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# Spirituality, Meaning, and Well-Being: A Role in the University Classroom

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**Abstract**

In recent years, for higher education—especially in the United States—spirituality has emerged as a prominent topic on campus, both in curricular and co-curricular formats. Historically, religion has played a large role in the foundations and even missions of many universities, but in the modern era, especially for public universities, personal spirituality has become the frequent way in which topics such as meaning, values, compassion, and mindfulness are addressed. Meaning is an especially prominent theme—not only "the meaning *of* life" but also "meaning *in* life" and the individual student's experience of "the search for meaning." This essay explores not only previous research and theoretical proposals on the links between spirituality and meaning, but it also proposes ways in which spirituality and well-being can be relevant topics for curriculum offerings in modern universities. The essay provides one illustrative example of a way to create learning structures to support students' exploration of practices from personal spirituality (e.g., mindfulness practices, values clarification, reflective journaling, and dream study) and how such practices can promote an enhanced sense of meaning in one's life. The essay concludes with thoughts regarding ways in which interested faculty might collaborate to share best practices on the modern university campus to support students' spiritual growth and their search for meaning in life.

**Keywords:** spirituality; meaning; higher education; well-being

## 1. Introduction

For millennia, religion has provided a means to shape meaning. Often, that meaning has come from adopting beliefs at the core of whatever religious tradition was to be followed (Park 2013). Hardy and Nelson (2023) emphasize that emerging adulthood—a period when many, although not all, are engaged in university education—is especially a time when religious beliefs are highly influential in meaning-making. They write, "...meaning making in adolescence and early adulthood is conventional and relational, defined by—and largely constrained by—a worldview gleaned within their family, religious community, and faith tradition." But in our contemporary world—even as religion continues to provide a source of meaning to billions of individuals—personal spirituality is increasingly a pathway for people to find an individualized sense of meaning and purpose in life, often outside the structures of any organized religious tradition.

In an article entitled "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education," Michael Waggoner makes a key point with regard to the emergence of spirituality on campus:

> Though religion played a central role in the founding of U.S. higher education, over the centuries, its influence was diluted by competing secular emphases. In recent decades, religion has seen a resurgence in academic and co-curricular

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> attention on campuses. In addition, a spirituality not based on religion has gained increasing attention. (Waggoner 2016, p. 147)

A comprehensive, multi-year study involving tens of thousands of students at many universities was conducted by the Center for Spirituality in Higher Education at UCLA. They explored the ways in which students experience a variety of influences and conditions that can potentially be conducive to the emergence of a personal sense of spirituality. Helen and Alexander Astin and their colleague Jennifer Lindholm reported on their findings in the groundbreaking book *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (Astin et al. 2011). Their research model includes a distinction between five domains of "spirituality" (spiritual quest, equanimity, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview) and five domains of "religion" (religious commitment, religious engagement, religious/social conservatism, religious skepticism, and religious struggle).

However, in spite of the extraordinary contributions from this work at UCLA, ambiguity has continued to be an issue for efforts to include spirituality within university offerings while at the same time being respectful of students' personal religious beliefs (or the absence of such beliefs). Fuertes and Dugan (2020) describe the important role spirituality plays on university campuses while at the same time recognizing that there is no simple distinction or precise definition to be made. Nevertheless, they propose that spirituality provides direction and meaning to life. They conclude that, "The results of the study suggest the following theme-categories: (1) spirituality is an abstract reality, which is difficult to define; (2) spirituality is a moral compass, giving direction and meaning to people; and (3) spirituality and religion are not the same, but they are interrelated."

Fuertes and Dugan, along with Astin and Lindholm, are not alone as scholars who have identified higher education settings as supportive of students exploring personal spirituality and meaning. Deb et al. (2020), in data collected from more than 400 post-graduate students at three universities in India, found a positive correlation between spirituality and meaning in life. Moretto (2011), in her dissertation entitled "Spirituality, Meaning, and Work Among College Students," documents the pivotal roles played by some students' religious beliefs and practices of personal spirituality in order to shape a sense of meaning, specifically through one's intended career pathway. Nash and Swaby (2011), in their book chapter "Helping College Students Discover Meaning through Spirituality," describe a variety of promising approaches for academic life to nurture this relationship between personal spirituality and a sense of meaning in life.

