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Learning to Practice, Becoming Spiritual: Spiritual Disciplines as Projects of the Self

Erin F. Johnston

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emotional roller coaster that is graduate school. Whether giving feedback on big ideas, editing written work or simply listening to each other vent, our little working group has been an incredibly important and fruitful resource for me during the past four years – and I know you will both do great things, as scholars, and as teachers and advisers.

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perspective, constantly reminding me that there is an entire world outside the walls and structures of academia. Our many (and incredibly diverse) imagined futures – from building a commune to living in China – remind me that the good life is not defined solely by publications, citation counts and job offers. During the final months of this process, he took on the equally thankless and unappealing roles of project manager and therapist: helping me plan out how I would make it to the end, and talking me off the edge when I wanted to give up. Through his words and his actions, he constantly challenges me and pushes me to chase my dreams – whatever they may be. Jeff, your humor, creativity, kindness and insatiable appetite for new hobbies continue to leave me in awe and full of pride. Your love and encouragement have meant the world to me. I love you.

Abstract

As traditional sources of identity lose their formative power, our lifestyle and sense of self are increasingly considered individual constructions. No longer ascribed at birth, we must choose who we want to be and how we want to live. In recent decades, however, there has been a proliferation of *self-constituting organizations,* each offering programs and techniques for self-development and personal transformation. How do these organizations and the resources they offer enable and constrain the development of members' identity and self-understanding?

This dissertation investigates the process of *spiritual* self-formation within two communities of practice: an Integral Yoga studio and a Catholic spiritual center. Drawing on more than two years of fieldwork, forty-five in-depth interviews, and participatory immersion, I examine both the what's and how's of spiritual formation. On the one hand, I reveal the "toolkit" of symbolic and practical resources made available in these communities for the construction of new spiritual selves. On the other hand, I describe *how* self-construction unfolds, walking the reader through the lived experience of apprenticeship in these communities, and highlighting the problems and issues that can arise in the development of new selves and forms of subjectivity.

Chapter 1 introduces the cases, methods and theoretical framework. In Chapter 2, I describe the basic structure and rhetorical conventions underlying official accounts of the "journey" of spiritual formation, and argue that this shared narrative template shapes how practitioners understand themselves in the present as well as who and what they desire to become. Chapter 3 brings together diverse literatures on corporeality and embodiment to examine the constitutive role of bodily techniques and practices in the formation of spiritual selves. Chapter 4 draws attention to the frequency and salience of perceived failures in the process of formation, and analyzes how texts and teachers account for these experiences in ways that promote persistence. Chapter 5 examines how these communities balance practitioners' desire for individuality and flexibility with the need to transmit shared rules and standards of excellence in practice. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings and broader contributions, addresses limitations and suggests avenues for future research. Together, these findings contribute to our understanding of how culture works, revealing some of the means through which organizations try to shape individual identity and self-understanding.

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Spirituality and the Art of Archery

An excerpt from: *Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ*

"'Sin' actually has a very interesting etymological history. It comes from the Greek word meaning 'to miss the mark,' a term from the art of archery. What does missing the mark actually involve? It presupposes a target for one… The purpose of the art of archery is to hit the target every time, or to get as close to doing so as possible.

This accomplishment does not happen easily or soon for those who are apprenticing in this art. The chances of hitting the bull's eye with the first shot are practically nil. Is this surprising? Nobody expects you to hit the bull's eye in the beginning. Only by mastering the subtlety of the discipline can you put the arrow into the bull's eye or coming anywhere near it.

The most successful archers have learned to develop first of all their tools, how to use their bow and arrow, so that through long and frequent practice, which involves missing the mark most of the time, they develop a sense of the space, time, distance, wind and other factors. Then the arrow has a good chance of striking the bull's eye.

What would be the proper response to missing the bull's eyes if you were an apprentice? Obviously, try again. That is all you have to do. So to lament the fact that one doesn't hit the bull's eye on the first shot is ridiculous. It is a skill to be learned gradually, and it is learned by adjusting the body, the nerves, the muscles and the tension of the string and its relation to the arrow.

When everything has been perfectly attuned through practice and a sense of physical and even spiritual poise, the expert archer will hit the bull's eye every time without effort. That level of skill can't be achieved by effort. The right effort goes into the preparation and the skills to be attained. Once they are attained, the archer barely has to look at the bull's eye. He has a feel for the practice. One look at the target and the distance, and he knows the exact moment in which to let the arrow fly. It is the letting go under those circumstances and with the right timing that carries the arrow unerringly to the bull's eye.

In other words, to let the divine energy work through us, through the preparation that has been done through many, many failures. We are not relying on our own skill to do this, but on becoming an instrument at one with the divine action that is manifesting in this particular skill… In the spiritual journey, purity of intention and the love of God enable us to hit the target in each of our daily activities, effortlessly…

It is not our skill that is the reason we hit the bull's eye, but our willingness to be an instrument of God and to fulfill the necessary conditions physically and mentally for this to happen…

Now it just so happens that human behavior, especially divine human behavior, is even more of a skill than the art of archery, or any other art. They are paradigms, or metaphors, for the skill of just being present to what is and being content with what is without wanting to change it, but willing to change it if such is the divine inspiration. It is life under the guidance or the discipline of the Holy Spirit, manifesting divine love in every situation."

Father Thomas Keating

Introduction

The Integral Yoga Institute

I pull into a parking lot at the back of a non-descript strip mall housing a pizza joint, nail salon, and a convenience store in an otherwise largely residential area. I grab my yoga mat out of the back of my car and hurry against the cold, early January air to the entrance of the Integral Yoga Institute (IYI). I am greeted warmly by Preeti, an Indian woman approximately 25 years old, who is serving as the receptionist that day. While Preeti enters my information into the computer, I scan the reception area. A warm and inviting space, the room is decorated in bright yellows, deep reds, and rich purples. There are a number of items for sale in the small room. Short and long-sleeve *kurtis* – or women's tunics – and colorful, embellished purses hang along the wall opposite the reception desk. T-shirts emblazoned with the Integral Yoga *yantra* (see **Figure 1**) and framed by the words, "Truth is One, Paths are Many," are stacked up next to the entranceway. At the far edge of the desk, a glass case displays mala (Hindu prayer) beads, neti pots, tongue scrapers, and small statues of Hindu Gods and Goddesses.

Figure 1: Integral Yoga *Yantra* (Symbolic Instrument)

The desk itself is lined with flyers and brochures advertising upcoming events hosted by the Institute: a five-hour workshop on chakras led by Aadesh (director and founder of the

Institute), a wisdom talk and Kirtan[1] concert with Krishna Das (an internationally acclaimed Kirtan artist), and a workshop titled "Total Relaxation Through Sound." Preeti hands me a red "New Student" folder, and gives me a quick run-down of what the class will be like. The Integral Yoga style, she informs me, includes practices and techniques I may not be familiar with, including chanting, breathing practices, a deep relaxation and mantra-based meditation. She encourages me to follow along as best I can.

The spacious main room of the studio is dimly lit. Buddhist prayer flags cover the ceiling and brightly colored paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddesses – including Shiva, Krishna and Ganesh, among others – hang along the walls. Following the lead of other students, I grab a wool blanket from the front of the room and find an open spot to set up my mat. I take a seat and flip through the papers in my folder. A letter of welcome from the staff describes the IYI as a community center, providing "a supportive environment for all who are interested in spiritual development." A handout entitled "The Benefits of Hatha Yoga" expounds the many physical and mental benefits of maintaining a disciplined yoga practice. An overview of the structure and content of the class and a weekly schedule are also included.

The other students are preparing for the class. Several give the impression of being regulars. Two women are chatting about Laughter Yoga class held at the studio over the weekend.[2] A middle-aged white man mutters that someone has taken "his spot" as he rolls out his mat across from me. Others sit quietly on their mats, or engage in preliminary stretches. By

[1] Kirtan is a practice of call and response chanting to the accompaniment of instruments, performed in the bhakti devotional traditions in India. This form of collective practice is performed at some yoga studios and institutes in the West and has received increasing attention and interest in recent years.

[2] Laughter Yoga involves playing collective "laughter games" with the goal of starting prolonged, intentional laughter. The practice is thought to release endorphins and T-cells to boost mood, immunity, and confidence.

the time the class begins, there are thirteen students in attendance: eight women and five men. More than half appear to be of South Asian descent, and apart from two younger participants attending with their mothers, they are all in their 40s and 50s. I wonder about their motivations for coming to class. What is it that draws them to yoga generally and to this school in particular? How do they understand the practice? What are its benefits and consequences?

Just as I start to do some stretches myself, Aadesh, founder and director of the IYI, enters the room. He has a presence and demeanor that demands attention. Although I later learn he is in his mid-sixties, he appears to be his in his late 40s. He has a muscular build, a clean-shaven head and an eager, piercing gaze. He greets some of the students and then moves to the back of the room, stopping in front of a low, rectangular table draped in a deep red tapestry (see **Figure 2**). On either side of the table sit framed pictures, one of Swami Satchidananda, the founder of Integral Yoga, and the other of his guru, Swami Shivananda. In the center of the table, there is candle holder in the shape of a lotus flower. Aadesh kneels to light the candle and then bows forward for several seconds, before standing up and walking between the two rows of mats to the front of the room. He settles into a seated posture and then looks out at the students with a wide smile, offering words of welcome in a soft tone.

Figure 2: Integral Yoga Altar at the IYI

After introducing himself and the class, he asks us to close our eyes, and to focus on the pattern of our breath. After guiding us through several rounds of deep, slow breathing, in and out, we chant "om" collectively, three times. Aadesh then leads the group in a practice of call and response chanting. Each time, the students repeat back his call, attempting to mimic his words, tone, and intonation: "Hari Om, Hari Om, Hari Hari Hari Om." The collective sound of students' voices joined together is dramatic and engaging, reverberating across the room. The volume of Aadesh's voice decreases with each successive round, finally drawing the chanting to a close. Aadesh then says quietly, almost to himself, "Hari Om Tat Sat. Om Shanti Shanti Shanti," and in doing so, marks the transition from the everyday world to this spiritual practice.

Aadesh smiles as his gaze moves across the room. There are a few moments of silence before he asks us to stand up so we can begin the physical postures, or *asanas*. Throughout this sequence of movements, Aadesh uses verbal instructions and sometimes physical adjustments to help students move in and out of each position. While doing so, he describes the physical and energetic benefits of each pose, and draws our attention to the various sensations we may be

experiencing. Throughout, he reminds us to pay attention to our breath and our bodies, to truly feel and enjoy the postures and their effects. The asana sequence moves more slowly and is less physically demanding than other yoga classes I've taken. However, it was the second half of the class that I found most distinctive.

After completing a relatively familiar set of physical postures, Aadesh instructed us to lie down on our backs in *shivasana,* or corpse pose (see **Figure 8**), for the practice of *yoga nidra,* or the "deep relaxation." We begin by tensing and then relaxing various parts of the body: one arm and then the other, one leg and then the other, and so on. Aadesh then instructs us to make a *sankalpa* – a "commitment with intention" – not to move for the remainder of the relaxation period. He then guides us to let go of the body, breath, and mind, before leaving us in silence for a full five minutes. Finally, Aadesh brings us out of this quiet, meditative state with the sound of an "om." We are asked to bring our attention back to our mind, breath, and body. The whole exercise lasts approximately ten minutes.

Slowly, we make our way to seated positions. Aadesh leads us in two breathing practices (*pranayama*) followed by a period of *mantra japa* (mantra repetition) and meditation. Altogether, these practices take up nearly half of the 90-minute class. Not only is the content and structure of this section markedly different from most classes offered in the area, it is also noticeably different in tone and focus from the asana sequence. While the first half focuses primarily on the physical body, the second half of the class turns inward: toward consciousness and the self. Aadesh uses terms like "true self," "pure consciousness," and "profound experience" to describe the subjective experience produced in and through these practices. During *yoga nidra,* for example, Aadesh tells us that we are accessing "the seat of your true self… this is your very nature." He instructs us: "Allow yourself to experience without any

reservation at all, without any restrictions, the fullness of your being." The practices taught in the second half of the class are described as "subtle" but "powerful," "profound," and even "transformative."

Aadesh tells us that we will end the class with a "traditional closing that's been done for thousands of years." He rises and passes out sheets of paper with the closing *slokas* – or prayers – on them. The majority of the students, however, have memorized the closing, and shake their heads when offered the handout. Aadesh begins and the students join in, adding their voices to his, reciting the following lines first in Sanskrit and then in English:

"Lead me from unreal to real
Lead me from darkness to light
Lead me from the fear of death to the knowledge of immortality."

With his eyes closed, Aadesh marks the end of the class as he did the beginning: "Hari Om Tat Sat. Om Shanti Shanti Shanti." He then folds forward, lowering forehead to ground in a gesture of humble thanks.

As the class drew to an end, I thought of the dominant stereotype of yoga practitioners in the US: thin, attractive, young (and mostly white) women contorting themselves into complicated physical postures in an effort to achieve the "yoga body," all while donning expensive and form-fighting apparel from Lululemon. The practitioners I met during my first few visits to the Institute, however, were far from this cultural cliché: the gender mix was more balanced, the average age was older, the clothing and props less expensive and rarely discussed, the racial and ethnic composition more diverse, and the fitness levels more varied. I also thought about my prior experiences taking yoga classes at the university gym: a cold and uninviting multi-purpose room where the sounds of techno music often drifted in from the class being

offered next door, punctuating yoga poses with a bass drum beat. The IYI, however, was quiet, warm and infused with an altogether different energy.

After the class, I approached Aadesh. "Did you enjoy the class?" he asked. I told him that I had, commenting on how it differed from the classes I'd taken before. He agreed, with an air of pride. This practice, he tells me, was designed by a great yogi and a truly enlightened being. "Did you feel it?" he asked. I was caught off guard. I had no idea what he was referring to. What was the "it" I was supposed to feel? I managed to say something about how relaxed and calm I felt, but I could tell from Aadesh's body language that I was not quite getting "it." Only after spending more time in the field did I realize the error I had made. The "it" Aadesh was referring to was not physical or mental, but spiritual: "it" was "cosmic consciousness" and "enlightenment," the taste of my "true nature" that the practice could provide.

*****

In this community, the practice of yoga is said to facilitate *spiritual* growth and development. The Institute's website, as well as online testimonials, clearly conveyed this association between practice and profound personal and spiritual development. Ron, a practitioner, teacher and trainer, for example, wrote the following testimonial as part of a fundraising effort for the organization:

> *"I have probably been doing some sort of yoga all my life, but about 15 or 16 years ago began to practice yoga with the Integral Yoga Institute and learned that yoga's benefits are myriad. I learned many lessons: the benefits of special physical exercises, breath work, profound relaxation, chanting and meditation.* ***I learned to open to my spiritual self****, to become more receptive to the spiritual traditions I was exposed to. The physical discipline, while good in itself, led to greater rewards for me.* ***It was the impetus to more deeply explore the inward journey.*** *The goals of yoga – an easeful body, peaceful mind and useful life –* ***have helped root me in my own values*** *and have strengthened my own faith tradition. The practice and what I learned there [at the IYI] and have taken into my daily life,* ***have been transformative for me****."*

Ron's account highlights many of the beneficial outcomes associated with the practice of yoga. The practice helps you connect to your "spiritual self" and become "more receptive to spiritual traditions." It stimulates a desire for introspection and self-reflection, and provides an ethical and moral framework for everyday life. Yoga, according to Ron's account, can be and has been personally "transformative."

Rather than a hobby or fitness program, yoga in this community was understood as a program for self-transformation, and ideally as a comprehensive way of living and being-in-the-world. One newly certified instructor, for example, writes that yoga has given her "a new way of engaging with life," and left her "beautifully transformed." Over and over again, I heard stories testifying to the power of yoga to enable personal transformation. I began my fieldwork at the IYI with several key questions: What kinds of people were students trying to be and become in the process of learning to practice? How exactly does yoga facilitate this transformation? What role, if any, does the IYI play in this process?

Trinity Prayer House

Not far off a major highway in New Jersey, my GPS instructs me to turn left into a long gravel driveway lined with trees. Rolling, empty fields stretch out in all directions. Arranged in neat rows, the brown remains of soy bean plants indicate the fields are still actively cultivated. At the end of the driveway, I turn to the right and park my car in front of a large, red barn, which houses a 1950s era tractor and other large-scale farming equipment. Behind me is Trinity Prayer House, a 200-year old farmhouse that has served as a spiritual center and retreat house for nearly forty years. The landscaping and grounds, even in the middle of winter, are meticulously maintained (see **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**), and are lined with bird feeders, wind chimes and statues of Catholic Saints.

Figure 3: Grounds of Trinity Prayer House

Figure 4: Trinity Prayer House and Grounds

I am here for the "Introductory Workshop to Centering Prayer." It is my first visit to Trinity, and I am a bit anxious. Because I was not raised Catholic, I feel as though I lack the proper cultural capital and initially feel less at ease here than I have at other field work sites. I sit in the car building up my courage before getting out and walking to the front door. When I enter, two middle-aged woman are hanging sparkly snowflakes on a still healthy looking Christmas tree in the foyer. Sister Nancy, a Sister of Saint Joseph and the Director of Trinity, comes over to introduce herself. She is a small woman, about sixty years of age, with short gray hair and a warm smile. After saying hello and inquiring about my drive, she asks me to sign in. I do so, and slip a check (the class costs $25) into the envelope lying next to the sign-in sheet. She tells me that we will go upstairs soon, buts says I should help myself to some coffee, water, or snacks in the kitchen before we begin.

While I wait, I look over the flyers on display in plastic bins near the front door. Each advertises a different event or program happening at Trinity. I learn that there are a number of ongoing monthly series taking place on topics such as living contemplatively, St. John of the Cross, and the Ignatian spiritual exercises. There are also advertisements for classes on spiritual practices including art journaling, spiritual discernment, and Lectio Divina, as well as workshops on topics ranging from the stages of prayer to the meaning of the Eucharist. Several flyers advertise for one-day, weekend, and week-long retreats taking place at Trinity throughout the year. Nearly all of the programs are run by Sister Nancy.

Before long, Sister Nancy herds the group upstairs to begin. I follow the others into a large, carpeted room that serves as the meeting space for most group meetings and classes. A dozen metal folding chairs are arranged in a circle around a small table, which holds a red candle, already lit. Nine women, including myself and Sister Nancy, take a seat. I am the youngest person present by a good margin. The others, all white, appear to be between the ages of 40 and 75. Sister Nancy quiets us down and begins. 'I know what you want,' she says, with her eyes closed. 'You want a life of peace, a life in relationship with God.' After a pause, she continues, 'This life requires grace and cooperation with grace.'

After her introductory remarks, Sister Nancy retrieves a small, solar-powered globe from the top of a book shelf on the far wall. As she places the spinning globe on the table at the center of the room, she tells us that prayer is 'the best thing you can do for the world.' According to the pamphlet she hands out, Centering Prayer is "the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery […] Through grace we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is *within us*, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing –

closer than consciousness itself."[3] By working on ourselves through prayer, Sister Nancy explains, we contribute to human spiritual development more broadly.

Sister Nancy tells us that "contemplation" – the awareness of God's presence – is a gift from God and can be experienced anywhere and at any time. Centering Prayer, however, is a method or technique that can help us be open to receiving the gift of contemplation. She tells us that centering prayer is a 'quiet prayer,' a prayer of 'just being.' The sole purpose of CP, she explains, is to 'be with God.' 'Where is God?' she asks. 'God is everywhere, of course, including *in you*.' The goal, Sister Nancy tells us, is to embody a state of being in which our full attention and intention are focused on 'God's presence and action *within*.' In cultivating this state, Centering Prayer is said to transmit "a basic orientation to the lifetime journey of contemplation."[4]

Sister Nancy then reviews the basic structure of the practice. The individual sits as still as possible for a period of twenty minutes. We are told that when our attention wanders, we should use a "sacred word" – a word like "Peace" or "God" – to bring our attention back to God's presence. Unlike some Eastern forms of meditation, however, Centering Prayer does not involve the repetition of the sacred word (as in the case of mantra-based meditation), but rather, practitioners use the word only when their minds become engaged in thoughts. The sacred word is a symbol and an act that reminds us of, and expresses our intention to be present to, God. Ideally, Centering Prayer should be practiced two times per day, once in the morning and once at night, for a period of twenty minutes each.

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[3] Pamphlet on Centering Prayer, distributed by Contemplative Outreach, Inc. http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer

[4] Pamphlet on Centering Prayer, distributed by Contemplative Outreach, Inc. http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer

After describing the history and Biblical basis for the practice, we do three practice sessions of increasing length: first five minutes, then ten, and finally a full twenty minute practice. After each session, there is a period of discussion. Sister Nancy asks people to share their experiences, comments, and questions. Each time someone shares an experience, whether positive or negative, it is with an affirming and validating response from Sister Nancy: 'Yes, this happens sometimes' or 'This is normal.' Participants' questions tend to be practical. 'Is it okay to move if we are uncomfortable?' one woman asks. However, others are more experiential. Another woman, for example, is curious about what should be happening during the prayer period: 'Do you hear God? Feel His presence?' she asks. Sister Nancy also offers a few suggestions along the way. She tells us, for example, that we should invest in some kind of timing device to avoid being distracted by the need to keep time. She also advises having a designated 'prayer place' at home, arguing that doing so increases the likelihood that the practice will become routine. Finally, she reviews and models a number of different options for how to sit: in a chair, on a cushion, or with a prayer bench.

Towards the end of the workshop, Sister Nancy asks us what defines *success* in Centering Prayer. No one responds. After a few moments of silence, she answers her own question: 'Just doing it. Just trying,' she tells us. 'The only way of messing up is giving up.' One of the participants asks Sister Nancy what the *goal* of practice is. 'I know we need healing,' she says, 'but I don't think the practice is about asking for healing.' Sister Nancy agrees, and tells her that the goal of practice is 'to let go of the false self and live in the True Self.' Centering Prayer, she tells us, helps take away the obstacles – notably 'the ego' – that prevent us from being able to receive and live in the gift of contemplation. The practice, she continues, is part of a larger process of personal transformation – specifically, a transformation of consciousness, perception,

and attention – leading, ultimately, to divine union. 'What you do in practice becomes a way of life,' she tells us. But, she continues, 'It is a discipline. There is no instant gratification.'

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While Catholicism seems an unlikely place to find vestiges of such a personalized form of piety, the individuals who attended the workshop were, by and large, committed Catholics. They attended Mass regularly and took on leadership roles within the church. Yet, they were also craving "something more." How did practitioners move from this relatively vague desire to sustained engagement in this specific practice as a comprehensive way of life that reflects something fundamentally true and authentic about themselves and the world? What kinds of resources did this Sister Nancy provide to help practitioners discover and embody their true selves? As was the case at the yoga studio, I began my fieldwork with a desire to better understand how the process of apprenticeship facilitated the formation of spiritual selves.

Spiritual Formation in Practice

While rooted in two very different religious traditions, there are many similarities in the discourses and practices underlying the process of apprenticeship in these two communities. At both sites, personal spiritual disciplines are undertaken as a means for personal development and self-transformation. Drawing on a range of popular discourses – from metaphysical traditions to humanistic psychology – these communities claim to help members reconnect with their divine nature. While perceiving their approach to be "counter-cultural," however, these groups neither seek to overthrow nor reject the mainstream. Rather, as I will show in the rest of this dissertation, these communities offer members a toolkit (Swidler 1986) of symbolic and practical resources for constructing authentic, meaningful, and coherent selves in an increasingly fragmented social world. While spiritual quests are often thought to be deeply personal inner journeys, this project

reveals the role that social and cultural resources – organizations, programs, discourses, and practices – and micro-level interactions play in the formation of spiritual selves.

Viewing these communities as *self-constituting organizations* (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 97, Gubrium and Holstein 2001:16), I began my fieldwork with two broad questions in mind: (1) What resources are made available in these kinds of communities for the construction of spiritual selves?; and (2) How does the process of self-formation unfold in relation to these resources? Rooted in a perspective that views identity and self-understanding as mediums through which social and cultural structures shape individual thought and action, I focus my attention on the nexus between community, social practices, shared discourses, and self-understanding. I aim to contribute to our understanding of how culture works by examining the tools and techniques through which individuals, with the help of others, "go about converting themselves" (Winchester 2008: 1773).

Chapter 1

Theory and Methods

"Self-knowledge — always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery — is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others"[5]

Projects of the Self and the Process of Becoming

Over the past several decades, scholars have argued that the structural and cultural conditions of modern social life have fundamentally changed the nature of individual identity and self-understanding.[6] As traditional sources of identity and meaning – such as family, religion, and career – lose their formative power, one's lifestyle and identities are increasingly considered individual constructions. The historical arc traced by scholars such as Gergen (1991), Denzin (1991) and Gottschalk (1993) is one of movement away from coherence and stability towards choice, individualization, and transience. No longer ascribed at birth, scholars argue that a stable and coherent sense of self is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. In the modern context, they argue, we are pulled in a seemingly endless number of competing and sometimes contradictory directions (Giddens 1991; Gergen 1991; Taylor 1989). Underlying much of this theorizing is a practical concern: the proliferation of choice, freedom, and flexibility in modern society has left the self fragmented, fleeting, and overly saturated.

Despite the grim picture painted by this recent theoretical work, however, most individuals in the US remain "unflinchingly committed to the belief that a singular, authentic self

[5] Craig Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 9-10.
[6] This line of argument can be traced back to the founding fathers of sociology. Simmel in particular argued that individualism itself is rooted in the structure conditions of modern life which place each person at an increasingly unique position in the web of group affiliations (Simmel 2010 [1955]; see also Zerubavel 1997 on cognitive pluralism).

resides within … in some deeply privileged space … available as a beacon to guide us" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 96). The *personal self*, it seems, remains the leading experiential reality of our lives (see Cahill 1998). This personal self, however, is confronted with a changing and often confusing landscape. There has been a proliferation of lifestyle options and authorities at the same time that we face increasing cultural pressure to consciously craft and embody their *best* and most *authentic* selves. While it may be true that we are able to *choose* who we are, rather than being handed immutable identities at birth, this "freedom" is at best precarious (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009). Individualism is not just a cultural value but a socially structured and morally enforced necessity: the modern self, in other words, is *burdened* with becoming an individual (Marti and Ganiel 2014). Everyday choices and actions are mechanisms through which we position ourselves in a broad web of identification, whether we mean to or not. We stake a claim to our individuality not only because we want to but because we must.

Without ultimate authorities to offer decisive mandates, we are asked to "fulfill our true potential – without knowing what exactly that might be" (Scott 2010: 220). We strive to "find ourselves" under structural and cultural conditions that make it ever more difficult to do so. But how? According to recent theorizing, we respond to these conditions by undertaking reflexive and continuous projects of self-monitoring and self-improvement (Foucault 1988; Giddens 1991; Connell 1995; Pagis 2013). Self-projects, while arguably more variable and individual, however, continue to rely on "locally salient images, models or templates for self-construction" which "serve as resources for structuring selves" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 96-7). In crafting our selves we still rely on and respond to the range of available cultural resources.

In fact, a broad range of organizations and institutions offering formal and informal programs for self-improvement have sprung up to meet this growing demand. As Gubirum and

Holstein argue, "personal selves have become big business, the stock-in-trade of a world of *self-constituting institutions*, which increasingly compete with each other for discerning and designating identities" (2000: 96-7),[7] and which span a broad range of social fields. Variously referred to as *reinventive institutions* (Scott 2010), *identity transformation organizations* or "people changing collectivities" (Greil and Rudy 1984), these organizations "encourage their members to reorganize their behavior, offer them new social roles to play, socialize them into new values, and foster in them new modes of self-conception" (Greil and Rudy 1984: 260). Examples range from new religious and radical political movements to therapeutic drug communities and weight loss programs, as well as social control agencies such as prisons and mental institutions.[8] In choosing to affiliate with different groups and communities, we not only express but also opt into various constructions of ourselves.

The connection between personal selves and institutional identities, however, needs to be constructed through *concrete* practices and discourses, and within particular and decidedly *local* contexts. Despite the number of scholarly treatises on the modern self, however, "scant attention has been paid to the setting in which identities are reconstructed, the places of retreat to which we flee" (Scott 2010: 213) when navigating the conditions of modern social life. Important questions therefore remain unanswered and under-theorized. What kinds of selves and identities are available in the contemporary context? What resources, practices, and techniques underlie

[7] This includes the expansion of existing institutions into the business of constructing the personal self. Arlie Hochschild's (2003) work on "Amerco" for example demonstrates how employees often feel their most authentic at work rather than at home, and how the company takes an active role in constructing and healing troubled selves by offering workshops and training programs to help employees better deal with the demands of everyday life.
[8] See Gubrium and Holstein's 2001 edited volume *Institutional Selves* for more empirical examples including talk shows, a battered woman's shelter, divorce court, and universities.

their construction? What are the issues, concerns, and problems that arise in the construction of modern selves, and how do organizations and individuals deal with them?

Self-constituting organizations differ in the kinds of selves they strive to transmit and the processes and techniques they implement in doing so. While some critics suggest, for example, that the growing emphasis on the self and its construction is a fundamentally narcissistic process (see Bellah et al 1987), the selves being constructed at these sites may be more or less other-focused. The selves constituted in some organizations, such as life coaching programs (see Pagis 2013), may be highly egocentric, while those constituted in other organizations, including many social movements, are defined, at least in part, by engagement with and in the community. There are also differences in the extent to which these organizations are premised on and allow for different degrees and kinds of agency in the process of self-formation. Social control agencies – such as those studied by Goffman (1968) and Coser (1974) – are populated by individuals, for the most part, coerced into treatment and forced to remain within the physical boundaries of the institution. Others, like the *reinventive institutions* studied by Susie Scott (2010), are "places to which people retreat for periods of intense self-reflection, education, enrichment and reform, but under their own volition, in the pursuit of 'self-improvement.'" Members of these organizations – such as private residential clinics, spiritual retreat centers, and utopian movements – are not forced into treatment, but instead "see themselves as consumers of a service who make an informed decision to undergo resocialization."

Further, many contemporary organizations concerned with self-cultivation explicitly reject coercive and authoritative techniques. The two communities I studied, for example, in embracing a "quest orientation" also reject external authorities, encouraging individual diversity and self-authority. There has been little research on processes of self-formation within non-

authoritarian contexts. What then are the implications of this perspective for the process of self-formation? Certainly self-authority presents a serious challenge to the establishment and maintenance of social order. If anyone can speak with authority, how can communities hope to reproduce their norms and traditions? This dissertation will highlight some of the difficulties faced by organizations that strive to facilitate identity transformation while discursively committing themselves to the primary of experience, individuality, and self-authority.

Following the framework outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (2001: 16), the following analysis attends to both "*what* is locally available by way of identity resources" in these communities, as well as to "*how* the complex process of self-construction unfolds in relation to these resources." The former outlines the descriptive counters of the cultural resources – such as discourses, narratives, and practices – made available in these communities, while the latter analyzes how these resources are incorporated into practitioners' lived experience and self-understandings, and the problems and issues that arise in the process. Throughout the text, I make comparisons to processes of socialization and self-construction in other self-constituting organizations, both within and outside the religious field. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate how the study of religion and religious practice can both contribute to and benefit from an engagement with existing studies of self and identity.

Practice Theory and the Process of Acquisition

Given that these communities are oriented around the transmission of personal spiritual practices, I pay particular attention in this analysis to how the process of becoming intersects with and relies on the process of apprenticeship, or of learning to practice, in these communities. In recent decades, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), sociologists have begun to investigate social practices as sites and processes through which the objective (external social

and material world) and the subjective (internal world of individuals) intersect. Unlike previous work which saw social practices – particularly religious rituals – as symbolic or expressive performances (Durkheim 1915), Bourdieu argues that practices perform constitutive work. Practices then are sites for the construction and maintenance of a "socially formed body, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its senses" (1977: 124). According to Bourdieu, practices and the dispositions they transmit are central means through which social and cultural structures are produced, transmitted, and maintained.

For this study, drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), I define a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity." There are a broad range of activities that fall under the umbrella of "social practices," from sports and artistic endeavors to intellectual inquiry and devotional practices. Scholars have investigated the process of apprenticeship in social practices ranging from playing the piano (Sudnow 1978) and listening to opera (Benzecry 2009) to boxing (Wacquant 2004) and martial arts (Zarrilli 1998; Foster 2013). Most of the existing research, however, investigates practices that aim to transform the *physical* body or transmit *technical* skills. In other words, the goal of apprenticeship in these communities is to be practically and technically competent.

Wacquant (2004), in fact, argues that boxing is an ideal site to study the relationship between practice and the habitus because it is a *pure practice*: it "follows a logic that is performed directly in bodily gymnastics, without the intervention of discursive consciousness and reflective explication, that is by excluding the contemplative and de-temporalizing posture of the theoretical gaze" (2004: 58-9). Learning to box, then, is largely a "(re)socialization of

physiology" (Wacquant 2004: 59), accomplished in a practical manner, by means of direct embodiment. Training involves mimetic imitation as well as the repetition of physical movements. Mastery is indicated in the ability to perform these movements without thought and within the context of a fight. "Correct" performance is visibly (or in the case of the piano as studied by Sudnow 1978, audibly) observable: the instructor can *see* if the apprentice has correctly executed a right jab, for instance.

However, "pure practices" like boxing represent only one kind or sub-set of the broad range of available social practices. In fact, focusing on practices whose primary target is the physical body overlooks the diverse range of practices that seek first and foremost to transform practitioners' embodied dispositions, from their emotions and bodily sensations[9] to their moral and ethical inclinations. According to Bourdieu, the process of learning to practice always entails not only mastery of physical skills and techniques, but the acquisition of a shared social logic. The individual is transformed both physically and mentally through practice, adopting a new way of being-in-the-world. From this standpoint, bodily techniques and subjectivity – ways of being, seeing, and thinking – are intricately interwoven. The body, mind, and social context interact in and through the transmission and acquisition of social practices. However, existing research has tended to focus primarily on the acquisition of skills and bodily techniques.

Studies of religious practice, however, draw our attention beyond the physical, highlighting other aspects of the self that are transformed through practice. Like the existing work highlighted above, studies of religious practice often draw on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Religious practices such as prayer and diet, for example, have been theorized as

[9] See for example, Becker's (1953) work on becoming a marijuana user; Benzecry (2009) on becoming an opera fanatic; or Katz (2008) on the seductions of crime.

important means "through which collectively sanctioned religious norms come to reshape individual consciousness, senses and emotions" (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 214). In fact, practices and bodily techniques are increasingly seen as central to membership, socialization, and identity in religious communities (see for example Davidman 2014; Schnable 2012; Winchester 2008). While these studies indicate that practices play an important role in the formation of religious habitus and in the transmission and maintenance of religious identities, few studies have approached the study of religious and spiritual practices from the perspective of social apprenticeship.

What are spiritual practices? Drawing on Wuthnow (1998: 170), I define spiritual practices as "intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred," including activities such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, and acts of service. Spiritual practices share many similarities with other forms of social practice, as outlined above. For one, spiritual practices require commitment to shared rules and norms, and shared standards of evaluation that structure and constrain their performance. Likewise, the process of apprenticeship in spiritual disciplines is usually time-consuming, involving daily or at least regular practice over long periods of time. Similar to boxing or playing the piano, apprenticeship in spiritual practices requires the individual to undergo "specialized body training" (Zarrilli 1998: 5) in order to acquire particular bodily techniques and competencies such as how to sit or kneel during prayer or meditation or how to perform a complicated *asana* (or posture) in yoga. These bodily skills and competencies become habitual, and spiritual practitioners, like boxers and musicians, no longer need to think as much about the rules and techniques of practice (Wuthnow 1998: 178). Finally, spiritual practices are personally formative: as the practitioner develops and improves, he comes to

understand and appreciate the game more fully, internalizing its rules and gaining the associated virtues (ibid 44).

On the other hand, however, spiritual practices have several distinct features that likely alter the structure and experience of apprenticeship. First, the target and presumed effects of practice differ. While boxing, dance, and martial arts seek to transform the physical body – literally reshaping it through the transmission of new ways of holding and using the body – spiritual practices are concerned with reformatting the whole person. In other words, spiritual practices are considered "transformative" (Wuthnow 1998): they are explicitly aimed at self-formation or self-(re)constitution (see Sarbin and Adler 1970). In other words, members are not only learning new bodily techniques and physical competencies, but undergoing important changes to their personal identity and subjectivity.

Given this focus, the motivations for initiating and maintaining the practice are often different from those of the boxer or pianist. Practices like boxing are often taken up in order to achieve external goals, such as status, respect, or financial gain. At other times, they are practiced for more intrinsic rewards, such as the feeling of finally throwing the perfect right hook or mastering a particularly difficult piece by Chopin for the first time. The practices I studied, however, are performed in order to gain inner awareness and a sense of personal integration (Roof 1999: 35). While sometimes seeking external goals such as status or intrinsic goals such as physical skill or transcendent experiences, practitioners learn that they should be motivated only by the desire to discover and embody their truest, most authentic selves. What is at stake in the spiritual world then is a viable, coherent, and authentic conception of the self. The practice is not an end in and of itself, but a means for finding and expressing one's True Self.

In addition, religious practices are often undertaken with the *explicit* desire to cultivate and modify specific personal and moral dispositions (Mahmood 2001; Winchester 2008). As Saba Mahmood (2001: 212-217) shows in her analysis of women's participation in the Islamic fundamentalist movement, participants are not unconscious and unwitting dupes in the formation of subjectivity through practice. Instead, the women Mahmood studied exerted "*conscious effort* at reorienting desires … through the repeated practice of virtuous deeds" (2001: 215). A similar line of argument is found in Dan Winchester's (2008) study of Muslim converts. The author argues that practices – such as wearing of the *hijab* – are not only symbolic representations of moral dispositions such as sexual modesty, but are the primary means "through which such a personality is cultivated" (2008: 1771). The practices transform abstract moral precepts into stable, durable dispositions.

Not only are the goals of practice different, but there is also a great deal more ambiguity inherent to spiritual practice. In the cases of boxing or playing the piano, practitioners' skill and progress can be assessed externally and relatively objectively. The boxer, for example, can assess his overall progress by his performance in the ring. In many spiritual practices, however, correct practice and personal progress are defined primarily by *experiential* content and *internal* senses. The goal of practice, for example, is "a certain specialized state of consciousness" (Zarrilli 1998: 5) or the cultivation of embodied dispositions such as "openness," "peace" and "detachment," rather than embracing concrete behaviors or beliefs. These goals, because they are internal to the practitioner, are inherently difficult to identify and evaluate. The spiritual practitioner therefore does not have the same tangible evidence of progress.[10]

[10] Wuthnow (1998: 243-4), for example, argues that spiritual practices differ from other forms of practice such as gardening because mistakes are less visibly apparent. Gardeners know they have failed to perform correctly if their plants do not grow. It is much more difficult for spiritual

Likewise, the process of apprenticeship itself is much more ambiguous in the spiritual field. This is due, in part, to a discursive emphasis on spiritual formation as a private, personal, and individual process. Learning to box or play the piano involves a relatively formalized and universal set of steps and stages. Novices acquire a progressive set of skills and techniques through formal drills (for example, novices must first learn the basic scales in order to play the piano), which build on each other in turn. The expectations for individuals at various stages of development, therefore, are relatively clear. Spiritual communities, on the other hand, often lack formalized role expectations for members; instead, individuals are "left on their own to formulate expectations and standards" for various roles and stages of development (Wilson 1984: 308). While it may be argued that a more open and flexible structure promotes freedom and flexibility, scholars have found that ambiguity creates a host of problems for members and may in fact serve to reinforce inequality and strengthen those in positions of power (see Kunda 2009, for example, on the operation of control and commitment in a 'flexible' high-tech corporation).

Communities and organizations like the IYI and Trinity offer formal training programs and classes, which help individuals learn how to pray and give structure to the process of apprenticeship. As I demonstrate in the following analysis, however, the features of spiritual practices reviewed above have important implications for the social organization and lived experience of apprenticeship. I found, for example, that the ambiguity underlying the "internal goods" and "standards of excellence" (MacIntyre 1981) in spiritual practice means that teachers, texts, and organizations must perform a great deal of cultural and interpretive work to keep practitioners engaged. While many assume the rhetorical ineffability of spiritual experience and

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practitioners to know whether or not they are in true contact with the divine, or if they are "growing spiritually."

the personalized nature of spiritual growth, the practices and processes remain "transportable" (Katz 2001). This is due, at least in part, to the transmission of discursive and practical resources which both constrain and enable practitioners' personal journeys, providing a foundation for intersubjective understanding.

I argue that studies of religious practices may offer important insights into the relationship between community, practice, and subjectivity by capitalizing on these important differences. By investigating the sites where individuals go to learn about, initiate, and maintain a spiritual practice, this dissertation will add to existing studies of "body pedagogics" within the field of religion (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 215). In doing so, I aim to do three analytically distinct things: (1) articulate the practices and dispositions that define and mark membership in these communities of practice; (2) examine the central techniques and processes of cultural transmission; and (3) describe the lived experience of learning to practice.

The Social Construction of Spiritual Selves

Over the last several decades, scholars have sought to identify and articulate the constitutive features of American "spirituality." Often defined in contrast to traditional "religion," spirituality is used to mark an orientation towards religious life which emphasizes personal experience, emotion, and intuition over tradition and community (see Bender 2007; Batson 1976; Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). No longer seen as adherents but as consumers, the "spiritual but not religious" are said to pick and choose from the range of ideas and practices available in the current "spiritual marketplace" (Roof 1999) to create unique and individualized packages. These individuals are said to be wary of institutions, hierarchy, and external authorities, preferring to rely on subjective experience as the ultimate guide for navigating this complex and

growing field of suppliers (e.g., Fuller 2001; Houtman and Auspers 2007). Their religious lives are defined by a quest for personal transformation (Roof 1999; Batson 1976; Heelas 1996).

Similar to the theories of self articulated above, much of the theorizing on contemporary spirituality rests on a practical concern: spirituality, as private, individual, and experiential, is too fleeting and ephemeral to provide a solid foundation for meaning and self-understanding (Berger 1967; Bellah et al 1987; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Matthew Wood (2009), drawing on fieldwork in an English religious network, for example, has argued that spiritual beliefs and practices are *nonformative*: the multiple and often contradictory authorities present in the spiritual field tend to relativize each other, and therefore each lacks the ability to formatively shape identity, belief, and self-understanding. Steve Bruce (2002: 99) argues that the beliefs and practices that constitute American spirituality are too diffuse to be successfully transmitted, suggesting that this orientation is not sustainable. Apologists, on the other hand, like some scholars of the modern self, argue that contemporary spirituality presents individuals with unprecedented freedom of choice and promotes greater openness to diversity. Individuals are now able to choose their identities, practices, and beliefs, constructing new, more personal approaches that fit their inclinations and predispositions.

Both accounts, however, usually rest on a shared assumption that contemporary spirituality is, in fact, more personal, private, and individual than traditional, institutional religion. Often taking the accounts and discourses of spiritual practitioners at face value, these studies fail to examine the deeply social and in many cases highly structured nature of spiritual life. Studies by Wuthnow (1998), Roof (1999), Bender (2010) and Ammerman (2013), for example, all demonstrate the myriad ways in which seemingly personal journeys are constrained and enabled by social and cultural resources. Individuals involved in the spiritual marketplace

(and who discursively embrace the orientation described above) are not lone riders but participate in a long history of seekership (Schmidt 2012; Bender 2010), as well as in communities, organizations, and institutions which shape and mold their spiritual travels.

Studies such as those by Roof (1999), Wuthnow (1998), Albanese (2001) and Ammerman (2013), have illuminated the counters of American spirituality, and described a range of ideal typical orientations available in the complex and growing religious field. However, this work has tended to focus either on the general landscape of American religion (Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999; Albanese 2001), offering a kind of bird's eye view, or at the level of the individual, demonstrating how people incorporate spiritual discourses and practices into their daily lives (Ammerman 2013). Relatively few studies have explored the social contexts and processes through which these orientations are constructed, transmitted, and maintained (see Wood 2009 for a longer critique of research within the sociology of spirituality[11]). In fact, as Houtman and Auspers (2007: 317) have recently argued, there is a "virtual absence of empirical studies into the social construction of self-spirituality."

Recent work by Michal Pagis (2009, 2010, 2012) and Courtney Bender (2010) represent notable exceptions. Bender's *The New Metaphysicals* describes the spiritual marketplace in Cambridge at ground level. Her work, by focusing on the local and the micro, reveals the intersections of history and discourse with practices and subjective experiences. Pagis's work on

[11] Wood argues that the sociology of spirituality has tended to suffer "from a naïve form of analysis in which data are interpreted by sociological meta-narratives (particularly those of detraditionalization and subjectivitzation, associated with Giddens) rather than being interpreted through knowledge of its local social contextualization," resulting in "scant attention to what is happening on the ground" (2009: 280). The current paradigm for the study and analysis of spirituality within American sociology, Wood argues, has focused primarily on texts, discourses and surveyed beliefs, and only rarely on the contexts in which they occur and the resources on which they rely (267). When practices and interactions are studied, they are often reduced to lists on surveys, rather than descriptions of practice as inherently social activities.

Vipassana meditation (2009, 2010, 2012) emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the acquisition of spiritual practice and self-understanding. Together, these studies reveal not only the importance of organizations, social interaction, and shared discourses in shaping and sustaining spiritual practices and identities, but the specific processes and dynamics through which the individual and the social intersect. The following analysis builds on this important work.

In this dissertation, I examine how spiritual selves are formed in two communities of practice. In doing so, I proceed from the assumption that the process of "becoming" always involves social learning (Becker 1963, 1968), even when individuals and communities discursively reject such influences. I will show, for example, that it is through immersion in these communities that practitioners learn to embrace self-authority and subjective experience as markers not only of spirituality but also of the good life. It is also in these organizations that practitioners learn *how* they might come to enact and embody these dispositions; in other words, these organizations provide the tools and techniques necessary for practitioners "to go about converting themselves" (see Winchester 2008: 1773). This dissertation reveals how organizations and communities can play a role in constructing a self-oriented spirituality.

At the same time, I maintain a local vision of socialization. Religious and spiritual traditions offer their own "models, guidelines and theologies for a valid conversion. Within a tradition there is a 'good' and 'bad' or a 'right' and 'wrong' conversion. Particular rituals are required, motives are evaluated, beliefs are expected and outcomes are prescribed" (Rambo 1999). In this dissertation, I seek to elucidate the ideal typical "experiential career" (Tavory and Winchester 2012) of practitioners in these communities, including both the models and guidelines for becoming, as well as the dynamics and processes through which this process

unfolds. The following analysis therefore offers a rich and detailed picture of the social organization and lived experience of self-formation, drawing out the similarities and differences in form and process across the two sites.

Cases, Data, and Methods

Against this theoretical backdrop, I began a study of the social organization and lived experience of spiritual formation in two organizations: an Integral Yoga Institute and a Catholic prayer house. These sites were chosen, in part, because of similarities in the approach and orientation towards religious life they sought to transmit. First, these organizations embrace and transmit a "quest orientation": an approach to religious life that is open-ended and active, and which centers on the desire for an authentic inner life and meaningful personhood (see Batson 1976; Baston et al 2008; Roof 1999). In other words, individuals and communities that embrace the quest orientation are explicitly focused on self-development and self-transformation (see also Heelas 1996, 2009; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). These kinds of organizations, therefore, serve as strategic locations for investigating the what's and how's of self-formation in the modern religious field.

At the same time, however, these communities may also be fruitfully thought of as transmitting a "practice-oriented spirituality" as articulated by Robert Wuthnow (1998). Practice-oriented spiritualties also represent a particular orientation towards religious life, one which is rooted, primarily, in the maintenance of personal yet disciplined practices. The practices, such as yoga, prayer, or meditation, are undertaken seriously and deliberately, and require rules and a sense of duty. At the same time, they are considered deeply personal and transportable, allowing them to exist outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions. Practice-oriented spiritualty therefore offers some of the benefits of both dwelling and seeking. While it draws on

socially-derived resources, it does not require that individuals be fully immersed in any one particular community. It emphasizes malleability and growth while imposing a degree of discipline and structure on personal exploration. As practice-oriented spiritualties, these communities offer ideal locations for investigating the nexus between community, practice, and individual identity.

As quest and practice-oriented communities, the organizations embrace broader cultural discourses of authenticity, individuality, and choice, while simultaneously emphasizing self-transcendence, universality, and discipline. Claiming to combat the egoism and self-focus lamented by many scholars of contemporary social life, these communities embrace the discourses of individualism and authenticity that are thought to underlie it. While encouraging self-authority, they also emphasize the importance of community, tradition and submission to the "rules of the game." The process of self-formation in these communities, therefore, brings to light the cultural, discursive, and practical work self-constituting organizations must do to the contemporary cultural milieu.

To maximize the comparative dimension, these communities were also selected because they *differed* in two key ways. First, these communities were chosen because of their different relationships to established, traditional, and institutionalized religious communities. Trinity Prayer House, on the one hand, has a close relationship to the Catholic Church. Partially funded by the local diocese, nearly all of the participants I spoke with during my fieldwork at Trinity self-identified as Catholic. While practitioners discursively situated themselves on the edges of the Catholic community, the vast majority continued to attend Mass regularly and most took an active role in the life of their local parish, from teaching Sunday school to serving as a

Eucharistic minister. Because of this, most practitioners had a shared foundation and language on which they could build in constructing new spiritual selves.

The IYI, on the other hand, is not explicitly affiliated with any religious tradition or institution. While the founder, Swami Satchidananda, was Hindu, the Institute is not directly affiliated with any Hindu beliefs or organizations. Practitioners at the IYI, consequently, displayed a much broader range of religious upbringings, beliefs and current affiliations. While practitioners were more likely to be of South Asian descent – particularly both Indian and Hindu – relative to other studios on the area, there were also practitioners from a diverse range of backgrounds. I spoke with practitioners who were raised Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, as well as those raised secularly. There were an equal number of practitioners who claimed a current religious affiliation as there were individuals who said they were "spiritual but not religious." This difference allows me to investigate what role external authorities and overarching communities play in shaping the process of spiritual formation, and how this may vary based on the position of individuals and organizations in the broader field.

Second, these communities differed in the degree of physical competence and skill required for the performance of key practices. On the one hand, while Centering Prayer involves and even directly targets the body, it does not require the acquisition of complicated or nuanced physical skills or bodily techniques. Hatha yoga, on the other hand, demands the acquisition of a broad range of new bodily techniques and competencies that require both strength and flexibility. This difference allows me to examine different understandings of and uses of the body across spiritual disciplines, as well as speculate on how these differences shape the process of apprenticeship and the dynamics of self-formation. Before describing my data methods in more detail, I provide a brief history and overview of each practice and its respective community.

Case 1: Integral Yoga and the IYI

During my initial search for yoga studio at which to conduct fieldwork, I found organizations offering all of the most popular forms of postural yoga[12] in the NYC metro area: from Bikram or "hot yoga" – where classes involve physically challenging postures and take place in rooms heated to over 100 degrees – to Yin Yoga – a style involving the extensive use of physical props and only passive effort to aid in stretching and relaxation. There were studios offering the more athletic styles such as "power yoga," "ashtanga yoga" and "vinyasa yoga," as well as others aimed more explicitly at mental, emotional, and spiritual development such as "Sivananda," "Kundalini," "Kripalu," and the focus of this study: "Integral Yoga."[13] Integral Yoga would be described by most practitioners and general yoga enthusiasts as gentler and more spiritually-oriented than the average yoga class in the US. Yoga Journal – the most widely-read international yoga magazine – for example categorizes Integral Yoga (IY) under the "Ease into Enlightenment" category of styles alongside Sivananda, Ananda, Kripula Anusara and Kundalini Yoga. As described in the

[12] Many scholars refer to Western forms of this practice as "Postural Yoga" to differentiate it from pre-modern forms of yogic practice. The precise history and origins of yoga – a diverse and varied set of theories of practices – however is not well-known. Although many claim that yoga is older than written history itself, most estimate that yoga has been in existence as a fairly systematized discipline for more than 2,500 years (De Michelis 2005, 2008). There were and remain to be many forms and traditions of yoga. The earliest text – the Bhagavad Gita - cites three forms: karmayoga, jnanayoga and bhaktiyoga (Strauss 2005, 2002; De Michelis 2005, 2008). [For more information on the history and modern forms of yoga see: Singleton and Byrne 2005, De Michelis 2005, 2008; for more information on the transnational movement of yoga see: Strauss 2005]

[13] This is far from an extensive list and new forms and schools of yoga are being developed all the time. See Yoga Journal's overview of yoga styles: http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/165

Introduction, IY classes include a guided relaxation, breathing practices, sound vibration (repetition of mantra or chant), and silent meditation [see Appendix A for a full overview of the basic Integral Yoga Hatha class].

Integral Yoga was founded by Swami Satchidananda, an internationally-recognized spiritual leader and a disciple of Swami Sivananda, who came to the US from India in the 1960s.[14] While there are teachers, practitioners, and institutes of IY in many locations around the world, the headquarters (*ashram*) is located in Virginia.[15] According to organizational sources, Integral Yoga is a synthesis of the various branches of yoga into a comprehensive system aimed at the development of "every aspect of the individual." In addition to cultivating "an easeful body, a peaceful mind and a useful life," the practice is said to lead to "self-realization" through the experience of Divine or Cosmic Consciousness. Practitioners are explicitly encouraged to approach IY as a *spiritual* practice aimed at spiritual formation and *not* as a form of exercise. The *asanas*, or postures, are meant to be practiced as a moving meditation, balancing effort and ease.

The Integral Yoga Institute (IYI), where I conducted my fieldwork, is a 501c3 not-for-profit under the designation of a "spiritual mission."[16] According to their website, the primary goals of the IYI include: (1) to share and provide spiritual support in living the teachings of Integral Yoga as taught by Sri Swami Satchidananda Maharaj; (2) to provide a supportive

[14] For more information: http://swamisatchidananda.org/
[15] Integral Yoga has affiliated organizations across the US (in New Jersey, New York California, Hawaii, Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Washington) as well internationally (in Canada, India, the UK, Gibraltar, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sri Lanka and Taiwan).
[16] This is according to Aadesh, the director of the IYI's, report. It is important to note that most yoga studios in the US are for-profit businesses, although an increasing number of organizations are seeking non-profit status.

environment for those interested in spiritual development; (3) to engage in and offer: yoga classes, meditation, kirtan, workshops, study groups, retreats, yoga teacher training, satsangs and ecumenical events; and (4) to be of service to the community and actively contribute to the interconnectedness and cooperation of its diverse members, among others. In line with its status as a charitable organization and community center, instructors teach at least one class without compensation (apart from free classes). The front-desk receptionists and most of the other staff are volunteers. Because of this, the cost of membership at the Institute is significantly lower than comparable studios in the area. Membership dues are around $45 per month for unlimited classes, compared to approximately $100 per month on average for studios in the area.

The IYI offers between two and four hatha yoga classes (90 minutes each) per day, seven days a week. Attendance ranges widely from as few as two to as many as thirty students per class. During my time at the studio, class participants were predominantly white (around two-thirds), while the majority of other participants appeared to be of South and East Asian descent. The gender composition was disproportionately female, although less so than other studios in the area: women comprised approximately two-thirds of the participants in any given class. Ages varied as well, with most participants appearing to be between the ages of 30 and 60. In addition to hatha classes, the studio also hosts a wide-range of other activities. During the time of my fieldwork, there was a weekly Bhagavad Gita (a Hindu scripture) study group as well as a monthly meetings for Raja Yoga[17] and Kirtan.

[17] Regarded as one of the six schools of orthodox Hindu philosophy and based on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Raja Yoga is primarily concerned with the mind and its fluctuations. It is commonly referred to as the eight-limbed path because there are eight distinct aspects of the practice: yamas (five restraints); niyamas (five observances); asanas (physical postures); pranayama (breath control); pratyhara (sense withdrawal); dharana (concentration); dhyana (meditation); and samadhi (blissful awareness).

Case 2: Centering Prayer and Trinity Prayer House

The practice of Centering Prayer was originally developed by three monks: Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meringer, and Basil Pennington. The story of the practice's origin – which I heard in the course of my fieldwork as well as read about in popular texts on the movement – suggested that it was developed in response, at least in part, to the growing influence of Eastern religions. When Father Thomas Keating was abbot of St. Joseph's monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, young people would occasionally stumble upon the monastery by accident while searching for the Theravada Buddhist Center nearby. Father Keating learned that many of these individuals had been raised Catholic or Christian but had turned to Eastern traditions because they desired a more personalized and contemplative approach to religious life. Keating lamented that these young people had no knowledge of the rich contemplative traditions and practices *within* Christianity.[18] To remedy this, the three monks sought to re-package existing contemplative ideas and practices in a way that would be accessible and useful for the laity. Centering Prayer was one of the results of this effort.[19]

In 1984, Father Thomas Keating founded Contemplative Outreach Ltd, an international organization providing training and support for contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina. The organization helped give structure to the growing community that had formed around these ideas and practices. According to their website, Contemplative Outreach is a "spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. The common desire for Divine Transformation,

[18] Contemporary practitioners trace the origins of the practice to the Desert Fathers, Benedictan monasticism, and to well-respected work such as *The Cloud of the Unknowing* and the writings of Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross.

[19] For a brief historical overview, see the Contemplative Outreach website, at: http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/history-contemplative-outreach.

primarily expressed through a commitment to a daily Centering Prayer practice, unites our international, interdenominational community."[20] Contemplative Outreach claims to serve more than 40,000 people per year through 120 chapters and 800 prayer groups across 39 countries.

Figure 5: Contemplative Outreach

Trinity Prayer House, a 200-year old farmhouse situated on 100-acres of active farmland, has been operational for more than forty years and – according to their website – serves approximately 4,000 people per year. Trinity seeks to provide "a contemplative environment for prayer, spiritual direction, retreats and programs that foster a deepening relationship with God and ongoing spiritual growth that all people may be one with God and one another." While partly funded by the local diocese, the prayer house receives much of its operating budget from donations and enrollment fees. One-day classes run between $20 and $45 dollars, although some are offered by donation. Monthly series, which run between September and May, cost approximately $200. Sister Nancy, who runs the vast majority of workshops, classes, and training programs at Trinity, trained under Father Thomas Keating and was certified by Contemplative Outreach to teach workshops and classes on the practice of Centering Prayer. In addition to monthly prayer groups like the ones I attended, Trinity also offers one-on-one

[20] http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/vision

spiritual direction sessions (with Sister Nancy), as well as one-day, weekend, and week-long retreats.

Participants at Trinity during the time of my fieldwork were almost entirely white, with a handful of East Asians, Latino, and black participants, and most appeared to be middle class. Their class status was evident from a variety of indicators, including the homes I visited during interviews and the cars parked in the lot during workshops and seminars. The majority of participants were well-educated and were currently or formerly (many were retired) employed in professional jobs, such as teachers and nurses. Women were in the majority, often quite substantially. Participants appeared to be between the ages of 40 and 70. I only encountered a participant younger than myself (I was 27 at the time), on one occasion.

