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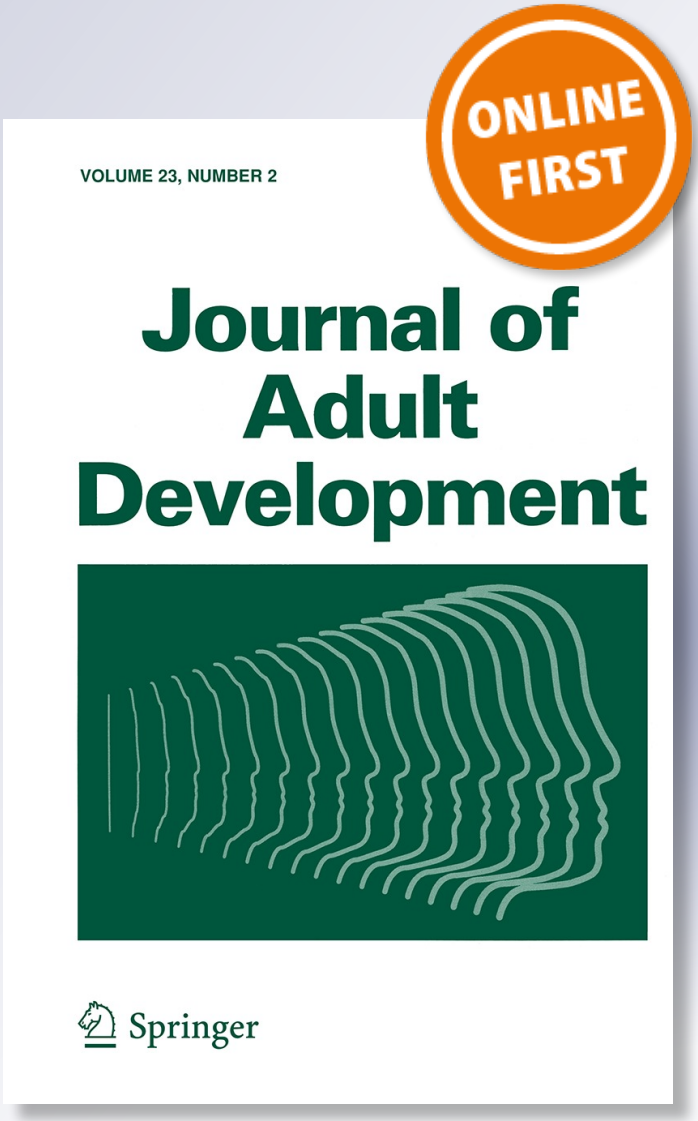

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Spiritual Change Outside Institutional Religion as Inner Work on the Self: Deep Within and Beyond

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Abstract The present study employed a qualitative phenomenological method to explore how processes of spiritual change were experienced outside institutional religion. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 Israeli adults (13 men, 14 women; age range 25–66; $M = 45.3$) who experienced such a change. The findings underscored the pervasiveness of the concept of *work*, which was extensively discussed by all the participants and which reflected the meaning they ascribed to their experience of the change process. Spiritual work was experienced as effortful, demanding, and involving a gradual non-linear process without a clear end-point. Spiritual work on the self was perceived as involving two complementary processes: uncovering and cleansing the self—the Spiritual-Psychological facet—and expanding it and rising above—the Spiritual-Transpersonal facet. The discussion suggests that the interplay of psychological and transpersonal spiritual work makes up an alternative narrative of human personal development where modern values of work sustain a postmodern change process.

Keywords Spirituality · Spiritual change · Adulthood · Qualitative methodology · Phenomenology · Work · Postmodernism

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Introduction

Considered a core and universal facet of human development (Wulff 1997), spirituality has played a key role in human experience and development across cultures (Benson et al. 2012). In general terms, spirituality encompasses experiences, worldviews, and practices that concern the transcendental, human relationships with the sacred and the self's existential search for ultimate meaning and self-growth (Piedmont 1999; Roof 1999; Wink and Dillon 2002). Historical, cultural, and social trends have colored the manner in which spirituality is manifested. Throughout human history, religions have functioned as institutional sociocultural frameworks in which individuals could understand, express, and experience their inherent and universal spiritual concerns. However, while the connection between organized religion and spiritual experiences was formerly clearer and stronger, the present era has seen a steady rise in contemporary alternatives to traditional religions that address individuals' broadly conceived interest in spirituality (e.g., Houtman and Aupers 2007; Wuthnow 2007).

A growing proportion of individuals in the Western world currently identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious," value personal experiences over institutional sources of authority regarding the spiritual (Fuller 2001), and engage in an individualized spiritual search (e.g., Roof 1999). Yet, this is not a binary phenomenon which assumes "spirituality" is contrasted or opposed to "religion" as in a "zero-sum movement from one to the other" (Ammerman 2013, 259), but rather a nuanced continuum reflecting the variety of ways in which individuals experience and express their spirituality. Among other things, the phenomenon of spirituality outside institutional religions reflects the pluralist postmodern world that challenges the

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existing continuity, socialization, and transmission of traditional patterns (Buxant et al. 2010). Such processes involving new religious movements and new spiritualities were often addressed within the broad context of what has been termed the New Age movement (Houtman and Aupers 2007; Heelas 1996). The New Age is used as an umbrella term for various forms of alternatives to traditional Western culture involving individual spiritual development aimed at personal transformation as a dominant theme (Lewis 1992). It often involves eclectic self-led quests for meaning and spirituality within a broad variety of practices and beliefs related to the spiritual (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000). In Israel, sociocultural processes of change involving a shift from a collectivist to an individualistic worldview and from a nationalistic to a universalistic ethos legitimized the search for alternative sources of meaning and resulted in the increased proliferation of New Age alternative spiritualities manifesting in such forms as festivals, literature, and workshops (e.g., Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013). Unlike institutional religion, which is perceived as particularistic, rigid, and dogmatic, alternative spiritualities, with their focus on a person's inner life and eclecticism, provide fertile ground for a personal and autonomous search for meaning and spirituality. The present study was conducted with a view to illuminating such experiences of spiritual change occurring outside institutional religious contexts among Jewish adults in Israel.