### *1.1. A Place for Many Components of Spirituality in Higher Education*

In modern institutions of higher learning, what place is there for the cultivation of personal spirituality for students? The question is especially challenging in the case of public universities, where there are likely to be constraints around teaching specific religious practices, other than from an objective, academic orientation. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that from both curricular and co-curricular perspectives, there is considerable benefit to be derived. Creativity and courage are required on the part of instructional faculty and administrative student services faculty.

Although this essay largely addresses a place for spirituality and meaning as themes for consideration in higher education, there is also significant evidence that additional qualities such as resilience, gratitude, and mindfulness can be viewed as aspects of spirituality and can play positive roles in student well-being. In a recent study of student well-being in Peru, Reyes-Perez et al. (2025) report on findings about the close relationship among spirituality, resilience, and happiness. They found a significant moderating influence on well-being from spirituality and resilience. They conclude that "spirituality and resilience serve as universal contributors to student well-being, operating independently of specific

religious orientations and academic progression." The findings support integrating spiritual development and resilience-building components into inclusive university student support programs.

In another example, Tolcher et al. (2024) evaluated the effects of three different gratitude interventions on college students' well-being. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three gratitude interventions (journaling, reflection, and app-prompted reflection) over an eight-week period, and they found that all three practices were associated with enhanced well-being, with gratitude journaling showing the most prominent impact. In another study, Fuertes (2024) documents the experiences of students in a university class entitled "Spirituality and Conflict Transformation." First, he demonstrates how "gratitude, conceptualized and articulated by college students as spirituality, influences students' well-being." More specifically, he presents evidence that through a weekly assignment of gratitude journaling, students experienced something of the essence of spirituality, which is about interconnectedness and bringing into focus the things in life that they must be content with and happy about. Second, he shows how expressing gratitude helps shift students' perspectives by looking at conflict more as an opportunity for growth and constructive change—redirecting their mindset to transforming conflict's negative and destructive energies into something beneficial. Finally, he presents students' gratitude journal entries to show how practicing gratitude "improves students' overall mental, physical, spiritual, and social well-being. It helps them develop a sense of empathy and understanding toward others and aids them with better communication, deeper connections, and awareness of the self and their surroundings."

Mindfulness—both as a "trait" and as a "practice"—can also be seen as an aspect of spirituality that has relevance to the lives of university students. Prescott et al. (2024) examined the experiences of nursing students whose academic training included mindfulness practices. They explicitly categorize mindfulness as a component of spirituality, and they write, "Spirituality, a fundamental component of mindfulness, is particularly important in the holistic development of nursing students. Spiritual beliefs and practices can provide a sense of purpose, connection, and inner peace, essential for delivering compassionate and empathetic care." Using qualitative data analysis from transcripts of semi-structured interviews with students, they found seven main themes: Interpersonal and Transpersonal Connections, Spiritual Beliefs and Practices, Faith in the Future, Feelings of Peace, Barriers to Mindfulness in Nursing Education, Integrating Mindfulness Across the Curriculum, and Mindfulness Models in Building Professional Patterns.

Mistur et al. (2025) examined the effectiveness of an online delivery approach to a program designed to enhance students' spirituality and mental health. They worked with spirituality using this definition: "an inner sense of living relationship to a higher power (whatever your word is for the ultimate loving, guiding life force)." Their program called "Awakened Awareness for Emerging Adults" (AA-A)—the effectiveness of which had already been reported for face-to-face delivery to university students—is an 8-week spirituality–mind–body wellness intervention consisting of 90-min weekly group sessions. Each session includes "three meditations, an introduction to awakened awareness concepts, written reflection, and paired and group sharing, led by two co-facilitators. AA-A supports emerging adults in developing a spiritual perspective to improve their relationships with themselves, others, the Transcendent, and the world." In comparison to face-to-face delivery, they found that this online delivery approach was equally effective in enhancing a measure of spirituality—the Delaney Spirituality Scale (Delaney 2005)—and in improving measures of anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

With regard to student services and co-curricular offerings to enhance spirituality, Jenny Small has been one student affairs professional providing leadership in the explo-

ration of possibilities. She is a scholarly expert on college students' religious identities. Her edited volume, *Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs* (2015), includes telling statistics on faculty trends. Although the cited research is somewhat dated, it is reasonable to expect that these statistical patterns have continued, and it points to how time demands on these administrative faculty tend to squeeze out attention to topics such as spirituality, meaning, and life purpose.