Methodological and Analytical Approaches

After receiving permission from the directors of both organizations (Aadesh at the IYI and Sister Nancy at Trinity), I began preliminary field work at each site, attending classes and workshops and interacting with students and teachers. Like other scholars who have studied processes of socialization into various communities and subcultures (Wacquant 2004, 2005; Becker 1953; Benzecry 2009; Winchester 2008; Mahmood 2001; Pagis 2009), my approach to data collection centered around a process of "initiatory immersion" (Wacquant 2004) and "reflexively embodied" ethnography (Winchester 2008: 1774). In other words, I not only observed but actively participated in each community, attending to both what I saw and what I experienced [See

Appendix A for more on the data, methods and analytical strategy underlying this project]

I conducted participant observation at each organization for approximately one year. In order to give my full attention to each community, I conducted my research at each site in succession rather than simultaneously. Over the course of my fieldwork, I attended more than 200 hours of formal classes, workshops, and training programs at each site. I was an active participant in all of the classes and workshops I attended, contributing to discussions and completing all required assignments and assessments. In addition to the basic classes and programs offered at each site, I also participated in more advanced training programs. At the yoga studio, I participated in a three-month, 200-hour teacher training program for those seeking to become a certified Integral Yoga instructor. At Trinity, I participated in the Spiritual Direction Intern Program, a three-year program for those seeking to become certified in the practice of spiritual direction. These training programs proved to be ideal sites for investigating the taken-for-granted and unwritten "rules of the game," because they were occasions in which these elements were clearly articulated and explicitly discussed.

In addition to the many informal conversations I had with practitioners before and after classes, I also conducted formal, in-depth interviews with teachers and students at each site. I spoke independently with thirty Centering Prayer practitioners, including Sister Nancy. Participants ranged in experience with the practice from less than a year to more than a decade. At the yoga studio, I interviewed the eight participants in the teacher training program on three occasions: before the training began, immediately after it ended, and again one year post-training.[21] I also interviewed fifteen additional IY practitioners, including ten students and five

[21] Except for one participant who never responded to my emails regarding the one-year follow-up.

teacher-practitioners. Interviews at both sites lasted an average of one hour. While relatively open-ended, I followed an interview guide, which included questions about participants' religious upbringing and current affiliations, as well as their experience with the practice (IY or CP) and the organization (the IYI or Trinity).

Finally, I not only actively participated in classes, workshops, and training programs, I also attempted to maintain a daily, personal practice for a period of at least one month. While not achieving the level of immersion documented by Wacquant (2004), I did however achieve sufficient proficiency to become a certified Integral Yoga instructor (although I have not as of yet put this certification to use) and to be invited to continue my participation in the intern program for spiritual directors at Trinity (which I declined). During this time, I attended to and documented my own experiences even as I actively strove to maintain some degree of ethnographic distance from the people and processes I was observing. As Hoffman and Fine (2005) argue in their critique of Wacquant's (2005) study of boxing, the process of immersion – and the desire to see from the perspective of an insider – can easily "bleed into an empirically troublesome romanticism. The impulse to heroize our research subjects rests uneasily with the goal of portraying the complex variety of lived experience" (Hoffman and Fine 2005: 156). I sought to combat this by balancing immersion and distance, experience and observation, in my fieldwork, my analysis, and my writing.

However, like Wacquant's work on boxing, I did not enter the field seeking to articulate practitioners' "diverse embodiments" or to offer "thick description" of these two communities; rather, I sought to contribute to our understanding of how experience and self-understanding are shaped by cultural contexts and social processes. My primary interest therefore was not in the people or places per se but in the process of socialization. Given my analytical focus, I tend to

emphasize similarity and downplay differences, in an effort to articulate "the generic properties" and features of being and becoming a practitioner (Wacquant 2005: 454; see also Zerubavel 1980, 2007). At the same time, however, I remain open to the tension between the normative and the actual, and often highlight the places where practitioners' narratives, experiences, and practices diverged from the official discourse.

My approach to data collection and analysis was similar to what Timmermans and Tavory (2012, 2014) have recently termed *abductive analysis*: a method of qualitative data analysis explicitly aimed at theory construction.[22] Unlike grounded theory, which often endeavors to begin fieldwork without any – or at least very few – theoretical preconceptions (Glaser and Strauss 2009), I entered these communities with a clear analytical focus and armed with "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969) from existing empirical and theoretical work on identity, practice, and contemporary spirituality.[23] Not wed to any particular perspective (see for example Buroway 1998), however, I moved back and forth between data and theory in an iterative process. And as in abductive analysis, I did so with an ear towards what was new or surprising in these particular contexts given existing scholarly work. This approach combines an

[22] Although this work did not inform the development of my project (it came out after my prospectus was already developed), their articulation did capture many elements of my approach to data collection and analysis.
[23] As Kathy Charmaz (2006) argues, the "fundamental concerns and contested ideas" (138) of the relevant sub-fields act as "points of departure" (337) for observation and analysis.

emphasis on theory-building with a commitment to think *with* and *from* the particular cases under study.

Interview transcripts, audio recordings and field notes were analyzed and coded in several successive rounds (Charmaz 2006). In the first round, data sources were explored in-depth and coded for dominant themes. In subsequent rounds of coding, recurring and emergent themes were used for further analysis (Charmaz 2006: 47-66). Finally, based on the prevalence of and relationship among the dominant themes, an attempt was made to articulate the general patterns present in the data (Kvale 1983), transforming the individual accounts and interactions into a coherent pattern or gestalt (Thompson 1990). Throughout the coding process, my analytical focus remained on the processes of acquisition and becoming. In doing so, I held in mind the factors identified as important to these processes in previous research, including narrative and discourse, practice, the body, and social interaction. Each of the empirical chapters below takes up one or more of these themes.

A Note on the Use of Different Registers

This project draws on data from a number of different sources, including: the books assigned or recommended to students in the course of classes and workshops, the content of teachers' didactic instruction, in-class interactions and exchanges (between teachers and students as well as among students themselves), the comments and insights of individual practitioners (from formal interviews and informal discussions), and finally, my personal experiences and reflections. Throughout this manuscript, I aim to draw out how and to what effect these different registers interacted in the process of formation. I seek to highlight, for example, how teachers talk about texts as well as how students reflect and even draw on the ideas presented by teachers and texts within interviews. Before moving on, however, I want to specify a few terms and

grammatical choices I have made regarding these different sources of data throughout the manuscript.

First, when I attribute ideas or beliefs to the "official discourse" of the community, I am referring to the content of: assigned texts and teachers' didactic instructions, as well as pamphlets, brochures, and websites compiled and distributed by the organization or the international network with which it is affiliated (Integral Yoga International or Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.). I recognize that this terminology reflects a particular vantage point in the field: that of the student-practitioner. I make this choice consciously, as my primary goal is to articulate the social organization and lived experience of apprenticeship. In addition, it is important to note that the "official discourse" need not be internally coherent, either within or across sources. In fact, in **Chapter 5,** I point out some of the tensions and contradictions present in the official discourses circulating in these communities. However, in using this term, I draw attention to the fact that these sources of information are thought to be relatively authoritative, influencing members' ideas about what ideas, values, and practices define the collectivity.

Second, I have made specific grammatical choices regarding the use of quotation marks in order to signal different levels of reliability and accuracy in my reports of the content of talk and dynamics of interaction. In some cases, for example, I was able to audio record interactions: this includes one-on-one interviews with practitioners at both sites, as well as all class meetings of the yoga teacher training program.[24] In cases where I am quoting directly from a transcribed audio recording, and can therefore be confident in the exactness of the speech, I place the text in double quotation marks ("X"). Dialogue or speech in double quotations is edited only to improve

[24] All interview participants consented to audio-recording. At the start of the teacher training program, all participants (students and teachers) gave their consent to be audio-recorded.

ease of reading; for example, I remove uh's and um's as well as repeated words. I also use double quotations when quoting from audio, visual, and written media for which I have a direct record. I use single quotations ('X') when citing dialogue and speech that I recorded in my field notes either during the course of the interaction or upon leaving the field for the day. Because the meetings at Trinity were usually structured as a combination of lessons and class discussions, I was usually able to take notes (relatively inconspicuously) in real-time; however, I cannot be sure that my notes reflect the actual speech fully and accurately.

Finally, throughout this manuscript, I aim to weave together three distinct modes of writing: the analytical, the narrative, and the experiential (see Wacquant 2005: 468):[25] To do so, I often write in the present tense, especially when I offer extended description of interactions I observed in the course of my fieldwork. I do so in an effort to convey "some sense of the immediacy and sensuousness of a situation" (Lande 2007: 98). While I try to avoid skipping too frequently between tenses, there is some movement back and forth between descriptions of interaction in the present tense and my reflections on these interactions at the time of writing, composed in the past tense. I also employ the first person or refer to classes and groups of students as "we" or "us" throughout. I do so both to communicate my presence in the situations being described and to acknowledge my location in those interactions as one of the student-practitioners.[26]

[25] The current manuscript leans (perhaps heavily) in the direction of the analytical. My goal in futures versions of the manuscript is to weave in more of the narrative and the experiential voices in order to better convey the texture of the practices and the process of acquisition.

[26] As Turner (2000) has argued, researchers in the field, especially those who undertake immersive socialization, become a part of the interactional dynamics and definitions of the situation into which they step. Because of this, participant observers do not develop a theory of what "they do" but rather an (always partial) understanding of what "we do."

Chapter Overview

This dissertation examines the social organization and lived experience of spiritual formation through disciplined practice. In each chapter, I aim to be attentive to what Gubrium and Holstein (2000) refer to as the "what's" and the "how's" of self-construction. On the one hand, I aim to articulate the locally available resources for identity construction present in these discursive environments, including the descriptive contours of available identities and the rules, norms, and standards regarding how spiritual persons are made. On the other hand, I describe how the process of self-construction unfolds, walking the reader through the lived experience of apprenticeship in these communities, and highlighting the problems and issues that can arise in the development of new selves and forms of subjectivity. How do practitioners understand themselves and the process of spiritual formation? What kinds of people do they aspire to become? What challenges and obstacles do practitioners face in striving to embody these shared aspirations? What role, if any, do interactions with texts, teachers, and fellow practitioners play in this process?

In **Chapter 2**, I describe the basic structure and shared rhetorical conventions underlying accounts of the "journey" of spiritual formation, revealing how the process of formation is imagined and described in these communities. I argue that the "quest orientation" – as a process-oriented perspective on religious life – manifests and is made concrete in these communities as a shared and socially-prescribed narrative template: a story form that individuals can use in making sense of and accounting for their religious lives and identities. Further, I examine the consequences of this orientation as narrative structure for practitioners' identity and self-understanding, suggesting that this shared narrative template shapes how practitioners understand themselves in the present as well as who and what they desire to become. On the one hand, I show how this narrative template constructs the storyteller as a *perpetual aspirant*:

someone continuously engaged in the pursuit of a highly desirable but elusive identity (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). On the other hand, I describe the discursive contours of the "ideal self" towards which practitioners are encouraged to aspire.

Chapter 3 brings together diverse literatures on corporeality and embodiment to analyze the central "incorporating practices" (Wacquant 1995) and "body pedagogics" (Shilling 2007) through which practitioners are socialized into and become members of each community. I show how bodily techniques and practices are often aimed at multiple, intersecting goals, from reformatting the physical body to transforming cognitive schemes and cultivating moral depositions. In doing so, I identify the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which the body is understood and used at each site, revealing the complicated relationship between the body, practice, and self-formation in these communities of practice. I find that the ambiguous nature of correct performance and personal progress in these communities means that apprenticeship requires a great deal more cultural and interpretive work than in other communities of practice.

In **Chapter 4**, I draw attention to the frequency and salience of perceived failures and shortcomings in the process of formation, and analyze how texts, teachers, and students account for these experiences. First, I outline the most commonly cited forms of perceived failure, error, or shortcoming in the process of establishing and maintaining these spiritual disciplines. In doing so, I highlight variations in discourse and practice across forms of failure, revealing how teachers and texts encourage students to downplay and ignore certain forms of failure while encouraging them to identify, acknowledge, and strive to overcome shortcomings in other domains. I then argue that these communities promote a particular interpretive style in relation to failures and shortcomings: one which normalizes, universalizes, and even valorizes failure, and which

balances internal and external attributions. I highlight the iterative and interactive nature of failure, interpretation, and persistence, and link discourses of failure to the embodied and performance of the ideal spiritual self.

Chapter 5 examines how organizations, teachers, and texts try to balance practitioners' desire for individuality and flexibility with the need to articulate the shared rules, norms, and standards of excellence of practice. I show how practitioners learn to draw on a wide range of epistemic authorities, both internal and external, in accounting for the rules and standards of formation. In addition, I demonstrate how texts and teachers place simultaneous emphasis on personal effort and ultimate surrender as well as structure and flexibility, in the process of formation. I then argue that the presence and use of these seemingly contradictory logics enables practitioners to position themselves in the broader religious field, demarcating themselves from two very different but culturally salient 'others.' Like Goldilocks, the practitioners in these communities implied that their approach to spiritual life and formation was "just right," carving out a middle-ground between what they saw as two problematic extremes: the overly dogmatic and rigid approach of institutional religion and the undisciplined, overly ego-centric approach of spiritual seekers.

In the conclusion (**Chapter 6**), I summarize the main findings, and highlight their broader implications. I argue that these findings contribute to our understanding of how culture works, revealing some of the means through which organizations try (and are more or less able) to shape individual identity and self-understanding. Finally, I highlight some of the limitations of this study and suggest avenues for future research.

Chapter 2

Spirituality as an Aspirational Identity

"*In each kind of self, material, social and spiritual, men distinguish between the immediate and the actual and the remote and the potential"* (William James, 1890, pg 200)

Introduction

I met John in one of the five bedrooms used for overnight retreats at the Trinity Prayer House. We had just completed a full day of classes (9:15am-3:30pm) as part of the Spiritual Director Intern Program, for which John was in his third and final year. John was 59 years old at the time we spoke, and had first come to the prayer house during his Deaconate training program eight years ago. Sister Nancy has served as his spiritual director ever since. While John was raised Catholic, he told me that religion was not a big part of his family's or his life while growing up. During our conversation, John described a series of events that he says brought him closer and closer to the Church and to God.

The process began, he explained, with his desire to impress a former girlfriend and appease her family, all of whom were Catholic. While the relationship eventually ended, it brought John back into the orbit of the Church. Then, just over a decade ago, John had a series of life-changing experiences. He went on two mission trips to Jamaica, had a stint living with Jesuit priests, and, afterward, made the decision to enter the Deaconate Program. While training to become a Deacon, John left a lucrative career in finance to serve as Business Manager for his parish. After taking a few years to "get some experience under his belt" as a Deacon, John entered the Spiritual Director Intern Program at Trinity in the hopes that he could apply what he learned there in his roles as both Deacon and Manager at the parish.

I asked John if his understanding of and relationship to God had changed over this time period. He laughed, "From no relationship to where I am now? I would say so!" However, taking on a more serious tone, he explained to me how he thinks his relationship to God is *always* growing and developing, part of an *ongoing* formation that includes both formal training programs and everyday practices: "The spiritual direction program is a huge move forward but so is what I do every time I pick up a book to read: it nudges me closer and closer to God. Every time I pick up the Bible to read another piece of scripture for the 50th time or whatever it is … that moves me a step closer. Every time I have a conversation like this, it moves me a step closer." John views the training programs, interactions, and practices as a system of support for furthering his spiritual growth, a process rooted in his decision to allow God into his life. He tells me, "**He [God] took that opening and filled*, is filling*, it**."

John's correction here – from filled to filling – is particularly telling, and marks a key feature of practitioners' accounts of their religious and spiritual lives: the stories they tell construct the process of formation as perpetually incomplete. While John feels that his spirituality and practice are more integrated with his daily life than ever before, he tells me, "I still have more growing in that. You never max out your prayer life." Despite being engaged in nearly "constant" prayer and reflection, John continued to feel that he was far from embodying a "completely contemplative life." In fact, he sees this as an ideal that he, and others, should "always strive for" but which is ultimately impossible to achieve because "there is always a little more peace you can have."

John was not alone in his emphasis on *continuous striving* as an important defining feature of being a practitioner. In fact, pairing descriptions of progress with references to how much remained to be done was one of the most striking and nearly universal features of the

stories I heard from practitioners at both sites. In this chapter, I analyze the structure and content of practitioners' accounts of their spiritual and religious lives in more detail. I will argue that practitioners' stories rely on a shared narrative template – what I call the *journey narrative* (see **Figure 6**) – used to describe the process of spiritual formation at both sites. Further, I will examine the implications and consequences of this ideal typical story-form for practitioners' self-understanding, arguing that it shapes their present and future self-concepts.

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The dominant theoretical narrative regarding religious identity in the US traces an historical arc from "ascription" to "achievement."[27] In modern society, scholars argue, religious identities are no longer considered to be fixed and immutable, or tied to birth, but are described instead as chosen, malleable and fluid, tied to explicit behaviors and practices (Berger 1967; Warner 1993; Smith 2010; Cohen and Eisen 2000). Both concepts, however, overlook an important component of many religious identities: their orientation towards the future. Drawing on my observations in these two communities, I introduce a third way of understanding, describing, and managing religious and spiritual identities: not as ascribed or achieved, but as *aspirational*. Although the practitioners I spoke with in these communities – like those studied by Cadge and Davidman (2006) – sometimes deployed notions of ascription and achievement, neither concept captures the sense of identity formation as incomplete and ongoing that was so central to practitioners' narratives.

As John articulates so well above, being a spiritual person in these communities means being committed to a continuous and ongoing process of spiritual formation, a process directed

[27] Recent research draws on the work of Ralph Linton (1936), Talcott Parsons (1982) and Phillip Hammond (1988).

towards the achievement of an elusive, and ultimately unattainable, ideal: enlightenment at the yoga studio or Chrsit-Consciousness at Trinity. In other words, practitioners learn to view their religious lives as a perpetual journey or ongoing quest. While I am not the first to recognize that some people view their religious lives in this way (see for example Batson 1976; Baston et al 2008; Roof 1999, 2000), in this chapter, I examine where and how this orientation manifests in these particular communities, as well as the consequences of this orientation for practitioners' self-understandings. How exactly do practitioners imagine and describe the structure and shape of the journey? How do they locate themselves and where, precisely, do they think they are going? In answering these questions, I view stories and accounts of spiritual formation as both discursive spaces and social practices in which collective understandings of religious life and religious selves are constructed and transmitted.

First, I argue that the "quest orientation" – as a process-oriented perspective on religious life – manifests and is made concrete in these communities as a shared and socially-prescribed narrative template: a story-form that individuals can use in making sense of and accounting for their religious lives and identities. Drawing on insights from existing theoretical and empirical work on narrative and narrative identity (Mead 1932; Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Ochs and Capps 2009; Ricoeur 1976; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Smith 2010; Somers 1994), I analyze the basic structure and shared rhetorical conventions underlying practitioners' stories of their religious and spiritual lives, revealing how the journey of spiritual formation is imagined and described in these communities. I find, for example, that practitioners' stories rest on the central unifying logic of progressive attainment (both retrospective and prospective): a logic that provides coherence to the self and experience through time.

Second, I examine the consequences of this orientation as narrative structure for practitioners' identity and self-understanding. On the one hand, I argue that this narrative template constructs the story-teller as a perpetual student or *aspirant*: someone continuously engaged in the pursuit of a highly desirable but elusive identity (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). I found that the individuals I spoke with described themselves as being in the same structural position on the journey of spiritual self-formation (see **Figure 6** for a visual diagram of the journey), regardless of the time and effort they have committed to the practice. On the other hand, I argue that this narrative template includes a shared image of *what* practitioners ought to be aspiring to. While Nancy Ammerman (2003: 210) has suggested that modern religious adherents are more like "tourists and vagabonds, rather than pilgrims with a sense of destination," I found that practitioners in these communities did, in fact, have a sense of destination, one shaped by the image and outline of the "enlightened self" as depicted in these communities. I show how the prototype of the "enlightened self" was defined not by birth, belief, or practice, but by the embodiment of certain perceptual, affective and somatic ideals. I argue that in articulating the characteristics and dispositions associated with "enlightenment," these organizations transmit a highly desirable but elusive *aspirational habitus* (Foster 2013)[28] which shapes and constrains practitioners' future self-concepts.

[28] My analysis of practitioners' future self-concepts and aspirations has been influenced by: Markus and Nurius' (1986) articulation of "possible selves," Maggie Frye's (2012) argument that aspirations can be seen as assertions of identity, Ibarra (1999) on "provisional selves"' Oyserman and James' (2011) "possible identities" and the concepts of "ideal" and "ought" selves as outlined by Higgins (1987). I tend to use the term "aspirational habitus," because I think it best captures the highly embodied nature of the self towards which practitioners in these communities are striving.

In this chapter, I do not seek to identify essential features of the quest orientation or spiritual identity nor do I aim to describe the stages that define its *normal* development.[29] Instead, I view these stories as social texts or relationally constructed and selectively filtered interpretations shaped by conventional patterns of "telling the story of becoming" (Mayer and Grunder 2010:401) in the wider community and therefore reflecting and reinforcing prevailing norms of discourse (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). In other words, self-narratives draw on and are shaped by official accounts of the moral trajectory of spiritual formation. Further, I argue that the quest orientation, as an ideal typical narrative template, shapes (1) how practitioners describe and account for their religious trajectories; (2) how they understand themselves in the present; and (3) who and what they desire to become (their future self-concepts and aspirations). This template therefore represents an important symbolic resource in the "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) made available by these organizations for the construction of spiritual selves.[30]

The Spiritual Journey: Narrating the Process of Formation

As demonstrated in the introduction, I found much resonance in these two communities with the quest orientation outlined by Batson and Roof. In fact, practitioners in both communities

[29] Most of the existing research on spiritual identity approach the topic from the perspective of developmental psychology. Researchers in this paradigm aim to articulate the essence of the spiritual identity (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2014; MacDonald 2009; Reimer et al 2009), as well as the causes, stages, and consequences of its development over the life course (see Poll and Smith 2003; Roehlkepartain et al 2011). This work tends to assume that spiritual development is a universal, objective feature of normal childhood development, and strives to identify the factors necessary for successful and "normal" spiritual identity development.

[30] While often relying on adherents' narratives of their religious lives to make theoretical and empirical claims, scholarship in the sociology of religion rarely takes an explicitly narrative approach to their analysis. Instead, scholars tend to use the content of individuals' narratives (1) to identify and categorize – as ascribed or achieved, for example – how adherents understand, describe and enact their religious identities (Cadge and Davidman); (2) to articulate the different stages or steps in the process of religious identity formation (Peek 2005); or (3) to identify and describe different ideal typical orientations towards religious life (Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998).

regularly used the language of "journey," "quest," and "growth" to describe their spiritual and religious lives. In this section, however, I want to move beyond a broad outline of this orientation to examine the structure, logics and rhetorics that underlie these metaphoric descriptions. Drawing on a narrative identity perspective, [31] I view practitioners' accounts of their religious lives as a genre of autobiographical work in which past experiences and affiliations are given meaning in relation to the present and imagined future, and which draw on available symbolic resources and templates in doing so (see Ochs and Capps 2009). In this section, I articulate the basic structure and central logics underlying practitioners' narratives, and argue that this narrative template – what I call the *journey narrative* – constructs the storyteller as a perpetual aspirant: someone who continuously strives, through concrete practices and techniques, to embody an ideal self, but does not and cannot ever fully attain it.

Embracing the Journey: Continuity and Change

Researchers interested in narrative identity, especially those who study narratives of self-change, seek to identify and articulate the central unifying logics – or story lines that tie together past and current self-understandings (Griffon 1990) – deployed in and across individual narratives. Past research has identified, for example, both "rebirth" (see for example DeGloma 2010, 2014) and "home-coming" (see for example Johnston 2013; Mason-Schrock 1996) as unifying logics commonly deployed to account for experiences of self-change and discontinuity. In the two communities I studied, however, practitioners described their religious lives as a "journey," and in doing so, conveyed a sense of self-continuity not through stories of rebirth or home-coming,

[31] Studies of narrative identity seek to identify, compare, and account for the formal conventions of storytelling common across individuals and social contexts (DeGloma 2014; Johnston 2013; Frank 1993). Scholars sift through individual narratives to identify, elaborate and compare the common themes and central unifying logics across individual narratives, ultimately contributing to the identification and delineation of ideal typical or "representative types" (Bellah et al. 1987).

but by tying diverse experiences and events into a teleological account of progressive attainment, or continuous movement towards an ultimate goal.

Much like the journey of Siddhartha in Herman Hesse's (1971) classic book, practitioners viewed their religious lives as an ongoing and relatively individualized journey. In the course of this journey, they sometimes moved in or out of different approaches, practices, and communities; however, each experience was accounted for and given meaning in light of the same ultimate goal. In other words, all events and experience – whether positive or negative, happy or sad – were described as *necessary*: each experience played a functional role in facilitating personal growth and spiritual formation. I found that the logic of progressive attainment was used to account for past events and experiences, to justify present actions and decisions, and to project forward into the future, providing a sense of continuity and coherence to the self and experience through time.

Past experiences, including prior affiliations, for example, were described as useful and necessary, even when seemingly contradictory, because of the role they played in moving the individual towards their current location and perspective. While other ideal typical narratives of self-change tend to downplay commitment and adherence to previous groups (Johnston 2013) or discount them through metaphoric contrasts (DeGloma 2014), I did not find either tendency among the practitioners in these two communities. Instead, past affiliations and periods of seeking were not viewed as mistakes, but as necessary steps on the journey of formation.[32]

During my conversation with Donna, for example, she recalled the nearly two decades she spent attending an Evangelical Church with her husband and children before returning to her

[32] There is evidence of a similar interpretive frame in the narratives of converts to Eastern Orthodoxy as described by Winchester (forthcoming), although he does not take this up in his analysis.

Catholic roots and discovering Trinity and the practice of Centering Prayer. Her memory of this period is fairly negative. She told me, "I really look back on those years and I feel like I must have been brain dead or something, because I've never really experience that much oppression of thought and intolerance." It was only after she watched her son marry the pastor's daughter that she became more acutely aware of the problems, both with the community and its beliefs. However, at the same time, she tells me, "I don't regret it." Donna says that her experiences there deepened her personal faith, gave her the opportunity to study and learn the Bible, and taught her "how not to be a Christian." Despite performing some boundary-work between her current self and this past community, she recalls her affiliation mostly in terms of what it *did* for her. In other words, she fits this seemingly contradictory past affiliation into a progressive narrative, arguing that this experience, while negative, was useful in moving her along the spiritual path towards her present location.

Even experiences, events, or moments considered significant "turning-points" were interpreted and given meaning through the logic of progressive attainment. Barbara, a 75-year old practitioner of Centering Prayer, for example, told me about an experience she had during a silent retreat, which she felt was pivotal to her spiritual growth. Over the course of the retreat, Barbara became increasingly aware that she "was being so harsh on myself internally… beating up on myself all the time." Then, on the last day of the retreat, toward the end of their final period of silent prayer, she heard this voice, "like it was echoing across a valley," saying, "*Ceeeeease fire!"* She laughs, and explains that she had visited the grounds where the final battle of the Civil War was fought in Pennsylvania not long before. The experience really affected her. "I think it was a significant turning point," she tells me. "I finally got it." Barbara explains, however, that this doesn't mean she "turned around and changed completely." "You get into a

habit pattern" which is hard to break, she says. "But more and more as I grow spiritually, I fire at myself less and less. I'm so much more compassionate and kind and understanding of myself," she tells me. "That seems to be my spiritual journey," she reflects: "just relaxing into being okay."

Barbara describes this moment as a "significant turning point." However, unlike many narratives of identity change which hinge on one key moment, event, or experience to account for dramatic experiences of self-change, Barbara does not think the experience changed her completely. Instead, Barbara argues that this was an important experience because it gave her a significant push towards her goal (she "got it"). Afterward, she began to "fire at myself less and less." This experience, in other words, is just one particularly meaningful (and perhaps particularly large) step on the journey of self-formation.[33]

At the same time, present actions – including the rules and requirements of apprenticeship – were also justified and made sense of in light of their role in the process of formation. Disciplined commitment and submission to the rules of practice were also functional and necessary tools for facilitating spiritual development. Likewise, the future was depicted using the same logic: practitioners imagined and described their future selves as more advanced than their current selves. In other words, they pictured their futures as a process of continuous movement forward toward their ultimate goal. The logic of progressive attainment, therefore, provides coherence to practitioners' lives and identities through time, by connecting past, present, and future into a continuous story of functional interpretations

[33] This is very different from the role of "turning points" in the context of awakening narratives (DeGloma 2014).

and progress towards an ultimate goal. I expand on present and future justifications in the next section

While practitioners construct self-continuity through the central metaphor and unifying logic of progressive attainment, they also simultaneously acknowledge having undergone important changes in the course of their religious lives. I found that the most important change described by practitioners was a shift in their *orientation* towards and *understanding* of their religious lives. Practitioners told me that at some point in the past, they came to see and understand their religious lives as a quest: an open-ended, active approach to religious life that was qualitatively different from their previous orientation. Donna, for example, embraced this perspective only recently, after leaving the Evangelic Church, returning to Catholicism, and discovering the prayer house. Donna told me, "I feel like I'm just beginning on this journey. I don't know what I'll find, but I feel committed to it." It was clear from our conversation that Donna had embraced the framework of the journey for making sense of her experiences, past and present.

Practitioners at both sites described their current orientation – religion as quest – as the result of an important shift in their perspective and approach towards their religious lives. What exactly they described shifting away *from* however tended to vary across the two communities. Most of the CP practitioners I spoke with, for example, described their previous orientation to religion as one rooted in a sense of obligation and fear. When I asked Barbara, for example, how if at all, she felt her religious life had changed over time, she told me, "When I was young, it was an obligation. When I was in high school, it was an obligation. Even in college, it was an obligation. An obligation to a point where if you didn't do it, you committed a bad sin." Barbara's first experience with a more quest-oriented approach to religious life was through

RENEW, or the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement.[34] She tells me, "Renew helped me to view my religion less as an obligation and more of, 'I want to know more.'" She feels that this orientation is the same one underlying the Franciscan approach, the community she most closely associated with when we spoke.

I asked Barbara what she thought it was about Renew that prompted this shift in her orientation from obligation to internal desire. She told me, "I think it's because I became more of a participant, whereas before, I was a spectator. And being a spectator, I didn't feel like I was really needed there. Whereas with Renew there were discussions, there were opinions given, there were questions answered, there were plans … Rather than sitting there … this was much more - I was able to be more involved in what was happening." This movement – from being a spectator to being an active participant in their religious lives – was referenced by many of the CP practitioners I spoke with. Practitioners described this change in orientation as a shift away from an approach defined primarily by adherence to rules and strict ethical codes of conduct to one which viewed the work of religious life as defined primarily by constant and consistent effort to shape and transform the self (see Heelas 1996 on "self-spirituality").

On the other hand, yoga practitioners tended to describe an important change in their orientation towards the practice of yoga itself. For many, classes at the Institute – especially the teacher training (TT) program – transformed how they understood, approached, and experienced the practice of yoga. When we talked at the end of the TT program,[35] Natalia – a 35-year old

[34] RENEW is spiritual movement within the Catholic Church that incorporates charismatic practices (such as faith healing and speaking in tongues) with Catholic belief and traditions. The movement emphasizes the development of a personal relationship with God. For more information see: http://www.renewintl.org/

[35] I conducted participant observation during a 10-week, 200-hour basic-level teacher training program. There were eight participants and three instructors. I observed, participated in, and

Eastern European practitioner – for example, informed me that "there is a big difference" in her orientation now. In our initial interview, Natalia made it clear that she associated her spirituality and spiritual development primarily with Buddhism and her practice of Zen meditation. Before the training, she saw yoga primarily as a source of community, exercise, and personal enjoyment, revealing an extrinsic orientation towards the practice. However, at the end of the training, Natalia told me that her understanding of and approach towards yoga had moved in a more "spiritual direction." She now viewed yoga as a practice with the same goals and intentions as her meditation practice: a technique for managing energy and facilitating her spiritual development.

Lynn, who had been practicing yoga for more than twenty years when training began, also described a dramatic shift in her understanding of and experience of practice. During class one day, Lynn told us that before the training, she would often leave classes at the IYI after the asanas (or physical postures), skipping the second half of the class (the deep relaxation, breathing exercises and meditation). Noting that she was embarrassed to admit it now, she had viewed this part of the class as a waste of time. However, the teacher training changed her understanding and experience of those aspects of the yoga practice. She now stays for and enjoys the entire class, viewing the practices she used to skip as equally, if not more important than the asanas.[36] Through these accounts, the yoga practitioners I spoke with argued that they now understand

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audio-recorded all class meetings over the 10-weeks. I interviewed all eight participants before the training, within two months of the end of training, and again 1-year post-training.

[36] I underwent a similar change in my understanding of and approach to the practice of yoga. Before beginning my fieldwork, I had practiced yoga regularly for about two years, mostly using online videos at home. During this time, I would usually do only the asanas, skipping over the initial "centering" activities – breathing practices and silent meditation – and stopping the video before the final relaxation and closing meditations. Viewing yoga primarily as exercise, I considered these components of the class a waste of time. By the end of the training program, however, I found myself not only participating in these parts of the class but enjoying them.

yoga as a *spiritual* practice, one which should be performed with the motivation and intention of facilitating spiritual growth. In other words, through immersion in this community, practitioners came to embrace a new orientation towards practice: one which viewed it as an important part of a broader and more encompassing spiritual "quest."

The metaphor of the journey and the logic of progressive attainment provide a sense of continuity and coherence to practitioners' narratives, tying together diverse experiences into a teleological account of continuous development towards an ultimate goal. At the same time, practitioners describe this orientation as qualitatively different from how they approached their religious lives and/or practices previously. At some point, practitioners came to think of themselves as being on a spiritual journey, and began using a shared framework – depicted visually in Figure 6 – to describe and make sense of their religious and spiritual lives. In the next section, I argue that these communities, in transmitting this narrative template, encourage all practitioners, regardless of the time and energy they have invested, to see and describe themselves as being in the same structural position on the journey of formation: that is, in the liminal space between the shift in orientation described above and the final achievement of the spiritual ideal.

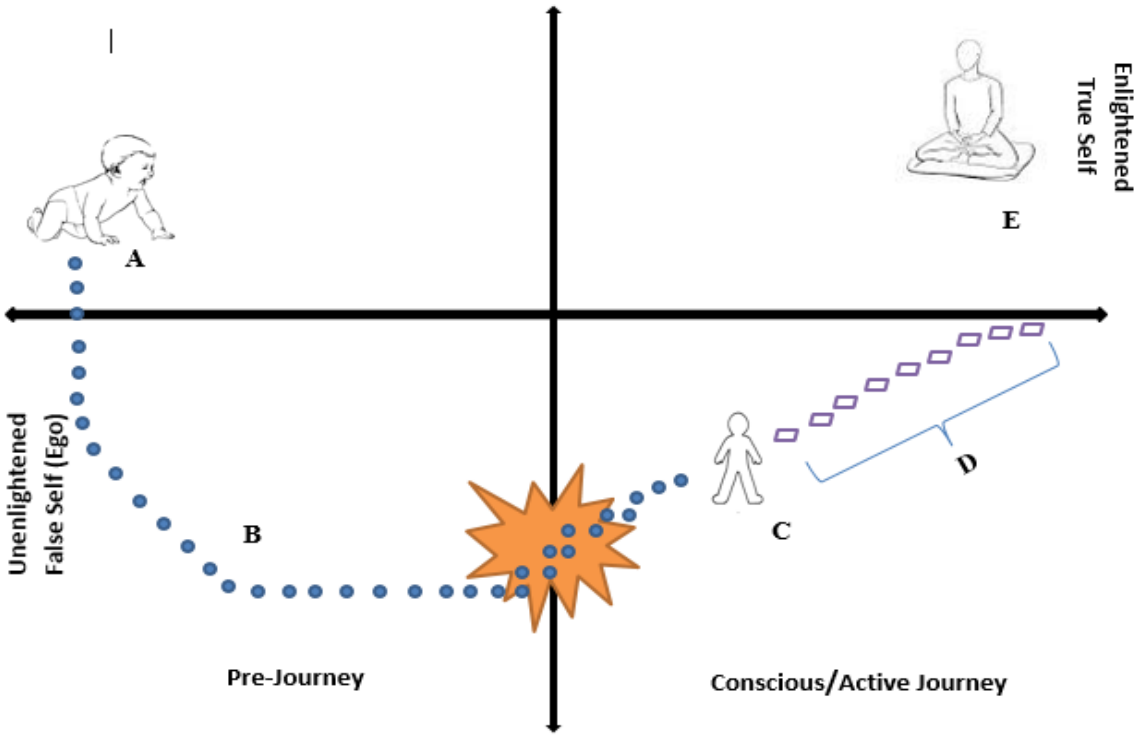

Figure 6: The Journey Narrative Template

Inhabiting the Liminal: On Being an Aspirant

> *"I hope I continue to learn. There is a lot to learn, and I still need to learn a lot more and get better at it. I am very glad I started this journey though and I hope it never ends"* – Vibha, IY practitioner

I found that practitioners in these communities were encouraged to view the journey of spiritual formation as perpetually incomplete. During my interview with Aadesh, the founder of the IYI and head instructor of the TT program, for example, he drew on the image of Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge, to describe this important and universal feature of spiritual formation. Saraswati, he told me, is almost always depicted holding a book, script, or scroll. "Even the source of all knowledge and all the art is constantly learning," he explained. Drawing a parallel to the journey of formation, he continued, "It's infinite. So there is always so much more we can learn. It never ends." Aadesh not only advocates for this perspective, but embraces

it as well. Despite being a committed and disciplined devotee of Swami Satchidananda and Integral Yoga for more than 15 years, Aadesh argued that he was still growing and improving. While he "gets clearer insights about things now" than he used to, playing the role of the teacher and interacting with fellow practitioners continues to offer him additional insights and to further his spiritual development.

I found that individual practitioners at both sites tended to internalize and deploy this sense of the "self in progress." They felt there was always more to learn or do, additional ways to grow and improve. In fact, one of the striking features of the discussions I had with teachers and students from both sites was the way in which descriptions of progress – for example, in their ability to be present, in the frequency and discipline of their practice, or in their ability to sense God's presence – were almost always followed by references to how far the person remained from their goal or how much there was left to do and learn. Practitioners' stories, from the novice to the most advanced, conveyed an image of their present selves as location at Position C (see **Figure 6**) on the journey of formation. This position was defined by four key elements: (1) they had adopted a "quest orientation"; (2) they were currently putting in conscious and active effort towards their formation; (3) they had made some tangible progress; and (4) they remained relatively far from their ultimate goal.

Natalia, the yoga practitioner described above, for example, felt her new orientation towards yoga – as a spiritual practice – was a form of progress. Possessing the correct motivation and intention for the practice was an important step forward on her journey. However, she immediately qualified this statement by noting: "It's not that I always do that [approach the practice in that way]. But of course, I would like to." Natalia goes on to explain that while she certainly does not always "one hundred percent embody" the approach and orientation she would

like to, she does feel she has made some progress and feels confident that she will continue to improve in the future. Natalia's reflections on her practice illustrate both a retrospective and a prospective progressive narrative format (see LaRossa and Sinha 2006); in other words, she positions her current state of development as more advanced than before the training but less advanced than she aspires to be. This progressive narrative was projected forward into the future, as well. She said, "I'm still working on it and 20 years from now, I will still be working on it."

Tony, another TT, expressed a similar sentiment. He told me that he thinks yoga helps you to become more accepting and understanding of one's self and of other people. It was only through his participation in the training program, Tony says, that he really came to understand and embrace the idea, outlined by Swami Satchidananda, that "Paths are Many, Truth is One." Yoga, he tells me, "makes you understand that everybody is in a different place on their journey and you really need to be accepting of that." Just as Natalia did above, however, Tony immediately hedges, noting: "Now, am I [accepting and understanding] all the time? Oh, I have many, many miles before I can rest, let's put it that way. But hey, it's a process." Tony's discussion of his progress suggests that he has internalized acceptance and understanding as a desired way of being-in-the-world and strives, through disciplined practice, to embody it. At the same time, it is clear that Tony sees himself as *striving* to achieve this state.

I heard similar sentiments articulated by Centering Prayer practitioners, as well. During our interview, Marie, a 42-year old practitioner of Centering Prayer, told me that becoming "spiritual" involved important shifts in her understanding of God and of religious life. Before finding the contemplative community at Trinity, Marie viewed the "rules and regulations" of the church as mandates, and constantly felt a sense of separation from God because of her inability to achieve them. However, Marie tells me that she no longer interprets these rules as mandates

but “perfect ideals.” She tells me, “I need to try to strive to live that way …I need to try every day to do my best to live up to those standards.” At the same time however, she now knows that she is never going to be perfect, but that God loves her even when she falls short. Marie no longer understands religious virtuosity as an either/or dichotomy; instead, she views constant and continuous striving as the defining feature of a mature religious life. In other words, it is in being an aspirant that Marie enacts her identity as a virtuous person.

Likewise, when I asked David, the Deacon described at the outset of this chapter, what it meant to be a contemplative person and to live a contemplative life, he told me that it was about being “more at peace with yourself, and being able to be at peace with other people with all their idiosyncrasies … all your goods and bads, just being able to deal with them a lot better.” Then he added, “Do I lead a completely contemplative life? Heck no! It’s impossible in today’s society to be totally contemplative. You just can’t. I don’t see that as being possible. You always strive for it, so there’s always a little more peace you can have. You have somebody who does or says something that really aggravates you, becoming less aggravated. I’m not saying not being aggravated, but becoming less aggravated at situations is what I strive for.” David’s reflections mirror those of other centering prayer practitioners, from the newest recruits up to and including Sister Nancy, someone who has dedicated her life to God and to the teaching and transmission of contemplative practices.

Because of this emphasis on continuous formation and the logic of progressive attainment, many practitioners had more or less developed plans for the future (section D in Figure 6). They were able to articulate a series of next steps or proximal goals that might move them further in the direction of their ultimate goal. At the end of the TT program, for example, nearly all of the participants had plans to take additional classes, trainings, or workshops in order

to both stay engaged in and to further their spiritual development. Lynn told me she planned to start regularly attending raja yoga classes and satsangs held in the local area. Julia had signed up for weekend training programs in both Kirtan[37] and Laughter Yoga[38] at the Integral Yoga ashram in Virginia. Vibha, Tony, and Rashmi all planned to enroll in an advanced training program in "Yoga for Healing" (offered at the institute) the following year. Tony also hoped to take a training in yoga for kids, and to develop a program for bringing yoga to veterans. Vibha hoped to take training in pre-natal yoga. When I spoke with these same practitioners one year later, most had followed through on some or all of their plans. Julia, for example, was certified in Kirtan and Laughter Yoga and was now offering classes in both practices at the Institute. Tony had received training in Yoga for Veterans and was working to start a non-profit in the area. Rashmi and Julia still planned to sign up for the advanced level teacher training program that fall.

While practitioners were usually self-motivated to pursue additional training (as demonstrated above), the emphasis on continuous becoming was also socially enforced, more or less formally, in each community. Many of the Centering Prayer practitioners I spoke with, for example, were also members of the Secular Franciscans, a spiritual community which explicitly encourages and requires ongoing faith formation. Barbara explained that "The Seculars also have a dedication to ongoing faith formation" that was reinforced through community norms as well as monthly meetings, which reviewed various practices and techniques for spiritual formation. At Trinity, Sister Nancy encouraged practitioners to become involved in additional programs and workshops, and to participate in at least one annual retreat. In the yoga community, ongoing

[37] A form of call and response chanting performed as a method of Bhakti (or devotional) yoga. A recent NY Times article on the rising popularity of this practice: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/fashion/05fitness-01.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
[38] A practice that involves prolonged voluntary laughter performed in groups, where forced laughter turns into real and contagious laughter.

formation is enforced institutionally by The Yoga Alliance[39] (the US-based national association which certifies instructors and training programs), which requires all instructors to accrue a certain number of "continuing education credits" per year to maintain their certification. In addition, Integral Yoga offers three different levels of teacher training – basic, intermediate, and advanced – along with a range of other certifications (such as those in Kirtan and Laugher Yoga taken by Julia), providing practitioners with a range of options and paths for continued training.

While the discourse surrounding spirituality often suggests that it is both simple and will simplify practitioners' lives, the process of formation in these communities requires substantial and sustained effort on the part of practitioners. By providing a series of 'next steps' and proximal goals, these communities and organizations keep people engaged. At the same time, the image of formation as a *journey* and the logic of progressive attainment on which it rests, acts as a regulating discourse, accounting for and justifying the demands of training and disciplined practice. In other words, what might otherwise seem like excessive constraints on personal freedom or an overzealous investment of time and energy are transformed into necessary and useful tools in the pursuit of an aspired-to self.[40]

As these examples demonstrate, each of the practitioners I spoke with, regardless of their degree of proficiency or length of time invested, described themselves as occupying a similar position on the spiritual journey. Broadly speaking, practitioners imagined the spiritual journey as a continuous process of improvement and growth over time. Their narratives about the process of spiritual formation therefore tended to mirror an epic literary format – similar to that identified

[39] www.yogaalliance.org

[40] Grey (1994: 494) makes a similar argument in his analysis of the regulating power of the discourse of "career." He argues that within some organizational contexts, this discourse transforms "techniques of disciplinary power" into "benevolent aids to career development."

among British paratroopers by Thornborrow and Brown (2009) –in which the story-teller is continuously confronting and overcoming obstacles in pursuit of an ever-elusive goal.

This story format has important implications for practitioners' self-understanding. I found that practitioners see themselves as both "being there" and "becoming" (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2014: 30-31). The idea of "being there" captures the fact that these individuals have "a strong, clear and committed spiritual identity" (30). On the other, hand, the idea of "becoming" captures the fact that their spiritual lives were also defined by "a constant never-ending path that requires maintenance" and continued development through time (30). In other words, unlike "converts" or "awakeners" (DeGloma 2014), practitioners' new identities were not yet fully formed. Rather, practitioners see themselves as continually occupying a liminal space (Turner 1969) of transition between their adoption of a quest orientation and the aspired-to ideal they hope to embody. In the next section, I argue that this has important implications for how they describe the process of self-transformation.

Vocabularies of Liminality

Thomas Degloma (2014) has argued that liminal spaces – or periods of transition –take on narrative form as "interstitial scenes." In his analysis of the "awakening narrative," DeGloma outlines two ideal typical *vocabularies of liminality*, which awakeners use to describe and articulate periods of self-transformation: (1) a sociomental express elevator, which portrays the transformation as a direct and rapid movement to a higher level; and (2) a sociomental staircase, which depicts a more gradual, step-by-step ascension (97-121). DeGloma also describes various ways in which these vocabularies can be combined. This may be the case, for example, when an elevator-like "shock" is positioned within or initiates a longer and more gradual "quest" (122). This is similar to Barbara's narrative described in the section above, where her "turning point"

experience – of hearing the voice yelling "cease fire!" – is positioned within an ongoing quest for spiritual formation.

In each case, the metaphor – or combination of metaphors – is used to describe and account for a period of transformation that is, at the time of narration, considered relatively complete. In other words, in the examples used in DeGloma's analysis, the storyteller almost always sees her new identity as fully achieved. In the journey narrative, however, practitioners construct themselves as perpetual aspirants, inhabiting interstitial scenes over long stretches of time. Rather than seeking to "lump" and "split" autobiographical time into discrete periods of "before" and "after," practitioners construct their lives as a continuous and ongoing process of discovery. While practitioners sometimes described spiritual formation in ways that mirror the vocabularies highlighted in DeGloma's analysis, I argue that the linear nature of these metaphors does not fully capture how the process of spiritual transformation is understood and described in these communities. Spiritual formation is neither complete nor straight-forwardly linear (whether rapid or gradual). Instead, spiritual formation is described as ongoing, and as circular and cyclical as well as linear. In this section, I describe some of the key metaphors and vocabularies that practitioners use to describe this liminal space, linking them to important beliefs about the nature of the self and spirituality.

Revealing the True Self: The Long Circle Back to the Self

"*We shall not cease from exploration*
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time." – T.S. Eliot

One of the central premises of contemporary American spirituality is that "we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated … by mainstream society and culture" and that "perfection

can only be found in moving beyond the socialized self – widely known as the 'ego' but also as the 'lower self' …. thereby encountering a new realm of being" (Heelas 1996: 18). The assumption is that this new self or "realm of being" is in fact "what we are by nature." In other words, the "enlightened self" being sought through is, in fact, the universal essence of human being (Heelas 1996: 19). Both communities embraced this perspective on the nature of the spiritual self. One important consequence of this perspective is that the process of spiritual formation is understood not as a process of building up or creating a wholly new self, but one of revealing or uncovering an already-existing but previously hidden "True Self." As Swami Satchidananda said in one of his lectures: "A blissful, pure consciousness is always there ... You are not to do something to create it, but removing everything that prevents it from coming to us … The practices are not done to bring you peace and happiness but to uncover the happiness that you already have." [41]

Practitioners at both sites were taught to think about and describe the process of formation as a long circle back to a naturalized and essentialized subjectivity, one uncorrupted by social and cultural context. This state of being is depicted visually as the upper half of the graph in **Figure 6**. This state of being was not only thought to be universally applicable and accessible, but also a deeply personal and authentic way of being-in-the-world. Ron, for example, told us that the process of spiritual formation was like re-learning how to ride a bike: we are working to become something we already know and are. He tells us, "You are already enlightened, you can't help that fact … we only need to help you realize that." Aadesh articulated the same view when he referred to yoga as "the great remembering." Yoga, he

[41] Yoga Nidra Guided Relaxation: Affirmations for Inner Peace. You can buy an audio version of this recording here: http://www.shakticom.org/product_p/a121.htm

argued, is a practice aimed at *remembering* and *recalling* as well as *re-embodying* our true nature. The knowledge and disposition practitioners develop through practice are not new but rather natural and inherent features of their truest and most authentic selves.

The metaphors practitioners used to describe the process of formation – for example, metaphors of uncovering, digging, or revealing – reflect this belief that the self is always-already divine. Practitioners learn that the practices enable them to "peel away the layers" and "remove the veils" that cover and hide the true self from conscious awareness and active embodiment. In our discussion of *pranayama* – the breathing practices – for example, Aadesh explains that these techniques help "remove the veil from the inner light." As is the case with the metaphors of elevators and staircases, these metaphors constructed the storyteller as more or less passive (or active) in the process of formation. In some cases, passive metaphors were used alongside and in addition to more active descriptions of the process of formation.

On the one hand, the process was described as relatively passive. From this perspective, spiritual formation requires only that practitioners "let go," so that the layers of the false self (or ego) can *fall away*. Spiritual formation therefore requires not effort but surrender. As we read in *The Posture of Meditation* (assigned reading for TTs at the yoga studio), surrender was often accomplished through the physical practice of yoga and meditation:

"Surrendering your weight to the pull of gravity does not just diminish and transform the sensations of physical tension. Inevitably the self-created masks or personae through which we interact with the world begin to **soften and fall away** as well. Commitment to the posture of meditation will force you to let go of the unconscious reliance on different masks of ways of posing in the world. It will allow you instead to meet and become familiar with a deeper, more authentic sense of self."[42]

[42] Johnson, Will. "The Posture of Meditation." *Boston: Shambhala* (1996). Pg 93.

A passive construction of the process of formation was also developed at Trinity, where practitioners were told that all they needed to do was to "let go" of their attachments, and allow God to do the transformative work.

In addition, the process of formation was sometimes described using metaphors of physical agitation, such as being rubbed or polished. Aadesh, at the end of the teacher training program, for example, reflected on the role of relationships in the process of formation. He told us, in light of some recent disagreements within the group, that as a community of fellow practitioners, "We get to support each other and be close" but, at the same time, "we're going to run into each other's edges, and maybe scrape off the rough edges to get smoothed out and polished. We get to see one another get polished and help one another, but we get bumped a little and we should be ready for that." He uses the metaphor of a rock tumbler to describe the process: "The rocks turn into these gems, but the way it happens is through grit and rubbing. And there is no doubt that invariably these sessions involve that … we are here to polish one another … That is when we get to really grow. That is when our best gets drawn up and we discover ourselves and learn."

At other times, the process was described as active and agentic, requiring sustained personal effort rather than surrender. In this case, the process of formation involved "digging deeply" or "peeling away layers" in order to uncover and reveal the True Self. The process of formation, from this perspective, requires hard work. In many cases, however, these metaphors were combined: the process of uncovering and revealing this Self requires both letting go of the false self (the ego) and actively uncovering and embracing the higher Self, or, at the same time, breaking down the false self and letting the True Self shine.

At both locations there is a tension underlying these various metaphors. On the one hand, practitioners are encouraged to actively work to *change* their way of being-in-the-world, modifying deep-seated habits of thought, feeling and action. On the other hand, they are told that the process is simple and easy, requiring only the act of surrender, and is, in fact, already complete. This tension often resulted in the need for regular discursive maneuvering. One day during the teacher training, Aadesh told us, "Enlightenment will require that you live in a certain way"; however, he immediately corrected himself saying, "Well, it's not a requirement, but you will *naturall*y live in a certain way in an enlightened state." Broadly speaking, these metaphors, in depicting the process of formation as a long circle back to the self, rested on and constructed a shared belief in the essential spiritual nature of all people. As in the poem by T.S. Elliot quoted above, the starting and ending points in the journey of formation are thought to be one and the same, depicted in Figure 6 as Positions A (the original state) and E (the enlightened self). However, while practitioners are always-already enlightened, they do not yet know what this means and will know it for the first time only at the end of the journey.

Spiral Staircases

In the fall of 2013, I attended a four-part series at Trinity Prayer House titled "Saint Teresa of Avila." The group, which met for a two-hour session one time per month, was reading *Spiritual Pilgrims* by John Welch, as a way to reflect on the ideas presented in Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*. The group had read *Interior Castle* the previous spring and would re-read the text again the following spring. At our first meeting, Sister Nancy reviewed some of the central ideas presented in Teresa's text. She begins by drawing a spiral on the white board, and reminding us that Teresa describes seven distinct "mansions," or approaches to one's relationship with God. Sister Nancy explains that she thinks a piece of us is in each of the seven mansions at all times:

part of us is always in union with God, she says, just as part of us is always about to fall off the edge of the outer mansion (a metaphor for forgetting about or ignoring God). Even Teresa, 'in all her wonderful seven-ness,' Nancy tells participants, is still partly in the first mansion. And we, each of us present that day, are partly in the innermost mansion (union with God) even if we only very rarely catch glimpses of it in our conscious experience. After all, she reminds us, 'We are made in the image of God.'

Sister Nancy continues her explanation of the mansions, taking up a new metaphor: that of an intimate relationship. She explains that the first mansion 'is really just the start of the journey" and involves the process of committing to the relationship. The second mansion is the stage where you come to recognize that you must let go of certain attachments (for example, other potential romantic interests) in order to continue with the relationship. The third stage is about external practices: you are doing well and you "look" holy, but your dispositions do not yet match your actions. Mansion four is when you realize that God does not just want your actions, but wants *you,* your heart and soul. Sister Nancy argues that the fourth mansion is the hinge, and that mansions five through seven then involve the deepening of one's love for and union with God. At different times, she explains, we may find ourselves dealing with issues that resonate with one or another of the mansions. 'It is good to be in any one of them,' she tells us, because 'they are all on the journey.' And reiterates that a part of you is 'already there [in the final mansion], always.'

Finally, Sister Nancy tells us that she is excited that the group is going to read Teresa's text again this coming spring. She tells us that as "we go around and around the castle … we learn a bit more, see a bit more, each time.' As we do so, "bit by bit, we come to see the union that is already there." Sister Nancy tells us, for example, that she has read through Teresa's text

more than a dozen times, but always finds something new. The text stays the same, she explains, but her relationship to it is always changing.

Sister Nancy's opening remarks paint a complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory image of spiritual formation. The various metaphors and discourses she deployed, for example, depict the process of formation as (1) relatively stagnant and haphazard, where practitioners are in all mansions at once; (2) as circular and cyclical, where practitioners move 'around and around' the castle; and as (3) somewhat linear, where practitioners 'see a bit more' each time. Altogether, spiritual formation was depicted as a process of circling to the center. Rather than a straight-forward process of linear development, as depicted by the metaphors of an elevator or staircase (see DeGloma 2014: 96-126), I argue that these communities articulate the process of transformation using another ideal typical vocabulary of liminality: that of a *spiral staircase*.[43]

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The spiral staircase, as an ideal typical *vocabulary of liminality*, captures two key features of the way the journey is depicted. First, teachers and texts constructed an image of spiritual formation that was cyclical and circular. Spiritual formation, for example, was described as a process of seeking balance between seemingly opposing forces, moving back and forth between the extremes or ends of a variety of different spectrums, such as the active and contemplative, the masculine and feminine. Sister Nancy explained that movement between these poles should be "like a breath - we move in and out, in and out, always moving between the two.' Finding balance between opposing ends was not a concrete state that could be achieved but a process of cyclical movement back and forth, in and out, through time.

[43] Spiritual formation was variously described as a movement 'downward' and 'inward' and as 'upward' and 'forward' so the practitioner could be seen as going either down or up the spiral stair case.

Likewise, the practices themselves were understood and enacted cyclically rather than linearly. The six seasons of the Liturgical year in Catholicism, for example, repeat themselves annually, with only slight variations in timing and content. Practitioners at both sites were encouraged to re-read important texts – like the Yoga Sutras or Teresa's *Interior Castle* – or perform key exercises and practices – like the Ignatian spiritual exercises or workshops on the ethical principles of yoga – over and over again. Personal devotional practices also followed a cyclical routine: daily, monthly, and annually. Practitioners had personal routines that repeated daily for years, often with little variation. Most were involved in a group that met weekly or monthly. All were encouraged to undertake annual spiritual retreats. Some practices even involved and invoked the image of a circle more explicitly; for example, walking the labyrinth as a form of meditation and self-reflection (a practice encouraged in both communities) or drawing mandalas (a practice encouraged at the yoga studio). In each case, the circle, often used to represent wholeness and integration, was an important metaphor for the spiritual journey in both communities.

However, the process of formation was not only circular but also linear, as the metaphor of the spiral staircase implies. Sister Nancy, for example, reminded practitioners that while the liturgy and the spiritual exercises repeat themselves on an annual basis, our engagement with them will and ought to shift and change over time. Practitioners were told, for example, that they should "go deeper" with each iteration. The same was true of the texts, exercises and practices which played out cyclically at various intervals. This was also true of the process of seeking balance between seemingly opposed forces, described above. While a perfect balance was never achieved, practitioners were told they would make clear *improvements* over time and with practice.

While practitioners were discouraged from making comparisons with others or from monitoring progress too closely (see **Chapter 4** for more on this), linear descriptions of the process of formation could be translated into a sense that some practitioners were "further along" on the spiritual journey than others. As Irene, one centering prayer practitioner, told me, for example, "There are people at [Trinity] who I think are way beyond where I am in their spiritual life. So it's a progression. I think I got a late start but I feel like with centering prayer I'm heading in the right direction." Likewise, teachers were often imbued with authority based on the assumption that they were more advanced in their spiritual formation. The ability to identify people that are more or less advanced implies that spiritual formation includes tangible and linear development.

