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### The Calling: A Study of Personal Spiritual Experiences of Seminary Students

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## **The Calling: A Study of Personal Spiritual Experiences of Seminary Students**

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*Increasingly various fields of mental health have been more receptive to the idea that religion and spirituality play important roles in many peoples' healthy functioning. For mostly historical reasons, the study of personal spiritual experiences (PSEs) and their influence has not piqued the interest of researchers. This study investigated the PSEs of seminary students and the results deliver a powerful message. Not only do PSEs occur, but they are experienced as a "calling," influencing and guiding lives. A unique adaptation of the biblical exegesis technique of "call narrative" analysis was applied to these PSE narratives yielding suggestions for clinical approaches.*

**KEYWORDS** *spiritual, calling, religion, mystical, spiritual experience, ecstatic, call narrative*

And suddenly there was this voice that was not my voice. It was powerful. It had authority. And it said, "From the beginning of time, I have called you." (V41)

Recently psychologists have opened up to understanding the role that spirituality and religion play in people's lives (Delaney, Miller, & Bisoño, 2007; McMinn & Hathaway, 2009; Walsh, 2011), especially since it has been documented that these human experiences and practices affect mental health and well-being. In an effort to discover what articles psychologists might be interested in reading regarding this association, McMinn and Hathaway (2009) found that although psychologists are less religious than the general U.S. population, they do think spirituality and religion are important

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psychological topics. Noting a small response rate for the survey, these researchers found that psychologists are interested in research providing information relating religion and spirituality to health and coping. Further, psychologists want to know more about cross-cultural and interfaith issues. Interest in religious and spiritual experiences in and of themselves was not noted.

It makes sense that psychologists would be interested in learning something pragmatic to aid human functioning. This practical approach is consistent with how William James (1902), often referred to as the father of psychology, would support psychological study. However, James (1902), did study extraordinary human experiences at the turn of the 20th century when psychology and religion were less differentiated. Later, the psychological study of religious experiences, for example divine revelation or mystical experience, became marginalized. It seems likely that in current mainstream Western culture there is an unspoken, yet tangible fear of speaking about extraordinary experiences, whether to a psychologist, social worker, priest, pastor, reverend, chaplain, minister or counselor, or others in the mental health professions.

The issue of this investigation is expressed as follows: A healthy clinical environment ensues when people feel free to express their experiences to a trusted person. It is likely that individual encounters with the divine are more prevalent than is generally thought. There are many reasons people may fear revealing or discussing these most often unexpected extraordinary experiences. This article briefly summarizes the history of changing attitudes toward personal spiritual experience (PSE), describes an investigation of such experiences in seminary students, and concludes with a discussion of the implications of findings for clinicians.

## FIVE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CONCEALMENT OF PERSONAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

### Religious Identity Formation of Christian Church

Prior to the Early Christian movement, many ancient cultures functioned in unison with spiritual experience. These communities operated in a sacred reality (Eliade, 1957). Although the Christian Church and its religious ancestor Judaism originated with personal and group mystical experiences, the Christian Church canon developed a more exclusive view of mystical revelation. The legitimacy of a PSE needed to be aligned with the standards and principles adopted by the church. Heresies and excommunications became accepted methods of weeding out views and experiences diverse from the accepted Christian way (MacCulloch, 2010).

## Discernment of the Origin of a PSE

De La Torre and Hernandez (2011) noted that during the time of the developing canon of the Christian church, there were some attempts to correlate the pagan beliefs and ways of knowing with the Christian revelation. These ancient societies lived in a world of spirits, some good and some evil. It was important to discern one's spiritual experience as truth or deception. There existed a very real fear of being led in a fraudulent path. As the church identity developed, spiritual experiences not in line with standards became increasingly demonized. As the concept of Satan evolved into the enemy of the church, spiritual experiences were scrutinized for their possible evil origins.

## Discredit of the Feminine

Another method to enhance control and eliminate personal revelation contrary to accepted doctrine, was to shut down the contributions from the feminine. Evidently the intensity and frequency of females' personal spiritual experience seemed chaotic and threatening to established church leaders. From the beginning of this movement, the female voice was silenced. In the New Testament, Paul seems to be contradictory in his approach to the female role in the developing church. He obviously had female companions who helped to spread the teachings of Christianity. Yet, he states that women are to be silent in church and that if they want to know anything, they should ask their husbands (Cor. 14:34, 35). They are to be submissive to their husbands (Tit. 2:5) as are slaves (Tit. 2:9). So the idea of equality between the sexes began to fade and distort into one of male-dominance, either in these early teachings or through later redaction (Christ, 2003; Johnson, 1992; Wolski Conn, 1986).

Further restriction of female influence came through the intentional change and editing of gendered language in the sacred writings. For example, although the original word for Holy Spirit in Greek (*pneuma*) and in Syriac (*rubā*), meaning breath, is either neutral or feminine in origin, by 400 CE the Holy Spirit is referred to as male. Women could not become bishops or participate in the leadership or the mass (MacCollugh, 2010). As noted by MacCollugh (2010), the systematic disenfranchisement of women is appropriately described by one Victorian clergyman who stated, "if Montanism had triumphed, Christian doctrine would have been developed not under the superintendence of Christian teachers most esteemed for wisdom, but of wild and excitable women." According to Trevett (1996), the main concern of the Catholic orthodoxy was more the frenzied expression of the prophetess, rather than the actual message. The idea was that one who prophesized must be in control of emotions and have insight into their words. The true (male) prophets of ancient times were imagined to have

stated the divine words in a controlled manner. The female seems to be a synonym for out of control feelings, especially, it seems, concerning ecstatic states of revelation. The male, on the other hand, uses the wisdom of ideas to approach an understanding of the divine. Cognition creates control and calm. Embodied, emotional sacred experience is wild and irrational. So perhaps the shutting down of PSEs not only reflects the tightening of doctrine for identifying true believers and secure discernment, but also an institutionalizing of a misogyny that restricts further the personal spiritual contributions of women.