> Have we come to value spirituality, faith, religion and life purpose more than we did 15 years ago? Are we becoming more open, honest, or forthright about what matters to us?. . . A study of 177 student affairs professionals found that "almost 66% of student affairs professionals reported 'consider[ing] yourself a spiritual person' as an accurate or extremely accurate self-descriptor, and just over half (54.8%) considered the objective to 'integrate spirituality into my life' as very or extremely important. Yet an additional phenomenological study of 24 student affairs professionals found that "many student affairs professionals have not given serious consideration to the topic [of life purpose]," possibly because "the pace of student affairs work is not conducive to much reflection." (Small 2015, p. 2)

In that same edited volume, Seifert (2015) makes a persuasive case that universities are more and more open to finding ways to support students' exploration of spirituality and the search for personal meaning. She makes several encouraging claims in her chapter entitled "What's So Funny About Peace, Love, and Understanding? Or, Why Higher Education is Finally Talking About Faith, Belief, Meaning, and Purpose." She writes, "Increasingly, a number of higher education administrators and faculty appear to seek to negotiate the middle ground of providing students with a place to explore their faith and beliefs. I also consider how this influences students' search for meaning and purpose, in relation to the individual and the collective." (Seifert 2015, p. 58)

Waggoner (2016, 2023) has made parallel points in his examination of the place of spirituality on campuses. His article "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education" is arguably the finest historical overview of the emergence of spirituality within colleges and universities in the United States. He names "meaning" as a core rationale for which many have turned from religion to spirituality—especially among young adults.

> The current interest in spirituality apart from religion derives from two trends: (a) a growing dissatisfaction by many with religious systems that are seen as less and less relevant explanations of and guidance for modern life, and (b) perceived alternative means to achieve personal fulfillment grounded in the authority of and care for one's self. People still want experience that can help provide meaning for life and frameworks for moral interactions with fellow humans, but an increasing number no longer see religion as a means to that end." (Waggoner 2016, p. 148)

Of particular relevance to this essay is the question of how spirituality and meaning can be practically and effectively addressed by instructional faculty. How can academic resources—including research from the science of well-being plus scholarly sources from philosophy, religious studies, etc.—be used to frame student inquiry regarding his or her own spirituality and personal experiences of well-being, including meaning, mindfulness, gratitude, and resilience?

One such effort in an academic setting was reported by this writer and two colleagues in an article entitled "Developing Students' Well-Being Through Integrative, Experiential Learning Courses" (Mahatmya et al. 2018). In a semester-long academic course entitled "Cultivating the Spirit," we collected questionnaire data on four occasions across the fifteen weeks of the semester. We focused on four aspects of well-being: resilience, emotional reappraisal, mindfulness, and social connectedness. Admittedly, finding instruments to

assess these issues is a complicated and challenging task in the research design. Zhang, Balloo, Hosein, and Medland (Zhang et al. 2024) have pointed out how this continues to be a challenge within the science of well-being. Nevertheless, we selected questionnaires that promised to provide valid measures of these four variables for this kind of pilot study investigation. Course materials involved an academic study and personal application experimentation with practices designed to enhance well-being, self-awareness, and capacity to respond to life challenges from a personal-values orientation. The data showed significant improvements for several of the well-being measures, particularly mindfulness and resilience.

One further arena regarding spirituality and meaning on campus also deserves recognition. The quest for meaning and spirituality in the lives of faculty themselves is also a relevant issue here, although a more detailed exploration is outside the scope of this essay. It is worth noting, however, that guiding students in an inquiry into meaning-making is surely enhanced by faculty who have personally undertaken a similar quest. Lindholm (2014) has explored this in *The Quest for Meaning and Wholeness: Spiritual and Religious Connections in the Lives of College Faculty*.

> Within higher education, there's been increased interest recently in issue of meaning, purpose and spirituality. However, there has been very little empirical research on how faculty view spirituality or how they experience its expression in their professional lives. Faculty have rarely been asked questions related to how they view themselves, how they conceive of their life missions and purposes, what personal meaning they make out of their work, or how the spiritual dimension of their lives interfaces (or does not) with their institutional roles and responsibilities as well as their additional professional pursuits. (Lindholm 2014, p. 9)

### *1.2. Meaning as a Core Aspect of Spirituality and Well-Being*

Both spirituality and well-being are often explained in terms of their respective components or aspects. And "meaning" is an element that often appears in descriptions of both terms. Co-founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, has argued that meaning is one of five core components of well-being. In his model, represented with the acronym PERMA (Seligman 2011, 2018), meaning is joined by positive emotion, engagement, relationships, and accomplishment as the central building blocks of well-being.

