**Wellness 10: Activities for Exploring**

**Spiritual Development – Student Workbook**

The following activities have been developed by the Center for Spiritual Development to get people thinking and talking about spirituality. <http://www.search-institute.org/csd/activities>

## Activity 1: Metaphors of Spiritual Life

**Instructions**: As you move through your life-—the days and seasons, the ups and downs, the joys and hardships and lessons learned—-is there an image that you use to describe the shape of life? For example, some people imagine life as a ship sailing across uncharted waters, and their faith, values, and beliefs as the wind in the sails. Others imagine it as a spiral of experiences and learnings, or as a journey over mountains and valleys. How do you see it? Draw your image, then share your image and describe it with the others in your group.

## Activity 2: Sacred Places

**Instructions**: Write a description of a place you have been or would like to visit that you think of as a sacred place. It could be a home altar, a place of worship, a shrine, or a special place in nature, among other things. Include details (appearance, colors and sounds) and describe what makes that place sacred to you. If you’ve already been there, tell what you did and how you felt while you were there. If it’s a place you want to visit, describe what you imagine doing and feeling while there. If you’re doing this activity in a group, divide the group into pairs and discuss your sacred place with a partner.

## Activity 3: Stand up for What You Believe

**Instructions**: Choose one person to be the reader for the group, while the rest of the group stands up. The reader should indicate for the group that one side of the room is for yes, the other side for no, and the space in between is for the continuum of believing somewhat or being unsure, or if you wish to pass. The reader will then read one of the statements below, and the group members will move to the part of the room that indicates their level of agreement with or belief in the statement. The reader may ask one or two people to explain why they’ve chosen to stand in a certain place; allow discussion among the group members, reminding them if necessary that the purpose is to discover the range of personal beliefs rather than to argue or debate them. However, it is okay for people to move to a different position if they find that the discussion changes their minds about a topic. Continue with additional statements.

### Belief Statements

* People understand the sacred best when they are outside in nature.
* God helps those who help themselves.
* Self-discipline is necessary for living a spiritual life.
* A person can be spiritual without being religious.
* Being spiritual helps you be healthier.
* We are spiritual beings when we are born.
* No one can know for sure what will happen when we die; it’s a mystery.
* If you are a truly spiritual person, you are concerned about the environment, endangered species, and taking care of the earth.
* It is more difficult for people in poverty to be spiritual.
* There are many gods and goddesses to whom people can pray for help.
* A person can’t be really spiritual unless they’ve gone through hard times.
* The most important thing in life is to serve others.
* People don’t live just one life, they live many lives.
* Strong religious beliefs have been the cause of many conflicts, even wars, in the world.
* You can be an ethical, caring person even if you’re not spiritual.

At the end of the activity, ask how it felt to physically stand up and share some of your views on these statements. Ask: did any of you change your beliefs in the course of the discussions? Do you feel more clarity about your own beliefs after participating in this activity?

## Activity 4: How Shall We Live?

**Instructions**: Walt Whitman was an American poet who lived from 1819 to 1892. Take a few moments to read the excerpt below from the preface to Walt Whitman’s poem Leaves of Grass. The poem is filled with mottos telling what Whitman thought people should do to live a good life.

“This is what you shall do: love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men…re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss what insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.”

With a pen or pencil, underline the things Whitman says “you shall do” that align with your values and beliefs and put a question mark by those things that don’t align with your values and beliefs. Then look again and circle the mottos that you live by. If you are in a group, talk about which of these mottos you try to live by, and what other mottos you would include in your own sense of meaning and purpose in life.

## Activity 5: Let's Talk

**Instructions**: Use the following questions, as many as you want and in any order, to facilitate a discussion about spiritual experiences and practices. Ask the group to make it safe and comfortable for all to talk by agreeing to take turns, speak only about one’s own beliefs, and listen respectfully.

### Discussion Questions

* How do you know if you’re a good person?
* Was there ever a time when you were filled with awe or wonder?
* What do you expect out of life? What does life expect from you?
* Why are you here, alive on the earth right now?
* What practices do you do in your life to grow in a spiritual way?
* How do you serve other people? Is it important to do that?
* Was there ever a time when you suddenly understood something new about life, or the world, or the nature of human beings?
* What is a time in your life when you needed to forgive someone? When you needed someone to forgive you?
* Are we responsible for other people? For the land and the birds and animals?
* Do you feel more spiritual when you’re alone or when you’re with other people?
* How does having lots of material things make it easier or harder to be spiritual?
* What is the source that never fails you and always gives you peace and help?
* What is your favorite motto to live by?
* How did life begin and how will it end?
* Was there ever a time when you felt very alone?
* Was there ever a time when you felt close to God?
* What is a favorite holiday, festival, or ritual? Why?
* If you could go on a pilgrimage to anywhere in the world, where would you want to go? Why?
* Does it matter what kind of work you do in the world to pay for food and shelter?
* What should people do when their own beliefs are in contradiction to a country’s laws?

