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Spiritual awakening leading to a search for meaning through travel

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Abstract

Arguably, all people are spiritual. We will, at different stages, seek meaning and connection, and seek transcendence through self-improvement. Often, this personal quest will begin or resume, or be addressed more fervently after a personal event that leads to an awakening of one's spirituality. This paper considers how transformative life experiences lead people to engage their spiritual side, and specifically how they may seek to do so through their experience of travel. Through 18 months of in-depth phenomenological data collection, this paper analyses the personal narratives of 11 tourists who experienced volunteer tourism after experiencing life events that facilitated a spiritual awakening. This paper finds that experiences such as the death of a close family member, the facing of mortality, or existential crisis can lead to a motivation to travel, and that travel can be deeply spiritual. It posits the question: In the year 2017, with great global and personal uncertainty, is the desire for spiritual growth through travel becoming more mainstream and urgent?

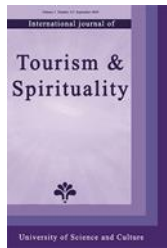
Keywords: Spiritual awakening, transformation, meaning, search.

Introduction

Arguably, all people will, throughout their lives ask themselves spiritual questions such as ‘what is my purpose?’ (Miner-Williams, 2006; Tanyi, 2002; Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). Indeed, this deep questioning is argued to be rooted deep in the psychological composition of a human (Hardy, 1979; Torrance, 1994). Within this paper, it is accepted that spirituality is a broader concept than religion. While not all humans are religious, they are all spiritual; that is, they all search for meaning, connectedness, and seek self-expansion through transcendent experiences (Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013).

At times, a person’s spiritual questioning can remain dormant; often they question more fervently after a transformative life experience (Bourne, 2005; Marques, 2006; Marra, 2000; Schultz, 2005; Torrance, 1994; Wright, 2000). For example, a serious illness, or job loss may cause an individual to reconsider what is personally meaningful to them. Positive life experiences such as giving birth or getting married are also considered to be a facilitator in an individual’s search for understanding in life (Marra, 2000; Marques, 2006; Schultz, 2005).

The scholarly literature has noted that people are increasingly seeking spiritual growth through travel. Travelling has presented significant opportunities for the development and marketing of spiritual-based products and services (Bone, 2015; Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017; Prayag, Mura, Hall & Fontaine, 2016; Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). It is argued that by experiencing something different from mundane life, people are able to view their lives from a wider perspective and gain a greater understanding of themselves (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Timothy & Conover, 2006). Despite the renewed interest in traveling for spiritual growth, there still remains a lack of scholarly attention toward understanding spirituality within a travel prism, with the exception of religious tourism research. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by considering how transformative life experiences can lead individuals to seek spiritual meaning through travel.



Methods

Over a period of 18 months, data were collected from 11 Western tourists, particularly residing in The United States, England, and New Zealand. Each participant had recently traveled with Hands Up Holidays, which aims to provide luxury sightseeing alongside volunteer service (Hands Up Holidays, 2017). Throughout this extended period of data collection, the author developed a strong understanding of each individual's life. Although not all individuals believed they were spiritual, they all exhibited the core constructs of spirituality, the search for meaning, connectedness, and transcendence in life (Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). Over the 18 month period, multiple conversations in person, over the phone, and via email were conducted. The author sought to gain a deep understanding of each individual, how they viewed their spirituality, and how their travel was prompted by a transformative experience. Further, the author aimed to understand the personal meaning each individual derived from their travel. It was found that it is important to meet the participants on multiple occasions over an extended period of time with each individual to determine which travel experiences were superficial and which ones were deeply meaningful. At the conclusion of data collection, the author wrote a series of short 'portraits' providing a snapshot of an individual's life. These portraits were then shared with each individual, who amended where necessary. The methods and findings presented in this current paper are adapted from a wider study. This study focuses on the relationship between transformative experiences and travel. For further reading and insight into how each individual's travel experiences were imbued with spiritual meaning, please refer to Willson, McIntosh, and Zahra (2013).

Results and Discussion

A spiritual awakening leading to deeply meaningful travel.