Lindholm (2014) provides a useful description of one way to measure a person's quest for meaning, as was done in the extensive research project undertaken by the Center for Spirituality in Higher Education at UCLA. She writes,

> Composed of nine items, the Spiritual Quest scale is the most process-oriented of the measures we developed over the course of the Spirituality in Higher Education project. Primarily, the measure reflects an engagement in the search for meaning and purpose in life as grounded in several key aspirations, including finding answers to the mysteries of life, seeking beauty in one's life, developing a meaningful philosophy of life, becoming a more loving person, attaining inner harmony, and attaining wisdom. Acknowledging that spiritual growth is facilitated through interactions with others, the measure also considers how commonly individuals' close friends are searching for meaning and purpose, along with the frequency with which individuals talk with their friends about life's purpose and meaning. The active or process-oriented aspect of spiritual quest is reflected by such words as "searching," "developing," "finding," "seeking," "becoming," and "attaining," which are contained within each of the items that the measure comprises. (Lindholm 2014, p. 69)

In a similar way, meaning can be viewed as a core aspect of both religion and spirituality. In her edited volume *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Park (2013) argues for the central role of meaning-making in human experience.

> Meaning is widely regarded as central to human experience. . . . Humans possess the most extreme example of a cognitive framework that provides prediction and explanation; other animals also have cognitive systems, albeit less complex. However, humans go far beyond biological imperatives in the function of their meaning systems. Humans desire a sense of purpose and direction, a feeling that what they are doing has some ultimate purpose, a view of their daily endeavors in the context of a bigger picture, transcendence; these are the demands placed upon their meaning systems. . . . Religion has been proposed as one way in which human may meet these existential, meaning-related needs. (Park 2013, pp. 357–58)

The very nature of meaning itself has also been the subject of scholarly scrutiny. The questions arise, "Will meaning always be a rather vague term, intended largely for conversations within religion and philosophy? Or can there be a science of meaning?" Especially within positive psychology (and the science of well-being), over the last twenty-five years, meaning has almost always been included as one of the core characteristics of happiness, life satisfaction, and flourishing. King and Hicks (2021) argue that we need to see the difference between propositions about the "meaning of life" and subjective experiences of "meaning in life." Both are surely important, but my own teaching experience has been that the second phrase has especially promising relevance to ways in which spirituality and meaning can be productively explored in a university setting.

Equally important to our examination of "meaning" is the distinction between "the presence of meaning" and "the search for meaning." This distinction is found, for example, in the work of Michael Steger and colleagues, whose Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al. 2006) has been frequently used in psychological studies of meaning. In their work, "Meaning in Life" is a broad subjective sense that one's life matters, makes sense, and is directed toward a goal. "The Presence of Meaning" refers to the extent to which a person currently perceives his or her life as possessing that meaning. The "Search for Meaning" refers to intentional efforts to find or deepen that meaning. Soucase et al. (2023) found in their study of 349 Spanish emerging adults (ages 18 to 26) that "Search for Meaning" was associated with greater life dissatisfaction, less happiness, and lower well-being. This makes sense because we might expect that emerging adults who are dissatisfied or unhappy would be particularly motivated to this sort of search. The researchers concluded that their findings "suggest the importance of providing resources to promote psychological well-being during emerging adulthood."

For purposes of this essay and the university classroom exploration of spirituality and meaning, which I propose in the next section, it was just this "Search for Meaning" that was the prominent way in which the topic of meaning was engaged. Further, to summarize how I am using certain terms in moving into the next two sections of this essay, these are my working descriptions:

Spirituality is a connection with something larger than oneself and an individual's subjective experience of the sacred. It includes aspects such as meaning, equanimity, compassion, active involvement to promote well-being for others, and a capacity for empathy and understanding of the way others experience life.

Well-being is a multi-faceted state of flourishing and healthy functioning. It includes aspects such as meaning, positive emotions, supportive relationships, achievements and life satisfaction. It can be seen as a life skill that can be taught and learned, and it includes not just individualistic thriving but also collective and societal expressions of those same qualities.