## Reformation

Over the next millennium the Western Christian Church grew in power and influence and spread its message throughout Europe and Asia. However, following the absolute devastation of the Black Death in Europe, people's tolerance for the obvious corruption in the Christian Church waned. During the 16th century a period of protests toward Church practices began. The main goal of this movement, later named the Reformation, was unveiling the corrupt practices of the church and eliminating the secrecy, in part by printing the Bible in the vernacular. Although the main thrust of the Reformation was social ecclesiastical reform, many leaders were inspired by personal spiritual experiences and or their respect for this particular kind of guidance (Hernandez, 2010). These were intense times, as new religious identities were forged with varying degrees of tolerance of the PSE. A branching effect of religious institutions began then and continues today. As a result of the Reformation, the idea of separation of church and state emerged with its clear influence on the American constitution.

## Scientific Revolution

Another cultural upheaval occurred somewhat concurrently with the Protestant Reformation: The Scientific Revolution. A new way to understand the world had arrived. Reality began to make logical sense and, most importantly, outcomes could be replicated. No need for superstition or magic. Reason became the way to knowledge, supplanting superstition. The scientific method proved to increase understanding of how the world worked and, even more enticingly, of how to predict it. A new method of control seemed to hold the promise for a better life here on earth. But even in these enlightened times, it is likely the PSE guided some scientists. Scientists may have continued to utilize messages from other than identifiable physical sources or logic, but perhaps did not express them publicly to avoid ridicule or worse. For example, the understanding in chemistry of the structure of the benzene ring in 1865 by the German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé,

came to him in a daydream of a snake biting its tail. Currently, Dr. Charles Tart maintains a website where scientists can with anonymity describe their PSEs ([www.paradigm-sys.com](http://www.paradigm-sys.com)).

One problem, in the view of the scientific perspective for the legitimacy of spiritual experience, occurs because the phenomenon in question is undetectable to others and therefore, unverifiable. Perhaps even more significantly, spiritual experience is unpredictable and therefore uncontrollable. Control is paramount. At the time around the turn of the 20th century, the burgeoning field of psychology wanted and still wants to be considered a natural science and housed on those respected grounds, separate from philosophy and religion. William James' (1902) study of spiritual experiences relegated him by his colleagues as a philosopher, not a psychologist. With the establishment of Wundt's experimental laboratory in 1879, psychology quickly became a laboratory science, suspicious of the subjective. Prior to this time, psychology and theology were closer in their purpose of understanding, but a split in objectives sent these two fields in separate ways. Perhaps current research on PSEs can encourage an integration of these fields, bringing their currently more individuated perspectives to a fuller understanding of human experience.

Together, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution perhaps led to another barrier to recognizing spiritual experience. The Reformation led to the idea of the separation of church and state with its clear influence on the writers of the American Constitution. Written into the law of the American land was a protection not only to worship as one chooses, but also the clearer separation of public government from religion. Science also separated from religion and spirituality. With government and science wary of spirituality, there has been little interest in funding for the study spiritual and religious experience.

From this cursory overview of Western history and how it affects the acceptance of PSEs as valid human experiences, it becomes clearer how people became insecure about reporting their spiritual experiences. Perhaps we do not even trust our own PSEs and fear we are or will be labeled crazy if shared. However, some hope to open the field of study is emerging with the increasing acceptability of qualitative study. Perhaps the field of psychology now is more open to the exploration of PSEs as having value as a relatively common human experience that has effects on human lives. The human longing for divine connection and guidance remains present and deserves our attention. Still, the challenge of studying something not material or predictable remains. One solution is to study people's narratives about their experiences and how they have affected their lives.

Recently, Miller (2001) studied the possibility of transformative change in personality as a result of personal spiritual experience. He notes in his writings, that he had always been fascinated with transformative experiences. He finds the story of Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's novella, *A Christmas*

*Carol*, a model of these profound experiences that change lives forever. Miller wondered why psychology had mostly ignored these types of experiences. Perhaps, he wondered, if transformations like these were only stories. Gathering stories from volunteers generated from a local newspaper feature, Miller and his staff at the University of New Mexico began recording and analyzing these narratives. Over time these researchers developed questionnaires which provided quantitative as well as qualitative data. Patterns began to emerge. For example, Miller and his team looked at the length of time the transformative experience lasted and the length of its effects. He found that two types of profound changes occur, epiphanies and sudden insights, both of which led to dramatic changes in the life styles of the experiencers. Epiphanies resemble the more classical mystical experience whereas sudden insights are a more cognitive sudden sense of knowing. Miller names these dramatic transitions, quantum changes. We now appear to have the means and cultural permission to begin to explore these extraordinary human experiences.

### Current Study

An obvious place to investigate spiritual experience would be with seminary students. The purpose of the current study was to: (a) to explore what, if any, personal spiritual experiences (PSEs) seminary students had had and were willing to share, (b) document the timing and context of these events, and (c) explore the influences, if any, on the person who experienced it. For the purposes of this study a broad description of a PSE was used (see Appendix A), following the Jamesian (1902) tradition.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were volunteers recruited primarily from a 1-day class, Science and Mysticism, taught at the Iliff School of Theology, a graduate seminary located on the University of Denver campus in Denver, Colorado. During the class, I provided a brief overview of my proposed study and asked for volunteers who believed they had experienced a personal spiritual experience, as well as those who did not think they had had such an experience (see Appendix A). In this class of 57 students, 24 men and 33 women, much enthusiasm for this study was vocalized. However, as adults with families and jobs, many found it difficult to schedule the time for the interview process. Forty-two volunteers filled out the necessary paperwork. Over the next five months, I conducted interviews with 14 participants (10 women, 4 men) who were able to make the time commitment. Average age was 50.29 years



(range: 30 to 65 years old,  $SD = 9.41$ ), and most were Caucasian (13 Anglos, 1 Latino). All had college degrees and three had PhDs.

