

A CASE OF SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT BELIEF¹

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This case study presents a phenomenological psychological analysis of the psychospirituality involved in the resilience of a self-proclaimed agnostic woman (pseudonym Teresa) in response to her diagnosis, extended treatment, and recovery from life-threatening thyroid cancer. This analysis, which was conducted within a larger study of resilience (Wertz et al., 2011), aims to conceptualize and describe the essence of life transformative faith that lacks a belief in God. This lived faith is identified and articulated in experiences of mysterious life-saving gifts, redemption, gratitude, and generosity that afford powerful flourishing in the face of personal tragedies. It paradoxically engenders transcendence in the face of mundane-world suffering. This distinctive type of spirituality is spontaneous and emergent, showing itself in a variety of empirical instantiations from childhood through life-threatening illness and the process of recovery. This analysis suggests the presence of the divine at the core of suffering and resilience.

Keywords: spirituality, resilience, cancer recovery, phenomenology, case study

The person we call Teresa was 26 years old when she participated in our research project on trauma and resilience. She is the daughter a Venezuelan father and Filipino mother, and was a developmental psychology doctoral student, now graduated. The trauma she described was an illness that was repeatedly misdiagnosed and eventually turned out to be thyroid cancer, which was treated with surgery and later spread to her brain. She battled this

¹ This paper was presented at *Spiritual Care Day*, a conference cosponsored by Fordham University and Calvary Hospital in New York City, 2016. The full interview on which this talk was based, a detailed description of the analytic methods used, and a summary of findings on this research participant's spirituality can be found in Wertz et al., 2011.

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cancer over a period of years, endured many kinds of treatments, radically changed her life, and eventually became cancer free. Teresa reported that she was not religious in that she did not believe in God or participate in any formal religion. She characterized herself as “spiritual,” and the purpose of our analysis was to understand what this “spirituality” was, apart from a belief in God. Before presenting the analysis, I will provide some context, a summary of Teresa’s life and struggle with cancer.

Teresa had an unhappy childhood. In her family, her tyrant father intimidated and oppressed both her mother and her. Her school experience was not much better, as Teresa was teased mercilessly for being fat. Her one good fortune was her voice, her beautiful singing voice. Singing made her happy—relieved her misery with a kind of consolation, was admired by others, and became the center of her life and hope for the future. Teresa eventually entered music conservatory with the aim of becoming an opera singer. She was in her final year, on the way to an audition for a professional singing job, when she noticed the lump on her throat that was to transform her life. She was misdiagnosed at first and later, when correctly diagnosed, she was not informed of the diagnosis or its implications by the physician who referred her to surgery. Teresa was completely crushed when she learned from the surgeon that she could lose her voice in surgery, which she did. She returned to the music conservatory and tried to sing, but she could not and became a kind of pariah who was abandoned by her friends and peers. Her teacher, in tears, proclaimed the end of her voice lessons and her singing career. Teresa battled her cancer nobly. She learned everything about her ominous condition, which required treatments for many years. She clung bravely to life with a kind of vengeance. Thinking her life might end soon, she lived as fully as she possibly could, engaging in the world with a resoluteness previously unknown. She bought a motor cycle, traveled the country, started rock climbing, dated men, studied psychology instead of music, eventually enrolled in graduate school, and even got married while the cancer treatments for her life threatening illness continued. She eventually became cancer free, and ironically after she had given up singing and committed herself to a completely different career, her singing voice returned in a new form and, though she could no longer sing opera, she began to perform popular music and blues in small venues.

The role of religion and spirituality in Teresa’s trauma and recovery is complex. Although Teresa had not participated in religion and had difficulty

conceiving of and believing in God (she considered herself an agnostic), Teresa identified herself as a “spiritual” person. Although Teresa’s spirituality appears to have little cognitive certainty and formal religious engagement, she experienced hope, faith, charity, humility, gratitude, redemption, and well-being in the face of difficult threats to her life.³ She was a seeker who opened herself to reading religious texts and, even though she could never believe anything she read, she accessed the *sacred* in subtle and powerful ways in her pre-reflective lived experience.

Teresa’s mode of resilience was rooted in her childhood and past. She stated that her singing, done in many different churches, *was her “religion”* long before she became sick. Teresa’s voice was her path to salvation. Feeling disadvantaged in her family and teased as a “fat kid” in school, Teresa’s voice became her consolation and means of transcendence, redemption, ascendance, and fulfillment: her voice, given its personal meaning of *sacredness*, offered Teresa a kind of “religion,” as she put it. Her voice uniquely embodied her way of overcoming of all the world’s adversity—abandonment and hostility on the part of her family and peers. Saving her from the forlornness of her childhood, Teresa’s spiritual center was her voice. Through singing, Teresa became connected with the loving universe. In possession of her voice, Teresa was graced with a divine gift, a means of salvation in the face of problems, and with it she met the slings and arrows of all kinds of worldly misfortunes with a bittersweetness that was characteristic of her spirituality in all its forms.

