



Shaken to the Core: The Nature and Roots of Spiritual Struggle

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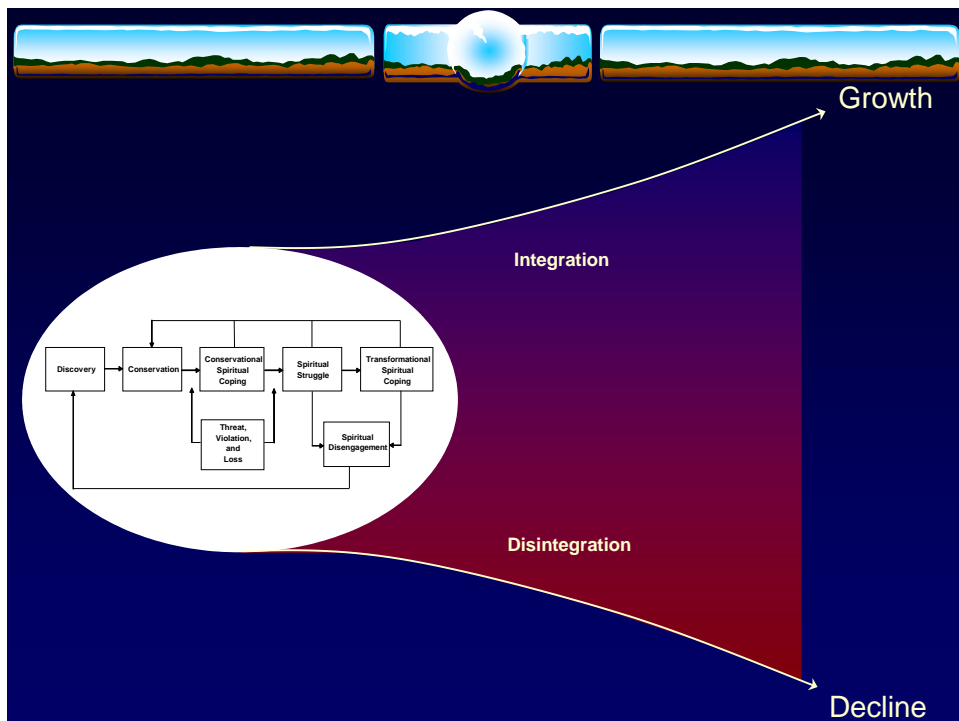


The Story of Nancy

- ❖ The problem was spiritual as well as psychological, social, and physical
- ❖ We are ill-equipped to help people who struggle spiritually
- ❖ We can't afford to overlook spiritual struggles

The Organization

- ❖ How to define and conceptualize spiritual struggles
- ❖ How to understand the origins of spiritual struggles
- ❖ How to understand whether spiritual struggles lead to growth or decline
- ❖ How to respond most effectively to spiritual struggles





A Definition of Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles refer to experiences of tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, within oneself, and with others.



Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural
- ❖ Intrapsychic
- ❖ Interpersonal



Divine Struggles

- ❖ “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Psalms XXII, 1-2).



Divine Struggles

- ❖ “I’m suffering, really suffering. My illness is tearing me down, and I’m angry at God for not rescuing me, I mean really setting me free from my mental bondage. I have been dealing with these issues for ten years now and I am only 24 years old. I don’t understand why he keeps lifting me up, just to let me come crashing down again” (undergraduate dealing with bipolar illness).



Divine Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt as though God had let me down

Felt angry at God

Felt as though God had abandoned me

Felt as though God was punishing me

Questioned God's love for me



Demonic Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt tormented by the devil or evil spirits

Worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits

Felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits

Felt as though the devil (or an evil spirit) was trying to turn me away from what was good



Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

Moral Struggles of Peter Moen (1951)

“I must recognize with bitter and painful regret how inexpressibly badly I have lived. I have abused everything: time – money – confidence – ability—Father’s, Mothers’, and Bella’s love. I have reduced to dust all moral and material values” (p. 26). . . “I have prayed God to cast me a rag from the cloak of faith. I want to be sanctified. . . It means for me to reach down to the root of all that is low – dirty – unworthy and worthless in my being and attack it. The word is – sin” (p. 40).



Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

Moral Struggles

Siddhartha Gautama confronts a series of temptations beneath the Bo tree on the evening before he becomes the Buddha

Paul : “I do not what I want to do but I do the very thing I hate (Romans 7:15)”



Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

R/S Doubt

“Is there a God? Where is God? The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, ‘Look, this is all very well, but isn’t it about time you did something, if you’re there” (Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Rev. Justin Welby, 2014).



Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

Ultimate Meaning

“Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in an open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and everyday of every year. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that instance on he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before. I am the moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks” (in Yalom, 1980, p. 419, suicide note).



Moral Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Wrestled with attempts to follow my moral principles

Worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong

Felt torn between what I wanted and what I knew was morally right

Felt guilt for not living up to my moral standards



R/S Doubt Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Struggled to figure out what I really believe about religion/spirituality

Felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs

Felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality

Worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct

Ultimate Meaning Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Questioned whether life really matters

Felt as though my life had no deeper meaning

Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world

Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence

Interpersonal R/S Struggles

- ❖ Moses shatters the tablets containing the Ten Commandments after witnessing the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf





Interpersonal R/S Struggles

- ❖ Negative interactions among congregation members:
 - ❖ Gossiping
 - ❖ Cliquishness
 - ❖ Hypocrisy
 - ❖ Disagreements with doctrine
- ❖ “They get off in a corner and talk about you and you’re the one that’s there on Saturday working with their children and washing the dishes on Sunday afternoon. They don’t have the Christian spirit” (Krause et al., 2000).



Interpersonal R/S Struggles

“One thing that really shook the whole class was during the hot topic discussion of gay rights. One girl said that she does not have anything against gay rights or gays in particular but if her sister turned out to be gay she would kill her. She was completely serious. She had thought about this and she said she had told her sister. That really shook up the discussion to where it was not even a conflict anymore; really made people not feel safe” (Hoefle-Croenenwalt, 2013,p. 89).



Interpersonal Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/
spiritual people

Felt rejected or misunderstood by religious/spiritual
people

Felt as though others were looking down on me
because of my religious/spiritual beliefs

Had conflicts with other people about
religious/spiritual matters

Felt angry at organized religion



The Interconnectedness of Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual doubt leads to interpersonal struggles
- ❖ Interpersonal struggles lead to guilt and shame
- ❖ Guilt and shame lead to fear of being punished and hell
- ❖ Fear of punishment and hell can lead to anger at God and organized religion



Spiritual Struggles Are Not Uncommon

- 62% of adults in national survey report feeling anger toward God (Exline et al., 2011)
- One out of five individuals reported moderate or high levels of religious struggles in a study of three groups of medical patients (Fitchett et al., 2001)
- 65% of adult sample reported religious conflicts, largely interpersonal in nature (Nielsen, 1998)



Most Common R/S Struggles among Muslims (Abu Raiya)

- ❖ Felt as though the devil (or an evil spirit) was trying to turn me away from what was good - 40.2%
- ❖ Questioned whether life really matters - 38% %
- ❖ Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world - 37.7%
- ❖ Worried that the problems I was facing are the work of the devil or evil spirits - 36.9%
- ❖ Felt as though God was punishing me - 34.4%



Most Common R/S Struggles among Jews (Abu Raiya)

- ❖ Felt angry at organized religion - 30.5%
- ❖ Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence - 28.7%
- ❖ Questioned whether life really matters - 24.5%
- ❖ Felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality - 18.9%
- ❖ Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world - 17.8%



Do Atheists Struggle? (Lindeman et al., 2014)

- ❖ Atheists and religious asked to read statements that (1) dare God to do something terrible (2) are offensive but don't involve God (3) neutral
- ❖ Atheists did not find God statements as offensive as religious people did
- ❖ Physiologically, atheists show more stress when asking God to do something terrible than reading other statements
- ❖ Religious ambivalence of atheists?