Assessments of progress, however, were complicated by the fact that spiritual formation was not straightforwardly linear. In other words, rather than a series of clearly delineated and universally applicable steps – moving from mansions 1 through 7 in order, for example – practitioners in these communities were told that the process of formation unfolded somewhat haphazardly. The structure and shape of each person's journey was thought to be somewhat unique and individualized. Practitioners were told that they might find themselves skipping from mansion 1 to mansion 5 and then back to mansion 3. As described above, however, the logic of progressive attainment meant that each movement, even if seemingly an experience of regression – say, moving from mansion 4 back to mansion 2 – was interpreted as useful and necessary for one's spiritual formation, and therefore evidence of progress.

A similar image of formation was painted at the yoga studio as well. During the meditation workshop, Priya told the TTs that we should work on all of the *yamas* and *niyamas* (ethical principles) at the same time rather than in succession. "You might focus more on one or

another at different moments," she explains, but they are intertwined so that you cannot really pull them apart. In addition, she tell us, "You do not ever master them." Ron made a similar point in reference to the eight limbs of yoga. He told the TTs, "While they seem like steps, you will come to know that you have to do them all simultaneously: you practice them all, all the time." Because of this decoupling of one's current location (what mansion you are in, or what ethical principle you are focusing on) from spiritual progress and personal development, it was difficult for practitioners to judge their exact structural position on the journey, both in an absolute and relative sense.

Summary

Practitioners' narratives describe and construct spiritual formation as an *ongoing* process of self-transformation rather than a completed process of moving into, out of or between communities (DeGloma 2014, 2010) or social roles (Ebaugh 1988). Rooted in a qualitatively different understanding and experience of "conversion" – one distinguished by its construction of becoming as a perpetually incomplete process – these organizations offer practitioners a varied and sometimes seemingly contradictory set of symbolic resources for understanding and describing the journey of formation. Broadly speaking, the process of spiritual formation is described as a long journey back to the self: the journey involves first movement away from and then gradually back towards a naturalized and universal state of being. In the short-term, however, the liminal space practitioners inhabit is imagined and enacted as a spiral staircase: the process of transformation consists of cycles of progress, stagnation, and regression, of movements in and out of various rooms or stages. Neither completely circular nor straightforwardly linear, practitioners learn to view spiritual formation as an individualized and ultimately unique journey. Ultimately, however, I found that the metaphor of the journey and the

rhetoric of progressive attainment provide coherence to practitioners' experiences by tying them into a teleological account of continuous movement towards a final goal: enlightenment or Christ-consciousness. Practitioners learn to view spiritual personhood as tied to a forward-looking and continuous desire for "something more."[44]

In addition to the ideal typical narrative template and shared rhetorics described above, these communities also transmit an outline or image of the spiritual ideal towards which practitioners ought to be striving. In other words, through their immersion in these communities, practitioners acquire a sense of destination. Julia, for example, told me that the teacher training program changed "how I view the world, and how I view myself, and *who I want to be*." Practitioners learn that spiritual personhood is not simply a matter of being someone who aspires, but is defined by the act of striving to achieve a *particular* way of being-in-the-world: to become, for example, a more "contemplative person." But what, exactly, does this mean? I found that the way of being-in-the-world towards which practitioners aspired was not purely individual, even while it was perceived to be personally authentic. Rather, members of these communities desired to embody the same way of being-in-the-world: an *aspirational habitus* (Foster 2013) associated with the idea of *spirituality*. In the next section, I review four important characteristics that defined the prototype of the "enlightened self" in these communities.

The Spiritual Ideal: Articulating an Aspirational Habitus

"According to the light of God's grace given to me, I beg that I might come to know Jesus as a pattern for my own living."[45]

[44] Frye (2012) makes a similar observation regarding the relationship between identity, morality, and aspirations in her study of women's educational aspirations in Malawi.

[45]Smith, Carol Ann, and Eugene F. Merz. *Moment by Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life*. Ave Maria Press, 2000. Moment 13. We read this quote aloud together during the spiritual intern program. On several occasions, Sister Nancy used this – or a similar statement – in her opening

Sister Nancy began nearly every program, workshop and group meeting at Trinity with an opening prayer. She would quiet everyone down and then sit, with her eyes closed, reflecting on the focus or topic of our gathering that day. This opening statement would almost always begin with Sister Nancy telling us that she knows what we want or why we are here. She would tell us, for example, *'I know what you want… You want to find that place within yourself where you and God are one. You strive to never leave the temple and to live from that place.'* While the descriptions she would offer of participants' motivations and "deepest desires" were always somewhat different, these statements articulated key aspects of the kind of life practitioners were striving to achieve: a life in union with God; a life of quiet, of reflection, and of peace. Sister Nancy's opening reflections illustrate the role that she, Trinity, and these classes play in shaping practitioners' motivations and aspirations. Her statements depict a particular set of motivations and desires as universal, attributing them to all participants, even while making them sound personalized ("I know what *you* want"). These desires and aspirations reflect a shared understanding of what it means to be a "spiritual person." As Sister Nancy said during one of these opening prayers: 'This is what it really means to be a spiritual person: to live in the moment, to find God in all things … to really look for God … to be a person of God all the time."

Many of the practitioners I spoke with, like Julia, told me that their participation in training programs, classes, and workshops at these organizations provided them with a clearer sense of who they wanted to be and how they wanted to live.[46] Through their apprenticeship,

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reflections at the start of a workshop or turning her closing reflections at the end of a centering prayer session.

[46] "Being able to take the teacher training course was one of the best things I ever did for myself … Learning the Yoga Sutras has given me more wisdom as to *how I know I should be*." Lynn

they acquired a shared language for describing and articulating these aspirations. I found that this idealized way of being-in-the-world was marked not by strict behavioral mandates but rather by broad dispositions. As Ramdas, one of the instructors in the teacher training program, told us during his meditation workshop, "We have a direction, not a destination. We are going East, but you can't *get* East. You can only go East." In this section, I elucidate four key components of the *aspirational habitus* – a general constitution or way of being-in-the-world, characterized by a set of acquired physical, mental, and emotional dispositions and sensibilities – practitioners were seeking to cultivate, including the sacred gaze; a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment; spiritual intuition; and finally, a holistic approach to identity management.

The Sacred Gaze

"Contemplative prayer … is prayer that sees the whole world through incense — a holy place, a place where the sacred dwell … a place where God sweetens living with the beauty of all life. [It] leads us to see the world through the eyes of God."[47]

Marie, a Centering Prayer practitioner, told me that part of what happens as she grows and develops spiritually, is that she becomes "more aware" of God's presence and action. In addition, and equally important for her, is the fact that she consciously *chooses* to be more aware, enacting practices that increase her ability to see, feel, and know God's presence. She links the cultivation of this perceptual ability to her disciplined practice of Centering Prayer, telling me that practice helps to bring her "to that place of peace and contemplation" so that when she steps out into the world "the mystery of things and the beauty of things just seem to stand out – you notice more." Marie is motivated to practice, at least in part, by a desire to further cultivate and develop this awareness: to notice and appreciate the beauty and mystery of life more often.

[47] Chittister, Joan. 1991. *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. Harper: SanFrancisco.

Teachers and texts in both communities argued that all of life – people, objects, events, experiences – was imbued with spiritual meaning. Through practice, practitioners were told they would develop the ability to see, experience and understand that meaning more frequently and more deeply. This perceptual ability or sensibility – what Morgan (2005) has called the *sacred gaze* – is a key component of the aspirational habitus practitioners sought to cultivate. The sacred gaze is "a way of seeing [which] invests an image, a viewer or an act of viewing with spiritual significance" (6). In seeking to cultivate this sense, practitioners must display what Morgan calls *visual piety*: "the constructive operation of seeing that looks for, makes room for, the transcendent in daily life" (6).

While perception is a bodily process, it is neither universal and objective nor purely individual. Rather, perception is a process that is structured and shaped by cultural context and social interaction (Zerubavel 1996).[48] Merleau-Ponty (1962: 153) argues, for example, "The gaze gets more or less out of things according to the way in which it ranges over or dwells on them. To learn to see colors is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's body." The spiritual gaze, therefore, is both a practice – something that people do – and a way of seeing – a socio-mental lens (Zerubavel 1997) – both of which reflect shared conventions of perception that "enable certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience" (Morgan 2005: 4). The observed– objects, people and events – is imbued with spiritual meaning, and the act of looking is transformed into a spiritual practice. Sister Nancy, for example, told the interns in the spiritual direction program that they should constantly be looking for God in every moment of life, asking

[48] This assumption is increasingly confirmed by cross-cultural and historical studies of perception (see for example, Nisbett and Masuda 2003), as well as studies which confirm differences in perception and attention by social categories such as gender, occupation, and hobbies (see for example, Fine 2009 on mushroom hunters; Hanson 1965 on physicists; Powers et al 1979 on differences in eye witness testimony by gender).

themselves, "What is God doing here?" "Let that be your constant focus," she told us. Becoming a member of these communities requires training the gaze to focus on and read one's surroundings in particular, socially-shared ways.

The gaze, as a ways of seeing, includes norms of attention and disattention acquired through *optical socialization* (Zerubavel 1997: 33), as well as habits of experience and interpretation. On the one hand, the spiritual gaze affects *what* is perceived as expectations are translated into selective attention (see Zerubavel 1993 on the sociomental foundations of relevance; Friedman 2011 on socio-mental filtration).[49] At the same time, these communities transmit frameworks of interpretations and shared meanings that can be deployed in processing various kinds of observances and experiences. As in the metaphor of seeing things "through incense," the cultivation of a sacred gaze causes more and more of life to be marked and classified as "spiritually relevant" (Taves and Bender 2012). Practitioners become more likely to see God's presence and action in the flow of daily events through modified structures of attention (mostly an increased attention to intra- and inter-personal events, especially to one's affective responses) and the acquisition of new interpretive frames; for example, in Centering Prayer, intrapersonal, affective responses are labeled as 'consolation' or 'desolation,' connecting these experiences to divine will and action.

Despite a discourse that implies the naturalness of the sacred gaze, practitioners were also told that disciplined practice was necessary for cultivating both the habit of looking and for

[49] Most of the existing scholarship on the social construction of perception identifies expectations as the primary means through which social and cultural context influence and shape perception and attention: people are socialized to expect certain things and therefore to attend and dis-attend to different elements in the perceptual field by context. There is evidence from social psychology, for example, to suggest that we do in fact tend to reject or ignore information that does not fit with our expectations.

refining one's perceptual ability to see. Practices like *examen*, for example, ask practitioners to give explicit attention to God's presence and action in the course of their daily lives, allowing practitioners to realize God's presence "by asking you to notice where God *already exists* in your life."[50] By performing examen regularly (ideally daily), practitioners are told they will begin to notice God's presence more and more in your day, until eventually they recognize that God is active every moment of the day.

I found that practitioners at both sites embraced this link between practice and the sacred gaze. They described leaving practice (both collective and private) in a different perceptual and sensual state. As Cindy, a Centering Prayer practitioner, told me, "When you come out … everything is bright, everything is alive – there is so much life in everything." This experience, she says, is qualitatively different from the average mode of being. "I think it's because all the noise – there's so much noise in the world" which prevents you from focusing on and seeing the beauty of life. However, she notes that "if you can focus your mind on something for a period of time, then your mind just becomes sharper" and you can see. Practitioners not only feel more physically relaxed, but also undergo changes in their perceptions: they notice more about their surroundings and interpret what they notice as spiritually-relevant.

The assumption underlying this perspective is that divinity is always present, and all practitioners need to do is put in the effort to *look*. If they put in the effort, they will see what has always been in front of them and begin to grasp its meaning. James Martin, for example, ends his discussion of examen, in his book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*, with the following parable:

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[50] Martin, James. 2012. *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life.* HarperOne: New York. Pg 102. This book was assigned reading for the Spiritual Director Intern Program at Trinity.

"Excuse me," said an ocean fish. "You are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?"

"The ocean," said the older fish, "is the thing you are in now."

"Oh, this? But this is water. What I'm seeking is the ocean," said the disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere.

"Stop searching, little fish," says de Mello. "There isn't anything to look *for*. All you have to do is *look*." (Martin 2012: 102)

The central idea conveyed in this passage is that God is all around us, all the time, despite the fact that we often fail to see Him. Our inability to see and feel God's presence is not the result of his presence or absence, but rather reflects a lack of effort on our part (the practice of looking) or the need to further refine our senses (the perceptual ability).

Both the practice of looking and the perceptual ability of seeing are considered markers of spiritual personhood. Because of this, practitioners in both communities aspire and actively work to cultivate a sacred gaze. In my conversation with Mary, for example, she told me that her awareness of God's presence has "grown considerably." While she used to compartmentalize everything, she has "slowly begun to let the wall down and realize that God is with me all the time. I just have to open my eyes and see." She sets aside time to work on this in her practice of examen. She tells me: "I'll look back at the end of the day: *Did I see God?* Well not quite in everything. Okay, you could have done better there." Drawing on the logic of progressive attainment, Mary sees the gaze and its deployment as something that has improved over time, but which still has considerable room for further improvement.

The acquisition of new perceptual habits and tendencies is central to socialization in a range of communities, especially those oriented around practice. Wuthnow (2003: 240-44) in his study of artists, for example, argues that those with un-trained eyes may "not see very much, even if permitted to look because of an inability to understand … Some training in art, art history or art appreciation will likely enhance the observer's *ability to see*. In short, the person's

perceptive capacities must be shaped or formed." The same can be said of becoming a doctor, a dancer, or a sociologist, among other professions. Like these other practitioners, if yogis and contemplatives see, experience, and interpret events differently than others, it is, at least in part, because they have trained themselves to do so. Practitioners are taught how to be more fully attentive to both their internal states and to external events, and to apply particular frames – God's presence or divine will – in doing so. Finally, through training, they also come to understand both the act of looking and the ability to see as markers of spiritual development.

Moreover, the cultivation of a sacred gaze is often explicitly tied to another disposition that marks the spiritual ideal: being simultaneously fully present *and* relatively detached from the flow of daily experience. On the one hand, it is argued that when you are fully present in the moment, you are more likely to notice the spiritual meaning underlying seemingly mundane events and experiences. When I asked Marie what it means to her to live contemplatively, for example, she told me:

"To be present - to really be present and to notice. To notice. To see, to see. Like behind you, the sunlight on the wall; it's just so beautiful … it's about experiencing God in everything all the time. You become more and more aware when you live that way - you become more and more aware … you get drawn into the miracle of everything."

At the same time, seeing the world in this way implies a level of detachment, a sense of separation from the flow of activity, so that you can make sense of it in new ways. In other words, detachment is necessary if one is to see the world with new eyes. In the next section, I take up this emphasis on presence and detachment more explicitly.

Presence and Detachment

In both communities, there was an emphasis on cultivating a disposition that was simultaneously fully present and relatively detached. On the one hand, participants were taught the value of being fully present and completely engaged in the flow of everyday life. Being fully present

requires not being bogged down by the past (regret as well as fond recollection) or distracted by worries about the future (anxiety as well as desire and hope). On the other hand, participants were told to cultivate detachment, a disposition defined not by acts of renunciation but by a sense of separation and distance from events and experiences, as well as one's thoughts and feelings. Together, practitioners were encouraged to cultivate a distinctive subjectivity – or relationship to reality – in which one is fully immersed and present to each moment and every experience, but also somewhat detached, watching the flow of life from the perspective of an external observer.[51]

The clearest metaphor for this state of being was described by Ron, the assistant instructor of the yoga teacher training program, who compared this state to that achieved while watching a really good film. In trying to explain the nature of this state, he says:

> "Another example … Going to a movie and getting so involved in it that you totally feel for the character and will cry and laugh and identify and find that you've lost any sense of separation from what is going on. You're experiencing it fully. And if it's a good movie, you enjoy it even if it makes you sad … In the movie theater, it's easy because your mind knows that I'm not there. You are in this witness place and you know you are sitting in the theater. You are immersed and enjoying it but you aren't attached. Our mistake is thinking that we are the movie."

This metaphor depicts both sides of this idealized disposition: being both fully present and relatively detached.

The two dispositions – presence and detachment – were emphasized at the prayer house, as well. During the Friday morning prayer group, for example, Sister Nancy asks the group to reflect on some of the "fruits," or benefits, of the practice. After a period of silence, Sharon shares that it helps her "be more present." When Sister Nancy asks her to clarify what this

[51] This is similar to what Michael Pagis (2009: 274) has called "embodied distance," an approach encouraged during Vispassana meditation, in which the practitioner is fully present to experiences (internal and external), but takes an "impersonal stance" relative to those experiences.

means, she adds, "I am better able to see and feel the movements of the spirit. I feel more in tune with them." Larry shares that it has made him "less reactive." He uses examples from driving to demonstrate his progress, noting that he is less likely to become angry or upset when something goes wrong on the road. Sister Nancy agrees, noting that life is full of "minor annoyances" like "family life" – "parish life," Larry adds – but we learn to simply let those go. She uses her hands to illustrate letting these experiences simply pass us by, the same gesture she uses to demonstrate how practitioners should deal with thoughts during Centering Prayer (see Chapter 3). Barbara adds that she is just 'better able to go with the flow,' and doesn't get as upset when things don't go as planned. Mary shares that she is better able to 'notice when she is upset and anxious.' Similar sentiments were shared in other groups as well. Donna, for example, in the Tuesday evening group, told the group that practicing Centering Prayer has made her realize "how not present she was in my daily interactions" and helped her become "more present on average." Together, these responses demonstrate the ideals of presence and detachment, and link them directly to the maintenance of a disciplined, personal practice.

Being present was also linked to changes in the subjective experience of time. More specifically, presence was correlated with "slowing down time." The nature of practice – as cyclical and quiet – helped contribute to this shift in practitioners' temporal experience. Sister Nancy notes that the speed and busyness of modern life make it hard to live a spiritual life. It is the hour of prayer in the morning and the practice of examen at night, she explains, that 'helps us slow down time.' Without this, Sister Nancy argues, we would be lost in the shuffle of everyday life. Presence was also cultivated and deployed *during* practice. Yoga practitioners, for example, were instructed to approach the asanas as a "moving meditation." When asked what exactly that meant, Ron explained: "whatever asana you are doing, that is what your mind is engaged in.

Your mind is just fully engaged in doing that posture. That is the meditation … it is being present with every single action that you are doing." (I expand on the link between practice and the cultivation of idealized dispositions in the next chapter.)

On the other hand, there was a simultaneous emphasis on detachment: on cultivating a sense of separation from one's feelings and thoughts as well as external events. At the prayer house, this disposition was referred to as *holy indifference* or *interior freedom*, and was said to be a necessary prerequisite to becoming attuned to and fulfilling God's will. Christ-like persons, practitioners were told, were not bogged down by attachments to roles, places, or even people, but were instead ready and willing to do and go wherever in response to God's will. In describing this approach, Sister Nancy shared a proverb, which she attributed to Buddhist teachings. She told us that we should 'look upon our favorite cup as if it is already broken.'[52]

This proverb encourages practitioners to cultivate a certain approach to and perspective on objects, people, events, and experiences. When you look at and interpret objects (people or experiences) in this way, you exhibit both presence and detachment. On the one hand, if we recognize and acknowledge that the things we love will not be around forever, Sister Nancy explains, we are encouraged to be fully present with and enjoy them in the moment. At the same time, recognizing and acknowledging impermanence as an inherent part of human life allows us to avoid devastation when the things and people we love leave, break, or go away. Detachment,

[52] The quote is often misattributed to the Buddha, but was actually an example of impermanence used by Ahahn Chah, and recounted by the well-known psychologist Mark Epstein. Epstein recounts the story of traveling in Asia and meeting Ahahn Chah, who in response to a question Epstein can no longer recall, said: "Do you see this glass?" he asked us. "I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, 'Of course.' But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious." - http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/?p=651

Sister Nancy tells us, means having only 'a light grasp' on our possessions, relationships, and desires. In fact, she argued that the cultivation of detachment was correlated with a decline in the number and variety of things we think we "need" to be happy. At the same time, the number of things that are likely to cause us agitation or 'set you off' also shrinks.

In the yoga sutras, this idealized disposition was referred to as *non-attachment* and was defined in Sutra 15 as: "The consciousness of self-mastery in one who is free from craving for objects seen or heard about."[53] In our discussions, the teachers made it clear that non-attachment did not require us to give things up – for example, getting rid of all one's possessions – but rather described "a certain consciousness" or a "way of being with things" similar to that described by Sister Nancy above. The central defining feature of non-attachment was being in a position – cognitively and emotionally – such that one would be okay with the potential or actual loss of objects, people, or roles. Ron explains that the key question to ask ourselves is, "Do I need this to be happy?" "Hint," he continues, "the answer is *always* no."

Aadesh and Ron used "the ice cream shop" story to illustrate the disposition of non-attachment in practice. They told us:

"A disciple of Swami Satchidananda asked, 'Is it okay for a yogi to have chocolate ice cream from the ice cream shop?' The Swami answered that it is okay as long as you aren't attached to having it. 'Imagine,' he said, 'that you go get ice cream after the program. Imagine now that you go and the place is closed. Are you still happy? If yes, then it is fine for you to have it. If not, then you might want to take a break and evaluate your attachment to it.'"

In the conversation about dealing with the loss of loved ones through death or the end of relationships that followed, the instructors argued that non-attachment does *not* imply a complete lack of emotional response. Aadesh tell us, for example, "It is okay to show emotion and be sad, but you don't spend all of your time being affected by it." Rather than a state of being free from

[53] Satchidananda, S. "The yoga sutras of Patanjali: Commentary on the raja yoga sutras by Sri Swami Satchidananda." *Yogaville, VA: Integral Yoga Publications*252 (1990).

affect, Ron describes non-attachment as maintaining "a little bit of separation" from your emotions. In doing so, he says, "You can watch your mind and body go through whatever it is." As was the case at Trinity, non-attachment is deeply intertwined with a disposition of presence. As Ron explains, "You can give yourself to things more fully when you are non-attached – either loving or grieving." When you are not attached, he suggests, you allow yourself to feel what you are feeling without concern that the emotions will "take me over the deep-end."

When I asked practitioners how, if at all, they felt the practices had changed them, the cultivation of detachment was the most commonly cited form of progress. Practitioners at both organizations described important changes in how they reacted to and handled the petty annoyances of mundane life, from traffic jams to unpleasant interactions with colleagues at work. Irene, for example, told me that, in general, things bother her less than they used to. She used "to fly off the handle pretty easily about so many kinds of things," she explains, but "that's the kind of stuff that … doesn't faze me anymore." Vibha, a TT at the yoga studio, described a similar change. She told me that she is "much calmer in the way I deal with things." Before yoga, she said, I "used to be very impatient with many things," but "now I notice that my responses are calm and I don't fly off the handle." Irene and Vibha were both motivated by these results; in fact, a desire to maintain and further cultivate this change in demeanor was one of the reasons they cited for keeping up the practices. In classes and interviews at both sites, I heard a broad range of stories that illustrated practitioners' ability to remain calm in the face of stressful situations.

It is equally important to note, however, that practitioners were also warned about the *limits* and potential *pitfalls* of detachment. Similar to Ron's suggestion above, that practitioners could be *too* present – for example, when they start thinking that they "are the movie" – it was

also argued that practitioners could be *too* detached. Sister Nancy, for example, told practitioners that they should strive to be a "contemplative in action," blending together "being" and "doing." It was not enough, in other words, to find internal peace amidst chaos. Rather, practitioners were also called upon to take action in the world, and ideally, to effect positive change through their actions. At the yoga studio, for example, Ron warned the TTs against becoming what he called "bliss bunnies." Bliss bunnies, according to Ron, are people who think, "Everything is good. Whatever is happening is happening … so I don't need to do anything." Bliss bunnies just sit around and "let life happen to them." But this is not the point or the goal of being a yogi, Ron explains: "You don't always need to be calm and nice. You are called on to take action."

These seemingly contradictory emphases – between acceptance and detachment, on the one hand, and presence and action, on the other – resulted in a practical problem for practitioners: How do you know when to do which? In other words, when do you let things go and adjust your own internal response, and when do you take action? I found that the answer to this question usually involved reference to the cultivation of a kind of *spiritual intuition*: an embodied *sense* or sensibility that was thought to be developed in and through practice. A refined spiritual intuition would enable practitioners to discern God's will (prayer house) or "right action" (yoga studio). As Ron told us: "You get to the point where *you just know* what action is necessary at the moment." In other words, advanced practitioners have an intuitive sense of what to do in any given circumstance.

Spiritual Intuition

"*By the practice of the limbs of yoga, the impurities fall away leading to discriminative discernment"* – Sutra 28, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*

During the Spiritual Direction Intern Program, Sister Nancy explained to us that the seventh moment in the (Ignatian) spiritual exercises is about recognizing "social sin." The news, she

says, is full of examples of these kinds of social evils, such as war and poverty. We are told to look at the contents of the news not just as a person but as a Christian. In other words, Sister Nancy encourages us to watch and reflect on the news from God's point of view, transforming the experience into a time of prayer. Pat, a second year student in the program, asks if it's okay to simply turn off the news in order to avoid having to see and hear about all of the awful things happening in the world. Sometimes, Pat says, "it feels like too much to handle," but she worries that shielding herself from it is a selfish solution. Her question implies a desire to know what the *best* response is; in other words, what should a spiritual person do?

Before this moment, I had heard arguments from practitioners for and against keeping up-to-date on the news and current events. Some practitioners told me that they stopped listening to the news because it upset them, making it difficult to maintain a contemplative state. Others argued that spirituality requires awareness in order to effect positive change. On this particular occasion, however, Sister Nancy responds that 'it depends' on 'how God's grace leads you.' She says that there are times to pray on the news and times to simply leave it alone. Both responses, she explains, have "the potential to deepen your life in God." Sister Nancy shares an example from her own life. There was a story on the news recently about a little girl who was hit by a car and killed while riding her bicycle. Hearing of this incident upset Sister Nancy for days, and she prayed on it continuously. She prayed for all the children, and for all the parents of children. She tells us that this response was okay, because it was how God was leading her. However, she explains, we have to be careful not to let 'the negative things to pull us away from God, to turn into desolation.'

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During a four-day retreat run by instructors from the IYI and hosted by a community center about an hour from the studio, Aadesh challenged those in attendance to try to live for the weekend as if they were already *jiva muktis*, or enlightened beings. After a long discussion about what a "jiva mukti" is, Natalia notes that she is still "not entirely sure what that would look like," practically speaking. Aadesh, in some ways skirting the question, responds, "See how you are now? It looks like that." This statement is meant to communicate that enlightenment does not look any particular way or require any specific actions. Instead, it is open and flexible, taking many different forms. However, Natalia pushes further with a more concrete question: "Okay, so for instance, I am trying to heal my belly. I am not supposed to eat for three hours before bed, but I am hungry now. If I were enlightened, would I eat or not eat? How would I approach that?" As was the case with Pat's question above, Natalia is seeking concrete answers to practical questions of action.

Aadesh again tries to stay at the level of the abstract: "That is a real quandary," he says, "but does it change who you are?" "No." Natalia indicates. "Right, just remember that. You know where you are and what time it is. You are here and it's now." Natalia is shaking her head as he talks, indicating that this is not what she meant. She wanted an answer to the practical question of whether or not to eat, not a philosophical reflection on the stability and permanence of the self. Aadesh picks up on this and continues, "Okay… you just want to know if you should eat or not ... I don't know the answer to this, but you might. I am not sure you do." He suggests a few questions she might ask herself to get to the answer: If I eat something, will that settle my stomach? Or will it upset me and make me not well?

Aadesh tries to close the discussion, indicating that Patty, his dog, wants to go for a walk, but Natalia pushes him one more time: "Can I ask a serious question? My understanding is that

when you are enlightened, you don't sit for hours contemplating whether to eat or not to eat. So I was confused when you expounded on what I should or shouldn't do. It seems like we should just listen to our intuition or wise self." Aadesh shakes his head in agreement, "Yes definitely! If you can hear that, go with it … if what you find is your intuition, then fine. If you find that it is not your intuition then don't do it. But just check first."

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These are just two examples of the many occasions in which practitioners, at both sites, sought clarification on what constituted "God's will" or "right action" in a variety of different circumstances and situations. Unlike the clear rules and prescriptions imposed on members of other religious communities (see for example Davidman 2014 on Orthodox Judaism), there are very few definitive behavioral mandates that members of these communities must follow. Instead, what constitutes the correct action is variable across people, time, and context. Discussions about how practitioners ought to be and behave involve reference to relatively vague and inherently ambiguous dispositions. According to Sister Nancy and the texts assigned at Trinity, for example, practitioners should always strive 'to do the next loving thing,' to 'live from the heart' and as in the section above, to be a "contemplative in action."

The ambiguity and openness of this ideal presents a problem for practitioners: How do they know what God's will is in any particular, concrete circumstance? I found that there were often long discussions about what would constitute "right action" in a range of hypothetical examples and events at both sites. These conversations reveal both the open-endedness of the aspirations and ideals being transmitted as well as the concern and confusion this flexibility created among practitioners. At the prayer house, where discernment required attention to and analysis of practitioners' "inner affective movements," many practitioners expressed uncertainty

regarding how to distinguish the workings of their ego from the movements of the Holy Spirit: From which place did their desire to do something (or *not* do something) arise? Did it constitute 'right action' or reflect the (false) desires of their ego? As one Centering Prayer practitioner put it, "I can never tell what is God and what is me. I really have a hard time. People talk about 'Oh, I just followed God's guidance and direction and all the pieces fell into place.' I don't know what God's guidance is. I'm still waiting for him to draw on the sand, you know? To write those words in the sand that I can read …Then it would be easier for me to know that. That's part of the desire: to feel that kind of guidance." (See Chapter 3 for more on the role of emotions in the process of discernment at Trinity.)

I found that the solution to this predicament was said to be the cultivation of one's *spiritual intuition*: a habitual sensitivity to Divinity or transcendent reality. In other words, if the practitioners were able to embody and live from their "True Self" – which is, by definition, divine or Christ-like – they would simply *know* and do God's will. It was assumed that through practice, the individual would develop and refine an "internal moral compass" (see Marler and Hadaway 2002: 295), which they could then use to direct action. During raja yoga training at the yoga studio, for example, we were discussing the ethical principle of *ahimsa*, or non-harm (one of the five yamas, or ethical restraints, outlined in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*). During the discussion, the TTs often brought complex and ambiguous scenarios for discussion. How do we decide what to eat if all food production involves harm, on some level, to animals, plants, people, or the earth? What are the circumstances under which euthanasia would be considered 'right action'? On one occasion, after a long discussion of these questions and concerns with no real resolution, the discussion was cut off by Aadesh. He tells us, "Look … we can come up with all these theoretical things, but it is best to think about what we actually confront in our actual life."

And Ron adds that, in the end, it all comes down to the practice: "You learn and grow through practice – so hopefully you come to the place where *you just know*." Participants are told that the answer to these kinds of questions cannot be discovered through philosophical reflection. There are no simple and universal rules. Rather, these questions represent practical decisions that must be made in concrete circumstances, and by relying on one's personal intuition.

The spiritual intuition, as a cultivated sensibility, was often described at the prayer house using the metaphor of an intimate, loving relationship. In the book *Weeds among the Wheat* for example, the author suggests that the norms of discernment outlined in the New Testament, while not always easy to apply in practice, are relatively clear. However, in one section, which we read aloud in class, he argues:

> "What is more problematic is the *fundamental disposition of soul* presupposed for the use of these criteria. That is, the real problem in choosing the right neckties for another person is not so much knowing the various possible types and styles of neckties but knowing, with the knowledge born of love, the *person himself*. What kind of person is he? And what of person must I be – what of relationship must there be between us – if I am to know him and his tastes and desires?"[54]

Discernment, according to the author, requires an *experiential knowledge* of God. The less personal experience one has of God – or the weaker one's relationship to Him – the more the person will need to rely on others for discernment. However, if the practitioner develops a deep and intimate relationship with God, she will be able to easily and quickly sense, and ultimately meet, His will and desires, just as a wife can easily pick out a necktie for her husband of forty years. In our discussion, Sister Nancy compares this to how members of an orchestra always have at least one eye on the conductor. Doing so, she argues, eventually becomes an instinctual habit: 'It is intuitive,' she tells us. These metaphors both depict correct discernment as the

[54] Green, Thomas Henry. *Weeds Among the Wheat: Discernment, where Prayer & Action Meet.* Ave Maria Press, 1984. This book was assigned reading for participants in the Spiritual Direction Intern Program at Trinity.

product of divine attunement, a state of alignment cultivated and acquired over time and through disciplined practice.

As was the case with the sacred gaze, described above, I found that practitioners internalized the connection between disciplined practice and the spiritual intuition. In fact, this link was often articulated as an explicit motivation for and benefit of the practice. Mary, a CP practitioner and fifth grade teacher, for example, told me:

> "It [practice] sharpens my intuition. So I'm better off getting a good night's sleep and praying the rosary than staying up all night preparing a lesson. I'll do my research … and I'll write my lesson plans and then I need to do something to fill me spiritually. Then, what happens is, my intuition becomes really sharp and I just know what to do. I don't trouble over things … My mind is clear so that the right message will come through. I don't know if that makes any sense … but decision making comes, almost like, it's pretty natural. You just know. And if you don't just know, then you retreat into the rosary or the chapel or a contemplative state for a while and you let it go. Then you just know – it's great."

Mary's reflections demonstrate the connection between personal devotional practices and the development and deployment of her spiritual intuition. It is also clear that this intuition, cultivated and accessed through practice, was used to guide thought and action outside the spiritual domain; in this case, to help her better perform her role as a teacher. The desire to enact spiritual dispositions across social roles and contexts was another important feature of the aspired-to self in these communities. I take up this feature of the "enlightened self" in the next section.

Integration: Promoting Holistic Selves

"*I don't try to differentiate between the religious, the spiritual and the day-to-day. I think it's all the same"* – Rohit

'The goal is to live life in awareness of God: to be a person of God all the time.' – Sister Nancy

Early on in the intern program for spiritual direction, Sister Nancy made it very clear that serving as a director required participants to be dedicated and disciplined in their personal practices and,

more generally, to live their spirituality "twenty-four seven." On the very first day of class, for example, Sister Nancy told us, "Spiritual direction is a way of life." She told us that we will hear her repeat this phrase over and over again throughout the training. She was not exaggerating, and by the third class, when she began, "Spiritual Direction is a…", the students would complete her sentence: "… a way of life." Being a spiritual director, she told us, is 'not a role or identity that you can put on and take off like a hat;' instead, 'you really have to *be* that.'

While it was especially true for those training to be directors and teachers, I found that all practitioners, at both sites, were encouraged to view and enact their spirituality as a *holistic identity*. I use this concept to capture an ideal typical style of identity management (Brekhus 2003) in which the identity is central and highly salient (Stryker and Serpe 1994) but simultaneously integrated with other roles and obligations. A holistic approach to identity management therefore falls in between two poles on the spectrum of identity management: (1) identities enacted as social roles and therefore tied to particular times, places, or interaction partners; and (2) identities enacted as a *master status* (Becker 1963) or *core identity* (Thumma 1991; Gecas 1981). The latter approach implies that the identity in question monopolizes the self-concept, overshadowing and even seeking to displace other sources of self-understanding. A holistic identity, on the other hand, resembles the steady hum of background noise: it shapes thought and action in subtle but important ways across many different contexts.[55]

[55] The spiritual identity can be maintained in a holistic fashion – both central and salient as well as enmeshed and integrated – in part, because it is defined primarily by a set of characteristics and dispositions (what identity theorists call a "person identity") rather than a role identity or social identity (category membership). Because of this, the spiritual identity does not compete temporally or contextually with other identities and commitments, but is able to complement and even inform their enactments.

According to texts and teachers, the spiritual identity should be activated not only when the practitioner is on the mat or in the chair, but should be "turned on" throughout their daily lives. Spirituality was described as a way of being, one which not only transcends time and space, but also filters down and changes the "standards" – or expectations and enactments – of other identities and social roles (see Burke 2006 on identity change; Charmaz 1994 on "master identity"). Treating spirituality as a "way of life" (rather than a bounded social role, for example) implies that all obligations, experiences and other identities are encompassed within and given meaning through their relationship to the project of spiritual formation.[56]

In fact, I found that practitioners self-consciously and actively sought to facilitate and maintain "identity spread" or the redefinition of other identities and social roles in light of their spiritual commitments.[57] The enactment of one's role as a lawyer or mother, for example, was described and experienced as an arena in which to both express and cultivate the ideal spiritual self. This can be seen, for example, in how one reacts to the petty annoyances of co-workers or children: a situation that is transformed from a mundane experience into an opportunity to enact (or fail to enact) the spiritual ideal of presence and detachment. The spiritual identity therefore is relatively all-encompassing in that it should ideally inform behavior across context and incorporates all other roles, identities and obligations into a coherent system of meaning.

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[56] Other work has suggested that religious groups and traditions often encourage that people use their religious identity as the basis around which to organize a coherent sense of self, but this work has tended to focus on conservative and fundamentalist religious groups (see Ammerman 1987; Thumma 1991; Armato and Marsiglio 2002).

[57] Armato and Marsiglio (2002) found that members of the Promise Keepers (an all-men's evangelical group) see themselves "as godly men moving through a complex world" and have undertaken a godly man project that "involves most of their thoughts and behaviors… across social contexts and relationships" (50). The authors use the concept of a "master identity" to capture the fact that their identity as "Godly men" is not only "enmeshed" with other "host identities" but also modifies these other identifications by, for example, defining, redefining, or reinforcing the role expectations or shifting their salience and centrality (576-7).

On the other hand, while all-encompassing, the spiritual identity is not *greedy* (Coser 1974): it does not seek to displace or eclipse other social roles or personal interests. Unlike monastics or clergy who seek to live spiritually-centered lives by giving up all or many of their other commitments (interpreted as potential distractions), these communities do not require that practitioners abandon relationships, give up social roles, or sacrifice other obligations. At the yoga studio, the teachers often quoted the following Zen proverb in explaining the goal of practice: "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water." In our discussions, it was clear what this proverb was meant to convey: it is not activities or social roles that change in the process of seeking enlightenment but the intention and approach to those activities that are ultimately transformed. The goal is *integration*, not displacement. Spirituality should not be elevated above all other activities, as in an increasingly monastic withdrawal from social life; rather, practitioners are asked to identify and embrace the spiritual impulse *within* everyday life (Wuthnow 1998: 198).

Holistic identities therefore clearly differ from concepts such as "master status" (Becker 1963) or "identity lifestyler" (Brekhus 2003), terms that have been used to suggest that, in some cases, multidimensionality and balance are either impossible or undesirable. In these cases, the identity in question is not only central and salient but also "determines one's auxiliary characteristics" and, in many cases, pushes aside other roles and interests in the process (Brekhus 2003: 213). Take for example, the graduate student whose academic obligations and commitments prevent him from participating in previously important hobbies and activities. He may discover that, over time, he no longer enjoys these activities even when he finds the time, as his preferences and identities have shifted. The spiritual identity, very much like the academic identity, is often enacted as "an essential core" of practitioners' sense of self: "a way of being

and living, and an encompassing meaning of their whole identity, rather than a single aspect within the self" (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2014: 34). However, with encouragement from others in the community, practitioners strive to maintain their pre-existing roles, relationships, and hobbies, often translating them into tools or arenas for spiritual development in the process.

Practitioners learn that the spiritual ideal is defined by "a consistent, fully integrated life of piety, such that one's practice of spirituality is indistinguishable from the rest of one's life" (Wuthnow 1998: 198). To accomplish this goal, they were encouraged to implement structures, disciplines, and routines that could provide the necessary scaffolding for living out their aspirations. Yoga practitioners, for example, were told that they could repeat a mantra, chant Sankrit verses, or practice pranayama while doing daily activities like washing the dishes or driving to work. Doing so, it was argued, would help practitioners activate their spiritual gaze, maintain a state of presence and detachment, and deploy their spiritual intuition. Many practitioners implemented regular schedules of prayer and practice throughout the day. Barbara, a participant at Trinity, told me about how she uses prayers written by Margaret Gunther for mundane daily activities from showering and getting dressed to ironing and making coffee.[58] She recalls being encouraged by one teacher to make a daily schedule of prayer where "morning prayer is 'Thank you God for another day. Help me to live it according to your will.' And noontime is a recollection time: 'How am I doing?' And then nighttime is for a review of the day. So that's a pattern that I just try to keep in the back of my mind."

While many practitioners felt that the ideal of holism would be easier to embody if they lived in a monastery, most felt they could and should actively strive to cultivate this approach in the course of their daily lives. During my conversations with practitioners, many noted evidence

[58] Guenther, Margaret. *Practice of Prayer*. Vol. 4. Cowley Publications, 1997.

of progress in this area as a source of pride and distinction. Irene, for example, told me, "I just find myself automatically thinking about God. Thinking about my interactions with God … [I feel] like God is more present for me at this point than I ever have. Before, I would have to stop and say, okay, I'll think about God. But now it sometimes just happens – and frequently during the course of the day… it's more integrated. I don't necessarily have to stop what I'm doing in order for that to happen." For many, spirituality defined their lives. Jennifer, a participant at Trinity, told me, "I mean, it's my whole life. My whole life is about this. So I'm always thinking about it. It's not like something that I just do once a week or once a day. I'm always thinking about it."

Conclusions

As "self-constituting institutions" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000), these communities provide a range of resources for the construction of spiritual selves. In this chapter, I have identified and analyzed two of these resources: a shared narrative template and an aspirational habitus. Together, these symbolic resources give meaning to past experiences, locate and make sense of the self in the present (as an aspirant on a spiritual journey), and provide a sense of orientation for the future (a shared destination). Practitioners' sense of themselves as spiritual persons, while considered deeply authentic and personal, was ultimately constructed, at least in part, from these shared social resources. The use of these symbolic resources tied individual practitioners to the community, uniting members through shared understandings of religious life, of what it means to be a practitioner, and of the way of being-in-the-world they desired to embody.

On the one hand, these communities encouraged practitioners to view, imagine, and describe their religious lives as a journey or quest. I argued that this orientation manifests and is made concrete in the shared narrative template, or story form, depicted in Figure 6. In the first

section of this chapter, I argued that this narrative framework provides coherence and continuity to practitioners' self-understanding through time, tying together diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences through a unifying logic of progressive attainment. Further, I argue that this narrative form also constructs the storyteller as a perpetual student, someone engaged in the pursuit of an elusive goal. Rather than describing their religious identity as "ascribed" or "achieved," practitioners' accounts depict a religious self that is defined by both a sense of "being there" and of "becoming" (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2014: 30-31). In other words, practitioners accounts depict and construct the story teller as a dedicated spiritual practitioner (a yogi or contemplative) on the one hand, but also as an aspirant (a participant in an ongoing process of formation), on the other.

This tension between "being there" and "becoming" can be found in other communities, as well. The opera fanatics studied by Claudio Benzecry (2009), for example, also conveyed a sense of the self in progress. During conversations with fans, Benzecry found that they would often refer him to or at least reference someone else whom they felt had more experience. Many would qualify their expertise by noting that they have been a fan "for only 25 years" (138). Likewise, in Alcoholics Anonymous, while members' identity as an alcoholic is relatively set (once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic), their identity as "recovered" is always ongoing and incomplete. Rather than viewing identities as ascribed, achieved, or aspirational, it may be useful to consider the extent to which different communities emphasize a sense of "being there" and/or "becoming." As this chapter demonstrates, these different ways of narrating identity have important implications for self-understanding and subjective experience. Future research should strive to articulate similarities and differences in local manifestations of these and other narrative forms across religious (and non-religious) communities.

Second, these communities transmit an aspirational habitus or preferred self which shapes practitioners' aspirations by serving as a kind of potentiality: a description of the life practitioners *could* and *ought* to lead, a ready-made template for who and what they could be (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 97). This shared, prototypical ideal serves as a resource for the construction of practitioners' future self-concept – our sense of who we will or might become – and as a guidepost for practitioners' actions and efforts in the present. Articulating preferred, feared, and otherwise possible future identities is one of the ways in which communities and organizations construct the selves and subjectivities of their members (see for example, Harris 2011 on the role of future selves in criminal desistance). However, at present, there is a dearth of research on aspirations and future self-concepts within both the study of religion, specifically, and the study of self-constituting organizations, more broadly. Future research should identify variations in the content, structure, and valence of future self-concepts across different communities, in an effort to better understand the breadth and consequences of these resources for the construction of modern selves.

When internalized, self-narratives and future selves not only serve as a means of constituting social identities and providing coherence to individual selves (Somers 1994), but can also become tools for deciding on lines of action (see Ochs and Capps 2009; Smith 2010). Maggie Frye's (2012) research in Malawai, for example, reveals that women's educational aspirations – and their desire to be seen as someone who aspires – shaped their decision not to marry, ultimately foreclosing opportunities in the marriage market in exchange for the pursuit of a statistically unlikely outcome (academic success). Our sense of what is possible – our future selves, both desired and feared – as well as the stories we tell about who we are, motivate and constrain behavior: we make plans based, at least in part, on what lines of action we think will

help mold us into the kinds of people we hope to be and which make sense given how we understand and imagine the contours of our personal story. Spiritual practitioners are no different. Their commitment to the practice and community is driven by the desire to achieve and embody the characteristics that mark enlightenment. Future research should examine the consequences of these symbolic resources for the relationship between culture and action.[59]

In this chapter, I have shown how practitioners are provided with shared symbolic resources that shape and constrain their religious orientations, their self-understandings, and their future aspirations. However, these organizations not only provide shared conceptions of the structure and final destination of the spiritual journey, but also articulate the primary means and techniques through which spiritual persons are made (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). More specifically, I found that teachers and texts, much like recent theorizing in the social sciences (see for example Winchester 2008; Mahmood 2001), argue that spiritual practices help constitute and construct the religious, spiritual, and moral dispositions to which practitioners aspire. This chapter's focus on discourse and narrative "forgoes the corporeal aspects of religious life, ignoring how practices such as religious ritual can structure human experience at the non-discursive levels of bodily perception, attention and affect" (Tavory & Winchester 2012; Pagis 2009; 2010). In the next chapter, I focus more explicitly on the enculturation of the body as a central aspect of becoming in these communities, and articulate the complex relationship between the body, practice, and self-formation in each community.

[59] I am thinking here that communities which emphasize "becoming" may construct a lived experience that is more "unsettled" (Swidler 2001) and in doing so, increase the degree to which the symbolic resources they provide actually enter into and shape social action.

Chapter 3

Embodying the Spiritual

"The effect of bodily learning is the incorporation of new competencies and dispositions that modify the habitus. Cadets, like any person entering into a new social microcosm, undergo a collective pedagogy that does more than remake their mental representations, deliberative ends, self-concept, role or discursive repertoire. New cadets literally become something different."
(Lande 2007: 106)

Introduction

Father Thomas Keating, in the excerpt quoted at length to open this manuscript, articulates the similarities between apprenticeship in the practice of archery and the process of spiritual formation (see **Spirituality and the Art of Archery**). In order to become a great archer, in order to master "the subtlety of the discipline," Keating says, the apprentice archer must first develop "their tools" through "long and frequent practice." Archery is a skill that is "learned gradually" and requires the apprentice to develop "a sense of space, time, distance and wind" and to retrain and adjust "the body, the nerves, the muscles." Only when everything is "perfectly attuned" – when the practitioner develops "a sense of physical and even spiritual poise" – can he "hit the bull's eye every time without effort." In other words, once the archer has attained the necessary skills through disciplined practice, he comes to a place where he simply "knows the exact moment in which to let the arrow fly."

The process, Keating suggests, is similar for the spiritual journey: the goal, in this case, however, is to "hit the target in each of our daily activities." In order to become an "instrument at one with the divine action," the novice practitioner must, like the novice archer, "fulfill the necessary conditions physically and mentally for this to happen." Sister Nancy once described

the process of becoming attuned to God as akin to developing a "sense of smell": it is a bodily skill or habitual sensitivity that accumulates over time and with practice. The assumption is that, as Sister Nancy told us, "What you do in the twenty minutes with practice becomes a way of life." The process of deification is thought to be rooted in the body. It is not only mental but physical and emotional, as well. In fact, the work of spiritual self-formation is decidedly not one of changing beliefs or acquiring conceptual knowledge, but a process of cultivating new senses and sensibilities that allow for an embodied understanding of and alignment with the Divine. The practices not only help to cultivate divine attunement, but are the means through which practitioners come to truly understand the ideals being described (it is an embodied understanding).

The goal of practice in both communities is to create an "embodied attunement," or alignment with divine nature. Practitioners at Trinity, for example, strive to *embody* the attitudes, dispositions, and demeanor of Christ – to become Christ-like (Watling 2005) – by refashioning the body and mind through a process of mimesis. Very similar to Charismatic theology, participants at the prayer house learned that "if Christ was God *incarnate* as an *embodied*, fully human being, then human bodies contain religious potentialities that can be developed by imitating him" (see Mellor and Shilling 2010). Like punching drills in the process of becoming a boxer, the disciplined practice of Centering Prayer, examen, and spiritual direction, enables practitioners to shape the body and self, moving closer to the ideal. Like the "Orthodox" churches studied by Watling (2003: 389) in the Netherlands, these groups "encourage individuals to 'interiroize' the 'truth' of their beliefs via 'socially informed' bodies, embodying … beliefs and practices within their self-identities."

At the same time, however, Father Keating recognizes and acknowledges some key differences between spiritual practice and the practice of archery. He notes for example:

> "Now it just so happens that human behavior, especially divine human behavior, is even more of a skill than the art of archery, or any other art. They are paradigms, or metaphors, of the skill of just being present to what is and being content with what is without wanting to change it, but willing to change it if such is the divine inspiration. It is life under the guidance or the discipline of the Holy Spirit, manifesting divine love in every situation."

The goal of divinization presents a challenge: the thing practitioners are trying to imitate and embody is relatively abstract and ambiguous. On the one hand, similar to other forms of social practice like dancing and boxing, practitioners seek to acquire a new habitus, something that cannot be grasped conceptually, but only tangibly, with and through the body. However, unlike these other practices, the goal of these spiritual disciplines – Enlightenment and Christ-consciousness – are impossible to identify and assess externally and objectively (as in the shape of a dancer's body or a good left hook in boxing).

I found that the "body pedagogics," or process of bodily socialization, in these communities differ from those found among boxers and dancers (see Wacquant 2004; Aalten 2007), as well as practitioners of Vispassana meditation (Pagis 2009, 2010). Wacquant (2004) finds that the techniques of boxing are acquired "directly in bodily gymnastics, without the intervention of discursive consciousness and reflective explication, that is by excluding the contemplative and de-temporalizing posture of the theoretical gaze" (2004: 58-9). Learning to box, then, is largely a "(re)socialization of physiology" (Wacquant 2004: 59), accomplished in a practical manner, by means of direct embodiment. Training involves mimetic imitation as well as the repetition of physical movements. In these communities, however, I found that teachers relied on verbal instruction and discursive interpretation to a much greater degree. While there is a clear emphasis on "learning by doing" in both communities, much of the time spent in classes

and workshops at both sites was dedicated to didactic instruction, collective reflection, and discussion, as well as the review of written materials. As will become clear throughout this chapter, teachers, texts, and practitioners struggled to articulate the nature of the relationship between the body, practice, and the process of spiritual formation, and often invoked different and seemingly contradictory ways of understanding and using the body in practice.

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In Chapter 2, I argued that practitioners, through their immersion in these communities, internalize an *aspirational habitus* (Foster 2013): a set of embodied dispositions, tendencies, and habits that are thought to define and mark enlightenment. Like the Akido practitioners studied by Foster, the individuals I spoke with in these communities practiced in order to "experience and embody a set of somatic ideals *to which they aspire*" (Foster 2013: 2). As is the case in other social practices – such as boxing (Wacquant 2004) or modeling (Mears and Finlay 2005), for example – practitioners in these communities worry about and seek to improve their *spiritual fitness*. Organizations, teachers, and texts provide an understanding of how the ideal can be achieved, or at least how the individual can make progress towards this elusive goal. These communities argue – similar to those in recent sociological scholarship[60] – that *embodied practices* and *bodily techniques* are the primary means of spiritual self-formation, contributing to the transformation of practitioners' dispositions, inclinations, and habits. In this chapter, I examine the relationship between the body, practice, and spiritual formation in more detail.

The body is central to the project of self-formation in each of these communities. In fact, I found that the body is called on to do many different and sometimes seemingly contradictory

[60] For more contemporary work making this claim see: Winchester 2008; Crossley 2007; Mahmood 2001, 2011; Asad 1993. For older work making this claim see: Mauss 1973; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1965; Durkheim 1915.

things. Both practices, of course, directly involve the body and require some degree – more for yoga, less for centering prayer – of physical competency and skill. The body is therefore a direct target of practice at several levels. The physical body as well as its sensibilities and embodied dispositions are thought to be shaped, molded, and re-formatted in and through practice. These competencies include not only physical abilities (such as the ability to sit without moving for extended periods of time), but emotional inclinations and cognitive proclivities (habits of attention and perception, for example) that define and mark membership. In other words, through disciplined practice, individuals become "spiritually fit."

While the practices transmitted in these communities certainly make use of the body and often explicitly work on the body (especially in the yoga community), the *primary* goal of these practices is not the transformation of the physical body or the acquisition of a bodily craft (such as boxing, dance, or playing the piano). Instead, the bodily techniques and practices are means to another end: the transformation of practitioners' habitus. While the dancer or boxer performs bodily techniques in order to re-format her body to match an aesthetic and functional ideal (to have a body that looks a certain way and can do certain things), spiritual practitioners undertake embodied practices in order to become attuned to or in alignment with the divine.

The spiritually 'fit' body can be counted on to perform and to speak competently and reliably (see Glassner 1990 on fitness culture). Spiritual fitness implies an ability to attend closely to the phenomenal information provided by the body, and to interpret and act on these sensations as meaningful sources of information. The spiritual intuition – as an embodied attunement with the divine and transcendent – is membership, identity, and spiritual knowledge made incarnate. In order to cultivate it, practitioners implement bodily techniques and practices which are thought to help 'tune' the body and mind to the divine. However, rather than a neat

correspondence between specifically bodily techniques or practices and different moral dispositions or virtues (such as the connections outlined by Winchester 2008), I found that each practice correlated with a variety of different discourses about the body and range of outcomes. Each of the practices transmitted in these communities, in other words, was thought to help cultivate not a "single, rational goal but a mosaic of physical, emotional, economic and aesthetic transformations, a pastiche of ends and means" (Glassner 1990: 233). In this chapter, I spell out more clearly how the body is understood and what kind of embodied habitus is developed in and through the practices and discourses of each community.

The Body, Practice, and Socialization

Processes of socialization rely on, are constrained by, and often directly target the body (Shilling 2001; Synnott 2002): the body, in other words, is often "the very medium by which a person comes into a collectively inhabited world" (Lande 2007: 97; see also: Wacquant 2004; Sudnow 1978; Csordas 1994; Davidman 2014). Socialization requires, for example, that novice members learn new corporeal schema, including new kinetic and sensory abilities, as well as new dispositions. Membership, identity, and status become tied to a particular kind of embodiment: physical, perceptual, and sensual. This is true both within and outside of the religious field (see for example, Davidman 2014; Griffith 2004; Lester 2005; Wincehster 2008; Pagis 2009, 2010, for example within the religious field).

The bodily and embodied component of the socialization process has been referred to as *body pedagogics* (Mellor and Shilling 2010). Analysts interested in these processes investigate "the central pedagogic means through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills and dispositions, the embodied experiences associated with acquiring or failing to acquire these attributes and the actual embodied changes resulting from this process" (Shilling

2007: 13). However, as in studies of "embodiment" more generally, there are several intersecting strands of empirical and theoretical work that investigate the role of the body, embodied practices, and bodily techniques in the existing literature on socialization and becoming (religious and otherwise), each with a slightly different focus and level of analysis. I review several of these different perspectives in turn.

Reformatting the Physical Body

In many communities and contexts, the body is both the vehicle and main object of socialization and practices of self-formation. In other words, the self that members aspire to is defined in largely physical terms; for example, the dancer who seeks to achieve the "ballerina look," a largely aesthetic ideal. In this context, the "ideal body has a specific form and the ability to perform specific movements endlessly and with ease. In ballet, this bodily form is well described and its movement patterns are known" (Aalten 2007). Dancers perform exercises and bodily techniques in order to mold their physical bodies into the ideal, moving closer and closer over time and with effort. In this case and others like it, self-projects involve attempts to re-fashion or mold the physical body in order that it might more fully (and more authentically) reflect the self, and tend to emphasize techniques of body maintenance and transformation (diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery). This is particularly true in communities, like ballet, where the physiological body – including its appearance, mannerisms, and abilities – is closely tied to membership, identity, and status (see also Wacquant 1995 on boxing; Foster 2013 on akido).[61]

[61] Ashley Mears work on the modeling industry also reveals the role of the body in identity and socialization. Mears and Finaly (2005) for example argue that part of the professional socialization of models involves learning how to manage bodily capital, through techniques of self-regulation (as well as techniques of emotional labor).

Attempts to reformat the physical body can be found in religious communities as well. Lynn Davidman (2014), for example, finds that the Haredi (Orthodox Jewish) identity and lifestyle is constituted primarily through embodied practices related to appearance – such as demeanor and comportment, dress and physical upkeep – and diet. She argues that leaving the Hasidic community requires individuals to change ritualized bodily practices and techniques. As defectors begin to feel an increasing sense of distance between "bodily routine and self-identity," they experiment with private deviations from established regimens as well as the adoption of new bodily practices. Likewise, Marie Griffith's book *Born Again Bodies* (2004) examines Christian fitness and diet culture, illuminating the ways in which bodily practices are undertaken in the service of God, as well as how these practices are acquired and become effective through immersion in a community of fellow participants.

Learning Practical Schemes and Body Techniques

Other studies have focused on how people acquire technical skills – or *body techniques*[62] (Mauss 1973) – that rely heavily on the physical body and its conditioning; for example, learning to shoot a gun (Lande 2007), play an instrument (Sudnow 1978), or blow glass (O'Connor 2007). These kinds of skills and practices "involve creating a bodily sensitivity that is the result of a protracted and diffuse process rather than the product of a deliberate will" (Lande 2007: 102).[63]

[62] Mauss defines this concept as "the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies" (1973: 97).

[63] The argument is that bodily techniques, skills, and sensitivities "cannot be affected by an act of will or a conscious transfer of information. It necessitates, rather, an imperceptible embodiment of the mental and corporeal schemata immanent in the … practice that admits of no discursive mediation of systematization" (Wacquant 1995: 72). It is a process of "progressive bodily self-transformation akin to a process of sedimentation" (1995: 72).

The findings demonstrate how the process of apprenticeship does not and cannot remain at the level of the conceptual and discursive, but requires direct physical contact, imitation, and co-presence.

