

# **“The Meaning of Life”; Ageing New Zealanders talk about Spirituality**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Psychologists, philosophers, social scientists of all sorts have set out their definitions of spirituality, linking it to religious belief, transcendence and generativity, but also to life course and ageing. But what do ordinary New Zealanders think? How do they define spirituality? How important is it to them? What effect do they think it has on their health and wellbeing? Have their views on spirituality changed over their lives? What has influenced these views? And, as they look forward to later life, do they feel that anything is missing from their spiritual lives? This paper analyses the answers from 50 New Zealanders, men and women, aged 55 to 70, who were interviewed in 2008 as part of the *Health, Work and Retirement Study*, and relates the findings back to theories of ageing and spirituality.

**KEY WORDS:** older adults; spirituality; life course; gender; mid-life.

## **DEFINITIONS OF SPIRITUALITY**

In the literature, many writers distinguish between spirituality and religiousness (or religiosity), although the two are linked. Among recent contributors, Lowis, Edwards, Roe, Jewell, Jackson and Tidmarsh (2005) defined religion as “participation in the particular beliefs, rituals and activities of traditional religion” and spirituality as a “way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension that is characterised by values concerning the self, others, nature and life”. In their research the authors treat religion and spirituality as discrete variables, acknowledging that one can have a spiritual faith in a higher power whilst not necessarily being aligned with any orthodox religion. Similarly, Leder (1996) considered that spirituality “need not involve adherence to a set of religious tenets, or even belief in a personal God.” This author used the term spiritual “to refer to that dimension of meaning which, for the individual, opens onto what he/she experiences as the most grounding and significant modes of connection” (Leder, 1996:107). Wink (1999) considered that the meaning of spirituality has been closely associated with religion, but recently they have become “decoupled” as people have explored a greater variety of philosophies to find personal meaning and psychic growth.

The common features of the definitions are transcendence – reaching out for something beyond the tangible; making connection with this “something” or with the values inherent in it; and finding “meaning” in life. In doing this, formal religion or belief in a divine force may be a helpful channel, but so might nature, inner resources and other people. Other concepts linked to spirituality include imagination and creativity, but also generativity. The latter means, literally, the ability to create or reproduce, but more widely to become more productive and do something more worthwhile, especially in relation to future generations. The purpose of this paper is to see whether, and how, these high level concepts are reflected in the definitions and understandings of spirituality expressed by mid-life men and women in New Zealand.

## **LINKS TO LIFE COURSE ANALYSIS**

It is commonly assumed that spirituality increases with age (Wink, 1999). This is inherent in Erik Erikson’s (1963) theory of developmental stages, but also in Jungian psychology, Neugarten’s (1973) heightened “interiority” in later years, and in Cumming and Henry’s (1961) disengagement model. It is also reflected in the search for enlightenment expressed in many religions. Jung argued that around mid life an individual typically begins to turn inwards to explore the more spiritual aspect of the self (Wink and Dillon, 2002). This may entail going beyond the linear and strictly logical modes of comprehending reality and embracing the notion of paradox. Paradox and conflict are also part of Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development. In mid-life, he proposed the need to reconcile generativity and stagnation (the need to assist the younger generation versus the feeling of not having done this). In later life, ego integrity is set against despair. Some

people accept moving closer to death. Some are dissatisfied with what they have accomplished or failed to accomplish within their life times.

Ageing is often associated with the attainment of wisdom. Increasing understanding and insight may allow people to see beyond the mundane and also to appreciate the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of reality. There are other theories that spiritual development may be influenced by changes and crises in social and personal contexts and that it may be enhanced by discontinuity and adversity in the life course. “The process of spiritual growth is complex and multifaceted, with different trajectories in women and men, and responsive to the socio-historical context in which human lives are lived” (Wink and Dillon, 2002:93).

The material available for analysis allows some testing of these theories. How is spirituality defined, how important is it in people’s lives and does it increase with age? Do life experiences influence spirituality? What effect do they think it has on their health and wellbeing? Have their views on spirituality changed over the years? And, as they look forward to later life, do people feel that anything is missing from their spiritual lives?