Guess the Struggler

- ❖ “I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”



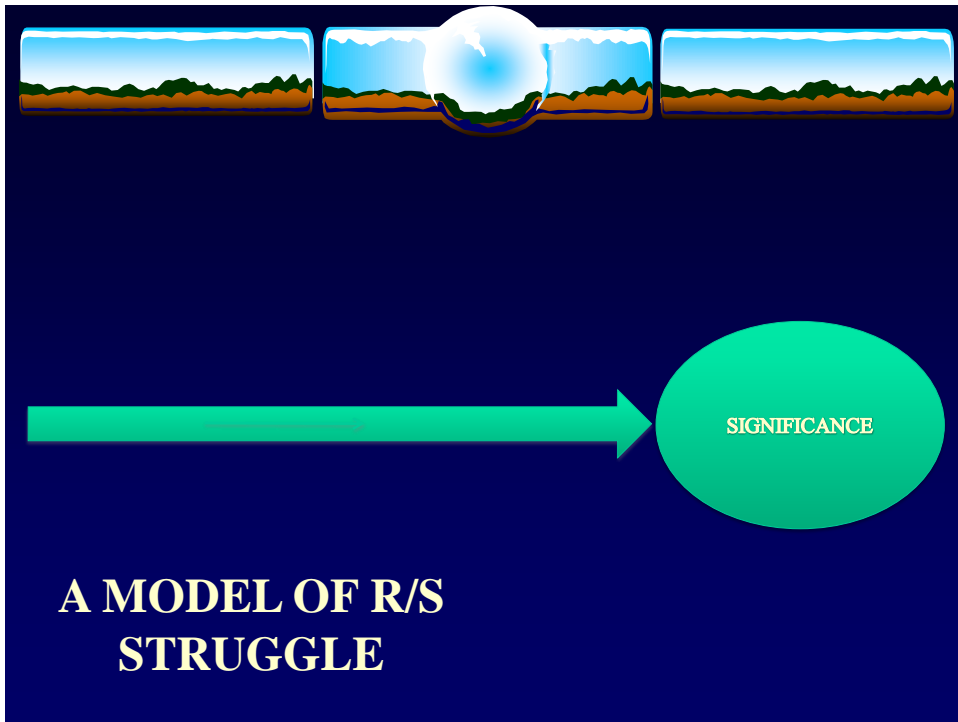
Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance



People as Proactive

“Like our bodies, our souls were not made for sitting still. We were made for moving, walking, traveling, learning, searching, striving, growing” (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2014, p. 4).



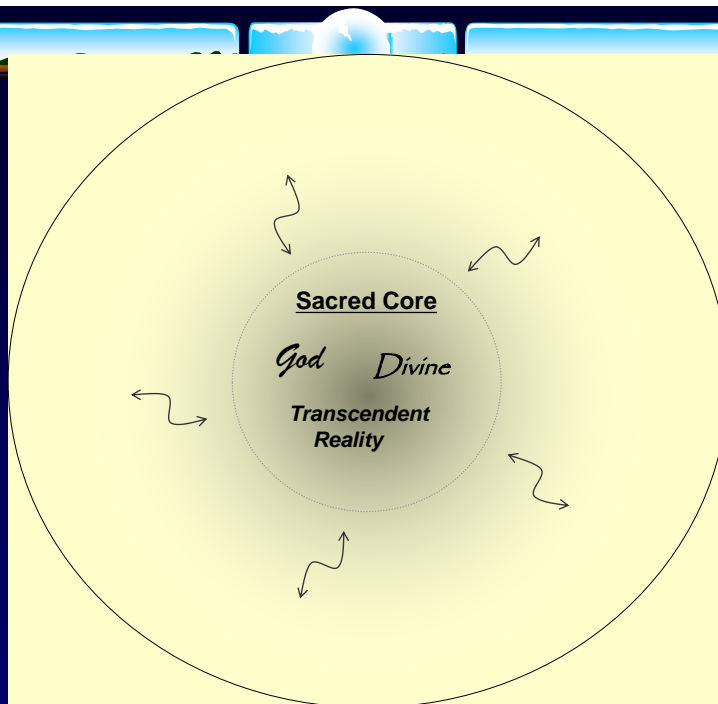
The diagram is set against a dark blue background. At the top, there is a horizontal strip with three rectangular frames. The left and right frames show a landscape with green hills and a blue sky. The middle frame shows a white sphere with a blue outline, positioned as if it is about to enter or has just entered a dark tunnel or opening in the ground. Below this strip, the text "Basic Assumptions" is written in white, uppercase letters. Below the title, there are two bullet points, each preceded by a white diamond symbol. The first bullet point reads "We are proactive beings, searching for significance" and the second bullet point reads "Spirituality is a search for the sacred".