Meaning is the way that one makes sense of life, feels that one's life has value, and experiences life as being directed by goals and purposes. It is a quality of human experience that can be present in one's life, but it can also be something for which a person is seeking and striving.

Religion is an organized system of beliefs and practices with an institutional context. It serves to support a person's search for the sacred within the context of an organizational structure with others who share those beliefs and practices.

## 2. Spirituality and Meaning in the University Classroom

As Astin et al. (2011) suggest, if the search for meaning is a core aspect of spirituality, then how can learning structures be created in university academic courses that support that kind of search? There are, certainly, many potential answers, and the creativity of instructional faculty can produce a wide variety of approaches.

### *2.1. One Example of a University Course on Spirituality and Meaning*

I offer the following only as a conceptual illustration. In this example from my own university teaching, there was no effort made to collect data for analysis, nor are there any claims that an intervention led to specific outcomes—in contrast to the research reported above with my colleagues (Mahatmya et al. 2018). For sixteen years, I have offered an upper-division, three-credit, interdisciplinary course entitled "Mindfulness, Meaning, and Well-Being." The course explores scholarly literature on the science of well-being, and it also addresses research and practices around contemplative traditions (including ancient religious practices of meditation alongside more contemporary and secular methods of mindfulness to enhance stress-management skills and overall health). The course has four primary learning objectives:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the essential themes and issues in the study of well-being, human consciousness, and mindfulness, making use of insights that integrate theory, research, and practical experience.
- Practice methods for the exploration of consciousness that one finds personally meaningful, including mindfulness practices, dream interpretation methods, visualization for stress management, creative expression, etc.
- Identify the central dimensions of meaningfulness and move toward being able to better articulate a personal sense of what makes life meaningful.
- Write clearly about your own experiences with well-being practices.

Broadly speaking, the first six weekly modules of the fourteen-module semester largely involve a study of the literature from the science of well-being, with special emphasis on resilience and happiness.

Week 1: "Meaning" in Turbulent Times. An overview of the science of well-being.

Week 2: Resilience and Well-Being. A study of the work of Southwick and Charney (2018) and their ten resilience factors.

Week 3: Happiness and Meaning. An overview of positive psychology and the science of happiness. A study of Baumeister's research on the differences between happiness and meaning (Baumeister et al. 2016).

Week 4: The Science of Consciousness. A review of theories of consciousness and how they relate to methods of mindfulness practice.

Week 5: Mindfulness Meditation. An overview of the history of mindfulness practices and research approaches. Essay 1 is due at the end of this week. It is a hypothetical newspaper article about "The Happy Life and the Meaningful Life."

Week 6: Meaning and Spirituality. A study of the work of UCLA's Center for Spirituality in Higher Education. Quiz 1 is administered, and it covers the academic material from the first five weeks.

Near the midpoint of the semester, the course turns more directly toward a study of meaning—both the study of theories from key thinkers such as Frankl and Baumeister, as well as personal explorations such as finding meaning in one's own dream experiences and assessing one's own core values and strengths.

Week 7: Calling to a Deeper Meaning. A study of the concept of a calling to a vocational pathway. An introduction to archetypal psychology.

Week 8: Finding Meaning in Our Dream. A review of practical methods for gaining insights and enhanced self-understanding from the study of one's own dream experiences.

Week 9: Getting Started on a Personal Application Experiment. See below for my reflections on how this assignment can be labeled as an "integrative insight" process.

Week 10: Money and Meaning. An examination of theories put forth by Needleman (1991) about the role that money has played in our society in the way that people go about shaping meaning in their lives.

Week 11: Near-Death Experiences. A review of both popular and more rigorous accounts of resuscitation experiences and their impact on experiencers' sense of meaning in life. The personal application assignment is conducted during weeks 10 and 11, with a narrative summary in Essay 2, due at the end of this period.

Although most of the key thinkers and researchers whose work we study come from positive psychology, the students are also given an opportunity to see how a materialistic worldview might address meaning. One text we use is *The Brain and the Meaning of Life* by Thagard (2010), in which he proposes that even if the "mind" is fully a byproduct of the "brain," nevertheless, such a materialist perspective still leaves room for meaning-making in an individual's life. The final weeks of the course focus largely on using the tools and perspectives of positive psychology and the science of well-being to view human development and how issues of meaning, happiness, resilience, etc., can be traced within a lifespan.