#### INTERVIEW DATA FROM THE *HEALTH, WORK AND RETIREMENT* (HWR) STUDY

The HWR study, funded by the Health Research Council, incorporates a large-scale postal survey of a nationally-representative sample of New Zealanders aged from 55 to 70 (Alpass et al., 2006). Information from the first round of the survey in 2006 was used to select 60 participants who were willing to be interviewed. They were located in the southern part of the North Island, for ease of interviewing, and balanced by gender. The first round of interviewing concentrated on workforce status, using a life course framework. The same 60 people were approached for the second interview round in 2008, which incorporated questions on spirituality. In total, 50 of the interviewees were revisited. Others were not willing to be interviewed, were not available for a variety of reasons, had moved out of the area, or had died.

The 50 people included 23 men and 27 women, fairly evenly spread between those who were retired, working full-time and working part-time. The average age of both men and women was 64. In terms of social marital status, only one of the men was unpartnered, but 12 of the women. These included women who were never married, divorced, separated and widowed. The interviewees included people from the original general and Maori samples<sup>1</sup>.

#### DEFINITIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

Before any definitions were introduced, interviewees were asked how important spirituality was to them. There were significant differences by gender. Over half of the men, but less than one in every three women said “not at all.” Conversely, 41% of the women, but only 21% of the men said that spirituality was important or very important to them (overall 32% of the interviewees). There were no significant trends with age, although, compared to the overall results, rather fewer of the respondents aged under 60 said that spirituality was important or very important and more said that it was not at all important. How this response can be interpreted depends on what definition of spirituality is being applied, so this was the next question – “What does spirituality mean to you?”

Over half of the interviewees mentioned formal religion in relation to spirituality, but only two mentioned religions other than Christianity. One person had looked at Buddhism and she said “there’s, like, many roads lead to Rome” (Carol)<sup>2</sup> and another, while saying that he believed in God, said, “God can be Allah.”(Joseph). Emphasis on Christianity was also implicit in mention of church and church-going. There were more negative comments about this than positive. Only a few felt that spirituality in terms of Christian observances was positive for them.

For me (spirituality) means faith in a (Christian) God who loves me, being able to express that in song and reading and prayer and listening; joining with others who are like minded (Nancy).

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<sup>1</sup> In the qualitative analysis, responses from members of the Maori and general samples were analysed in the same way. The former varied greatly in the extent to which they identified with Maori culture.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Such sentiments were expressed mainly by women. Two men, who defined spirituality as church-going, spoke about community service rather than worship or prayer. Rather more people, when talking about spirituality and their beliefs, added “but I don’t go to church”.

I’m very strong with my beliefs but I’m not a churchy person (Ann).

Others were more forceful in their negative comments about church.

I am not very strong on “holy roller” type of spirituality (James).

If we’re talking about religion and after-life and things like that, it’s hocus-pocus, superstition (Willie).

Not going to church did not exclude belief in an (implicitly Christian) after-life.

I don’t go to church, but I believe in heaven and after-life. It’s important to think that you will meet people who have gone on before you (Sandra).

Spirituality, for some people, evoked spiritualism, and most felt negative towards mediums, “hearing voices” and reading the future.

Several people included belief in a Supreme Being or power in their definition of spirituality, even though this was not necessarily the Christian God. For some people this meant “not being alone”.

Spirituality means to me – being aware of who I am, where I’ve come from and being in tune with my Maker (Martha).

There’s something beyond ourselves and for me it’s, I suppose it’s God, who ever he or she is, but spirituality doesn’t necessarily centre on the religious (Thomas).

Is there something else greater and bigger out there controlling it (Janice)?

Equal numbers of men and women (eight in all), linked spirituality with nature. Their comments are thoughtful and lyrical, most eloquently expressed by a semi-retired earth scientist.

For me, the nearest I would get to spirituality would be a sense of awe and respect and being hugely impressed by certain situations - mostly natural situations. A magnificent sunset going down. It’s something I wouldn’t just look at and say “Oh that’s pretty.” You would actually feel something. Now you can describe those sorts of feelings as in some ways spiritual..... You climb to a top of a mountain on a fine day and you suddenly get a view that you can see for miles across the beautiful landscape, you suddenly get hit by quite a strong emotion. Now that emotion is quite explainable in rational terms but for some people that would be a spiritual feeling. They would say “Well there’s something bigger than me here that I don’t understand.” For me I don’t. I think it’s all explainable and understandable, but it could also be called spirituality (Charles).