## Measures and Procedures

Participants completed individual interviews with the author. Many took place at Iliff in an available room; however, in order to accommodate some participants, I also went to a church, to an assisted living facility and to a student's home. Each interview took approximately two hours. The interview consisted of four parts:

- Part 1: Participants were asked to sign a release permitting this author to use the information gathered in research, publication or presentation (see Appendix B).
- Part 2: Participants were asked to tell the story of his or her experience. This free recall narrative was recorded. The author took notes and would occasionally ask clarifying questions or questions of omission according to a preformatted sheet (PSE Interview; see Appendix C).
- Part 3: Participants filled out PSE Questionnaire to aid in gathering some quantitative data (Appendix D).
- Part 4: Participants were given a demographic form to complete (see Appendix E). Each participant was given a code name to protect privacy, *V* for volunteer and a number (e.g., "V01" would designate Volunteer 1).

Both the PSE Interview and the PSE Questionnaire were adopted and modified with permission from Dr. William Miller, professor at the University of New Mexico. He had developed these measures to study the concept of quantum change (Miller, 2001), a profound change in behavior that positively affected peoples' lives, focusing on chronic alcoholics.

Each participant's story of their PSE was recorded and listened to by the author several times. The stories were transcribed and read several times as a process for uncovering common themes following Miller's example.

## RESULTS

The purposes of this study were to find out if seminary students were having experiences that they would consider spiritual and, if so, to document the content, timing and context of these events and to explore any influences the students reported on their current lives. I will begin by reporting the demographic data that describes the 14 participants at the time of their PSE. Next, I will provide the data that describe the contexts, both internal states



and external descriptions of the PSEs. A description of the influences the PSEs had on participants will be provided.

The most intriguing and unexpected result revealed for the participants in this study was that as a consequence of their PSE, these participants felt a “calling.” In an effort to analyze these particular results, an exegetical procedure named form criticism, in particular, the call narrative will be utilized.

Context of PSE

Ages at the time of the experience varied in range from age 7 to 60. The median age was 31.5 years. The time between telling their stories for this study and the actual occurrences of the PSEs varied from 1 year to 45 years past.

CHILDHOOD HISTORY

Participants reported a varied childhood history, with most responses (11) occurring in the more happy range. Table 1 describes the responses to the question, “How would you characterize your childhood, overall?”

Table 2 shows the responses to the question “What was your experience of religion in your growing up years?” demonstrating for most participants (12, 86%) the experience was in the positive range.

CONTEXT JUST BEFORE AND DURING THE PSE

Ten participants (71%) reported being alone when the experience occurred, while three (21%) reported being with one other person and only one (7%) reported being with many others. Twelve (86%) participants reported that the experience came upon them suddenly and nine (64%) found they were quite surprised by the experience. Four (29%) participants reported not being surprised at all. Eleven participants (79%) noted that they had not been expecting or hoping for a PSE, while two (14%) had hoped to have a PSE

TABLE 1 Childhood Rating Scale

Total no. responses	Response prompt
2	1. Very happy and peaceful
4	2. Mostly happy and peaceful
5	3. Somewhat happy
0	4. Neither happy nor unhappy
1	5. Somewhat unhappy
2	6. Mostly unhappy and painful
1	7. Very painful and traumatic

Note: One participant scored in twice.

**TABLE 2** Rating of Childhood Religious Experience

Total no. responses	Response prompt
5	Very positive
5	Mostly positive
2	Somewhat positive
1	Neutral, or I had no experience of religion growing up
0	Somewhat negative
1	Mostly negative
1	Very negative

Note: One participant scored in twice.

to some extent and one (7%) meditating participant reports expecting a PSE. Eleven participants (79%) reported that they were not doing anything to attempt to have a PSE, while three (21%) reported that they were to some extent. Examples of these attempts to have an experience were praying, or participating in a spiritual practice. Seven participants (50%) note that nothing out of the ordinary was happening just before the PSE. Three (21%) participants reported that the PSE came in dream form. Most participants report that the PSE was of brief duration, only lasting minutes; however, one participant reported a 5-hour experience.

Some examples from participants representing the variation in what was going on just before the experience:

What surprised me so much is that I was just doing something ordinary—just typing out of a book . . . in the middle of everyone, just typing robotically and I wasn’t thinking about anything and it just hit me. (V42)

Disaffected with life in the world and other ways of feeling and the meaning of life and life is just suffering and you know, there got to be more and things like that. (V25)

The Experience and Effects of the PSE

A Likert scale was utilized to explore the questions about whether the participant felt in control of the PSE and whether the participants felt that the PSE could have been stopped if desired. For these two questions the scale ranged from 1 to 5, one designating control of PSE and 5 designating no control. For the question rating control of the PSE, 12 participants (86%) rated a score of 5 indicating “completely not of my own doing or under my control.” Two (14%) participants rated the PSE a 4 and one gave a score of 3. For the most part, participants did not feel as they had control over the PSE. Further, as to the question about ability to stop the experience, nine (64%) participants rated the question a 5, indicating “definitely could not have stopped the PSE.” Two (14%) participants scored the question a 4 and three (21%)

scored a 3. These results indicate for the most part, PSEs are experienced as spontaneous and uncontrollable experiences.

In an effort to compare a change in the feelings of participants from just before to during the PSE a system of tallying points on a list of feelings provided on the PSE Questionnaire and then comparing the just before and during ratings was utilized (see Table 3). Participants could circle a number from 0 to 3 to indicate the intensity of the feeling and were allowed to mark as many feelings as seemed appropriate to describe their experiences. A review of the scores indicates that a general pattern of positive feelings increased during the PSE as compared to just before and negative feelings were reduced. The biggest increases in scores were for the following feelings: amazed, excited, joyful, and surprised.

The ending of the experience shows more variance. Four participants (29%) reported that the PSE ended suddenly, while five (36%) reported it generally faded away. Five (36%) of the participants reported that the experience has continued. Most reported feeling more energetic and peaceful.