Crossley (2007), expanding on Mauss' concept, for example, argues that body techniques are "not mere movements" but represent a form of understanding and knowledge in and of themselves: "To learn to swim is to grasp the principles of buoyancy and propulsion which different strokes utilize in different ways and which competent swimmers can orient to in improvised play" (86).[64] While we could specify these principles intellectually in a physics lab, the swimmer grasps them in a different way; that is, practically and in an embodied fashion. The swimmer may not know the theory and does not need to know it. Knowledge and understanding are defined by an embodied, rather than intellectual or conceptual, competence. For Crossley and for Mauss, body techniques impart and reveal a practical wisdom and reason, and can serve as an ideal location for investigating the dialectical relationship between subjective, embodied experience and the objective social and cultural context.

Much of the existing empirical work on "body pedagogies" (Shilling 2007) has focused on this kind of learning: the acquisition of bodily techniques and practical skills. This is true even in cases where bodily techniques and practical skills are just one part of a larger process of socialization: for example, in his study of military socialization, Lande's (2007) interest in embodiment led him to focus only on the acquisition of bodily techniques such as breathing and shooting a gun, ignoring the many of the other practices and techniques of socialization, as well as the other (more or less embodied) forms of personal change cadets underwent in the process.

[64] Others scholars have also noted the ability to improvise as a key component of competence and/or as evidence of body techniques consisting of more than merely producing mechanical patterns of movement (Sudnow 1978; Becker 2000).

The choice of focus implies a kind of divide: the body and theories of embodiment are only relevant to the investigation of apprenticeship and acquisition of practical skills and bodily techniques. Overlooked in these accounts is how mental representations, deliberative ends, self-concepts, and discursive repertoires are not distinct or separate from the body but also rely on, impact, and are shaped by the body, practice, and embodied experience.

Cognition and Emotion

Others scholars have investigated apprenticeship and socialization in less overtly physical but still highly embodied practices: from learning to get high (Becker 1953) to developing a taste for opera music (Benzecry 2009). These kinds of skills and abilities, while clearly embodied, aim to restructure more subtle forms of lived experience, including sensations, perceptions, and affect. Becker, for example, argues that new users must learn to both notice and enjoy the physical and mental effects of smoking marijuana. Benzecry finds that opera fanatics learn from others how to properly listen to and hear the music. Cognitive processes such as perception and attention, as well as emotion and affect, are often the targets of socialization into different communities (see Zerubavel 1997).

In the religious field, this includes, for example, what Pagis (2009) refers to as *embodied self-reflexivity*: a form of self-reflection that is based predominantly on feeling the body, and in which relation with oneself unfolds by way of practices that increase awareness of internal sensations, such as meditation, yoga, and dance (266). While most people in contemporary American context go about their lives with little conscious awareness of their bodies – in other words, the body is "absent" (Leder 1990[65]) – these communities aim to cultivate self-awareness

[65] Drew Leder (1990) investigates how people's bodies becomes absent from their awareness, as well as how, at certain times, they are pushed to the forefront. Leder's account focused on the role that illness and injury play in bringing attention to the body.

through greater attention to the body. Practitioners learn to attend to and perceive their bodies in new ways. This requires a process of *cognitive socialization* (Zerubavel 1997), which produces changes in members' habits of attending to, perceiving, and classifying objects and events, including their thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions.

Cognition and emotion, therefore, are considered to be both physical and conceptual, linking the body and mind in complex ways. Emotions, for example, are the results of both physical states *and* conscious reflection; a comprehensive understanding of *both* is necessary to fully account for the role of emotion in cognition and behavior (see Damasio 2003, 2000). The emerging perspective of "embodied cognition," likewise, argues that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the capacities and structures of the physical body as well as its interaction with the world (see Wilson 2002). The social groups within which we participate constrain and enable particular ways of seeing, thinking and feeling.

Cultivating Dispositions

Further, some scholars focus on the cultivation of new dispositions through practices of socialization. This is particularly true in studies focused on moral and religious communities. Dan Winchester (2008: 1755), for example, has argued, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his own study of religious practices among Islamic converts, that embodied practices not only reflect moral dispositions, but are "relationally and mutually" constitutive of them (see also: Davidman 2014). Winchester shows how Muslim converts "produced new moral selves in and through the use of embodied religious practices" such as prayer, fasting and covering (2008: 1753). These practices helped cultivate dispositions, like humility and modesty, associated with being a "good Muslim." Similar arguments have been made by Talal Asad (1993) and Saba Mahmood (2003). Moral philosophers and scholars of ethics have also argued that it is through

bodily techniques and practices that moral wisdom and moral virtues are imparted (see MacIntyre 1981; Stout 2001).

The Embodied Basis of Abstract Knowledge

Finally, there are some researchers who contend that the realm of "embodiment" ought to extend to the realm of conceptual thought, discourse and abstract knowledge, beliefs and ideas, as well. These scholars argue, for example, that language and conceptual knowledge are often rooted in and made concrete in and through bodily experience (see for example Lakoff and Johnson 1999 on the bodily foundations of linguistic metaphors). Michal Pagis (2010), for example, argues that religious knowledge, understanding, and belief are all rooted in bodily experience. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews, and her own experience with Vispassana meditation, she reveals how the embodied experience of meditation provides practitioners with a practical *sense* of abstract ideas such as dissatisfaction, impermanence and not-self that are so central to Buddhist theology. In other words, the concept of impermanence is felt, believed, and understood in and through the body and bodily experience. The practice of meditation not only transmits new bodily skills and competencies (for example, how to sit or how to deal with bodily discomforts) and new moral dispositions (such as serenity), but is also crucial to the transmission of the conceptual knowledge constitutive of Buddhist identity. Pagis's work, therefore, ties together the discursive and the practical, the conceptual and the embodied, in order to better understand the process of self-formation in these Buddhist meditation centers.

Other scholars have found and argued for a similar intermingling of the body, experience, and belief. In Watling's (2003: 392) study of "Orthodoxy" in the Netherlands, for example, he suggests that the community and its practices are "created and reproduced with the aim of supporting members in their personal struggle to *experience* belief." Likewise, Lynn Davidman

(2014: 21-22) also finds a co-mingling of abstract and even theological knowledge with embodied practices. The ex-Hasidism she spoke with "described how their community's metanarrative and the physical rituals through which it was enacted began to lose sense and meaning for them" as they began to withdraw from the community. In this statement, we can see the deeply intertwined nature of belief and embodied practice, of meaning, sense, and identity.

Summary

In each of these approaches, the body and practice are tied to identity and status. Membership is constituted, at least in part, by physical appearance, by the enactment of specific practices and bodily techniques, and by the possession and deployment of particular sensibilities, habits, and dispositions. As Davidman (2014: 183) argues based on her study of ex-Orthodox Jews, practices, body techniques, and habitual modes of comportment, especially those learned early in life, are "deeply inscribed within our bodies" and resistant to change even with conscious, explicit, and consistent effort. Because these different approaches all fall under the umbrella of "embodiment," it is often difficult to pin down exactly what and how the body is being used and articulated across different communities of practice. Researchers tend to focus on only one of the areas described above, despite the fact that other forms and methods of embodiment are relevant to the contexts being investigated.

In many or perhaps most communities, the process of socialization and self-formation does all of the above. Socialization, in other words, (1) re-formats the physical body (what the body looks like; how it is held and carried); (2) transmits new practical skills and bodily techniques (what the body can do); (3) modifies members' tastes, senses, perceptions, and affects (how and what the body perceives, senses and feels); (4) inculcates new moral dispositions; and (5) fosters experiences that provide an embodied basis for understanding and embracing shared

beliefs and ideas. In other words, the body being targeted is simultaneously physiological, phenomenological, and discursive. Communities vary, of course, in the extent to which they emphasize one or more of these arenas in defining what it means to be a member. Some communities, like boxing and dance, focus primarily on the physical body and technical skill. Membership and status are defined primarily by the body's appearance, mannerisms and capacities. Others, like traditional religious communities, focus primarily on moral dispositions and belief. Membership and status in these kinds of communities are defined primarily by the extent to which individuals embrace and enact moral virtues and theological ideals.[66]

In this chapter I use the term "embodiment" to orient myself and the reader towards the body at each of these levels of analysis. In attending to the role of the body and practice in the process of socialization and self-formation, I include attention to the physiological and phenomenological body, as well as to language and shared beliefs as they target the body or are articulated in and through embodied experience. I argue that the process of socialization affects each of these "levels," doing so in ways that make that boundaries between them fuzzy and complicated. Abstract theological ideas are understood in and through the embodied experience of concrete practices. Perception and attention engage faculties and inclinations acquired through practice. The physical body, sensual experience, and affect are all objects of conscious reflection and discursive analysis.

[66] In some communities these areas – the physical, emotional, and cognitive – are seen as inherently intertwined. This is particularly true in communities where the practices which define membership require the acquisition of relatively complicated bodily techniques, but in which the ultimate purpose of those practices is said to be the transformation of subjectivity rather than the formatting and development of the body per se (see for example Foster 2013 on Aikido; Zarilli 1998 on Kalarippayattu, a South Indian martial art). Integral Yoga, for example, would fall under this category.

Bodily techniques and practices, subjective experience (perception, sensation, and affect) and discursive interpretation intermingle in complicated and nuanced ways within the process and discourse of self-formation within both organizations. In the following analysis, I strive to elucidate some of these complex relationships between the body, practice, and identity. In refusing to focus on one of these "levels" to the neglect of others, I align myself with recent theoretical work which argues that social and cultural resources, from abstract concepts to concrete bodily techniques, are neither purely "cognitive" nor purely "physical." And in doing so, I reveal the myriad ways in which the body is understood and given meaning (and value) in these communities, while simultaneously revealing what the body does or affords practitioners in the process of self-formation in each community.

Integral Yoga Institute

The body is of central importance in the practices and processes of socialization at the yoga studio. Like the boxers studied by Wacquant, yoga practitioners pursue their spiritual formation through "restless, continuous, systematic work; with and upon the body" (Wacquant 1995: 76). Practitioners are also required, however, to give their bodies intellectual and conceptual attention. In fact, an RYS 200 (or 200-hour) Yoga Teacher Training program must include 20 hours of instruction in anatomy and physiology (A&P) in order to be certified by the Yoga Alliance.[67] During the first day of our A&P at the IYI, Ambika, our instructor for this component of the training, justified these requirements by arguing that yoga, as a comprehensive way of life, begins first and foremost "with the body on the mat." Yoga requires that practitioners not only work on the body, but also have deeper knowledge of *how* it works.[68] In this section, I describe

[67] https://www.yogaalliance.org/Credentialing/Standards/200-HourStandards

[68] This is in stark contrast to the case of Orthodox Jews studied by Davidman (2014). Davidman also finds that the body and bodily practices are important in this community; however, despite

several of the practices transmitted in the yoga community, articulating how the body and its relationship to the practice and to the self is constructed in each.

Asana Practice: Cultivating Embodied Self-Reflexivity and Experiencing Presence

> "*What you want to try to do is get in the right frame of mind … You want to focus on what is happening inside … Let the mindfulness take you to the deeper levels. One thing you don't want to do … is let it become a mechanical practice, where you do the same poses every morning … and have it be mindless. You want to keep it fresh and treat every asana that you do as an exploration. In Buddhism it's called a "*beginner's mind.*" Bring that to your practice every single day. We talked about the body being different every year, but every day it is different. You feel good one day and not so good the next day: my shoulder or knee hurts. Every day is different. Watch the postures with that knowledge, with that in mind. It is going to feel different today. Watch how the body feels. Watch the breath. Feel what is happening inside*." – Ron

The *asanas,* or physical postures, are one of the central and most important components of yogic practice in the Integral Yoga tradition.[69] During asana practice, the body is both a target of effort and an object of meditation. The correct performance of any asana requires both: (1) physical ability and effort: the ability to move the body into a specific position, or at least substantial effort towards achieving the physical posture; and (2) a distinct demeanor or disposition: a particular way of approaching and experiencing the practice, in which the practitioner attends closely to the body's movements and sensations and attempts to disregard or "let go" of all other thoughts. It is with the "beginner's mind" that practitioners should come to each and every posture and technique. In fact, the asanas, as taught in this community, resemble a moving form of Vispassana meditation (as studied by Pagis 2009), where practitioners are encouraged to

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this focus on the body and its control, Davidman argues: "Most of the people I spoke with described growing up with no knowledge of their body parts and having no language with which to discuss them" (2014: 13).

[69] See Appendix A for a full overview of a typical hatha yoga class in this tradition.

attend closely to their bodily sensations as a means both of stilling the mind and of acquiring self-knowledge.

Through the asanas, participants cultivate a deep understanding and sense of the body: how it is positioned, how it moves through space, how it feels, and where it needs healing or attention. Aadesh tells us that "part of the study [of yoga] is the study of your own body." He explains that each person's anatomy is different, and therefore, there is no single or universal ideal for any given posture. Rather, each individual practitioner has his own personal ideal for *his* body in each posture. The process of apprenticeship involves becoming attuned to one's body and developing, over time and through repetition, a sense or feel for when that alignment has been achieved. Aadesh told the participants in the teacher training program (TTs) that he prefers not to have mirrors present when he teaches, because the practice should be about *feeling* that the pose is right, rather than looking at the body externally. In other words, the practitioner should feel and know that their body is in alignment "from the inside out."

This process, however, is not purely individual or subjective. Practitioners come to know, in both the conceptual and the embodied sense, the correct alignment through social feedback as well as a socially acquired embodied intuition (see also Crossley 2007). Teachers, for example, offer verbal and physical adjustments in order to help them move into the correct alignment. Students also observe and monitor other practitioners to gain a better sense of what each posture ought to look like. In some cases, teachers point out other students as examples of correct alignment and performance. There are also books such as Swami Satchidananda's book, *Integral Yoga Hatha*,[70] which include pictures of people performing each asana, that serve as references,

[70] Satchidananda. *Integral yoga hatha.* Shakticom, 1990. http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/649512.Integral_Yoga_Hatha

guides, and models. Discursively, however, alignment is considered an embodied understanding and competence. While students and teachers may be able to articulate or identify the correct alignment, they only really "get it" when they are able to feel it with their bodies. This relates to the imperative that would-be teachers maintain a disciplined personal practice, because, as Aadesh said, you should "teach from your own practice."

As with the ability to physically perform the asanas, embodied self-reflection, or conscious and explicit attention to the body, is also a practical skill – a habit or tendency – that must be cultivated. Most of us walk around, in the course of daily life, paying very little if any attention to our bodies and bodily sensations, a state of being Leder (1990) refers to as *corporeal absence* (see also Zarilli 2004). Instructors help practitioners overcome this tendency, by encouraging them to attend closely to their bodies, on and off the mat. The opening sequence of the hatha yoga class, for example, is designed to facilitate this shift in attention and perception. Students usually start the class in a cross-legged position, with eyes closed, at the front of their mats. The teacher describes small physical adjustments students can make to the seated posture, as well as points of concentration (such as the breath), that might help bring them "into the present." During this opening sequence, the instructor often asks the students to notice how explicit attention to the body helps calm and focus the mind: "And you'll find as you do this that the body becomes light and energized. That the mind becomes still and centered, relaxed."[71]

Throughout the class, the teacher instructs students to pay attention to the body and breathe, generally, as well as to specific areas or sensations in the body. During and between postures, for example, students are encouraged to "stay engaged," to "stay with the breath," and

[71] This and the quotations in the following paragraphs are from the transcript of the full class taught by Aadesh and provided for the teacher trainees as a guide and exemplar for how to instruct the basic hatha class.

not to "let the mind wander." During sequences such as the sun salutation, teachers often encourage students to pair movement with breathe, providing a specific point of concentration with the intention of quieting and focusing the mind. As in the opening of the class, teachers also regularly offer recommendations for physical adjustments to help students move deeper into a posture, repeatedly drawing their attention to the position and movement of their bodies in space. Finally, instructors often describe or reference physical or emotional sensations that students may be feeling at different points in the class. Novice instructors were encouraged and even required to verbally acknowledge and describe physical sensations at certain points in the class. This was the case, for example, after one of the back-bending postures – *salabhasana* or locust pose – where instructors were taught to inform students that this posture often raises one's heart and respiration rate, asking to students to simply "look" at or "observe" these sensations as they move through the body.

Zarrilli (1998, 2004), based on his study of a South Indian martial art called *Kalarippayattu,* argues that the acquisition of bodily techniques usually involves two important shifts or stages. The first is a volitional shift in attention *toward* the body and its actions, similar to that described above. Novice practitioners consciously and explicitly focus on the body in an attempt to master new bodily techniques. Over time, however, the body disappears again as what was conscious and explicit becomes intrinsic and intuitive (see also Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999). This process rings true for many practical skills and bodily techniques, from boxing (Wacquant 2004) to driving. In the practice of yoga, however, explicit attention to the body and its actions is ideally sustained regardless of one's practical expertise or physical competence. In fact, as Ron makes clear in the quote above, keeping the body, its actions and its sensations, at the forefront

of one's attention – as in the idea of *embodied self-reflexivity* defined by Pagis (2010) – is a definitive feature of correct practice.

Embodied self-reflexivity, as a practical skill, is thought to develop and deepen over time and with practice. In other words, practitioners are told that as their internal senses become more refined, they will be able to feel and perceive more *subtle* movements. As Ron told the TTs: "As the physical body is purified and healed through practice, you will start seeing that the practice *feels* different. You may think, 'I'm feeling things that I don't quite understand. It is not my physical body, but there is something deeper that I am seeing now.' That is the energy body talking to you, so to speak, but being able to feel and see that … That is why we do our practice. And deepening your practice, you begin to see these different, more subtle aspects." The asana practice, in other words, also provides practitioners with an embodied experiences of the *koshas*, or sheaths: the different aspects of the body, from the grossest (the physical body) to the most subtle (the bliss body).[72] Ron suggests that until you begin to feel these subtle energies working with the body, the koshas and the chakras can be "a little theoretical." However, as you practice, and as you start becoming aware of the more subtle aspects of your being, "it definitely becomes more tangible."

Generally speaking, students are encouraged, more or less explicitly, to approach the physical practice of yoga – the asanas – as a "moving meditation." By focusing their attention on the body rather than allowing their minds to wander off to thoughts of the past or the future, students learn, as Aadesh once said, to "give yourself wholly to what you're doing" and to stay "in the present moment." The asana practice therefore is not only about reformatting the body

[72] Yogic philosophy suggests that there are five koshas, or coverings, of the Self. Moving from the gross to the subtle, the five koshas include: annamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, vijnanamaya, and anandamaya koshas.

and cultivating a practical skill (embodied self-reflexivity), but also about practicing and cultivating "presence": one of the idealized dispositions that constitutes the aspired-to spiritual self (as outlined in **Chapter 2**). Through practice, students re-train themselves to stay focused on and engaged in the present moment. The body – including the breath and sensations – is an ever-present point of focus that practitioners can use to bring themselves back into the present moment on and off the mat.

"You are not the Body…": Understanding and Cultivating Detachment

On the first Saturday of the yoga teacher training (TT) program, we all sit on yoga mats arranged around the edges of Ron's living room, which has been cleared of almost all its furniture to make room for the eight students and two teachers. Ron and Aadesh sit at the front of the room beside the alter: a small, rectangular table which holds a lotus flower candle holder, with a lit tea light, and two pictures, one of Swami Satchidananda, and one of his guru, Swami Sivananda. We were told at the end of Thursday evening's class that we will spend most of today's meeting doing the "Sun Salutation Drill," and there is some nervous chit chat and laughter among the students as we look over the handout that explains what we are about to do. The drill is a method, designed by Aadesh, to help us learn, as quickly as possible, the instructions for teaching *Surya Namaskar*, or the sun salutation: a series of twelve postures which the practitioner moves through in sequence, flowing smoothly from one into the next (see Figure 7). Aadesh begins, however, by talking about the body and out relationship to it.

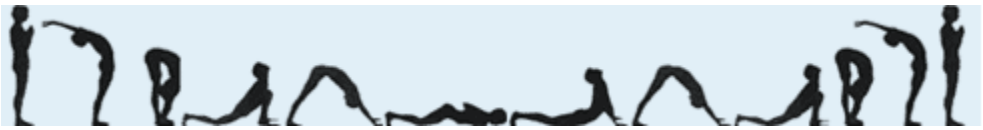

Figure 7: Surya Namaskar, or The Sun Salutation

He explains that we "are not the body" even though we tend to identify with it. During the hatha yoga class, he continues, we want to help students "feel a little free of that" so we use the word "*the*" in place of "*you*" or "*your*" when referring to students' bodies: for example, telling students to "lift *the* arm" rather than to "lift *your* arm." Aadesh explains to us that part of the goal of the class is "to get people to become aware of their eternal self, their soul; to let go of their engagement with the body, the mind and become lucidly aware of this self." Ron chimes in, noting that this shift in language really does help the students get "into that mindset," and ultimately helps them to move closer to achieving *yoga* (or a sense of union) during practice.

With this preface, we move into the drill. Ron rolls out his mat at the center of the room. He moves through the sun salutation, with each of the trainees instructing one posture of the sequence in turn. There are a lots of pauses and re-do's as we – the fumbling novice teachers – try to recall and articulate the verbal instructions necessary to guide Ron through the sequence. Laughter erupts on several occasions when Ron gets stuck in an awkward pretzel-like shape after trying to take one of our inaccurate and sometimes physically impossible instructions literally. Aadesh and Ron give corrections and suggestions, offering key phrases and helpful hints on how to instruct the movements more clearly and fluidly. Instructing this sequence was difficult for all of us, especially at first. Each posture requires several distinct verbal instructions, and the sequence itself moves fairly quickly. Students often forgot the order of the postures, or misspoke in their instruction; however, the most common source of correction was the use of the word "your" rather than "the" when referencing the body. For many, it was difficult to overcome what seemed like a deeply ingrained habit of using 'your' or 'my' when talking about the body.

We returned to this drill on several occasions over the next few weeks. With each passing session, Aadesh and Ron's patience with students use of the words 'you' and 'your' waned. The

exasperation in their voices became clearer with each passing day. In mid-June, about four weeks into the 10-week program, Aadesh reiterated the importance of using this wording. He told us, "There are some things we are very demanding about your saying, including 'your.' If you say it every once in a while, that's fine – but we are trying to help people move past their identification with the body. It's not terrible to say it once, but if you keep saying it, that is terrible."

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I heard the distinction between the Self and the body-mind reiterated over and over again during my time observing classes and workshops at the yoga studio. On some occasions, the instructors offered evidence or exercises to support this claim. On two occasions, for example, students were asked to perform a thought-experiment. Instructors asked: "What happens if you lose a body part? Are you still you?" Ron and Aadesh argued that "Of course you are!" because "You are not the body." A similar line of reasoning was used when Ron shared his understanding of the process of aging and physical regeneration. Ron told us:

> These are some interesting facts I like to share. Scientists can track the atoms in and out of the bodies: in one year, every atom is new. Every 5 days, you have a new stomach lining. New skin every month. All the atoms in the liver are changed every 6 weeks. Skeleton is 3 months. The brain is different every year. All of these things we think are permanent and unchanging are always being renewed. When we identify ourselves with our bodies, you have to ask: Which one? This body in a year will have completely different elements. It is in a constant state of change.

Ron notes however, that "there is still something in there that is the same. We are called on to identify with that that is not changing." Practitioners are encouraged to, and according to Ron, "called to," believe and *to feel and know* this "Eternal Self."

It is the practice of yoga however, rather than these conversations or thought experiments, which are thought to lend the greatest support to the reality of a transcendent Self. The practices are designed to provide students with an *experience* of this Self, a Self that is

separate from the body. As Aadesh made clear during the sun salutation drill, the separation of the Self from the body-mind is built into the structure and discourse of the basic hatha yoga class offered at the studio. At the same time, however, it is also the primary aim of a particular practice in the hatha yoga class: the practice of *yoga nidra*, also called "yogic sleep" or "deep relaxation."

The practice of yoga nidra begins with students in savaasana, or corpse pose (see Figure 8 below). Students are then guided by the instructor through a process of "physical relaxation," in which they tense and release the entire body one piece at a time: one limb at a time, followed by the pelvis, chest, neck, shoulders, and face. Students are then guided through a process of "mental relaxation," or a mental scan, in which they are instructed to bring their *attention* to different parts of their body in sequence, from their toes to their heads, and to imagine their bodies filling with "a beautiful relaxation" (sometimes in the form of a bright light). In the section describing instruction for this component of the practice, the training manual notes that "release, relax and soften are key words: use them over and over again" (84).

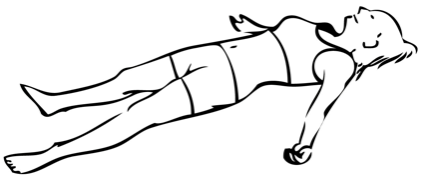

Figure 8: Sivaasana or Corpse Pose

After this mental scan of the body, the teacher instructs the student to "witness" first the body, then the breath, then the mind. Finally, the student is told to notice and "witness" the "peace within." Aadesh's transcribed instructions for this component of the practice read as follows:

> "As you witness the body, you see it is totally at ease [10 second pause]. The breath is flowing easefully as well – relaxed, not requiring any effort at all. Just observe the breath [1 minute pause]. You can even let go of the mind and just watch it – just witness the mind. The mind too has become quite calm and still. It's becoming more and more placid. Sure, you may notice some movement, some thoughts, but you don't have to be involved in them. Just let them roll on and let them go … just let the mind be. [30 second pause] Focus all of your awareness now at this place from which you're witnessing – the knower, the seer – this is the seat of your True Self. Notice how peaceful it is here. This is your true nature – this peace, that's unlimited and ever-present – you're never apart from this – this is your very nature … Allow yourself to experience without any reservation at all, without any restrictions, the fullness of your being. Total peace, total bliss. Total love."

Students are then left in this position, in complete silence, for a full five minutes, to "observe the peace within" (Manual, pg 85). At the end of this period, the teacher uses an "om," or rings a small gong or bell, to help "bring students back" to their minds and bodies. Students are then instructed to bring their attention back to the body and breathe, first, and then to slowly bring movement back to their bodies, before finally coming to a seated position to complete the remainder of the class.

The manual also offers suggestions for what teachers can say in order to help students cultivate a sense or experience of detachment from their minds and bodies, including: "Watch your mind as though it belonged to someone else. *Regard any thoughts as apart from who you really are."* Or: "What is in your mind now?' After a few moments, 'Again, take note, what is in your mind now?' And a few moments later, 'And now, what has changed, what thoughts are there? *Separate yourself from your thoughts"* (Manual, pg 86). The practice of yoga nidra as well as teacher's verbal instruction aim to provide practitioners with an embodied experience of True or Eternal Self. By asking students to let go of physical movement and effort, and then to move into act of "witnessing," they are being asked to dissociate from their body-minds, viewing them as an object from the perspective of an external observer. In doing so, the practice of yoga

nidra provides the practitioner with an embodied experience of their "True Self" or "Cosmic Consciousness" and helps cultivate the disposition of "detachment."

Practices for Cleansing and Purification

"[Just] because you aspire to these high aspirations (i.e. enlightenment), don't begin to ignore the physical body. You must tend to it … even though 'I am not this body,' you can't disregard it and not eat healthy or worry about it. [Several former students] came up with this: 'The body is the tupperware of the soul.' It carries around your little piece of this oneness. Make sure that it is healthy and well-maintained." – Ron

In addition to the practices of asana, pranayama, and meditation, which are included in the basic yoga classes offered at the studio, practitioners are also encouraged to perform the *shat kriyas*, or six cleansing processes, and to maintain a *yogic diet*. The *kriyas* are a set of bodily techniques used by practitioners to cleanse and purify the physical body. The yogic diet is an approach to and set of suggestions regarding what and how to eat. The transmission of these practices conveyed an understanding of the body as both a container – the "Tupperware of the soul" – and also as a potential impediment to successful formation. As Aadesh told the TTSs, "Until the body is cleaned, the kriyas are a top priority. You should do them regularly until you get cleaned up, then your asana and meditation and pranayma are improved. Your consciousness is heightened." In addition, I found that these practices were thought to accomplish two different but equally important goals: (1) to cleanse and purify the body, helping to prepare the practitioner for extended period of meditation; and (2) to help foster a sense of detachment between the Self and the body. The latter goal was related to how these practices required individuals to interact with and relate to their bodies.

Participants in the teacher training program were required to both learn about and "try on" the cleansing practices. On their final written exam all participants were required to identify and accurately describe each of the six cleansing processes. In addition, participants were

required to "try out" at least four of the techniques.[73] Ramdas, an Integral Yoga (IY) practitioner and instructor, led a special workshop on the kiryas for the TTs on Saturday morning. Ramdas reviewed each of the six areas that require cleansing – including the stomach, colon, and lungs – and described the range of techniques available for doing so. In the process, Ramdas demonstrated several techniques, including *sutra neti*, or nasal flossing, walking them through the steps required to successfully perform the practice (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Sutra Neti (Nasal Flossing)

Ramdas explained that the shat kriyas not only purify the body but also alter our view of and relationship to it. We will, he explains, "come to see the body in a different way. It is an organic piece of machinery. [The kriyas] open up your conception of what this body is – you become less attached to or identified with it while simultaneously taking care of it and respecting it." The need for a sense of detachment from the body was evident just by watching Ramdas perform the practices.

[73] The six processes are: (1) Neti: nasal cleansing; (2) Dhauti: cleaning of digestive tract and stomach; (3) Nauli: abdominal massage; (4) Kaphalabhati: purification of frontal lobes and lungs; (5) Basti: colon cleaning; (6) Trataka: blinkless gazing. All TT's were required to do Trataka and Kaphalabhati. Most TT's opted to try Neti (using a neti pot) and Basti (using an enema that was provided by the instructors, as a gift to the trainees), as the two optional practices to try.

In addition to the shat kriyas, practitioners were also encouraged to maintain a yogic diet. According to the training manual, "Our main object is to keep the mind in a tranquil condition. Therefore, our food must be taken into serious consideration … The quality of the food, the quantity, the way of eating it, all should be considered in order to get the maximum benefit from our daily use" (pg 255). The teacher training program included a 3-hour workshop, held at the studio and open to all members, on yoga and diet. The workshop was led by Manu, an Integral Yoga practitioner, master teacher, and a Certified Yoga Nutrition Therapist. Manu instructed the TTs and other yoga practitioners in attendance in the basic principles behind the yogic diet. We learned, for example, that the ideal yoga diet is one which is primarily satvic,[74] or light, easy to digest, full of good *prana* (energy), and which keeps the body healthy both physically and mentally.

Further, the training manual also included advice and suggestions on how a yogi ought to eat. The manual informed new teachers, for example, "There are three conditions that food should meet: it should help your mind maintain its tranquility; it should not stiffen the body with toxins; and it should be able to be digested without wasting a lot of energy" (255). In practice, this translated into a series of prohibitions: instructions to avoid chemicals and sugar, as well as most processed, refined, and packaged foods. It also meant chewing slowly and carefully, as well as eating moderately, in small quantities and only when truly hungry. Maintaining a yogic diet also involved meditating on the process of eating itself: practitioners were told to avoid watching

[74] "In eastern thinking, food is divided into three groups according to the three gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sattva is a tranquil state, Rajas a very active state and Tamas the state of inertia or dullness." (Manual, pgs 255-6). Foods that are "natural, not very spicy, sour or hot are considered to be Sattvic."

TV or reading or even talking while eating, and instead to direct their attention fully to the act of eating (in doing so, the practice of eating become another opportunity to practice 'presence').

Similar to the interpretation of the shat kriyas offered by Manu, the yogic diet was said to not only help care for and cleanse the physical body, but also to transform how practitioners view and interact with it. Yoga practitioners are encouraged to view the act of eating as a means to nourish the body and maintain the "machinery," encouraging a sense of detachment from the body and the practice of eating. What one eats and how is a matter for conscious reflection, in order to maximize the positive impact, and minimize the negative impact, of eating on the body. Practitioners are instructed to pay attention to the body in order to better recognize and understand states of hunger and fullness, and to identify those foods that suit the body well and those that do not.

Trinity Prayer House

"Our religion (Catholicism) has a very, very high theology of the body, but a very low practice about what that really means … of getting into your body and really and connecting with what's happening at the physical and emotional level –and bringing it closer to that divineness. That's where you want to be. And that's where we headed as a Church. I believe that's where we need to go: how it's Christ in you and you live that way. You don't read about it, you don't talk about it, you imitate it. You live that way." – Alice, CP Practitioner

This quote from Alice reveals that spiritual growth in this contemplative community is understood as a series of fundamentally embodied processes. Belief, knowledge, and understanding are not purely conceptual, but deeply embodied. Spiritual development is not indicated by change in belief or attitude, but a transformation of demeanor and disposition such that one becomes "like Christ." At Trinity, participants are taught a number of practices to help them better imitate the ideal. It is these practices, tools, and techniques that allow the practitioner, as Alice says above, to cultivate an embodied understanding of divine will and to

bring their actions, attitudes, and habits into alignment with it. In this section, I analyze several of the primary practices transmitted at the prayer house, articulating how the body and its relationship the practice and the self is constructed in each.

Centering Prayer: Presence and Detachment

In the practice of Centering Prayer, the ideal state is one of 'pure being,' as Sister Nancy sometimes called it. Similar to the practice of adoration, she would explain, the goal of Centering Prayer is to simply 'be present.' To further illustrate this state of being, Sister Nancy regularly compared it to being in the room with a baby, a sick relative, or a close loved one, where rather than talking or doing, we simply sit, watch and be present. She asked one prayer group, 'Have you had the experience where you are so close to and so comfortable with someone that you can just sit with them in silence?' When people say they have, she tells us, 'This is what Centering Prayer is like. So where are you in Centering Prayer?' she continued, before answering her own question: 'You are **present.** You are in God's presence. Everything else just floats by because you aren't interested in anything else … You let everything go.' Practitioners learn that they should embody a 'disposition of consent, surrender, and receptivity' in and through the practice of Centering Prayer.

In practice, however, the experience of Centering Prayer is often filled with thoughts, emotions, and sensations that distract one's attention from this state of "pure being." Each time this occurs, the practitioner must first catch herself in the act of wandering off and then use her "sacred word" – a word, chosen by the practitioner, to remind her of the goal of practice – to bring herself back to this state of presence. During class one day, Sister Nancy acted this experience out with her body. She sat up a bit straighter in her chair and closed her eyes. Then she stretched her hands out in front of her, holding them up at head height. Her fingers began

fluttering quickly, a representation of thoughts circulating in her mind. Slowly, she started to lower her hands, and as she did so, the movement in her fingers began to slow down and eventually came to a stop as her hands rested in her lap. However, as soon as the movement stopped, she raised her hands back up and began fluttering her fingers once again. There was laughter from the participants, as Sister Nancy once again started to lower her hands and slow the movement of her fingers. She repeated the whole sequence once more, this time with a smile, before opening her eyes and surveying the room. Her physical demonstration was meant to capture the cyclical nature of Centering Prayer: practitioners' minds wander and then settle, wander and then settle, achieving a state of "just being" sometimes only for a few seconds at a time.

Practitioners were also taught how to *deal* with thoughts, which included, by Sister Nancy's definition, not only conscious thoughts but also any bodily sensations, images, feelings, and memories that may pop up during a session. In order to explain this process to practitioners, Sister Nancy regularly used metaphors and analogies related to everyday experiences. One analogy, which she used with some frequency, was being disrupted while in the midst of conversation. She explained: 'If I am in a conversation with Mary, for example, and Sharon calls out for my attention. What do I do? I don't want to be rude to Mary but I don't want to ignore Sharon either. Instead, I simply acknowledge Sharon's request, ask her to wait and return to my conversation with Mary.' The same approach should be taken, Sister Nancy explained, with any "thoughts" that occur during practice: when a thought, emotion or sensation pops up, you simply acknowledge it and then let it go, or, if necessary, put it aside until after the prayer session.

Sister Nancy often used another analogy for this process, as well. She suggested that the practitioners should imagine themselves sitting on a river bank, watching the ships and rafts

(thoughts and sensations) pass by. Sometimes, she says, you will find that you have 'jumped on a boat and started heading down stream' (i.e. become engaged in a thought). When you realize this has happened, you simply acknowledge it, get off boat, and return to your place on the shore, once again observing the ships as they pass.[75] In this analogy, the practitioner more clearly takes on the position of an observer: the person on the bank is clearly distinct and separate from the movement and fluctuations of the mind (the ships on the river). In both this and the previous analogy, however, thoughts are transformed from problematic disruptions into neutral objects. In both analogies, Sister Nancy encouraged participants to approach thoughts with loving kindness (I will return to this discourse in **Chapter 4** on discourses of failure). Practitioners were told they should "smile at" their thoughts and "walk them to the door *while laughing*."

By learning to deal with thoughts in this way, the disciplined practice of Centering Prayer was said to help practitioners accomplish two important ends. First, this process of noticing and letting go of thoughts, emotions, and sensations allows practitioners to gain an embodied understanding of the ideal disposition of "presence and detachment." Through practice, individuals are cultivating a particular kind of conscious state in which the body and subjective experience are present (rather than absent) but observed at and from a distance. In texts, this process was described as a shift from "egoistic awareness" to "spiritual awareness," where the latter is a state of consciousness defined by observation without attachment. This approach is similar to the conscious-perceptual state encouraged in asana practice; however, it differs in the degree to which it encourages explicit and intentional focus on body, thoughts and sensations.

[75] This way of dealing with thoughts, sensations, and emotions was to be applied regardless of the content or valence of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The practitioner was instructed, for example, to watch the thought pass even if it is "devotional" (for example, thoughts of how much you love and are thankful to God) or the emotion or sensation is enjoyable (a feeling of love, happiness, or transcendence).

Unlike the asana practice described above (see also Pagis 2009, 2010 on Vispassana meditation), practitioners of Centering Prayer are not instructed to purposefully and consciously attend to their bodies or bodily sensations. Instead, practitioners are told that thoughts, sensations, and emotions will likely "bubble up" during practice, but are told they should let these sensations go without focusing on, judging, or engaging them in any way. Sister Nancy tells participants that we should notice these experiences, but 'then just let God deal with it. Don't engage in it or judge it.' By doing so, Sister Nancy continues, the practice also helps *tame* practitioner's "afflictive emotions": when we ignore them, she claims, these emotional tendencies 'die of disinterest.' In other words, practitioners are told the practice will lead them to become less reactive.

This disposition, once cultivated in practice, was said to move with the practitioners into everyday life. As Sister Nancy argued, "what you do in practice becomes a way of life": in other words, practitioners are told that the process of noticing, acknowledging, and letting go 'becomes a habit' and they will also become 'less reactive to other things outside of prayer.' You learn, she says, 'to feel it and let go' rather than 'hold on to it and dwell in it for a week.' She clarifies that it is not an act of 'repression' but of 'letting go': rather than pushing our feelings and thoughts down or 'zoning out,' practitioners should let themselves 'feel it.' Being a contemplative, she says, 'means thinking your thoughts and feeling your feelings.' But, she notes, ultimately, we let them go rather than allowing them to spiral out of control.

The practice of Centering Prayer therefore is aimed at cultivating an ideal disposition – a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment – which can and ideally should be present both in and outside of formal practice. It is in the process of doing the practice, however, that practitioners acquire the ability to access and maintain this state, which can then be implemented

in a range of circumstances through their daily lives. Practitioners cultivate what Sister Nancy called "holy indifference" by practicing the process of noticing and letting go over and over again in their Centering Prayer practice. In my conversations with participants, it was clear that this link between practice and the cultivation of new habits and dispositions was understood and taken up by the practitioners themselves: many undertake the practice with the explicit desire to cultivate presence and become less reactive.

Examen and Spiritual Direction: Cultivating Spiritual Intuition

"How do we know when God speaks to us? You have to use practices, you have to use process. Spiritual direction is a process: When do you feel connected? When are you in consolation? When are you in desolation? ***… I've learned to feel in in my body*** *then I can say that is it, and I just know it. It's just something I know. And I can't do that to anybody, I can't.* ***It's not a fact. It's just in my experience****. But those discernment processes have helped me to be a better person. I mean, I feel the growth. I really feel the growth and I feel change within me from where I was ten years ago, five years, two years ago."* – Susan, CP Practitioner

About six months into my fieldwork at the prayer house, I was having one of those mornings where everything seems to go wrong. I woke up late after turning off my alarm without hitting the snooze button. I burnt, to the point of being inedible, my last piece of toast and was forced to leave the house hungry. Already late, I spent ten minutes frantically searching for my car keys, which I had misplaced the night before. Two minutes after leaving the house, I was forced to slam on my breaks and swerve to avoid colliding with one of my neighbors who had pulled out of her driveway without looking. With my heart rate elevated – from both the near-miss and my anxiety about walking into my morning meeting late – I managed to hit *every* light on the way into campus. I tried to stop for a quick breakfast – to compensate for the burnt toast – only to realize I had no cash and the store I stopped at did not accept credit cards. With each event, my mood became noticeably worse: "Ugh, this day!" I thought to myself, "Maybe I should just go

home." But I had an important meeting that could not be cancelled. So I pushed on. When I finally arrived on campus, I could not find a parking spot anywhere close to my office.

Now more than fifteen minutes late and nearly in tears from frustration (and hunger), I finally found a suitable parking spot. As I turned to parallel-park, I knocked my coffee mug over, spilling the entire contents all over the passenger seat, floor, and cup holders. "Seriously?!" I shouted out loud to myself. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, I started to laugh out loud. The absurdity of my terrible morning hit me as if it were a funny joke. My frustration and irritation melted away. And then a thought popped into my head: "Consolation!" I knew that what I had just experienced – the shift in my emotional and affective responses from frustration, anger, and irritation to laughter – was what practitioners at Trinity Prayer House would call a *consolation*: an inner affective experience that helped orient me towards, rather than away from, God.

Like the experience recounted by Susan Harding (1987) in her research on fundamentalist Baptist conversion, I found myself using a language and framework of meaning that was not my own but that of the community I was observing. While I did not necessarily believe that this emotional shift was the work of the Holy Spirit, as Sister Nancy told us during classes at Trinity, I named and gave meaning to my experience using the interpretive scheme she encouraged and transmitted. I felt, both in and after that moment, that I had a better *sense* of what consolation *was*. At the next meeting of the spiritual director intern program, I was randomly paired with Sister Nancy for a one-on-one practice session. In these practice session, partners took turns playing the part of the director and the directee. During my turn acting as directee, I shared the story of this experience with Sister Nancy, who enthusiastically affirmed my experience and my interpretation. Moreover, she was clearly impressed and excited. At the end of our session, she

told me I had 'a natural intuition for this stuff' and should consider remaining in the program after my fieldwork was complete and becoming a spiritual director.

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The practices of examen and spiritual direction are central to the process of *discernment* and the cultivation of a *spiritual intuition.* Spiritual discernment, a practice rooted in Ignatian spiritual practice,[76] involves three interrelated processes: (1) attending to and noticing our "interior movements," including thoughts, desires, repulsions and attractions and, most importantly, our emotions and affects; (2) reflecting on and naming these experiences (usually as either "consolation" or "desolation"); and (3) analyzing these experiences to identify where they come from (usually: the Holy Spirit or the "evil one") and where they are leading us.

The practices of examen and spiritual direction provide structured opportunities to identify, reflect on, and analyze what Sister Nancy called our "inner affective movements." Through this process, individuals' (relatively) spontaneous emotional experiences are objectified using available cultural frames – the ones offered by these organizations – in order to make the firsthand experience interpretable (see also Pagis' 2010 on Vispassana meditation). Practitioners acquire a new framework for categorizing and classifying their sensations and affects (see Zerubavel 1997 for an overview of the social influences on cognition). Discernment, therefore, requires the acquisition of new habits and tendencies (the habit of attending to and noticing subjective experience) as well as the deployment of a new and socially-shared interpretive scheme (the process of naming and analyzing).

[76] For an overview, see: Gallagher, Timothy M. The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living. Crossroad, 2005.

First, practitioners must cultivate the ability to look and focus *within*: to attend to and notice these internal movements. Sister Nancy often used the metaphor of moving from the "head" to the "heart" in describing this attention to inner affective movements. Becoming aware of this movement is the hardest part of the practice because 'we all tend to be so engaged with the world' and externally focused that 'we forget how to assess what is happening *inside* us.' Very much like the idea of *corporeal absence* (Leder 1990), Sister Nancy argues that most of us "live in a coma" relative to our emotions and affects. However, it is our job as practitioners, she says, to pay attention to the presence and action of God, through the Holy Spirit, in our lives: 'both *within* you and *around* you.' She explains that God and the Holy Spirit are always present. 'We just need to *notice* them. We must *learn* to *recognize* the movements of the Holy Spirit *within*.' Sister Nancy acknowledges that this is a difficult thing to learn but explains that 'we get better at it: we get better at being aware and paying attention.'

Second, in addition to learning to notice and attend to one's inner affective movements, practitioners were also encouraged to identify and classify them as either consolation (movements towards God) or desolation (movements away from God). Consolations were usually described as happy emotions and desolations as negative emotions, as can be seen in the following exchange that occurred between Sister Nancy and participants during the spiritual intern program:

Sister Nancy: What does consolation feel like to you?

Responses: Peace; Clarity; Serenity; "aha!"

Sister Nancy: What is desolation like?

Responses: Fear; Anxiety; Doubt; Sadness; Agitation

Sister Nancy: What is the cure for desolation?

Response: Prayer

Sister Nancy: Yes, prayer – so that you can *experience* God's love.

However, identifying consolations and desolations was more complicated than this exchange implies, and there are some important exceptions to this assumed correlation between emotional valence and consolation or desolation.

For one, Sister Nancy clarified that consolations are *not* external events but internal movements; for example, the consolation is not a beautiful sunny day, but your *delight* in the sunny day. On different occasions she would provide other examples of consolations, as well; for example: (1) Your children forget that it is mother's day. Instead of feeling anger or resentment, you feel forgiveness. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit; (2) You get laid off from your job. Instead of being angry, destitute, or seeking revenge, you feel courage or hope. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit; (3) You are nervous about giving an important speech to lots of people. You pray to ask God to give you the courage to say what needs to be said. Sister Nancy argues that the workings of the Holy Spirit always correlate with increases in "faith, hope, and love." The event or experience itself is not always a happy, good, or joyful one (in fact, attention here is diverted away from the external event and towards the individual's embodied response) but the Holy Spirit works to move you in the direction of these three things.' She reiterates that paying attention leads one to being open to consolations, and that 'it takes a lot of practice to be able to do it.'

Sister Nancy also made clear that negative feelings or emotional experiences are not always or necessarily evidence of desolation. Emotions like fear, anger, and sadness are natural reactions. Desolation is present only when 'those natural feelings escalate' and start to affect your life and relationships, especially your relationship to God. Sister Nancy provides an example in reference to one of the first year participants in the intern program, Jill. She says that Jill is probably worried about how her daughter is doing today (she recently told us that her

daughter was being bullied at school). 'That is natural,' she says. But, if that thought 'leads you further to think that you shouldn't be in this program because you should be home with her, or that God doesn't want you here, then that natural feeling turns into desolation.' She explains that this shift often happens quickly and that we can only defend against it by paying attention and not letting ourselves go down the 'greasy pole' of desolation. The point, she says, is to 'pay attention, notice, and then act against the desolation.'

She also suggests that negative events do not necessarily lead to desolation. The event can be positive, negative, or neutral; the determination of consolation versus desolation is based on the way we react and then how we deal with that reaction. Using the example of a car accident, she suggests that the accident is a negative event, but desolation only occurs if we react in particular ways: for example, by thinking, "Oh, just my luck. This always happens to me." Consolation, instead, would include expressions of gratitude ('Thank God no one was hurt!') and forgiveness ('He is just a young driver who made a mistake'). Those inner movements, as consolations, are considered the work of God's grace. The point of examen, Sister Nancy argues, is to get into the "habit of looking." The practice is like watching your life like a video tape ('oh, look at that!'). However, the classification system matters, too. Sister Nancy stresses that "I want you to learn the language" because, as a spiritual director, participants must learn to look for and notice consolations and desolations in the stories their directees tell.

Since there is no neat correspondence between emotions and categories of experience, practitioners must learn to differentiate normal, natural, and acceptable negative emotional responses from experiences of desolation. Likewise, they must also learn to recognize when positive emotions may actually be evidence of desolation, or movements away from God. Sister Nancy argues, for example, that the Devil often comes cloaked as an angel of light. In

elaborating on this notion, June, one of the spiritual direction interns, gave the example of someone who is intensely happy about going to the casino every day and spending all of their money there. The feelings of joy or happiness this person experiences are *not* of God (i.e. not consolations), she notes; rather, the person will learn, with deeper intellectual reflection and judgment, that these emotions and affects are the work of the "evil spirits" seeking to pull this person *away* from God. As these examples make clear, the process of discernment is inherently ambiguous. Not only must practitioners learn to notice and attend to their bodily sensations and affective responses in new ways, they must apply shared logics or frameworks of interpretation in order to classify and give meaning to those experiences "correctly." But how can they tell if they have attributed their emotions correctly when there are no clear rules or set correspondence between emotions and labels?

As I briefly described in Chapter 2, I found that these ambiguities and uncertainties are discursively resolved through references to a deeply embodied *spiritual intuition*: a sense of knowing and understanding that prioritizes feeling through the body over rationalizing with the mind, and which is thought to be developed in and through disciplined practice. The process of discernment, as detailed in these practices, implies that it is a highly conscious and explicit process. However, at the same time, it is assumed in this community that the practices of noticing, naming, and deciding will accumulate over time into a habitual response. Sister Nancy explained that, 'we must first learn to recognize the consolations and then we can *live* in it.' 'Little by little this happens,' she says. In other words, practitioners are told that eventually, they will simply know (read: feel) which emotions are which and what to do in response. The primary method for achieving this "attunement" was through the practices: through Centering Prayer (described above) as well as through examen and spiritual direction.

Examen and spiritual direction help practitioners cultivate both of these elements necessary for the successful discernment: noticing and naming affective movements on the one hand, and interpreting and applying them to decision-making on the other. The practice of examen, for example, is described as a "technique for encountering, revealing and apprehending the work of an immanent God" similar to that of spiritual journaling as studied by Bender (2008). There are three key steps to the practice. After bringing an image of Jesus to mind, the practitioner reviews and expresses gratitude for external events in their lives that day (for example, the opportunity to visit with loved ones). Next, the practitioner moves internally. She reviews and expresses thanks for the consolations of the day (for example, the love and gratitude she felt during her visit). And, finally, the practitioner recalls and reviews any desolations experienced that day. Before closing, practitioners are encouraged to make resolutions for improving their attentiveness or responses to God's presence and action in the future.

Spiritual direction is akin to a spiritually-oriented talk therapy: the individual meets with a "director" who asks questions and offers responses, which aim to help them recognize and analyze where God meets them in their daily lives, as well as how God is leading them. In the intern program for spiritual directors, I was able to get a sense for the underlying theories and rules of the practice as they were necessarily made more explicit for novice directors. The primary rule, which Sister Nancy regularly reiterated, was to "follow the juice": the juice being a metaphor for the participants' emotions and affects. In other words, interns were instructed to encourage the directee to stay at the level of affects, attending to and interpreting them in detail, rather than trying to cognitively work out the best course of action. Directors were encouraged to: ask direct questions about feelings (i.e. 'How did you feel when she said that?'); to reiterate, restate, and/or point out the affective elements of a directee's story (i.e. 'So I am hearing that you

felt angry after your conversation with him'); and to encourage the directee to re-experience the event or experience being described (i.e. 'I want you to take a moment, close your eyes and just revisit your conversation with her. Try to recall exactly how that felt.'). It was clear throughout the training program that emotions were the central focus of the practice of mutual discernment that defined the monthly session of spiritual direction.

Both practices ask individuals to identify and reflect on their emotional experiences and responses during the course of their everyday lives. In asking them to do so at regular intervals (daily in the practice of examen and monthly in the practice of spiritual direction), these practices serve as a reminder and impetus for attending to these movements throughout the day. The practices also encourage practitioners to name or identify their affective movements according to a shared system of classification: as consolations or desolations. Finally, the practices encourage concrete actions. Examen asks practitioners to identify and implement behaviors or techniques that will help them be more attentive to God, generally, and to their inner affective movements, more specifically. Spiritual directors often offer suggestions for how to cultivate this attentiveness or how to modify one's responses. Spiritual direction sessions also offer a space to practice the process of interpretation: directees learn, through interaction with their director, how to interpret and give meaning to their emotional experiences.

When the inclinations and frameworks of discernment – noticing and naming, interpreting and applying – become internalized and habitually deployed, the practitioner is said to have accessed his spiritual intuition. Until this process happens, however, there is a tension between the imperative to pay attention to, and consciously evaluate experience and the ideal of, "just knowing" what to do. Practitioners learn that the primary means for getting to this ideal

state is disciplined practice: of Centering Prayer, of examen, and of spiritual direction. Through practice, the participant "tunes" or "calibrates" the body and mind to the will and desire of God.

In this way, the body and mind becomes simultaneously an object of practice, an indicator of progress, and a source of knowledge for contemplative practitioners. Practices such as Centering Prayer, examen, and spiritual direction re-format the mind and body, helping practitioners cultivate greater attention to their inner affective movements. In addition, practitioners' ability to notice, to interpret, and to use these experiences in the process of discernment becomes an indicator of their progress and spiritual development. Finally, once a practitioners' spiritual intuition is developed, the body and mind become a *source* of knowledge: practitioners can "listen to their gut" in deciding what lines of action constitute God's will.

Meanings, Value, and Uses of the Body

As demonstrated in the previous two sections, I found that there were several different, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, ways in which practitioners understood and articulated the relationship between the body, practice, and the process of self-formation. I also found that there were both similarities and important differences in how the body was understood and used across the two communities. While I found evidence of similar metaphors and conceptualizations regarding the body present at both sites, the communities tended to emphasize some ways of understanding this relationship over others.[77]

First, there were some important similarities in how these communities understood the relationship between the body, practice, and the process of spiritual formation. In neither

[77] Morley (2008) argues that the body is usually understood as a vehicle for achieving enlightenment in Eastern religions while it is often understood as a temple for the soul in Western religions. However, while I found more emphasis on the former at the yoga studio and on the latter at Trinity, the conceptualizations of the body I heard in these communities do not neatly align with Morley's division between "eastern" and "western" religions.

community, for example, was the body considered the primary object or goal of practice. In other words, while the practices taught at both organizations certainly involved and affected the physical body, the ultimate goal of practice was *not* physical. Practitioners may undergo changes, for example, in the shape and appearance of their bodies, in their posture, gait, and style of movement, or their physical tendencies and competencies, as an outcome of disciplined practice, but these modifications were considered (or ought to be considered) fringe benefits: perks of a practice aimed at an altogether different goal. The same can be said of practitioners' understanding of and relationship to the mind. Both practices involved and affected practitioners' consciousness or mental states; however, as was the case with the physical body, practitioners were taught not to view these effects as the object or goal of practice. Yoga, for example, was thought to calm the mind. The second sutra says that the goal of yoga is to calm the fluctuations of the mind. This goal however was a means to and reflection of another, deeper and ultimately more important goal: enlightenment (defined as self-knowledge and self-actualization).

In both communities, however, there were important linkages between the body, the mind, and the process of self-formation. Similar to Wacquant's (2011) conceptualization of the habitus as both "topic" and "tool," practitioners in these communities were taught to view the body-mind as both a target of practice and as a vehicle for self-formation. Wacquant (2011) argued that ethnographies of practice should include both (1) a sociology *of* the body, in which the body is considered a social product and the focus of inquiry is on the methods and techniques of its production; as well as (2) a sociology *from* the body, in which the body is understood and used as a spring and vector of knowledge. Practitioners in these communities held a similar two-fold view of the body as object and tool.

There are also some important differences in how the body is understood and acted upon at each site. At the yoga studio, the body was understood simultaneously as an impediment to and vehicle for spiritual formation. In yoga, practitioners work more directly and concretely the physical body, and this effort to re-make the body and its habits and inclinations is one of the primary means through which practitioners acquire spiritual dispositions. In addition, yoga, as a practice that requires a great deal of physical skill and competency, also saw the body more often as an object of practice. Because of this, the body occasionally became a source of capital for practitioners. At the prayer house, however, the body was understood, primarily, in two interrelated ways: (1) as a source and foundation for a metaphoric understanding of practice and of relationship with divinity; and (2) as a conduit for interacting with the divine (primarily through one's affects). Below, I briefly review each of these ways of understanding the relationship between the body, practice, and self-formation.

The Body as Object, Indicator, and Capital

In these communities, the body is sometimes understood as the object or target of practice. Practitioners desire to reformat the body: to heal, cleanse, and purify it. They also desire to cultivate practical skills, such as the ability to perform the asanas or postures as well as to maintain attention to the body (embodied self-reflexivity). Because of this, the body is sometimes understood, described, and used as an indicator of progress and development and can become a form of status. In other words, the body can sometimes be a source of capital (see Wacquant 1995; Mears and Finlay 2005 on "bodily capital").

On the one hand, for example, I found that in some cases, key practices explicitly encouraged or even required practitioners to overcome corporeal absence (Leder 1990; Zarilli 2004) and to cultivate an embodied self-reflexivity (Pagis 2009). In doing so, these practices

transmitted both a practical skill (embodied self-reflexivity) and an embodied experience or sense for the abstract ideal of "presence" (described in Chapter 2).

At the yoga studio, I also found some evidence that practitioners accumulate bodily capital (Wacquant 2004) in and through these practices. There were much stronger norms, for example, regarding bodily appearance and comportment at the yoga studio than at the prayer house. Practitioners learned how to hold and move their bodies in ways that are identifiable and desirable to other practitioners (for example, holding the proper posture, or moving gracefully). In other words, despite instructors' attempts to discredit this association, certain physical features, bodily mannerisms and postures, and physical abilities sometimes and in some places conveyed status and prestige on practitioners, becoming a basis for intra-group stratification and hierarchies. Because of this, the body was sometimes understood as a target and object of practice in and of itself.

There was a belief, for example, that the practice of hatha yoga was correlated with longevity and youthfulness. During the anatomy and physiology portion of the yoga teacher training, Ambika told us: "A wise yogi once told me that one is as young as the spine is flexible. By moving it in all directions, we keep the appearance of youth." Aadesh also explained to us how certain postures, most notably headstand and shoulder stand, generated *amrita*, or the nectar of immortality. He explained that amrita is "generated in everybody, all the time" but when you invert and hang out there for a while, "the amrita starts to be generated more profusely because you don't have gravity pulling it down, and it gets to be absorbed through the system and keeps you youthful." Because of this, a youthful appearance was sometimes seen or interpreted as evidence of a committed or successful practitioner. On several occasions, for example, I heard or was told directly by practitioners that Aadesh's youthful nature and physical appearance served

as a kind of evidence both of his personal authority as a teacher and of the efficacy of the practice.