Karen and Thomas expressed similar sentiments.

I decided to walk to work today and I noticed that I could hear lots of birds singing and it’s those kind of, you know, it’s sort of connection with the world around me but I’m not really a very spiritual person (Karen).

If there were no such thing as religion the spirituality would still be there and, I mean, looking up at the sky at night and just seeing the glory of the stars up there, you can’t help but be in awe of creation really, whether it’s a God did it or not (Thomas).

The most common definitions of spirituality among the interviewees, however, related to social relationships and personal values, a more introspective view, summed up by a 67 year-old widow (Barbara) as “what has meaning and about insight into our own nature and into the nature of our relationship with others and with

the world we live in; about the values that mean most to us.” Women were more likely than men to mention the quality of relationships with other people. This might be expressed as belonging, as a 70 year old Maori man put it.

To me it’s an over-enveloping sense of belonging. Having a permanent attachment to - whether it’s family or your whanau (Eruera).

Several people talked about being kind, looking out and doing the right thing for others. In the widest sense, this is “a belief in humanity really and the way you treat humanity” (Susan). Barbara defined spirituality as “Insight into our own nature and into the nature of our relationship with others and with the world we live in.” Phyllis defined it as “who you are and what you are and any empathy or sympathy and how you relate to people”. Several people connected this definition with acting morally, “leading a clean life” and thus with their codes of values, which may or may not be derived from Christianity or any other religious code. In some cases there was an explicit denial of such linkages.

I have my own sort of philosophy and, yes, I think it’s good and it doesn’t even have to be connected to a church (Carol).

I think there’s too many hypocrites in it (formal religion). I think you can be a good person without having that (Henry).

In summary, formal religion did not figure prominently in the discussion of spirituality and its meanings.

#### EFFECT OF SPIRITUALITY ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING

When the respondents were asked what effect spirituality, as they defined it, had on their health and wellbeing, there was a great variety of responses, as shown in Table 1. One group (A), rather more men and women, who replied that spirituality was not important in their lives, also, predictably, said that it had no effect.

I don’t need it to feel good. You know, some people have to go to church to feel - I don’t know – something that they get from church. I don’t get it from church (Frank).

At the opposite end of the spectrum were people (group B) to whom spirituality was important and who also said that it had an important effect on their health and wellbeing. Women predominated in this group.

Oh (it affects me) quite positively. It has quite a big contribution. Because it’s all linked, I mean, we’re all linked emotionally and spiritually together and mentally (Nancy).

I think it impacts quite a lot (on my health or wellbeing). We’ve talked about the physical things that you can do to maintain your health but I believe that there’s a greater being. I’m not always quite sure how to define it but I, yeah, I just think that belief helps my mental and state of being (Joan).

There was a larger group between these two extremes (group C) who felt that spirituality was “somewhat” important and also that it could “possibly” help their health and wellbeing.

Oh, well I’m sure it helps your health if you’re happy and that (Larry).

I think normally (spirituality) would help you to maintain a bit of an equilibrium (Virginia).

But there were also people who had contrasting, or possibly contradictory, views; who thought spirituality was important, but who didn’t feel that it had a significant effect on their health and wellbeing (group X).

Well I was just thinking if I didn’t have anything that I believed in spiritually and what I do have now (belief but no formal religious observance), what would be the difference? Very little quite frankly (Kenneth)

Then there were those who didn't feel that spirituality was important, but at the same time recognised some beneficial effect on wellbeing and health (group Y). This may be because their concept of spirituality is not related to religion, or at least not to formal religion.

(Spirituality) used to be very, very important but I've sort of grown away from that. (But) I think it makes me feel calm. I have the bible by the bedside and I often read that (Ruth).

(How important is spirituality for you?) As in formal religion, not at all. As in – I think probably the thing that is important to me is the ethical rights and morality. (So how do you think spirituality might affect your health or wellbeing?) I think it probably improves it (Marilyn).