Table 4 illustrates the participants' answers to questions relating to the lasting changes as a result of the experience. The summary of these "result of PSE" questions indicate that for this group the PSE changed their life perspectives for the better. Indeed, not one participant reported that things became worse. In response to the question as to the extent the effects of the PSE have lasted to this day, two (14%) participants checked most have lasted, five (36%) checked that the effects have lasted completely, and seven (50%)

**TABLE 3** Comparison of Just Before and During the PSE

Feeling	Just before	Just after	Difference
Accepted	21	29	+8
Afraid	6	6	0
Aimless	4	0	-4
Alone	8	2	-6
Amazed	4	28	+24
Angry	5	0	-5
Ashamed	2	1	-1
Confused	13	10	-3
Excited	2	23	+21
Exhausted	7	0	-7
Joyful	7	21	+14
Judged	6	0	-6
Loved	29	31	+2
Peaceful	15	26	+9
Sad	10	2	-8
Sick	1	0	-1
Surprised	2	23	+21
Tense	8	7	-1
Trapped	5	1	-4

**TABLE 4** Lasting Changes as a Result of the PSE

Question of result	Not at all	Somewhat	Considerably	Completely
I became a different person	2	9	2	1
My life was changed for the better	1	6	2	5
My life took on a different meaning	0	4	4	6
My life changed for the worse	14	0	0	0
My values and priorities changed	1	5	3	4
My faith in God was strengthened	1	3	4	6
I lost my fear of death	6	2	4	2
I knew that everything would be all right	1	2	3	9

checked that the effects have increased over time. Further, to the question about the confidence that the effects will last or continue in the future, two (14%) participants checked probably and 12 (86%) checked that they were sure the effects will last.

An Information-Processing Approach: Modalities of the PSE

The PSEs were experienced through three different modalities of information processing: auditory, visual (dreams), and a feeling bodily experience (kinesthetic). No participants reported gustatory or olfactory experiences. Often participants reported a powerful bodily and emotional reaction with the PSE; that is, they reported a “felt” experience. In several cases, the participant reported the PSE as interactive in a sense or that something external was connecting with them. The experienced connection was intense both physically and emotionally. The PSEs were unexpected, but clearly welcomed in all cases but one where the participant vacillated.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL, KINESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The following are quotes from participants related to the physical-kinesthetic and emotional piece of the PSE:

- This energy just overwhelmed my body. I felt so connected to everything . . . It's fascinating how you really feel it in your body. I just finished my thesis on embodied religion. (V42)
- I was overcome with most incredible sense of peace, was just overcome. Like the Holy Spirit and God had come down on me and said “you’re gonna be fine.” (V22)
- I felt like my body was shaking all over. (V25)
- I feel a presence . . . something is with me. (V20)
- Like having the love of your life with you at all times. (V18)

A greater sense of oneness-on the cellular level. I feel a transparency—language is inadequate. (V05)

I felt this immense kind of closure around me—and the most overwhelming sense of tranquility and sort of light and peace and more kind of connection or heart or safety. (V15)

#### AUDITORY

Three (21%) participants had an auditory PSE in the form of a voice that made a direct statement. Only one participant reported hearing something other than a voice. Nine (64%) participants reported nothing auditory. In all cases, the voices were experienced as a male voice to a female recipient. All statements appear to be in English and in the command form. Some examples follow:

“Love my people.” (V18)

“Masters of Divinity.” (V05)

“From the beginning of time I have called you.” (V41)

“And you are going to work with the poor.” I don’t know what it was yet. It was a little scary. It was a man’s voice. It kind of surprised me. (V22)

Interestingly and seemingly contradictory to the above statements, all participants checked “no” on the question “did you hear anything out of the ordinary, like a voice.” The following statements indicate that “heard” is perhaps an inadequate verb to describe how the words became known.

The only mandate or direction I have ever heard is . . . tied with the whole ministerial piece . . . you know, “[name omitted], love my people.” I really feel it is hard to articulate this. (V18)

Upon waking from a dream state, she says to her husband, “God just spoke to me.” (V27)

Explains that the words “feel implanted” rather than heard. (V20)

#### VISUAL EXPERIENCE

Ten (71%) participants reported that they did not see anything out of the ordinary, such as a light or a vision during the PSE. Only one participant

reported seeing a light and one reported seeing something like a light. Two participants reported seeing something other than a light.

#### MIXED MEDIA/DREAMS

Three participants had profound dream experiences. These dream PSEs and the actions following combine several forms of information processing. As one participant noted, "It was like an HGTV." Each of these three dreamers got their sense of "calling" with the dream experience. One dreamer experienced a "flashing blue light" on a map of the northeast United States indicating a university where he found the perfect match to study for a degree combining psychology, history, and theology. A second dreamer was guided from the dream and during a seemingly waking experience following the dream. She was guided to a previously unknown home where a childhood abuser was living, confronted him and forgave him, before he apologized. Amazed, she gave up her previous work as a lawyer and judge to go to seminary. The third participant had a vivid conversation with a school teacher who had remained her confidant into adulthood. He had passed away recently, but, during the dream, she had a very vivid and normal conversation with him and now works in hospice care with a powerful sense that we go on after death.

#### LANGUAGE

Many participants expressed how difficult it was to put the PSE into words. This type of ineffable experience is common across the literature for mystical experience:

It's hard to explain. I've tried to explain it to people and they look at me like I have two heads. (V22)

Limited language. (V18)

I don't know how to describe it exactly. In some ways it's a joyful and ecstatic kind of feeling, also seems like uncontrollable to some extent. (V25)

I feel transparency. Language is inadequate. (V05)

I still don't really know the words for it. Incredible feeling of being enveloped, overwhelming sense of tranquility. (V15)

## Sharing the PSE, the Social Experience

Two (14%) participants had never told anyone about the PSE they reported in this study. One (7%) had told one other person. Nine (64%) reported having told a few others, while two (14%) reported telling many others about their PSEs. These results demonstrate some variance in the willingness to share the experience. Next are some examples of participants statements about sharing a PSE:

It was hard for me to talk to anyone. Didn't feel like I could talk to my minister because I didn't know any females who were ministers. I never really told anyone about it. I was still trying to rule it out. My mind's playing tricks on me. Not family/friends. Some people at the church where I work, I've told . . . not the closest people to me. Part of it is parents are pragmatic. My father is a physicist. He's going to immediately say it was my mind. Don't think I shared with family and my closest friends really aren't religious. Friends? I think they'd each respond differently . . . she wouldn't know how to talk about it. I have a couple who would dismiss it as imagination running away with me. (V16)

I was in awe—for the next few days—just a sense of wonder. Like wow! I can't believe that happened to me. I wanted to talk to someone about it but I didn't think very many people . . . A few months later I told my best friend. It was cool because he's a Buddhist monk. He could relate of things in his own experience to it. (V40)

Never told anyone, still trying to rule it out. (V16)

Two participants mentioned fears of being “thought of as crazy” or of the PSE “not being honored.”

