

Article

Trauma, Spirituality, and Healing: A Journey through the Lens of an Incarcerated Person

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Abstract: This article examines the case study of Joseph, an incarcerated man in a northeastern state who experienced myriad traumas over the course of his life and attained healing through spirituality. We follow his story from his abusive childhood home to the foster care system, where he was further traumatized through repeated forced separations. Then, through his adolescent years and his witnessing the deaths of two integral people in his life, we see Joseph's spiritual struggles that led him into a life of violence and into an adulthood that found him quickly transitioned from the foster care system to the prison system. It is not until years into his prison sentence that we see Joseph begin attaining some semblance of spiritual clarity and grounding—and this through the providential intervention of a man of faith who himself is incarcerated. Interwoven in Joseph's case study is a thread of extant literature pertaining to the overarching themes of this article: Trauma, Spirituality, and Healing. To honor Joseph's faith and to most accurately represent his voice and experience, the author's references to God are almost exclusively in relation to the Judeo-Christian faith tradition, while acknowledging the much wider application of the term "spirituality".

Keywords: trauma; trauma-healing; spirituality; child abuse; foster care; crime; prison; meaning-making



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1. Introduction

Incarcerated persons usually experience the existential spiritual struggle of finding meaning in a life of trauma, while living in an environment that creates and exacerbates suffering (Flood 2018). This is borne out in the case study of Joseph, through whose experience we see the themes of trauma, spirituality, and healing as they pertain to incarcerated people. This article examines Joseph's case study as it relates to the body of literature around the themes of Trauma (Part 1), which includes child abuse as a trauma and trauma as a spiritual violation; Spirituality (Part 2), which addresses positive/negative spiritual coping mechanisms, interpersonal aspects of spirituality/spiritual coping, and connection between spirituality and mental health; and Healing (Part 3), which encompasses forgiveness and service as pathways to trauma-healing. For the purpose of this article, the author drew from Harper and Pargament (2015) in saying that one may understand spirituality as the search for the sacred, while "the *sacred* often directly references God or a higher power, any aspect of life may be deemed as sacred if it is perceived to have divine-like qualities, such as transcendence, boundlessness, ultimate meaning, and perfection".

This article is based upon the case study of Joseph, an incarcerated man in a northeastern state who experienced myriad traumas over the course of his life and attained healing through spirituality. In childhood, he was subjected to physical, mental, and emotional abuse at the hands of his father, which led to repeated traumatic separations and spiritual confusion after he entered the foster care system. These experiences led to a spiritual hardening of his heart. Witnessing the subsequent deaths of his foster mother and biological father pushed him beyond his threshold of tolerance, ultimately leading to the violent act for which he was imprisoned, as well as the experience of spiritually dying. Reviewing this journey of trauma highlights the powerful impact of spirituality—positive and negative—upon the trauma-healing process.

The thematic focus of this article was to introduce the lived experience of an incarcerated person into the body of literature around trauma, spirituality, and trauma-healing. This is an area that is largely unexplored in the extant literature. Research should be carried out to examine the spiritual/healing pathways of people who have both experienced trauma and have inflicted trauma upon others. Potential guiding questions could be as follows: How can such a person's experience healing, and does the current body of literature apply to the spiritual/healing journeys of such people? Do the current impact implications of spirituality/spiritual coping mechanisms apply to people who have both experienced trauma and have inflicted trauma upon others? Incarcerated people should have their voices intentionally included in this research.

2. Scope and Limitations

This article is based upon a single case study revolving around the specific themes highlighted in the life and experience of Joseph, an incarcerated man. As such, this article is not representative of the experiences of all incarcerated people. Instead, the information contained in the case study is unique to Joseph's experience (i.e., geographical location, race, upbringing, gender, etc.). Further, Joseph's case study is subject to the flaws inherent in trauma-affected memory, which is retrieved in fragments as perceived by a child and an adolescent, only gaining clarity in adulthood.

3. Literary Examination of Joseph's Case Study

After examining the themes of trauma, spirituality, and healing in the case study of Joseph's life journey, the author reviewed extant literature related to the following key topics: Child abuse as a trauma; Trauma as a spiritual violation; Positive/negative spiritual coping mechanisms; Interpersonal aspects of spirituality/spiritual coping; Connection between spirituality and mental health; and Forgiveness and service as pathways to trauma-healing. Each theme will now be addressed, highlighted by Joseph's interwoven case study. The author has known Joseph throughout his incarceration, witnessed his journey, and is committed to representing his voice as clearly and accurately as possible. Joseph has been intimately involved in the presentation of his voice herein.