**Table 1. The relationship between Spirituality and Health and Wellbeing**

Importance of Spirituality	Effect on health and wellbeing			
	None	Possible	Some	Important
Not at all	A		Y	
Somewhat		C		
Important				
Very important	X			B

### CHANGING VIEWS OF SPIRITUALITY

The interviewees were asked whether their feelings about spirituality had changed at all in recent years. Three in every five said they were the same, equally men and women. This group included people to whom spirituality was important and also those who had no interest. Several people spoke in terms of not having any need to change.

I don't think there's a need to make a change. You set a standard, you adopt a lifestyle, you practice that. You respect others. Life goes on (James).

I haven't felt a need for (change). I've been comfortable with where I am in the world so, yeah. There's been no gap that I've needed to fill (Stephen).

Others felt that perhaps they should change but had not got around to doing anything about it.

Well I have a sort of nagging suspicion that I should be more spiritual (laughs) and, yeah but I haven't done anything about it which shows that it hasn't gone past the nagging feeling (Karen).

There were a few comments about spirituality and ageing, but only Charles (aged 69) related this to mortality – “It will be interesting as I get older, won't it? Will (I) be thinking what's going to happen to me after I die?” Thomas thought that age led him to take a wider view than previously.–

I think like a lot of people that get older, things are not black and white. They're more shades of grey in between so I've become much, much more liberal, if I can put it that way. And a lot of those moral issues really - euthanasia - there's no right or wrong, it's just where you've come from on the spectrum of 'this is for and that's against' and I find that as I get older, people as they get older, generally become perhaps a little less dogmatic than they were (Thomas, aged 65).

Nancy linked the change to “slowing down” -

I'm more aware of the importance of silence and listening, not rushing round all the time but giving space to my spirituality and also, I guess, in accepting other people's spirituality, yes, which might be slightly different from my own (Nancy, aged 64).

A few people considered that their feelings about spirituality had become less, mainly related to a reduced religious involvement. Kenneth had gone along to church with his first wife but later began “drifting away”.

Shirley had become disillusioned with formal religion after she had lost several of her children. Virginia felt confused about what had happened.

It's just something that I've just gradually become aware that I don't quite feel as – what's the word – 'involved' I guess might be the word. It's just something that I've – it's just kind of happened. I don't know why. I haven't made a conscious decision to not do these things. I don't know if I can do a prayer here whereas once I might have. I probably still do the odd one but I'm not sure how much I believe in it (Virginia).

There were, however, a group of respondents, predominantly women, who said that their spirituality had increased in recent years. They talked about it having become "reinforced", becoming "more concrete" and "deepening". This was often related to life experiences, as it was for Jean.

My spirituality's probably got stronger. I want to be still connected to my mother, so since I lost my mother and I lost two really good friends, one ten days after the other, to suicide, after all that, I felt at peace with them all through that (Jean).

## SATISFACTION WITH SPIRITUALITY

To conclude the section on spirituality in the interview, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the extent of spirituality in their lives. The majority were satisfied and did not identify any gaps. This included equal numbers of men and women, most of whom also said that spirituality was not important in their lives and who had maintained the same opinion for a long period. But the satisfied group also included people who placed considerable importance on spirituality. These included two women who "had beliefs" but did not consider themselves religious.

I'm working on it but I'm quite satisfied. I feel truly that I can see a person as a person and be accepting, regardless of how others might see them (Jean).

When I sort of realised that that's how I had always thought, it made sense to me. Yeah. I have been satisfied, very satisfied with it actually (Janet).

A second, smaller, group, again both men and women, were less sure about where they stood with respect to satisfaction.

Yes and no. You always keep wondering if it could be different, if there's something else but I don't generally have much time to think about it (Robert).

Well, I am (satisfied) because I know it's still there and if I want to upgrade it well there's an opportunity and I guess if I want to downgrade it, I can do that. I guess something I can call on if I have to. And that might happen (Virginia).

It would be an area that I would be interested in exploring, not in terms of conventional religion but in terms of was there some possibility of making more meaning of life. I don't know how or where. Worshiping is not the answer to me but there might be some other answer. I haven't found that answer - not actively looking though (Susan).