Research and Conceptualizations of Spiritual Change

Processes of spiritual change and development are evident both within and outside the boundaries of institutional religious practice and tradition (Barry and Abo-Zena 2014; Benson et al. 2012; Sutcliffe 2000). Smith (2006), for example, found that spiritual/religious change is a prevalent phenomenon in America—about half of all adult Americans report having had such an experience. The classic common paradigm of individual religious change within the Christian context is *conversion,* which draws heavily from the accounts of Saul/Paul's conversion. Such experiences are characterized by a sudden, dramatic, and radical change that involves a powerful external force, which leads to drastic changes in life, and a change of allegiance from one source of authority to another. Contemporary views have expanded this conceptualization to include more gradual processes involving an active search and self-realization (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). This type of spiritual change is evident within the context of Jewish converts who often show a gradual and incremental process of extensive learning that results in profound changes and greater commitments to Judaism (Danzig and Sands 2007). For the religious convert, this new personal center becomes the sacred and entails the acknowledgment of self-limitation and the incorporation of the sacred into the self (Pargament 1997).

During the last two decades, studies examining individual-level religious/spiritual change have underscored the necessity of providing an integrative concept of spiritual change and/or transformation broad enough to encompass a variety of subtypes including sudden and gradual processes in both theistic and nontheistic representations of the sacred and within or outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions (e.g., Pargament 2006). This broad construct is generally defined as "a change in the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns" (Paloutzian 2005, 334). Based on this broad category of spiritual change, research concerning spiritual change outside institutional religion has accumulated, including processes in which individuals leave a faith or religious group such as "de-conversion." Davidman and Greil (2007), for example, have pointed out that individuals leaving organized religions lack a structure and readily available language for formulating their de-conversion experience, which leaves them with a sense of scriptlessness, of "having to write their own scripts" in order to "learn how to undergo such a radical transformation of self and world" (ibid., 213). This demonstrates the need for a better understanding of how spiritual change processes lacking structured and unifying scripts or language because they occur outside the context of religious communities are experienced.

Experiences of Spiritual Change

Very few studies have directly addressed the question of how the process of spiritual change is experienced. Experiences of the change process often appear to be associated and even merged with the experience of the transformative trigger itself. For example, experiences of spiritual change as sudden, abrupt, and involving profound illumination are evident in the literature of exceptional or peak experiences such as epiphanies (McDonald 2008) or near-death experiences that often include a sense of separation from the physical body and encounters with a mystical or divine presence (Greyson 2006). Miller and C'de Baca (2001) have described the phenomenon of *quantum change*, which often includes spiritual change too. Such changes involve dramatic experiences in which "the person knows immediately that something major has happened, and that life will never be the same again" (ibid., 20), as well as insightful transformative experiences, "a shift in perception and the realization of a new reality, but at a much deeper level" (ibid., 40). The sudden new perception, recognized as an authentic truth and inner "knowing,"

creates an immediate awareness that a transformation has occurred. Most accounts of quick transformations have often described the experience, but do not refer explicitly to the change processes that accompanied it, explaining that the experience itself fused with the quick and transformative change process.

Spiritual change may also be experienced as development. Several theoretical models of spiritual change within the Western developmental perspective have proposed stages for delineating human spiritual development. A central example of such a model is Fowler (1981)'s model, which proposes a sequence of seven universal stages of faith development across the life span. Although rich and comprehensive, this model provides descriptions of typical behavior at various developmental levels yet does not explicitly reveal how these processes are actually experienced by individuals. Wink and Dillon (2002)'s study of spiritual development among adults suggests that spiritual development is experienced as an increase in the depth of individual's awareness of and search for spiritual meaning over time, and as involving an expanded and deeper commitment to engaging in actual spiritual practices. Within the sociocultural context of the New Age, Heelas (1996), for example, asserts that such processes aim at self-liberation from the "tyrannical hold of the socialized mode of being" (ibid., 20) and stresses the central role of changes in the self in the search for higher authenticity. Roof (1993, 1999) points out that many people currently experience spirituality and spiritual change as a journey, and described the motifs of three subgroups that range from reclaiming faith or switching faiths, strengthening faith or "recovery," and searching for existential or sacred meaning (Roof 1993). Wuthnow (1998)'s qualitative study further suggests that many young people today experience spirituality as a journey or quest ("spirituality of seeking") rather than a "home" to be used as a permanent dwelling ("spirituality of dwelling"). This is reflected in the shift from spiritual production, such as being active in devotion to religious committees and guilds, to spiritual consumption, that does not require a permanent investment of resources.

The present study builds upon this literature and follows the recent call to explore what spiritual change means for those who experience it from a subjective first-person perspective (Williamson and Hood 2013). Accordingly, this study focuses on exploring the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences of spiritual change directly and explicitly by using an open-ended qualitative research methodology. Such an exploration may provide a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which these individuals shape and integrate their own personal idiosyncratic quest toward meaning and transcendence outside the context of a religious doctrine or faith (Hodge 2001). The present study is embedded in the phenomenological tradition, which endorses an open approach to the meaning of phenomena. The objective of phenomenology is going "back to the things themselves" (Husserl 1980, 116), providing an avenue for a direct exploration aimed at describing a particular phenomenon or experience with as few unexamined presuppositions as possible. Phenomenology is thus a qualitative inquiry into human "lived experience," which involves the direct, pre-reflective consciousness of life, asking "What is this or that kind of experience like?" for the persons experiencing it from their own point of view. The lived experiences are symbolized and articulated through language. Described by Heidegger as "the house of being," language plays a central role in phenomenology as a source of meaning in our experiences (Moustakas 1994). An open and broad exploration of the lived experiences of individuals as articulated by themselves may thus shed light on the diverse meanings, connotations, and perceptions of individuals undergoing processes of spiritual change. More specifically, the study addresses the following questions: How do the participants experience their spiritual change? What are the lived experiences involved in processes of spiritual change outside institutional religion and what are their characteristics?

