# Four Paths to Spirit at Work: Journeys of Personal Meaning, Fulfillment, Well-Being, and Transcendence Through Work

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Spirit at work involves profound feelings of well-being, a belief that one's work makes a contribution, a sense of connection to others and common purpose, an awareness of a connection to something larger than self, and a sense of perfection and transcendence. This exploratory qualitative study revealed 4 paths leading to spirit at work: the *always there* path, which had a continuous nature; the *coming together* path, which resembled a growing and integrative journey; the *transformative events* path, which was in response to an awakening or crisis; and the *contextually sensitive* path, which was dependent on the work environment. Implications for career counseling are discussed.

Career counseling is at a critical crossroads (Niles, 2003). Although the empirical tradition of rational career counseling has not focused on developing the more complex human qualities such as spirit, consciousness, and purpose (Savickas, 1997), Savickas (1993, 1997) posited that career counseling in the 21st century must move toward fostering self-affirmation in clients. Increasingly, employees are seeking meaning, beyond economic reward, in their work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Bloch, 2005; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). With work envisioned as a quest for self (Savickas, 1997), the key to career counseling is to assist clients in finding fuller meaning in life; thus, career counseling becomes a methodology for life planning (Guindon & Hanna, 2002).

A new approach to increase workers' meaningful experience of work and to foster more fulfilling lives for employees is the promotion of *spirit at work* (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006c; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Spirit at work reflects a distinct state that involves profound feelings of well-being, a belief that one's work makes a contribution, a sense of connection to others and common purpose, an awareness of a connection to something larger than self, and a sense of perfection and transcendence (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004). Although spirit at work is being promoted by academics, career counselors, and organizational consultants as a source of wellness and deeper meaning for employees, little is known about how spirit at work develops. Thus, the key objective of this exploratory qualitative study was to reveal the process of how an individual comes to experience spirit at work. Understanding how spirit at work develops should lead to insights into how spirit at work can be nurtured in career counseling.

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# Conceptualizing Spirit at Work

Although academic, practice, and popular literature have given much attention to this new field of spirit at work, relatively little empirical research has been devoted to the topic. Research in the field has been hampered by the lack of a clear, widely accepted definition (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004) and by a lack of theory about antecedent conditions for, processes related to experiencing, and outcomes of achieving spirit at work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a).

The terms *spirit at work, spirituality at work, workplace spirituality,* and *spirituality in the workplace* seem to be used interchangeably to capture similar notions. Several scholars have provided definitions for or identified components of workplace spirituality. It has been conceptualized as being passive and static; having trait-like qualities; or as dynamic, that is, having capacities and abilities that are evolving and interactive (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). It has been conceptualized as a characteristic of the organization, the individual, or both. At the organizational level, spirituality in the workplace refers to an organizational culture that is guided by mission statements, leadership, and business practices that are socially responsible and value-driven; that recognizes the contributions that employees make to the organization; and that promotes personal spiritual development and well-being (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). As an individual construct, spirituality at work refers to the inner life of employees finding meaning and making a contribution through work, serving others, connectedness at work, and authenticity at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004).

Although there are differences in emphasis in the various conceptualizations of spirit at work, there is also considerable overlap. Sheep (2004) argued that a conceptual convergence has emerged in the literature and occurs in four recurring themes: a self–workplace integration, meaning in work, transcendence of self, and personal growth and development of one's inner self at work. Ashforth and Pratt's (2003) critical review of the literature revealed three dimensions (transcendence of self, holism and harmony, and growth). In our work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006b), we found four dimensions of spirit at work (engaging work, spiritual connection, sense of community, and mystical experience).