Week 12: Positive Psychology, Strengths, and Meaning. Administration of the VIA (Values in Action inventory) and examination of its personal relevance. Quiz 2 is administered, and it covers the academic material for Weeks 6 through 11.

Week 13: Meaning and the Brain/Mind Problem. An exploration of competing views on whether or not "mind" and "brain" are identical.

Week 14: "The Return" in a Journey of Meaning. Using the imagery from the "Grand Round" in archetypal psychology, we examine how well-being can unfold at different phases of a lifespan. At the end of the course, Essay 3 is submitted (a narrative review of one person's life story, using the lenses of positive psychology to tell that story), and Quiz 3 is administered, which covers all the academic material from the course.

I would be glad to provide a detailed syllabus to any reader who might make use of my work to create his or her own adaptation for the classroom.

### *2.2. Potential Challenges and Concerns from This Conceptual Illustration of a Course*

Because of the pronounced diversity of the student population at this university (diversity in terms of religious background, ethnicity, etc.), the course largely deals with "spirituality" in contrast with "religion," and it emphasizes the characteristic of "spirituality" which we could call an "ecumenical worldview" (Astin et al. 2011) or the capacity to see and understand matters with broad appreciation for the value to be found in perspectives not inherently one's own. It seems especially important to make students of all faith traditions or no faith tradition feel comfortable in our explorations during this

course, "Mindfulness, Meaning, and Well-Being." Most of the course materials come from positive psychology and from the science of well-being. However, some topics do deal with matters that could potentially cause concern for some students because of their own religious practices and beliefs. As one example, even though the preponderance of research literature on mindfulness comes from Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or even secular points of view, there is growing interest in how mindfulness has a place within Islam, and we study a recent journal article by Aldbyani (2025) that finds evidence that mindfulness has been a core aspect of Islamic spirituality for centuries and that it has the potential to serve as a means to promote public health and enhance overall well-being among Muslims. While not only trying continually to find learning materials that come from a wide variety of religious as well as secular sources, I often include in my classroom statements the reminder that I am very open to working with any student who feels a need for an adapted assignment in order to better fit his or her religious beliefs. On the relatively infrequent occasions of a student asking for such adjustments, it has usually concerned a preference to work with "prayer" instead of "meditation" or "mindfulness" as a reflective practice—an adjustment that I am more than happy to make for that student. But like any course in which subjective experience becomes a key part of the students' graded work, I find that I need to continually be alert for any point of hesitation or mistrust about how personal reflection writing will be dealt with. I would encourage any professor offering a course like this one to maintain vigilance for overt or indirect cues from students that might indicate the need for a sensitive adjustment to the wording of an assignment that touches on spirituality, religion, or meaning.

Such a broad approach is especially important for dealing with the second word in the course's title: meaning. The course does not present a single theory of the meaning of life but instead examines academic models for what constitutes a meaningful life and supports students individually in considering what makes his or her life meaningful, as well as ways in which the individual can pursue personally relevant approaches to the search for meaning. Referring again to a distinction from King and Hicks (2021), my course is about "meaning in life" rather than "the meaning of life." Admittedly, both are important, and other courses within my university (from philosophy, religious studies, and psychology) address the second of the two.

In my own course, one model of meaning is explored academically, which comes from social psychologist Baumeister (1991)—a model that proposes that there are four "needs for meaning" that must be addressed: the need for purpose in one's life, the need for clarity around core values, the need for efficacy and a sense of agency in one's life, and the need for self-worth. The search for meaning in life, as one aspect of spirituality, can be readily recognized within this framework. Another model explored in the course comes from logotherapy and the work of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Frankl (1992). It proposes three areas of life in which meaning is most likely to emerge: one's accomplishments, one's loving relationships, and the courageous meeting of unavoidable adversity and suffering. These three arenas of life experience provide students with yet another useful perspective on how to look at their own lives and recognize a cutting-edge issue in personal meaning-making.