Method

Participants

The sample for the present study was made up of 27 adults: 13 men and 14 women. Participants were recruited via multiple methods in order to reflect as broad and as diverse perspectives as possible. Such methods included advertisements in various offline and online forums, as well as the "snowball" method (participants recommending others). A broad and open invitation was provided, as follows: "For an in-depth study, we are seeking participants who have undergone, or are currently undergoing, spiritual change in their lives," and participants self-selected based on this criterion given in the solicitation for the study. Those who responded to this invitation were contacted by phone and provided with an explanation of the study. They were also promised confidentiality and anonymity and asked various background information questions. The sample included participants who had experienced spiritual change outside the boundaries of institutional religion; that is, they did not describe themselves as participating in an organized traditional Jewish community. The sample size was determined by the saturation principle: Data were collected and analyzed until the addition of new participants did not offer any new insights (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The participants came from a variety of spiritual

orientations (e.g., channeling, transcendental meditation, Kabbalah, Buddhism, and Shamanism) and had diverse triggering life experiences, ranging from the loss of loved ones, dealing with terminal illnesses, domestic abuse, and socioeconomic hardships, as well as feelings of meaninglessness and existential concerns with no apparent external adversity or crisis. Nevertheless, these differences notwithstanding, all participants shared a common experience of the phenomenon of spiritual change (Creswell 2007). All participants were Jewish Israelis of various ethnic origins (51.85 % European American origin, 33.3 % Asian-African origin, and 14.8 % mixed origin). Education levels ranged from high school (30 %) and professional diploma (26 %) to higher academic education (44 %). Ages ranged between 25 and 66 years (mean age = 45.3). Fourteen participants were married, six divorced, six single, and one widowed.

Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews carried out by the first author. All the interviews were conducted in Hebrew and took place in the participants' homes at a time of their choosing in order to maintain a familiar environment (Creswell 2007). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim and lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 h. Before each interview, the participants signed informed consent forms following a detailed explanation of the study and its aims. They were also informed of their rights and of the possibility of stopping the interview at any time, speaking "off the record," or skipping uncomfortable questions. The participants were then asked a broad, open-ended question concerning the manner in which they experienced the spiritual aspect of their lives: "I am interested in the personal experience of people who have undergone, or are currently undergoing, a change in their lives which they define as spiritual. Could you please tell me how you experience the spiritual aspect of your life?" If the conversation did not address topics that we wished to cover (i.e., how the process was experienced, its meaning, and its manifestations), the participants were asked probing questions, such as: "Tell me about the change you have undergone (or are currently undergoing)," "How would you describe this change?" This process allowed us to attain further clarification without leading the interviewees.

Data Analysis

As is customary in qualitative research, the data were analyzed and collected in parallel. A phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in order to develop a textural description of the participants' experiences (what they experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how it was experienced), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions in order to convey an overall essence of the experience (Creswell 2007). The analysis process followed a spiral four-step procedure. *First*, all interviews were read independently several times in order to gain an overall and profound impression of the participants' experiences to the point of immersion. *Second*, we attempted to identify patterns and extract core units of meaning—words, descriptions, phrases, and expressions—as they appeared in the text through a process of "open coding" (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These separate "meaning units" were then used to create descriptive categories of basic themes which could be used in the construction of an initial framework for further analysis. *Third,* the various categories and basic themes were re-examined and compared for possible connections across individual "meaning expressions" as well as between participants. We then grouped the different themes found in the interviews into clusters of similar issues. *Fourth,* an attempt was made to tie together the essential themes and move from a descriptive view of the data to an aggregated "bigger picture" with a new understanding of the participants' experiences of the spiritual change process. It is important to note that while this process is presented in a linear form, it actually represents a cyclical process both within and across cases.

Qualitative phenomenological research seeks to offer a holistic and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the participants' lived experiences, rather than generalize findings to a larger population. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed four criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research: *Transferability* refers to external validity, or the degree to which the findings can be applied or "transferred" to other contexts. *Dependability* concerns the extent to which findings are consistent and could in principle be replicated by others. *Credibility* refers to internal validity, namely that various aspects of the data complement each other to create a consistent and rich description. *Confirmability* refers to ensuring that the presented results reflect the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's preferences or biases to the greatest possible extent. These trustworthiness criteria were addressed in a variety of ways in the present study. For example, we used an open and broad invitation in recruiting potential participants and our interview questions were as open and non-directed as possible. We provided thick descriptions of the phenomenon of spiritual change through interview excerpts. We also used detailed documentations of reflections and interpretations and maintained a continuous process of critical discussion and interpretation on the data including feedback from independent colleagues which allowed us to triangulate our

interpretations. In this respect, a central and essential methodological principle of the phenomenological method is "bracketing," or requiring that the researchers set aside their presumptions, attitudes, and previous knowledge to the greatest possible extent (Moustakas 1994), which we addressed by employing a reflective research diary.

Findings

Spiritual Change as Work

A thorough analysis of the interviews uncovered a noticeable and pervasive motif of "work" articulated by all participants in a consistent and comprehensive manner. Shelley (all names are pseudonyms), a 32-year-old female, for example, said: "It's not some hobby. It is inner work [her own emphasis] that demands a lot of self-observation, a lot of learning, analysis…." The frequent use of the term "work" as either a verb or a noun in various contexts throughout the interviews with **all participants** suggested that there was an underlying common and fundamental meta-theme used for anchoring the participants' lived experiences. For example, the term "work" as a noun or verb appeared an average of 36 times in the interviews (ranging from 11 to 63 appearances per interview), whereas other general descriptions appeared as nouns or verbs an average of 1–5 times in the interviews: "journey" (ranging from 0 to 12 times), "development" (ranging from 0 to 13), "growth" (ranging from 0 to 6), and "moving toward/getting closer" (ranging from 0 to 6). Spiritual work could therefore be conceived as a meta-theme evident in several themes that appeared to characterize the manner in which spiritual change was experienced by the participants.

Themes of Spiritual Change as Work

Interview analyses yielded three major themes characterizing the experience of spiritual change as work among the participants. The first described its *essence* and *meaning* as "inner work on the self" (the *what*). Within this first theme, we uncovered two facets of inner work on the self: the Spiritual-Psychological and the Spiritual-Transpersonal facets, as well as their interconnectedness. The second and third themes were concerned with *how this work was experienced*, with the second theme being a "gradual nonlinear process with no specific end-point" and the third theme being "effortful and demanding work."