The research participants are profiled in Table 1. Each individual was aged between 17 and 66 years (the mean average age was 41 years). The average length of travel with Hands Up Holidays was 17

days per individual. Most of the respondents had revealed that their travel was partly or wholly motivated by one or more transformative life experiences. Indeed, certain conversations with individuals elicited deep emotion amongst research participants. A death in the family or serious illness were considered to be significant transformative experiences amongst certain participants. Periods of life transition such as marriage and moving out of home to attend university were also identified as facilitators of spiritual growth. More mundane experiences such as children arguing in the back seat of a vehicle were also identified, suggesting that transformative experiences are deeply personal and will impact different people in different ways.

Table 1: Transformative experiences expressed by research participants.

Name*	Age	Destination /Approximate Length of Travel	Self-View of Spirituality	Self-Stated Transformative Life Experiences	Occupation
Amy	25	Vanuatu 14 days	Involves finding life purpose through God. Linked to Christian belief	I haven't yet had any	Engineer
Laura	48	Peru 16 days	Achieving meaning in life through God; it involves the meaningful aspects of life. Linked to Christian belief	The passing of my sister, reaching Peru and moving city	Doctor (General Practitioner)
Lachlan	18	Peru 16 days	Involves my relationship with God and my purpose. Linked to Christian belief	Moving to university	Student
Charlotte	51	Peru 16 days	Intuition/listening to the bird on your shoulder	The death of my husband and sickness	Semi-retired hotel operator

			and being at one with nature	of my brother	
Rhys	21	Vanuatu 14 days	It relates to my faith in God but the word 'faith' means more to me. Linked to Christian belief	My brother's death and my fiancée's cancer diagnosis	Engineer
Karen	53	India/ Morocco 18 days	I hate the word spirituality, it is so kooky	Traveling to India	Mother/ Homemaker
Lana	46	Borneo 21 days	No thoughts toward the word. It means nothing to me	My kids quarreling in the back seat	Environment al Policy Engineer
Sharen	37	Borneo 21 days	Involves finding meaning and for me, that's through God. Linked to Christian belief	Passing of a good friend	Music Director
Nyla	66	Vietnam 15 days	I am not spiritual, definitely not!	Surviving breast cancer and a conversation with my father	School Cleaner
Amber	53	Peru 16 days	It involves finding inner peace and contentment	Marrying young and raising children, and the children's illnesses	School Bus Driver
Brendon	30	Morocco/Egypt 21 days	Involves finding out about myself and what really matters to me. Christian, but do not necessarily adhere my life to Christian beliefs	Moving to college and the travel I've done	Marketing Executive

Spirituality challenged through transformative moments.

As noted above, mortality was a strong facilitator in leading to spiritual transformation. Sharen, Laura, Rhys, and Charlotte identified that a death of a loved one and/or confronting a health shock challenged their perspective on life. Illustrative quotes included, 'I had to deal with my sister dying young... It defined my faith in a way' (Laura); 'My brother's death and my fiancée's illness have moved me a lot closer to God' (Rhys); 'The episodes with his epilepsy and really worrying about him. That changed me in terms of, I now don't suffer fools with anyone' (Amber); 'That changed me, I think it has to, doesn't it?' (Nyla considering her breast cancer diagnosis and movement into remission)

Divorce was also considered transformational. Illustrative comments included; 'Ending a relationship after 40 years; that has changed my life' (Nyla) and, 'My parents divorcing had a big impact on me' (Brendon). Similarly, life experiences that changed one's daily schedules were considered transformation. Lachlan explained that 'Moving to university was a time that I think I was forced to ask myself what was important to me', and Laura commented, 'Packing up the house, and seeing my possessions there made me think about whether I was on the right path'.

Each individual's transformative experiences were found to strengthen and weaken an individual's understanding of what was personally meaningful to them. Specifically, these challenges led individuals to either become stronger in their beliefs of what was personally meaningful to them and what their life purpose was, or to lose some understanding. To illustrate, Laura discussed on many occasions how her Christian faith was questioned when her sister passed away at a young age. Laura explained that 'We prayed and we thought we saw improvement, and then we lost her and my sister died at a young age'. Laura initially considered whether Christianity was right for her but explained that 'Really, that was a cool time to explore my faith and I came away from it believing that yes, I do like God and my relationship is now stronger because of what I went through'. Rhys,