An isolation is indicated, as eight (57%) participants note that they don't know anyone who has had a PSE. Obviously if PSEs are not shared, finding others who have had an extraordinary experience would be less likely. There may be some change in willingness to share extraordinary experiences that develops with age as one participant puts it, “Come out of the closet as a mystic” (V18).

## The Calling

All participants reported “yes” to the question, “Did your experience affect your current choice of study or work?” Most participants report that they felt “called.” The following are quotes from each participant:

I think it was the groundwork for something bigger. (V42)



I had a sense of that whole call thing [age 12]. . . . That whole, this is the direction your going kind of thing. (V18)

And I thought wow! I woke up Sunday and I knew I was going to seminary. Again, I cannot explain the peace I felt, I still recall it. I'm just finishing my first year. I spoke at church about my call. It evidently moved someone in church because a woman came up to me and said, "I want to pay for your tuition." (V22)

[I] probably wouldn't be studying at Iliff. (V25)

When I came to Iliff, something drove me there. (V20)

I didn't have any other way to process what happened to me that day other than it was a call. (V27)

Through all these connections, I'm living the life I am living now. (V16)

Helped me to decide to become ordained minister and pursue MDiv. program. (V40)

And all I heard was "Masters of Divinity." (V05)

I think it was a sense of call to ordination. (V15)

I remained connected to church and now considering ministry. (V03)

Left the law for ministry. (V27)

To the study at Iliff. (V20)

Nursing and ministering to the dying. (V04)

#### CALL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

In an attempt to understand this idea of a calling as perhaps a particular type of PSE, the analytic procedure used to study the call narrative in biblical exegesis will be utilized. This particular form of analysis is used most often to study the Hebrew Bible prophets' personal encounter with the divine. However, Buss (1981) noted that the call narrative is common to spiritual summons found throughout the world. It seems this form of analysis might illuminate these participants' experience as well. Bratcher (2011) explained that the call narrative literary form:

developed as a standard way to express certain theological confessions about how the Israelites understood God to be at work in their leaders and prophets, and thereby their community, rather than simply as a vehicle to report history or personal experience. (p. 1)

Bratcher provides the following five basic elements of call narrative:

1. A situation of distress or crisis in which God confronts the person.
2. The commissioning of the person for some action or message.
3. Objections raised by the person in the form of inadequacy for the task.
4. Assurance of God's help, often in the formula "I will be with you."
5. A sign to confirm the commission, often with the content of the commission.

Utilizing these criteria, Table 5 denotes how the participants' PSEs compare to the call narrative structure.

The analysis of participant patterns of the call narrative demonstrates some variation from the Biblical expectation for prophets. Partial variations occur in the biblical narratives as well, however one striking difference is that for these participants 12 out of 14 (86%), did not object to the commission, the third requirement in the call narrative structure. Both outliers were female and had their PSEs at the age of 16. Adolescent issues of acceptance and identity had these two participants questioning and then burying the experience until later in life. Others who may have had childhood or adult experiences show an acceptance and a tendency to know that the PSE is guiding them. There were no participants that reflected the classical prophetic objection of, "I am not worthy to serve."

DISCUSSION

This investigation set out to discover if seminary students were having PSEs and, if so, whether they had told the story to anyone else prior to the study. The PSEs and their effects were analyzed.

TABLE 5 Call Narrative Development of PSEs

Elements	V03	V04	V05	V15	V16	V18	V20	V22	V25	V27	V33	V40	V41	V42
Crisis/concern	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Commission	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Objections/ questioning	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
Assurance	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sign	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note. Y = yes, N = no.

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Each participant related a story of a PSE. The range of time passing between the PSE and the telling of the story was large; varying from one to 45 years; yet the experiences remained vivid in the person's memory. Not only did participants recall the experience with great detail, they remembered where they were at the time, how old they were and how long it lasted. These are implicit memories (Siegel, 2010), episodic in nature, and yet, contrary to the expectations of a seemingly unprocessed type of memory, these PSEs have been integrated by operating to influence or direct each participant's life. That is, for this group, the PSE was experienced as a calling. A calling is defined as: "1. the act of one who or that which calls 2. Vocation, profession, or trade: What is your calling? 3. A call or summons: He had a calling to join the church. 4. A strong impulse or inclination: He did in response to an inner calling" (Calling, 1989, p. 211). This calling outcome was unexpected and contributes to our understanding of PSEs. That is, not only do PSEs occur, but they appear to be important directors in the experiencers' lives, at least for those who are involved in this study.

Additionally, the calling finding is significant in that we have long known that having a "reason for being" is a good indicator of positive mental health, of a sense of well being. For these participants, the emotional effects of these mostly brief and spontaneous experiences were generally in the positive direction, reducing tension, sadness, shame, anger, sickness, confusion, a sense of feeling judged, exhausted and/or trapped. Also, following the PSE, participants felt more peaceful, loved, excited, and surprised. Thus, a sense of aliveness accompanies these PSEs. The effects of these PSEs last and continue to influence these participants. PSEs were life changing.

It seems that the fear of sharing these experiences may wane with age, perhaps when we are less concerned about what others think of us or perhaps when we know how to better discern safe venues. Either way, it seems likely that these experiences are under reported and perhaps go unacknowledged or carry some fears, like "being crazy" or thought to be "crazy." One of the effects noted in this study for some participants was that the actual telling of the story in this study brought to consciousness how the PSE had influenced choices not noticed previously, that is the experience became more consciously integrated. Further study of this effect of telling one's PSE might lend support for clinicians being open to these stories that may aid in a client's understanding of their guidance and direction for their lives. However, these results suggest that the PSEs influence operates whether its influence is conscious or not.