Theme I: Inner Work on the Self With Two Facets: Spiritual-Psychological and Spiritual-Transpersonal

The participants experienced spiritual change as work in the sense of it being a deliberate, vigorous, and continuous conscious act involving internal efforts aimed at significantly transforming the self. Two central facets of spiritual work representing two somewhat different meanings or orientations emerged from the data. The first, which we termed "Spiritual-Psychological," referred to work aimed at "cleansing emotional toxins," "peeling unpleasant layers," and dealing with different aspects and layers in the "self" perceived as negative or as hindrances to spiritual change. Such aspects included fears, defense mechanisms, weaknesses, inner barriers, difficult emotions, or "the ego," which the individual confronted, transformed, cleansed, or removed in order to reveal the more authentic core self. This depiction posited the existence of a core, authentic self needing to be exposed and liberated, which resonates to some extent with the processes involved in psychotherapy.

The second facet, which we termed "Spiritual-Transpersonal," involved work geared toward the expansion of self-awareness and consciousness, to "see[ing] things from above" and to viewing or experiencing life from a different, higher perspective. This perspective concerned issues of human existence in the world, seeing "wholeness in all things, the bad and the good," and "really being present in every moment" as well as realizing "that you exist in another dimension;" all these appeared to enable more interconnectedness, empathy, and benevolence toward others. These two facets of work were discussed by all the participants, albeit often in different sections of the interview, although participants also discussed their interconnections.

Spiritual-Psychological Facet of Work The *Spiritual-Psychological* facet entailed work as a process of in-depth exploration, discovery, and confrontation with different aspects within the self. Rachel, for example, described the penetrating depth of her inner work:

> Through this work you become aware of everything that happens to you, you can peel out all that is fake: Fear, anger, worries, doubts, cravings, interpretations… You realize that it is not relevant, that it is poisonous. [Rachel, 59, female]

Roey, a 44-year-old male, described a similar experience of facing his "ego":

> It is inner work, it is turning your gaze inward… in real spiritual development, a person constantly peels away unpleasant layers, discovers unpleasant things about himself… there are always challenges and difficulties…internal difficulties with facing my ego, this place which only desires for myself…

Nathan, 40-year-old male, likened such conscious processes to becoming more "accurate":

> It means opening blockages… It is a hell of a lot of work to learn how to be accurate with my life. Understanding it in your mind is not enough, you have to change something from within, and that happens through work involving persistently separating everything that hinders the accurate.

The participants' accounts illuminated an experience of the removal, release, uncovering, and cleansing of negative and impeding parts from the self that involved false aspects in order to reach the innermost true essence of the self: "leaving out external or temporal distractions in order to get back to yourself, to your true authentic self, to come back home" (Yaron, 26-year-old male). This was quite different from practices of addition or supplementation that reflected an incremental process of gaining knowledge and learning. Interestingly, the participants' accounts reveal rich and varied terminologies and images borrowed from different contexts. Meirav described her experience as stains needing to be constantly sought after and cleaned:

> The more you move forward with working on yourself, [a] big change begin[s] to manifest in very very gentle and minor nuances because it is no longer the huge change it was at the beginning… this is the work… it's like when you have, let's say, a white tablecloth… you begin by cleaning the big stains, but then you need to look for the tiny spots… [Meirav, 45, female]

Other participants used metaphors to communicate their experiences, such as removing a heavy burden, a "backpack full of stones" (Shay, 34-year-old male), or "reformatting disks":

> …Ultimately the spiritual work is [like] reformatting our disk because we are raised and educated with all sorts of disks. The spiritual work is reformatting all [our] insights. Great masters in all disciplines did that to their students. They would break them to pieces, forcing them to make up new ones, or think beyond them. …This is a corrective experience, a wonderful experience of enormous liberation from chains placed on me which I embraced as my own, and deceived myself as being mine… [Nathan, 40, male]

Spiritual-Transpersonal Facet of Work The second facet of work, *Spiritual-Transpersonal*, was expressed through the motifs of rising above and expanding the self in an upward direction, often reflected through the common use of the phrase "seeing from above":

> The work that needs to be done is to expand awareness [in order] to see things from above, and understand that there is some kind of wholeness in all things, the bad and the good… not to react automatically to everything you are used to, and mainly to really be present in every moment. [Shelley, 32, female]

Another clear example of such an experience was articulated by Dorit, a 52-year-old female:

> This work is seeing everything from a different perspective, not as of me, me, mine, but from a higher place… you discover that you exist in another dimension that is not the existence your senses or intellect can give you information about, but some kind of existential dimension that you can experience. It is something entirely different.

In a similar vein, Rachel, a 59-year-old female, elaborated on the facilitating qualities of the ability to approach life from a different, higher perspective:

> This work [is] moment by moment, doing this switch of perspective, looking at things from above… it makes you become less judgmental and more accepting, more capable of accepting what happens, not trying to control or subject reality but accepting it, [and] treating life from a softer and more containing place.

This sense of an expanded self and a heightened view of reality culminated, among other things, in an interconnectedness with others. For example, Yaron, a 26-year-old male, highlighted how spiritual work was oriented toward a more holistic, heightened, and expanded point of view enabling greater awareness, an acceptance of the self, as well as more love and care for others:

> Being able to expand your awareness to this kind of vision or point of view is essentially spiritual work. To see from above also means being fully present in any moment with your eyes open and realizing that things happen, and accepting them as they happen. It's like the sun that shines on everyone without asking whether someone is a good or bad person. In a sense, it's a very egoistical process because you are doing it for yourself. At some point you understand that it's the most loving thing toward everyone, because it is only when you really arrive at a place that is whole that you can really provide service and help other people.