Although Sheep (2004) put forth a compelling argument for the existence of conceptual convergence, we have provided the only empirically grounded definition of spirit at work:

> Spirit at work is a distinct state that is characterized by cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and mystical dimensions. Spirit at work involves: *engaging work* characterized by a profound feeling of well-being, a belief that one is engaged in meaningful work that has a higher purpose, an awareness of alignment between one's values and beliefs and one's work, and a sense of being authentic; a *spiritual connection* characterized by a sense of connection to something larger than self; a *sense of community* characterized by a feeling of connectedness to others and common purpose; and a *mystical or unitive experience* characterized by a positive state of energy or vitality, a sense of perfection, transcendence, and experiences of joy and bliss. (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006b, pp. 16–17)

Although several terms continue to be used to signify this experience, we have opted to use the term *spirit at work* to describe the experience of individuals and the term *workplace spirituality* to reflect the organizational construct. The emergence of individual-centered spirit at work as separate

from organizational-centered spirit at work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002) has facilitated research that focuses on the individual experience of work. Understanding how and why individuals come to experience spirit at work will provide career counselors with information to assist clients in finding increased fulfillment at work. Thus, in this research, we sought to empirically explore how individuals come to experience spirit at work.

# Method

Determining the process of how individuals come to experience spirit at work requires the exploration of deeper perspectives involving thoughts, feelings, and beliefs best captured through in-depth, face-to-face discussions. Grounded theory is a qualitative method that generates theory from research that is "grounded" in data that are based on real-life experiences. This method is particularly useful for research in areas lacking previous theoretical development and offers a means of exploring issues when data are not readily quantified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because it is suited to revealing process, we selected grounded theory as the approach to investigate how individuals develop spirit at work.

## Sample

We developed a list of potential research participants who were either known to the first author, referred to us by colleagues, or identified from published stories in local newspapers about positive work experiences. Identified individuals were contacted and informed of the study. The first author shared with each one a general understanding of spirit at work (work is perceived as meaningful, feelings of making a contribution, a sense that their work was important) and why the individual was thought to have spirit at work. Individuals who then self-identified as having spirit at work were asked to participate in an interview.

Participants (10 women and 3 men) ranged in age from 26 to 81 years. Twelve were Caucasian, 1 person was Aboriginal. Ten of the participants were married or living common-law; 3 were widowed or divorced. Participants' highest levels of education were high school diploma ($n = 2$), apprenticeship or special training ($n = 3$), 2-year diploma ($n = 2$), undergraduate degree ($n = 2$), and graduate or professional degree ($n = 4$). Six participants were self-employed, and 7 were employees working in organizations ranging from small businesses and not-for-profit agencies to large bureaucracies. Occupations represented were administrative assistant, dentist, educator, hairdresser, landscape designer, medical doctor, organizational consultant, parking attendant, physiotherapist, police officer, professor, real estate agent, and receptionist. All participants worked full-time from 30 to 80 hours per week. Income ranges were $25,000 to $50,000 ($n = 6$), $50,001 to $100,000 ($n = 3$), and more than $100,000 ($n = 4$).

## Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In-depth interviews with each person lasted 1.5 to 2 hours. To clarify interpretation of data or to further explore emerging patterns and themes, some participants were either interviewed face-to-face twice or contacted a second time by telephone. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who explained to participants why they were selected for an interview,

for example, "You seem passionate about your work" or "People mention your name when I describe spirit at work." After a general description of spirit at work was provided, each participant was asked to rate his or her level of spirit at work on a scale ranging from 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*) and to explain why they chose that rating. All participants rated themselves an 8, 9, or 10.

Participants were asked to describe their work, what it was that drew them to their work, how often they experienced spirit at work, and how it felt. The interview then moved to questions about how they came to experience spirit at work and those factors that fostered or stood in the way of the experience. Participants' experience of spirit at work over time was also explored, with a focus on when that experience was strongest or was not present and the reasons for the change. When it became apparent that the process of how one comes to experience spirit at work was different for some individuals, subsequent interviews included questions that asked individuals to reflect on their particular process, which is a technique that is consistent with a grounded theory approach. Participants interviewed previously were contacted a second time to gain clarity about their process.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The first author read and assigned descriptive, first-level codes, grouping the initial codes that appeared frequently under broader themes. Participants' quotes from the interviews that supported these initial codes were documented and grouped according to the emerging themes. Coding and themes were examined by the second author, and the broad themes were reworked until all coded data fit into distinct categories and the two authors reached agreement. Constant comparison enabled the linking of categories into a coherent framework. Once a central category became apparent, the researchers (the two authors) went back to the raw data to determine if the relationship between this central idea and all other categories was supported. Ongoing member checking (i.e., confirming interpretations and themes with the participants) throughout the interview as well as corroboration of emerging themes with the remaining participants strengthened the confirmability of the study.