Knowledge of the varied ways PSEs can be experienced will help clinicians to recognize and validate client's stories. PSEs can come in many modalities. In this study, participants experienced physical body sensations, auditory and visual experiences. Dreams offered powerful guidance and healings. It is likely that PSEs can come in other ways as well, for example, through the sense of smell and taste. Several researchers have noted spiritual

experience can come in a general sense of awe, described by Newberg (2001) as “transcendent spiritual unity.” Perhaps if we clinicians can create an environment to notice and share these experiences, we may recognize them more often and benefit from their assistance. However, I would like to note that my experience as a clinician has shown me that some clients who recognize their calling may not be ready to pursue this guidance, especially if it entails a major life change.

Although there were certain patterns that occurred across the participants that are consistent with other studies on this subject (Miller, 2004), variations also occurred. For example, although most experiences were brief, around a minute duration, others lasted much longer. Some participants have an ongoing interactive experience with the original connection. Overall, there was a general sense of well being that accompanied the PSE; however, one participant felt fearful after an initial reaction of joy in her sense of questioning, “What does this mean?” Also, this particular group shared only positive PSEs. We must be careful not to overgeneralize into thinking that all PSEs are positive or have a positive effect. If there is restraint in sharing positive PSEs, then it is likely that the limits to sharing are even greater if one has had a negative, confusing, or chaotic experience. Nowinski (2004) provides some ideas about how one may choose an identity based on a dark vision and some suggestions for interventions.

The call narrative elements might be used to develop a clinical approach to those who might seek the support of a pastor or therapist.

There are five elements to address a call narrative:

1. Confrontation arising from a crises or concern: Most likely someone seeking therapeutic assistance will have a concern or may be in a crisis. The concern is a confrontational invitation to grow, to evolve. Always in a clinical environment we strive to provide a safe environment. To provide a safe environment for sharing and exploring PSEs, we must address the topic in a general manner so as to let the seeker know that such subjects are open for discussion. One way to set the stage for this security is to make it known in one's presentation of services that these kinds of experiences are honored. Perhaps as part of an initial interview, we might ask a client about religious/spiritual beliefs and practices. Then equipped with this information, the practitioner can provide information about PSEs either in general or specific to the person's concerns. Timing is crucial as a recent dissertation (Magaldi Dopman, 2009) notes that clients may be conflicted about bringing up spiritual issues in general fearing the therapist might not be accepting or worse condemning. It is most important to note that the practitioner is comfortable with the content and has some knowledge in this arena. Recently there has been a call for “religious competence” training for psychologists as a type of diversity training (Whitley, 2012; Masters, 2010). A therapist would

provide reassurance that one is not “crazy” because they have had a PSE. Asking if the client has shared their experience and the reaction received is advised, so that any reluctance to share is explored. Caution for a therapist in self-disclosure is always advised and must be done only when the practitioner discerns that it will meet a need of the seeker.

2. Commission: Commission is an authoritative order to act usually thought of in the service of God. If a PSE is shared, then it might be explored as to what it means. The data from this study indicate that there is rich material in a PSE to be mined for a sense of direction in one's life. We might encourage the seeker to be open to this guidance that come in many packages. Providing examples of the different ways PSEs may arrive and how they have benefited others is suggested.
3. Objections: Objections usually arrive in the form of “Who am I that I should go?” (Exodus 3:12) according to Bratcher (2011), but it seems the several forms of objection can be addressed by therapists. The question of how one knows if this is a PSE, a mystical or extraordinary experience may be explored. William James suggests pragmatic approach in that we should look at the fruits of the experience. Although for these participants objections did not play a significant role in following the commission, there is a sense from the ancient prophets that the objection reflects the necessary humility to let divine guidance take the lead in one's life. For the participants in this study, the PSE is more experienced as a gift of guidance toward their calling.
4. Assurance: Assurance in this structure means that one has Gods support. Depending on the clinical setting assurance may be addressed with the client's spiritual perspective in mind. The therapist's support is critical. Assurance means support. Helping the client find support for exploring and acting on their understanding of the meaning of their PSE may utilize family, community, literary resources, spiritual groups, and other means to aid in the change that is coming. Assurance is to provide the knowing that the client is not alone.
5. Sign: According to Harper's Bible Dictionary (1985) a “sign” is a significant event, act or other manifestation that betokens God's presence or intention. For clinical purposes we might help the client notice signs of support in their environment. A sign does not need to be a miracle, like the turning of Moses' staff into a snake, but can be a timely coincidence, a feeling in nature, a conversation that feels right. A counselor may orient a person to be on the lookout for signs of support and direction.

This study was exploratory. It is a small sample of people involved in a seminary school in Colorado in 2008. Although the general findings of the experience of PSEs are consistent with other studies of these kinds of experiences, it seems that the sense of calling may be particular to those called to a spiritual vocation. Miller (2004) studied these kinds of experiences with a

population of addicts (alcoholics) and found similar patterns of expression; however his data showed that these participants described how the spiritual experience dramatically changed their drug dependency. Currently, Charles Tart is studying these types of experiences on his website for scientists. So it is possible that the PSE may have specific targets and functions within identified groups. Further research may reveal more specific effects of PSEs within vocations. As Buss (1981) noted in his anthropological perspective on call narratives that the call “summons the recipient to a specialized role, which becomes increasingly differentiated as a society grows in size and complexity.” This study is an attempt to bring a psychological method to the study of spiritual experiences of living humans. Previously, theologians study historical records and scripture and psychologists study human behavior that is observable. Hopefully this study is a beginning to meld the two perspectives and provide important information regarding spiritual experience of humans.

The limitations to generalization present in this study in that it is a small sample from a particular group of people from a seminary in Colorado. Only positive PSE narratives were obtained. There were no really negative experiences related and no participant who did not have a PSE. This examiner developed the study, completed all the interviews, the analysis, and the write up. There are no inter-rater reliability scores.