Roey, a 44-year-old male, also emphasized that spiritual work is aimed at rising above and observing reality with an orientation toward others:

> Through this [spiritual] work, you learn to approach the supreme nature, to remove the things that hinder the true vision of reality, and you work to rise above,

> and, although reality itself does not change, you are different. Your vessel becomes cleaner and you can rise above and see more. You become a person who only wants to influence others, to connect with others from a place of love…

The Spiritual-Psychological and the Spiritual-Transpersonal as Interconnected The former was often viewed as a crafting and cleansing of the self which allowed the formation of a clearer, cleaner, and more genuine and authentic self. This "lighter" and genuine self allowed the work of expanding the self toward a broadened being-centered and heightened view of reality to proceed. Mira, a 57-year-old female, for example, provided a succinct description of the two facets and their connection:

> …if you want to be able to rise above, you have to do emotional work, to reach places requiring the resolution of internal and deep conflicts… you have to clean [yourself]. The more you are emotionally and psychologically, balanced, the more you know yourself and your triggers, and the more you can transcend… You can't separate the two. A person who tries to bypass and thinks there are shortcuts, that s/he can progress without having to do this work, will later rebound to the places s/he didn't work on.

Yogev, a 53-year-old male, used the metaphor of weight to describe the demanding volitional efforts involved in creating the pre-conditions necessary for releasing the self from redundant weights and allowing a heightened and expanded view of the self and the complementary role of the Spiritual-Transpersonal view which imbues it with the strength to engage in the Spiritual-Psychological work:

> What I experience as the core, the leading axis of my life, is the spiritual urge which is a strong yearning for the beyond… But [in order] to make your personality fit for this spiritual experience and yearning, it has to become as light as a feather. And to do so, you have to do some very serious work, to agree to look inside yourself. It won't take a month or two or a year or two. This [spiritual] work and these insights give you the strength and self-discipline required for passing through the storms and crises along the way. It's like letting go of the things that weigh me down so I am able to fly. It's like throwing some sandbags overboard so my hot-air balloon can rise further.

Efrat, a 38-year-old female, used another metaphor:

> When we do the work, when we shed our outer skins and cleanse ourselves from unnecessary emotions that block us, we are reminded of the higher parts within us… all of these processes of expanded awareness allow more light to get in.

In sum, the participants' descriptions suggested that both facets of work were interconnected and complementary. The *Spiritual-Psychological* facet was aimed at the internal depths of the self, at dealing with emotional blockages in order to clear the way to a cleaner, authentic, and more accurate self, whereas the *Spiritual-Transpersonal* facet was oriented toward a broadened and heightened view of life and the experience of existence and allowed the expansion of the self and the attainment of a sense of interconnectedness, empathy, and compassion toward others.

Theme II: The "How": A Gradual Non-Linear Process With No Specific End-Point

Spiritual work was described by the participants as a gradual and slow process rather than a "transformative leap" toward enlightenment or revelation: "It is a very slow and gradual process which builds up… it's a repeated experience of awareness, presence and self-connectedness" (Ziva, 44-year-old female). The participants chose to employ various images and symbols to articulate the gradual nature of the process, with the most common being that of a ladder or stairs. Although the image of stairs or ladders is often associated with gradual progression, our participants outlined a non-linear process. Yasmin, for example, a 25-year-old female, described the slow step-by-step progression of her spiritual work as constituting a non-linear process which included progression as well as regression:

> It feels like I am working slowly, step after step after step after step, and also going back sometimes. If I compare this to a metaphor of going up a flight of stairs, it's sometimes important to go back two steps because things keep coming up all the time. It's circular; there are repeated things, because a certain point can make me want to look back at things. It's like going back to re-examine things…

Tali, a 53-year-old female, articulated a similar view stressing that the slow and gradual pace was necessary for attaining real spiritual progress:

> … You keep learning, layer after layer after layer, with increasing depth. In this process, you can't skip steps… it's a process. You must go through a process, because if you skip from one end to the other you can fall to a deeper abyss… It must come gradually… in my experience, I can tell you that it is a way of life… you have to live it. You go up a step and you go

> down, up one and down another… It's constant, because it takes time until the next step is stable, when you know it is really yours, that you really earned it.

Yafit described her experience of the process as an accumulation of drops:

> … As I learn to connect to the good, I'm getting rid of the redundant, the false… a little bit every time, in small portions… the good is built and the redundant is ejected. This work is like a drop and another drop and another, and in the end it adds up and has substantial significance… [Yafit, 30, female]

Reuven, a 47-year-old male, explained the importance of the slow and gradual process as the difference between "reading a book about children" and "actually raising them":

> … it's like the difference between a person that reads books about children and the one who actually goes ahead and has them. Is that the same? He can say that he read all the books and knows exactly what raising children means, but he actually doesn't understand anything. You need to absorb it. Slowly, very slowly, you begin to understand…

Another central characteristic of the process, articulated broadly by all participants, revealed that the process was not experienced as having a specific end-point: "there is no 'final destination' here, it doesn't end anywhere. Walking this path is endless, with endless work. You move from one room to another and so forth, and this is how you grow" (Boaz, 63-year-old male).

Meirav, a 45-year-old female, described moments of insight that created qualitative change, viewed by her as part of a gradual long process without a specific end-point:

> It never ends, never… at first it demands work, practice, attention, even effort and intention… and then comes a moment when it happens, when you know it is yours. Insights, comprehension, really assimilated within me … So if we use a stair metaphor, this is major progress, it's an important breakthrough, and you can stay on that stair for a long time until you get another insight like this one… It's not like you should reach a certain destination at the end.

To summarize, the participants used various images for describing their experience of the nature of spiritual change as work, such as climbing a ladder or stairs, or accumulation of drops. All of them highlighted a process that was slow, gradual, and non-linear, with no specific end-point. The process was described as including progression and development, but also as involving regression. The gradual process was seen as crucial for the assimilation of real changes in the self. Some of the participants mentioned rapid insights, although they were not viewed as independent but as an integral part of a cumulative, long, and gradual process, which was experienced as a continuous way of life.