3.1. Trauma

3.1.1. Child Abuse as a Trauma in Joseph's Life

While a strict reading of the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* does not include child abuse as a trauma, other authors rightfully do. As [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) relayed in Chapter 3 of *Trauma, Meaning, and Spirituality: Translating Research Into Clinical Practice*, the DSM-5 "describes trauma as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, involving direct exposure, witnessing (in person or indirectly), by learning that a close relative or close friend was exposed to trauma, or experiencing repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties, as with first responders". However, as Joseph experienced, [van den Blink \(2012\)](#) asserted in his article "Trauma and Spirituality" that trauma has come to describe an extremely distressing and harrowing personal or communal experience that exceeds our normal abilities to cope. Furthermore, and drawing again from [Park et al. \(2017\)](#), "Briere (2013) suggested that trauma may also include 'threats to psychological integrity, including major losses, events that were very upsetting but did not include fear of death or injury, and early and severe childhood neglect'". Elsewhere, [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) categorized abuse at the hands of a trusted attachment figure as "interpersonally mediated traumas". As we will see, Joseph experienced physical and emotional abuse from his father, thus inflicting trauma upon him.

Elsewhere, Melissa [Balgobin \(2021\)](#) writes that childhood trauma experiences are attributed to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, as well as to dysfunctional family life and parental mental health problems. As is true in Joseph's case, people who experience

childhood trauma may be exposed to multiple forms of trauma throughout their lifetime (Balgobin 2021). What follows is the manifestation of trauma in Joseph's early life:

Growing up in a northeastern state, Joseph's early years were marred by consistently sporadic episodes of physical, mental, and emotional abuse at the hands of his father, which constituted what Park et al. (2017) call "an assault" on his spirituality. Joseph does not remember much physicality from his father before he turned eight years old, but Joseph was witness to the culmination of his father's physical abuse of his eldest brother, Samson. This was the legendary night when Samson defied his father by breaking his favorite instrument: a thick wooden yard stick. According to Joseph's sister, Samson realized their father was preparing to use it on the younger boys who were coming of age for such treatment and was hoping to spare them the pain. Sadly, none of the children could know that Samson would die just a few days before their father's birthday—leading to another "DSM-valid trauma" (Salazar et al. 2013) in Joseph's early life. Rather than changing his ways and placing greater value on the sons he had left, Joseph's father blamed an ethereal "them" for killing his son and proceeded to unleash his anger upon the two that remained for any further disturbance of his peace. Through this arbitrary delivery of violence, Joseph lost any trust he once had in his father and in God.

Only now, at the time of this writing, is Joseph able to look back with a greater understanding of his father's traumatic childhood and see in his abuse a desire to toughen his sons enough to survive in a world that hated them. Like most domestic violence, this all occurred behind closed doors and Joseph's mother was so busy trying to keep food on the table, a roof over her children's heads, and her husband's extensive medical needs cared for that she remained largely oblivious to the depth and extent of the suffering of her surviving sons. By the time Joseph's grandmother (his last remaining grandparent) passed away when he was ten, Joseph refused to endure anymore of his father's abuse.

The year prior, Joseph began running away from home on occasions when he knew a lashing was coming, when he received one that he did not feel he had earned, or when he thought he might actually be able to stay gone. After his grandmother died, Joseph increased the frequency and intensity of his disappearances to the point that his mother feared for his life. Joseph did not possess any of what Harper and Pargament (2015) call "positive religious/spiritual coping mechanisms" through which to steady or sustain himself through the abuse. When his family now speaks of these times, there are two decisive moments that revealed to Joseph's mother the severity of what happened in her home while she was away: when he ran away from school; and when he jumped off the roof to get away from home. On the former occasion, Joseph's mother was in the car at an intersection when she witnessed his reckless dash across four lanes of traffic in midwinter to get away from his remaining brother, Levi, and the police. Joseph performed the latter escape while the police officer who had just returned him home was still speaking with Joseph's father downstairs; this time, Levi acted as Joseph's accomplice. Being two years his senior and seeing his desperation to be rid of that home, Levi accepted Joseph's need to leave, even though that meant he would be the only target left for their father. Levi, too, thought Joseph might die in his escape attempts if he did not help his brother get away. This fear led Levi to yell Joseph's name in a feigned attempt to prevent his escape, hoping to assist his brother while avoiding an inevitable lashing for doing so. Joseph thanks God for emboldening Levi to help him and for protecting his young body that could easily have been broken by the leap. It was shortly after this two-story jump that Joseph entered the foster care system.