Personal spiritual experiences have occurred throughout human history and they continue to influence lives today. Many indigenous cultures have devised systems to initiate personal spiritual experiences and embrace these experiences as vital to the guidance of the community. This study reveals some of the lasting and positive effects of these events, in particular, signifying a sense of calling. Having a sense of calling is a human yearning that not only gives us our unique purpose in life, but serves to integrate us into our community. Maslow (1971) wrote “In examining self-actualized people directly, I find that in all cases, at least in our culture, they are dedicated people, devoted to some task “outside themselves,” some vocation, or duty, or beloved job. Generally the devotion and dedication is so marked that one can fairly use the old words vocation, calling, or mission, to describe their passionate, selfless and profound feeling for their work.” A calling is the grand human integrator that provides for that sense of well-being and purpose. It seems most important that we create safe and nurturing environments to express and explore these vital human experiences. The clinician's office can be one of these places.

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## APPENDIX A

### Personal Spiritual Experience Study

I propose to study the personal spiritual experiences (PSE) of theology students.

It is my hypothesis that although students may have had PSEs, that they might not have felt comfortable sharing these experiences. I plan to provide the opportunity to share such experiences. All participants name and information will be kept confidential through the use of code names or numbers. A combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses will be utilized to understand the information, I have created a partial list of what some people have considered an exceptional, nonordinary experience. In addition, I will want to consider the outcomes of these experiences, that is did the experience effect the experiencer's life.

Nonexhaustive list of possible PSE or names used in the literature:

- Exceptional mental states (William James)
- Nonordinary experience
- Exceptional human experiences (Rehea White)
- Walk-in
- Meditation experience
- Theophany
- Clairaudience
- Conversion experience
- Mystical experiences
- Visions
- Divine or spiritual healings
- Premonitions
- Direct voice (of God, angel, spirit guide, etc.)
- Spiritual emergencies (Grof)
- Near-death experience
- Prayer
- Revelation
- Past life or between-life experience
- Peak experience (Maslow)

- Out-of-body experience
- Stigmata
- Coincidence, synchronicity
- Deceased spirit experience
- Channeling
- Alien UFO encounter
- ESP

## APPENDIX B

### PSE Interview: To Establish Context and Build Rapport

As you might recall in the course at Iliff, "Science and Mysticism," I told you about my interest in the personal spiritual experiences of participants in the class. As you volunteered to be interviewed for this study, I would like to ask you about your experience. As it is possible that you may have had more than one experience, please choose the one you feel has been most influential for you. I will provide an opportunity for you to report some others later if you would like to do so.

At the completion of our interview, I will ask you to fill out a questionnaire providing your personal data and about your experience. You have been assigned a code number so that your responses will be confidential. I plan to write up these results for publication or for presentation. Please sign below if you give your permission to utilize this interview for these purposes.

Do you have any questions?

Sign name

## APPENDIX C

### Personal Spiritual Experience Interview

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_

[Start recorder]

*To start with, I'd like you to tell me about your experience, in your own words. Tell me how it was before your experience, what happened, and how it is now.*

As specific information is provided, record it in the appropriate places below. Cover other areas not answered along the way, either by inquiry during the subject's narrative or after the subject has finished his or her story. When a specific response is unclear, record enough information to permit a later decision

- A. AGE AT EXPERIENCE
  - A.1. How long ago did this experience happen? \_\_ Years or \_\_ months ago
  - A.2. How old were you at the time? \_\_ Years old
- B. BEGINNING (ONSET)
  - B.1 What happened first, to make you aware that something out of the ordinary was happening?
- C. CONTEXT OF EXPERIENCE
  - C.1. Where were you at the time?
  - C.2. What were you doing just before your experience?
  - C.3. Were there important problems or concerns that you were dealing with in your life before this experience happened?
  - C.4. Who else was present when it happened?
- D. DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE
  - D.1. Describe what happened during the experience. (Use additional blank sheets as needed.)
  - D.2. How long did your experience last? Over how long a period did it occur?  
Convert to hours: \_\_ Hours
  - D.3. Did you have any unusual sensations or feelings during the experience?
- E. ENDING
  - E.1. How did your experience end?
- F. FEELINGS (AFTEREFFECTS)
  - F.1. Sometimes people notice different feelings after their experience. How did you *feel* immediately afterwards?
  - F.2. In what ways, if any, did things around you *look* or seem different afterwards?
- G. GENERAL EFFECTS AND PERSPECTIVES
  - G.1. How do you understand what happened to you? What do you make of it?
  - G.2. In what ways, if any, has this experience changed you?  
What is the same?  
What is different? (Give me an example)  
How would someone else know about this change in you?
  - G.3. What changes have happened (or have you made) as a result of this experience with regard to:  
Your family?  
Your friends?  
Your work or career?  
Your religious or spiritual life?
  - G.4. How did the people who were closest to you respond to your experience and the changes that followed?

G.5. Do you know anyone else who has had this kind of experience?

\_ (0) No \_ (1) Yes

G.6. How, if at all, has this experience changed how you understand:

Your past?

Your present life?

Your future?

G.7. To what extent have the changes or effects in you from this experience *lasted* or changed over time?

\_ (1) Completely lasted or increased

\_ (2) Mostly lasted

\_ (3) Lasted somewhat

\_ (4) Not lasted at all

H. H.1 Had you had experiences like this *before* the one you have been describing?

\_ (0) No \_ (1) Yes

If yes, how many times? \_\_\_\_

Notes:

H.2. Have you had experiences like this *since* the one you have been describing?

\_ (0) No \_ (1) Yes

If yes, how many times? \_\_\_\_

Notes:

H.3. What was your religious or spiritual background during childhood?

H.4. How would you describe your own religion or spirituality as an adult, before this experience?

H.5. At the time of your experience, were you in therapy or counseling?

\_ (0) No \_ (1) Yes

If yes, do you think that this played a role in your experience?

\_ (0) No \_ (1) Yes

I. INCOMPLETE?

I.1. Is there anything else about this experience that you would like to tell me, before we move on?

Anything else I should have asked you?

[Turn off recorder. Have the client provide contact information. Give the client the PSE Questionnaire to complete (explain that there will be some overlap with the interview).]