Seven out of the 50 interviewees were not satisfied with the extent of spirituality in their lives. All were women. Some said they would like more, but were not specific how this could come about. Like Susan, they were probably not actively doing anything about it.

I think more focus on listening to myself. I sort of feel, maybe over the last three or four years I've stopped listening a little bit and I think it's time I did a little bit more listening (Carol).

There can never be enough really. Once again, that depends, you know, on your journey. It changes. Spirituality is just not one thing, it's several I think (Martha).

Probably not (satisfied) but I haven't done anything about that ...but one day I see every possibility that I might. It's more likely to be something like Buddhism or something. A meditative connection (Karen).

In all these cases efforts to achieve greater satisfaction with spirituality were expected to come from within themselves, rather than from some external impetus, such as formal religion.

#### LIFECOURSE INFLUENCES

Sixteen respondents mentioned life course experiences which influenced their current perceptions of spirituality. Often this related to family religious practices in their childhood. Several talked about being brought up in the Christian tradition.

I was brought up in a Christian home and so I practiced Christianity which was not spirituality at all, it was a ritual really (Susan).

When I was a child I used to go to bible class and sing in the church choir and my mother was the influence on that. My father would take my mother to church and drop her at the door and go home (Sandra).

When I was little we were brought up Anglican but I used to go to the Open Brethren and they were really good and that was just really part of my life and I think it's always stayed with me actually (Joyce).

Some people, like Joyce, continued in the family tradition of Christianity, but others began to question it as they developed independent personalities in their young adult years.

When I was a little girl, it just all seemed natural, what I learnt in church and I accepted it and then as a teenager I got frustrated because they wouldn't answer the questions I wanted to ask - appropriately to me, anyway. I didn't hear any answers that meant much and then at university I chucked the whole lot away (Beverley).

Life experiences as adults also influenced spiritual positions and practices. Some people were influenced by others, especially marriage partners (all the examples concerned wives). This did not always lead to very strong religious adherence.

It was through us going to church in our locality that I met the priest. He was quite friendly and some of those church committee members were friendly, so I went along. (My wife) asked me if I wanted to convert so (I thought) "Oh, might as well" (Kenneth).

Jack was christened a Catholic, but his wife is Presbyterian.

I'm part of the Presbyterian church here, although I don't go to church. I'm in the men's fellowship and I get together with them from time to time. I help the church wherever possible and I'm satisfied with where I am with that (Jack).

Much more active changes in spiritual life appear to have been brought about by bereavement, mentioned by several interviewees.

I guess that I've become very regular in my meditation practice (based on Buddhist and Taoist teachings), that's become more and more important to me. I suppose the experiences of the last few years, not just my husband's death but before that, the death of my parents and before that there were others - I mean I had a couple of great friends who both died when they were quite young but particularly, you know, losing someone who was as close to me as my husband, it really makes things very real, not just ideas. Things like the shortness of life and how precious it is (Barbara).

Shirley found that the deaths of her children shook the religious beliefs of herself and her husband.

We used to go to church quite regularly when the children were young but when we started losing the kids I sort of thought, well, you know, hey, this is not right. We only go to church now for weddings and funerals (Shirley).

Other life events which the respondents felt had influenced their spirituality included marriage break-up and child birth.

(After my marriage broke up) I probably did the real big search about lots of things. I learnt to meditate, found out about transcendental meditation. I think I've taken a little bit of everything I know and applied it to me, so I have my own sort of philosophy and yes, I think it's good (Carol).

I was too busy living to deal with spirituality earlier in my life. And then when my fourth child was born I started to have what you call spiritual experiences, just out of the blue and I was quite kind of frightened in a way and I had to try and make sense of these so then I departed on an intense search to make sense of these things (Beverly).

## CONCLUSION

Theories of spirituality and ageing are based mainly on deductive reasoning, deriving hypotheses on a logical basis from general principles, mainly within the discipline of psychology. Less common is the inductive approach, drawing conclusions from specific observations. Material from the *Health, Work and Retirement Study* allows some theory testing, albeit from a small group of subjects.