When I asked Tania, for example, why she brings her questions and concerns regarding her spiritual experiences and growth to Aadesh rather than one of the instructors in her Buddhist sangha, she explained:

> "At my Buddhist meditation group, we have a nun but she is really old and she is really struggling. We have a woman who is not a Buddhist monk and she is very knowledgeable and she tries to be helpful, but the reason why I go to Aadesh and not to her [is that] even though she tries, she doesn't live it. Not because she doesn't want to, it just takes years. It takes years and practice. You cannot just magically appear to be there. So, that's why I go to Jayadeva, because it is crystal clear to me that he operates from the witness perspective the majority of the time. I have seen him being very kind to people even in difficult situations. And people who reside in the witness, they have sort of a different look in their face. You can tell they have different energy about them. So, that's why I go to him."

Here we can see Tania attributing a degree of status and prestige to Aadesh in terms of his ability to embody enlightenment. The evidence she provides is not his conceptual knowledge, physical competence in the practice, or his ability as a teacher, specifically, but the fact that he lives his spirituality; that he seems to "operate from the witness the majority of the time." The evidence she provides of this is both in his actions (being kind to people even in difficult situations) and his physical appearance and demeanor (a look in his face; an energy in his co-presence).

In general, however, status in this community was less tied to physical skill and ability than it was to the possession and enactment of particular dispositions, a feature that distinguished them from other studios in the area. At other studios, I have been complimented for having a "beautiful practice" after only one class session with an instructor, a comment which necessarily must be based on my physical performance or competency. However, this was never a comment I heard given to myself or any other participant at the IYI. Ron also served as a prime example of this. Ron was nearly universally mentioned by TTs as someone who they felt embodied the

ideal 'yogi.' When asked what they meant by this, it was Ron's demeanor, character, and dispositions that were mentioned, not his conceptual knowledge of yogic philosophy (of which he also had much) or his physical competence (of which he also had much).

The Body as Impediment and Vehicle

The body was also sometimes understood as an impediment and/or a vehicle in the process of formation. First, the body was thought to be an impediment to spiritual formation in two primary ways. On the one hand, attachment to the body is one obstacle to cultivating the ideal of detachment more generally: the practitioner must learn to feel and know that the Self is separate and distinct from the body and mind (or body-mind, as it was sometimes called). Second, the body, with its aches, pains, and toxins can be an impediment to both seated meditation and the cultivation of internal awareness. On the one hand, the body must be stretched, strengthened, and healed in order to allow the practitioner to sit (relatively) comfortably for extended periods of meditation. At the same time, the body must be cleansed and purified in order to allow the person to concentrate on subtle internal movements without distraction. In all cases, the claim is made that the practices help to overcome these bodily impediments to spiritual growth and formation. At the yoga studio, for example, teachers explicitly referenced this as the primary goal of *asana* practice.[78]

Second, the body was understood as a vehicle or tool, a means to an end. Bodily techniques were learned and deployed not as an end in and of themselves but in the effort to

[78] While the body was also on occasion described as a potential distraction in the practice of Centering Prayer (bodies sometimes ached or whined during prayer sessions or itching distracted the practitioner, drawing their attention away from God's presence; or bodies were tired and lethargic, which led to falling asleep), this was less often a topic of conversation and discussion here than it was at the yoga studio. In part, I think this is because the physical body is, overall, less of an object of practice. Centering Prayer does not require any elaborate bodily techniques.

cultivate desired dispositions. In this way, these practices resemble those identified by Daniel Winchester (2008) in his study of converts to Islam. Winchester found, for example, that the practice of veiling was said to cultivate humility. The production of dispositions may be an explicit goal of practice, or a side product (as in Wacquant's [2005] boxers). In addition, the dispositions themselves may be more or less consciously transformed and/or enacted. Acquired dispositions vary from the relatively concrete (a tendency towards anger, for example) to the relatively abstract (a tendency towards humility).

However, at the same time, the processes and practices involved in working to overcome these bodily impediments are thought to be key drivers of the process of formation. Through this discourse, the body is transformed into a tool or vehicle for spiritual growth. Struggling against the body and one's identification with it becomes a way to "polish" the self and become more attuned to the divine. The practices also help individuals cultivate and internalize new sensitivities and sensibilities over time. In other words, the struggles that play out on the mat or in the chair, and the techniques and tools acquired in overcoming them, help facilitate personal transformation. During the cleansing practice encouraged at the IYI, for example, practitioners are targeting the body, trying to clean up impurities that impede spiritual development, but at the same time, work on the body is also a vehicle or means for cultivating new dispositions, in this case a sense of detachment.

The Body as Conduit and Compass

Furthermore, the body was sometimes seen and understood as a source of knowledge and understanding. This was especially true at Trinity, where emotions were described as the primary means through which God communicated with practitioners and therefore an important source of information regarding God's will and desires. In these communities, the body is called on to

arbitrate tensions and is considered to be the location and source of knowledge, belief, and understanding. From this perspective, then, emotions were considered to have a "signal function" (Hochschild 1979, 1983): they communicate information to the self. Except in this case, rather than emotions serving as a tool for figuring out, as Arlie Hochschild has argued, where we really stand in relation to the world, emotions and the body are one of the means through which God communicates with us and makes His presence and desires known. Practitioners are told that their bodies will and should be their guide: the body, therefore, becomes a barometer of spiritual attunement. As both a source and repository of knowledge, the body could be called on to resolve tensions, evaluate progress, and define truth. Practitioners learn to literally *feel* God's will.

Summary

At both sites, the body is understood simultaneously as an object and an indicator, an impediment and a vehicle, a container and a conduit. As a container for the Self (or "Tupperware of the Soul"), the body must be cared for and carefully maintained. As a potential impediment to practice and formation, the body must be cleansed and re-formatted, and our attachment to it overcome. As a vehicle, the body can be used and manipulated in the effort to facilitate spiritual formation. As an indicator, a compass, and a conduit, the body must be tuned and listened to as a source of knowledge and intuition.

Practitioenrs learn to view and experience their bodies as objects that are distinct from their Selves, as eternal and unchanging, but also as important possessions requiring love and attention. On one occasion, for example, Aadesh asked us: "We have this body-mind—how should you view it?" Answering his own question, he told us: "I view it as a pet. And you see how I treat pets." His dog, Patty, is present at the time, and he gently pets her head. "So I treat

myself that way too," he continued. "I get lots of treats. I get disciplined sometimes but not too much. Loved a lot and played with." In these communities, the body must be cared for as well as "worked on." The practices are viewed as means for simultaneously connecting to and distancing oneself from connection to the body, and in doing so, ultimately deepening practitioners' ability to feel and hear the body "speak" to them. In each of these ways, the body is understood as both an object and tool – separate and distinct from the Self – as well as an integral and important source of information regarding practitioners' truest and most authentic selves – as a conduit and source of knowledge.

Conclusions

The key practices transmitted in these communities construct and rely on varied and sometimes contradictory understandings of the body and of the relationship between the body, practice, and spiritual formation. I found both similarities and differences in these conceptualizations and uses of the body and practice between the two communities. Both communities, for example, saw the body as both a key target of practice, as well as a means to other, discursively more important, ends. Practitioners gained a sense of control and personal morality through these spiritual practices by learning to control and monitor their physical, emotional, and cognitive responses. However, while these practices produce a self that is more in touch with the body, it does not provide an experience of the self and body as existing in an "intimate and holistic marriage" (see Glassner 1990: 221, on fitness culture). Rather, practitioners were encouraged to cultivate a sense of separation from the body: to view their bodies as objects rather than a fundamental or defining part of "who they are." Unlike boxers (or dancers) who tend to identify completely and totally with the body (the boxer 'is' his body; see Wacquant 1995), spiritual practitioners are encouraged, through discourse and practice, to believe and feel that their Selves are distinct from

their bodies *and* their minds. They do not come to see the body as a representation and symbol of themselves, but as a container and vehicle for accessing their deeper, more authentic Selves.

Likewise, I found that both communities spent more time in discursive reflection on experience, practice, performance, and progress than has been found in previous studies of apprenticeship in practices such as boxing or playing the piano. The range of metaphors, discourse, and practices outlined here demonstrate the ineffability of spiritual practice, experience, and formation. The extensive use of metaphor and analogy allows the discourse to resonate with a diverse range of personal experiences without specifically and clearly articulating what constitutes and defines the "correct" experience. The metaphors and discourses deployed in these communities are open and flexible, allowing space for a broad range of experiences.

In the light of these arguments, it is clear that religious subjectivities and identities cannot be located clearly in either the mind or the body, the abstract or the practical, the cognitive or the embodied. Rather, lived experience and self-understanding are *emergent* phenomena constituted through the complex interrelations between the physical, the mental, and the social. It is for this reason that a study of the lived, embodied character of religious life must be just as attentive to the textual, doctrinal, and conceptual aspects of religious life as it is to the practical, ritualistic, and performative dimensions.

As Vaisey and Frye (2014) have argued, existing studies do not often clearly articulate the various interrelationships between practical and discursive knowledge, either outright rejecting mind-body dualism or implicitly reinforcing it. In this chapter, I have tried to articulate the important interconnections between the "corporeal" and the "mental" by remaining attentive to both how the body is understood and how it is used, as well as how these elements interact. Socialization in these communities, like the process of apprenticeship in boxing studied by

Wacquant (2005) and elaborated by Vaisey and Frye (2014), involves the acquisition of forms of knowledge that are more or less practical and more or less discursive, and which also sometimes move from one level to the other. These findings also contribute new insights to our understanding of how this occurs and why. The ambiguity inherent to experience, performance, and progress in both spiritual practice, specifically, and spiritual formation, more generally, may explain, in part, the importance of discourse, reflection, and metaphor – in addition to practical techniques of imitation and physical drills – in the process of apprenticeship. This ambiguity in both subjective experience and collective discourses of the body in practice, however, creates a context in which practitioners are more likely to perceive themselves as failing to achieve the ideal states of being in and outside of practice. I take up this issue of perceived failure in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Accounting for Failures and Shortcomings

"*When you try to pray contemplatively … all the distractions in the world are there. Sometimes I say to myself, "I called that prayer? What on Earth was I doing?" But, I've come to accept the fact that, that's normal. I'm not looking for an experience, you know? Some people I think … want to have a certain kind of experience or they want to feel peaceful … calm …. but we have no control over that. I think the important thing is just to keep on doing it. And the important thing is the attitude … it's really God's presence, and nothing more. So, the distractions teach me things like, "What are my abiding preoccupations?" and "What do I allow myself to get taken up with?" Sometimes I feel like a rat running a maze, you know? The rat goes down, following it to one end, and "oh, there's nothing there," and goes back and runs down another one and then follows another. But, that's just the way it is*." – Jane, CP practitioner

Introduction

I met Irene, a 57-year old practitioner of Centering Prayer, at her office – where she works as a pediatric physician – in May of 2012. Irene had a doctor's demeanor: she was friendly although not overly warm, intelligent and thoughtful but direct in her communications. Irene was raised in what she described as a fairly devout but not particularly spiritual Catholic family. It was not until her late 40s that Irene discovered Centering Prayer, despite being immersed in the Catholic community throughout her life. At the time we spoke, Irene had been practicing regularly for more than eight years and according to her own report, rarely missed a day.

During our conversation, Irene walked me through a typical centering prayer session. Her routine includes reviewing the Mass readings for the day, setting her 20-minute timer, and settling into a comfortable position in her favorite chair. She tells me that her experience with the practice is generally one of "constant struggle." Irene regularly finds herself engaged with thoughts, and must continuously remind herself to focus her attention on God's presence. She explained that she is not one of those people who have a "wonderful, peaceful and terrific feeling throughout the whole thing," as she often hears from other participants at the prayer house.

When I asked, Irene admitted she does occasionally experience a sense of peace and connection during the practice – a sensation she describes as "wonderful" – but notes that this "doesn't happen very often" and she is lucky to get even one minute during a 20-minute session where this feeling is predominant. Irene laughed a bit and reflected, "When I think about it, I'm very surprised that I've done this for as long as I have: that I haven't just kind of dropped off because I'm not getting any immediate gratification from it."

Throughout our conversation, Irene emphasized her commitment to the practice, despite regular feelings of shortcoming and struggle, anxiety over her performance and progress and without being able to clearly identify very many tangible benefits. I had been attending classes at the prayer house for only a few months when I spoke with Irene and I left this initial interview with a question scribbled at the top of my notepad: "Why does she keep practicing?" I wondered why anyone would remain committed to a practice that was so often experienced as frustrating and challenging, even after eight years of dedicated and disciplined effort. How did Irene and other practitioners like her make sense of these experiences? Did the communities of practice in which they participated offer any official explanations and justifications?

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Irene's experience with the practice of Centering Prayer illustrates the primary puzzle this chapter will speak to: despite the fact that we might expect practitioners who face persistent feelings of error and shortcoming, like Irene, to give up or drop out, many of the individuals I met in the course of my fieldwork have been practicing for years or even decades. Their persistence is puzzling in part because we know – based on extensive research in social

psychology – that individuals tend to give up or avoid tasks when faced with repeated failures[79] (Maier and Seligman 1975; Hiroto and Seligman 1975). Why then does anyone remain engaged in a disciplined practice, such as yoga or meditation, where perceived failures and shortcomings are such frequent experiences? While theoretical work (MacIntyre 1981; Bourdieu 1977; Wuthnow 1998) has implied – albeit largely implicitly – that failure, error, and shortcoming are part of the internal logic of practice, existing empirical work has tended to overlook the constitutive role of perceived shortcoming in the acquisition and development of practices (see Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2008; Sudnow 1978; Benzecry 2009). Given this, the discourses and strategies of action related to these experiences remain undertheorized.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the significance of perceived failure, error, and shortcoming in the social organization and lived experience of spiritual formation, and analyze the *interpretive style* related to failures, mistakes, and shortcomings that currently circulates in these two communities. After reviewing relevant literature and arguing for the constitutive role of these experiences in social practices, I outline the most commonly cited sources of perceived failure and shortcoming in the process of establishing and maintaining these spiritual disciplines. I then highlight variations in discourse and practice across them. I describe how teachers and texts encourage students to downplay and ignore certain forms of failure while encouraging them to identify, acknowledge and strive to overcome failure and shortcomings in other domains. Next, I argue that texts and teachers promote a particular interpretive style – what I call the

[79] In this paper, I use to the term 'failure' to mean discrete occasions or experiences felt by the individual to be characterized by a 'lack of success' or 'falling short.' I use 'failure' to indicate feelings of underperformance rather than to mark 'exit,' an outcome commonly associated with repeated discrete instances of failure or underperformance at a given task. I also differentiate 'failure' from the state of being 'a failure.' My use of the term therefore is closer to deficiency, misstep, and frustration than exit.

compassionate growth model – related to experiences of perceived failure or shortcoming: one which normalizes, universalizes, and even valorizes failure and which balances internal and external attributions in accounting for these experiences. Lastly, I demonstrate that persistence in the face of perceived failure, error, and shortcoming is not a discrete outcome but part of an iterative process that involves the construction, deployment, and reinforcement of particular modes of interpretation in and through social interaction with fellow journeymen.

In the discussion, I argue that this approach to failure and shortcoming is used to perform identity work: understanding and enacting the socially-sanctioned approach towards experiences of failure come to define and mark spiritual personhood. I found that this discourse becomes a means for articulating both intra- and inter-group differences and distinctions. First, the enactment of these scripts becomes a way to both project oneself and to identify others as committed and authentic practitioners, and to demonstrate spiritual growth and development. Second, this discourse is distinguished from other culturally dominant understandings of failure in the field of self-growth and transformation and, in doing so, demarcates the community from other self-constituting organizations. Consequently, a collective discourse which strives on its face to relieve practitioners' anxiety and self-doubt in relation to perceived failures, actually opens up a new arena of potential shortcoming: the failure to (dis)attend, to interpret and to respond to experiences of failure and shortcoming in socially-sanctioned ways.

Failure and the Internal Logic of Practice

There are a number of existing empirical studies of social practice that have sought to elucidate the process of acquisition (Sudnow 1978; Pagis 2010; Wacquant 2004) as well as the role practices play in the cultivation of particular habits and dispositions (Mahmood 2011; Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2008). However, this work has tended to portray the connection between

practice and disposition in terms of stable embodiment or progressive attainment, overlooking the constitutive and significant role of error, struggle, shortcoming, and periods of regression to both the internal logic and lived experience of learning and maintaining a practice. In fact, none of the major empirical works on social practices, to my knowledge, contain an explicit and sustained analysis of the nature and role of these experiences in the process of acquisition and becoming.[80][81]

In his theoretical treatise, *After Virtue,* Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) implies that errors, struggle, periods of regression and feelings of shortcoming are definitive features of social practice, as he defines it. Using the example of chess, MacIntyre (1981: 188) argues that the goal of practice is to "progress towards and beyond a variety of types and modes of excellence"; in other words, the shared standards and rules of practice and performance set by the community. At the same time, he acknowledges that there are also "sequences of decline as well as progress, and progress is rarely understood as straightforwardly linear." In fact, MacIntyre suggests that the "internal goods" of practice are accessible only through "attempts to sustain progress and to respond creatively to problems." It is only through their participation in a process of progressive attainment which necessarily includes struggles and challenges, experiences of failure, and

[80] Winchester (2013) has recently pointed out the need for greater attention to individuals for whom socialization programs do not result in the acquisition of a new identity or subjectivity; for example, those who drop-out. He argues that that empirical studies of practice to date have tended to focus only on the fully initiated. While I agree that future studies should seek to examine drop-outs alongside those who continue, I would argue that this focus continues to overlook the fact that error, failure and shortcoming are important components of *successful* socialization. In other words, those who remain often must continuously overcome feelings of failure.

[81] Mahmood (2001: 216) mentions failure in passing in her work on the mosque movement in Egypt, noting only that the women she studied exercised "great vigilance in scrutinizing themselves how well (or poorly) their outward performance matched or reflected their inward dispositions." However, she does not expand on how the community shapes this process of reflection or how it may influence persistence and commitment.

periods of regression, that the individual comes to *be* a practitioner. According to MacIntyre's definition of practice then these experiences are part and parcel of what it means to be a practitioner, whether the practice be painting, scholarship or meditation.

From this perspective, experiences of perceived failure and shortcoming are inevitable in the process of acquiring and maintaining a social practice, even for the most experienced practitioners. If this is the case, we would expect them to be salient features of the lived experience, collective discourse, and practical methods of apprenticeship. The salience of these experiences as well as the presence of shared accounts and behavioral norms is in fact visible across a wide range of social practices. In games such as chess or basketball, for example, players can expect to fail (in this case, lose) at least some of the time. Shared rhetorics such as "you win some, you lose some" circulate in these communities as justifications and accounts, encouraging players to see occasional failures as inevitable and therefore not a cause for concern. Likewise, behavioral mandates implicit in the ideal of being a 'good sport' encourage particular strategies of action in response to failure, discouraging overt displays of frustration and mitigating exit. These cultural resources encourage players to remain engaged in the practice despite these experiences.

Spiritual practices are a particularly interesting case for examining how and why practitioners persist in the face of failure. Taking the case of basketball again, for example, it is hard to imagine a player remaining committed if the game were rigged in such a way that he lost nearly every time. In the face of repeated failures and few successes, the discourse and behavioral norms outlined above may not be enough to keep the player engaged. However, these circumstances – repeated and sustained experiences of failure and shortcoming – are a defining feature of apprenticeship in the spiritual disciplines I studied. In fact, for many practitioners like

Irene, experiences of perceived failure and error far outweigh tangible experiences of success and progress. Given these circumstances, how can we understand and account for practitioners' persistence?

Attributions and Interpretive Styles

Much of our understanding regarding how individuals respond to failure comes from experimental studies in health, education and organizational behavior within social psychology. The inherited wisdom from this body of research is that individuals tend to abandon or give up on tasks in the face of repeated failures, a condition referred to as *learned helplessness* (Maier and Seligman 1976). More recent studies, however, have added nuance to this broad finding, suggesting that persistence may be more likely in certain cases or under particular conditions. Polivy and Herman (2002), for example, found that individuals renew resolutions to modify the same behavior in the new year an average of ten times despite past failures (25% of resolutions are abandoned by 15 weeks). Staw (1997) finds that decision-makers respond to repeated failures by becoming *more* willing to invest additional resources, a process referred to as the "escalation of commitment." Current research seeks to uncover what variables – from dispositional to task-related – might account for differential responses to failure.

One strand of this research identifies attributions – how individuals interpret the cause of failure – as an important variable in predicting differential responses to failure (Weiner 1971). Since the original argument was put forward by Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978), causal attributions have become one of the most studied topics in social psychology (see Hoogghiemstra 2009; Lee, Hallhan & Herzog 1998 for an overviews). Drawing primarily on laboratory experiments and surveys, researchers have identified and analyzed two key dimensions of variation in causal attributions: (1) whether they are static or malleable; and (2)

whether they are internal versus external to the actor. Studies find, for example, that learned helplessness is more likely to occur when the individual perceives the cause of failure to be fixed and unchanging – such as inherited personal ability –rather than malleable – as in personal effort (Andrews and Debus 1978).

Further, other suggest that attributional styles are not fixed traits of individuals but tendencies that are learned and can be modified. Cross-cultural research on attributions – which finds significant differences in attributional tendencies between cultures – provides the strongest evidence for the hypothesis that attributions are learned (Choi et al 1999; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit 1997; Mezulis et al., 2004).[82] Other work finds evidence that attributions can be modified through targeted retraining programs, with some indications that these changes may be both durable and generalizable (see Andrews and Debus (978). Interventions such as teaching individuals to monitor and reflect on the assumptions and consequences of their ongoing interpretations (Abramson et al 1978; Ellis 1980) or providing functional attributional feedback (La Foll, Rascle and Higgins 2008), for example, have been found successful in overriding an individual's initial attributional tendency.[83] Taken together, this research suggests that (1) attributions mediate the relationship between real and perceived failures and task motivation, persistence, and performance, and (2) the social and cultural contexts within which individuals are situated may play an important role in how they interpret

[82] There is some debate about whether or not these findings are valid. Concerns have been raised about the validity of methodology and measure techniques (see Heine 2001), as well as difficulty in assessing differences between privately-held attributions and publically-shared ones, especially in eastern cultures (Heine et al 1999).

[83] See Haynes, Perry, Stupnisky, & Daniels (2009) for a review of theoretical and empirical work on attributional retraining in the field of education.

and therefore respond to failure, both through the circulation of shared discourses and through explicit and concrete feedback.

Efforts at self-change are particularly prone to experiences of failure and shortcoming. Most of the existing research on failure and persistence within the field of self-change has focused on attempts to modify health-related behaviors such as quitting smoking, increasing exercising and altering diet (see Prochaska et al 1992 for a review). Most studies find that individuals often fail in their attempts to modify behavior. As Polivy and Herman (2002: 678) suggest, "the perennial popularity of self-help books on the best-seller lists and the recycling of New Year's resolutions speak to the prevalence of failure" in attempts at self-change. In their analysis, the authors imply the importance of interpretation in accounting for renewed or continued commitment after experiences of failure: "Failures are typically followed by explanations—more accurately, exculpations— that cloud or even reverse the message of failure" (681). The authors also suggest that these explanations are constructed, at least in part, from available social resources. However, the content, structure and process of interpretation has received little scholarly attention, despite the fact that the meaning given to these experiences may "provide a crucial bridge from failure to renewed hope" (ibid).

Keeping these prior empirical findings in mind, this chapter takes a hermeneutical approach[84] to the experience of perceived failure, error, and shortcoming in the process of acquisition and spiritual formation. In line with recent calls for a more comprehensive approach to interpretations – for example, "mind sets" (Brooks et al 2012) and "styles" (Polivy and Herman 2002) – I proceed from two assumptions: (1) that understandings of perceived failure

[84] A hermeneutical approach involves a shift away from concerns over causes and outcomes (What causes individuals to persist?) to a focus on the meaning of action (How do individuals make sense of their behavior and experiences?).

and error are more complex and multi-dimensional than the attributional binaries described in previous research suggest; and (2) that these styles are learned, employed, and reinforced in and through social interactions which occur within particular social and cultural contexts. This chapter therefore elucidates the content and form of discourses related to failure as well as the micro-interactional dynamics of failure and persistence, situating these elements in the broader institutional field and cultural context which structure them.[85] Before doing so, however, I first review the nature and content of experiences of failure and shortcoming in these communities.

Struggles, Challenges and Obstacles on the Spiritual Journey

Several features make spiritual disciplines ideal cases for investigating the role of perceived shortcoming, error, and periods of regression in the acquisition and maintenance of social practices. For one, failure to achieve the end-goal in these communities is by definition inevitable. The goal of practice was and will remain, according to the official discourse, out of reach; regardless of practitioners' commitment, dedication, and effort, they are unlikely to ever fully embody their aspirations in this lifetime. Practitioners therefore set themselves up for failure, their lofty expectations exceed what is feasible (see Polivy and Herman 2004). Practitioners are encouraged to set achievable proximal goals as they progress, a requirement which ensures intermittent experiences of success but also leads practitioners to perceive themselves as perpetually in need of improvement (as demonstrated in **Chapter 2**). The unachievable nature of the end-goal and the constant setting of proximal goals together create an environment in which feelings of shortcoming are likely to be both salient and persistent.

[85] I do not seek to nor do I have the data necessary to assess the efficacy of the discourses and techniques I uncover. I hope that this analysis, in providing a detailed picture of how failure and persistence unfold in two real-world settings, will contribute important insights for future research on the efficacy of these techniques in encouraging persistence.

Second, the standards of excellence and internal goods of spiritual practice are largely internal – for example, transformations of intention, disposition and consciousness – and therefore difficult to define and identify. As Wuthnow (1998) argues in his discussion of practice-oriented spirituality:

> "The main difference between spiritual practice and gardening is that 'spiritual goods' are much more difficult to measure than almost any other kind of good. Gardeners know when they have made a mistake if their garden grows weeds; it is harder for spiritual practitioners to know whether they are truly in contact with God or just imagining it… it may be hard to specify rules and to measure performance by using those rules… and much of spiritual practice is likely to be concerned with defining the nature of its internal goods (that is, the sacred)" (244)

Because of the difficulty in defining and measuring standards of excellence and spiritual goods, progress is inherently ambiguous. This creates anxiety for practitioners who are immersed in a cultural context which desires measurable and concrete outcomes to justify investments, and heightens the importance and impact of "interpretive moments" (Calcaro 2014). Practitioners' anxiety is also exacerbated by a discourse which suggests that ongoing spiritual formation is a moral imperative, not only for the individual to live a fulfilled and authentic life, but for the local and global community, as well.

Lastly, much like 12-step self-help programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, identifying and acknowledging failures and shortcomings is considered an essential component in the process of spiritual formation. Texts and teachers argue that recognition of one's shortcomings necessarily precedes their modification, and therefore any spiritual growth and development. [I describe this practice of identification in more depth later in this chapter] A consistent focus on failure, errors, and shortcomings, therefore, is built into these programs of spiritual formation, ensuring that these experiences remain at the forefront of practitioners' minds. Given these features of spiritual practice and apprenticeship – the internalization of unachievable ideals, the difficulty inherent to measuring progress, and the requirement to identify and acknowledge

personal shortcomings – it is unsurprising that I found failures and shortcomings to be a salient theme in both the official discourse and individual accounts of spiritual formation. Before moving on to an analysis of how practitioners accounted for these experiences, however, I first outline the four most salient sources of perceived failure I encountered in these communities.

Sources of Perceived Failure

I found that practitioners, from beginners to the most advanced, described a range of obstacles and challenges they have and continue to face in the acquisition and maintenance of these spiritual practices, as well as the larger process of spiritual formation. In the course of my fieldwork, I found that there were many opportunities for practitioners to learn about the struggles of others, as well as to share their own. In texts, well-respected practitioners and spiritual leaders reflected on their personal journeys, sharing the fruits of practice as well as periods of doubt, struggle and regression. In the classroom, there were regular occasions for collective sharing in which participants and instructors described their experiences within and outside of practice, voicing their goals and shortcomings, accomplishments and challenges. During interviews, I asked practitioners to reflect on how they had developed over time as well as their hopes for the future. Below, I provide a brief overview of the four most commonly cited sources of perceived failure or shortcoming mentioned in these contexts: being disciplined, the experience and performance of practice, embodying spiritual ideals in everyday life, and finally, sustained progress. I outline briefly why each was a concern to participants and how they tended to account for their failures in each domain.

The most commonly cited source of failure at both sites was establishing and maintaining a *consistent daily* practice, or simply "being disciplined." Even for practitioners who had personally experienced and strongly believed in the efficacy of practice for fostering spiritual

growth and self-transformation, getting to the chair or the mat everyday remained a challenge. Practitioners were very concerned about their inability to live up the ideal of a disciplined daily practice. They were repeatedly told by texts and teachers that a disciplined practice was *necessary* for their spiritual development and pivotal to their ability to embody the "enlightened self." The official discourse encouraged practitioners to work hard to overcome this form of failure, and encouraged internal but malleable attributions (for example, a lack of effort or desire). Although practitioners often mentioned the demands and conditions of modern life in accounting for failures of discipline (external attributions), most in the end attributed this shortcoming to a lack of effort or desire.

Second, practitioners often felt a sense of failure, error, and perceived shortcoming in relation to their performance or their subjective experience of the practice itself. Most practitioners, for example, felt they had experienced "bad" sessions of practice and found these experiences discouraging. In Centering Prayer, the most common forms of "bad" practice were an inability to empty the mind (lots of thoughts) and falling asleep during prayer sessions. In Yoga, practitioners often expressed concerns over an inability to physically perform an asana (posture) as well as concerns about possessing the incorrect intention or approach towards practice– for example, comparing oneself to others or not being fully present during practice. In addition to the performance of practice, practitioners expressed concerns about the experiential content of practice: they were concerned, for example, when did not experience what they thought to be the "correct" or "ideal" states of mind and body (a sense of unity or transcendence for example) during or after practice.

Practitioners were concerned about this aspect of practice for three primary reasons. For one, many thought that other practitioners were able to achieve these states and they desired to

share in these experiences. In addition, many felt that their performance or experience of practice was an indication of progress or lack thereof. Finally, practitioners found "good" practice sessions intrinsically rewarding: the achievement of physical progress in the performance of an asana, or the experience of God's presence, was motivating and deeply gratifying. Practitioners tended to attribute failures of performance and experience to personal effort, ability or lack of experience. The official discourse, however, encouraged practitioners not to think of shortcomings in this area as failures at all. The performance and experience of practice, it was argued, were inconsequential: they did not affect the efficacy of practice and could not be used as markers of progress. I will return to this discourse in the next section.

Third, practitioners regularly reported feelings of perceived shortcomings in their attempt to embody spiritual ideals (including the dispositions outlined in **Chapter 2**) in the course of daily life. The lofty standards of excellence set by these communities ensure that practitioners are regularly faced with an inability to live up to their aspirations. This form of failure was troubling because practitioners were often motivated to initiate and maintain these practices by a desire to live moral and ethical lives. In fact, daily life is, for many, the arena in which practitioners seek transformation the most, and therefore the arena they strive to monitor and assess progress most acutely. Practitioners often attributed shortcoming in this domain to internal causes, including ability and effort, as well as failures of discipline or incorrect practice. While the official discourse encouraged practitioners to strive to overcome failure in this domain, both communities promoted and modeled external attributions in accounting for these experiences.

Lastly, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the journey of spiritual formation is imagined in these communities as a process of continual improvement and development over time.

Practitioners therefore often expressed concern over periods of perceived stagnation, or even regression, in which they failed to sustain what they felt to be the ideal of progressive attainment. This experience was particularly frustrating for participants who were dedicating substantial time and effort to the practice and training, and desired some evidence of its efficacy to justify their commitment. Stagnation and regression were also concerning because participants had internalized the spiritual ideal as a preferred self and therefore their self-worth had become wrapped in in the premise of progress. While there was some initial tendency to attribute failures of progress to personal ability – or to the efficacy of the practice – texts and teachers, as I will demonstrate below, encouraged practitioners to balance internal and external attributions for these experiences, and to reinterpret stagnation and regression as positive experiences, useful for promoting spiritual growth and development.

While novice practitioners often attributed perceived shortcomings to personal ability or to the efficacy of the practice itself, these communities encouraged a very different interpretive style related to these experiences. In the following two sections, I outline several key components of this official discourse. First, I show that practitioners were encouraged to reinterpret some perceived failures as unimportant and inconsequential. Texts and teachers argued that practitioners should not dwell, for example, on their performance or the experiential content of practice, because these aspects of the practice were not relevant to spiritual growth. Second, I show how texts and teachers encouraged practitioners to adopt a particular interpretive style in relation to experiences of perceived failure: one which normalized, universalized and valorized struggles and challenges, and which balanced internal and external attributions for these experiences.

Standards of Excellence: Attending to What Matters

In this section, I demonstrate that practitioners are encouraged to (1) reinterpret some forms of perceived failure as inconsequential, and therefore to downplay or ignore them altogether (performance and experience); and (2) identify, acknowledge, and strive to overcome other forms of perceived failure (discipline, embodiment of ideals). I argue that through discourses and practices that mark what counts as failure, these communities construct and transmit shared standards of excellence.

"You Can't Judge It…": Downplaying the Experience and Performance of Practice

Eleven of us, including Sister Nancy, sit, eyes closed, in folding chairs and along benches in the small room that serves as Trinity's indoor chapel. The room is completely silent, each person sitting perfectly still. The silence seems to amplify the sounds floating in from outside: the steady hum of a lawnmower, the birds chirping at the many feeders that line the property. I find myself, as is sometimes the case, anxiously awaiting the end of this prayer session. I try to focus on the sounds of the birds, allowing the noises to take my mind off the strong desire I feel to stretch and move my legs. Finally, the sound of a gong emanates from the CD player in the corner of the room. I breathe a sigh of relief, but remain still. As the third and final chime dies out, Sister Nancy begins to speak in a soft, rhythmic voice, offering a prayer of thanks, as she always does, to the triune God: to Jesus, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit. Her prayer is met by soft "Amen"s from across the room. People begin to shift and stir in their chairs, bringing movement back to bodies that have been still for the past twenty minutes. I stretch out my legs, releasing the desire for movement. Sister Nancy stands and asks us to join her in the living room when we are ready. She moves slowly, bowing to the altar before exiting the room. The other participants

follow her lead, bowing and moving slowly through the doorway into the living room, one by one.

We reconvene in the small living room just outside the chapel, sitting in a circle in chairs and on couches. Sister Nancy looks around the room and says, "Now you may be thinking, 'That was terrible! My mind was running around like a caged animal.' But, you can't judge it because you can't do it right and you can't do it wrong." As usual, we take some time to share our experiences with the practice that day. Sister Nancy leads off, noting that while her heart was in the right place, her mind was not. Rather than remaining focused on God's presence, she found herself making a to-do list for the retreat she was hosting this weekend and fretting about how we were doing with the practice that day. She tells us, however, that it is okay that her mind was running all over the place, because it gave her 'many opportunities to return.' Each time she caught herself in a thought, she let it go and returned her attention to 'God's presence and action within.'

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Texts and teachers regularly encouraged practitioners, more or less explicitly, to view the experience and performance of practice as inconsequential to the project of spiritual formation. Instructors reminded students that neither a blank mind nor the perfect asana is or should be the goal of practice. Likewise, transcendent experiences, while possible, should not be expected or sought after. According to the official discourse offered in texts and by teachers, the performance and experience of practice does not in any way indicate progress or signal efficacy. In other words, participants are discouraged from striving for goals related to performance and experience; instead, practitioners are encouraged to simply acknowledge their performance and the content of the experience and move on. As Sister Nancy says in the field note above, "you

can't judge it because you can't do it right and you can't do it wrong." The only requirement, as Sister Nancy told CP practitioners was to "just do it." This discourse downplays the importance of experience and performance while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of discipline. Below, I describe in more detail the occasions and techniques through which instructors at both sites encouraged the re-interpretation of the performance and experience of practice.

Performance is Irrelevant

At the yoga studio, the irrelevance of performance – in terms of physical ability – was concretized through the discourses and techniques of apprenticeship. The requirements for entry into and completion of the teacher training (TT) program, for example, as well as the content of the course itself, communicated to participants that physical performance was inconsequential to spiritual advancement. First, while students were required to have background knowledge and at least some experience in hatha yoga (and some experience at the IYI specifically), there was no test of physical competency required for either entry into the TT program or certification as an instructor. The content of the program also clearly indicated that improving physical ability was not one of the primary goals of the training program. I was surprised – as were many other students, based on informal conversations – by how little time we spent doing the physical practice of yoga during the training. Significantly more time was dedicated, for example, to a review of yogic philosophy and ethics than to the performance of postures.

The irrelevance of physical performance was also concretized in the norms and rules of instruction for hatha yoga classes offered at the Institute – the classes which the TT students were being trained to teach. Most notably, in the Integral Yoga tradition, the instructor does not perform the asanas or other practices while teaching. In fact, this was a fairly strict rule and was repeatedly emphasized during the training program. Instead of doing the postures, novice

instructors were told to observe students' form and make verbal and/or physical adjustments as necessary. This rule helped justify the lack of emphasis on physical performance in the teacher training: instructors need not be able to physically perform an asana in order to teach it. This requirement also makes it difficult for students to assess a teachers' competency or spiritual development in terms of their physical ability, requiring them to focus on other factors in making these assessments.

The decoupling of competency from performance was demonstrated on the studio's website as well. Unlike comparable studies in the area, instructors at the IYI are not pictured performing difficult asanas in their online bios. The descriptions of their involvement with yoga also tend to highlight the spiritual nature of the practice rather than its physical benefits. Several, in fact, explicitly articulate a movement away from a focus on the physical to an understanding of the spiritual nature of the practice. One instructor, for example, writes, "What initiated as a fitness practice has evolved into a way of being" and another, "Although originally seeking yoga as a means to maintain and improve optimal physical health, she has since realized that yoga is so much more than physical postures." As instructors, these statements model for students the correct approach to practice, translating a downplaying of the physical into evidence of development and progress as a practitioner.

The downplaying of physical performance was also communicated through the layout and material contents of the studio itself. Most notably, unlike many gyms and fitness centers, there are no mirrors in the studio, a decision Aadesh made consciously in order to help facilitate what he felt was the correct approach to the practice. As he told the TTs one day in class, "One of the things about this school of yoga is that we aren't as focused on the physical positioning of posture as the energetic flow." Justifying his decision not to buy mirrors for the studio, he argued

that while mirrors can sometimes be useful, they also encourage students to focus their attention outward, on their physical performance, rather than inward, on how the posture *feels*. It is the latter ability – the ability to feel a sense of alignment and the energetic flow of the posture – that define "correct" performance in the Integral Yoga tradition.

In addition to these more subtle cues, the importance of downplaying physical performance was also communicated more explicitly to students during classes at the studio. The basic hatha yoga class, for example, includes a segment of required discourse referred to as "the shivasana spiel." The spiel – which is given by the instructor during the first shivasana, or corpse pose (see **Figure 8)**, approximately 15 minutes into the class – explicitly discourages students from focusing on their performance. During the TT program, the spiel was one of the elements trainees were required to learn about and master. Although there was some flexibility allowed in the content of the speech, there were certain required elements, outlined in the teacher training manual[86] as well as demonstrated by the instructors during the training, which must be included.

In class one evening, Ron gave his spiel while Aadesh performed the posture in front of the class. After guiding Aadesh into the posture physically (by instructing him on how to place his body), Ron paused for a moment and then continued, talking to Aadesh as he lay still with his eyes closed:

> Remember, this is your practice so wherever you are right now, be conscious of that. You shouldn't be straining in any of the postures. There is a little bit of effort so you should feel a little bit of a stretch but no strain in the postures. And remember also there is no competition, so don't worry about what you've seen in a yoga competition or in a book or even your own practice. Every day is different. Don't be in competition even with yourself. Whatever is appropriate for you today; that's where you should take the body. And watch the breath throughout the practice as well; it should be flowing through each posture. You

[86] The teacher training manual is a 3-inch binder containing several hundred pages of information on the basic level course and the larger philosophy and lifestyle of yoga, as well as a brief history of the particular style and the founding guru. For each posture and practice in the basic level class, the manual included a general description, information on benefits, a list of acceptable modifications and a script for how to instruct the pose.

> shouldn't be holding the breath... If you find that happening … ease off a bit or come out completely. Again, whatever is called for, you do that. Keep the mind engaged in the practice as well. Be conscious of the breath and the body, watch the mind. Make the whole practice a moving meditation.

Afterward, Aadesh told us that the spiel is a really important element of the class, noting that they will check to make sure that we each "give a good spiel that helps your students be ready to practice properly, safely, comfortably and effectively" during the qualifying class. Ron then reiterated several of the essential components for a "good spiel": "be aware of the body; no competition; be aware of the breathing; no straining; okay to come out when you need to." In other words, the shivansana spiel should articulate the correct *approach* to asana practice, encouraging students to focus on their intention and state of mind rather than their physical performance.

In each of these ways, the teachers and organizations communicated information regarding the shared standards of excellence for assessing performance and progress. In this case, students were taught to reinterpret their physical performance: rather than viewing their physical skill as an important indicator of progress, practitioners were told that their technical ability was irrelevant to their spiritual growth and development. However, despite these efforts, I found that this interpretation was neither something the students entered the training with nor something all students fully embraced at the end. In pre-training interviews, the majority of participants said that their primary goal in taking the training was to "deepen their practice." For many, this was at least partially understood at that time in terms of the *physical* practice of yoga. Participants hoped to improve their physical performance and to learn new, more advanced postures (although most also expressed a desire to learn more about the "spiritual aspects" of yoga). In the post-training interviews, several participants told me they wished more time had been spent on the physical performance of the postures. While most embraced the idea that

physical performance was not necessarily tied to spiritual development, many continued to desire improvement and progress in this domain. This tension demonstrates how difficult it is to transmit a disregard for the physical aspect of practice in this context.

Experience Doesn't Matter

Most practitioners consider spiritual experiences during practice – a feeling of deep connection with God (in centering prayer) or an enlightened experience (in yogic language) – desirable. In practice, however, participants rarely achieve these states. While most of the practitioners I spoke with described having this kind of experience during practice at least once, the majority of practitioners, like Irene at the opening of this chapter, found this state difficult both to obtain and to sustain. Given this, the desire for these experiences can represent a practical problem for persistence. If students come to view these experiences as the *goal* of practice or as an important sign of *progress*, they may become frustrated or disheartened when they fail to achieve or sustain them. I found that texts and teachers encouraged students to view the content of their experience, like their physical ability above, as irrelevant to their performance and progress.

One way in which the experience of practice was downplayed was to insist that experiential content was not correlated in any way with the *efficacy* of the practice. Texts and teachers emphasized that the practice was still *working* – moving the practitioner in the direction of spiritual growth – even if the practitioner did not experience a particular subjective state, such as a sense of well-being or peace. One day early in the TT program at the yoga studio, for example, we were learning about the three primary breathing practices (pranayama) taught in the basic level class. Rohit was concerned about his experience of the practice of nadi suddhi (alternate nostril breathing):

Rohit: The first two (breathing practices), I can feel effects – relaxation immediately…but the third one, I don't feel the effects for some reason. I try it, it works fine but I don't feel…I've done it fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, it doesn't matter how long I do it.

Aadesh: What it's telling you and this is useful… it's really fun to watch this happen… there is a fine-tuning of the consciousness to where it gets sort of polished off, the grit is taken away and made finer. When it gets finer it starts to reflect the light much more clearly whereas before it didn't give a clear reflection. That is what is happening. You are doing these practices and that particular practice, you probably heard me say in class, is the most powerful thing we are doing in class. It is very subtle but very powerful ... It's not that it's not affecting you. You should keep doing exactly what you are doing. But, what's happening is that your awareness or consciousness will be brought into a state where you will notice what is happening. You just want it now. I know. I got it. That's good.

Ron: It could also be another thing. You are already at that state and you just don't see a difference. There are some yoga practices that I do – and it's taken me a long time to realize it – I'm not feeling anything because there's no difference between what this practice is doing and how I am already.

Aadesh: I'll give you a good example. You jump into the water and you say 'Wow, that is really cold and wet.' But, then you are swimming in the water and someone splashes you, and you barely feel it.

Ron: Right, as you do the practice longer and longer, you get to a place where the effects you are feeling are less and less.

Aadesh: And it is actually because they are staying with you. There is no shift anymorel it's not that they are less.

In this interaction, we see an occasion in which perceived failure is reinterpreted in a way that downplays the importance of the experiential content of the practice. What feels, to Rohit, like a failure to have the 'correct' experience and possibly a sign of incorrect performance, is attributed to either a lack of experience or, in contrast, of success. In either case, the content of the experience is unimportant, because the imperative to do the practice regularly and its ultimate efficacy for spiritual growth remain unchanged by the experiential content. As both Aadesh and Ron's interpretations make clear, the practice is still "working" regardless of whether or not Rohit feels the effects.

As demonstrated in the opening vignette of this section, the irrelevance of experience was communicated to practitioners at Trinity, as well. Participants learned – through stories and

descriptions offered by Sister Nancy as well as by their peers – that the experience of practice fluctuates, sometimes dramatically, from one session to the next. Sister Nancy clearly conveyed to students that the content of any given session in no way reflected either the efficacy of the practice or the ability and progress of the practitioner. During an introductory workshop on Centering Prayer, for example, Sister Nancy had participants "try out" Centering Prayer after a brief overview of the practice. Since this was their first exposure to the practice, she set the timer for only five minutes. After the gong, Sister Nancy noted: "For some people, that period felt very fast but for others it probably felt interminable. The next time around, it might be the opposite. The good news is: You can't do Centering Prayer right and you can't do it wrong." She then asked people to share their experience. "What was that like for you?" she asked the group.

Sandy jumped in and shared that she found it difficult to stay focused. Her mind was busy and full of thoughts. Sister Nancy affirmed her experience. This is "normal, integral and inevitable," she reflected. No need to worry. Mary, another novice practitioner, shared that she found the experience comforting and relaxing. She felt a profound sense of peace. Sister Nancy affirmed her experience as well, noting that experiences of peace and tranquility are common. However, she also explained that practitioners should not actively seek these experiences. The cycle of sharing and affirmation continued around the room. Sister Nancy acknowledged each person's experience, regardless of the content: positive or negative, every experience was interpreted as normal and good. Through these exchanges, participants are taught that the content of their experience does not matter: although they should not ignore it, they should not be concerned about it either. Instead, Sister Nancy clearly articulates that the only thing to worry about is being disciplined and practicing daily. As was the case at the yoga studio, however, I found that practitioners, like Irene, struggled to embody and enact this perspective. While most

understood, conceptually, that experience was not tied to progress, they struggled to let go of their desires and expectations regarding the experiential content of practice.

Summary

The strategies and discourses outlined above help construct and transmit the *irrelevance* of both the physical performance and the experiential content of practice. While novice practitioners are often anxious about their performance and experience, they learn – through interaction with teachers, texts and their peers – that these concerns reflect an incorrect and immature approach to practice. Through training, teachers and texts seek to transform the structure of practitioners' attention and concern (Zerubavel 1993, 1997), drawing their focus away from performance and experience. As I will return to in the discussion, enacting and embodying a lack of concern for the performance and experience of practice becomes a marker of spiritual growth and development in these communities. This discourse therefore, somewhat contradictorily, creates a new form of potential shortcoming: a failure to dis-attend to those elements of practice considered irrelevant to spiritual development.

Practices of Self-Reflection: Identifying and Acknowledging Failures

At the same time, however, both of these communities encourage nearly *constant* reflection on other forms of shortcoming and failure. This was particularly true for failures of discipline and failures to live up to dispositional and behavioral ideals in the course of daily life. Similar to the structure and discourse of 12-step recovery programs, teachers and texts in these communities argued that the first step toward progress – in this case, spiritual growth rather than recovery – is self-reflection and analysis. Practitioners must honestly and openly acknowledge their shortcomings, and identify what keeps them from becoming the people they want to be. The lofty goals of daily practice and of the spiritual ideal ensure that practitioners have plenty of

failures and shortcomings to identify and acknowledge. Given the importance and centrality of this step in the process of spiritual formation, formalized practices of self-reflection and analysis were taught and encouraged in both communities. In this section, I review and analyze the key practices and assignments in each program which encouraged reflection on failures and shortcomings.

Integral Yoga

Participants in the yoga teacher training program were encouraged to reflect on their shortcomings and their progress in several ways. First, all participants were required to keep a "spiritual diary" during the course of the training. While there was some flexibility in what the diary included, participants were given a form copy of what instructors called the "Sadhana[87] Chart" on first day of class. The chart consisted of an excel table with different practices – such as meditation, pranayama, hatha yoga class, yogic diet and spiritual diary – arranged vertically and the days of the week listed horizontally across the top. Participants were instructed to complete the check-list each evening, marking down the practices they completed that day. While use of the chart was never formally monitored, instructors did occasionally ask students if they were keeping up with it, and if they found it useful. The majority of participants said – on these occasions and in post-training interviews – they were doing and enjoying the assignment. The Sadhana Chart requirement forced practitioners to be aware of, acknowledge, and analyze failures to live up to the expectations of training and practice, particularly in relation to discipline. It also provided an opportunity to see small amounts of progress in their degree of commitment and discipline to the yogic lifestyle.

[87] Sadhana can be roughly translated as "spiritual practice."

There were other assignments during the course of the training that focused on identifying and acknowledging personal shortcomings, as well. In the course of learning about the *yamas* and *niyamas* – the ethical restraints and observances, respectively – we were asked, on several occasions, to "take on" one of the principles for a period of time, reflecting on when and how we enacted, or failed to enact, this principle in our daily lives. Two weeks into the program, for example, the instructors reviewed the ethical principle of *ahimsa*, or non-violence. We were asked to "look into" the principle of ahimsa for the next week. To do so, we were told to keep this principle at the forefront of our minds as we went about our everyday lives, and to think about how ahimsa could be relevant not only to our actions, but to what we said and thought, as well. Ron told us that it should not be difficult to find examples of "places where ahimsa would be useful to consider." The goal of this assignment, he continued, was to start walking around with greater awareness of whether or not our actions, words and thoughts reflected this principle.

At the next class meeting, we were asked to share our experiences and reflections on ahimsa. Vibha shared that she finds practicing ahimsa very difficult. This was especially true in regards to her interactions with her husband and children. Over the course of the week, Vibha realized that she often takes her stress and frustration out on them unfairly, and in doing so, causes them harm. In other words, the assignment helped Vibha notice how often she fails to enact and embody the principle of ahimsa in the course of her daily life. Mae affirmed and reiterated Vibha's experience. She too identified many occasions in which she failed to live up to the ideal of non-harm. In fact, she shared that it seems like the more aware you become, the harder it gets, because you realize and recognize all the times and ways in which you fall short. But, she continued, "at least it's a process."

A week later, we discussed our experiences with ahimsa again. Anthony shared a story to illustrate his progress. He was driving one day recently when he saw someone get caught off. Anthony's first reaction was to get out of the car and "deal with this person." However, his second thought was: "What kind of right action is that? Who would I be doing good for?" Reflecting on his reaction, he explained, helped mitigate his anger. Rashmi shared that paying attention to ahimsa helped her improve how she interacted with her teenage children. Rather than getting upset with them, she was able to take a step back and consider their perspective. Instead of immediately yelling at them, she found herself considering how best to phrase her responses and requests.

Underlying these requirements was a belief that awareness precedes behavioral change. Aadesh told us, for example: "That is the practice – you notice them [instances or occasions in which you fail to live up to an ethical principle], you catch them and eventually, they dwindle away." Ron made a similar claim later in the class when he told us that, with reflection and practice, "the mental grooves smooth out and eventually it is no longer a part of your reality to react in that way anymore." This connection between awareness, analysis and behavioral change is evident in the stories shared by practitioners, as well. As Anthony and Rashmi demonstrate, for example, reflexive awareness was thought to translate into an ability to "catch oneself" in the moment of being reactive, take a deep breath and finally, to modify one's thoughts and actions.

Trinity Prayer House

At Trinity, participants were encouraged to reflect on and analyze their progress and shortcomings through the practice of *examen*, as described in **Chapter 3**. Sister Nancy encouraged the practice of examen in all of the prayer groups I attended. She also occasionally reviewed how and why the practice was performed. On the first Saturday morning session of the

year, for example, Sister Nancy took time to review this practice with the group. Examen, she explained, is a spiritual practice that involves noticing and analyzing your Inner Affective Movements (IAMs). Underlying this practice, she continued, is the belief that the Holy Spirit communicates God's will through our affect. By attending to and analyzing our affective movements, we can discern – and ideally enact – God's will. Our initial emotional reactions ("initial stirrings") are often automatic, she explained. There is nothing wrong with these, good or bad, positive or negative. 'They are just reactions. They are just there – like when we have thoughts in Centering Prayer.' But, she says, we want to figure out what to do with them. In other words, what is the exact nature of the response called for?

Practitioners were told that examen should ideally be performed once per day. Participants are asked to reflect, usually at the end of the day, on how their emotions and actions reflected (or failed to reflect) the will of God. How did God make His presence known to me today? Where did I meet (or fail to meet) God today? Examen, Sister Nancy explained, is like watching your life on video tape and reflecting on it more objectively than is often possible in the moment. The goal is to get to the point where you don't react in ways that are fretful, nervous, or anxious, but instead have faith that things will work out. Through practice, she explains, you will find that you are better at noticing IAMs and at noticing God's grace in your life. In addition, as in the case of the yoga practices described above, you will be better able to let go of negative affect and doing so more quickly.

In addition to the practice of examen, participants at the prayer house were also encouraged to find a qualified spiritual director, and meet with her at least one time per month. Spiritual direction is "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally-

communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship."[88] During spiritual direction sessions, participants are asked to reflect on their relationship with God, including how and where God manifests in their lives and how and where they meet God. The content, therefore, is very similar to the reflections and analysis that constitute examen; however, in the case of spiritual direction, participants are sharing their experiences and reflections with another person who serves as a guide and mentor. The practices of examen and spiritual direction were thought to cultivate awareness with the eventual goal of modifying ingrained habits of thought and behavior. In the course of this daily self-reflection, practitioners become aware of the primary sites and occasions where they fall short of their goals, and are urged to consider how best to overcome these shortcomings.

Summary

Each of these practices require participants to compare themselves to the community's standards of excellence, identifying and acknowledging occasions of failure and shortcoming. In doing and discussing these assignments, practitioners are therefore learning and ideally internalizing these standards. In providing a new and socially-shared set of criteria for evaluating the self, these communities shape practitioners future aspirations and current actions. Regular acknowledgement of the need for improvement, as required in these assignments, may also help foster commitment. As practitioners come to feel that their values, priorities, goals, and aspirations align with the community's, they become increasingly dependent on the groups and its methods and techniques of self-formation (see Kanter 1972). On the other hand, constant

[88] Barry, W. A., & Connolly, W. J. (1982). The practice of spiritual direction (p. 37). New York: Seabury Press. This book was assigned reading for the training program to become a spiritual director offered at the prayer house in which I participated during the course of my fieldwork there.

reflection on one's shortcomings may damage feelings of efficacy and promote exit. In the next section, I examine how texts and teachers account for and justify personal shortcomings in ways that encourage persistence.

Interpretive Style: Accounting for Failures and Shortcomings

While novice practitioners often attributed failures and shortcomings to personal ability or to the efficacy of the practice itself, these communities encouraged a very different interpretive style related to these experiences. In this section, I outline two key components of this ideal typical discourse: what I call the *compassionate growth model*. First, I show how failures and shortcomings were normalized, universalized and even valorized in these communities. Second, I demonstrate how practitioners were encouraged to balance internal and external attributions for their shortcomings. In the final section, I link these rhetorics to the cultivation of self-compassion: a variable which has been found to promote persistence in the face of repeated failures (Neff 2003; Neff et al 2005).

Normalizing, Universalizing, and Valorizing Failure

All four kinds of perceived failure (outlined above) were normalized and universalized in the official discourse that circulated in both of these communities. This perspective was communicated to students in several ways. First, students are taught to *expect* obstacles, challenges, and even periods of regression, and to interpret these experiences as *constitutive* of the process of formation. Texts and teachers regularly remind students that the journey of spiritual formation is both *long* and *arduous.* As Aadesh once said, "There is no magic carpet ride to enlightenment." Obstacles and challenges are simply part of "what you are up against as you work through the practice" (Ron). This discourse discourages practitioners from categorizing

themselves as "failures" in response these experiences, and instead, to view them as normal and inevitable features of the process of spiritual formation.

At the yoga studio, for example, Ron told us that the yoga sutras are a very scientific text. The author, Patanjali, Ron continued, tells us, "in a very scientific way," that as you work towards the goal of enlightenment, "things are going to happen. There are going to be obstacles in your way." However, we should not be discouraged by these experiences. Instead, Ron argued, we should "simply note that this is what is going to happen and that this is something you've got to work through." Likewise, in teaching us how to give a meditation workshop, Priya, the instructor, informs us that it is good practice to go over some common struggles and challenges that people have when first trying to initiate a meditation practice. She imitates the act of falling asleep during meditation and asks, "Who does this happen to?" before answering herself, "Everybody!" She tells us that new meditators will often have these kinds of experiences and think, "I am just not fit for meditation." Your goal, she continues, is to reassure our students that "this happens to everyone," even people who have been practicing for ten years can "still get frustrated" and suffer setbacks. By describing and encouraging us to describe the process of apprenticeship in this way, Ron and Priya normalize and universalize experiences of failure, struggle and shortcoming.

Likewise, Sister Nancy taught practitioners at Trinity to expect obstacles and challenges, as well. In describing the experience of Centering Prayer, for example, Sister Nancy would often refer to the human brain was the "monkey mind." She would remind students over and over again: "The lungs breathe, the heart beats, the mind thinks." In other words, having thoughts during prayer was a normal, expected and universal experience for both novice and advanced practitioners alike. By deploying this analogy, Sister Nancy discouraged practitioners from

viewing this experience as an indicator of their personal shortcomings, but rather an inevitable part of the practice.

The nature of group meetings also ensures that practitioners are exposed to the stories and reflections of their fellow practitioners, including teachers and long-time practitioners. By listening to the experiences of others, novice practitioners learn that experiences of struggle and shortcoming are normal and universal. In my interview with Susan, a Centering Prayer practitioner, she told me that one of the most difficult aspect of CP is dealing with the thoughts that come up during prayer and trying not to be engaged in them. When I ask her what motivates to keep trying, she reflected: "I think what kind of motivated me was looking at all the others in the class [at Trinity] and thinking to myself, 'They've all been where I've been and if they can make it this far, where they've been coming six years, ten years, fifteen years … I can do it too.'" Susan felt that the discussions she has had during small group breakouts at Trinity have been particularly helpful, because everyone talks about and shared their experiences. She is comforted by the knowledge other people face the same challenges. "Even the most expert in contemplative prayer," she tells me, "it happens to: they get very distracted, or have dry spells."