## APPENDIX D

### Personal Spiritual Experience Questionnaire

Code No. \_\_\_\_

You have indicated that you once had a vivid, out-of-the-ordinary experience. Experiences like these happen to many people, but in different ways. Please answer the following questions about your own unique experience:

1. Do you remember about when your experience occurred?  
 Do you remember the exact year? \_ No \_ Yes, it was in \_\_\_\_\_  
 Do you remember the exact month? \_ No \_ Yes, it was in \_\_\_\_\_  
 Do you remember the exact date? \_ No \_ Yes, it was on \_\_\_\_\_  
 Do you remember the day of the week? \_ No \_ Yes, it was on a \_\_\_\_\_  
 Do you remember the time of day when it began? \_ No \_ Yes, \_\_\_\_\_  
 it was \_\_\_\_\_
2. How old were you when it happened? \_\_\_\_ years old
3. How well do you remember the experience?  
 \_ Not very well  
 \_ Fairly well  
 \_ Very clearly and vividly
4. Would you say that your experience began (check one):  
 \_ Suddenly  
 \_ More gradually
5. To what extent were you *surprised* by this experience?  
 \_ Very surprised  
 \_ Somewhat surprised  
 \_ Not surprised
6. When your experience began, were you:  
 \_ Alone  
 \_ With one other person  
 \_ With a few other people  
 \_ With many other people

11. How were you feeling *just before* your experience occurred?  
 For each feeling, circle a number (0 = *not at all*, 1 = *somewhat*, 2 = *very much*, or 3 = *totally*) to indicate how much you were feeling each of these things just before your experience:

Accepted	0	1	2	3
Afraid	0	1	2	3
Aimless	0	1	2	3
Alone	0	1	2	3
Amazed	0	1	2	3
Angry	0	1	2	3
Ashamed	0	1	2	3
Confused	0	1	2	3
Excited	0	1	2	3
Exhausted	0	1	2	3
Joyful	0	1	2	3
Judged	0	1	2	3
Loved	0	1	2	3

Peaceful	0	1	2	3
Sad	0	1	2	3
Sick	0	1	2	3
Surprised	0	1	2	3
Tense	0	1	2	3
Trapped	0	1	2	3

5. Did any of the following things happen as an immediate result of your experience?

(Indicate “yes” or “no” for each item)

- 1. I was relieved of a mental burden.
- 2. I gained new knowledge or perspective.
- 3. My life went out of control
- 4. A medical problem from which I had been suffering was healed.
- 5. I was freed from an addiction or compulsion.
- 6. I became cynical or pessimistic.

16. To what extent did you feel these things *during* your experience?

For each feeling, circle a number (0 = *not at all*, 1 = *somewhat*, 2 = *very much*, or 3 = *totally*) to indicate how much you were feeling each of these things *during* your experience.

Accepted	0	1	2	3
Afraid	0	1	2	3
Aimless	0	1	2	3
Alone	0	1	2	3
Amazed	0	1	2	3
Angry	0	1	2	3
Ashamed	0	1	2	3
Confused	0	1	2	3
Excited	0	1	2	3
Exhausted	0	1	2	3
Joyful	0	1	2	3
Judged	0	1	2	3
Loved	0	1	2	3
Peaceful	0	1	2	3
Sad	0	1	2	3
Sick	0	1	2	3
Surprised	0	1	2	3
Tense	0	1	2	3
Trapped	0	1	2	3

22. Have you ever had other experiences of this kind, besides the one you described here?

- \_0. No, this was the only one.
- \_1. Yes, I had one other experience like this.
- \_2. I have had several other experiences like this.
- \_3. I have had many other experiences like this.

23. To what extent have the effects of this experience lasted to this day?

- \_0. Not at all. The effects are completely gone.
- \_1. Some of the effects have lasted.
- \_2. Most of the effects have lasted.

- ☐ 3. The effects have lasted completely.
- ☐ 4. The effects have continued to increase over time.
24. How confident are you that the changes that occurred in you from this experience will last or continue in the future?
- ☐ 0. I am not at all sure that the changes in me will last or continue.
- ☐ 1. I think that the changes in me may last or continue.
- ☐ 2. I think that the changes in me will probably last or continue.
- ☐ 3. I am sure that the changes in me will last or continue.
25. To what extent have you told other people about this experience?
- ☐ 0. I have never told anyone else about it before.
- ☐ 1. I have told one other person about it
- ☐ 2. I have told a few other people about it.
- ☐ 3. I have told many other people about it.

**These two questions are about your early life:**

26. How would you characterize your childhood, overall?
- ☐ 1. Very happy and peaceful
- ☐ 2. Mostly happy and peaceful
- ☐ 3. Somewhat happy
- ☐ 4. Neither happy nor unhappy
- ☐ 5. Somewhat unhappy
- ☐ 6. Mostly unhappy and painful
- ☐ 7. Very painful and traumatic
27. What was your experience of religion in your growing-up years?
- ☐ 1. Very positive
- ☐ 2. Mostly positive
- ☐ 3. Somewhat positive
- ☐ 4. Neutral, or I had no experience of religion in growing up
- ☐ 5. Somewhat negative
- ☐ 6. Mostly negative
- ☐ 7. Very negative
28. Did your experience affect your current choice of study or work?
- Yes/No
- Please explain:
29. If you have had other personal spiritual experiences that you would like to share please tell me.

## APPENDIX E

### PSE Personal Data Form

Interviewer:

Date: \_\_ / \_\_ / \_\_

Code No.: \_\_\_\_

---

Please provide the following information for our research records. You are given a code number and your information will remain confidential.



Name:\_\_\_\_\_

	First	Middle	Last
--	-------	--------	------

Street Address\_\_\_\_\_

ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number(s):

Home: \_\_\_\_\_ Work:\_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Gender: Female \_\_ Male\_\_\_\_

Education\_\_\_\_\_

Profession \_\_\_\_\_

Student currently at\_\_\_\_\_

Major interest:

Primary racial ethnic identification:

Anglo (not Hispanic)

Asian

Black

Hispanic

Native American

Pacific Islander

Other (please specify)

Thank you.