A sympathetic neighbor found Joseph trying to sleep on her fenced-in front porch one night, avoiding the snow-covered ground and icy winds outside. Joseph was not sure if he had made a noise or if it was a police car's spotlight that woke her up, but Miss Lisa came out in her bathrobe and found him curled up on the wooden floor. Rather than turning him away, she showed Joseph grace and made up a sleeping bag on the floor of her daughter's room for the night. In the morning, as Joseph prepared to walk her young daughter to school, as was his custom, Miss Lisa gave him a business card of a Department of Human

Services (DHS) caseworker and told him there was a nice lady on the other side of that phone number who could help him if he was not safe to go home. Though Joseph could not see it at the time, he now acknowledges that God once again stepped in to protect him. On a night shortly thereafter, Joseph found himself without food, money, or shelter, having exhausted the available couches of those friends whose parents allowed him to stay with them without asking too many questions. He made a call from a payphone in a Rite Aid parking lot, and to his astonishment, a kind lady answered the phone and told Joseph she would help him get somewhere safe. At the time, it felt like divine intervention. He was saved. Little did he know the cost of that safety.

3.1.2. Joseph's Experience of Trauma as a Spiritual Violation

Turning now to trauma as a spiritual violation and drawing from [Harper and Pargament \(2015\)](#), one may understand spirituality as the search for the sacred; and while “the *sacred* often directly references God or a higher power, any aspect of life may be deemed as sacred if it is perceived to have divine-like qualities, such as transcendence, boundlessness, ultimate meaning, and perfection”. With this understanding, we see that trauma is a direct violation and what [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) call “an assault” on a person’s spirituality, leaving them to question their whole existence and place in the world. As is the case with Joseph, when someone experiences trauma, it “can violate one’s spiritual beliefs, spiritual aims, and fundamental sense of purpose in life. Trauma can be devastating when it violates deeply held spiritual global meanings, such as beliefs that God is a loving and protective parent, good people will not suffer, or human nature is primarily benevolent and good” ([Park et al. 2017](#)). When Joseph’s father violated the parental bond of trust, it also created a spiritual violation in Joseph’s perception of the world.

When looking at human beings in a holistic light (mind, body, soul/spirit), one sees how the violation of the body and mind through abuse is also a violation of the spirit. In her article “The Spiritual Implications of Interpersonal Abuse: Speaking of the Soul”, Emily [Lyon \(2010\)](#) reveals that “Abuse is an interpersonal event which mangles, rather than nurtures the soul [spirit] of the person.” By experiencing this spiritual violation, Joseph lost his trust in God. As established in the research conducted by [Kosarkova et al. \(2020\)](#), this mangling then leads to adults who are “less likely to report positive images of God” and who hesitate “to describe God as loving, always present, forgiving, fatherly or just”, but instead “critical or angry”. This is likely because the “attack on a child so that her [or his] self becomes a ‘no-self’ is indeed a repudiation of God as creator that can only be understood as radical evil” ([Kosarkova et al. 2020](#)). When a child is abused by his or her parent, guardian, or trusted adult, the violation is one of mind, body, and spirit. Such was the case with Joseph.

The near-daily assaults on his mind, heart, and body finally came to an end when Joseph entered the foster care system. However, Joseph was now entering a world where “home” changed meanings and faces with the passing of time. Not only had he left the only family he knew and loved, so too were gone all of his familiar surroundings and everyone Joseph once called “friend”. The group homes were filled with “staff” and “residents” or “clients”, many of whom were pleasant, and none of whom were to be trusted. The other children became the focus of Joseph’s search for a “sense of connection” and salvation, which Judith [Herman \(2015\)](#) says is common among trauma victims, but they failed him on both fronts. With each new connection came a painful separation for Joseph when the time came for one of the other foster children to go to another home, some hoping for a forever-home, some returning to their parents, and some being shipped off to a mental hospital. He tried to protect one of the girls headed to a mental institution, only to find himself sitting next to her in the back seat of a police cruiser in the middle of the night of their escape and forced to see her dragged out the front door the following morning anyway. *What kind of God would allow that?* Faced with what he saw as a grave injustice, Joseph found himself confused at the nature of a loving God who would allow such suffering.