The broadest definition of spirituality from the literature is awareness of a transcendent dimension, that is, something beyond the material sphere. This may be organised religion or belief in some kind of higher power not aligned to any religion. Spirituality may be inherent in connections with other people, with nature and the natural world or focussed internally, in a search for personal meaning. All these definitions of spirituality emerged in the discussions with mid-life New Zealanders. Over half of the respondents saw spirituality as formal religion, almost all as Christianity. But it is clear that many people do distinguish between spirituality and religion and believe that they can be spiritual without being religious. Some feel they can be religious, in the sense of faith in God and an after-life without being involved in formal religious activities. Full commitment to organised religion was rare among interviewees (and when it did occur mainly involved women), although many had been brought up to it.

Spirituality, in the sense of an awareness of a transcendent dimension, was clearly understood by most of the interviewees, but it was expressed in different ways. Several saw spirituality in the natural world. Others found it in social relationships with other people – their families and whanau – suggesting a link to what could be seen as generativity. More commonly, people took an introspective view, looking within themselves, their ethics, values and behaviour, for the source of their spirituality. This reflects Wink's (1999) view of spirituality as the self's search for ultimate meaning through individualised understanding. Does this represent a constructive and intelligent search for meaning in life, based on individual learning, understanding and experience? Or is it, in the view of other commentators, quoted by Wink, a weakness; an "outgrowth of narcissistic license to pick and choose remedies without commitment to community at large", or, implicitly, to the discipline of an organised religious code? Whatever their definition, only one in three respondents said that spirituality was important to them. Nevertheless, most people thought it did help, or could help, in terms of their health and well-being. Women predominated among those who felt that it could, indeed, have an important effect.

How do the experiences of these New Zealanders fit the mode of spirituality increasing with age? The numbers are not sufficient to identify trends, although the older respondents were more likely to place some importance on spirituality in their lives. The word "wisdom" was not used, but some interviewees felt they had developed a broader and more tolerant view of life, perhaps perceiving paradox. Many exhibited complexity in their introspective insights. While there were indirect allusions to generativity, no one expressed regret over their life's achievements so far. Only one person mentioned their own mortality, although bereavement sometimes triggered consideration of spirituality. People in the age range 55 to 70 may be too young to have confronted ego integrity/despair. Certainly none could be described as becoming disengaged from life.



Although the data cannot clearly illustrate “different trajectories in men and women” (Wink and Dillon, 2002), there are clear differences in levels and perceptions of spirituality by gender. The women in the study were far more likely than the men to say that spirituality was important or very important to them and to have some commitment to organised religion. All the interviewees who were seeking greater satisfaction with their spiritual lives were women and so were those who perceived spirituality through their personal relationships. Does this contribute to a conclusion that women, overall, may be more spiritual than men?

The main change which people reported through their spiritual lives was movement away from organised religion. A few have continued in early paths set out for them, but more have found new paths or have turned away altogether. Some respondents felt that their spirituality had decreased over the years, but some, especially women, that it had increased. Three out of every five, both men and women, felt that it had not changed recently. Many had not even thought about their spiritual lives – they had not felt the need. As a result most respondents, especially those who felt that spirituality was not important, were satisfied with their current position.

The stories told by the respondents, in discussing their views of spirituality, confirmed that life events – changes and crises - are influential, in both positive and negative ways. Family traditions were important but sometimes abandoned in young adulthood when people began to think for themselves. In adulthood, partners could influence (especially in encouraging men to observe formal religion), but also events such as marriage break up and bereavement. Fitting these into Wink and Dillon’s (2002) “socio-historical context”, it is clear that religious observance was more common as this cohort were growing up (in the 1940s and 1950s) than it is today. Their young adult stage – 1960s and 1970s – were periods in which traditional family life and stereotypes were being challenged, undermining values and introducing diversity in living choices and lifestyles.

Spirituality, in any definition, is not central to the lives of many mid-life New Zealanders who took part in the HWR interviews. But it is for some, more so for the women. While none of the respondents articulated an overt search for “the meaning of life”, many were actively seeking a better understanding of intangible factors in their lives. A few were using traditional religion or meditation. More were taking an introspective approach and working things out for themselves. This is perhaps the spiritual equivalent of what New Zealanders describe as the “number eight fencing wire” approach – inventive and individualistic.

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