Failures and shortcomings, as well as periods of struggle or regression, were also reinterpreted as positive and beneficial experiences. These occasions, according to teachers and texts in both communities, were opportunities to practice, to grow, and to express one's desire for and commitment to spiritual growth. At the yoga studio, for example, instructors regularly emphasized the benefits and necessity of struggle and shortcoming in both the physical practice of *asanas* (or postures) and in the process of formation more broadly. On the very first day of the teacher training program, for example, Aadesh read aloud a poem by Rumi entitled "The

Question."[89] After doing so, he offers his own interpretation: in the image of the practitioner going through the fire, the Sufi poet is explaining the benefit and necessity of challenge, struggle, and even suffering on the spiritual journey. Aadesh explains that "when seen in the right attitude," challenging and even painful experiences can be enjoyable or at least useful, facilitating spiritual growth and development.

Later in the training, the class sat in silent meditation as we listened to a recorded lecture the founding guru, Swami Satchidananda. In it, he says:

> No pain, no gain: if the pain in our lives is properly understood, we will no longer hate it ….Problems help us develop our inner resources. We should not expect a smooth, problem-free world. Suffering's purpose is to burn your ego. Suffering burns out the undesirable qualities. This leads you to be unattached. You need adversity to know the truth... If you understand the goal and dedicate yourself to achieving it, you won't be disheartened by failures…The process is slow…. Use failures as stepping stones.

The participant then is being taught an important lesson about the spiritual journey and the nature of the spiritual self: not only should she *expect* practice and formation to be challenging – full of struggle, perceived shortcoming, and periods of stagnation and regression – but these experiences should be interpreted in a positive light. In fact, the benefits of failures, errors, and suffering were emphasized to such a degree that teachers simultaneously instructed students not to *seek out* challenges and obstacles. While these experiences were considered a source of growth, there was no need to look for them; instead, these experiences would simply come to practitioners.

At Trinity, Sister Nancy not only described the experience of getting caught up in one's thoughts during Centering Prayer as normal and universal, but also as beneficial. A busy mind, she would say, offers the practitioner 'many opportunities to return,' and the act of returning –

[89] http://people.tribe.net/230e8b7b-b0bb-475c-9b5a-3272772a947d/blog/f80db51b-e6e0-45c4-bd79-bda00d1460ef

using the sacred word to re-focus one's attention to the present moment – was an expression of one's love and commitment to God. Sister Nancy used the analogy of being engaged in a conversation with a loved one to describe the process of returning. She would explain: 'When you are talking to one person and you get distracted or called to by another and you tell that person, 'Oh no, I was talking to this person.' In that moment, you are showing your love and respect for that person by bringing yourself back.' By describing the act of returning in this way, Sister Nancy is encouraging practitioners to adopt a positive interpretation of an experience (a busy mind) that was often experienced as frustrating and challenging.

In addition, Sister Nancy also told practitioners that we should 'be thankful for our sins, as strange as that may sound' because they ultimately help facilitate our spiritual growth and development. There were several ways in which this connection, between sin and spiritual formation, was made. First, Sister Nancy argued that the recognition and acknowledgement of our sins and shortcomings makes us more aware of our need for God's love and compassion. In other words, it is often our failings that push us to seek out a deeper relationship with God. Second, Sister Nancy argued that struggles and challenges make us more loving and compassionate people, giving us a basis from which to understand the struggles of others. Finally, Sister Nancy argued that we needed periods of darkness – struggles, challenges and obstacles – in order to recognize and appreciate the good periods. In this case, Sister Nancy used the metaphor of the mountain and the valley: how would we know we were on a mountain if we had never seen and known the valley? These interpretations help justify and account for personal shortcomings in ways that mitigate negative self-evaluations and promote persistence.

However, I also found that discourses which valorize failure may also produce anxiety in practitioners who have *not* had negative experiences, or faced challenges and obstacles. In late

April, during the Friday morning group at Trinity, for example, William, a participant in his mid-50s, drew the group's attention to a passage in the book we were reading by Father Thomas Keating. In this passage, Keating mentions that negative and painful thoughts often arise during Centering Prayer, and notes that these experiences are evidence that God is healing deep mental and emotional wounds. William has never had this kind of experience, and is worried about what this might mean for his growth and development. Sister Nancy, however, responds with a different interpretation: "This simply means that God is not doing that now and that maybe he never will. Maybe God wants you to be doing something else. The book is highlighting these experiences not because they always or inevitably happen but that because they sometimes do and it is better not to be alarmed by them." Sister Nancy affirms William's experience, linking it to God's will, without undermining the interpretation that these experiences can be and often are useful and beneficial experiences for others.

William's concern about not having negative experiences reflects a perspective, encouraged in these communities, that persistence in the face of failure is not only an expected and universal experience, but also one that promotes and marks spiritual development. In other words, challenges and obstacles are translated into useful aids in the process of spiritual development. Aadesh, for example, told me that he thinks we need the challenges, troubles and problems to grow and change. These communities therefore encourage practitioners to adopt a perspective on practice very similar to that outlined by MacIntyre (1981): it is in the struggle to overcome challenges and respond to problems that practitioners gain access to the "internal goods" of practice.

Recent research has found a similar perspective in other communities of practice, as well. Wainwright and Turner (2004), for example, found that dancers both normalized and valorized

physical injury as an occupational hazard that symbolized their artistic passion. Dancers incorporated suffering into a vocational habitus, often posturing and performing an elaborate identity display through their injuries. Pain and sacrifice became badges of honor. Likewise, while the discourses outlined above helped account for experiences of frustration, struggle, failure, and shortcoming in ways that promoted persistence, they simultaneously tied spiritual development, at least in part, to the process of overcoming personal shortcomings.

Balancing Internal and External Attributions

In addition, I found that texts and teachers encouraged practitioners to balance internal and external attributions for experiences of failure and shortcoming. On the one hand, I found that failures and obstacles were often attributed to a range of external causes. Shortcomings, for example, were often attributed to human nature. This was particularly true at Trinity, where the nature of the human condition was tied, theologically, to sin and to a sense of separation from God. Practitioners were encouraged to strive for divine union, but were also told that this goal was not achievable in in this lifetime: the human condition prevented them from fully knowing and embodying the divine. A similar perspective however was articulated at the yoga studio, as well. Like Sister Nancy above, Aadesh sometimes referred to the human brain as the monkey mind and told practitioners that they should not be surprised if they find it difficult to focus during practice.

In addition, teachers and texts in both communities often attributed failure and shortcoming to the pervasiveness and power of the dominant, secular culture. It was argued that contemporary American culture provides little space or incentive for spiritual practice and both encourages and rewards thoughts and actions – for example, competition, egoism and consumerism – which are fundamentally at odds with the spiritual ideal. In the course of training,

practitioners were reminded that spiritual formation requires them to push back against powerful institutional structures and to undo deeply ingrained habits, neither of which are easy tasks. Under these conditions, occasions of "slipping" are expected and understandable. This attribution for shortcoming, as both external and malleable, encouraged practitioners to keep working towards their spiritual development.

Lastly, these communities also attributed failure, shortcoming, and regression to transcendent forces, such as God's will (Trinity) or fate (yoga studio). A blog post on Integral Yoga's main website[90] highlights this idea:

> By combining effort or intention and an act of free will, the mind can be controlled. However, this **brings the seeker only to the point of receptivity** to Self-revelation. This is a crucial distinction because it sets the Self as distinct from ego, requiring a **delicate balance between free-willed intention and self-surrender.**

The author suggests that spiritual transformation – or the full development of the true Self – remains "outside the reach of our control." Practice – even if done for a long time, without break and with the correct intention – only brings the practitioner to the point of *receptivity* to Self-revelation. The actual revelation itself is beyond the agentic or pragmatic actions of the practitioner.

A similar sentiment is expressed at the prayer house. In class one day, for example, Sister Nancy asked us what the point of effort was. After several incorrect answers, she informed us that the point of effort was to show us that it doesn't work. The process of spiritual formation requires God's will and grace. It is assumed that not everyone is meant to or ready to progress on their journey at a given time and in the same way. It is God's will that determines when and what will be revealed to each individual. On the other hand, the "evil one" also acted as an external force, pulling the practitioner away from God. This force was most commonly invoked in

[90] http://www.yogaville.org/2013/09/hatha-yoga-and-intention-of-self-realization/

relation to failures of discipline. Sister Nancy told participants at Trinity that the evil one often bombards us with negative thoughts about prayer, including all the reasons why we shouldn't bother with prayer: 'It's useless'; 'It doesn't work'; 'You're no good at it.' This "fallacious reasoning," as Ignatius calls it, is attributed to the Devil who tries to tempt us away from God. These two forces – God's will and the work of the evil one – both articulate the limits of personal effort and in doing so, may help practitioners account for personal shortcomings.

At the same time, however, this perspective is balanced with a simultaneous emphasis on internal attributions. In both of these communities, practitioners are encouraged to recognize and acknowledge the importance of individual intention, effort, and will in facilitating spiritual formation. Practitioners are told to "take advantage of what is available: classes, teachers, talks, events, books" (Aadesh). They are told that they must maintain a disciplined daily practice "for a long time, without break and in all earnestness" (Yoga Sutras) in order to achieve enlightenment. While personal effort may not be sufficient for transformation, it is considered necessary. As Swami Satchidananda said, as quoted by Aadesh: "Take it easy but don't be lazy."

I found that external attributions were coupled with internal attributions to make sense of what has, is, and will be happening on the spiritual journey of any particular practitioner. This dual-emphasis, for example, can be seen in how practitioners describe their initial exposure to the practice. I found that most practitioners attributed this event to both (1) a subjective sense that something was missing followed by a period of active seeking (internal attributions); as well as (2) the intervention of fate or divine will in the form of a particular event (external attributions). When asked how she first came into contact with Trinity, for example, Sarah told me that a few years ago, she started feeling a strong sense that something was missing from her religious life, and began actively looking for something to fill this gap. Then, one day, she just

happened to see a flyer for an event at Trinity outside her local parish. Something in the description resonated with her. She tells me that this was God's way of guiding her to Trinity and to Centering Prayer. In this account, Sarah's personal desires and efforts are met and guided by God's will and actions.

Summary

Together, these components – the universalizing, normalizing, and valorizing of failure, alongside a simultaneous emphasis on internal attributions and on the necessity of personal effort towards self-improvement – constitute what I call the *compassionate growth model*: an ideal typical interpretive style for making sense of failures and shortcoming in the process of self-formation. These communities account for and validate perceived failures while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of and *ability* to actively change, modify, or overcome, rather than simply ignore or accept, personal shortcomings. Practitioners are encouraged to put in substantial effort regardless of the current payoffs and conditions, trusting in and acknowledging the larger forces that are at play in determining the shape and speed of their personal journeys. They are encouraged to identify and acknowledge failure without judgment but also without becoming complacent.

I used the terms *compassionate growth* model in order to link this discourse to the concept of self-compassion, a term proposed by Neff (2003) to account for differential responses to failure in the field of education. Neff defines self-compassion as "being open to and aware of one's own suffering" while "taking a non-judgmental stance towards one's inadequacies and failures, and framing one's own experience in light of the common human experience" (Neff et al 2005:264). Self-compassion, he suggests, avoids the pitfalls of self-pity – becoming overly absorbed in one's personal problems – by situating suffering, failures, and shortcomings in light

of a common human experience. On the other hand, it avoids the pitfalls of self-acceptance – becoming complacent with one's current state – by promoting active self-development. This is precisely the cultural work performed by the discourses and strategies of action related to failure outlined above.

As I will return to in the discussion, the enactment and internalization of the compassionate growth model, along with the particular mode of attending/dis-attending described in the previous section, become markers of the spiritual identity and of spiritual growth. Spiritual people are defined, at least in part, by how they interpret and respond to failures, challenges, and periods of regression that they face in the process of acquisition and becoming. However, the question remains of whether or not practitioners fully internalize or even regularly enact the standards of excellence and interpretive style transmitted by texts and teachers. I found indications in the course of interviews and in field notes that practitioners struggled to do so. The interpretive style deployed by practitioners therefore was not a discrete variable (present or not present) but was *in process*: they were actively striving to enact and ideally internalize the approach to failure encouraged in these communities. In the next section, I describe the iterative nature of perceived failure, interpretation, and persistence, and highlight the importance of social interaction with fellow journeymen in the process.

The Iterative and Interactive Nature of Failure, Interpretation and Persistence

I found that the official discourse, as outlined above and deployed by teachers at both sites, did help motivate practitioners to maintain their practice in the face of perceived failures. In my interview with Carol, a 65-year old woman who has been practicing Centering Prayer for three years, for example, we had the following exchange:

Erin: What first brought you to the practice and what motivates you to keep practicing?

Carol: (Laughs) These are the hard questions! … when I started, Sister Nancy was more instructional and -- and you know what I loved about it? -- Maybe this is what taught me to do it, you know? I always would think 'I'm not doing this right' or something. She would say: 'You can't do it right, you can't do it wrong, just do it' (Laughs) I don't know if you've heard her say that.

Erin: yes, yeah

Carol: Yeah, okay. One of her mantras (laughs). She was in my head. So I thought okay well, you know, you can't do it right, you can't do it wrong, you just do it. So I -- I started doing it and it just became part of my day.

Many of the participants I spoke with, like Carol, mentioned Sister Nancy's lessons and "mantras" about the nature of practice as important in sustaining their commitment. Practitioners felt that being repeatedly exposed to the official perspective on how to understand and deal with failure played a role in shaping their personal experience, as well as how they interpreted and responded to feelings of shortcoming and anxiety over their performance and progress.

On the other hand, I also found that practitioners did not seem to internalize this interpretive style once and for all. For many practitioners, understanding conceptually that they should not judge their experience was not sufficient to overcome feelings of frustration and discouragement. Irene, the woman described at the outset of this chapter, for example, also cited Sister Nancy's teachings as a source of reassurance and continued motivation. Irene recalled that Sister Nancy was always saying that "things were as they should be" and that "you just need to show up." However, Irene also told me: "I have to say that one of things that's discouraging in a way, and obviously I'm not supposed to judge centering prayer, but it's discouraging to me that I don't have a better handle on being able to refocus from all these thoughts, to return constantly." Even after eight years of practice and regular attendance at the prayer house where she is exposed to the official discourse regarding these experiences, Irene still finds her experience with the practice discouraging and is actively striving to achieve a more peaceful state.

While the official discourse clearly shapes Irene's interpretations of herself and her practice, I found that she also looks to other students at Trinity in order to validate and confirm her experiences and interpretations. Irene told me, for example, that she recently shared her experiences and frustrations with another participant at Trinity during a group meeting, and asked her for advice. The woman, who had been practicing for even longer than Irene, said she didn't have any good hints. Rather she told Irene, "I've been doing this fourteen years and I'm still wandering off." Irene reflected, "So obviously others have similar experiences which is reassuring." For Irene, it is only through an *iterative* and *interactive* process that she continues to maintain the practice: feelings of frustration and failure alternate with social interactions, which help account for and normalize her experience. These interactions also provide a space where the importance of the practice and possibility of its efficacy in transforming dispositions, regardless of the content of experience, is emphasized and modeled.

These examples illustrate that periods of collective sharing, either in the context of formal group meetings or in more informal discussions among practitioners, can promote persistence not only by offering evidence of success or opportunities for social persuasion (Bandura 2001) but through the normalization of failures, challenges and obstacles. In fact, I found that focusing too heavily on success to the neglect of acknowledging failure can lead to feelings of alienation and discouragement among those practitioners who are struggling. When sharing her personal experiences with the practice, Sister Nancy clearly sought to balance an emphasis on both success and failure. On the one hand, her reflections validated practitioners' experiences of struggle by explicitly referencing and describing her own. At the same time, however, her stories as well as her actions articulated the many benefits Sister Nancy had experienced through her practice. Despite the balanced accounts modeled by Sister Nancy, however, some of the prayer

groups at Trinity developed a tendency to share only positive experiences in the discussions that followed periods of collective practice.[91] Below, I use an interaction I had with a participant in one such group in order to demonstrate the importance of social interaction in shaping the process of perceived failure, interpretation and persistence.

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Early on in my fieldwork at Trinity, I noticed the tendency for some groups to share mostly positive experiences with the practice of Centering Prayer. This bias stuck out to me because my experience of the practice was, more often than not, filled with thoughts, dream-like images, and a near-constant struggle against falling asleep regardless of the time of day. There were, in fact, as mentioned above, many occasions in which I actively and longingly anticipated the sound of the gong which would end the session. While I, like others, found Sister Nancy's "you can't do it wrong" argument somewhat reassuring, I also felt – based in part on the collective discussions – that other practitioners were managing to achieve a very different kind of embodied experience than I was. At times, this made me feel both lonely and frustrated.

During my in-depth interviews with practitioners, however, I discovered that many shared a similar experience to that of Irene: despite being committed practitioners, they continued to struggle with thoughts during practice and found this experience frustrating. However, many never spoke up about these issues during collective discussions at the prayer house. Joanne, a woman in her mid-50s who attended the Tuesday evening series at Trinity, for example, discussed the struggles and challenges she faced in her practice openly when I met with her in her home, though she rarely shared her experiences in class. After explaining how she first came to Trinity, the conversation turned to her reflections on the Tuesday evening program:

[91] Each group seemed to develop its own subcultural norms and tendencies in regards to the content and structure of these periods of collective sharing.

Joanne: It's nice. It is nice. And I don't know why I just can't, I can't even talk to Sister Nancy… I just get vaguely annoyed when I'm at the Tuesday night thing. I don't know why, what's bothering me. I just feel like I would rather do more of the centering prayer and less of the talking.

Erin: And what is it that motivated you to go to it – to a group class – to begin with?

Joanne: Hmm, I guess I wanted to go deeper and I'm kind of hitting a wall, you know? I want to see the benefits. I guess that's the thing that's really hard for me when I go there, because everybody talks about how wonderful it is and the difference that it makes in their lives. I don't really notice that it makes a difference. I know that I need to change. I don't want to be caught in the same thought patterns. But silent prayer for me is like… I was talking to [my son] about it … it's like when you do it, there's nowhere to hide. You really see what you think about. And it's really a big blow to the ego. I guess maybe that's why I'm annoyed about it. I don't really feel what everybody's saying: "It's so peaceful," "It's wonderful." It's not peaceful to me. I feel like when they talk about the divine therapy, it's kind of devastating.

…

[Centering Prayer] is hard for me. So I think maybe that's what's driving me. It's like I want to connect with someone who I can be on this journey with but I don't think I really find it there right now. Maybe it's just the wrong venue. But it's frustrating for me being there because … I feel like, 'does anybody like feel this way?" I guess I must worry that I must be distorted. Like I must be weird.

Joanne admitted that she does occasionally have a positive experience during practice, but, like Irene (and myself,) she found it difficult to both get there and to sustain these experiences. I felt a sense of fellowship with Joanne. Her experiences in some way legitimized my own feelings of frustration in class. I told her this, and wondered out loud if others who rarely spoke up in class might be having similar experiences and feeling the same sense of frustration.

In the Tuesday evening session following our interview, Joanne shared some of experiences and reflections on her Centering Prayer practice. She explained to the group how she felt that there is no place to hide during the practice, and how it forced her to confront the often unpleasant or at least 'less than holy' contents of her thoughts. Afterward, another participant affirmed her experience, noting that his practice is "sometimes frustrating" for him, as well, and shared his own struggle with staying centered during prayer. My conversation with Joanne seemed to change her desire or willingness to share her experience more openly during class and this, in turn, opened up space for others to do the same. Our conversation also shifted my own experience with the practice, as well as my understanding of how and why practitioners remain committed despite regular feelings of frustration. Our interaction and its consequences demonstrate the important role peer testimonials and interaction can play in shaping persistence.

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Psychologists who study behavioral modifications have found that hearing about or seeing the efficacy of a practice or behavior for others can be a key factor in promoting feelings of efficacy in oneself and to both the initiation and maintenance of personal change (Bandura 1986). In the case outlined above, however, Joanne argues that hearing about the ease and frequency with which others had positive experiences and beneficial outcomes made her feel alienated and abnormal. Stories of ease, success, and efficacy told by others can be a double-edged sword. Depending on the current or recent experiences of the listener, these accounts may not foster feelings of efficacy, but lead to self-criticism and feelings of self-doubt. Being inundated with stories of success can potentially negate the efforts of teachers and texts to normalize and reinterpret failure.

On the other hand, focusing exclusively on failure, challenges and obstacles can be discouraging as well: persistence requires the perception that the practice *can* be efficacious. Bandura (1981), for example, finds that people can develop a state of learned helplessness *vicariously*; in other words, observing another person encountering uncontrollable events and obstacles can lead to decreased motivation and negative affect. Collective discussions likely work best when they balance – like Sister Nancy's personal accounts – the normalization of failures and shortcomings with a clear articulation of the efficacy of practice. In this way, participants come to feel a sense of shared experience (including and perhaps most importantly struggles and challenges) as well as a sense of hope that they and the practice *can* and *will* (eventually) produce positive and beneficial outcomes.

While previous research tends to assume that individuals possess a concrete and measurable – albeit potentially malleable – tendency toward a particular style of attribution, I found that social interaction and social resources play an important in shaping individuals' interpretation and response to experiences of perceived failure. In the course of my involvement in these communities, I found that failure, interpretation, and persistence were part of an iterative process which played out within concrete relationships and contexts of social interaction. In the cases outlined above, for example, the verbalization or enactment of particular causal attributions does not necessarily reflect fully internalized biases and tendencies. Instead, interpretations were variable across time and space, even for the same individual. Future research should strive to further flesh out the role social interaction and social resources – such as texts, organizations and relationships – play in the construction, transmission, and deployment of attributional styles.

Discussion: Failure and Identity

In this chapter, I outlined the discourses and shared rhetorics related to failure that are constructed and transmitted in these communities of practice. Despite the role these symbolic resources may play in promoting persistence, however, they were not explicitly implemented by practitioners as a practical solution to the problem of persistence. Rather, this approach to failure was understood to be a defining feature of the spiritual way of life. In this section, I relate the key findings of this chapter back to the larger theoretical interests of this project: (1) the nature and cultivation of spiritual selves; and (2) the ways in which these communities situate themselves in the broader social and cultural field.

Defining the Spiritual Self

In this chapter, I argued that participants receive subtle lessons in the standards of excellence underlying these practices through shared discourses which mark some forms of perceived failure as irrelevant while drawing practitioners' attention toward others. At the same time, practitioners are taught that there are more or less correct ways to approach the practice and that this includes how best to interpret and respond to challenges and obstacles. Understanding, enacting, and ideally internalizing, the community's standards of excellence (knowing and caring about what matters) and interpretive style (compassionate growth model) are considered characteristics of "spiritual persons" and therefore come to be seen as markers of spiritual growth and transformation.

Because of this association between discourses and failure and "spirituality," I found that this approach was used to identify and mark committed, authentic practitioners. In class discussions and in popular texts, for example, people who were concerned about achieving the perfect asana or who sought transcendent experiences during prayer – in other words, people

who focused on the performance and experience of practice –were described in negative terms. These individuals were said to possess the wrong *intention* in regards to practice: they were driven primarily "by ego-concerns" rather than a desire for self-transformation and spiritual growth. In the DVD interviews with Father Thomas Keating which we screened at Trinity, for example, he says: "Little by little we enter into prayer without any intention except to consent… It has nothing to do with attaining something, or getting anything, or the desire for enlightenment, peace, or spiritual experience. Such desires are still ego, however devoutly masked." Since overcoming the ego in order to access the True Self is one way that practitioners' describe the goal of the spiritual journey, accusations of ego-driven action are particularly damning. A lack of concern about performance and experience therefore define, in part, the spiritual ideal towards which practitioners aspire: mature or advanced practitioners, according to the official discourse, do not concern themselves with these features of practice.

Like the imperative to be a 'good sport' in practices such as basketball or soccer, there are behavioral norms regarding responses to failure wrapped up in the concept of being a practitioner and becoming spiritual. Giving up, becoming frustrated, or being self-deprecating in the face of obstacles, challenges and even periods of regression are considered signs of spiritual immaturity**.** The advanced practitioner remains disciplined and committed to the practice regardless of these experiences, expressing a level of detachment from indicators of progress and occasions of shortcoming in daily life. The imperative to not only understand but to internalize and enact these standards, discourses, and norms creates a context in which interpretations and responses to failure and shortcoming actually become spaces of potential failure, error, and shortcoming themselves. It is only because of this, for example, that Irene can chastise herself for failing to *not judge* the experience of practice, as when she tells me (quoted above), "and

obviously I'm not supposed to judge centering prayer, but it's discouraging to me." Learning and enacting the community's approach to failure becomes a project and goal of training, part of the way of being practitioners aspire to.

Defining the Spiritual Approach

The interpretive style promoted in these communities, as outlined above, differs from two of the dominant discourses about failure that circulate in contemporary American culture: the discourse of the "self-made self" (Pagis 2013) on the one hand, and the discourse of radical self-acceptance on the other. According to the discourse of the self-made self, the only legitimate attribution for failing live up to one's aspirations are internal: for example, if you fail, it is because you didn't try hard enough or are not good enough. In a cultural context that valorizes hard work and despises complacency, occasions of failure threaten to stain one's reputation. In order to preserve a positive self-image, failure is something that must be avoided – or if necessary, hidden– at all costs.[92] On the other hand, according to the discourse of radical self-acceptance, failures and shortcomings are attributable to external causes. From this perspective, failure is not a stain on one's character, but an inevitable part of life that should be *unconditionally accepted*. Failure is perceived to be a neutral (not positive or negative) experience, and action to remedy the failure is generally not considered necessary. Individuals are instead encouraged to modify their *interpretations* and to accept themselves completely as they are right now.

What I have called the "compassionate growth model" strikes a kind of middle-ground between these two approaches. Failures and shortcomings, for example, are attributed to a

[92] Cross-cultural research has identified the opposite tendency: individuals in the West are more likely to attribute failure to external causes, a phenomenon they refer to as the self-serving bias (Mezulis et al 2004). Some scholars have hypothesized that this bias reflects a desire and need for Western individuals to protect self-esteem because they are immersed in a cultural context where an individualized understanding of the nature and locus of the self prevails.

combination of external and internal causes. Malleable internal attributions allow individuals to feel they *can* overcome their failures and shortcomings (at least to a degree). External attributions account for and justify periods of stagnation, failure, and shortcoming in circumstances where individuals are putting in substantial effort. Practitioners are encouraged to compassionately acknowledge their shortcomings while working to overcome them.

Members of the communities I studied were more or less aware of the fact that their approach to failures and struggles stands in contrast to other available cultural discourses. In fact, members drew boundaries between themselves and those that embrace the cultural trope of "heroic individuality" (Pagis 2013). In doing so, practitioners argued against what they perceived to be an overly ego-centric vision of self-formation that posits only internal causes for outcomes and disregards the role of divinity, culture, and community in this process. Likewise, practitioners took issue with the instrumental rationality underlying this discourse, distinguishing spirituality as a realm in which the goals of action should not be defined in terms of practical, concrete results (Weber 2008; see also Spencer 1970). Denying the validity and importance of assessing progress counters the dominant secular culture's emphasis on the need for concrete and measurable benefits to justify investments of time and energy.

At the same time, I found that practitioners also rejected the rhetorics of radical self-acceptance by arguing for the importance of disciplined effort and intention in the process of spiritual formation. Unlike the rhetoric of radical self-acceptance, these communities do not eschew but actively promote and demand efforts at self-improvement. Self-formation in these communities is now-oriented as well as future-oriented, transmitting goals and aspirations as well as practices and techniques for achieving growth and development. These communities therefore account for and validate perceived failures while simultaneously emphasizing the

importance of and *ability* to actively change, modify, or overcome, rather than simply ignore or accept, personal shortcomings. Members of these communities work hard to effect meaningful change rather than merely accepting themselves and the world as is.

While practitioners tend to view this particular approach to failure as a definitive feature of their personal and collective identities, the compassionate growth model may not unique to these communities or to spiritual communities more broadly. A wide range of books within the genre of self-help, for example, have adopted a similar interpretive style in recent years. A search on Amazon for example reveals book titles such as: "Failure: The Secret to Success," "Celebrating Failure: The Power of Taking Risks, Making Mistakes and Thinking Big," "and "Failing Forward: How to Make the Most of your Mistakes." In addition, a similar emphasis can be found in the field of education, as well, where research in educational psychology increasingly emphasizes the importance of *grit* (persistence, determination, resilience) in shaping academic achievement. Efforts to transmit grit to children often include techniques for modifying and retraining how students interpret and respond to failures, errors, and shortcomings, including the use of discourses that are strikingly similar to those outlined above.[93] The compassionate growth model, as an ideal typical interpretive style, may be part of an emerging cultural discourse across a range of organizational and institutional contexts.

Conclusions

This chapter makes several important contributions. First, this analysis highlights the constitutive and experientially significant role of perceived failures and shortcomings in the acquisition and maintenance of social practices. Future research should examine the nature and role of these

[93] This NPR article gives some examples of how mistakes and failures are dealt with in schools oriented towards fostering 'grit':http://www.npr.org/2014/03/17/290089998/does-teaching-kids-to-get-gritty-help-them-get-ahead?utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=npr&utm_campaign=nprnews&utm_content=03032014

experiences in the process of acquisition across a range of social practices in an effort to identify similarities and differences in forms of and responses to perceived failures and shortcomings. What forms of failure are considered relevant and irrelevant across forms of practice? What rhetorics and discourses are used to account for failures, errors, and shortcomings? To what extent do practitioners embrace and internalize this shared interpretive style?

In addition, this research suggests that the relationship between failure and persistence should be investigated more holistically – moving beyond previously identified attributional dichotomies – and within the context of real-world settings. As this study demonstrates, doing so reveals the complexity and nuance inherent to experiences of perceived failure and the important role that social resources play in shaping how individuals interpret and respond to them. I find that these two communities for example are acting as naturally-occurring attributional retraining programs (Haynes et al 2009; Andrews and Debus 1978; Craske 1988), and making use of a variety of practical and discursive techniques in doing so. Additional research in similar kinds of real-world setting across a variety of social fields would likely contribute important to the study of persistence.

Finally, I find that the interpretive styles and strategies of action related to failure play an important role in construction and definition of practitioners' social and collective identities. First, I find that the enactment of particular discursive and behavioral scripts related to failure help mark individuals as spiritual persons. In this way, perspectives on failure which seek to promote detachment from the anxiety and self-doubt that often accompany failure produce new forms of potential failure and sources of anxiety for practitioners. Shared rhetorics of irrelevance and of the compassionate growth model represent not only new frameworks and narratives that practitioners can use to account for their experiences, but new dispositions which practitioners

must cultivate in order to authentically enact their aspired-to spiritual selves. The association between approaches to failure and morally salient, aspired-to identities constitutes a relatively subtle but powerful mechanism in garnering commitment to the practice and the community. Second, I find that the official discourse regarding failure circulating in these communities is influenced by, and consciously pushes back against, culturally dominant approaches within the broader social field. Through the elaboration and enactment of this approach to failure, these communities carve out a unique collective identity, and assert its legitimacy, and in some cases superiority, vis-à-vis culturally salient reference groups.

Chapter 5

Betwixt and Between: Constructing the Spiritual

"*The protean self wants to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination*."
– Robert Jay Lifton

Introduction

When I spoke with Alice, a retired school teacher in her early 60s who attended workshops at Trinity Prayer House, she shared with me a diverse range of experiences, events and people who were influential in shaping her understanding of and approach to religious life. Much of what Alice told me sounded familiar: the way she spoke about her religious life resonated with what I had read in scholarly accounts of contemporary spirituality (see Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998; Heelas 1996). For instance, towards the end of our conversation, Alice told me, "I just want to … be my best self. To live my life as my best self. I will use whatever is out there that brings me to that point. I mean, whatever is good, I'll find it and I'll use it to help me."

And Alice has certainly walked the talk: she has experimented and implemented cultural resources from across a diverse range of contexts and traditions. She has gone through periods of church shopping (although ended up back at the Catholic Church), experimented with Buddhist meditation, attended classes and training programs at Kripula Yoga, and even participated in a Tantric encounter group, where by day three, "everybody was taking their clothes off." Alice's current affiliations, practices and beliefs reflect the hybridity characteristic of contemporary, individualized approaches to religious life. Alice is a member of the Secular Franciscans, she regularly attends events at Trinity as well as another Catholic spiritual center near her home, goes to Mass weekly, and is an avid yoga enthusiast and instructor. Alice tells me the goal of all

of these practices is the same: "to have a look at yourself and know yourself better in every aspect."

Alice's account and her actions are in line with a broader "turn towards the self" within the American religious field (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005). She clearly places a strong emphasis on personal agency and self-authority, both characteristics of what scholars refer to as the "New Age" (see Heelas 1996) or quest-oriented approaches to religion (see Roof 1993). However, intermingled with her emphasis on the self, experience and intuition are descriptions and rhetorics that sound much more like those commonly associated with traditional, institutional religion. Her decision to pursue Yoga more seriously, for example, was undertaken only after she was encouraged to do so by her Catholic spiritual director. Likewise, her Yoga practice is not only focused self-discovery, but also on cultivating a relationship with God in order to better know and enact His will. Alice told me that she prays, "Lord, just take me," before beginning the practice, and often says the Our Father as she moves through the postures. Alongside Alice's pride in her ability to flexibly combine insights from a variety of traditions, she also emphasizes the need for tradition, community, and structure to achieve spiritual growth. She explained that we need to be disciplined and to submit to the rules of practice in order to help us become receptive to God. And while Alice's desire to become her "best self" is clearly personal and individual, her understanding of what that means is shaped by her interactions with others in the communities of practice in which she participates.

While Alice feels free to draw from a variety of authorities and traditions in piecing together her religious life, it is also the case that not just *anything* goes. In the quote above, for example, Alice quickly corrected herself to note that she does not make use of "whatever is out there" but rather only "whatever is good." But, how do practitioners, like Alice, who embrace a

pluralist religious identity (Mermis-Cava 2009) – one which posits many paths to the same ultimate truth – decide which beliefs, practices and communities are "good"? How do they justify and make sense of the choices they have made? How do "suppliers" – organizations, texts, and institutions – in the broader spiritual marketplace strike a balance between honoring individual diversity and transmitting and justifying the rules and standards of practice and membership in their particular community?

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Modern American society clearly values individuality and authenticity. The process of discovering and expressing our "true self" has cultural value. This is true both within and outside of the religious field. At the same time, as I described in **Chapter 1**, we live under conditions where the authorities on which we can rely and the models which we can apply have proliferated. Yet, it remains the case that not just anything goes. In fact, while modern conditions have opened up space for the proliferation of ways of being and defining oneself, these very same conditions also require that people actively work to articulate and legitimate their personal choices. Further, while we may value and believe in listening to our own internal compass, that internal compass tends to point in directions and paths well-worn by others. How does this happen? Part of the answer to both of these issues, I have argued, lies in the institutions, organizations and discourses that have popped up to constrain individual freedom and to impose order on the process of constructing selves and lifestyles in the modern context. But the question remains: How do people and organizations balance the contemporary desire for individual authenticity and self-authority with the need to impose rules, structures and discipline?

I found that teachers, texts and practitioners achieved this balance by finding ways to honor and acknowledge the individual while simultaneously – and more or less subtly –

acknowledging the authority, legitimacy and necessity of traditions, structures and rules. In this chapter, I focus on two discursive spaces where I found these two emphases simultaneously at play: (1) the sources of epistemic authority on which teachers and students draw to decide on and justify perspectives, practices and lines of action; and (2) the way in which practitioners describe the process of formation. In the former, I show how practitioners at taught to value self-authority at the same time that they emphasize submission to external authorities, in making sense of and justifying their commitments. In the latter, I demonstrate how the process of formation is described as involving: (1) active effort as well as a willingness to surrender; and (2) structure, discipline and rules as well as personal freedom and individual flexibility.

In the final section, I argue that practitioners use these different discourses and emphases, like the discourses of failure reviewed above, to positively demarcate themselves and their collective approach from other available options in the "spiritual marketplace" (Roof 1999). In doing so, I take what is often considered an analytical problem for scholars – distinguishing the religious, spiritual and secular – as a practical program for practitioners. While both communities espouse a pluralistic identity, teachers and texts must simultaneously articulate what makes this particular group and its approach unique and valuable (relative to others) if they are to recruit and retain committed members. This argument expands on Swidler's (2001) theory of culture in action by suggesting that cultural logics not only help construct and justify lines of action (they do), but can also be used to solve problems and dilemmas associated with identity and legitimacy in changing cultural fields.

Competing Discourses: The Religious and the Spiritual

> *"Religion is founded on objective truths, on codified rites, on the moral norms to which we must subject ourselves; spirituality starts from one's own experience, one's own feelings, one's personal wellbeing and from the realization of one's own self."* (Giordan 2009: 233)

The focus and main arguments of this chapter were originally prompted by an inductive observation. As in Alice's narrative described above, I found that practitioners in these communities regularly drew on what are often said to be contradictory or at least distinct sets of cultural discourses: what Giuseppe Giordan (2009) has referred to as the 'religious-institutional logic' on the one hand and the 'spiritual-subjective logic' on the other. In distinguishing these concepts, Giordan argues that "the 'language of spirituality' has a rather different vocabulary, grammar and syntax from the 'language of religion'" (Giordan 2009). The religious-institutional logic is defined by an approach to religious life that is collective and formal, prioritizing commitment, belief and submission, and requiring obedience to the authority of religious leaders, tradition and institutions. The spiritual-subjective logic, on the other hand, is defined by an approach to religious life that is personal and subjective, prioritizing flexibility, practice and agency, and recognizing experience and intuition as the foundational sources of authority.[94]

While these categories are best understood as "ideal types" (see for example Wuthnow 1998 on "dwelling-oriented" and "seeking-oriented" spiritualties), recent work often assumes that these two approaches while not necessarily mutually exclusive are, at the very least, deeply incompatible (see, for example, Heelas and Woodhead 2005, pg 4). Giuseppe Giordan (2009: 233), for example, focusing in particular on understandings of and relationships towards the body and drawing on examples from contemporary Catholicism in Italy, suggests that "a shift has taken place from the religious dimension of control and repression to the spiritual dimension of acknowledgement and valorization, overcoming the dualistic juxtapositions of soul and body,

[94] Studies have found that these descriptions align with popular understandings and uses of the two terms. Zinnbauer et al (1997), for example, finds that people tend to describe spirituality in experiential and personal terms, while religiousness is defined primarily by institutional beliefs, memberships and ritual practices.

interiority and exteriority, reason and emotion, nature and super-nature, male and female" (230). The religious perspective wants to exert institutional control over the body, viewing it as an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of religious development. On the other hand, the spiritual approach views the body as a site and source of the sacred. Giordan finds that these two approaches are in conflict and that the former is giving way to the latter.

As the findings described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation (*Embodying the Spiritual*), make clear, however, understandings of the body in these communities straddled both sides of this dichotomy: practitioners were taught to view the body and soul as both separate ("you are not the body") and integrated, and learned to both control and valorize the body. The body was both an obstacle and a vehicle, an object and a conduit. In fact, these communities seem to pride themselves on the complexity of their relationship to and understanding of the body. Being comfortable with and even embracing contradictions, without trying to resolve them, was a fundamental source of identity and pride for practitioners in both communities.

Further, my observations in these two communities call these assumptions into question, more broadly. I observed practitioners at both sites relying on a wide range of authorities, both internal and external. I heard the process of formation described as unique and personal, rooted fundamentally in effort and will, as well as universal and collective, requiring discipline and surrender. In this analysis, I follow Wood's (2009) suggestion that "religion" and "spirituality" should not be viewed as analytical categories that capture something "out there," but rather ass cultural resources (categories and their associated logics) that are *used* by individuals in concrete situations and contexts across the religious field. In doing so, I take seriously and attend closely to the potentially recombinant nature of how and to what ends these logics are deployed.

Some recent research suggests that combinations of these logics are indeed occurring. In his study of the beliefs and practices at orthodox Reformed churches in the Netherlands, for example, Tony Watling (2003) finds that individuals emphasize community, stability and certainty, while simultaneously emphasizing "reflexivity" by encouraging "individuals to choose their religious (and secular) paths thoughtfully" (385). In other words, he finds a "dialectical interaction between individual and community, 'choice' and 'discipline'" (ibid). Watling (2003: 386) demonstrates that "although the church 'disciplines' individuals teaching them its particular forms of right from wrong, it also allows them to express their individuality and to exercise choice": members learn to choose or turn to God and in doing so, gain a sense of certainty in relation to their beliefs through experience. Watling suggests that the approach he saw in this church is one of "flexible strictness" (396), defined by a balance between individual and collective desires. Members are expected to be both active and passive: membership requires them to make the (agentic) decision to submit to the rules of the community (or leave).[95]

A simultaneous emphasis on individualism and community was also found by Marti and Ganiel (2014) in their study of the Emerging Church movement. The authors suggest that EC's "are distinct in that they promote individualism while at the same time providing a basis for community around shared experiences and relationships" (32). Drawing on Ulrich Beck's concept of "cooperative egoism," Marti and Ganiel argue that the religious orientation and sense of self provided by EC's can be described as "legitimate, sacralized and pluralist" (ibid, 33). At the same time, however, they argue that "any religious self, even a critically oriented religious self, cannot thrive without a community of others" (34). And while an emphasis on self-

[95] This is very similar to the "volunteerism" described by Swidler (2001) in her study of discourses of love and marriage.

development and individualism may seem to imply a 'me-first' therapeutic approach that rejects community, the authors found that their study of Emerging Churches revealed "bounded groups of individuals who share a religious orientation" and whose "individual religious journeys are bound up with the journeys of others" (34-5). The authors suggest that these congregations "strike an apparently contradictory balance as they create religious communities in which the autonomy of the individual is held as a core value in the very midst of an often-stated emphasis on relationship and community" (35).

Most of this work, however, investigates discourses and practices *inside* traditional religious institutions (churches and congregations), and reveals the extent to which the spiritual-subjective logic has been taken up and integrated into traditional religious settings. However, there has been far less attention paid to whether or not the religious-institutional logic (such as discourses of commitment, discipline and surrender) are deployed within the context of the spiritual marketplace (or holistic milieu). Part of my goal in this chapter, therefore, is to further the work of scholars who have suggested the need to balance competing emphases on the individual and the collective, on choice and discipline, by investigating how this is accomplished in these two communities, each with different locations in the broader religious field.

The Use of Cultural Logics

My approach to thinking about religion and spirituality as sets of discursive logics is influenced in part by the work on Ann Swidler (2001) on the culture and discourses of love in the US. Swidler's study serves as a prime example of how we can attend to cultural logics as objects of investigation in and of themselves. Rather than using an analysis of participants' narrative to classify them as embracing one or another ideal typical approach to love ('romantics' or 'realists,' for example), Swidler seeks to understand how people *use* available cultural logics: in

other words, how "culture is appropriated, mobilized and linked to experience" (5). Of particular relevance to this chapter, is the emphasis in Swidler's work on the "varied and sometimes contradictory" ideas people have about love (6). Swidler argues that the people she spoke with often drew on two seemingly contradictory ways of thinking about love in the very same narrative: what she calls the "mythic" (or "romantic") and the "prosaic-realist" logics (7).

Swidler's informants "had a complex, ambivalent relationship to the dominant culture. They were often critical … disillusioned … and even uncertain about the concept of love itself." However, Swidler argues, that like other Americans, "they are continually aware of the discourses about love, commitment, self-discovery and happiness the wider society makes available" (3). In other words, even those who were critical of the dominant discourse (which she argues is defined by the myth of romantic love), were still clearly aware of it and, in many cases, used it to make sense of their experiences and justify their decisions related to love and marriage. Swidler argues, more generally, that the "cultural universe is much wider and more diverse than the culture we make fully our own" (15), and we often use and draw on the logic we say we reject in order to help make sense of our actions.

Ultimately, Swidler provides a deeply pragmatic perspective on culture. She argues that people use cultural resources to negotiate institutional constraints, and to decide on lines of action, especially arenas of social life that are relatively under-determined. The fact that people deploy the dominant discourse even as they argue against it does not reflect ideological hegemony, she argues, but rather attempts to navigate the practical contingencies of everyday life. Swidler finds that "people can live quite nicely with multiple, conflicting ideas about the world (and with huge gaps between beliefs and experience). Criticism of a dominant ideal will not eliminate it as long as it still provides a useful guide to action" (2001: 129). Further, she

argues, “We need more explicit attention to the question of how different logics interconnect (and disconnect) and why” (205).

In this chapter, as in Swidler’s work on love, I ask “how multiple cultural framings of the same issue can coexist side by side … even in the minds of the same people,” and how despite being critical of the dominant approach, individuals may still draw from this discourse repeatedly in their own thinking (2001: 111). The transformation of religious identity from ascribed to achieved – a product of individual choice rather than birth – means that individuals must justify their choices and commitments, just as individuals in the US must justify their choice of marriage partners as well as their continued commitment to the relationship through time (given the acceptability and frequency of divorce). I will show how practitioners, in these communities, despite offering critiques of the traditional, institutional approach to religious life (what they call ‘religion’), continue to draw on the religious-institutional logic to decide on and justify lines of action, and to define their approach to formation vis-à-vis culturally relevant others.

Sources of Authority: Learning How to Navigate the Journey

In line with recent studies on the spiritual marketplace, I found that practitioners in these communities were encouraged to approach their spiritual lives as an intuitive journey: participants were taught to “try on” and evaluate various teachings and practices to see if they “fit” their personal needs and desires. Further, knowledge, they were told, was acquired by *doing* not by listening: in other words, the truth could only be truly understood through direct personal experience. This experimental and experiential approach to formation gave the individual both the authority and the responsibility to decide what strategies, practices and discourses they would take on in pursuit of spiritual growth.

Much like the journey of Siddhartha depicted in Herman Hesse's classic text, practitioners were told that they should follow their inner guide as they grow, develop and change over time. In this text, Siddhartha, the main character, is described as a dutiful and obedient son of Brahman parents who one day awakens to the feeling that his life is empty. He no longer feels his soul is being fed by the devotion, duty and the strict observance of religious rules and rituals required of him. He leaves his family home and all his possessions to go into the woods and become a monk. The text follows Siddhartha as he moves in and out of different communities and sets of practices, all the while seeking enlightenment. One important emphasis underlying Hesse's story is the value and centrality of reflection, intuition and self-authority on the spiritual journey. These elements are constructed as necessary prerequisites for Siddhartha's successful movement away from a religious life defined by external rules and toward a life of contemplation. The way of salvation, Siddhartha comes to learn, cannot be taught; instead, each person must find his own way.

Following a similar logic, practitioners were told they should try on different techniques and practices to see if they "worked." The ultimate test of whether a practice was good and worthy of adoption was its *usefulness*. Even how the practice is implemented was, according to official discourse, open to adjustment and modification, at least to a certain degree. Rather than applying universal rules and following strict behavioral codes, students were encouraged to reflect on and do only what works for *them*, modifying practices in response to their personal experiences and to suit their personal needs and tastes. One day during class, for example, I asked Aadesh about how best to structure a morning meditation routine: Would it be okay to do pranayama then yoga mudra followed by meditation? Aadesh responded, "This is a good question. Either way is fine. Do both and see what you find most useful. There is really not as

much right and wrong as we make up. Try useful. Start to work with useful and you will be much better off."

About two weeks into the teacher training, Natalia asked a question about the physical positioning for seated meditation. She explains that her back has been hurting lately, and sitting in the way described as "ideal" for meditation exacerbated her pain. Aadesh recommended a few adjustments to her posture to make it more comfortable. Natalia follows his instruction, but finds that now her knees are above her hips, something we learned previously could lead to distractions during meditation and should be avoided. When she expressed this concern, Aadesh asked her: "Who cares? Just comfortable. It is about the spirit of the law. That is what gives life. As it says in scripture: The letter of the law kills. If it's not better then you don't do it." Aadesh encourages Natalia to rely on her personal experience ("Is it better?") to assess how to sit rather than trying to adhere strictly to external rules and standards.

At the same time, however, in doing so, he draws on and demonstrates external sources of authority. First, his statement exerts his authority as the teacher – and a more advanced practitioner – to guide and advise Natalia not only in how to sit but in how she ought to make decisions regarding how to sit. In addition to encouraging her to rely on her experience as the ultimate guide, however, Aadesh also invokes the authority of scripture to justify the practitioner's ability and freedom to modify the rules of practice to suit their needs. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that, in addition to the authority of personal experience and intuition, practitioners were also taught to rely on and make use of external sources of authority – from expert testimony (scripture, spiritual leaders, and teachers and even scientists[96]) to history

[96] At the yoga studio, raja yoga is regularly referred to as the "science of the mind" and the Yoga Sutras as "a very scientific text," kind of "like a recipe book." Likewise, scientific findings about the benefits of asana, pranayama and meditation were regularly cited, discussed and circulated.

and tradition – in navigating their personal journeys. At the IYI, for example, teachers regularly quoted Swami Satchidananda (the founder of the tradition), Swami Sivananda (the founder's guru), as well as Jesus, Ghandi, and the Buddha in accounting for the legitimacy of beliefs, practices and requirements of training. At Trinity, Sister Nancy referenced Jesus and his disciples, the founders and saints from various orders, as well as Father Thomas Keating and other contemporary spiritual thinkers, in accounting for the value and authority of the practices she taught.

Centering Prayer was justified and given legitimacy, for example, not only through personal experience but through history and expert testimony. Paul, for example, the organizer of a weekly Centering Prayer group at a local Episcopal Church, told me that 'the practice dates back to 3rd and 4th century monastic life.' He explained that it was re-packaged for the laity in the 1960's by Father Thomas Keating, in an attempt to expose Catholics to older contemplative practices (an effort designed to keep them from flocking to eastern forms of spiritual practice). This origin story depicts Centering Prayer as an ancient practice, justified and legitimated by the fact that "the mystics" and "desert fathers" were doing it centuries before. Further, Sister Nancy would regularly remind participants at the prayer house that, according to scripture, Jesus himself prayed in a similar, contemplative manner.

In the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, yoga trainees are told that there are three primary sources of "right knowledge" (or truth): "The sources of right knowledge are direct perception, inference

These findings offered further proof of the efficacy of the practice, above and beyond history, text and expert testimony. At the prayer house, elements of practice were also justified by scientific findings; for example, the requirement for sessions to last 20 minutes, was explained primarily by "physiological reasons" and reference to scientific data on the efficacy of the 20-minute "power nap." Sister Nancy also regularly drew on the theories and expertise of psychologists, especially Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud.

and scriptural testimony" (Sutra 7).[97] In our discussion of this sutra, Ron first gives the example of tasting a banana as an example of direct perception: "if you taste it, you have right knowledge of the taste of a banana." Aadesh explains the last one, scriptural testimony, by noting that "there are truths that you have not yet experienced and don't have the background to make inferences about but if there are some people that have and can give testimony to it than that is still right knowledge. When you feel that someone is in that place, you can trust that it is true." Ron adds that this sutra is often "translated as authoritative knowledge rather than scriptural testimony." He uses the example of trusting your doctor to illustrate the idea that expert testimony can come from a range of sources, not just scripture. In the end, however, Ron emphasizes the primacy of direct knowledge: "It really comes back to direct knowledge. Even knowing what a cow looks like – the best way is to go out into the field and see a cow."

This sutra and the discussion that surrounded it demonstrates the tension present in the discourses that circulated in these communities between two seemingly opposed understandings and sources of epistemic authority: personal, subjective experience on the one hand and scripture and other forms of expert testimony on the other. In this section, I examine how texts, teachers and practitioners balance an emphasis on and desire for self-authority with the need to transmit standard rules of practice and to justify the legitimacy of external sources of authority. I show how these seemingly contradictory logics regarding how to navigate the spiritual journey – submission to external authorities on the one hand, and a self-guided journey which rejects external rules and standards, on the other – were integrated and combined in the course of training.

[97] This translation is taken from the version of the Sutras assigned for TT participants to read. It is the translation and commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda (published in 1978).

Transmitting the Value of Self-Authority

I found that self-authority – and the value of and desire for freedom and experimentation – was itself a perspective that must be learned and justified. I found that this orientation – one defined by the primacy of self-authority and the belief in individual diversity – involved, like other socially normative frameworks for experience, reliance on external authorities, including teachers, texts and organizations. In other words, practitioners were taught to value personal experience over rules and standards, and to understand the process of formation as fundamentally experiential. The process of transmission required students to rely on the authority of texts, teachers and organizations.

Aadesh, for example, would regularly chastise students for approaching the practice and process of formation with what he felt was the incorrect orientation. Natalia, for example, would often ask for specific details regarding how *exactly* a practice should be performed and *why.* Aadesh, rather than answering her question directly, would often encourage her to adjust her orientation. One day, for example, Natalia expressed concern about the practice and goals of pranayama, or breathing practices. She read somewhere that the eventual goal of pranayama is "to have exhalation twice as long as inhalation but also to have them both long." Aadesh agreed, noting that the practice would slow down the pattern of breathing. Natalia continued, "My question is that I am breathing really fast so my breaths are really short. So to get to that point, do I first elongate them both or like midway or do I try to exhale twice as long?" Aadesh, smiling, told her, "Stop trying. Don't even worry about that. Enjoy your breathing. *That is too heady*." He explained that she could check on her progress every once in a while – "just to see" – but that it would happen naturally, without a need to impose strict rules regarding the exact process by which the improvement should occur.

On other occasions, students were corrected for desiring or over-emphasizing a comprehensive and rational understanding of the reasoning and logic behind different practices or the rules and standards of their implementation. One day, for example, Natalie raised a question about *yoga mudra* (see **Figure 10** below): an energy configuration performed after the asana sequence but before the deep relaxation. Yoga mudra was said to help integrate and process the physical, energetic and spiritual benefits of the practice, and to aid in the transition from the physical to the more subtle aspects of the practice in the second half of the class. Natalia asked: "The manual says that it [yoga mudra] balances the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, but I don't understand *how* that would work." Aadesh responded that he did not know exactly how that worked. Then after a few seconds of silence, he continued: "I believe it, but I don't know. I can't answer that so I won't pretend that I can. It is a good question." Then finally, he added, "I'll have to experience it and see if I can notice it." In this exchange, Aadesh models reliance on direct experience to justify external interpretations of practice. At the same time, however, it is clear that he will also "believe it" regardless of his experience. In other words, the experiential process is not performed in order to *test* this interpretation but rather to see if he can *notice* the effect. Students therefore learn to value subjective experience as a source of knowledge, but also that they should ultimately defer to external authorities when the two were not in agreement (or when personal experience is ambiguous).

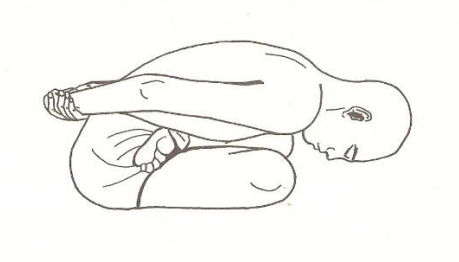

Figure 10: Yoga Mudra[98]

Through his interactions with Natalia, Aadesh transmitted the idea that knowledge comes from *experience*, not a rational analysis of what is being taught or the attempt to implement the practices according to rigid rules. The importance of "learning by doing" was also more explicitly transmitted during an interaction that occurred with Julia early in the teacher training program. While reviewing how to instruct students in the sun salutation, Julia asked why it was necessary to put the back knee down on the ground in the third posture in this 12-posture series (see **Figure 7** for a visual illustration). Her question reflects the fact that this is not required in many other schools of yoga. In response, Aadesh asks her to clear off her mat, indicating that he wants her to do the posture. Julia, faking exasperation, jokes, "You open your mouth and you've got to do it, right?" Ron and several of the others students laugh as Julia proceeds to clear her notebook off her mat. The following exchange occurs:

Aadesh: "Well, it's much better to learn something experientially."
Julia (laughs) "Okay, bring it on. What am I doing?"
Aadesh: "You don't have to do anything. Never mind."
(more laughter around the room – as it sounds like Aadesh is joking)
Aadesh: "Forget it. There is no difference. There is no point."
Julia: (realizing that Aadesh is offended) "Oh, I want to see it!"
Rohit: "Yeah, I want to see it too."
(there is a period of tense, awkward silence)

[98] Image taken from: http://yogawithsubhash.com/2012/12/24/yoga-mudra-yoga-seal/

Julia: “I was kidding, I really was… Do you accept my apology?"

(Aadesh indicates yes)

Julia: “Alright.”

(Julia prepares to do the posture)

Aadesh: “I really wasn't kidding though. I was really trying to help you and instruct you.”

Julia: “I would gladly accept your instruction.”

Aadesh then instructs Julia in the posture first without putting the back knee down, and then a second time with the back knee down. “Push the groin forward,” he tells us. "Feel the tight squeeze to the colon? You didn't get that in the other position … That's why we're doing it." As Julia returns to a seated position, he adds, “If I tried to explain that to you, as opposed to asking you to do it, you wouldn't have understood it as well." “Thank you,” Julia says.[99]

In this exchange, the importance of personal experience in gaining knowledge and understanding is clearly conveyed. Aadesh argues that Julia would not have understood the reasoning and logic behind the posture without doing it and *feeling* the difference. In asking her to do the posture and in making a point to emphasize the importance of this experience, he attempts to transmit this orientation and approach to the trainees. At the same time, however, the fact that not all of the students present were asked to do the posture – and therefore did not have the chance to experience the difference – also communicates that this exercise was, at least in part, about Aadesh exerting his authority as the teacher in the face of being questioned (even if done jokingly). Throughout the training program, it was clear that Aadesh wanted the students to

[99] This was a really uncomfortable exchange, which became increasingly awkward as everyone realized Aadesh was actually offended and not joking. Several TTs recalled it as a tense moment during their reflections on the training program, especially Julia. In our conversation post-training, Julia highlighted it as an interaction which really upset her and which she thought was unfair and undeserved. However, she also framed it as a learning experience that helped promote her spiritual growth by challenging her to overcome her ego (in line with the discourses described in **Chapter 4**).

listen and follow his instructions without calling them into question. Personal experience was clearly important – and students were encouraged to "test things out" – but at the same time, if a legitimate, external authority provided the information or instruction, it should be heeded.

A similar sentiment was conveyed in an exchange that occurred towards the end of the teacher training program. During the training, a discrepancy came up between a fact we learned in the Anatomy and Physiology component of the class and the instructions and justifications for the performance of one of the postures, or asanas, given by the instructors. *Sarvangasana*, or shoulder stand (see Figure 10 below), is part of the basic asana sequence in Integral Yoga. It is called the "queen of all postures" and was said to have many benefits, physically, emotionally and spiritually. One of the benefits, regularly mentioned by instructors during class, is that the posture reverses the flow of blood through the body, allowing oxygen rich blood to flow into areas that usually do not receive it. This position is held for longer than other postures in the sequence: once inverted practitioners hold the posture for a full three minutes before coming out. In explaining why this is the case, Aadesh told us that three minutes is the length of time it takes for the blood to circulate fully through the body one time.

