by our side.

The following poem appeared in the program of Elva's memorial service as she had planned:

Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not here. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
  of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft star that shines at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not here. I did not die.

(The source of these poems is unknown.)
Appendix D

Poem From Suzanne

The following poem has special meaning for Suzanne:

TOMORROW'S BRIDGE

Tomorrow's bridge as I look ahead
Is a rickety thing to view;
Its piers are crumbled, its rails are down,
Its floor would let me through.

The chasm it spans is dark and deep,
And the waters foam and fret;
I have crossed that bridge a thousand times
Though I never have reached it yet.

It has crashed beneath me to let me through,
Although it is miles away;
But strange, the bridges that I have crossed
Have all been safe today.

Perhaps I shall find when I reach that one
That lies in the distant blue,
Some hand may have mended its rickety floor
And its piers may be strong and new.

And I can pass over, light-hearted, free,
As a bird on the buoyant air--
Forgive me, God, for my fearful heart,
My anxious and foolish care.

Grace Noll Crowell
Appendix E

Poems From Sarah

Time

Time is different now.
There's less to do
But more to weigh.

Life reaches quickly.
I consider more
Yet know less.

Facing truth, failure, darkness,
Feeling loss, illusion, pain,
My soul is freer now.

I walk stronger, prouder.
My senses heighten,
Searching the limits.

Time spent
Untangling who I am
Is nature's course flowering.

Silence is my partner,
Practice my teacher.
Only God I know.

Sarah
November, 1990

Becoming Sixty

Becoming sixty brings forth an
Era that colors our
Consciousness and opens
Our hearts to a greater spiritual
Maturity than was possible before.
If we accept the challenge to
Nurture our souls, and receive and
Give God's love in new ways, our
Sense of wisdom, freedom and
Insight takes us on an
X-tra-ordinary journey
Toward a flowering of
Years as messengers of peace and joy.

Becoming Seventy

Becoming seventy encourages us to
Embrace the gifts and
Challenges that God has given us.
Oftentimes a deep sense of
Meaning, why we are here,
Invites us to give in
New ways we never dreamed possible.
God's love and acceptance surround us with
Strength, thankfulness and
Enlightenment that allow us to
Vision peace and trust in the
Eternity of the universe and
Nature. We flow
Toward a genuine integration of
Years as messengers of love and harmony.

Becoming Eighty

Becoming eighty directs our
Energies toward a sense of peacefulness and
Connectedness, and the
Opportunity to explore the
Mystery of the spiritual realm. It
Invites us to accept God's
Nourishment with gentleness and
Gratitude for our courageous journey.

Even as we look toward prayer to
Integrate and balance our lives, we continue to
Grow with the strength of the
Holy Spirit in search of the faithfulness,
Trust and love needed to bless our
Years as teachers of younger generations.

Sarah, 1991