**Journal Assignment Outline**

This assignment gives you the opportunity to reflect upon some aspect of your sexuality that generated religious/spiritual/moral struggles[[1]](#endnote-1)---experiences of tension, strain, and conflict---about sexuality.[[2]](#endnote-2) Religious and spiritual struggles are widespread across a range of faith orientations; for example, among atheists ([Bradley, Uzdavines, Pargament, & Exline, 2016](#_ENREF_2)), Muslims, Jews ([Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Weissberger, & Exline, 2016](#_ENREF_1)), as well as the general population. Pargament et al. ([Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016](#_ENREF_4)) note that spiritual struggles are common and can have either life-giving or life-limiting outcomes:

Spiritual struggles have to do with the most fundamental issues of life – questions of ultimate meaning, good and evil, religious doubts, intimacy, the divine and one’s relationship with a higher power (Exline et al., 2014). These struggles are fundamentally dis-orienting; they shake people to their very core.  A number of studies have linked struggles in the spiritual domain to psychological, social and physical signs of distress (Exline, 2013).  But distress and dis-orientation are not the end of the story.

As people struggle, they try to re-orient themselves to the challenges posed by internal transitions and external events.  Although popular culture has sentimentalized the value of difficult life experiences, as we hear in statements such as “no pain, no gain” and “suffering builds character,” it must be stressed that efforts to re-orient following difficult life experiences are not necessarily successful. Some people experience only pain, suffering, and brokenness through their struggles.  In this regard, higher levels of spiritual struggles have been associated with decline in immune functioning (Trevino, Pargament, Cotton, Leonard, Hahn, Caprini-Faigin, & Tsevat, 2010), increases in depression (e.g., Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, Pargament, & Midlarsky, 2011), and even greater risk of dying (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001).

It is true, however, that spiritual struggles can be a source of growth and greater wholeness… Empirical studies have shown some ties between spiritual struggles and reports of growth following trauma and major life events (e.g., Gall et al., 2011; Magyar-Russell et al., 2013; Trevino et al., 2012).  We suspect this growth is manifested by shifts in orienting systems that become more whole; that is, more deeply purposive, broader and deeper, more flexible, more coherent and discerning, and more benevolent and life-affirming.  In support of this notion, Desai and Pargament (2015) compared college students following a period of spiritual struggle who experienced growth or decline.  Those who reported greater growth were able to find greater meaning from their struggle, were able to draw on more positive religious coping resources, had a more secure relationship with God, and had integrated religion more fully into their lives. (Pargament et al., 2016, pp. 387-388)

Emerging research is demonstrating that if these kinds of struggles remain private they tend to become a source of shame, anger, and guilt that generate life-limiting theologies/orienting systems of sexuality triggered by stress.

Throughout this course we consider life experiences you or others have had that generate religious/spiritual/moral struggles over some aspect of sexuality[[3]](#footnote-1):

* Aspects of one’s gender and/or sexual orientation identity that do not conform to societal/religious norms and/or that make one a target for prejudice/aggression/violence.
* Work and family balance that generates moral stress over one’s gender roles and responsibilities.
* Experiencing sexual pleasure in ways that do not conform to societal/religious norms.
* Working through conflicts/power struggles in intimate and/or caregiving relationships that generate moral stress/spiritual struggles because of aspects of one’s sexuality (i.e., gender roles).
* Seeking personal and relational wholeness amidst the challenges of being single, dating, negotiating transitions in intimate relationships, and ending intimate relationships.
* Experiencing sexual trauma (abuse, harassment, assault).

These are the kinds of experiences that could be used in a journal assignment.

*Note: The final assignment should be about 5 pages single-spaced, including references. Word lengths are suggested here; some sections may be shorter or longer but the entire assignment needs to be about 5 pages). Please use all relevant readings and discussions from the course forums, especially the forums early on in the quarter focusing on pastoral and spiritual care. Please refer to the grading rubric to ensure you have done an adequate literature search and demonstrated course learning goals in competing this assignment*

*Please use a fictional name and disguise all identifying features of the care seeker.*

**Preface:** Why did you choose this assignment; what do you hope to gain from doing this assignment?

**Your spiritual practices:** Describe the intrinsically meaningful body-aware practices you used in working on this assignment that

1. Increased self-awareness of one’s stress-based reactions/emotions that give rise to life-limiting, socially oppressive beliefs, values, and consumer ways of coping, especially for coping with academic stress.
2. Increased self-compassion, self-transcendence, and relational systems that support use of meaningful body-aware practices as a basis for searching for meanings about one’s stress responses and life experiences.