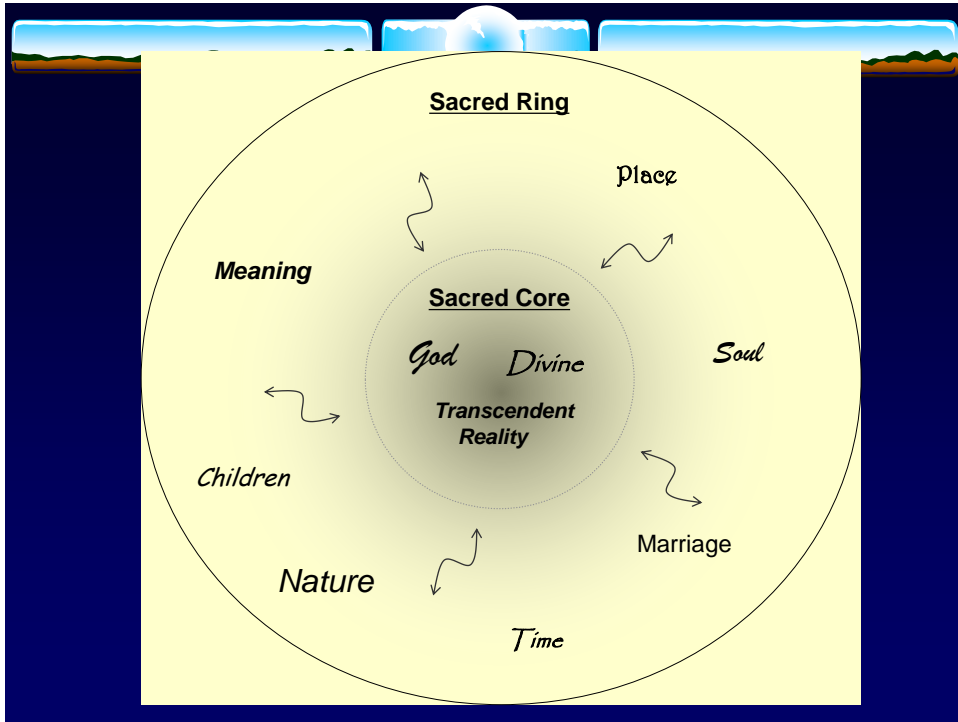
Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance
- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred

The Yearning for the Sacred

- ❖ “Our heart is restless until it rests in you” (St. Augustine, 1960, p. 43).
- ❖ Faith as “the centered movement of the whole personality toward something of ultimate meaning and significance” (Tillich, 1957, p. 123).
- ❖ The fundamental human impulse that “presupposes that the manifest is but the barest hint of reality, that beyond the manifest there exist the major portions of reality and that the function of the impulse is to reach out toward the unmanifest” (Bakan, 1966, p. 5).





The Sacredness of Life

“Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. . . . Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace” (Buechner, 1992, p. 2).



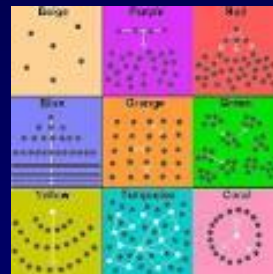
Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance
- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred
- ❖ Not all objects of significance are created equal



When People See the Sacred

- ❖ The sacred becomes an organizing force





When People See the Sacred

❖ The sacred becomes an organizing force

❖ **The sacred becomes a precious object**



When People See the Sacred

❖ The sacred becomes an organizing force

❖ The sacred becomes a precious object

❖ **The sacred becomes a resource**





When People See the Sacred

- ❖ The sacred becomes an organizing force
 - ❖ The sacred becomes a precious object
 - ❖ The sacred becomes a resource
- ❖ **The sacred becomes a source of spiritual emotion**