## Activity 6: Reflecting on a Koan

**Instructions**: In Zen Buddhism, a koan is a phrase, statement, or brief story that is perplexing in some way or that goes beyond rational thought to inspire an intuitive response. Koans are often used as a topic of meditation and as a means of teaching about life, reality, and meaning.

Choose one of the koans below. Sit in a very comfortable way and read the koan carefully once, then again. Close your eyes and focus on the koan for several minutes. Write some notes below about the thoughts, feelings, and ideas you had in relation to the koan. Discuss with your group what you learned, if anything, from this experience that has relevance to your own life and beliefs. These koans were downloaded 10/20/06 from [www.nozen.com](http://www.nozen.com).

### Reasons

One day a malcontent was sitting under a walnut tree, and his eyes fell on a great pumpkin growing nearby. “O God,” said the malcontent, “how foolish you are to give such small nuts to such a big tree and such immense fruit to this tiny vine. Now if pumpkins were growing on this big tree and nuts on this vine, I’d have admired your wisdom.”

Just after he said this, a walnut fell down on the man’s head and startled him. “O God,” he continued, “you are right after all. If the pumpkin had fallen from such a height, I might have been killed. Great is your wisdom and goodness.”

### A Parable

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming at a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed after him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw on the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

### Muddy Road

Tanzen and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around the bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection. “Come on girl”, said Tanzen at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. “We monks don’t go near females,” he told Tanzen, “especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?”

“I left the girl there,” said Tanzen. “Are you still carrying her?”

***Reflection:***

**Activity 7: Nurturing Your Own Spirituality**

People use many different practices to help themselves grow spiritually. Take a look at the chart and rate how important these practices are for you: Circle 1 for very important, 2 for somewhat important, or 3 for not important at all. If you like, use the bottom rectangle in the chart to fill in another practice you use.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Spiritual Practice**  | **How Important Is It to You?**  |
| Listening to music  | 1 2 3  |
| Prayer  | 1 2 3  |
| Meditation  | 1 2 3  |
| Reading the Koran, the Torah, the Bible, or other sacred texts  | 1 2 3  |
| Having a deep conversation with a friend  | 1 2 3  |
| Attending a religious service or class  | 1 2 3  |
| Spending time in nature or with animals  | 1 2 3  |
| Holding or looking at a sacred object  | 1 2 3  |
| Singing or chanting  | 1 2 3  |
| Dancing, practicing yoga or tai chi, or another physical practice  | 1 2 3  |
| Creating art or playing a musical instrument  | 1 2 3  |

***Discussion questions***: Do you do certain practices only in groups or only when by yourself? Do the practices you find important have qualities in common? Choose one of the practices you do and share with the group a story of when this practice has been especially meaningful to you.

## Activity 8: Rituals

**Instructions**: A ritual is a special activity that is done for a meaningful purpose, often with the intended result that the participant is somehow changed or different at the end. Rituals take place within families, in civic society, as part of faith traditions, and as part of our everyday lives. Some we carry out individually and privately, some in groups.

Have you participated in a ritual that was meaningful to you? If yes, draw three vertical ovals in a row and use them to describe it. In the oval at the left, write a few words that describe who or how you were before the ritual; in the oval in the middle, write the name of the ritual and some details about the ceremony-–who was there, where it took place, what objects were used, what was done–-and then in the oval on the right, describe what was different about you after the ritual was completed. If you have not participated in a ritual that was meaningful for you, imagine a ritual that you would find meaningful and describe that.

## Activity 9: What's Your Spiritual Type?

If you go to [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com) on the Internet, a multi-faith spiritual site, you can take a survey of 25 questions that determines your “spiritual type.” Thousands of people have taken the survey so far, and here are the results (downloaded in 2006).

* **Hardcore Skeptic**: 0.5%
Not spiritual or religious “but interested or you wouldn’t be here!”
* **Spiritual Dabbler**: 4.3%
Open to spiritual matters but far from impressed
* **Active Spiritual Seeker**: 8.2%
Spiritual but turned off by organized religion
* **Spiritual Straddler**: 13.6%
One foot in traditional religion, one in free-form spirituality
* **Old-fashioned Seeker**: 19.8%
Happy with his/her religion but searching for the right expression of it
* **Questioning Believer**: 21.4%
Have doubts about the particulars but not the Big Stuff
* **Confident Believer**: 25.6%
Little doubt they’ve found the right path
* **Candidate for Clergy**: 6.4%
Very informed and deeply committed

From reading the types and their brief descriptions, what “spiritual type” do you think you are? Do the percentages of your group come close to the percentages above? Are these categories helpful as you think about the range of faith traditions and spiritual practices in the world today?