Theme III: The "How": Effortful and Demanding Work

Spiritual work was experienced by the participants as difficult and as involving commitment, determination, and a strong devotion to the process. Rachel, a 59-year-old female, for example, recounted:

> In my experience it's work… hard work, although the meaning of hard work is toil, implying some kind of unpleasant experience, but I'm saying hard work in the sense that achieving the necessary trust and awareness implies a desire to do the work and to make an effort. It's a process that requires patience and devotion… It's not like you just sit in your living-room and things happen by themselves…

Some participants referred to difficulties, suffering, and sacrifices as an integral part of the process. Tali, a 53-year-old female, described this in terms of paying tuition: "…You don't learn for free. You have to work for it. If you don't pay your tuition, then it has no value. It's like it loses its value." A similar point was raised by Roey, a 44-year-old male:

> Through this intense work you come to realize that you should check yourself again and again for what you are willing to sacrifice… sacrifice [*hakrava* in Hebrew] is used for approaching… they have the same etymology in Hebrew [both come from the same Hebrew stem – *krv*. [to come close] – the authors]… What am I willing to sacrifice right now in this material life if I want to make a change?

Some of the participants even used metaphors with harsh motifs, such as being broken into pieces (see p. 14 on breaking and reformatting disks) or "bumps" which, although painful and difficult, were necessary for inner work toward further refinement, as described in this example by Reuven, a 47-year-old male:

> It's like a piece of metal that gets into a Ferrari factory and doesn't know that all the hits and abuse it receives are meant to eventually make it a Ferrari. At the end of the process it says 'look how beautiful I am, maybe I should have received some more bumps so I could become even more perfect.' You see, I can look back and realize that all of these inner processes, struggles, are things that I have to go through to

> become better. I wouldn't change a thing, even though it is difficult.

Yaron, a 26-year-old male, described an experience of being uprooted and almost dying:

> In a way, it's like going against yourself and even against your instincts. To really change yourself is not easy, it's actually really, really difficult. It's a bit like dying. It's like uprooting my entire being and changing the formation of my entire self.

In sum, these illustrations outlined a demanding and effortful process that the participants seemed to engage themselves in fully and willingly. The process was experienced as involving struggles, uncertainties, difficulties, and sacrifices and was viewed by the participants as inevitable for the generation of genuine and profound change.

Discussion

The present study set out to contribute to the existing literature on spiritual change by addressing the manner in which spiritual change outside institutional religion was experienced by the individuals themselves. From a phenomenological perspective, the terminology used by the participants guided us in uncovering their lived experiences. The utilization of the term "work" appeared to function as a guiding map for organizing the meanings they ascribed to their experiences of spiritual change. Although the participants had diverse spiritual orientations, they used the same overarching metaphor—work—in order to describe their experiences. Thus, the term "work" functioned as a "meta-theme," which bound the different meanings together and epitomized the experience of spiritual change for the participants.

Two Facets of Inner Work Reflecting Spiritual Change

The interview analyses illuminated a process of spiritual work that was experienced as containing two distinct yet complementary facets interrelated in a dynamic manner: the Spiritual-Psychological and the Spiritual-Transpersonal. The former cleansed and removed external conditioning and inner "toxic" patterns such as envy, arrogance, anger, fear, or criticism. Some participants explicitly referred to the ego as the focus of their work, embodying a confrontation with falsehood due to the ego's identification with external demands. Although the general meaning of removal was used by all the participants, the diverse and rich metaphors used for describing this spiritual work appeared to reflect the uniqueness of these phenomenological experiences and their authenticity. Such terminologies included cleansing, breaking free, opening blockages, or peeling layers of external constraints which stood in the way of the core and authentic essence of their being. The intentional intra-psychic work was aimed at liberation from attachments to conventions, societal expectations, and the need for external approval. These existed as false, redundant, or external "layers," "walls," or blockages surrounding a true and authentic core self-structure depicted as unconditioned by socialization and as interconnected to others. In this sense, the findings of our phenomenological research resonated, supported, and complemented Heelas' (1996) observations, which relied mostly on sociological perspectives concerning the ideas, practices, and thought of the New Age movement. Heelas highlighted the recurrent need within New Age practices for liberating the self from the chains and restrictions of an ego representing the internalized structure of parental or social expectations (Heelas 1996). Our findings suggested that beyond working to liberate the self from social conditioning or construction, inner work also involved attending to psychological blockages including defense mechanisms, unconscious material, and emotional "unfinished business."

Uncovering the "deeper self" or "true self" was intended to attain a self-transformation directed "deep within" the self. This process was experienced as enabling the *Spiritual-Transpersonal work* geared toward expanding the self, rising above and "beyond" the self, and viewing life differently. This facet appeared to reflect a transpersonal (beyond the personal self) experience which involved self-transcendence and self-expansiveness (Hart et al. 2000; Maslow 1971; Tart 2006). Transpersonal experiences have been discussed in the theoretical literature on transpersonal psychology, as well as by other disciplines such as religious studies, social work, and nursing, as involving an expansion of the self that goes "beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos" (Walsh and Vaughan 1993, 203), and as reflecting the "ultimate self," "real self," or the "Self." This expansiveness coupled with a unity devoid of attributes also involved a sense of interconnectedness with all that exists. The interplay between these two facets, viz. the psychological and the transpersonal, has been discussed quite extensively within the framework of transpersonal psychology, which is concerned with development at higher levels of consciousness. Maslow (1971), one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, suggested that the self-actualized individual who has developed psychological maturity can develop further and transcend her/his own self and attain spiritual self-transcendence. Assagioli (1971) postulated that a certain level of personal

or emotional maturity was also necessary for developing the higher transpersonal levels of the self. Similarly, Wilber's spectrum of development model (2000) suggested that a certain level of psychological maturity (subconsciousness and ego consciousness) was necessary for the attainment of higher transpersonal levels of development (super-consciousness).

In the present study, the transpersonal and psychological facets were experienced by the participants as an interwoven process: The Spiritual-Psychological facet of work was directed "deep within" the self in order to release "emotional baggage," clearing the way to a lighter, cleaner, and more authentic self. This in turn contributed to the Spiritual-Transpersonal work that was directed above and beyond and toward the adoption of a state of being that was expanded, heightened, and transpersonal. Such a process appeared to lead participants to a new view of reality and of others reflected in their sense of interconnectedness, as well as in their empathy and compassion toward themselves and others. These two facets of spiritual work further seemed to support a multilayered and complex development of the self, demonstrating that the psychological realm and the transpersonal realm were bound together within the human experience of the spiritual and embodied essential dimensions of full human growth. This resonated with the findings of a quantitative study which suggested that psychological maturity and spiritual development were interrelated but different, with each contributing significantly and independently to the same positive outcomes, such as moral values and an empathic and benevolent attitude toward others (Mayseless and Russo-Netzer 2011).