A core assignment for the semester-long course is a ten-day to two-week personal application experiment, mentioned above. After studying these and other academic resources on meaning, we turn to a systematic, personal exploration. It takes the form of an assignment with "integrative insight," featuring the way that we can synthesize analytical perspectives alongside intuitive, non-linear modes of knowing and problem-solving. It is a pedagogical exercise for reflection and meaning-making within the course setting. Creating psychological space for the emergence of new understanding, perspective, and meaning is a discipline found in many religious traditions, but it can also be approached in a secular

way. As an example of this process from a religious perspective, some authors have pointed out that within Christianity, there are traditions and practices that contain elements of profound, private inquiry. Charleston (2015) identifies four such pivotal experiences of Jesus: the experience in the Wilderness, the Transfiguration, Gethsemane, and the crucifixion on Golgotha. As a further example from Christianity, the meditative practices of St. Ignatius—often conducted in a structured, silent retreat with lengthy contemplative sessions—show parallels to what I am calling "integrative insight" with my university students (Marek and Walulik 2022). And the Desert Father tradition of the early centuries of Christianity also emphasized solitude, stillness, and spiritual reorientation in remote settings—a tradition examined by Lane (1998) in his study of desert and mountain spirituality. In a similar fashion, there are many ancient traditions from Buddhism that bear similarities to the application exercise I give my students—an exercise that is on *a much more modest scale*. In his recent book *Mountain Dharma: Meditative Retreat and the Tibetan Ascetic Self*, DiValerio (2025) examines individual, meditative long-term retreats within Tibetan Buddhism.

Extensive scholarship shows that these practices of reflection and meaning-making belong to no single culture or religion. Instead, the common themes in these practices point to something inherent in the human condition and our search for meaning.

In my own academic course, which I am using here as an illustration, each student selects an issue or challenge that stands in a central place in his or her current search for clearer meaning. Most often, the "Question" (as it is labeled in the rubric for the assignment, with a capitalization of the word to emphasize that we are exploring something deeper than a superficial problem or discomfort in life) is a heartfelt problem or a seemingly unsolvable dilemma about how to proceed in one's life. Students are given anonymous examples of Questions created by students in previous semesters, and they are invited to adapt any of those examples or (more often) to merely use the examples as an inspiration to write their own Question. The examples offered include the following:

- What is my "gift"?
- What needs to be dropped or released so that I can move on to the next phase of my life?
- How can I live more authentically?
- What kind of person do I want to be for the years ahead?
- How can I spend my life serving others while also remaining financially stable?
- How can I become more at peace with change in my life?
- Who am I without "what I do"?

Each student then submits a brief essay (1) to define the exact wording of the Question, (2) to provide background and context for why that Question was selected, and (3) to describe the series of activities that will occupy their attention over the coming period of between ten days and two weeks. As the instructor, I provide quick turnaround feedback on this initial essay immediately before the two-week application period begins. As an observation from being the professor for this course for 16 years, the nature of the actual activities during the personal experiment is where instructor feedback and suggestions are most often needed.

The application period—of between ten and fourteen consecutive days—occurs during the tenth and eleventh weeks of the semester. Students are encouraged to take the full two weeks for the personal experiment, but a period of even ten consecutive days is acceptable. Students are advised that this assignment is admittedly being done in the midst of all the other weekly duties they have to fulfill: jobs, family responsibilities, assignments for other courses, etc. Nevertheless, we are looking to find regular windows of time daily during the application period—most often 15 to 30 min but occasionally with a larger investment of time and attention. Many examples of potential activities for the assignment

period are provided, although students have free rein to construct, as they see fit, their intentional search for meaning and "integrative insight," which honors both analytical reasoning and intuitive modes of knowing. Activities are to be designed to support oneself in achieving some temporal and psychological space for creative thinking, inspiration, and the emergence of fresh insight and understanding. For example:

- A daily period for reflection, contemplation or meditation
- One night or more to prepare for a dream experience that might address aspects of the Question
- Periods of electronics detox—e.g., going for several hours with smartphone turned off and no access to social media
- Mindfulness walks in nature
- Creation of a collage or mandala drawing
- Reflective journaling about one's Question
- Intentional conversations with selected individuals who might provide a perspective on the Question
- Review of photographs or journals from the past
- Artistic expression

Students are to keep notes throughout the application period, and these notes are used to write an essay that provides a summary of experiences from this assignment.