With the loss of her singing voice, Teresa lost her central sense of well-being. This loss of her voice was a loss of hope, of self—a loss of bountiful life itself. When Teresa lost her voice, she became spiritually lost, underwent a spiritual crisis, perhaps even a spiritual death, for her ultimate source of being and value was lost. One consequence of trauma was this crisis of faith. It is therefore understandable that Teresa emphasized so pointedly in her interview the *absence* of God from her experience and proclaimed her agnosticism. However, her very “lostness” was a foundation of her faith and consequently a place where her spirituality was reborn. In living through the traumatic loss of her voice, Teresa seized the possibility of good life beyond her singing voice, and she was able to find an even more encompassing consolation. Teresa learned that her voice, a limited worldly gift, is not sufficient to confront and flourish through all the calamities of life and the possibility of

³ This case offers some confirmation of William James’s (1902/1986) classic analysis of personal religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he asserts that the faith state may have little, if any, cognitive content.

death, not sufficient to protect her from the most extreme horrors of the living and dying. In this way the loss of her voice--and with it the loss of her faith, limited as it was to the single worldly entity of her singing voice, became the occasion for the emergence of a deeper faith and a greater consolation that embraced the world more completely. She eventually experienced the recovery of her voice itself as a gift re-given in a world more widely blessed.

Teresa's "spirituality" was not limited to her voice, for after Teresa lost her voice, she continued other spiritual modes of experience in the course of suffering and in coming to terms with the tragic possibility of her death. With hope and faith, Teresa eventually accepted the loss of her voice. She acknowledged the narrow limits of her peer relationships when her friends deserted her, and she sought a life beyond anything she had known before. Teresa embodied a life force, an affirmative emotional well-being that sustained her through continuing traumas, a well-being that was not dependent on other people or anything particular in the world and yet one that increasingly encompassed and infused everything. She understood others generously, even those who failed and betrayed her, and even accepted their destructiveness. She realized that her conservatory peers were imagining themselves being struck down by cancer and therefore could not bear to be around her, and she viewed them, with their human fallibility and frailty, with compassion. These aspects of her life were the very core of Teresa's resilient way of living through traumas.

The typical structure of her resilience involved a widening of her sense of well-being, beginning with an acceptance of inimicality and loss, which she also experienced as a bountiful gift. How could a life-threatening illness be a gift? It was not an ordinary, mundane gift. For Teresa, the cancer itself possessed a numinous quality of something other-worldly. Although threatening, destructive, and diminishing, cancer was also, though less obviously, *a divine gift*. This cancer--an Other invading her with a life of its own--struck her as an almost supernatural rage that was not only a foe but eventually also a friend as if from an invisible world. As Teresa came to know the cancer, she continued to experience it as something unusual, unknowable, mysterious, and even unworldly--much as "God" was for her--and she developed a certain respect for its awesome wrathfulness.⁴ In a strange

⁴ These meanings are reminiscent, in its essential meanings, of the wonderful concept of *mysterium tremendum* developed by Rudolf Otto (1917/1958) in *The Idea of the Holy*.

and paradoxical way, she accepted this cancer without being able to know or control it with any certainty. Stunningly, Teresa appropriated its form of life herself, acting herself “with a vengeance,” as if she were embracing and incorporating its very fury into her fight for life, her fight against the cancer itself, and the violently expansive rebirth of herself. In this sense, the characteristic meaning and force of this mysterious illness infused Teresa’s entire embodied substance, her personhood beyond the mere cancer itself, mimicking, intensifying, and extending its very adversarial force throughout her whole person, as she thereby took on the cancer itself and more in the battle of her life against impending death.