## Study Findings

Participants' descriptions of their experiences of spirit at work were similar to the definition of individual spirit at work that had emerged in our previous research (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006b). This confirmed participants' self-assessment indicating that they experienced a high level of spirit at work. For example, participants reported profound feelings of well-being ("it was overwhelmingly positive"), a belief that their work made a contribution ("we make such a difference to people"), a sense of connection to others and common purpose ("it is a shared experience"), an awareness of a connection to something larger than self ("we are conduits"), and a sense of perfection and transcendence ("see the poetry in the everyday"). Although the experience of spirit at work was strikingly similar for all 13 participants, the process they had each followed to get there was different.

### The Four Paths to Spirit at Work

Analysis revealed four distinct paths to spirit at work: *always there, coming together, transformative events*, and *contextually sensitive*. A description of each of these paths follows.

*The path of always there.* Many participants with spirit at work reported that they had always experienced work in this way, and all but one of these participants believed that they were born with this capacity. Spirit at work for this group of individuals was constant, cutting across a range of jobs. For example, participants on this path included a receptionist, organizational consultant, dentist, and parking attendant. Molly, who was a receptionist, said, "no matter where I worked . . . I loved it." Similarly, Ken, a parking attendant, could not remember a time when spirit at work had not been present for him.

Although the experience was constant, the intensity of the experience varied across participants and over time. For example, Kelly, an organizational consultant, reported an awareness of being "more fully conscious of [her] connection all the time" and that, as a result, the experience of spirit at work became deeper. On the other hand, Larry, a dentist, described his experience of spirit at work as remaining consistent:

> My love for it and desire for it hasn't waned in 31 years. I have *never, never* in 31 years woken up and said, "Oh, God it is Monday morning." It is more like (*snaps fingers*) "Monday morning, here we go; we've got another week ahead of us."

Participants who experienced spirit at work as always there had little to say about how they had arrived at that point, claiming that it had just always been so. Aware of this connection at a young age, they stated that their spirit at work tended to grow and deepen over time.

*The path of coming together.* The largest group among the participants experienced spirit at work as a "coming together." This group seemed to get just a taste of spirit at work along the way. For example, Noreen suggested that she had "fleeting moments" of the experience that kept her going, and Maureen recalled that it was the times when everything went well and she "clicked with clients" that had kept her in the field for 26 years. For the most part, this group believed that spirit at work developed over time and was something that was "constantly worked on." These individuals reported that they only experienced spirit at work when their abilities, experience, and passion came together. At that point, they described a match between their passion, gifts, and their work and reported that a transformation occurred. For example, at the point that Noreen, an educator, experienced spirit at work, she described being in "a rare position where my skills that I have been developing as a teacher, my faith . . . and my passion [have] all come together. I feel more at home than I have felt in a long time."

For some, this process of coming together was less than smooth. Moving between careers in music and hairdressing, changing relationships, and moving between countries, Maureen, currently a hairdresser, described her life as a "roller-coaster ride," and said she had "to work [her] way out of that before [she] could get to [spirit at work]."

Spirit at work was considered by participants in this category as a mid-life phenomenon. For example, Rowena, a professor, reported that although she led a spiritual life and her faith significantly influenced how she worked, it was not until mid-life that she experienced spirit at work. She indicated that now that she is older, she asks different questions and is more "interested in what legacy we are going to leave." Similarly, Maureen reported:

> I was just a late bloomer. . . . I have come to a place where I know how I want to
> do things, how I want it to be done. . . . I am just happy with who I am now.