**Describe a life-changing experience of stress that involved core values and beliefs (up to 300 words)**

Describe a life-changing experience involving an aspect of your sexuality that was stressful and/or transformative because it involved core beliefs and values. Make sure you feel comfortable describing this experience with faculty. You must edit your narrative description so that it is no longer than 300 words.

*As our learning covenant notes in referencing levels of self-disclosure: The purpose of self-disclosure is to develop competencies in spiritual care, especially a commitment to one’s own process of spiritual integration that enhances self-differentiation and a capacity for empathy. The purpose of self-disclosure in this learning context is not for personal healing. In deciding how to use/disclose personal experiences in assignments, students need to track their levels of stress as they work on assignments, and to not use/disclose experiences that overwhelm their capacities for self-differentiation, spiritual integration, and critical thinking skills. Students need to use their support systems when they become overwhelmed and in making decisions about what personal experiences to share in journal assignments.*

**Part 3: Elaborate the automatic stress/emotion-based theology/spiritual orienting system of values, beliefs, and coping that arose in the immediate aftermath of this experience by answering the following questions (1000-2000 words)**

EMBEDDED/INITIAL STRESS/EMOTION-BASED THEOLOGY/SPIRITUAL ORIENTING SYSTEM

***Emotions:*** describe what emotions (like shame, guilt, anxiety, fear of causing harm or being judged, anger, loneliness, sadness, relief, guilt, or joy) shaped your immediate response.

***Values:*** describe three to four relevant values that did or could have generated spiritual struggles/moral stress (see shortened list of values if you have difficulty identifying what values were at stake[[4]](#endnote-3)). Add a narrative description of whether/how this value might come from your family’s ethnic/religious/cultural identity. If you are describing a recent experience, use this section to identify immediate values and beliefs and whether these came from childhood/family or from your current relationships and communities.

***Beliefs:*** what beliefs, particularly about suffering and hope, did you initially have about this experience? Use course readings and your readings in theology/philosophy to describe these beliefs. Nelson ([Nelson, 2003](#_ENREF_3)) provides a helpful orientation to traditional and contemporary ways of understanding suffering and evil in theistic traditions.

***Coping:*** How did you cope? If you are describing a more recent experience, see if you can separate out ways of coping that were automatic habits from the past/childhood/our consumer culture that are often default ways of coping. Add a narrative description of whether/how such coping might be shaped by your family’s ethnic/religious/cultural identity. Assess the pros and cons of such coping.

**Part 4:** **How was your embedded/initial theology shaped by intersecting social systems, like religious sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism….? (200 to 250 words).**

Describe aspects of your social identity that shaped your experience by giving you social disadvantages or social advantages. See if you can identify layers from childhood: like social advantages or disadvantages that shaped your parents’ religious/spiritual existential identities in ways that helped or harmed their coping with life changing events; and the extent to which you internalized and still experience these dynamics inter-generationally.

**Part 5. Describe the intentional theology** that is energized by positive emotions like compassion, joy, gratitude, hope, or sadness experienced in spiritual practices, which hold together values and beliefs that make up an intentional theology/spiritual orienting system specific to this experience. Your spiritual practices and this intentional theology/spiritual orienting system help you integrate this experience in ways that resist/protest embedded family, cultural/religious values/beliefs/coping that are perpetuate sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism and other forms of social oppression. This intentional theology may be what you want to experience, and/or may have evolved for you over a long term process of using spiritual practices and searching for meanings that helped you integrate this life-changing experience into your life. **(1000 – 2000 words).**

***Emotions*** *(emotions that arise from life-giving coping and spiritual practices identified below):*

***Spiritual practices:***

***Values:***

***Beliefs:***

**Additional References**

Nelson, S. L. (2003). Facing evil: Evil's many faces: Five paradigms for understanding evil. *Interpretation, 57*(4), 399-413. doi: 10.1177/002096430005700405