The Nature of the Unending and Arduous Process of Spiritual Change

The spiritual change process was experienced by the participants as involving a non-linear progression with no specific end-point. In this sense, the findings challenged the unidirectional and epigenetic sequencing of some theories of spiritual development (e.g., Fowler 1981; Maslow 1971) and corroborated Benson et al. (2012)'s suggestion that "spiritual development should be understood to be a non-linear and dynamic process" (ibid., 456). Furthermore, many classical theoretical models of adult development, such as Erikson (1963)'s and Levinson (1978)'s, suggested clear end-points for a mature developed person who has successfully coped with challenging developmental tasks and gained stability or equilibrium. Rather than an aspiration toward stability or homeostasis, our participants' spiritual change was experienced as an intentional and conscious engagement in a continuous process entailing inner tension and struggles without seeking a specific resolution. This finding corresponds with Love and Talbot's (1999) suggestion that one of the fundamental premises underlying the different theories in the field of spiritual development called for a process and movement with no end-point. The participants' experience was also somewhat unlike "quantum change" experiences characterized by sudden or rapid transformation (Miller and C'de Baca 2001), as well as radical religious conversions (James 1985 [1902]). Rather, it may resemble contemporary conceptualizations of spiritual transformation (Paloutzian 2005, 2014; Pargament 2006) which portray change as more gradual and active. The participants' subjective experiences can thus be viewed as illuminating theoretical and/or objective accounts of spiritual change.

The continuous work process of spiritual change as experienced by our participants did not follow a fixed set of stages or structured phases as seen in other processes of self-initiated personal change (e.g., Prochaska 1999). This change process also appeared to be different from that described as a "journey" (Roof 1993, 1999) and "spiritual seeking" (Wuthnow 2007), or the well-known script of the "Hero's Journey" (Campbell 1988 [1949]). This monomyth is considered a central symbol in the growth and development of the human spirit and is found in many narratives around the world. Perhaps the best known among these is the classic hero's tale of Greek mythology—the *Odyssey*. However, different versions of this script are apparent in many other myths, motifs, and symbols throughout history: the epic of Gilgamesh, the quest of the Holy Grail in the legends of King Arthur, and modern fictional narratives such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This dominant and universal script of human growth in general and spiritual growth in particular portrays stages of development triggered by an inner or external "call" that motivates a search for authenticity and ultimate meaning that includes facing external challenges that demand maturity, courage, resilience, and wisdom, and which result in a return to daily life with new capacities and insights.

The Hero's Journey metaphor was nonetheless criticized for placing a unitary self established by heroism, separation, and individuation at the center of the process and thus reflecting an androcentric process (Ray and McFadden 2001). Rather than a scripted progression through stages culminating in "returning home" as the journey's final destination, our findings suggest a different and possibly complementary experience. The connotations of the spiritual work experienced by the participants reflect a flexible non-linear process with no definite final destination involving self-authenticity along with self-expansion and an interconnection with others. Similarly, and unlike the Hero's Journey which involves external triggers, events, and challenges the hero is confronted with (such as a dragon or other monsters), the process described by our

participants reflected internal work and the challenges they encountered mostly originated from deep within.

The present findings further suggest that although the content or method may vary and change throughout the process (e.g., Shamanism, Kabbalah, Buddhism, channeling), and despite the absence of any obligatory organizational framework, our participants' experience was nonetheless one of a deep and continuous commitment to and an engagement with a process involving struggles, sacrifices, and hard work. This commitment was not experienced as transient or temporary, but as reflected in their way of living, rather than in immediate pleasure or "fun." This view emerged as different from the popular New Age discourse, which described eclectic and idiosyncratic "take-it-or-leave-it" experimental approaches (Rindfleish 2005) not requiring commitment, effort, or perseverance. The pragmatic attitude described as part of the New Age sociocultural context was one of "picking out" what is "true for me" (Sutcliffe 2000, 28-32), or "tinkering" (Wuthnow 2007) and choosing what comes effortlessly because this signifies something that is more "natural" and authentic (Roof 1999).

Interrelation Between the Personal and Cultural Context

The present findings reflected the significance ascribed to the inner realm and the value of conscious work on the self. However, such processes always occur within a cultural context. The use of the motif of "work" in a pervasive manner rather than other possible "candidates" raised several intriguing questions: Why "work?" Why was the process of personal change and growth, which focused on the self, viewed as a process of "work" rather than other "softer" terms such as "journey," "development," or "growth?" What did this concept convey with regard to the participants' experience and how was the social–cultural context involved? Being Israeli Jews, our participants were exposed to a mixture of influences affecting the meanings of work they experience. Some of the relevant sociocultural contexts in this respect include Western capitalistic–individualistic values (represented by the modern work ethic), the postmodern context as well as the New Age, and Jewish origins and traditions.

Originating in survival and biological needs (Baumeister 1991), the concept of work evolved culturally to entail other overarching values (Bell and Taylor 2003). From a negative and inferior connotation in classical antiquity, work went on to gain cultural prestige through theological (and especially Christian) justifications linked to inner virtue, self-discipline, and the realization of a calling or unique contribution (see Baumeister 1991). The work ethic which emerged in modern Western society was established on the presumption that work was important to the cultivation of a moral existence (Rodgers 1978). These ideas were particularly conspicuous in the dominant Protestant work ethic: the belief that work gives meaning to life, and that the necessity of hard work cultivates a strong sense of duty. It further suggested that work contributes to individual morals and to the health of the social order, and that wealth that results from work is a sign of God's favor. These values contributed significantly to the development of the modern capitalistic ideology of work and production (e.g., Davidson and Caddell 1994) and led to the legitimization and idealization of work discipline, commitment, and perseverance (Bell E and Taylor 2003). This terminology also brings to mind the common "myth" of "no pain, no gain," which is well-rooted in the Western world, and which suggests that progress in a process a person must work hard to attain. These aspects resonated in the ethical and moral qualities attributed to effortful work by our participants, who stressed the need to work if the spiritual gains are to be real and long-lasting.