who also experienced a crisis when his fiancé became ill went through a similar period of questioning. He explained, 'That was a time of exploration with my faith and I read a lot and became a lot closer to God so that was an important time'. Conversely, Charlotte and Nyla described how their transformative experiences had led them to lose meaning and understanding in life. To illustrate, Nyla described how she had experienced a 'year from hell' in which she divorced her husband of 40 years. After this, she 'wasn't herself', felt 'weird' and could not find joy in her favorite music because she was 'empty'. Similarly, Charlotte explained, 'I think feelings of spirituality can come and go in your lifetime... I used to have a number of goals but they are on hold now'. This discussion illustrates that what one determines to be personally meaningful is fluid; it may change markedly over time; transformative experiences, which everyone will face force individuals begin or continue engaging with their spirituality, and in many cases, significantly alter the 'path' toward what is personally meaningful (for example, Gaarder, 1999; Hardy, 1979; Marra, 2000).

Transformative experiences and tourism

Certain discussion with participants clearly illustrated a relationship between transformative life experiences and one's travel choices and the meaning they derived from their travel experiences. Nyla discussed with emotion a memory of her father that 'always stays in my mind... He turned to me and said 'What have I got to show for my life girl?'' After surviving breast cancer, and with the conversation with her father in her mind, Nyla was determined to 'Make every moment count and live life to the full'. Traveling with Hands Up Holidays to Vietnam by herself formed a part of this personal philosophy. She commented 'I had never done anything like this before but I thought why not? Nyla also explained, 'If there was something in Vietnam that would normally seem too difficult or frightening, because of that comment from my Dad, I made sure I was going to do it'. Her travel with Hands Up Holidays allowed her to live her personal vow of 'living life to the full' that arose from her breast cancer experience. For Nyla, volunteering with Hands Up Holidays is 'living life to the full'.

Sharen provided a further example of how a transformative experience may impact an individual's travel experience. She was 'badly shaken' when her good friend Peter died. For Sharen, the most impactful experience of her travel to Borneo came when she could honor Peter. Sharen explained 'When we could help those people with the truck, and also the fact that our family became a lot closer through what we went through, that meant a lot because it was honoring Peter'. She continued 'When I told Peter's wife about those experiences, I think she was stunned because she could see how much Peter meant to me... I think that travel was a really great way to honor Peter'.

For other individuals, transformative life experiences impacted the type of travel they could take and/or when they could travel. As an example, Amber explained 'The travel that I wanted to do was put on hold because I married young and had to raise the kids, and my husband wasn't really into the same sorts of holidays that I wanted to do'. She also noted her goals had changed because of her circumstances, and that people often do not live in an ideal world where they are free to pursue their desires; this adds credence to the belief that one's spirituality can be both a facilitator and resistance factor for travel. For example, Amber explained how she needed to act in a caregiving role; her granddaughter had personal problems that were of more importance than her own personal goals. While she wanted to travel more extensively, she felt she could not. She explained 'I have had to reassess what is important to me because I've needed to look after her... She's recently come back to live with me so she is my main focus at the moment'. Charlotte similarly noted that her personal issues impacted her travel aspirations by commenting 'I have goals, including future travel but that has all been put on hold now'.

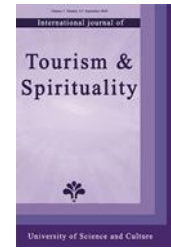
Transformative travel

For a number of participants, travel itself was considered to be a significant transformative life experience. In particular, travel was considered to be spiritual; it helped these individuals answer personal questions of meaning and/or provided them with a wider perspective on life. This finding adds weight to previous studies that have found that travel, and in particular volunteer travel can facilitate feelings of

catharsis, healing life-fulfilment (Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2016; Wearing & Wearing, 2001; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). Laura expressed how travel to Peru helped her to fulfill her life purpose of 'To who much is given, much will be required'. She explained 'Arriving in Peru was defining... I just broke down because this was what my life was all about'. Others noted how travel had transformed their behavior once returning to their home surroundings. Supporting quotes included 'It has changed our family dynamic... We now are tighter as a family unit because of what we experienced in Borneo' (Sharen); 'All the travel I've done has really opened my eyes and defined me as a person... I look at things differently and interpret situations differently now' (Brendon); 'I really found out how damn narrow-minded I was' (Karen discussing how travel influenced her feminist beliefs) and 'It just answered so many questions and brought up thousands more and we would lie awake at night, like the whole family talking' (Karen describing how her relationship with her child had strengthened through the ability to bond through travel).