Others supported the notion of spirit at work as a mid-life phenomenon.
Donna, a medical doctor, noted that as both she and her practice age,
she is more reflective. Karla, a landscape designer, was conscious of her
own growth over time and reported:

> It seems that things have built on each other and although I have left behind
> certain experiences . . . I have also been very aware that I have pulled a lot
> forward with me . . . and draw on all of that experience.

Individuals on the path of coming together described spirit at work as
developing over time and culminating when their life experiences, skills,
and passions came together and they lived in alignment with that which
mattered to them. They claimed that spirit at work "gets better with time"
and "gets richer with every significant event . . . [and] with age."

*The path of transformative events.* The third way to arrive at spirit at
work is the path of transformative events, a process that had occurred
in response to a crisis or a spiritual awakening. Rose began a career in
real estate when she was in her late 30s. At the time, her level of spirit
at work was low because work was only a means to avoid other obliga-
tions. She enjoyed the work, but not the same way she currently does.
Rose reported that the turning point for her was when her husband
died, and she learned that she was not eligible for any benefits to raise
the family. She recalled the experience in this way:

> [Losing my husband and our family's financial support] was *absolutely devastating.*
> [Yet,] that is . . . when I started working much harder. . . . I really got into it, and
> it became my whole life. . . . The more I worked, the more I liked it.

Rose invested herself in her work because she had to earn a living to raise
her family, not because it was her passion. Initially, she derived meaning
from her work because the work allowed her to provide for her children,
but she said that it "gets to be that you love it." She now views her work
as an act of service. Rose currently rates herself as a 10 on spirit at work
and refers to selling real estate as "what makes [her] tick." She reported
that becoming widowed was transformative and led to her experience of
spirit at work.

Whereas Rose's transformative event path to spirit at work came as a
result of a personal crisis, Ben, a physiotherapist, described his experience
as a spiritual awakening. Although he experienced consistent improve-
ment in his work, participation in an acupressure course changed his
"entire philosophy of how [he goes] about things." He referred to the
experience as life transforming, and one that was carried into every single
relationship or conversation that he had at work and outside of work:

> I would call it a transition point. A big change from how I began to look at
> people. If that hadn't happened, I don't know that I would feel this way right
> now. I don't know that I would even be working in this same profession. It was
> that big of a transition. . . . It changed everything.

As did participants on the path of coming together, individuals on
the path of transformative events had moments that helped them to

remain in their career. However, it was only when they lived through a significant event that transformed their lives and their way of perceiving work that they actually experienced spirit at work.

*The contextually sensitive path.* This path was clearly distinct from the other paths to spirit at work. This path was notably influenced by the participants' work environments; thus, the experience of spirit at work would come and go. Even though Sheila, an administrative assistant, rated herself a 10 on spirit at work, she spoke of at least two periods when she lost her spirit at work and had to change jobs before regaining it. In one position, Sheila reported feeling a lack of respect and being degraded and blocked. She believed that she did not belong and, as a result, became bitter and negative:

> "I'm going on a coffee break, and I don't care if he calls," or "I'm taking a longer lunch, and I don't care," or "I'll just sleep in and be late." . . . I was developing an attitude, and it was no longer cooperative, it was no longer happy. . . . You just don't like it that you've become grouchy, because that's not your nature to snap at people, to complain about people, to say a nasty thing. And it was doing that to me.

Because she was unhappy with the person she had become, Sheila changed jobs. In her new workplace, she immediately felt included, challenged, supported, respected, trusted, valued, involved in rewarding work, and recognized for her contribution. Again, she experienced spirit at work. After 3 years in the new position, Sheila continues to experience high levels of spirit at work—she continues to be highly motivated and involved in her work and finds it rewarding.

Sandra, a police officer, also rated herself a 10 on spirit at work until she had a brush with death at work. That changed everything, including her rating. Even though she still experiences those 10s on a regular basis, she now gives herself an average of 8. She described the change:

> [I]n the beginning, I was gung-ho and ready to go—which I still am. I never changed how happy I am to be at work or my ethic . . . but obviously I had a *real bad* experience . . . and I felt I couldn't do the job anymore. . . . So [I] really went down and sort of stayed ho-hum for a couple of months. . . . But now I am back up to how I was before.