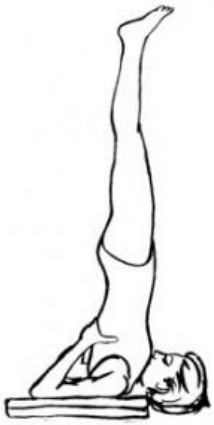

Figure 11: Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand)

However, during our Anatomy and Physiology training, we were told that it takes nearly an hour for the blood to circulate through the body before returning to the heart. Because of the discrepancy, this became a source of debate among the students and teachers. Rohit, in particular, was determined to find the correct answer. He searched online for a scientific, medial source to provide the definitive answer, and followed up several days after the initial conversation with an email. In it, he included links to two resources that he felt provided the true answer to the question of how long it takes the blood to circulate one time through the body. The first was a PDF attachment from KidsHealth.org which says that it takes "60 seconds to pump blood to every cell of your body." The second was a link to "wiki answers," which suggests that the time for circulation depends on a number of variables – including stroke volume, total blood volume, heart size and heart rate – but is usually close to one minute for the average, healthy adult.[100]

On the final day of the training, the topic came up again. Ron joked, "So how long does it take for a blood cell to circulate?" Rohit, relying on his sources, said it depends on a number of factors. Aadesh, however, says, "I don't know except that I learned from Dr. MacLanahan, who studied it pretty thoroughly." Dr. MacLanahan is a practitioner and proponent of Integral Yoga, who is known for communicating its therapeutic benefits. Ron agrees: "I believe her too." Rohit goes on, trying to support his claim, but is eventually cut off as the talking stick circle continues. This was a particularly interesting case, because Rohit and the other students were not interested in modifying the practice but only in having the correct knowledge and understanding regarding blood flow rates. Yet, the attempt to question the teachings was pushed back against by Aadesh,

100 http://www.answers.com/Q/How_long_does_it_take_for_your_blood_to_circulate_through_your_body

who modeled submission to a community-supported external authority and the tradition of the teachings.

External authorities, such as scripture, texts and expert testimony, were also deployed to justify the importance and value of self-authority, as well as the ability to modify rules and standards. This can be seen, for example, in the interaction between Natalia and Aadesh regarding the seated posture of meditation, outlined above. In addition, spiritual pluralism, the idea that there were many paths to the same, essential truth, was given authority and legitimacy with reference to scripture. Ron, for example, in explaining the Integral Yoga slogan, "Truth is One, Paths are Many," told the TTs: "This is actually – I don't remember what Veda – but one of the oldest scriptures on the planet. It is a loose translation, but literally I think it is something like: there is one truth and seers see it in different ways. That is pretty much what we are asked to do. There is no single path to the truth of your being. It really is your personal journey and really discovering what it is for you and in you that takes you to that place of oneness or realization." The idea that there is more than one potential path to enlightenment is justified, in this statement, with reference to an authoritative text (the Vedas, scripture), the legitimacy of which rests, at least in part, on its age (tradition). Further, an orientation towards practice and formation that values and rests on a foundation of self-reflection and self-authority was not only justified and legitimated but *prescribed* by scripture, tradition and expert testimony.

Ron then continued: "And as we are human beings, I believe – and there have been books written about this recently – we are hardwired to search for that one truth of what we really are: the make-up of our brains compels us to look for that and to find that place… whether it is physics or religion, everyone is searching for the truth of our essence." In this statement, Ron argues that the desire to seek and the act of seeking is linked not to a personal choice or

particular personality, but to a universal human condition, and reinforces the truth of this argument by referencing "books" and current scientific knowledge ("the make-up of our brains"). In doing so, Ron reinforces the naturalness and universality of seekership, providing practitioners with a way to account for the investments of time and energy they devote to the practices and their personal spiritual formation.

Occasions and interactions, like those outlined above, give us a window into how complex and complicated the process of accounting for and justifying the rules, standards and requirements of training, practice and formation can be communities that discursively prioritize self-authority. Practitioners not only value but are "called to" enact self-authority because this orientation and approach is more or less formally prescribed by the social norms and shared values that circulate in these communities. In the following two sections, I reveal some of the ways in which practitioners were taught to think about and enact self-authority in the practices and processes of formation.

Interacting with Authoritative Sources

"Scripture study is not just reading what's in the Bible. That's part of it, but it's also: How does that relate to me? How do I look at it? Do I see myself there in that scenario? And how am I taking it out and living my life with it? … It's not just sitting, reading words in a book, you know? … It's about getting out there and living it." – Christine, CP practitioner, Trinity Prayer House

At Trinity prayer house, practitioners were encouraged to approach the act of reading – scripture and other assigned texts – and listening – to didactic instruction, lectures and DVDs – as highly embodied and deeply personal experiences rather than purely cognitive exercises. Several techniques for accomplishing this were outlined during the course of my fieldwork at the prayer house. First, practitioners were encouraged to put themselves into the text, either by imagining themselves as one of the characters, or by reading the passage as if God were talking directly to them. Second, Sister Nancy regularly told participants to read in such a way – usually slowly and

thoughtfully – that the text would "seep in," "fill them up," or in other words "become a part of them." Lastly, practitioners were taught to attend to and reflect upon their subjective reactions and responses – physical, psychological and emotional – as they read. In hearing Sister Nancy talk about the act of reading, there was sense both of the person being inserted into the text and the text becoming a part of the person.

When reading and referring to scripture, Sister Nancy regularly used metaphors of *depth* such as 'saturate' or 'penetrate' to describe how participants should relate to and approach scripture. In the program for spiritual directors, she informed participants that they really need to let the scriptures 'seep in' – to really learn them 'from the heart' – both for their own edification and so that they can offer relevant scriptures to their directees. She advised that the best way to learn the scriptures is to pray with and experience them rather than try to memorize them. Her descriptions suggest that scriptures can become internalized and embodied: that they can and should be a part of their very being.[101] The technique involves reading scripture regularly and slowly. It is important for the practitioner to take time to let the words 'move deep.'

On other occasions, Sister Nancy suggested techniques which more directly placed the practitioner *in* scripture. She suggested that participants could 'insert your own name' into the scripture, so you read it 'as if God is talking directly to you.' One day, for example, she read the day's scripture aloud inserting Pat's name at the beginning of the passage. Pat responds that it 'almost puts tears in your eyes.' Sister Nancy then asks us all to read the passage to ourselves,

[101] There was a similar emphasis at the yoga studio as well, particularly in relation to slokas (or chants) and mantras. During the meditation workshop with Priya, she informed us that we can chose any word, words or phrase to use as a mantra – it doesn't need to be Sanskrit and could be Christian or a Hebrew mantra – but she warns us: "The words are going to go in very deeply, into every cell, every bone, below the skin: it's going to reverberate," so if you choose your own make, she says, be sure it is "very uplifting" and "means something to you."

inserting our own name in it as we did so. She tells us that we should read it in this way until we *feel* a sense of direct involvement and then try to *stay there*. 'Take time with it and *experience* it: feel it, taste it, savor it," she tells us. In addition, participants were often encouraged, both in their own reading and especially in the practice of *lectio divina*, to place themselves into the scene being described in a given passage and to imaginatively embody the characters and experiences being described. In each way, the act of reading is transformed into an interactive and individualized experience.

A similar approach was articulated in regards to the reading of assigned texts from Thomas Keating and Teresa of Avila to Pope Benedict. Sister Nancy would lead off discussions about assigned readings or readings from scripture with questions, such as: "What spoke to you?"; "What is the grace in that for you?" "What moved you?" "What do you want to remember?" Each question implies that the text may be 'saying' different things to different people or to the same person at different points in time. These questions also imply that the primary focus should be on the person's *reactions to* the text rather than solely on the content. Sister Nancy told us, for example: 'Just see if you can find parts that touch your soul. Read it quickly and then go back to the parts that *mean* something to *you*.' For some practitioners this came as a relief. Micki, for example, was glad to know she doesn't need to understand every detail of the theologically dense text by Pope Benedict assigned in the Friday morning prayer group.

In addition to the reading and discussion of assigned texts, Sister Nancy screened segments of a recorded interview with Father Thomas Keating at most of the monthly prayer

group sessions.[102] Sister Nancy advised participants to undertake "deep, unanalyzed listening" or to "listen with the ear of the heart." She explains that we should not be concerned if we fail to understand all of the ideas and theological concepts being referenced, and instead trust that the tapes "will meet you where you are." The point of listening to the tapes, she reminds us, "is for *transformation,* not for the purpose of information." Listen, she tells us, "with your whole being: body, mind and heart."

After the segment ends – a point signaled each time by the sound of three gongs, whose resonance lingers for several moments in the silence that follows the end of the interview – Sister Nancy prompts a discussion by asking, as she does in the discussions about assigned readings, "What touched you?" Participants then, in turn, mention key phrases, topics or ideas presented in the interview that struck them or resonated with them. On some occasions Sister Nancy would follow this discussion by asking: "What do you want to take with you?" or "What do you hope to remember?" She would tell us to slip a word, phrase or idea "in our back pocket" and take it with us for the rest of the day, week or month. Rather than asking participants to articulate or summarize the central ideas or key arguments, Sister Nancy asks participants to analyze and share what moved them. In encouraging us to approach the texts and tapes in this way, Sister Nancy is teaching practitioners that the content is less important than its impact. This discourse shifts the focus from the realm of the abstract and conceptual to the personal and embodied, prioritizing the subjective *experience* of reading. Theology, Sister Nancy told participants one day, is 'interesting information' but knowing the theology is not the same as 'living the Gospel.'

[102] *Heartfulness Transformation in Christ*. Tape Series. The interview consisted of nine separate segments of approximately 20 minutes each: (1) The Pursuit of Happiness; (2) The Human Condition; (3) Centering Prayer; (4) Sin; (5) Suffering; (6) Redemption; (7) Love and the Trinity; (8) Divine Indwelling; (9) Divine Transformation. Most of the classes that met monthly at the prayer house watched one segment of this tape per meeting.

Practitioners also learned that they should focus on and apply only those aspects of the teachings that most resonated with their experience and personal needs. Two women in the Friday morning program, for example, shared that they did not agree with everything Thomas Keating said in the book we were reading. They felt that some of the ideas were outdated and did not apply to their experience. Sister Nancy agreed that the book is a bit old – it was published in 1987 – but reminded them, and the rest of us, that we don't *need* to agree with everything in the book anyway. She says, 'we take what we like and let the rest go.' Later in the conversation she notes that while the language might be 'time-bound,' we can still get 'something out of it.' For many of the Catholic participants, this approach to engaging with scripture, with liturgy and with any form of the 'official discourse' is relatively new, and many found is both exciting and liberating.

Finally, I also found that some practitioners were actively translating scripture and expert testimony into the language and logics they were most comfortable with. Morgan, for example, a third-year student in the Spiritual Direction intern program, articulate this approach well. In her mid 50s, Morgan considered herself Catholic but never attended Mass, and identified more strongly with a mystical and New Age perspective than traditional Catholicism. During the my interview with her, Morgan told me she was sometimes uncomfortable with the language used by Sister Nancy at the prayer house. In fact, she was really put off by it and almost did not return. After a few visits, she explains, "I'm thinking, '*oh, what the heck am I doing here? '* [Laughter] Like I haven't been in such a traditional setting in such a long time, what the hell am I doing here? You know? [Laughter]." Despite this, she explains "something just kept me going."

Over time, Morgan learned that she could simply *translate* Sister Nancy's teachings into the a language she was more comfortable with; She told me: "At some point, I'm sitting there,

I'm watching her talk and I was seeing the words coming out of her mouth and then sort of midair I see them morph, you know, into *my context*. I said, 'oh, right, okay. I got it. I can see how this fits.'" She goes on, "I can see how that wisdom of 500 years ago fits into this world. And I see it's … what we need. That's what people want. **The thing is they just needed the language change.** They can't, I mean some people – obviously the people in the program, you know, and many others, they'll like it in that form – but a lot of people if you can change the language, they will love it." Through the act of translation, Sister Nancy's emphasis on discerning God's will, for example, was reinterpreted as a process of becoming attuned to the "cosmic energies" of the "universe."

Morgan justified these translations with reference to a Catholic saint: "Well, I mean the deep look into how we work that Ignatius did …that is as modern as anything is… I see it as: that's the call: to be deeply who we are and to be of service to the whole. But you know this book that just came out, it's called *The New Spiritual Exercises* by Louis Savary. He combines Ignatius and Teilhard. So he does exactly that. He takes the Ignatian exercises and puts them inside the context of an evolving universe. It's fantastic… That's what I've been looking for … There's some of the language in there I mean, it's very Christian … but here again, keep translating, keep translating. What's really going on underneath this, below the language?" Morgan takes a lot of what is taught at Trinity, "adapts it," and then shares with a small group of seekers, from many religious backgrounds, that meet at her home monthly to discuss spiritual growth and development.

The practice of translation also occurred at the collective level, where practices, beliefs and logics were often reframed in light of existing convictions and beliefs. For example, while both communities espoused and encouraged a pluralist religious identity and enacted this identity

through hybrid forms of practice, their use was often premised on the translation of other approaches into the language, discourses and logics of the existing community. At Trinity, for example, during a discussion about the need to give up one's allegiances to various roles and groups in the process of formation, it was suggested that this imperative resonated with Western conceptions of Buddhist philosophy. Sister Nancy said: 'I think Ghandi put on the heart and mind of Christ… the call to Christ is not a call just for Christians.' There was a general sentiment of agreement from those present. While there is a sense of universality and pluralism in this statement, it also clearly privileges the interpretive style of Christianity, attributing the Buddha's authority and legitimacy to his affiliation with Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in my interview with Aadesh, he described his movement through a number of religious traditions, approaches and practices over the course of his life. He was raised in what he described as a culturally Jewish but non-practicing family. He left Judaism and joined a Christian cult in his mid-20s. After leaving the cult in his early 30s, he began dabbling in yoga and attending Buddhist meditation circles. After describing this trajectory, he noted, "That's why when you asked earlier [about my current religious affiliation], I said, 'No, I don't know what my religion is.' I don't really identify with any of them. But yoga has certainly helped me, because I think they are all heading toward yoga, union. Religion leads back to yoga, back to union. So as far as I can tell, all the religions are aimed toward yoga." Aadesh feels that the yogic philosophy provides a general foundation for understanding the different religious perspectives, uniting them in a way that makes sense and feels true to him.

Practitioners at both sites learned to approach external authorities – from texts to the rules of practice – in ways that honored their individuality and promoted a sense of freedom and flexibility. In doing so, practitioners learned to practice self-authority even when relying on

external sources of authority for guidance and direction. The practices and approaches described above allowed practitioners to view their engagement with these sources as part of a unique and deeply personal journey, even while these sources shaped and constrained how they did so and to what effect.

Locating and Listening to One's Inner Voice

During a workshop called *Deepening your Practice* (which took place on the TT retreat), Ron explained the different forms of or approaches to the yogic life,[103] suggesting that people tend to be drawn to some more than others. He says that people often express concern over what they should do or where they should focus their attention, but explains that the boundaries between these approaches are more fluid and each person's path more variable than is often assumed:

> "In karma yoga, you are there doing service, but you are around people and gurus and there are lessons to learn and you see what is going on around you and you react and have challenges that come up, so again it takes you to: What is it? What should I do here? As I am doing karma yoga, maybe I want to do mantra or chanting to feel closer to your true nature…. They are all in each other and as you go and flow with it, you'll find you will do karma when that is called for, bhakti when that is necessary, you will sit and meditate **when that is called for.** There is nothing exclusive about them and they all will take you to that place, and whatever you are drawn to is the right thing to do in that case."

Reflecting the idea of a cultivated spiritual intuition (as outlined in Chapter 2), practitioners are encouraged to trust their instincts and go where they are drawn at any given time. However, one's inner voice is not the only authority at play here. The idea that, as Ron says, "we are asked" to find our own path, translates the acts of seeking, trying on and choosing an approach into an assignment, and a moral imperative that is universal and which ultimately comes from

[103] Karma Yoga (the path of action and service); Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion and worship); Jana Yoga (the intellectual approach); Japa Yoga (mantra repetition); Raja Yoga (the path of the mind: meditation and ethics); Hatha Yoga (the physical approach – asanas, pranayama, kriyas, diet).

outside the individual. The spiritual intuition is said to guide practitioners not towards action that is purely utilitarian (not what makes us happy, necessarily) but towards what "is called for."

The same approach was encouraged in relation to the practice itself, both in one's personal practice and for the TTs, in how to organize and teach classes. Ron explains that there are no set rules for what postures to do in any given session or in what sequence to do them. He tells the teacher trainees: "You want to start tuning into your inner intelligence while doing each posture: listen to that inner voice and begin to trust that inner voice. This goes for how you do the postures, and for what postures you choose to do. Some days you might really feel like doing a particular posture that isn't a part of your normal practice. Trust that and know that there is something there that is talking to you." Again, Ron's teachings indicate the importance of listening to one's inner voice and intuition in deciding on lines of action. However, as is the case above, this inner voice rest, ultimately, on an external force, one that transcends the individual self.

As was the case in engaging with texts, practitioners learned to rely on their experience and intuition in performing the practices and in navigating their spiritual journeys. At the same time, however, there were clear guidelines and limitations on their choices, which constrained where their intuition might or could lead them. In the case, above, for example, Ron's workshop on navigating one's journey emphasized individual diversity and self-authority, but it also communicated the available options among which practitioners could pick and choose. In other words, there were six approaches that were available and recognizable in this community. Likewise, in terms of the physical practice, individuals were encouraged to be flexible and follow their "inner intelligence" but at the same time the available postures were circumscribed

by the community, as was the structure and content of practitioners' "inner intelligence." In other words, even their improvisation followed a certain shared logic (see Becker 2000).

While intuition was thought to be the ultimate voice of authority in delineating what the practitioner should do, both in and outside of practice, it was also clear that this inner sense must be cultivated and refined before it could be trusted. Before this was accomplished – and in order to do so – one must first listen and defer to external authorities. As the following excerpt from Teresa of Avilia's *Interior Castle* indicates, the central forms of authority guiding the spiritual journey were thought to shift through time in a linear progression from external to internal:

> "The individual has traveled closer to the center of the castle and the attraction from the center is now perceived as a personal call from God. The call from God begins to make demands on the individual who now is invited to make a personal response … At this point, the call from God is mediated through sermons, books and people and events in one's life. In time, the center calls more clearly and directly."[104]

Practitioners were told that they must remove the trappings of the 'ego' in order to access their spiritual intuition. As described in Chapter 3, practitioners' intuitions are only deemed 'correct' if and when they are attuned to the divine. While everyone *can* potentially hear God's will, practitioners must first submit to the rules of practice and the guidance of external authorities in order to refine this universal and essential ability. In order to advance, practitioners were encouraged to rely on a teacher or mentor as a guide and adviser.

The authority of teachers and instructors was tied primarily to the fact that they were deemed more advanced practitioners: people further along on the journey of formation. These were often individuals, like Sister Nancy or Aadesh, who had dedicated their lives to their own and others' spiritual formation, and were assumed to be closer to embodying the ideal spiritual self than others in the community. In the training programs for both yoga teachers and for

[104] Pgs 98-99.

spiritual directors, participants were repeatedly told that being a teacher (or director) *required* them to approach spirituality as a "way of life." Teacher trainees at the yoga studio were told that the best instructors "teach from their practice." Interns in the spiritual direction program were told that in order to help others find God in their lives, they must first 'do it for yourself 24/7,' by committing to live 'a life of prayer.' Teachers' authority in these communities therefore stemmed more from their experiences and personal characteristics than their institutional role; however, these individuals still represented figures of authority that exerted influence over the ideas, aspirations and behaviors of their students.

In these communities, therefore, it is not the case that institutional authority, expert testimony (from religious leaders or from scientists) or tradition are rejected, but rather, practitioners are taught that they should approach these sources in particular ways. While the ultimate authority is said to be subjective experience and personal intuition, the fact that practitioners persist for so long in a practice, like Centering Prayer, despite no clear sense of progress or success in these practices, suggests that something else is motivating them to keep trying. The ambiguity of experience, of performance and of progress in these communities in some ways reinforced and even strengthened the power of teachers to shape participants' experiences, interpretations and aspirations.

A similar tension can be found in studies of modern corporations, as well. While flat organizations and personalistic forms of authority are often celebrated in the corporate world, qualitative research shows that many people find ambiguous structures and personalistic forms of authority exhausting and undesirable (see Swidler 1979; Kunda 2006). The indeterminacy and informality of these organizational arrangements does not eliminate the presence of shared rules, norms and standards of excellence, but simply makes them harder to see and more difficult to

master. While organizations which refuse to provide a single standard for what it means to be a "good member" allow for greater individual freedom and diversity, they can also create anxiety among members whose sense of themselves and the good life is always and necessarily a relational construction. This ambiguity and anxiety may even make members *more* reliant on the organization than those with more clearly prescribed rules and standards of excellence.

Summary: An Intuitive Journey?

"*Authorship of the reinvented self is not the unique privilege of the subject, nor simply directed by the experts to whom they turn, but rather emerges from the interaction between the two*"
(Scott 2010: 213)

Existing scholarly work has tended to define "religion" by the subordination of the self to external authority, while "spirituality" is defined, in contrast, by the exercise of self-authority (see for example, Heelas 1996; Houtman and Auspers 2007[105]). As Giordan (2009: 231) has argued, spirituality is "a modality of referring to the sacred that is legitimized no longer by obedience to the external authority of a religious institution, but rather by the subject him/herself, by the free expression of his/her creativity." This assumption, as Matthew Wood (2009: 238) has argued, fails to offer a properly sociological examination of self-authority as discourse and practice, and overlooks some of the important issues and problems that arise in communities structured around this emphasis. Most notably, when anyone can technically hear and discern the will of God, it becomes a problem for the maintenance of social order. It is here then that cultural discourses, institutional logics and shared practices arise to 'fill the gaps,' where patterns of

[105] Houtman and Auspers' (2007) paper builds this assumption into their attempt to measure affiliation with what they call "post-Christian spirituality." The authors include measures of both "critical distance" from the Christian Church and a "rejection of secularist rationalism" into their dependent variable (meant affiliation with post-Christian or New Age spirituality. However, as Swidler's account of logics of love makes clear, individuals may make use of discourses and logics of which they are critical or even discursively reject.

action are not clearly defined. These resources help individuals decide on lines of action, but do so, ultimately, by constraining freedom and imposing order.

In these communities, I found that references to internal and external sources of authority were regularly invoked side-by-side. Practitioners were told to listen to their "internal voice," and to take on only those practices that "work for you." At the same time, teachers and texts offered justifications and evidence for why this specific practice *should* or *ought* to work. At times, it felt like teachers were saying, albeit less explicitly: only your experience can tell you if the practice works, but we know that it does, and there are plenty of accounts and hundreds of years of history to back us up. As Ron told the TTs one day in our discussion of the ethical principles of yoga (as outlined in the Yoga Sutras), "You have to try things on, explore it, see what it means; what it really is and if it works for you. *I think you will find that it will*, but we're not asking you to believe it because we said it or because it's in the yoga sutras. You need to sort of test it out, sit with it and see what it really means." The priority as in Ron's statement is on direct, personal, subjective experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. Understanding the yamas and niyamas is inherently embodied, acquired only through direct experience. At the same time, however, Ron tells us that he thinks we will find these principles both applicable and useful, suggesting that practitioners *ought* to find this to be the case (if they are doing it right). As Ron's explication of the yamas and niyamas makes clear, the neat dichotomy between the external and internal, as well as the clear differentiation among faith, reason and experience as sources of authority, are disrupted and complicated in these communities.

The findings presented in this section complicate and add nuance to our understanding of self-authority in several important ways. First, we can investigate self-authority as a discourse and an orientation, constructed and transmitted through social interaction, rather than simply an

objective feature of the process of formation in some communities. As a discourse, self-authority is "very often interwoven with discourses about duty, obedience and submittance" and is itself "redolent with social norms and morals" (Wood 2009: 272).[106] The process of internalizing and enacting self-authority rests on practitioners' engagement with external sources of authority (texts, teachers, organizations, traditions, and science). Second, similar to those studied by Swidler (2001), I find that practitioners continue to draw on and make use of symbolic resources – discourses, rhetorics and accounts – which they are critical of or even outright reject.[107] A discursive rejection of institutions and external authorities does not necessarily correlate with a rejection of these resources in practice.

Through training, practitioners learned to feel confident and comfortable enough to take what worked for them and leave behind what did not, in some cases actively changing or modifying those elements to suit their needs. At the same time, they were taught to listen to external authorities with a stance of reverence and submission. At times, these seemingly contradictory instructions were integrated through a logic of linear progression, in which external authorities were most important and more central early on in the process of formation, and less important later as the practitioner cultivated their spiritual intuition. At other times, the two sources of knowledge were invoked side-by-side, and were used to reinforce rather than relativize one another.

[106] Wood argues that what was most interesting and definitive of the groups and individuals he observed was not their rejection of external authorities, but "that they developed relationships with many authorities from a diversity of sources" (241).

[107] This is an important insight, especially in light of the fact that recent work attempting to measure affiliation with New Age or Post-Christian spirituality has built criticism and rejection of both institutional religion and "secularist rationalism" into its measure (see Houtman and Auspers 2007).

The Process of Formation

In addition to combining an emphasis on internal and external sources of authority, I found that the central discourse and rhetorics used to describe how the process of formation unfolded and what it required also combined these two sets of logics. I found that this dual-emphasis was in two key discursive spaces. First, I found that practitioners placed simultaneous emphasis on the need for sustained, personal effort and for ultimate surrender in the process of formation. In doing so, they argued for the importance of personal agency and intentional effort, as well as articulating their limits. Second, I found that these communities emphasize freedom, flexibility and innovation in practice, while also articulating the benefits of rules, structure and discipline.

In each section, I first highlight the tensions present in the discourses of these communities, before showing that they are resolved, at least in part, through a narrative that constructs formation as a linear progression. Effort, for example, was said to be more necessary early on in the process of formation and less necessary or even antithetical to the position of the advanced practitioner. Likewise, flexibility and experimentation are considered more acceptable early on in the process, when the practitioner is 'trying out' techniques and practices. Eventually, however, the practitioner must choose an approach and "go deep" by committing to a routine and sticking to it. Flexibility and innovation are then encouraged again, late in the process of formation, after the practitioner has a stable base of knowledge and understanding from which to operate.

Effort and Surrender

> "It is important that we take advantage of what is available: classes, teachers, talks, events, books, health food centers. There is nothing wrong with taking advantage of things that help you become what you want to be**.** But you should be patient with yourselves. In your hand out, you go the Desiderata. Everyone has seen that. It says, beyond a healthy discipline, be gentle with yourself. That is worth noting. You do want a healthy discipline. You do want to work at this

stuff and notice when you've made a mistake and see what we can do to avoid doing it again. That is fine, but we should be gentle and kind and loving with ourselves." – Aadesh

"… a lot of effort can be put into prayer, and there's a certain activity to it, which is, you know, good activity and peaceful activity. But in the end, it's the individual before God … In the end, it's God who does the work in you …you spend your whole life doing good things and doing prayer, and you get to a point where it's what God does in you. And it takes a long time to get out of the way. I wouldn't say that I'm there, but at least I recognize now how I can get in the way." – Jane, CP practitioner

In these two quotes, we can see some evidence of the tensions present between the importance placed on personal effort, the acknowledgement of its limits, and the value of surrender to transcendent forces within practitioners' understanding of the process of spiritual formation. Alongside disciplined, committed practice, teachers and texts stressed the need for surrender and submission: to let go of effort. Sister Nancy told practitioners, for example, that "It is strenuous to live a life of prayer." Practitioners must commit to putting in the effort required for a daily practice, and to maintain continuous reflection on God's presence and action. However, at the same time, practitioners were told that, "Human effort alone will not produce fruit, for the water comes from a bubbling spring rather than through manmade conduits" (Interior Castle, pg 104). In this section, I review some of the ways in which these two discursive emphases – on effort and on surrender – appeared in these communities.

Tensions

As I briefly addressed in Chapter 4, I found that practitioners in these communities make use of both internal and external attributions in accounting for their progress. On the one hand, it was repeatedly emphasized that spiritual formation was a long and arduous journey, requiring personal effort, intention and will. As Aadesh, the founder of the yoga studio told the students in a teacher training program: "There is no magic carpet ride to enlightenment." The necessity of effort was reinforced through references to scripture. Aspiring teachers at the yoga studio were

required to memorize sutra 14, which reads: "Practice becomes firmly grounded when well attended to for a long time, without break and in all earnestness." At the prayer house, Sister Nancy frequently reiterated to participants that they should dedicate 'an hour a day, a day a month and a week a year' to their spiritual formation. These communities, therefore, place "responsibility on the individual to act on behalf of or at the behest of God" (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 187). Spiritual formation requires hard work, dedication and commitment. The progress practitioners make can be attributed, at least in part, to the effort they dedicate to their practices.

Like the charismatic Christian studied by Tanya Luhrmann (2012), these practitioners are asked to submit themselves to an exacting process of disciplined practice through which they 'tune' themselves to the divine. Sister Nancy, as well as several of the texts assigned during my fieldwork at Trinity, argued that God was *not* a puppeteer, directing every detail of individual action. Rather, practitioners were encouraged to recognize that they are free to make choices in response to God. I found that practitioners internalized the necessity of effort. Pat, a retired nurse in her early 80s, who attended the Friday morning prayer group at Trinity, told me: "I am totally convinced that a time commitment is essential. I recently went to hear a talk by a Rabbi, and he said, 'Look at yourself and examine how much time you spend each day doing something that feeds your soul, and if it's not at least an hour, you're starving yourself.' And that's really the way I look at it, it's like we need food for our body, we need food for our soul as well or it'll dry up, and, so some sort of practice is necessary."

And Pat walks the talk. According to her own report, Pat had been practicing Centering Prayer for nearly a decade when we spoke, although she admits it has only been about five years with disciplined regularity. She currently practices twice a day for twenty minutes per session. In addition to maintaining this personal devotional practice, Pat also attends services at her local

parish weekly (and sometimes more), participates in a monthly prayer group at Trinity and organizes another prayer group, focused on contemplative practices, at her local parish.[108] Pat completed the intern program in spiritual direction offered at Trinity and currently serves as a spiritual director for others. She also meets with her own spiritual director on a monthly basis. Pat tells me that spiritual growth motivates her life, and this is evident in her daily practices.

At the same time, teachers and texts often described the process of formation as "simple" and "easy," requiring little effort. At one of the monthly prayer groups at Trinity, for example, Sister Nancy said that the world would be a different place if 'people only knew that all they had to do to find their True Selves was to do nothing.' As Thomas Keating said, in his comparison of spiritual formation to archery: "it's easy to negotiate the entire spiritual journey because all you have to do is accept it. It is already happening." The message being conveyed in classes and in texts was that we do not need to, and ultimately cannot, force change. Instead, it is God that does the work. Sister Nancy told students that 'it is important to remember that it is *not* about what *I* should do but about where God is leading me, about God's desire.' Yet at the same time, Sister Nancy continuously encourages attendees to do Centering Prayer every single day: to *allow* God to complete his transformation, to *give* him time to 'work on us.'

In order to become the kind of person they desire to be, practitioners learn to rely on both personal effort and divine will. During the opening of a CP workshop, Sister Nancy begins as she always does, with a reflection on why "you are here today." She begins, "I know why you are here. You want to live a life of peace and contemplation; to be close to God." She then notes, *"This life requires grace and cooperation with grace."* On the one hand, Sister Nancy explains

[108] It began in 2012 just before I started my fieldwork. On Pat's invitation, I was able to attend a meeting of this newly formed prayer group.

that we are called to give three gifts to God: the gifts of time, body and perseverance. She explains that CP is a practice – 'you *do* centering prayer' – which opens you to *receive* the *gift* of contemplation. Participants are encouraged to maintain a disciplined practice of Centering Prayer, but ultimately it is not their effort that leads to contemplation but God's grace. Contemplation is a gift from God. Centering Prayer is a *method* (technique) to receive this *gift*.

In both communities, but particularly at Trinity, practitioners described the process of coming to the practice as one that involved both effort and surrender to divine guidance. Practitioners argued that what initially prompted their action – the acts of seeking, searching, testing, trying – was a feeling that their souls are no longer being fed by the forms of religious community and practice to which they belong and participate. Judy, a CP practitioner, for example, accounted for her movement from a Protestant congregation to the Catholic RCIA program and ultimate conversion to Catholicism as follows: "I just didn't feel that my soul was being fed anymore… there were ways I wanted to go deeper, places I wanted to go that I – my soul was not getting that. And that's when another God moment (laughs) occurred." In Judy's and other practitioners' stories, an internal sense or desire was "met" by God moments: occasions and events where God intervened to open doors or to shine a light on certain paths, drawing their attention to certain options and making them available. Personal intuitions and efforts are driven and met by God. As one centering prayer practitioner told me, "God always calls you to him. It's whether or not you listen."

In both communities this tension between effort and surrender was also present in descriptions of the practice itself. Practitioners were told that they must exert effort during practice but were also that they should not be struggling. These instructions communicated to

practitioners that there were good and bad kinds of effort. For example, Ron encouraged practitioners to find the "edge" between comfort, effort and strain. He told the TTs,

"Looking where you are and seeing where that edge is between an easy comfortable posture and straining. We try to tell our students in the first shivaasana [corpse pose] to watch your body and be comfortable, but going back to Patanjali, there is some effort, some push. You want to get to that place where you find effort but you don't go past that effort to a strained position. That may take some analysis."

Ron explains that the yoga postures should be accomplished by "relaxing all stressful efforts." This prescription captures the spirit of yoga as a process of spiritual formation and was thought to apply to all yogic practices. In fact, stressful effort – or "trying to do something by sheer will"– was considered an indication that the ego was trying to dictate practice, and thought to be a self-defeating strategy. Effort, it seems, is more complicated than it first appears. Not all forms of effort are equal, some are better than others. Ron says that we should assess "whether it is an effort that causes you stress" or not. Ideally, "there is effort in your action but it isn't forced or stressful."

A similar differentiation of good and bad effort was articulated at the prayer house. In discussing the need to "let go" of the "false" or "shadow" self, it was communicated to participants that they should do so somewhat passively rather than with force. This was articulated most clearly in a discussion during the Wednesday morning monthly series at Trinity, where participants read *Spiritual Pilgrims*, by John Welch.[109] In Chapter 5, the author uses a fairy tale about a Princess and a frog as an analogy for the process of letting go of the false self. In our discussion of this chapter, Sister Nancy explains that she thinks it is 'about the symbolism.' She goes on, 'The shadow self is the frog and we have to distance ourselves from it, *but not by force*. We have to befriend it first. We have to kiss it and say goodbye.' Nancy acts

[109] Welch, John. *Spiritual Pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila*. Paulist Press, 1982.

out kissing the frog – using her hand - and saying goodbye – by letting it go. She explains that 'sometimes we can say goodbye forcefully and sometimes we say goodbye gradually.' Ruth Anne, a participant in her late 70s, adds that 'sometimes we let go with God's grace.' Nancy corrects her saying, 'Always. We always let go with God's grace.' But, there is a tension here is that the process of letting go is also 'freely chosen' as demonstrated in a quote from the very same text: "The spiritual life is not simply something which happens to a person but is a process which a person actively enters into in a free response to God" (pg 206).

The tension between (good) effort and surrender within the practice was described as a progression: "You want to get to this point [of steady effort] but then relax into the stretch also. Move to that edge but then let it be a relaxation that takes you deeper into the posture" (Ron). After finding the "edge," practitioners were then encouraged to "let go" and "relax" into the posture. This progression was in fact built into the instructions for a number of the asanas taught in the basic hatha yoga class, especially the "forward bends" such as *paschimottanasana* (see image below).

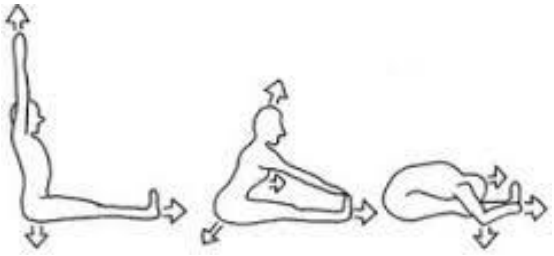

Figure 12: Paschimottanasana[110]

The forward bending postures include a period of effort, followed by a period of 'letting go' (the second and third images in Figure 12). During the first phase, students are instructed to "lengthen on the inhale" and "soften into that space" with the exhale. Each breath is used to bring the

[110] http://thebeautyhacks.com/2014/07/15/lets-do-yoga/

practitioner deeper into the posture. Finally, after several rounds of breathing aimed at deepening the posture and finding the "edge," the practitioner is instructed to "let go" and "relax" into the posture, allowing the spine to curve and releasing any tension or effort in the arms and shoulders. During this phase, "gravity does the work" and the practitioner only needs to think about releasing and relaxing areas of tension and strain.[111]

This progressive arc – from effort to surrender – was mirrored in how the process of formation was described more broadly. In general, effort was considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for spiritual growth and formation, but further, it was considered to be more important and central to the process in the early stages of spiritual development. In the next section, I analyze how the needs for effort and for surrender were combined through the deployment of a linear narrative of progressive development.

Linear Progression: Effort to Surrender

The tension between effort and surrender was resolved, in part, through a narrative that described the process of formation as a teleological progression from the former to the latter. Once the practitioner achieved "enlightenment" or "Christ Consciousness," it was said, they would no longer need to work at being spiritual and performing right action, but rather they would simply *be* that. Recall from the opening of this manuscript, the analogy used by Father Thomas Keating to describe the spiritual journey: the art of archery. In this analogy, Keating describes this linear progression of personal effort to surrender in detail. He argues that once the archer has – through

[111] As Courtney Bender (2010) observed in her book, *The New Metaphysicals*, however, even learning to relax and 'let go' is hard work, and is described as such: yoga instructors regularly told students that shavassana (corpse pose) and yoga nidra (yogic sleep) were the most difficult postures, because they required practitioners to learn to let go. Letting go (surrender) was described as antithetical to the dominant culture and therefore something many practitioners found difficult to do.

disciplined practice and "many failures" – cultivated "poise," he will "hit the bull's eye every time *without effort*." In fact, he says, "that level of skill *can't be achieved by effort*." Rather, effort "goes into the preparation and the skills to be attained": the archer develops "a feel for the practice" and then simple "knows" when to "let the arrow fly." Keating argues that it "is letting go under those circumstances" – circumstances of training and cultivated poise – that determines success. The expert archer, in this analogy, no longer puts in active effort but rather simply allows himself to be carried by his training.

In the realm of spirituality, however, training and effort is aimed at making the Self into an "instrument of God." To do so, the practitioner must first "fulfill the necessary conditions physically and mentally" through disciplined practice. However, any successes we have as practitioners – defined as occasions of hitting "the target in each of our daily practices" – are attributable not to "our skill" but to "our willingness to be an instrument of God." The goal is not to become an expert per se, but to "*let* the divine energy work through us." Unlike the archer, the spiritual practitioner does not rely on personal skill to "hit the mark" but rather on "becoming an instrument at one with the divine action." Personal effort, however, is required to cultivate a spiritual body and mind that is attuned to the divine (through the practices and techniques described in Chapter 3). Once accomplished, however, the ultimate goal is achieved through submission and surrender (the end of effort). These seemingly contradictory logics, therefore, were combined into a progressive narrative: effort is more important early on and then fades in importance as the practitioners develop a kind of 'spiritual poise' and eventually are able to surrender or 'let go' of effort.

In the first few weeks of the teaching training program at the IYI, Priya, an IY instructor and practitioner, came to give a special workshop on meditation to the class. During this and a

second session on meditation led by another instructor, Ramdas, practitioners learned the value of choosing and implementing particular concentrative techniques for steadying the mind *as well as* the value and necessity of eventually letting go of those techniques. Priya used two different analogies to describe this hybrid discourse of effort and surrender, of technique and letting go: smoothing the surface of a lake and a toddler learning to walk.

On the one hand, Priya notes that many students come to classes thinking that meditation requires them to "empty the mind," but she argues that this is not the case. She tells the trainees that it is easiest to think of the mind as a collection of thoughts, feelings and sensations, and to envision this collection as a lake or pool of water. Meditation, she explains, is the process and experience of getting the surface of the lake "very, very smooth." When the lake is very smooth, with no ripples, the contents (the water which represents the "mind stuff") are still there, but "you are able to gaze into the lake and see your true reflection with no distortions." "How do you get the lake smooth?" she asks. She tells us that you cannot smooth the surface of a lake or a bowl of water with your hand, or by shaking it (analogies for personal effort), but rather but letting it settle (a more passive, receptive form of action). At first, she explains, you apply concentrative techniques like focusing on the breath or repeating a mantra, but at some point, "you have to release the object you are holding" (the concentrative technique). "Only when you let go of the strategy, can you hope to see your true reflection," she tell us. However, "this takes preparation and practice."

Later in the session, Lynn follows up on the idea of "letting go" of techniques. She explains that she likes to use a candle for meditation, and asks if Priya's explanation implies that she should eventually stop using it. Priya explains that "*eventually* you want to close your eyes and let the mind go," but this does not necessarily mean that Lynn should throw her candle away.

Rather, Priya describes the experience and progression as more cyclical: she tells us to use the techniques or props when necessary, but to let go of them whenever possible and just "be." She then uses the analogy of a toddler learning to walk: when first learning, the child will "get going and be doing well but will eventually stumble and fall. But the mother, the object, will come and help them up again." Priya explains that this happens over and over again, until eventually the child no longer needs the mother. A key point being communicated in these analogies is that the practitioner must work hard before letting go – and that letting go itself is difficult – but that eventually the practitioner will be able to perform the practice without (or at least with less) effort.

In Aadesh's meditation workshop given later in the training, we focused primarily on the use of a mantrum in the practice of meditation. He explains that the mantra helps to bring the mind into a calmer state but once "the mind is satvic," (calm, even), he says, you can simply "let the mind flow on its own; let it be more subtle." When the mind starts to wander again, he suggests making the breath deeper or using the mantra again to refocus; however, he reminds us that "letting it go subtle is very valuable. That is more powerful than the grosser approach." As with a focus on the breath as a source of concentration, there are various stages of progression from the gross to the subtle in the use of a mantra. The grossest level of practice is to repeat the mantra out loud. Next, you can "repeat it just by moving the lips and tongue." The most subtle version is "to stop moving the tongue and lips but just to listen and feel it repeating. It is even more subtle when you stop making an effort, and you just let it carry you, but that doesn't happen until you've been using it for a long time." Aadesh's instructions also indicate the various stages in the development of a meditation practice, moving from the gross to the subtle or from the most effort to the most passive.

The same linear progression was present in descriptions of the spiritual journey more broadly. When we spoke after the end of the teaching training, Julia, for example, told me that she thought the program had contributed immensely to her spiritual growth. I asked her what it means to her to grow spiritually and how she assesses her progress. She responded:

"There is a quote – and I'm probably not going to get it exactly right – that I've had hanging on my wall at work for ten years. It's 'Dwell as close to the channel in which your life flows."[112] And I've always just thought that was lovely, so I've always wished I could find that channel and dwell in it… And I feel like I'm in that channel now. I feel like I've just being trying to find that and you know it [yoga] completely speaks to me now."

In this analogy, the spiritual journey required Julia to put in substantial effort, actively seeking to discover her dharma. At the same time, the idea of going with the "flow" captures the sense of ease and surrender that is encouraged in the later phases of the spiritual journey. The work goes into finding and getting to the edge of the channel. Once she gets there, Julia can simply float with the current. Of course allowing oneself to 'go with the flow' is not always an easy task. David, a Centering Prayer practitioner, for example, told me that he used to do "a lot of upstream swimming" rather than just "going with the flow." Once they find the river, practitioners must work to become comfortable letting go of the effort and allowing themselves to be carried (a position of surrender).

A similar linear progression from active effort to passive surrender is described by Teresa of Avilia in *The Interior Castle*, required reading for several of the prayer groups at Trinity. During a discussion of the book in the Saturday morning series, Sister Nancy explains that Mansions 1 through 3 'require your effort and hard work' while in mansions 4 through 7, 'God does all the work.' She uses the metaphor of watering a garden to describe the difference between the two approaches. The first three mansions, Nancy explains, are 'like digging out the

[112] The actual quote is by Henry David Thoreau and reads: "Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows."

trench for a sprinkler system' while the final four mansions are more like 'when it starts to rain and the garden is watered without your effort.' This analogy, as the ones used by Priya above, communicates to practitioners the progressive nature of their spiritual formation, from effort to surrender.

According to the progressive narrative, the practices and their corresponding dispositions become "firmly grounded" over time (Sutra 14, Yoga Sutras). "What does this [firmly grounded] mean?" Aadesh asked the TTs one day in class, before answering his own question: "It is just how you are. No more effort. It is just how you do things." "It is second nature," Vibha offers. Ron corrects her: "Actually, it is first nature." "Well put," Aadesh agrees. This statement, along with those made by Sister Nancy above (especially regarding the need to do nothing in spiritual formation) reflects the idea, central in these communities, that the divine Self is always-already present. Rather than building up a self, practitioners are simply revealing the Divinity that already exists within them. This perspective contrasts with the emphasis on personal effort in the discourse of the self-made self (Pagis 2013) where individuals are free to choose or invent their selves and identities and are solely responsible for its development and its content. From this perspective, popular in therapeutic conceptions of self-formation, people can choose to be whatever they want and are held accountable for the outcome of the process of becoming. In the communities I studied, however, the centrality and efficacy of effort is tempered by the need to transcend personal effort and to surrender to Divine will (or fate). In fact, the discourse suggests that the True Self cannot be revealed through personal effort alone.

Structure and Flexibility

In addition, I found that practitioners emphasized flexibility and freedom alongside structure and discipline when describing the practices and the process of formation. And, as in the discourses

of effort and surrender, I found that these competing emphases were often arranged into a linear progression. At the yoga studio, for example, Priya also described a linear progression not from effort to surrender but from experimentation to commitment. Swami Satchidananda, Priya explained to the TTs, always asked his disciples, "What do you do if you want to find water?" His answer was: If you pick one spot and dig deep, you will eventually find water. "But, what happens when you dig just a few feet in many different places?" he would ask. "You will never find water that way.". Priya explains that we should take some time and try out different approaches and techniques (a mantra, the breath, a candle), but then we should pick one and "go deep." If after a few months of practice, it is not working, we could then try another one. It was important, however, to eventually commitment to a practice and technique in order to fully receive the benefits.

The analogy of digging for water makes it clear that the specific technique one choses is less important than the commitment and discipline of sticking with it and "going deep": after all, no matter where you dig, you will eventually find water if you go deep enough. This emphasis gives the individual the flexibility and freedom to try on different practices and find what works *for them*, but simultaneously acknowledges the value of commitment and discipline. During this exchange, I asked Priya if the same is true for the sitting posture we used during meditation: Should we keep it the same or is it okay to switch it up? Priya responds: "The more you keep the same, the better it is going to be." She says that it is like making a "groove for you mind to flow in": if you have lots of grooves, the mind can't settle in as well, so use the groove and it will deepen. Aadesh made a similar claim about choosing a mantra for meditation in his workshop: "You may initially try a lot of different mantras, but eventually you want to just pick one. Only when you do one for a long time can you start building the mental patterns that allow it to stay

like that." In this section, I review some of the ways in which these two discursive emphases – on structure and flexibility – appeared in these communities.

Tensions

During the Saturday morning prayer group series at Trinity, Maryanne, one of the long-time participants, commented that she liked how the book we were reading, *Teresa of Avila*, encouraged people 'to be flexible and not too rigid in their practice.' Sister Nancy agreed but added, 'Structure is good but structure is not the end.' 'The goal of practice,' she continued, 'is not to follow the rules of practice'; however, 'structure does help us. Structure is a means to the end: to the goal of practice.' She tells the participants that in her own life, she finds it beneficial to set aside specific times to pray. Otherwise, she 'just won't do it.' The approach to spiritual formation being encouraged here was one that is both flexible and structured, allowing room for individual variation but still requiring commitment and discipline. I observed this tension again and again at both sites.

In reviewing for the final exam in the yoga teacher training program, for example, we discussed the defining features of the "yogic diet." The most important requirement was that diets should be easily digestible (*sattvic*). In addition, the teacher training manual made a number of additional suggestions regarding diet. For example, it recommended that practitioners should ideally be vegetarian. All food should be fresh, not old or stale. You should eat either all cooked or all raw food in one sitting. You should only eat when truly hungry (not out of boredom, or because it is time). You should only sip water while eating and wait to drink more until 20 minutes after you eat. You should avoid toxins like coffee and alcohol. You should eat simply and more for health and necessity than for taste. When eating, you should not being doing anything else, including watching TV: you should concentrate only on eating. You should try to

avoid eating when angry or depressed, or in a hurry. You should consecrate your food. And then, after 15 minutes of discussing suggestions for the ideal yogic diet, Aadesh, tells the TTs, "And no fanaticism – eat what you want. Don't make a bunch of rules."

Through these interactions, practitioners learn that the process of spiritual formation while individualized and relatively flexible, also requires them to be committed and disciplined. Rather than seeking intense religious experiences by regularly switching up and re-enchanting rituals and practices (Tavory and Winchester 2012), these practitioners value structure, discipline and repetition. As I will return to in the final section, this tension helps to situate these communities between the a dwelling-oriented spirituality – defined by rules and rigid structures – and a seeking-oriented spirituality – defined by its lack of structure, discipline and stability, making it ephemeral and fleeting. On some occasions, the tension was resolved through an emphasis on a linear progression from structure to flexibility: teachers and texts argued that practitioners needed a stable foundation before they could innovate.

Linear Progression: Structure to Flexibility

Rohit: If we all know this stuff and it's all within us, why so much structure?

Aadesh: Well let me ask you something: if you hadn't gone through these past 10 weeks, would you be able to do what you can do now?

Rohit: Clearly no.

Aadesh: Well, that is the answer to your question. Not only did you learn to teach a yoga class and do it well, you used this to continue exploring yourself in good and healthy ways. That is what this is for.

Ron: *And until you don't need the structure, you do need the structure*. There is the discipline and structure that is necessary until you can let that go.

As demonstrated in the exchange above, a linear progression from structure to flexibility was evident in the design of teacher training program, particularly in how participants were taught to give instructions. During the training, it became clear that there was essentially a script for the

basic hatha class that participants were learning to teach. The script dictates not only the postures to be performed, and the order in which they were performed, but also the *specific words* participants should use to instruct them. Deviation from the script was not encouraged. In fact, on many occasions, it seemed like memorizing the wording outlined in the manual or in Aadesh's transcribed class, was the goal of the training. The participants who stuck closest to this script were rewarded with praise and encouragement, those who deviated were corrected.

However, towards the end of the ten-week training, the flexibility and creativity involved in teaching was emphasized. At the end of the program, for example, Aadesh told the TTs: "You are not going to teach a qualifying class again, so when you teach, no one is watching or judging, so teach how you like. At the IYI, the class has to have the finale [i.e. yoga nidra, pranayama, mediation] but you can do a variety of other things. I've taught classes that were all optional poses before. But mostly I wanted to say that when you teach, the class is gone. Teach. Feel free. Teach how you are led. Go with the flow." This approach to teaching, however, seemed in direct contradiction to the emphasis placed on specific wording and particular sequencing during the training. Participants were not taught how to innovate and be flexible, but were taught to memorize and regurgitate a class script.

Summary

While there are often concerns raised (by scholars and religious persons alike) about the ephemeral and undisciplined nature of contemporary spirituality, the communities I studied strongly emphasized the importance of serious, deliberate and sustained effort in pursuing personal spiritual growth. Spiritual growth, according to the discourse of practitioners in these communities, requires the maintenance of disciplined practices, including "prayer, meditation and other forms of devotional activity" (Wuthnow 2003: 44), which strengthen the individual's

inner life and personal relationship to Divinity. These practitioners therefore differ from those who claim casual interest in spirituality but do not expend much effort towards achieving it.[113]

Much of the existing scholarly work on social practices suggests that novices need structure and discipline in order to acquire the necessary foundational skills and competencies to be able to successfully innovate. This is due in part to the fact that improvisations, while crafted on the spot, make use of existing (and collective) resources and are constrained by informal rules (Becker 1963; Sudnow 1978; Wuthnow 2003). Robert Wuthnow (2003: 242), for example, writes: "Hard work is generally more effective if it follows certain rules that have been found to help people accomplish their goals. This is why painters learn rudimentary techniques of sketching and pianists learn finger drills." And he suggests that the emphasis on techniques, practices and rules exists in the religious field as well, where it is said "that one gains a closer relationship to God by mastering the rules that have been set forth in religious traditions" (ibid). From this perspective, structure and flexibility go hand in hand, but also exist in a linear progression, from the former to the latter.

Discourse, Symbolic Boundaries and Identity Work

> "Notice how people start reacting to you as you start to grow in this practice. It can be difficult because they won't understand or they'll take on the popular societal opinions which don't match with what you are learning. You might find that the circles you run in start to shift. All of a sudden, the people you wanted to do things with before, there is no interest there anymore, and that there are other people that you'd rather be with and be around. You need some non-attachment. Things are going to start shifting. Know coming in that it is probably going to start to occur. **People aren't on the same path as you are.**" – Ron

[113] "Despite the fact that three-quarters of the public claim to be interested in spirituality (and nearly half say their interest is increasing), most people do no expend a lot of effort in pursuing spiritual growth … This casual interest in spiritual is sufficient to propel people to pray once in a while and to attend religious services on special occasions … but it does not involve significant personal effort or serious commitment to learning the teachings of a religious tradition" (Wuthnow 2003: 52)

While embracing a pluralist religious identity (Mermis-Cava 2009), I found that practitioners still drew boundaries between being a yogi or a contemplative and other approaches and perspectives in the broader religious and cultural field. There was a clear sense among practitioners, as Ron says above, that others were not "on the same path." Aadesh was quick to remind participants that there was no "need to be judgmental" about these differences; however, I found that practitioners did in fact express not only a sense of difference but of distinction relative to others.

As in Gieryn's (1983) work on science, in this section, I take what has been considered an analytical problem for scholars of religion – distinguishing forms of spirituality, religion and secularism – as a practical problem for practitioners. Like scientists, these practitioners have a stake in distinguishing themselves from other, related approaches in the cultural field. While both communities argue that there are many paths that lead to the same end, teachers and texts must simultaneously articulate what makes this particular group and its approach unique and good if they are to recruit and retain committed members. In fact, while modern conditions have opened up space for the proliferation of ways of being and defining oneself (in the field of religion and beyond), these very same conditions also require that people actively work to legitimate and justify their personal choices against possible alternatives. This, I argue, drives a process of boundary-work (Gieryn 1983; Lamont 2009) in which practitioners articulate the differences that matter most between themselves and relevant out-groups, in an effort to achieve positive demarcation.

A close examination of the content and processes of boundary-work is particularly important in the current religious milieu because, as Robert Wuthnow (1989, 2005) has argued, the twentieth century saw major shifts in symbolic boundaries, modes of identification and

alterations in the categories of religious discourse and identification. Previously important fault lines such as denomination have given way to new categories of difference and distinction. The members of these two communities demonstrate these shifting allegiances, as they embrace identities such as "spiritual," "freethinker," "yogi," "contemplative" or "mystic" as much as and in most cases more than traditional religious categories (this being true even when they are active in traditional institutional religious life). In such a diverse and rapidly changing social field,[114] how do communities and individuals situate and justify their particular approaches? Who do practitioners consider the most relevant comparison groups? Along what dimensions do they distinguish themselves?

Gieryn's work on science provides insights into how this process may occur. Gieryn (1983) uses the term "boundary-work" to refer to an ideological style he identified among scientists in which practitioners attempt to create a public image for science by contrasting it favorably to non-scientific activities. He finds that there are alternative sets of characteristics available for ideological attribution: science can be made to look empirical or theoretical, pure or applied. Selection of one or another description depends on which characteristics best achieve demarcation in a way that justifies scientists' claims to authority and resources vis-à-vis culturally relevant others (for scientists, this usually meant the humanities or mechanics). Gieryn

[114] I follow Matthew Wood's (2009: 282) suggestion here that 'religion' and 'spirituality' are best investigated as a "unitary arena of practice, involving power-relations in competitions over capital." However, Wood (2009) suggests that in New Age networks, "claims of legitimacy did not involve competition and did not result in structured relationships with others … did not result in the establishment of followers or disciples, or the establishment of a specific habitus or identity" (242). Wood goes further to argue that New Age individuals and groups in do not "play the game" of the field: in other words, they do not compete for capital on the basis of a specific location and associated habitus. However, in the communities I studied, I found that practitioners did indeed perform *identity work* in an effort to situate and justify their approach relative to others.

finds, for example, that, "science is no single thing: its boundaries are drawn and redrawn in flexible … and sometimes ambiguous ways."

As described in the sections above, the practice-oriented spiritualties I studied are similarly multi-vocal. This approach or orientation towards religious life can be made to look flexible and personal or structured and disciplined. It can be described as relying primarily on self-authority or as rooted in tradition and legitimated by expert testimony. While these collectivities are not involved in the same kinds of disputes as scientists, especially regarding access to material resources, groups and organizations in the spiritual milieu do have a stake in achieving cultural legitimacy and recruiting potential members. In this section, I want to suggest that the seemingly contradictory sets of discourses, rhetorics and logics I outline above provide practitioners with a flexible toolkit (Swidler 1986) which allows them to positively demarcate their particular approach to spiritual life in relation to others in the field.

In each community, the others against which practitioners sought to define themselves shared both similarities and differences. At a general level, the "others" were the same for both communities. I found that practitioners at both sites sought to carve out a middle ground between what they saw as two problematic extremes: the overly dogmatic and rigid approach of institutional religion and the overly ego-centered and consumerist approach of spiritual seekers. Like Goldilocks, the practitioners in these communities implied that their approach to spiritual life and formation was "just right." At the same time, however, the more specific out-groups demarcated by practitioners varied across the two groups.

Centering Prayer practitioners, for example, were most concerned about distinguishing themselves from "the Church" (the Catholic Church specifically) on the one hand, and from those who claimed to be "spiritual but not religious," broadly speaking, on the other. Yoga

practitioners, however, were most concerned with distinguishing themselves from "religion" broadly speaking, on the one hand, and from non-spiritual forms of yoga, more specifically, on the other. The groups' relative location in the broader religious field may explain why the 'others' they define themselves focus more closely at different ends of the spectrum between the institutional and New Age, the religious and the secular. In both cases, however, I found that claims about what it means to be a member of these communities – a contemplative or a yogi – were usually made by drawing on one or more of the discourses outlined above. Practitioners, for example, would draw on discourses of self-authority, pluralism and flexibility to demarcate themselves from institutional religious life. At the same time, practitioners drew on discourses of submission, discipline and structure when drawing boundaries against spiritual seekers.

In taking up this line of inquiry, I hope to add to Swidler's account of the uses of cultural discourses. I found that individuals and social groups use different cultural discourses not only orient themselves in relation to institutions (and institutional structures), or to decide on and justify their actions, but also to carve out a sense of identity by positioning themselves in the broader social field. Defining oneself vis-à-vis others, and feeling a sense of legitimacy in relation to that position and identity, is part of the larger "problem of action" highlighted in Swidler's work. I will argue that this positioning is accomplished, at least in part, through discursive maneuverings.[115] Individuals are aware not only of other individuals, groups and

[115] Bamberg et al (2011: 187-8) also suggest that subjects resolve the dilemma of self-differentiation and self-integration through choices in discourse. These choices, the authors argue, signal the speaker's position in relation to others. Within talk, speakers mark affiliations between self and others in terms of proximity and distance: "aligning with (or positioning in contrast to) these categories, speakers draw up boundaries around them – and others – so that individual's identities and group belongings become visible. Thus, it is typically through discursive choices that people define a sense of (an individual) self as different from others, or integrate a sense of who they are into communities of others … "However, which aspect of

approaches, but of the available symbolic resources and dominant cultural discourses that structure them. In articulating a sense of what makes them unique, practitioners draw on some of these resources and rejecting or critiquing others.