## Activity 10: I Will Live Forever and Ever!

**Instructions**: The title of this activity is an exclamation by the character Colin in the book The Secret Garden, by British author Frances Hodgson Burnett, when he has become convinced that he can get well from his long illness. The following excerpt begins the chapter that immediately follows Colin’s excited announcement:

“One of the strange things about living in the world is that it is only now and then one is quite sure one is going to live forever and ever and ever. One knows it sometimes when one gets up at the tender solemn dawn-time and goes out and stands alone and throws one’s head far back and looks up and up and watches the pale sky slowly changing and flushing, and marvelous unknown things happening, until the East almost makes one cry out and one’s heart stands still at the strange unchanging majesty of the rising of the sun—which has been happening every morning for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. One knows it then for a moment or so. And one knows it sometimes when one stands by oneself in a wood a sunset and the mysterious deep gold stillness slanting through and under the branches seems to be saying slowly again and again something one cannot quite hear, however much one tries. Then sometimes the immense quiet of the dark blue at night with millions of stars waiting and watching makes one sure; and sometimes a sound of far-off music makes it true; and sometimes a look in someone’s eyes.”

Has there ever been a time when you have been quite sure you were going to live forever and ever? What thoughts and feelings does reading this excerpt provoke in you? Using the back of this page, write a paragraph or poem about your responses. Share your thoughts and words with one other person.

## Write and Share Your Spiritual Autobiography

One way of increasing your awareness of your own spiritual journey—its beginnings, influences, changes, and current direction—is to create your own spiritual autobiography. Consider these two quotations:

The spiritual path represents the process of becoming whereby the soul remembers itself and the self discovers its true identity as spirit. Every spiritual tradition offers a map for the seeker. Each metaphorically depicts a journey of the soul from darkness to enlightenment, or from ignorance to knowledge.
—Susan Wittig Albert, author

A spiritual autobiography focuses less on the people, events and experiences of a person’s life and more on what these people, events and experiences meant for him/her and how they formed him/her or shaped the course of his life. It allows the writer to communicate who she or he is as a person and what is important in her or his life.
—Jesuit brother Charles J. Jackson

As Brother Jackson notes, a spiritual autobiography tells of meaningful events and circumstances in your life and how they have shaped your purpose, your path, your life, and yourself.

In fact, sometimes the writing (or drawing!) of a spiritual autobiography can itself be a meaningful event, bringing to you new insight into your past and present or inspiration for new action in the future.

The activities below offer two ways to begin; perhaps you’ll come up with other ways. However you do it, you’ll certainly learn something about yourself. And if you’d like to share your spiritual autobiography with us here at the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, we’ll be able to learn something about people’s individual spiritual paths as well.

### Two Activities for Creating a Spiritual Autobiography

**1. Draw or describe your spiritual metaphor**

Instructions: As you move through your life—the days and seasons, the ups and downs, the joys and hardships and lessons learned—is there an image that you use to describe the shape of life? For example, some people imagine life as a ship sailing across uncharted waters, and their faith, values, and beliefs as the wind in the sails. Others imagine it as a spiral of experiences and realizations, or as a journey over mountains and valleys. You can visualize your life as a river and describe its flow, twists and turns, depths and shallows, etc. How do you see it? Draw your image and consider using it as a metaphor throughout this spiritual autobiography activity.

**2. Use these questions to guide your thinking and writing**

Note: You don’t have to answer all of them, just the ones that are interesting or useful to you.

* What is your first name and age and where do you live?
* Does your name have a meaning or a story attached to it?
* As a child, what did your parents teach about religion? What did they teach about good and evil? How has your family’s religious background affected you?
* What scriptures or other books did your family regard as holy? How seriously were the teachings in them taken?
* How did you perceive God or the sacred when you were a child?
* Did your family observe any religious rituals? How were those rituals related to their beliefs?
* Have there been times when you felt the presence of the sacred outside your place of worship, when there were no priests, pastors, rabbis, or other teachers around? \* What was that experience like?
* How is your present religious affiliation or spiritual life similar to or different from your parents’? How did the change, if any, come about? Was it a long process or short? Easy or difficult?
* When have you experienced awe or wonder? Where were you, and what happened?
* Who are your saints, holy people, spiritual teachers?
* What are the important words and stories of the philosophies or religions that have shaped you?
* What holy days do you celebrate?
* Are your spiritual beliefs or values relevant to what you wear, what you do, who you are friends with?
* Has a belief in God, other deities, or a sense of something larger than yourself, shown itself in the ordinary, everyday events of your life?
* Do seemingly random events of your life seem to reveal interconnectedness?
* Call to mind the significant turning points in your life; what are they?
* What are the most significant decisions you have made?
* What are the most intense struggles and conflicts, successes and failures you have experienced?
* Have you ever felt or experienced a sense of being “called” to do something?
* How do you plan to live out your beliefs in the future?