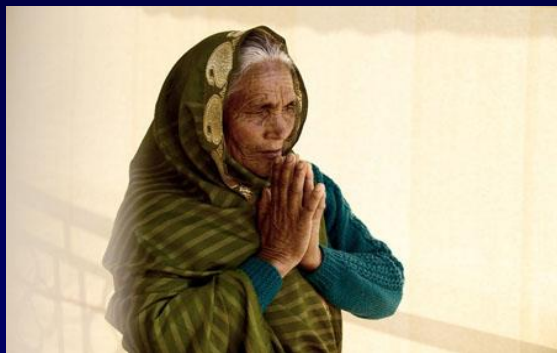
Emotions of Joy



Emotions of Awe



Emotions of Gratitude



Emotions of Love and Compassion



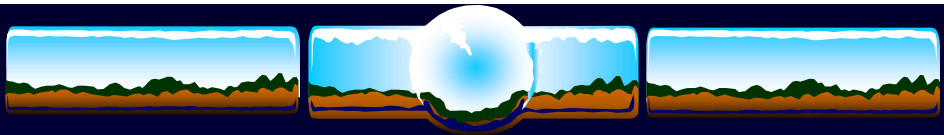
New York Cabbie

“We’re here to die, just live and die. I drive a cab. I do some fishing, take my girl out, pay taxes, do a little reading, then get ready to drop dead. Life is a big fake. Nobody gives a damn. You’re rich or you’re poor. You’re here, you’re gone. You’re like the wind. After you’re gone, other people will come. We’re gonna destroy ourselves, nothing we can do about it. The only cure for the world’s illness is nuclear war – wipe everything out and start over” (from Life Magazine).



Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance
- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred
- ❖ Not all objects of significance are created equal
- ❖ In the search for significance and the sacred, people are guided by an orienting system



**A MODEL OF R/S
STRUGGLE**



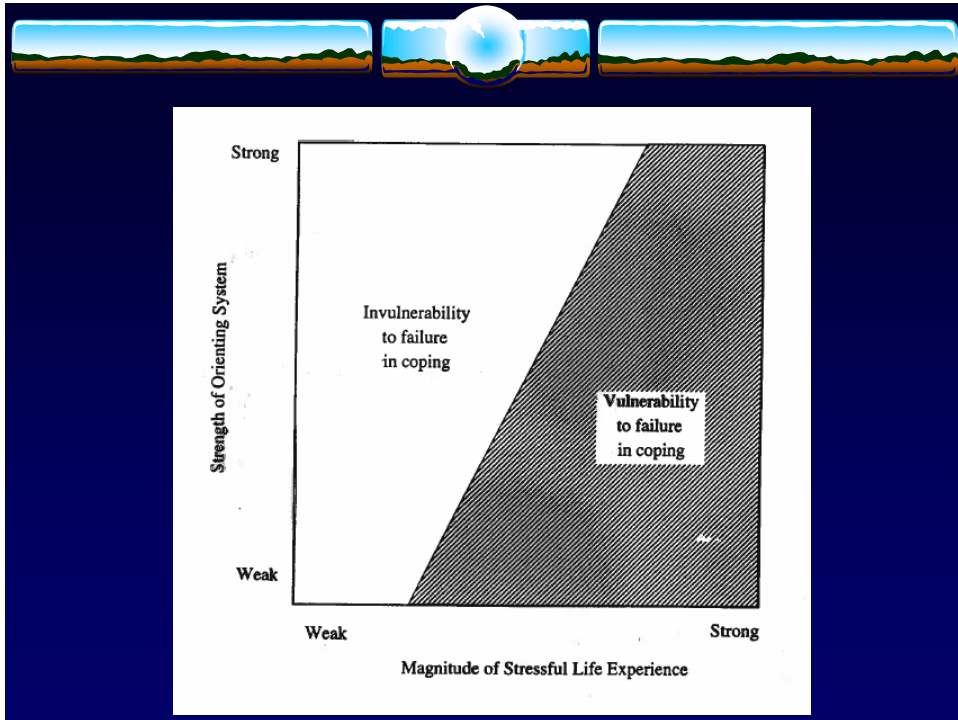
Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance
- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred
- ❖ Not all objects of significance are created equal
- ❖ In the search for significance and the sacred, people are guided by an orienting system
- ❖ The orienting system is psychological, social and spiritual
- ❖ Orienting systems vary in their strength
- ❖ All orienting systems are limited



The Resilience of R/S

- ❖ 70% of trauma survivors reported no change in religious beliefs following their first (or only) trauma; 73% reported no change in religiousness after the second event (Falsetti et al, 2003).
- ❖ 61% of Holocaust survivors reported no change in religious behavior before the Holocaust, immediately after, and today (Brenner, 1980).