**Abu-Raiya, H., Pargament, K., Weissberger, A., & Exline, J. (2016). An empirical examination of religious/spiritual struggle among Israeli Jews. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 26*(1), 61-79. doi: 10.1080/10508619.2014.1003519**

**Bradley, D. F., Uzdavines, A., Pargament, K., & Exline, J. (2016). Counseling atheists who experience religious and spiritual struggles. In A. Schmidt, M. Chow, P. Berendsen & T. O’Connor (Eds.), *Thriving on the edge: Integrating spiritual practice, theory, and research*.**

**Nelson, S. L. (2003). Facing evil: Evil's many faces: Five paradigms for understanding evil. *Interpretation, 57*(4), 399-413. doi: 10.1177/002096430005700405**

**Pargament, K., Wong, S., & Exline, J. (2016). Wholeness and holiness: The spiritual dimension of eudaimonics. In J. Vittersø (Ed.), *The handbook of eudaimonic wellbeing* (pp. 379-394). Switzerland: Springer International.**

**Tino, M. J., Millspaugh, S. G., & Stuart, L. A. (2008). *Our whole lives: Sexuality education for young adults, Ages 18-35* Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.**

1. There are three types of spiritual or religious struggles ([Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014](https://iliff.instructure.com/courses/1914534/discussion_topics/12762589#_ENREF_15)):

   * *Struggles with God* (e.g., questioning God’s love, feeling angry at God, feeling like God has abandoned or is punishing us because of some aspect of our sexual lives)
   * *Intrapsychic struggles within us:* conflicting values, ultimate meanings, and doubts about aspects of our sexuality
   * *Interpersonal struggles between us and our significant others* over aspects of our sexuality.

   These three kinds of religious and spiritual struggles are interconnected. For example, spiritual doubt can lead to interpersonal struggles. Interpersonal struggles lead to guilt and shame. Guilt and shame lead to fear of being punished by God and/or religious authorities/others. Fear of punishment and hell can lead to anger at God and organized religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We are using the *Our Whole Lives* curriculum to define these five aspects of sexuality: *sensuality* (bodiliness and touch), *intimacy* (relationality), *sexual identity* (orientations and roles), *sexual health/reproduction* (physiology, procreation, etc.), and *sexualization* (power dynamics). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this course we will be using the 5-circle definition of sexuality used by the *Our Whole Lives* Sexuality Education curricula, a set of six comprehensive and medically accurate programs jointly created by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association for a range of ages ([Tino, Millspaugh, & Stuart, 2008](#_ENREF_5)). “These curricula use five aspects of a “whole” concept of sexuality that are interlinked, but which can be spoken about separately. The 5 circles consist of Sensuality (body-liness and touch), Intimacy (relationality), Sexual Identity (orientations and roles), Sexual Health/Reproduction (physiology, procreation, etc., content that is most typically covered in "sex ed." curricula), and Sexualization (power dynamics)” (Tino et al., 2008 p. 8).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. |  |
   | --- |
   | Here are examples of values. This is a shortened list taken from Zuckoff, A., & Gorscak, B. (2015). *Finding your way to change: How the power of motivational interviewing can reveal what you want and help you get there*. New York, NY: Guilford Press. |
   | Achievement: to have important accomplishments |
   | Adventure: to have new and exciting experiences |
   | Authenticity: to be true to who I am |
   | Autonomy: to determine my own actions |
   | Belonging: to feel like a part of something |
   | Challenge: to take on difficult tasks and problems |
   | Contribution: to add something to the world |
   | Creativity: to have original ideas and create new things |
   | Dependability: to be reliable and trustworthy |
   | Duty: to carry out my duties and obligations |
   | Family: to have a happy, loving family |
   | Generosity: to give what I have to others |
   | God’s will: to seek and obey the will of god |
   | Growth: to keep changing and growing |
   | Justice: to promote fair and equal treatment for all |
   | Knowledge: to learn and add to valuable knowledge |
   | Passion: to feel strongly and live with intensity |
   | Purpose: to have meaning and direction in my life |
   | Responsibility: to make and carry out responsible decisions |
   | Risk: to take risks and chances |
   | Spirituality: to live and grow spiritually |
   | Tradition: to follow respected patterns of the past |
   | Work: to work hard and well at my life tasks |

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)