A spiritual experience of her cancer was also involved in Teresa’s equanimity toward the physicians who misdiagnosed and misled her. In view of the utter strangeness of this disease, which continued to manifest its awesomeness, Teresa forgave them. In understanding and accepting the doctors’ fallibility, she adopted a kind of ultimate, beyond-this-world perspective, a compassionate (one could say *divine*) grasp of life, an understanding of its endangeredness, fragility, and ugliness. In this moment, Teresa also affirmed the mysteriousness of life, its not lending itself to judgment or control. Teresa similarly forgave the many deficient and even cruel people in her life—her mother, physicians, schoolmates, teachers, and even her father, who had scorned and undermined her since her childhood and who now abandoned her to sickness and impending death. Teresa put herself in their shoes and embraced them with compassion, with an attitude of respectful acceptance—with love. This attitude was ego-transcendent, sharply contrasting with her very prominent rational-instrumental style, in which she took others for what they had done or could do for her, which through much of her traumatic experience amounted to *nothing at all*. Perhaps the evaporation of instrumentality was the gateway to a deeper spirituality. Of course all significant others gave Teresa she gratefully accepted, but it was on this very nothingness—their inadequacy, uselessness, and deficiency in the face of illness and death, that her spirituality grew, and this was the center of the way she got along harmoniously with others and transcended their impotence, indifference, lack of support, and abandonment. Teresa’s acceptance of others’ failings was a crucial foundation for cultivating her own agency in the face of trauma, and this allowed her to remain engaged and connected with others even when they failed her.

Teresa's spirituality also manifested *thankfulness*, her sense of being gifted with life itself. She mentioned this thankfulness for being alive as a part of her post-surgery experience. Her gratefulness was not always complete or overflowing, and it vacillated with anger, forlornness, and bitterness. However, it was extremely and uniquely significant in the paradox of her lived experience. Despair was a precondition of Teresa's gratefulness for life, just as the destructive aspects of cancer and other people were the precondition for her acceptance of and finding value in them. That Teresa's thankfulness was not continual and was often shaken, even broken, does not invalidate its importance in her life itself as a whole. Her gratefulness tended toward embracing everything and had a quality, an experiential meaning of *ultimateness* even in its fragility, its relationship with her despair. Teresa's spirituality seems essentially to have arisen out of her very sense of abandonment—the opposite of being gifted with life—of life being threatened, taken from her, her being bound toward nothingness. This impending nothingness bestowed a sense of ultimate value on her life. As her life was increasingly enveloped in the threat of cancer, she rose in opposition. In her very forsakenness with all its uncertainty, Teresa fought for and worked toward affirming the value of living. She embraced life, her own and others', as a blessing and a gift. Teresa's relationship with *the ultimate* is therefore ambiguous, paradoxical in that it embodies both negation and affirmation. Even when she lost her voice, she was thankful to be alive. When she began to feel betrayed, compromised, faulty, she battled for redemption. No doubt her anxiety in the face of death and uncertainty was at times bereft of grace. Yet recurrently, in the moments of her flourishing spirituality, even after others failed her, Teresa embraced her interdependency on them with hope.

Teresa's relationship to "God" paralleled her relationship to her voice and to the redeeming world her voice once opened up for her. Consistent with the structure of spirituality that we have described above, Teresa said she felt more *abandoned by* than *angry at* God in this fateful loss, hence the very absence of her belief in God throughout her experience. If Teresa experienced God at all, she did so in the mode of God's abandonment, as a dynamic absence. She did not experience a personal God who was credibly there for her. With her belief in God in suspense, Teresa remained open to being moved by an ineffable healing affirmation of life that we might call "faith without belief." Her search through various religious texts and traditions openly anticipated

something, even though the presence of God was not actually revealed to her. What Teresa called “spirituality” took place below the level of any belief in a personal deity, and yet it pervaded her life perhaps precisely by virtue of its lack of the kind of cognitive content that would be limited to a specific object of experience. This spirituality was about how and how much she lived, how and how much she loved in the face of the bitterness and negation of her existence. What Teresa called “spirituality” was the deepest affirmative force in her life, secretly and pre-reflectively present throughout her life and intensified decisively in her battle with cancer, her enhanced way of living. As a transcendence in living and in the fulfillment of life’s potential, Teresa’s spirituality was embodied in her struggle with cancer, her generosity toward those who failed her, her fencing, her rock climbing, her new studies, her marriage, and eventually her return to singing. But this secret, mysterious, paradoxical process was not manifest in a conception of God. Although difficult to conceptualize and describe, it therefore makes sense that Teresa felt faithful even though she was never sure of the existence of God. When asked by her interviewer if she could imagine ever encountering God, she said it would be *after she is dead*, in a final moment of judgment, in which God would understand and accept her, including even lack of belief in God. Within her lived experience, deep in its core, Teresa was persistently in tune with divinity even though she only imagined God as not existing in her lifetime and appearing only in a hypothetical, final dialogue after her death. Perhaps we would not be going too far to think that there was a divine presence at the very core of Teresa’s living of trauma and recovery.

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