Alongside these influences, motifs of work are also evident in Jewish tradition and probably affected our participants although they were not religiously observant Jews. Different biblical precepts, such as "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" [Genesis 3:19 (KJV)] or "When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you" [Psalms 128:2 (NKJV)], suggest that hard work is an integral ingredient of a moral life (Friedman and Adler 2011). Furthermore, as a praxis religion which emphasizes "doing" as a "rule of thumb," Judaism includes numerous shared values and conventions of hard work, exertion (*hishtadlut*), and work on mending one's character (*tikkun hamidot*). Judaism values working on the self and soul to resist temptations control negative emotions and postpone gratification in order to develop spiritual virtue and ethics and become a better and more whole human being. Hence, in the Jewish context, *avodat ha-shem* ("service of the Lord"; literally "The Lord's work") refers to both physical labor and internal work (Levisohn 2012). The moral value of effortful work also played an important role in Israel's creation as a state. Physical labor and work were considered an existential need for the first pioneers who settled Israel, and were held as a national value and a central avenue for ethical self-realization: "the reformation of the individual and the rebirth of the nation come about through labor… in suffering for it and working [for] it" (Sternhell 1998, 68). All these contexts were echoed in the language used by our participants and in the meanings they ascribed to spiritual work, such as their references to difficulties and struggles, to the importance of sacrifice, and to self-purification en route to moral goodness. Various sociocultural traditions and contexts thus appeared to inform our participants'

perceptions and experiences of their spiritual change process and were reflected in the narratives, rituals, and language they used (e.g., the prevalent use of the ladder metaphor which echoes the biblical Jacob's ladder from earth to heaven).

It appears that the essence of the participants' lived experiences represents a creative amalgamation of modern and postmodern characteristics whereby modern structures and ways of thinking are used for addressing postmodern challenges without obliterating them. The modern values of hard work and commitment as implicated in Protestant and Judaic traditions, as well as within capitalistic thought and within the modern ethos of the creation of the state of Israel, are integrated and intertwined with the postmodern values of "seeking" and "becoming," which are fluid, boundless, unorganized, and non-linear. The content of such inner work can also be seen as bearing both the modern aspects of believing in the existence of a "real" core or "true" self and of working to uncover it and the postmodern aspects of an unbound expansiveness and of "rising above" that are more fluid in nature. Lacking the stable context of organized religions, our participants found other modern anchors to provide them with the structure and stability necessary for to navigating their way through the uncertainties, multiplicity, and ambiguousness of postmodern society.

Concluding Remarks

The present study uncovered two dense, complementary and interconnected processes: *Spiritual-Psychological work* and *Spiritual-Transpersonal work*. The elucidation of the manner in which these aspects were perceived and experienced contributes to the literature on spirituality and spiritual change (e.g., Paloutzian 2005, 2014; Pargament 2006) by offering clarity and embodiment to the conceptualizations of transpersonal psychology which might be perceived as somewhat abstract, and which have mostly been presented at the conceptual level (e.g., Assagioli 1971; Jung 1964; Wilber 2000). Furthermore, in relating to general depictions of processes of human development, and in particular development that includes self-growth processes and a search for meaning, the findings illuminate an alternative narrative or script of human personal development to the customary metaphor of a "quest" or "journey." Our participants' process was experienced as reflecting an inner focus on a person's consciousness which emphasized a kind of work not oriented toward performance or external achievements, but toward interconnectedness and a non-linear process with no specific termination. Rather than effortless and hedonic "tinkering" or a sudden transformation, the participants' accounts reveal a profound engagement with continuous eudemonic work on the self that demanded sacrifices, effort, and confrontations with inner struggles. These insights may contribute to the literature concerning human change and development in adulthood, as well as suggest an alternative narrative of human personal growth involving **"***conscious work on the self."*

Finally, and in line with current contextual and cultural perspectives, the findings underscore the existence of a hybrid intersection of modern and postmodern values. The use of the modern concept of work revealed the need for a stable grounding and solid structure for sustaining and organizing the postmodern eclectic, un-institutionalized, and fluid experiences of existential search. These insights may contribute to our understanding of the processes the current generation of adults undergoes when it engages in the developmental task of an existential search for meaning in the face of the instabilities, fluidities, and complexities embedded in Western industrialized postmodern and postsecular societies (e.g., Roof 1999).

Caveats, Directions for Future Research, and Practical Applications

In line with the phenomenological worldview, the present study sought to portray the essence and core meaning of the phenomenon of spiritual change as a shared experience (Patton 2002). Yet, the richness and multidimensionality of the phenomenon may also benefit from an exploration of the distinct rather than the common experiences of the participants as reflecting individual differences in this process. Despite representing a rather heterogeneous sample, the participants were influenced by specific contexts and it is possible that the concept of work, which appeared to be a pervasive and consistent meta-theme for our participants, is not as salient for other samples. More specifically, most accounts revealing a journey metaphor were discussed and conducted in cultures with a Christian legacy (Roof 1993, 1999). Moreover, and however unintentionally, all the participants' interviews revealed a committed spiritual identity. In this sense, the sample may not represent other individuals who do not portray themselves as having a committed spiritual identity. It is also possible that other recruitment criteria or developmental periods might have led to different descriptions of the change process. An important direction for future research might be the examination of individual differences and the various antecedents and motivators of spiritual change outside institutional religion. An exploration of spiritual change across the life span (i.e., adolescents, the elderly) and among distinct cultures and populations may also help to shed further light on this phenomenon. Future research may also benefit from longitudinal designs in order to address

the change processes directly and from the use of quantitative methodology.

Since the spiritual dimension is echoed in the most fundamental questions people ask about meaning and identity, therapists, counselors, educators, and mental health professionals can also benefit from an understanding of the manner in which spiritual change unfolds and is experienced by individuals themselves. While such personal processes may appear reckless, superficial, or random to an external observer, they are in fact experienced as central to peoples' lives and as representing an in-depth, profound, and effortful investment in personal change. As spiritual processes can cultivate an individual's well-being as well as contribute to increased prosociality, it is important that policy makers acknowledge and empower such processes in the challenging contexts which characterize a great deal of postmodern adult life.

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