## 3. Discussion

There are many opportunities for creative impulses in both curricular and co-curricular offerings to help higher education students navigate issues of personal spirituality and meaning. For my own academic teaching, I am continuing undergraduate courses on meaning and well-being but adding a new course that broadens the perspective on well-being to include its *collective* characteristics rather than focus solely on the questions of *personal* well-being and *personal* spirituality. Coursework around global well-being and happiness invites students to consider how meaning is shaped in their own lives by the degree to which they are constructively involved in the lives of others. This kind of academic study (alongside carefully designed personal application assignments) is consistent with an orientation for spirituality that engages the dimensions of an "ethic of caring" and "charitable involvement," to name two of the five elements of spirituality from the work of Astin et al. (2011).

### *3.1. Awareness of Potential Pitfalls*

These kinds of explorations into spirituality and meaning also need to be undertaken with faculty awareness about pitfalls that can arise. For example, it is important to keep in mind that for many university students, "spirituality" can also be associated with "struggle" or even "trauma." Although the term "spirituality" is most often used in a uniformly positive fashion, for some students it can be a complicated and conflicted subject. Gilbertson et al. (2022) examined the experiences of 839 first-year college students, and among their findings was a significant pattern whereby spiritual struggles were associated with lower well-being and belonging. In an even more comprehensive study that involved 3598 college students, Exline et al. (2022) reported that "DBR [disengaged but religious] and DBS [disengaged but spiritual] students scored highest on ultimate meaning struggles, interpersonal struggles, doubt struggles, and emotionally oriented divine struggles." They concluded that "religious disengagement, either by pulling back from organized religion or shifting toward a nonreligious identity, is often associated with a wide range of r/s [religious/spiritual] struggles." These and other studies remind us that whenever we are

dealing with college and university students, topics such as "spirituality" and the "search for meaning" may well be associated with confusion, distress, and struggle.

### *3.2. The Opportunity of Collegial Networks*

In order to strengthen and develop these kinds of opportunities for university students, one possibility would be in the cultivation of collegial networks of faculty and higher education administrators who are committed to the development of learning opportunities around spirituality and meaning. One model that has been demonstrated in the United States concerns not "meaning" but rather "mindfulness" in higher education settings. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) did pioneering work for more than twenty years in providing communication platforms for educators to share best practices around bringing mindfulness into the classroom at colleges and universities nationwide—even worldwide. Although the network dissolved in 2022, its conferences and publications had a powerful impact. Another, more regional and less extensive effort in the United States is still operative, with an annual conference. The Contemplative Higher Education Alliance for Research, Teaching and Service (C-HEARTS) aspires to have a worldwide impact in higher education, with a stated mission: "Building and sustaining an inclusive global community dedicated to cultivating contemplative practices within higher education by supporting contemplative practice and pedagogy and cultivating an alliance in service to our communities, our well-being, and empowering our efforts for all others who we serve" (https://www.c-hearts.com/about-us (accessed on 1 February 2026)).

This type of network for faculty and higher education professionals has also been demonstrated with yet another theme from the science of well-being: resilience. The Academic Resilience Consortium (ARC) is a collaborative community dedicated to promoting academic resilience in higher education to help college students learn, grow, and reach their goals. The organization conducts periodic conferences around the intersection of resilience and well-being within university settings. An example of their programming is found at https://academicresilience.org/conferences/ (accessed on 1 February 2026).

Although not directly addressing spirituality, the Wellbeing in Higher Education Network is another relevant model. Their stated purpose is to be "a coalition of richly diverse, leading higher education institutions and organizations that are committed to catalyzing a culture of inner well-being within the social change education field." The network emphasizes "first-person" approaches that connect educators to their personal values and sense of meaning and purpose. The resources they offer can be found at https://wellbeing-project.org/wellbeing-in-higher-education-network/ (accessed on 1 February 2026).

A newly organized network provides yet another example. The Contemplative Education Network was founded in 2025 with the intention to create an international, interdisciplinary dialogue among higher education professionals, with the stated intention to promote "the integration of a range of contemplative, creative, and embodied practices—such as focused meditation, *yoga*, *taiji* (Tai Chi), etc.—in different educational settings. These practices, both conceptual and non-conceptual, aim to enhance individual awareness and support collective learning" (https://contemplative-education.com/ (accessed on 1 February 2026)).

These models are promising, and if applied to the intersection of spirituality, meaning, and higher education, they could well provide a needed next step. Such a model—applied to spirituality and meaning—could provide fruitful inspiration to faculty in the development of courses at their respective universities, and it could also provide the connections among faculty interested in collaborative research studies. I would be pleased to hear from any readers of this essay who might be interested in exploring these opportunities.

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