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Spirituality and Aging (review)

Holly Nelson-Becker

Loyola University Chicago, hnelsonbecker@luc.edu

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grow old. The question resonates with concern for understanding the implications of aging as it relates to the individual and the contexts, environments, and places in which older rural adults live. In applying a critical human ecology lens across a breadth of rural aging issues and topics, the contributions to the book provide theoretically informed, evidence-based, and policy-relevant insights. At risk of revealing the ending, ultimately, the editor is right to conclude that "The answer to the question ... must be that 'it depends' – on people's place in the lifecourse, on the community settings in which they live and on the ways in which they construct their relationships to people and place"

(p. 129). Indeed, convincing readers of the importance of developing nuanced understandings of rural aging, situated critically in time, space, and place, is perhaps the book's most significant achievement.

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Robert C. Atchley. *Spirituality and Aging*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Holly Nelson-Becker, PhD LCSW

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Questions open us up to a process of discovery. Other questions form and we are off on a hunt of magnificent proportions. Spirituality and the journey of aging are, for this expert author, fundamentally about the questions one poses in research, practice, teaching, and other forms of service. Accordingly, *Spirituality and Aging* is first and foremost a book framed by core questions, such as What does it mean to grow spiritually? How does spirituality influence identity and self? What is spiritually centered service to the community? Answers abound as well, but the answers are set in a broad historical spectrum of literature on spirituality. (Spirituality was often defined as religion in mid-20th century and before which leaves a lack of crispness in terms as meanings evolved over time.) Consequently, we are presented with a very rich perspective on this topic.

It is well established that there is currently a tension in the field of religion, spirituality, and aging surrounding the development of scientific knowledge in, and guidelines for, evidence-based practice. Much of the research in religion and health, for instance, follows an empirically based framework. Yet, at the same time, it is recognized that work in the area of spirituality and aging often grows out of a contemplative, intuitive, and reflective stance that lies squarely outside the ability of scientific method to confirm or disconfirm. Atchley is clearly cognizant of these contradictions in methods. He is an emeritus professor of gerontology at Miami University who has published widely on sociology and aging. For all of this author's immersion in that first world of empiricism, he yet understands the

importance of other ways of knowing and so he identifies many aspects of his own spiritual journey for the reader. Along the way, he refers in this book to data from his longitudinal study of spirituality as well as work by some of the classic writers in the areas of religion and spirituality, such as William James, Aldous Huxley, and the transpersonal theorist Ken Wilbur. A range of others who have made important contributions to understanding a spiritual perspective in aging both from within and outside of academia are also mentioned. These include developmental theorists Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnik's work on aging and development (1986), sociologist Wade Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), Eckhart Tolle's ideas about solving problems "in the now" (1999), and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller's (1995) book on "saging." In addition, Buddhist, Hindu, and other world perspectives on spirituality are briefly (though no less emphatically and carefully) integrated.

In blending his personal and professional insights, Atchley offers the reader some of his own valuable experiences and grounding in this topic. He notes a time when he attended a ritual of blessing performed by elders and was unexpectedly invited to participate as an elder. Prior to this experience, he did not view himself as old enough at age 60 to even be considered an elder. Initial bewilderment about how to provide a blessing gave way to inner certainty that he did know how to bless others: this was in turn validated by the recipients of his blessings. Acknowledging his own aging became a gift to himself and others. Such self reflection and

disclosure is an effective way to model for others that essential juxtaposition of "head and heart" that helps researchers, professionals, and interested others to develop more nuanced work and to anticipate their own blind spots.

He does not summarize the large amount of quantitative evidence he might have incorporated, but that does not seem to have been his purpose. Instead, according to his topical choices, Atchley judiciously incorporates the work of theorists and practitioners as well as qualitative data from his own research participants on the linkages of spirituality with aging. As he states, "A major goal of this book is to provide a conceptual and theoretical picture of spirituality ... " (p. 9). Following the current best agreement in the mental health disciplines, he treats spirituality as an encompassing larger concept that identifies religion as one subset. Consistent with his position throughout this text, Atchley closes with a challenge to readers "to engage the possibilities of spirituality and aging" (p. 159) and to make their own contributions to this important area.

Spirituality and Aging is certainly not an exhaustive book on the topic, but neither does it make that claim. The organization of section 1 offers basic knowledge (chapter 1 addresses "The Nature of Spiritual Experience," chapter 2 explores "Spiritual Development," and chapter 3 examines "Spirituality, Spiritual Self, and Spiritual Identity"), but the other chapters speak to the author's areas of specific interest. In section 2, on spiritual journeying, he discusses the ideas of becoming a sage and spiritual elder within a transpersonal psychology perspective (chapter 4) and examines the value of building a life of service, drawing ideas from transpersonal sociology and the Buddhist eightfold path (chapter 5). The three chapters in section 3 include discussion of continuity, growth, and coping (chapter 6), spiritual beliefs and time (chapter 7), and spirituality of dying and death (chapter 8). The "Conclusion" chapter offers some interesting material such as discussion of major theorists and a critique of the Fetzer scales (first published in 1999 to measure religiousness

and spirituality in health research) that would have been better placed in the body of this work. Two appendices offer an 85-item quantitative spiritual inventory scale and a list of qualitative questions for reflection. Well-detailed case studies and participant quotes are also interspersed throughout.

The first four chapters are the most logically ordered. Later chapters follow the journey metaphor by unfolding in an interesting if rather eclectic manner. The chapters on time, and death and dying are important and enjoyable topics, but some references such as a Gallup Poll cited from 1982 should be balanced by more current research. Overall, this book does well at generating interest in spirituality and aging and in drawing on a selected body of historical work, with less attention to more recent writing that has been proliferating in this decade (see recent work of Kimble & McFadden, 2003 and Moody, 2005 as examples). Indeed, because of Atchley's extensive knowledge and experiences in spirituality and aging, this volume should serve as an excellent supplement for anyone interested in research, practice, or teaching of spirituality and aging.

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