At his next home, Joseph found a family who grew to love him. Whom he grew to love. Joseph turned twelve years old with them shortly after his parents took his brother with them to live in Florida (a move they had begun to plan before Joseph left home; a plan that helped him decide to leave). The father of this family was a 35-year-old Canadian man with a beautiful wife in her mid-twenties and a 15-year-old son who treated Joseph like he was his real little brother. In the summertime, they took trips to the beach together, and the mother would turn off the alarm on Joseph's door after the other foster children were in bed for the night so they could sneak downstairs to play *Super Mario Brothers* for a few hours or watch a movie the other kids were not supposed to watch (like *Braveheart*). Even though it was a halfway house and Joseph was only supposed to stay for six months, they became a family. The Canadian couple wanted to adopt Joseph, and they managed to postpone his transfer to a longer-term foster home in hopes that they could obtain full citizenship and complete the process. Joseph finally began to experience a spiritual peace and rebuild a trust and belief in parental love and protection. However, after nine months, he was ripped away from the only family he wanted to call his own.

3.2. Spirituality

3.2.1. Joseph's Struggles with Spiritual Coping Mechanisms

In the wake of spiritual violations, one must learn to cope. Drawing again on the wisdom of [Harper and Pargament \(2015\)](#), spiritual coping mechanisms are generally delineated as either positive or negative. Positive spiritual coping mechanisms "generally reflect a secure connection with the divine, oneself, and others", while negative spiritual coping mechanisms "are generally associated with conflicts with the divine, oneself, and others about sacred matters" ([Harper and Pargament 2015](#)). As we will see, Joseph employed primarily negative coping mechanisms. [Harper and Pargament \(2015\)](#) further discussed how both positive and negative spiritual coping mechanisms aim to address the same "five key coping functions: (1) finding meaning, (2) gaining mastery and control, (3) increasing comfort and closeness to God, (4) enhancing intimacy with others and closeness to God, and (5) achieving life transformation". The main difference is that, while exceptions exist, positive coping mechanisms generally increase people's ability to heal from trauma, whereas negative coping mechanisms typically exacerbate posttraumatic distress ([Harper and Pargament 2015](#)). The results of Joseph employing negative spiritual coping mechanisms is evident in his distress and enmity toward God. [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) support these findings in that "Attributions about an angry or vengeful God [negative coping mechanism of appraisals of causation] tend to be associated with higher levels of distress, whereas those about a loving or purposeful God [positive coping mechanism of appraisals of causation] tend to be associated with less distress" ([Park et al. 2017](#)).

Learning and developing positive spiritual coping mechanisms, like spiritual beliefs, play "a crucial role in how humans make sense of life events and cope with challenging situations", as is asserted by Ca Trice B. [Glenn \(2014\)](#) in her *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* article "A Bridge Over Troubled Waters: Spirituality and Resilience with Emerging Adult Childhood Trauma Survivors". Without them, people struggle to make sense of life and cope with trauma and loss, as we see in Joseph's experience. Yet, when external supports fail, [Dill \(2017\)](#) shows that positive spiritual coping mechanisms serve as internal sources of resilience. In "Religion, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth: a Systematic Review", [Shaw et al. \(2005\)](#) further affirm that spiritual beliefs as a positive coping mechanism can assist people in their psychological recovery and in their personal development and growth following trauma. According to Melissa Balgobin's research, in addition to developing these positive coping mechanisms, people who develop the ability to modify their spiritual coping strategies when in the wake of trauma "have shorter spiritual struggles and exhibit a higher likelihood of growth" ([Balgobin 2021](#)). Conversely, when people succumb to negative spiritual coping mechanisms, they are more likely to experience higher levels of distress ([Balgobin 2021](#)), often manifesting as extended spiritual struggles and, as

relayed by [Bjorck and Thurman \(2007\)](#), “worsened psychological functioning”. We see this in Joseph’s story.

More than 19 years after the forced separation, at the time of this writing, Joseph still remembers looking out the back window of the station wagon that carried him away from the tears streaming down his would-be mother’s face. That was the day Joseph resolved to never love anyone again. Ever. Not even God, because if God loved him, He would not have hurt him like that again. Joseph did not know at that time that this experience was the beginning of a hardening of his heart. Within a year, he was diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and emotional detachment disorder (EDD) by the first therapist Joseph felt actually cared about him. Naturally, Joseph rejected the therapist’s diagnoses and thought him to be one more well-meaning white man who had no idea who Joseph was on the inside. Sadly, the doctor was correct on both counts. Joseph was deeply wounded spiritually, and that damage manifested itself psychologically and behaviorally. Looking at the emotional and behavioral symptoms criteria put forward by the Mayo [Clinic \(Clinic\)](#) for a diagnosis of ODD (angry and irritable mood; argumentative and defiant behavior; and vindictiveness), the contributing factors thereof (problems with parenting that may involve . . . inconsistent or harsh discipline, or abuse or neglect), as well as the risk factors (a child who experiences abuse or neglect, harsh or inconsistent discipline, who lives with a parent or family discord or has a parent with a mental health disorder), Joseph now sees how easy it was for his therapist to reach this conclusion.