Shaken to the Core (Brenner, 1980)

- ❖ 38% of Holocaust survivors who were observant before the Holocaust became nonobservant after
- ❖ 4% of Holocaust survivors who were nonobservant before the Holocaust became observant after



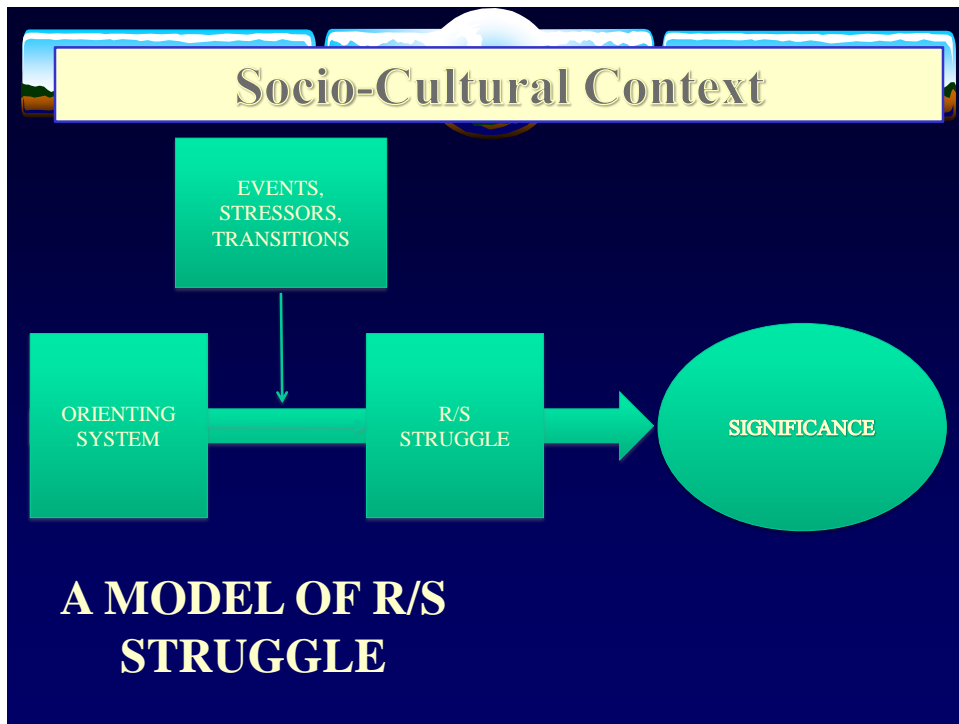
Shaken to the Core (Brenner, 1980)

“I used to have a very personal, intimate relationship with God. I thought everything I did and every move I made God knew and was right there and He was participating in my every step of the way. . . That’s the kind of person I was . . . Then the Nazis came, and where did He go? God was no longer near me. Disappeared. And I am no longer the person I was”
(Brenner, 1980)



When do People Encounter R/S Struggles?

- ❖ When their orienting systems are more limited;
- ❖ When their objects of significance are more limited;
- ❖ When they face life events/transitions that pose a threat to or harm what they hold significant;
- ❖ When they face life events/transitions that underscore the limitations of their orienting systems



Unorthodox (D. Feldman, 2012)

- ❖ “I feel unloved. By my parent, yes, and by the people who reject me for being their offspring, and by my aunts and cousins who look down at me because I’m evidence of a familial scandal, but mostly I feel unloved by God who surely put me here and forgot about me. Without God’s love what chance do I have at happiness” (p. 97).



Orienting System Predictors of R/S Struggles

- ❖ Insecure attachment to parents
- ❖ Insecure attachment to God/negative God images
- ❖ Lack of religious resources
- ❖ Being a member of a non-majority faith
- ❖ Personal vulnerability (e.g, neuroticism, anger, pessimism, openness)
- ❖ Truth-seeking orientation



Life Events/Transitions as Predictors of R/S Struggle

- ❖ Major life events
- ❖ Moral transgressions
- ❖ Events that violate or harm sacred values
- ❖ Social and personal injustice
- ❖ Unanswered prayers