Vs. Dwellers

Early on in my fieldwork, I attended several Centering Prayer groups that met at churches in the area surrounding Trinity Prayer house. The following set of field notes comes from my experience at one such session, hosted at an Episcopal Church and run by Paul, an Episcopalian in his late 70s:

Paul's watch beeped to let us know the session of silent prayer was over. After a few seconds of continued silence, Paul repeated the Lord's Prayer, slowly, in a low tone. When he finished, the others opened their eyes, as he reach for and flipped open his copy of the Bible that lay on the coffee table. Paul said (mostly to me, by way of explanation) that there is an assigned reading for each day, but since he 'didn't really like the one for today,' he chose this one, from Mark 7, instead. The reading describes a scene in which the Jewish pharaohs ask Jesus why his disciples eat with defiled hands, in violation of the tradition of the elders. Jesus chides the Pharaohs, arguing that they teach human principles as doctrine, and, in doing so, violate the word of God. Further, Jesus tells the Pharaohs that they pray with their lips in vein, because they are not close to him in their hearts.

Paul reads the passage aloud two times in a row. The others sit now with their eyes closed again. There is a period of silence. Paul then read the same passage a third time. After this final reading, he shared some of his thoughts on the passage. First, he tells the group that he thinks

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sameness and difference is picked and made relevant in a particular speech situation is likely to vary…. And is open to negotiation and revision" (188).

'Jesus should have been a lawyer,' because of the way he is able to get at the Pharaohs for their hypocrisy. His second thought is how many people still behave like the Pharaohs: they follow the precepts they are taught but do not seek God in their hearts. By way of example, he notes that much of traditional, religious practice is learned and repeated by rote. Paul relates a story about how someone once said, "Christianity doesn't work," to which someone else replied, "Christianity has never been tried." He thinks the passage captures this sentiment and his own feelings about the state of Christian religious practice.

At the end of the session, I sat with the other attendees, and talked in more detail about the practice and their experiences. I asked why the chose to attend this group session rather than practicing at home. Tom, a member of the Episcopal Church in his mid-50s, says he comes, in part, because it is easier to practice in a collective setting, away from all the potential distractions available at home. But, he says, "It is more than that." He goes on: "It is being around people who share the same goal; the same desire to live a spiritual life." This is not something he feels among "other people in the church." Rather, he thinks that other people 'seem to go just for social things,' which of course, 'is fine' but Tom wants 'to be around people doing something deeper.'

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Centering Prayer practitioners often described themselves as being situated on the outskirts, or at the edges, of the Church. Many felt the Church and its institutional leaders were skeptical or even dismissive of the contemplative approach and its practitioners. Mary, for example, told me: "I think contemplative living is held in great disregard in a large part of the church … people where I was [attending Mass], they're doing what they do and they don't want anything to rock the boat, so they stay away from anything that sounds mystic or deeply spiritual or

contemplative." She smiles and laughs, "God help us! Right?" Another practitioner, Linda, related the story of going to hear Basil Pennington, a major proponent of Centering Prayer, speak at a local parish. She told me that he is "a great speaker" and liked how he wasn't afraid to offer criticisms of the Church. She recalled that he joked with the audience at one point, saying, 'but as of today … I am still a Franciscan in good standing in the Church." This sense of themselves as an embattled minority provided a foundation for a unified, collective identity. Practitioners justified and accounted for both their extra-institutional affiliations as well as their continued commitment to the Church (see also Mermis-Cava 2009) drawing on the logics described above.

Participants at Trinity, like Paul, continued to attend Church services, in many cases on a daily basis, and were very involved in and committed to the life of their parish. However, they also have sought out instruction and fellowship outside the Church. Trinity Prayer house, for example, was described by practitioners as a space where they could connect with "like-minded" individuals who are "on the same path": a path that is *qualitatively different* from that taken by the average Catholic. The primary difference, as one practitioner, Barbara, suggested was a sense of "living their faith… more consciously, more intently, more intensely." Likewise, when I asked Melody if anyone else in her family was spiritually active, she told me, "No, not really. I mean there are those that go to church and … everyone that I can think of has the belief in God and so forth, but not the quest for spiritual enrichment that I have."

As these examples suggest, I found that practitioners tended to draw on discourses of self-authority, active seeking and conscious effort in describing what was unique about their approach vis-à-vis the institutional Church. Of particular importance for Centering Prayer practitioners was the centrality of personal effort and commitment to self-exploration. I found that practitioners differentiated the "religious" from the "spiritual" by claiming that spiritual

persons were those who, like themselves, were committed to consciously and continuously 'work on' their relationship to the divine, and who sought to embody the spiritual ideal throughout their daily lives.

This difference in approach was not without a sense of distinction either. Practitioners described the Church as promoting an *underdeveloped* and *immature* approach to religious life. As Mary told me, "I think the problem with a lot of our Catholics today is the fact that most of them still have an eighth grade mentality regarding what their Catholicism is all about. They're still child-like, you know? '*I have to go to Mass because the church tells me I have to go to Mass,'* not because God is calling me to go to Mass every week … Unless you're moving into a scripture study group or something, you don't have the same appreciation for the Mass, because you're still stuck in that mentality of not having moved forward." At the same time, Mary explained that she wasn't sure that many people would really be open to a contemplative approach: "they're still very much into oral prayer. '*I'll say in our father ... That'll do it.*'" She thinks it is important to try to "evangelize," to try to "get these adults who are still stuck in eighth grade mentality … to move beyond just what they've learned in school … let's move on to: How does your Catholicism affect you in your daily life?"

Mary clearly felt that the contemplative approach was more "mature" than the approach exemplified by the majority of Catholics and encouraged by the Church. This sense of contemplation as part of a linear progression in one's personal religiosity was articulated in the workshops offered at Trinity, as well. During the intern program, for example, Sister Nancy explained that there were "three degrees of humility," and used the metaphor of a close, intimate relationship to illustrate each stage. The first degree she explained is where you mostly aim to avoid sin: you live a moral life by following the rules of the Church. Your approach is motivated

primarily by a desire not to induce the wrath of or disappointment of the other (God). In the second degree, you want to do what pleases the other (God), and love him so much that you are willing to give up your own will and desires. At this stage, you are motivated more by love and affection than by fear. In the third degree, she continues, you love the person so much you want to not only understand but in union with them, so that their fear is your fear and their joy is your joy. The progressive nature of Sister Nancy's explanation, and the metaphor of a relationship, implies that these stages are not simply equally valid alternatives, but more or less ideal approaches to religious life.

I found that individual practitioners used this framework to describe their personal development. Marie, a 50-year old teacher and Centering Prayer practitioner, for example, told me that she struggled with feeling distant from God for a long time, and that she overcame this distance only by dramatically altering her understanding of and approach towards God and the Church. She explained further:

"There are a lot of rules and regulations in the Catholic Church and they're designed to keep us safe. But when the rules become more important than the living out of our faith then there's a distortion. I felt separated from God when I couldn't live up to the rules and regulations, when I was constantly falling in to sin … But I've come to realize that it was me separating myself and that God is there all the time … I learned – and it was a major shift – that man was not made for the law but the law was made for man. That these are perfect ideals and I need to try to strive to live that way, but that I'm never going to be perfect.

Many of the Centering Prayer practitioners I spoke with told me that their *spiritual* lives and growth were most closely linked to their personal practices rather than their involvement in the Church. As Melody told me, "I think prayer has been the biggest part of my spiritual life. Not that I don't gain from Church, but I really feel for me, my growth throughout my life has been through personal prayer."

I also found that practitioners drew on the same language – of flexibility, of self-authority, of personal effort – in describing how they related to the Church. They would pick

and choose what they liked from the resources (practices, discourses) made available there, viewing them not as clear-cut mandates but as "tools for transcendence" (Meintel 2014). When I spoke with Sherry, for example, she told me she did not always agree with the teachings of the Church – "I'm just not a pope person or hierarchy; just going along with what they have mandated as Catholic" – and felt empowered to let go or leave behind the things she disagreed with. "I will walk out of a church if they're going to be talking about who you should vote for because of their beliefs. Right to life, or right to choice," she told me. When people aren't accepted because of their orientation, she felt this was not of Christ.[116] "I don't think a lot of what the Catholic Church did and does is Christ. It's man and we've made it God Man kind of. I'll never quite fit for that."

Many of the practitioners I spoke with expressed similar criticisms of the Church – its beliefs, practices and hierarchy – but at the same, time, they felt it offered useful tools for their spiritual formation. Sherry, for example, told me that the Church offers "structures" and "foundations" which are important pillars in her religious life. She thinks the structure keeps her from just dropping everything, and therefore finds them valuable. Just as spiritual practices can fuel religious commitment, religious rituals, institutions and communities also act as pillars for the faith-lives of many practitioners who embrace a practice-oriented spirituality. Centering prayer practitioners were able to positively distinguish themselves from their spiritually unenlightened fellow parishioners by drawing on discourses of self-authority, flexibility and personal effort. The people I spoke with did not suggest that other parishioners were not

[116] Many practitioners blamed the Church's outdated views on important issues for a loss of members, especially young people. Mermis-Cava (2009: 441) found the same sentiment among Christian Meditators, most of whom were Catholic.

Catholics, but they did imply that their faith was shallower because of it lacked a spiritual and contemplative dimension.

Vs. Seekers

On the other hand, when considering themselves vis-à-vis those they considered less serious seekers, I found that practitioners emphasized the role of discipline, submission and surrender in the process of spiritual formation. Practitioners drew boundaries between their own and other programs and practices of self-improvement, both within and outside of the religious field. These programs, from life-coaching to exercise-based yoga, for example – were often criticized for a lack of structure, rules and standards as well as the intentions – ego-centered, they argued – with which participants approached practices and techniques of self-change. While other programs may be concerned with self-improved and engaged in fundamentally efficacious practices, they were perceived to lack a stable moral foundation and structured framework of apprenticeship from which to proceed.

At Trinity, for example, practitioners sought to distinguish themselves from those who claimed to be "spiritual but not religious"; in other words, those engaged in a process of spiritual formation but without a traditional religious affiliation. One poignant example comes from a discussion that occurred during the intern program for spiritual directors. The group was reviewing the second chapter – titled "The Six Paths: Spiritual, Religious, Spiritual but not Religious and Everything in Between" – in James Martin's *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. In this section, Martin reviews several distinct "paths" to religious life, including "the path of belief," "the path of independence" and "the path of exploration." Afterward, Martin digresses slightly, by his own admission, to give his thoughts on the perspectives and approaches of the "spiritual but not religious" (see pages 44-50). He defends

religion against claims that it is arcane, oppressive and narrow-minded, while emphasizing what he feels are religion's important contributions: love, forgiveness and charity, as well as a sense of community and of transcendence. Throughout the chapter, Martin is careful to admit the faults of religious institutions and adherents, but ultimately conveys his belief in the value of being *both* spiritual *and* religious.

During our discussion, Judy – a second year student in the intern program – tells the group that she liked Martin's arguments about the benefits of adhering to a single religion and not 'just being spiritual,' which is something she has heard a lot of people say recently. She notes that she sometimes feels 'strange or uncool' for being religious, but that Martin's argument helped her feel justified in her adherence. Sister Nancy affirms her, and notes that the spiritual life 'well lived' will lead to a desire to join others. She then asks what we see as the differences between religion and spirituality. The conversation that followed described religion as rules rooted in traditions, and spirituality as something relatively amorphous and hard define but revolving ultimately around a personal relationship with God. Sister Nancy then argues that ideally, you should 'feel your spirituality expressed in your religion' and they should feed one another. Your life in the church, she explains, is growing as does your relationship with God does. During this and other similar conversations, it was clear that practitioners valued the sense of structure and community that Catholicism provided. They drew on these features of their orientation to mark the boundary between the contemplative approach and the approach of those who claimed to be "spiritual but not religious."

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"We are so fortunate to be learning underneath these wonderful yogis. I haven't ventured off too far, but when I have, I always go right back to the IYI because what you find there is really authentic. It is the real thing. No dippy hippies. These are real yogis. They know their stuff." – Shanti

As Shanti, one of the instructors at the IYI, makes clear in the quote above, IY practitioners often articulated a sense of difference and distinction relative to other schools of and approaches toward the practice of yoga. This was particularly true in relation to styles that were more physically intensive or which viewed yoga primarily as a form of exercise rather than a spiritual discipline. While IY practitioners claim a pluralist identity ("One Truth, Many Paths"), practitioners regularly offered critiques of other schools, styles and approaches. Critiques often centered on practitioners' *intentions* and *motivations* for practice: other schools, and their adherents, IY practitioners argued, were more concerned with achieving gumbi-like postures or the "yoga body" than on the spiritual growth and development.

Anthony, for example, drives more than 30 minutes to the IYI, passing several other studios on his way including one he attended for several years before coming to Integral Yoga. He told me that he chose to make the commute because he "just felt more comfortable" at the IYI. While he sometimes wishes the practice was a bit more physically challenging, he told me, "I'm getting more *spiritually* at the IYI" than at other centers and classes. The spirituality of the Integral Yoga style is evident for Anthony in both the style and the environment of the Institute. On Tuesdays, however, Anthony attends a yoga class with his wife at the fitness center near his home. He tells me that while he really likes the instructor and benefits from the class, "because it's in a gym environment, you're not getting the spiritual aspect." He argues that while he is able to channel the spiritual aspect of the practice for himself, he laments that there is no chanting or deep relaxation, "only for a minute at the end," he explains. "Just a quick decompression and a thank you for coming."

Others emphasized the spiritual aspect of the IYI, as well. Rashmi, for example, said she shopped around a bit before deciding on the IYI, and felt that "everybody was too commercial

and no one was teaching the spiritual part of it." When she went to classes at the IYI, however, she "really liked their style," especially the deep relaxation, and felt that it offered something distinct from other studio in the area. At other studios, she tells me, there was no meditation, no deep relaxation, no mantra japa; in other words, "no spiritual aspect." Rahsmi and Anthony, along with others members, chose the IYI because it was grounded in a more comprehensive program for spiritual growth and development. Beyond the physical practice of the asanas, practitioners at the IYI learn how to manage and control their prana through breathing practices, calm their minds with meditation, and live a spiritual life according to shared ethical principle (the yamas and niyamas).

In addition to their personal experiences with other studios and styles of yoga, practitioners' perspective regarding the uniqueness of the IY approach was also shaped through conversations and discussions that occurred in class. Aadesh, for example, regularly articulated how the teacher training program we were taking was different from (and better than) others offered in the area. One key difference was the strong emphasis on yogic philosophy in the IY training program, particularly the amount of time dedicated to studying the yoga sutras. Aadesh told us that other training programs often allot only a weekend – or sometimes even just a day – to this component of the training.[117] In fact, Aadesh claims that other instructors are "blown away" by the scope and depth of the "raja yoga" training offered in this particular program. The structure of the program and the articulation of its difference from others both conveyed to students the importance of situating the physical practice of yoga in a broader framework of

[117] This is barely enough to meet the minimum requirements for instruction in this area, according to the Yoga Alliance. For more on Yoga Alliance standards see: https://www.yogaalliance.org/Credentialing/Standards/200-HourStandards

spiritual development and grounded in a comprehensive way of life founded on shared goals and ethical principles.

This interpretation of yoga as a comprehensive "way of life" was also articulated to trainees on the 4-day retreat. During a lecture – or *satsang* – on the second evening, Aadesh asked participants, "Really, what is yoga?" Most people, he tells us, think yoga is about postures and yoga classes, but "those of you that are Integral Yogi's," know that this is only "a small part of yoga." Yoga, he continues, "is a much broader spectrum: doing the practice from the heart, doing real intellectual inquiry and exploration, doing loving service." The physical practice is part of a larger framework that guides practitioners on and off the mat, leading people to change and develop in a variety of ways: "They start changing their diet, the activities they do with their friends, because *their consciousness has been cleared up and elevated* ... They stop doing the things that are less supportive." Furthermore, Aadesh argues, the practice draws to ask deep, spiritual questions about who they are and why they are here. These changes, he suggests, are part of the natural consequences of a disciplined yoga practice. However, he argues, "Then there are people who are doing that actively and consciously and it is happening much faster."

Aadesh's argument demonstrates another key factor distinguishing Integral Yoga from other approaches: practitioners' intention or motivation for practicing. One day during the teacher training, for example, Aadesh told us: "In this country … hatha yoga is mostly just asanas and most of the people doing it are not awakened to their spiritual path." Inferring their motivations and intentions, Aadesh tells us that, "People get in to it because they want to look good, lose weight, their friends are doing it." The average yoga practitioner, according to Aadesh, is someone who is unaware of or does not embrace the spiritual nature and consequences of yoga. However, Aadesh tells us that yoga puts "you on a spiritual path" even

"without any awareness that it does." At the same time, awareness is important. Awareness, Aadesh tells us, "pumps up the volume," enabling growth and development to happen "much more quickly." Aadesh articulates what he sees as an important difference between Integral Yoga and others schools: a difference in awareness and intention. In doing so, he ties this difference to a sense of distinction by tying awareness and intention to progress. The ticket, he tells us, is in knowing that you are on a spiritual path.

Summary

The ambiguities and tensions in the discourses of practitioners in these communities, as described above, became tools in performing *identity work*, distinguishing what it meant to be a 'yogi' or a 'contemplative' from other available approaches – sets of discourses and practices – in the religious field. On the one hand, they draw on discourses and vocabularies associated with "spirituality" – such as self-authority, flexibility and personal effort – and by doing so, are able to differentiate themselves from more traditional forms of religiosity. On the other hand, they draw on the discourses and rhetorics associated with "religion" – such as submission, discipline and transcendence – and, in doing so, demarcate themselves from those they considered less serious and committed seekers. By drawing boundaries on both sides, practitioners were able to carve out a unique social identity betwixt and between the religious and the spiritual, or between dwelling and seeking (Wuthnow 1998). In making selective comparisons along particular dimensions, practitioners achieved not only demarcation but a sense of status and distinction.

Conclusions

Teachers, texts and practitioners in these communities combine seemingly contradictory sets of discourses in describing and justifying their desire for and approach to spiritual formation. Self-authority is learned and acquired in conversation with texts and teachers, as well as through

submission to the rules and standards of a formal, disciplined practice. Hard work and personal effort are necessary but not sufficient conditions for spiritual development. The process of formation requires both experimentation and commitment, freedom and structure. In these communities, commitment and discipline are means for accessing true freedom through the discovery of one's truest, most authentic self. In combining these discourses and rhetorics, these organizations offer practitioners an approach to religious life that honors and respects individual diversity while simultaneously imposing the constraints necessary for the development of a community and social order rooted in shared understandings of the self, of spirituality and of the "good life."

In doing so, these communities strike a balance between "post-modern" and "modern" emphases. On the one hand, these communities are exemplary cases of what is sometimes called a "post-modern" mindset: practitioners are immersed in a world defined by hybridity contradiction and complexity (Venturi 1966). In fact, I found that practitioners learn to embrace and to value duality and ambiguity, and see their comfort with these conditions as evidence of their spiritual development. In other words, the fact they do not need clear-cut answers to life's most complicated questions is part of the way in which they "do spirituality." At the same time, however, these communities rest on collective rules and norms as well as shared distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, self and other. These communities, therefore, combine modern with post-modern sentiments: linearity with circularity, certainty with hybridity. The findings outlined in this chapter demonstrate how much cultural work is required for communities and organizations to strike a balance between the modern and the post-modern, between community and individuality.

These tensions, however, may also account for the appeal of these communities to individuals experiencing the anxieties and existential dilemmas of the late-modern world. For early symbolic interactionists, like Mead and James, the self "was actively formulated in ways that permitted individuals to cope with the ongoing demands of daily living" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 101). The self as social structure, therefore, is thought to be deeply pragmatic and practical, shaped by the contingencies of daily existence. I believe that these communities, and the practices, identities and discourses they provide, help practitioners to navigate modern social life, meeting its demands by offering systems of meaning and self-understandings that are (perceived to be) shared, stable and coherent while also being deeply personal, flexible and expansive. Practitioners acquire a sense of self and system of meaning that resonates with the contemporary culture of individualism and self-projects while also providing a sense of stability and security through a structured and socially-shared path. In doing so, they help practitioners navigate a cultural context which rejects institutional influences on the self, while at the same time continuing to insist on coherence and stability (in the form of the "authentic self").

The proliferation of choices and authorities characteristic of modern society creates a context in which individuals are faced with increasing pressure to justify their choices to themselves and to others. Understanding how this occurs – and the role that shared cultural discourses play in the process – is an important line of inquiry in and outside the field of religion. This research suggests that, in the modern context, self-constituting organizations, religious and otherwise, must find a way to strike a balance between honoring individual diversity and sustaining social order. Religious institutions, for example, may accomplish this through Bible study classes and other small group meetings, where adherents can consider scripture and religious teachings in light of their personal experiences, needs and aspirations (see Wuthnow

1994). Educators often do this by drawing from a wide array of concrete examples in the hopes that each resonates with different students' experiences. Corporations encourage their employees to design individualized "career plans" and provide spaces and resources for employees to "work on themselves" (see Grey 1994; Hochschild 2003). In each of these cases, organizations allow for diversity and promote a sense of flexibility and individuality, while also ensuring that members acquire the important and socially shared ideas, as well as follow standardized scripts that fit with the needs and goals of the collectivity. Future research should attend to how different communities, organizations and institutions achieve this balance.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Project Review and Summary of Findings

Modern society is characterized by a seemingly endless proliferation of options and possibilities for identity and lifestyle. At the same time, however, we are immersed in a cultural context that values personal authenticity and the construction of a "meaningful" life. On the one hand, we are free to choose who we want to be and how we want to live. On the other hand, we are increasingly called to account for and justify the choices we make, to both ourselves and others. The growing number of self-help books and how-to guides on these topics serve as testaments to the difficulties and anxieties people confront in striving to fulfill these ideals.[118] Communities, organizations and institutions have also popped up to meet this growing demand. Through more or less formal programs, these *self-constituting organizations* provide resources for structuring coherent selves and meaningful lives. But what kinds of resources – symbolic, social and practical – do these organizations provide? And how does the process of self-formation unfold?

In this dissertation, I have approached these questions through ethnographic investigations of two religious communities: an Integral Yoga studio and a Catholic spiritual center. Through participant-observation, reflections on my personal experiences, and in-depth interviews with practitioners, I examined the process of spiritual self-formation within each

[118] A search on Amazon Books for "authentic self" for example retrieves more than 30,000 results, with titles such as: "Something More: Excavating your Authentic Self," "Restoring my Soul: A Workbook for Finding and Living the Authentic Self," and "Discovering your Authentic Self: Finding the Person who you Want to Be and Living the Life you want to Live." A similar search for "meaningful life" reveals a similar number of results, with titles such as: "It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice" and "Seven Secrets of a Meaningful Life: Find More than You've Been Looking For."

community. Central to this project was the claim that religious communities, organizations and institutions can be fruitfully analyzed as *self-constituting organizations*. This dissertation, therefore, examines what kinds of selves these organizations aim to construct, the resources and techniques they transmit in order to do so, as well as how the process of becoming unfolds. In doing so I demonstrate how the transmission and appropriation of a collective "toolkit" (Swidler 1986) – of narratives, discourses and practices – works to transform practitioners' self-understanding and subjective experience, providing a coherent sense of self and way of being-in-the-world which practitioners both like and affirm.

In Chapter 2, I identified two important resources made available in these communities for the construction of spiritual selves. First, I identify a shared narrative template deployed by teachers, texts and students in both communities to describe the process of spiritual formation. I articulate the key features of this shared story-form, and argue that it (1) gives coherence to practitioners' sense of self through time by tying together past, present and future with the unifying logic of progressive attainment, and (2) constructs the storyteller as a perpetual student and aspirant: someone in pursuit of a desirable but elusive ideal. Second, I describe what, exactly practitioners are aspiring to, revealing the key features of a shared *aspirational habitus* or *ideal self* transmitted in these communities. I argue that this shared prototype of the "enlightened self" acts as a kind of potentiality: a template for who and what practitioners could be. In doing so, the "enlightened self" shapes practitioners' self-understandings, lived experience and action in the present. This chapter demonstrates how practitioners' descriptions and articulations of their religious lives (past, present and future) play an important role in the process of self-formation, both as resources for and practices of self-construction.

In Chapter 3, I turned my attention to the role of the body and of embodied practices in the process of spiritual self-formation. I demonstrate that in these communities – where the goals and markers of progress are largely experiential and therefore highly ambiguous – the process of apprenticeship requires a good deal of interpretive and cultural work. I examined how practitioners understand the relationship between the body, practice and self-formation, revealing the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which the body is understood and used in each community. I show, for example, how the body is understood as both an impediment and a vehicle for self-formation, as well as target of practice and a source of knowledge (conduit). I also demonstrated how collective discourses, membership and shared ideals were made concrete through practitioners' embodied experiences in practice. In doing so, I argue that these communities embrace and transmit a highly embodied sense of self even as they discursively reject this perspective, arguing instead that the Self is fundamentally separate from and transcends the body and mind.

Chapter 4 highlighted a salient featured of the lived experience of spiritual formation in these communities: occasions of perceived failure and shortcoming. In this chapter, I described both the most common sources of perceived failure, as well as the frameworks and discourses through which practitioners learn to think about and deal with these experiences. Arguing for the constitutive role of challenges and obstacles in the process of apprenticeship, this chapter analyzed how these particular communities account for these experiences in ways that promote persistence and discourage exit. In addition, the findings articulated in this chapter suggest that attributional styles can become a resource for the construction of personal and collective identities. I found that ways of understanding and responding to perceived shortcomings are

considered markers of spiritual growth and development, becoming part of the ideal self practitioners are striving to achieve.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I turned to an important problem facing these (and other) self-constituting organizations in the modern context: communities must find a way to balance an emphasis on self-authority, individuality and authenticity with the need to transmit and enforce shared rules and standards of practice (or justify not doing so). I described how teachers, texts and practitioners found ways to honor individual diversity, while simultaneously acknowledging authority and necessity of traditions, structure and rules. Relying on two seemingly contradictory sets of discourses, these communities emphasize self-authority alongside external authorities, effort as well as surrender, and structure in addition to flexibility. Finally, I argue that these ambiguities and tensions become tools for performing identity work. Practitioners draw on these different discourses to distinguish what it means to be a "yogi" or "contemplative" from other available options in the broader religious field.

The proliferation of options available in modern social life has been both lamented and applauded. On the one hand, scholars argue that these conditions are threatening, overwhelming and potentially debilitating (see for example Gergen 1991 and Hochschild 1983). On the other, proliferating options are seen as empowering and liberating (see for example Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Rather than contributing to one or the other side of this debate, this dissertation examined *how* processes of self-construction and socialization unfold within organizations that remain committed to the holistic formation of their members. In doing so, I draw attention to some of the key resources transmitted by these organizations for the construction of spiritual selves. In addition, I attend to how formation unfolds, revealing some the problems and salient

issues that communities and individuals face in transmitting and navigating the spiritual journey, particularly in the face of modern cultural conditions.

Broader Sociological Implications

While each of the empirical chapters summarized above makes several distinct arguments and contributions to existing literature, I turn now to the broader contributions of this project, taken as a whole. My research starts from the assumption that religious communities are sites in which to investigate cultural process, such as apprenticeship and becoming, and key sociological questions – regarding, for example, agency and structure, self and society – that are applicable well beyond the religious field (see Guhin 2014 for a similar perspective). I argue that doing so allows us to see not only what theories of self and identity can contribute to the study of religion but also what the study of religious communities can add to our understanding of modern selfhood and processes of self-formation. I expand on these contributions in the following sections.

For the Study of Religion

Viewing religious communities as self-constituting organizations: it (1) draws attention to aspects of religious life that are often overlooked in existing research; and (2) provides scholars with new theoretical and empirical tools for making sense of their observations and findings across religious communities. For one, this perspective encourages scholars to move beyond a broad articulation of the discourses, identities and practices that constitute "spirituality" or "religion," and instead work to identify the concrete tools and means through which specific orientations, identities and subjectivities are constructed and transmitted on the ground (see for example, Bender 2010; Wood 2009; Pagis 2009, 2010; Winchester 2008, 2013). This perspective also suggests the importance of combining an emphasis on local social interaction with a

specification of the broader "institutional practices of self-construction" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 109) and cultural discourses that structure the social fields in which these processes play out. Religious selves and subjectivities are not only constructed in particular, micro-level contexts of interaction, but also reflect and respond to dominant cultural discourses, moral agendas and materials constraints within the broader religious and cultural fields.

In doing so, this perspective can reveal issues and problems which all religious communities must deal with in the contemporary context. In this study, for example, I highlight the need to simultaneously honor individual diversity and freedom while also articulating the value of rules, traditions and structures, which allow for social order (see Chapter 5). These communities are not alone. This tension can be found in other contexts as well. Marti and Ganiel (2014: 35), for example, find that Emerging Churches also "strike an apparently contradictory balance as they create religious communities in which the autonomy of the individual is held as a core value in the very midst of an often-stated emphasis on relationship and community." Tavory and Goodman's (2009) research on The Rainbow Gathering in Israel also highlights this tension, finding that the collectivity is often perceived or interpreted as a tool that participants can use to develop and express their uniqueness.

By examining religious and spiritual communities as different variations of a similar type (self-constituting organizations), scholars can identify and analyze similarities and differences in the processes of religious subject formation across them. For example, what kinds of selves, if any, are different communities trying to construct? What are the different resources they use in doing so? What kind of issues arise in the process? And finally, how successful are they in doing so? Matthew Wood (2009) has argued, for example, that some religious communities may be more or less "formative"; in other words, some communities – in his analysis, New Age

networks – are less able to constitute new and socially-shared subjectivities and self-understandings. What kinds of variables determine the degree to which different religious communities are "formative" (or even care to be "formative")?

Existing research, however, tends to view contemporary religiosity as privatized and individualistic, and therefore neglects to investigate empirically the social organization and lived experience of "self-spiritualties" (see Houtman and Auspers 2007 for a more complete articulation of this critique). Viewing religion as a site in which to investigate these more fundamental processes – of self-formation and the transmission of lifestyles – opens up a range of comparison cases that will enable greater analytical breadth and depth, contributing to more refined theories of the interrelationships between social and cultural contexts and the embodied individuals who participate within them. This is true, of course, because attempts to reformat the self are not unique to these particular communities, or to religious and spiritual communities, more generally. An increasing number of organizations now view the self as a site for purposeful invention. I turn to the implications of religious communities for research on self-constituting organizations next.

For the Study of Self-Formation

While research on the self-constituting role of various social organizations and institutions has proliferated in the past several decades, there have been relatively few studies that have applied this approach to religious communities. Gubrium and Holstein's (2001) edited volume on the subject, for example, does not include a single chapter focused on a religious organization. Instead, the authors investigate the process of self-formation within therapeutic and self-help organizations, social service and social control agencies (for example, a shelter for battered women and a prison), and even through talk shows and divorce proceedings. This focus – on the

intersection between organizations and identity – has also been taken up within organizational studies, revealing how professional and corporate socialization processes construct particular kinds of selves among their members (see for example: Grey 1994; Garsten and Grey 1997; Thornborrow and Brown 2009).

Religious and spiritual communities, however, continue to serve as prevalent and culturally salient sources of identity and meaning, and provide a broad range of symbolic resources and practical tools that individuals can use to construct identity and self-understanding. In fact, the study of religion was central to much of classical sociology in part because it threw into sharp relief questions about the relationship between the individual and the collective (see Mellor and Shilling 2010). Studies of religion helped reveal key mechanisms through which the embodied constitutions and subjective experiences of individuals were shaped by their membership in social groups. Beyond simply being another important location for the construction of modern selves, however, religious communities also draw our attention to aspects of this process that are left under-theorized in existing research.

First, religious communities and organizations, in promoting holistic identities, ask members to "live ideologically pure lives" (Swidler 2001: 5): lives in which their actions and thoughts must match their values and aspirations. Practitioners, in other words, are asked to be "monks in the world." Studies of religious organizations can teach us how organizations and their members strive to accomplish this ideal. I found that, like sociologists, practitioners in these communities, for example, recognize the importance of structures and concrete cues in shaping thought and action. Practices, people, physical spaces and material objects served as reminders of practitioners' desire to become "enlightened selves." Practitioners were encouraged to set up daily reminders as means to help them live as they aspired to. At the same time, however, the

process of self-formation in these communities emphasizes continuous self-reflection and analysis. Structures and cues are important, but spiritual formation also requires constant deliberation. Studies in religious communities can help us better understand the consequences of attempts to make more and more of everyday life and action a product of conscious deliberation.

Second, religious communities draw our attention to the fact that self-constituting processes need not be purely ego-centric. In fact, religious selves and subjectivities are often more other- rather than self-focused. Practitioners, in these communities, for example, were encouraged not only to be compassionate and loving in their relationships, but also to be of active service in t heir communities. The ideal prototype of the "enlightened self" in fact was defined as ego-less: someone who had overcome their desire for "power and control, belonging, affection and esteem" (Sister Nancy). What kinds of communities promote other-focused selves, and how is this accomplished? How do communities resolve the tension between participants' desire self-improvement and their desire to be less self-focused?

Finally, religious communities draw our attention to notions of the sacred and of transcendence – as well as their consequences – in processes of self-formation (see also Csordas 1997 on the "sacred self"). In religious communities, the selves being constructed are considered transcendent: separate and distinct from the body and mind. Transcendent selves are considered natural and unchanging, and therefore are relatively more stable and coherent than selves that are simply chosen. Further, the "enlightened self" and the process of seeking it are also sacralized in these communities. Because of this, practitioners' aspirations as well as their actions were considered markers of virtue, and were accounted for and justified by reference to a transcendent authority. In other words, the language of transcendence and the sacred imbue selves and processes of self-formation with meaning, authority and coherence. Similar discourses along

with their underlying beliefs (the idea that the self is transcendent), can be found outside of the religious field, as well (see Ashforth and Vaidyanath 2002, for example). Further, it is useful to ask: what are the discourse and rhetorics that perform this function (of justification and legitimacy) within secular self-constituting organizations?

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While this study makes a number of important contributions, as described above, it is also limited in a number of ways, particularly by my methodological and analytical approach. For one, relying on detailed case studies of just two organizations reduces the breadth and generalizability of the findings. Ethnographic observations, as clearly shown above, offer rich detail on the specific and localized processes of self-formation in concrete settings. However, in doing so, they sacrifice the ability to examine and articulate the process of religious subject formation, more broadly. Future research on the process of self-formation within these and other religious communities is necessary to corroborate, expand and modify the findings outlined here.

The particularities of these communities, for example, as well as their shared orientation towards religious life (as a practice-oriented quest) likely play an important part in determining the structure, process and consequences of socialization. For one, these communities are more institutionalized and structured than other forms of practice and other communities under the broad umbrella of the "New Age" (see Heelas 1996). This may account for the fact that I found these communities be relatively *formative*: in other words, to play a significant role in shaping and constraining practitioners' beliefs, practices and self-understandings. Other "suppliers" in the marketplace may, as Matthew Wood (2009) has argued, be relatively *non-formative*. Future research should consider "formativeness" – both in terms of organizational intent and individual

outcomes – as an important dimension of variation across "suppliers," religious and otherwise, and identify the causes and consequences of this variation for organizations and their members.

In addition, by focusing in detail on these communities for a relatively short period of time, my findings also prevent an analysis of the process of becoming in the long duree. In practice, the process of self-formation unfolds over years and even decades, and the process of socialization is never truly complete (see Wrong 1961). Further, as Gooren (2007, 2010) has pointed out, conversion and socialization are not once-and-for-all events; rather, individuals regularly move in and out of groups as well as increasing and decreasing their commitment to the same group over time. While I was able to talk with practitioners at various stages of their apprenticeship, from those who just started to those who had been practicing for more than two decades, I was not able to systematically follow practitioners' experiences and accounts through time. Important questions therefore remain. How, for example, do individuals relationships to and experience of these practices change over time? Are there important similarities in how this process unfolds? Who drops out, when and why?

More broadly, we need a better understand of the mechanisms underlying people's movements into and out of various self-constituting organizations within and across social fields. How do people decide what identities and lifestyles to pursue? Within fields, we can consider, for example, how people navigate and move around in the "spiritual marketplace" (Roof 1999). Why, for example, did Julia, the yoga practitioner, join and leave both a Wiccan coven and a Buddhist meditation group before settling into her identity as a committed Integral yogi.[119] Across fields, we can consider, for example, how declining investment in one community may

[119] When I last spoke with Julia (two years post-training), she had quit her job to take a job managing the IYI.

fuel engagement and commitment to another. How, for example, might a falling out with one's parish affect one's likelihood to join a therapeutic self-help community?

Further, what are the factors that shape and constrain people's desire and ability to pursue different options across domains? Gubrium and Holstein (2000: 107-8), for example, point out that the freedom to pick and choose – to shop around in the market of self-constructing discursive environments – is not equally distributed. While some people can search for the right "fit" in colleges, employers or counselors, others are faced with severely limited – and in some cases socially-mandated – options. Research that takes a life-course approach to examining people's engagement with various self-constituting relationships, communities and organizations could provide insight to these and other important questions.

Finally, my analytical approach also imposed important constraints on my data and findings. In my effort to articulate the process of self-formation in these communities, for example, I purposefully attended to some aspects of the interactions and contexts I observed while disregarding others. I have no doubt that scholars with different substantive interests and analytical commitments could have studied the same organizations, individuals and interactions I describe here and produced a very different yet equally useful analysis. Scholars interested in gender, for example, would have much to say about the overrepresentation of women in these communities, as well as the discursive and practical construction and reproduction of gender in and through the process of apprenticeship. Likewise, those interested in the relationship between practices, social class and habitus (see for example Wacquant 2005; Foster 2013), could use these cases and this data to offer an insightful analysis of how the bodily techniques taught in these communities resonate with the habitus practitioners possess or desire to possess.

Likewise, my desire to articulate the *general* process of spiritual self-formation in these communities also required that I attend to more to both intra- and inter-group similarities than dimensions of variation and difference in how individuals or sub-sets of individuals understood and navigated the resources and requirements of apprenticeship. I ignore, for example, the role that pre-existing affinities and dispositions, tied to group memberships and life experiences, play in shaping the process of spiritual formation. While each organization provided a standard set of resources, it is certainly not the case that all participants wholly embraced the resources provided or applied them in the same ways. The degree of formativeness, as articulated above, for example, likely varies across individual practitioners. What variables, for example, explain differences in the structure and content of spiritual formation across individuals in the same community?

In addition, like many studies of apprenticeship and socialization, my dissertation focuses more on the constraining role of available social resources and organizational processes than it does on the ways in which individual members shape the communities, practices and processes in which they are engaged. Future research focused more clearly on this end of the dialectic relationship between the group and the individual could be fruitfully combined with an analysis of dimensions of intra-group variation. This could be applied, for example, to how the members of under-represented social groups – for example, men or racial minorities in these communities – not only relate to, but also change or modify the process of formation.

Despite its limitations, my hope is that this study promotes and provides a basis for future research on the study of self-formation, or "becoming," from a comparative perspective. I believe self-constituting organizations, as sites of socialization, are ideal locations for investigating the interplay between social and cultural context, the individual person and social

action. More or less formal programs for self-improvement and self-development are particularly revealing because they are locations in which the implicit is made explicit, where the processes through which individuals and communities are co-constituted can be seen more clearly. Each chapter of this dissertation provides a set of empirical findings and theoretical contributions that may serve as a useful point of departure for future work in this area: including, for example, the role of narratives, discourses, preferred selves, bodily techniques and experiences of failure, in the process of self-formation. In making comparisons across a broader range of cases, future work will be able to identify, as I have tried to do here, important similarities and differences in the resources and process of self-formation across cases. In doing so, this research could further our understanding of "how culture works." My hope is that this project contributes in some small way to this important endeavor.

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Appendix A

Trinity Prayer House: Data Overview

Classes, Workshops and Programs

During my time in the field at Trinity Prayer House, I regularly attended the following monthly prayer groups:

Classics on Contemplative Prayer
Meeting Time: Tuesday 6:30-8:30PM
Average Attendance: 10-15

Saint Teresa of Avila
Meeting Time: Wednesday 10-11:30am
Average Attendance: 8

Opening the Door: Friday Morning Retreat
Meeting Time: Friday 9:30AM-12:00PM
Average Attendance: 6-10

Living Contemplatively
Meeting Time: Saturday 9:00AM-3:00PM
Average Attendance: 20-25

Each of these groups met monthly between September and May, for a total of 9-10 meetings per year. I attended all meetings of each of these groups during the 2012-2013 season. I also attended the "Opening the Door" Friday morning group during the spring of 2012 as part of my preliminary fieldwork.

In addition, I was a full participant in the *Intern Program for Spiritual Directors* during 2012-2013 season. All 15 students (across three "cohorts") met the first Tuesday of each month from 9:00AM through 3:00PM. Students then met with their respective cohorts (with 5 students per cohort) for 2-hour focused sessions one Thursday per month.

There is a fair amount of stability in attendance from year to year in each of these monthly groups (except the intern program where some students graduate and new students begin each year). At the end of each year, the participants decide collectively, under the guidance of Sister Nancy, on the program content for the following year. The Friday morning group for example decided to focus on the "mystical approach" to religious life and planned to read works by Richard Rohr and Ronald Rolheiser, and to watch segments of the DVD series *Entering the Narrow Gate with the Mystics* (by Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault and James Finley) each week.

In addition to these monthly groups, I also attended a variety of one-day workshops on various topics such as the stages of prayer and the practice of discernment, as well as the "Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop" (3 hours) on three separate occasions.

Materials

During my time in the field, the following materials were assigned and/or recommended to participants:

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Integral Yoga: Data Overview

Classes, Workshops and Programs

During my time in the field at the Integral Yoga Institute, I regularly attended hatha yoga classes. These classes run 90-minutes each, and are offered several times per day, seven days a week. I sampled the various class offerings, including those at different levels of difficulty (during the time I conducted fieldwork, there were Level-1, Mixed Level and Level-2 classes available), at different times of the day (classes were offered in the morning and evening), and with different instructors. During this time, I met and spoke informally with students before and after classes.

In addition, during the summer of 2012, I participated in a 200-hour, basic level teacher training program. This program ran from mid-May through early August. During this time, the nine students (including myself) met with the instructors (Ron and Aadesh, but occasionally others) at Ron's home. During most weeks we met: Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6-9:30pm and on Saturdays from 8am-1:30pm.

You can see a video containing testimonials about the Integral Yoga teacher training program (at the ashram), here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQrr9XuDM6c.

Basic Integral Yoga Hatha Class

The basic class adheres to the following format (with occasional modifications):

Opening and Centering

The class begins with the instructor welcoming participants and asking everyone to come to a comfortable seated position (in most cases, cross-legged). The instructor then leads the participants in drawing their attention inward by focusing on their breath and deepening their inhalations and exhalations. The instructor encourages participants to close their eyes and to let go of the worries and concerns they might have from earlier in the day or what they need to do after class. This period of focusing and centering is followed by three 'oms' led by the instructor but chanted in unison by all participants.

Call and Response Chanting

The call and response chanting is led by the instructor. There are many possible slokas (or prayerful verses) that can be used at this point in the class, but in the course of training as well as during my observations at the studio, the one below was the most popular. All chants I heard were in Sankrit, although I did hear that some instructors used chants in English and sometimes chants coming from other religious scripture when teaching in different contexts.

Hari Om Hari Om Hari Hari Hari Om

Asanas

The flow of asanas follows a relatively set format with room for some modification by the instructor. The general structure is: sun salutations, forward bends, backward bends, an inversion and finally a spinal twist. Other than the sun salutation sequence (which is a series of 12 postures one flowing into the next), the rest of the asanas are performed individually and do not flow into one another as in other forms of yoga (i.e. what is commonly referred to as "Vinyasa Yoga" in the US). The order of the asanas is said to be designed specifically to promote physical healing and well-being. Optional poses and variations may be inserted in different places in the sequence. The sequence of asanas using takes about half of the class time or 45 minutes.

Yoga Mudra: Energy Configuration

The final posture is considered a mudra not an asana. A mudra is an energy configuration. Mudras are thought to both express and produce feelings, attitudes and mental states.

Deep Relaxation: Yoga Nidra

The deep relaxation, called yoga nirdra (or yogic sleep) takes approximately 10 minutes in total. Participants assume a position lying on the backs with arms and legs relaxed and slightly separated (a posture call shivasana or corpse pose). Many participants put blankets over themselves (as the instructor informs the class that body temperature often drops a couple of degrees during the relaxation) and some take eye pillows (which the instructor passes out). The instructor leads participants through a process of tensing and relaxing the various muscles of the body. The instructor then leads the participants through a mental process of releasing and relaxing that often involves an imagined warmth or light flowing into the body through the feet and moving up through the crown of the head. The instruction ends and the participants are left in silence for a minimum of five minutes. The stated goal of this practice is the movement of the participant into the state of consciousness/awareness that is the 'true self,' that part of the self that is separate from breath, thought and sensation. The instructor ends the relaxation with an 'om' that progressively increases in volume or by striking a gong or chime. The instructor then walks participants through deepening the breath, returning movement to the body and finally returning to a seated position.

Pranayama

Pranayama means breathing practices or breath control. Prayanama is one of the eight limbs of yoga. In the basic Integral Yoga class two breathing practices are usually instructed: Kapalabhati and Naadi Shuddhi. Kapalabhati or the "skull shining breath" is a cleaning breath. The instructor walks participants through three rounds of Kapalabhati which involves brisk, forced, quick exhalations (produced by pulling the abdomen in towards the spine) and automatic inhalataions. The instructor then leads participants in Naadi Shuddhi or "alternate nostril breathing," which involves closing alternating closing off the right and left nostril and inhaling and exhaling in a patterned cycle. After leading the class through a few rounds, the instructor invites students to continue at their own pace. Naadhi Shuddhi is said to cleanse the subtle nervous system, allowing the free flow of prana (or life force) increasing energy and vitality and assisting in spiritual growth.

Mantra Japa and Meditation

Following pranayama, the instructor leads the participants in a brief period of mantra japa (or mantra repetition) followed by a period of silent meditation. There are many possible slokas that can be used as mantras. In the classes though the most common mantra used for this exercise was "om shanti." The instructor begins chanting "om shanti om; om shanti om" and invites the participants to join her. The entire class chants the sloka with the volume slowly decreasing over time. The instructor then invites the participants to simply mouth the words and then finally to close the lips and let the sound resonate in their heads. This is followed by a period of silent meditation. In most cases the meditation lasts only a short period of time (usually only 1 to 3 minutes), but some instructors prefer to save more time at the end for a longer meditation. The instructor brings participants out of meditation with an 'om.'

Closing Slokas

After the meditation, the instructor invites participants to join her in the closing slokas. The closing slokas in the Integral class are always the same. There is a cheat sheet available for new comers, but most regular attendees seem to have memorized the chants and repeat them from memory. The closing slokas includes a set verse in Sankrit followed by the translation in English (I include only the English below). The slokas are chanted in unison by the students and instructor, except for the last four lines which are call and response.

Lead us from unreal to real
Lead us from darkness to the Light
Lead us from the fear of death to knowledge of Immortality
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti

Bless the entire universe with Peace and Joy, Love and Light

Leader: May the Light of Truth Overcome all Darkness
Response: Victory to that Light!

Hari Om Tat Sat

The class is opens and closes with the instructor saying aloud (although often quietly) and without being echoed: "Hari Om Tat Sat. Om Shanti Shanti Shanti." This verbal declaration closes the call and response chanting, opening the class. It also follows the closing slokas, ending the class. The translation (as with most Sanskrit) of "Hari Om Tat Sat" is complicated and varied depending on the source, but the translation given to trainees in the teacher training program was: "Supreme Absolute Truth" or "all that is." Shanti translates to "peace."

Materials

During my time in the field, the following materials were assigned and/or recommended to participants:

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Health Yoga Anatomy, with Dr. Sandra Amrita McClanahan – DVD

The Healthy Heart, with Dr. Dean Ornish – DVD

Integral Yoga: Basic Teacher's Manual. Satchidananda Ashram – Yogaville.

In addition to these assigned texts, practitioners were encouraged to sign up to receive Integral Yoga Magazine and the Integral Yoga Teachers Association Newsletter, both of which I received and reviewed during my time in the field.

[120] Each student was given a copy of this text at graduation from the teacher training program.

Getting In and Getting Out

We cannot give the whole picture – ever. What I present in this dissertation is necessarily a partial representation of the process of apprenticeship and becoming as I saw, heard about and experienced it.[121] However, I embrace the limits of what I can say while acknowledging the benefits of the endeavor as it stands. My goal was to outline the formal orthodoxy and orthopraxis in these communities while also highlighting some of the other stuff in between; including, the relationships between different registers and the multiplicity of meanings associated with practices, discourses and objects both between and within communities, as well as within individual practitioners. I use this section to offer some reflections on the ways in which the field, the participants and myself mingled and interpenetrated during the course of my fieldwork.

First, it is important to note that getting in to both communities was relatively easy. At both sites, I had the impression that the teachers and staff I spoke with in order to request permission to conduct fieldwork, assumed that I would become a practitioner and member once I had sufficient exposure to the community and its practices. In both cases, however, I began my time in the field with minimal knowledge of the traditions, communities and practices at each site. Early on, I felt bombarded by new information and acutely aware of my lack of social and cultural capital at both sites. I felt awkward during my time at Trinity, for example, as I mumbled incoherent non-words, faking my knowledge of the "Our Father" on the first occasion we said it aloud together at Trinity (this is a prayer I have since memorized!). I felt aware of my outsider status when asked what parish I attended and informed a group of 10 people, all of whom were

[121] In the book manuscript, I hope to include participants' responses to my presentation and analysis of events, practices and discourses. I view these responses (comments and critiques) as important data that can help reveal the limits and constraints of the researcher's perspective.

sharing rich stories of Catholic childhoods and parish life, that I, in fact, was not Catholic. I felt the uniqueness of my youth when discussions of differences between generations in religious and spiritual life always led to an uncomfortable focus on me and a desire for me to speak on behalf of "the youth."

During my fieldwork at Trinity, I tended to be quiet during classes and workshops, doing my best to let the interactions unfold without my intervention. However, this is never truly possible. As my comments above have already made clear, my age made me somewhat of a novelty, and I often drew the attention and interest of other participants. My role and identity in the organization was also not something I alone crafted alone. Sister Nancy regularly spoke directly to me or referenced something that "we" had discussed in a prior session during classes and workshops. Further, I often volunteered and she sometimes asked me to make copies of the handouts for the day's classes, or to tell the participants she would be upstairs soon to begin. Because I often attended multiple classes in the same day, I was also often there before classes started or hung around afterward, chatting with other participants and with Sister Nancy. These behaviors, activities and interactions conveyed me with a special status, as I seemed to play the part of volunteer or even assistant.

At the IYI, I less often felt awkward or out of place. This was due, at least in part, to the fact that the group came from a much more diverse set of backgrounds. There was no "majority" in terms of people's religious upbringing or current affiliation. There were also a number of members close to my age, and nearly all shared my political leanings, education levels, and many even shared interests and hobbies. Because of this, I fit in much more easily here. However, I still found myself experiencing a feeling of distance as I moved through this space. I knew upon entering the field that this was not a style of yoga I would regularly practice or ever teach,

separating me in many ways from the others who were invested (to varying degrees, in their own right, of course) in this particular style and school.

As a former competitive gymnast (from ages 5 to 16) and casual yoga practitioner in the two years leading up to my research, I was of more than average physical competence. In fact, I was one of the most physically advanced students in most of the classes I attended, including the teacher training program. I don't mean this to be self-congratulatory, navel gazing but mention it for two key reasons. First, this personal characteristic likely affected how people saw and interacted with me in the field. While practitioners' were discouraged from focusing on physical ability as an important indicator or marker of status, most desired to improve this feature of this practice, and competent and advanced practitioners were often given greater status in the community. During classes and training programs, I was sometimes asked to demonstrate a posture or had teachers call attention to my performance as an example of correct alignment.

Second, my physical ability likely also affected my findings – what I saw, felt and experienced – as well as my analysis. This is true not only because of how teachers and students interacted with me, but because, as I describe in **Chapter 3**, the body is the primary medium, target and barometer of spiritual formation. On the one hand, if I had been a less physically competent researcher, I may not have been able participate in some of the practices and postures, or to experience different aspects of apprenticeship. On the other hand, a strong sense of body awareness, strength and flexibility were "written into" my body at a very young age, and this sometimes made my role as an aspiring teacher difficult. I often found it hard to articulate aspects of the physical performance that for me were "taken for granted." It also means that the tensions between effort and letting go, as well as the "edges" I found were different from the average participant.

When I was wrapping up my fieldwork at each site, I was encouraged by the teachers and participants to continue my participation in the community in some way. Among the yogi's, I was repeatedly told how wonderful a teacher I was and how I really should use my talents even if it was not at the IYI. At Trinity, Sister Nancy and the others told me I had a natural gift at spiritual direction, and encouraged me to continue. Sister Nancy told me she hoped that I would just come to something, even if just a short monthly program. At times, she joked, that I could come back and be her assistant once I'd finished my PhD. In both cases, I felt a sense of genuine hope for and interest in my well-being and spiritual development, as well as a sense of sadness that I would leave the community and not return.

During my time in the field, however, I underwent a participatory immersion. In saying this, I am not attempting to solicit additional legitimacy, authority or street cred in reference to what I write and the conclusions I draw. I know that I remain an outsider to these communities and that this position vis-à-vis the field has a particular set of costs and benefits, allowing me to see and know a particular partiality. Yet, at the same time, we are all a little converted by our field sites. I will not deny that I was and am changed in many ways, tangible and otherwise, by my time in the field. As I learned the language and practices of each community, for example, I became more comfortable sharing my experiences alongside other members of each community. I found myself participating in the same process of self-examination undertaken by the others, and noticed occasions in which my thinking had been affected. As Harding (1987) elaborates in her experience of being witnessed to in the course of her fieldwork on evangelical conversion, I experienced occasions in which the rhetoric and discourse of one or both communities became the lens through which I interpreted my experiences in the course of daily life.

One day while driving home from my office in Princeton about halfway through the yoga teacher training program, for example, I came close to colliding with a car whose driver had turned left at an intersection without ensuring that no one was coming. I was forced to slam on my brakes as my breath caught, my heart raced and I slammed on the horn. To my relief, I was able to avoid an accident. But, my next reaction was anger. I yelled at the other driver from the safety of my car, calling him names and asking how he could be so stupid. I relived the experience and rehearsed what I might say to the anonymous driver if I had the chance for the next several miles. A few minutes later, however, it struck me how my reaction and constant repetition of the past was examples of *vrittis*: the mental whirlpools yoga practitioners strive to rid themselves of. I interpreted my responses as harmful to my well-being. I found myself practicing *deergha swasam*, or three-part breath, a form of *pranayama* I learned at the Institute. For the rest of the ride home, I caught myself as my mind wandered back to the near-accident and refocused my attention on the present through awareness to my breath. During this event, I had not only interpreted and given meaning to my experience through the framework of yogic discourse, I had also implemented a yogic practice in order to alter both my subjective experience (change my emotions, alter my physical reactions and calm my mind).

As described in Chapter 5, I had a similar experience during my time conducting fieldwork at Trinity. I still am not sure what prompted the shift in the car that morning from frustration and sadness to laughter, but as I sat there, coffee burning my lap, laughing to myself, I recall thinking that this must be what Sister Nancy meant when she referred to a movement from desolation to consolation. Negative experiences, she always told participants, don't have to be desolations: it is all in how we interpret and respond to them. I recognized this as a place where practitioners would likely see consolation: my shift in affect could be interpreted the result of the

action of the Holy Spirit, guiding me closer to God. As was the case at the yoga studio, I received affirming responses when I shared this experience, my interpretation and my response with other practitioners.

At the present moment, I consider myself a sympathizer (Eddy 2012) in relation to both communities of practice. I have respect for both forms of practice and their requisite beliefs and traditions, as well as for the motivations and perspectives of the individuals I spoke and practiced with in each community. On the other hand, I do not currently have the conviction or discipline to call myself a yogi or a contemplative, or even a particularly spiritual person. At the same time, however, I felt that my time in the field gave me a clearer sense of some of the qualities and characteristics that I would like to acquire, similar to those outlined by practitioners in Chapter 2. I find myself articulating these dispositions – for example, calmer and less anxious, more compassionate and loving – as an ideal way of being-in-the-world. Like others, I felt that Sister Nancy and Ron both exuded *spirituality* in all its complicated ambiguousness. They lived a life that seemed filled with purpose and direction. They were content, it seemed to me, in a way that maybe only commitment can provide. During the course of my fieldwork, there is no doubt that I hoped this way of being might rub off on me.

It has been more than a year since I left the field now, however, and some of the changes I had experienced were not lasting. I rarely find myself interpreting my experience using either communities' discourses or frameworks (although the process of writing keeps the language fresh in my mind, still). When I look back at the notes on my personal experience, I can hear myself becoming more enthralled and convinced (although always only partially) by the communities and practices. As the distance grows, however, this interest has also diminished. I have thought about the benefits and pitfalls of these issues for my research and findings. I have

wondered, for example, if the fact that I have not embraced this orientation, identities or sets of practices prevents me from truly understanding the process of apprentice and becoming. Sure, I tried to maintain each practice for a month, but I did so for the purposes of my research, a fact that was made concrete in my self-imposed requirement to write up notes on my experience after each session. I find myself, however – perhaps based on my immersion in these communities – more comfortable with the tensions and ambiguities inherent to my position as "ethnographer."

I pursued this study in part because of a personal desire to explore yoga and contemplation in greater depth as well as to pursue my academic interests in contemporary spirituality, socialization and self-change. However, I felt that my own journey should or was necessarily forestalled while I wrote this manuscript. I tell myself that it remains to be seen where I will go and how my own journey will unfold when I feel more free to explore without the lens of the sociologist. Yet, at the same time, I believe that my sociology hat is a deeply embodied way of being-in-the-world that I cannot easily remove, just as I could not remove my predispositions when I entered the field nor the changes I'd undergone during my fieldwork when I sat down to analyze and write-up the data. In all of these ways, my relationship to the field and the other practitioners was and is not only complicated but shifting and changing, as it is for each and every person I spoke with during the course of this study. One thing, however, has not changed. I still find myself somewhat envious of practitioners' commitment and discipline. It is, in fact, my curiosity about the decision and ability to commit – to pursue a particular way of being in the world – that ultimately drives my interest in these and other communities like them.