In addition to the above discussion, Nyla explained that travel was 'a great healer, it helped me get over that year from hell'. Upon returning, she explained, 'I came back in such a different mood, I came back just buzzing and now I'm listening to my music again'. Nyla also believed that her travel was an act of respect for her father who felt he had not achieved as he would have wanted in life. Lana was also seeking change and achieved this travel. Through traveling to India with Hands Up Holidays, Lana commented that she became aware that she needed to move to India to be at, 'peace with my life'. She explained, 'Going to India, I knew right away that I belonged there'.

Other individuals noted that their travel facilitated strong transcendent experiences that resulted in personal growth. Amber discussed how climbing Machu Picchu had given her more confidence in herself. She explained, 'I just pushed myself so much because that was a real goal of mine and, you know what, I did it; that's given me more confidence to push my boundaries back in my life'. Lachlan similarly commented that 'I think I've got a valuable experience that is different from my friends because I have seen how other people live



and I don't think I'm as caught up on materialistic things like my friends are'.

Conclusion

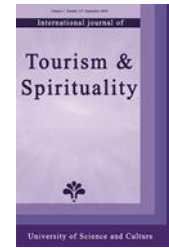
This paper has evidenced that as thinking beings, at different periods in their life, individuals will experience times where they are led to deep thinking about what is meaningful in their lives. These periods are generally facilitated by transformative experiences, which everyone is likely to experience on multiple occasions throughout their life (McGraw, 2008). Amy provided a comment to support this. She stated, 'When something goes hideously wrong you think maybe I can't control everything... it really makes you think about your life'. However, from a tourism perspective, there has been a lack of scholarly research that considers how major life experiences impact on the phenomenon of tourism.

Perhaps part of the reason why there is a gap in scholarly attention toward major life events and their impact on travel is because these personal moments, including dealing with mortality or divorce are, arguably, often seen as 'private' by scholars, and it may be that scholars have not sought to explore many of these issues because of the personal toll their discussion could take on both researcher and research participant (Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). Spirituality is argued to be a study area that is high up Gottschall's (2003) 'tree of knowledge'. That is, it is not an easy phenomenon to grasp and often elicits emotional responses from both researchers and research participants (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001; Moran, 2000; Willis, 2001). It is hoped that this paper contributes to the building of dialogue into scholarly understanding into the lived world of individuals and the personal meaning individuals gain from their travel experiences. This conclusion coincides with the 'critical turn' in tourism research whereby calls are being made to advance scholarly understanding into the individual tourist and add to a more personal, humanistic research agenda (Tribe, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006).

While humanity's engagement with their spirituality has occurred since the beginning of time, it may be that the awareness and urgency of the quest for meaning and purpose in life are becoming more pronounced in an uncertain, stressful world. Indeed, Brown (1998) proffered that 'The spiritual search has become a dominant feature of late twentieth-century life; a symptom of collective uncertainty' (p.1). It would thus be of scholarly interest to consider how recent world events have caused unsettledness amongst certain individuals and the extent to which these events encourage a personal quest. Previous research, such as that conducted by Jarratt and Sharpley (2017) and Willson and McIntosh (2007) find that the pressures of modern life can facilitate a yearning of nostalgia, or a wish for a quieter, simpler experience such as relaxing at a seaside resort. Indeed, in their study of spirituality at the seaside, Jarratt, and Sharpley (2017) considered the important role of travel in the spiritual quest by concluding that through leaving the distractions of modern life, tourists become more attuned to their surroundings and experienced enhanced awareness of their lives and spaces around them. It is hoped that this paper has contributed to the dialogue regarding the potentiality of the tourism experience to be deeply spiritual. While sharing the narratives of a particular group of people within a particular setting means the results in this paper cannot be generalized, it is hoped that future research will seek to develop on the findings within.

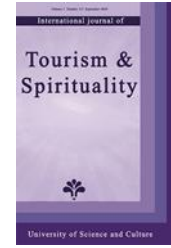
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