The negative experience significantly changed how she went about doing her work and, consequently, affected her experience of spirit at work. Rather than serving others, she found that, out of fear, she was focusing on her own safety. Recognizing the difference, Sandra reported pulling herself out of that state and regaining her sense of spirit at work:

> I was feeling good about helping people, but I wasn't really getting to experience it that much because I was so concerned about myself, and I was so concerned about avoiding going to situations. . . . Obviously I didn't like it, so I switched out of it.

Sheila also talked about her role in developing spirit at work along with a "sense of responsibility and commitment to make the team work." She reported continually working at it and would not give up. However, her commitment to and love for her work were not enough. The work environment played a critical role in fostering her experience of spirit at work: "if you're well-suited to the job, and

you're allowed to flourish . . . you have a very happy environment. If you stifle that kind of personality, you have a very unhappy person, and you won't last."

Although participants in this study did not develop spirit at work in the same way or at the same stage of life, their experiences of spirit at work were similar. Regardless of the path they took to develop spirit at work—always there, coming together, transformative events, or contextually sensitive—participants reported that the experience deepened over time. Moreover, the majority of participants reported having *defining moments* along the way, sometimes as early as childhood, that had an influence on their spirit at work.

### Defining Moments as a Window to Spirit at Work

Most participants recalled experiencing defining moments, that is, significant events or experiences that influenced their worldview or career choice. These individuals believed that it was those defining moments that had led them to the path of spirit at work or, at least, helped them to make decisions that would influence their experience of spirit at work.

These defining moments ranged from parents teaching them as children to listen to their own voice (Kelly), to a moment of enlightenment as to which career to choose (Larry, Sandra, Karla), to changing jobs (Noreen, Sheila), to the influence of a message from a movie (Ken). For example, Larry recalled that, at the age of 12, he was inspired to consider a career in dentistry through his ongoing contact with his dentist. Larry reported that the dentist "meant the world to [him] as a kid" and that, as an adult, he tried to emulate this dentist in his own dental practice. The defining moment for Donna came in mid-life as she observed her father's anger with death. Concluding that there was another way to deal with one's inevitable demise, she found ways to ease terminally ill patients into death, which became an important and fulfilling part of her work. These defining moments were instrumental in participants' experience of spirit at work, in deepening its intensity, and in influencing their career choices.

## Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study revealed that participants took one of four paths to arrive at the experience of spirit at work: always there, coming together, transformative events, or contextually sensitive. Each path was personalized and sustained through defining moments along the way that contributed to what participants referred to as "their journey of spirit at work." Defining moments, for a number of participants, were similar to what Maslow (1968) called *peak experiences* and had a powerful influence on their experience of spirit at work.

Spirit at work is a complex phenomenon, and many factors may be involved in its development. It is uncertain why the group that took the path of always there had an experience of spirit at work that had been constant. It may be that individuals in this group share certain innate qualities that set them apart from other people. The notion that personality could influence and perhaps sustain the path to spirit at work lends support to the idea that *spiritual intelligence*, the ability or propensity to experience spirituality (Emmons, 2000), may be a key component in the development of spirit at work. It might also be that these individuals

experienced a coming together or transformative events very early in life. Regardless of how they arrived at this point, this group was different from the others in that their experience of spirit at work was constant and, in some instances, was present despite less-than-ideal working conditions.

The path of coming together exemplifies the view that developing spirit at work is a journey that tends to culminate around midlife. However, it seems that the precipitating factor for participants on this path was spiritual growth, not generativity, as Erikson's (1997) personality theory suggests. For most of these individuals, the importance of making a contribution to others was evident early in their careers. Yet, what fostered spirit at work on this path was a coming together of their passion, values, abilities, and experiences, combined with a practice of reflexivity and self-discovery and engagement in meaningful activities. For some individuals, spirit at work is a midlife phenomenon that can be fostered by spiritual growth and transcendence (Piedmont, 2001).

On the path of transformative events, a significant life event can be transformative and precipitate spirit at work. Such transformations affect individuals' relationship with work as they begin to question their values, life priorities, and way of living (cf. Neal, Lichtenstein, & Banner, 1999). As posited in crisis theory (Gilliland & James, 1997), times of crisis are situations with the potential to generate growth and change. Thus, significant life events that involve crisis in the workplace, including job loss, organizational takeovers, and downsizing, should be viewed by career counselors as opportunities as well as challenges for their clients. Career counselors are in an ideal position to encourage their clients to respond to and take advantage of crisis, unexpected events, transitions, and conflict (Peavy, 1996).

The contextually sensitive path reveals that, for some, spirit at work can be determined by the environment. Regardless of the path they were on, most participants described their experience of spirit at work as being influenced to some extent by organizational factors. However, this effect was much stronger for those on the contextually sensitive path for which spirit at work was dependent on organizational characteristics such as leadership, inclusion, respect, support, teamwork, and recognition of a person's contribution in the workplace (cf. Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a).

Regardless of the path that led them to it, all participants in the study took responsibility for their spirit at work. This idea of personal responsibility is consistent with the theory of existential meaning (Frankl, 1959; Reker, 2000), which posits that meaning can be created through making choices, taking action, and engaging in relationships. The element of personal responsibility is also consistent with the postmodern constructivist approach to career counseling (Brott, 2005; Peavy, 1996; Savickas, 1993), because the individual is seen to have a key role in the development of spirit at work. Thus, career counselors are in a unique position to assist clients to take personal responsibility in finding their path to spirit at work.

## Implications for Career Counseling

Career counselors can explore with clients how spirit at work can be developed over time, in response to a significant life event or defining moments, and how it can be enhanced through personal actions for different clients. To accomplish this, unique career counseling interventions may be required for different individuals.

Given that most participants in the study recalled experiencing defining moments that influenced their worldview or career choice and put them on the path of developing spirit at work, it would be valuable for career counselors to assist clients to uncover those kinds of occurrences in their lives. Whereas a seasoned worker may be invited to identify defining moments over the course of his or her life and how they were influential, a new employee may be counseled to understand how these events influenced his or her choice of work and the meaning underlying this choice.

Consistent with Peavey's (1993) proposition that careers are everything that people do with their lives and that career counseling is a method for life planning, understanding how a personal crisis can lead to spirit at work will lend support and guide career counselors to explore difficult times with clients. Clients undergoing significant life events, whether or not they are work-related events, could be assisted to reflect on the deeper meaning associated with these events and to reassess their values, priorities, and way of being. It is often during these times that clients realize that they are not living or working in alignment with their values, their priorities, and what is most important to them and are more likely to be motivated to change. Thus, career counselors are in an excellent position to help clients uncover what is important to them personally and either to find work that is meaningful or to work in a way that is congruent with their values and priorities.

It is important for career counselors to understand that some employees' spirit at work is significantly influenced by their work context. Although there is value in considering the work history of all clients, this process is vital for those clients who seem to fluctuate between having spirit at work and not having spirit at work. Clients who seem to be on the contextually sensitive path could be assisted to identify both the work context in which their spirit at work flourishes and that in which it does not. Awareness of the factors that contribute to their spirit at work will enable clients to assess the organizational characteristics of perspective employers and to ensure that these characteristics are in alignment with their particular needs when making a career choice.

Understanding that spirituality is a component of spirit at work and that the precipitating factor for participants on the path of coming together was spiritual growth should free career counselors to open up conversations with clients about spirituality and how their spirituality influences their work experience. In particular, spiritual questions could be raised with clients in midlife, clients who have undergone a personal crisis, and those who are questioning the meaning of their life or work. Regardless of the path on which clients are embarking, career counselors are in a key position to help them cultivate spirit at work.

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