The same is true for the therapist’s conclusion of EDD. As shared by Danielle [Dresden \(2020\)](#), “Children may have a greater chance of developing attachment disorders and emotional detachment if they experience difficult circumstances in early life, such as: experiencing significant loss, such as the death of a parent or separation from a caregiver; having traumatic experiences; growing up in an orphanage; experiencing emotional abuse; experiencing physical abuse . . .”. Furthermore, at that time, Joseph was clearly exhibiting the warning signs that accompany EDD, which include “changes in sleeping habits; bad moods that do not seem to go away; mysterious or vague physical ailments; angry outbursts; social withdrawal; poor performance at . . . school; run-ins with the authorities; substance abuse; thoughts of suicide” ([Dresden 2020](#)). By the time Joseph turned twelve, he had already been smoking cigarettes off-and-on for almost four years in an effort to soothe the spiritual ache for which he had no language or metaphysical salve. His time with the loving Canadian family was a refuge not meant to last, and the rupturing of that bond confirmed for Joseph that, due to what Judith [Herman \(2015\)](#) calls his “innate badness”, he did not deserve love or peace in this life. For if he did, God would have made it happen. Rather, Joseph had internalized his early abuse as something he deserved.

3.2.2. Joseph’s Experience with Interpersonal Aspects of Spirituality/Spiritual Coping

Although spiritual choices and perspectives are unique to each person, [van den Blink \(2012\)](#) asserts that “spirituality also calls for participation in a community of those committed to a similar journey, regular spiritual practice, and help from others who have been on the path, usually in the form of spiritual direction or friendship”. Joseph needed human connection in a way that was largely absent in his life. One of the “five key coping functions” posited by [Harper and Pargament \(2015\)](#) is “enhancing intimacy with others and closeness to God”, wherein “a person may seek support and reassurance from clergy, congregation members, and others in the community who share one’s religious or spiritual faith”. However, this interpersonal aspect of spiritual coping can also manifest in negative ways, where a person may harbor discontentment toward their faith community or express confusion and dissatisfaction with clergy or others associated with the traumatic experience ([Harper and Pargament 2015](#)). Seeing what he perceived as the hypocrisy in those who professed to be Christians led to Joseph’s distrust of people in that faith community entirely. For better or worse, one’s spiritual journey “is not a solitary journey and cannot be engaged in half-heartedly but requires our best efforts, the support of spiritual friends, and compassion and outreach to others” ([van den Blink 2012](#)).

God did not create human beings to be independent, but inter-dependent. According to [Lyon \(2010\)](#), people are created to be “relational beings who act both as the presence of God and the presence of evil to one another”. As Joseph would come to learn, one person’s spiritual walk can directly impact another’s. This is true for both individual relationships and how one relates to their community ([Balgobin 2021](#)). The interpersonal connectedness a person experiences and chooses to share can include family, friends, romantic partners, faith community members, or others ([Aldridge 1991](#)). The choice belongs to each individual whether the interaction and interconnection is “destructive or healing” ([Lyon 2010](#)). Joseph’s general distrust of people brought about more destruction than healing.

Following his emotional departure from the Canadian family, Joseph spent the next two-and-a-half years living in a home where he became what Judith [Herman \(2015\)](#) calls “a superb performer”, an identity he has donned at various times in his life. However, this identity carries with it an inherent duality of self: on the outside, as relayed by [Hylton \(2021\)](#), Joseph was “a consistently happy young man with an easy smile and a kind word always at the ready”; on the inside, he saw in the mirror an ugly, worthless half-breed who would only amount to something if the white men let him. Maintaining this charade in his new foster home and other environs led people to feel close and connected with Joseph, whereas (with one notable exception) he lived with a perpetual feeling of disconnection, loneliness, and isolation. Therefore, the appreciation of others simply confirmed his conviction that no one could truly know him, and that if his secret and true self were recognized, Joseph would be shunned and reviled ([Herman 2015](#)). Upon his reflection, it is no wonder that Joseph’s inner self could not support this façade under the extreme duress that would follow. He still had no firm spiritual foundation upon which to build self-confidence and resilience.

One month before his seventeenth birthday, Joseph watched his foster mother of more than two years die of a massive heart attack while he was on the phone with the 911 dispatcher. Having never learned how to deal with grief and trauma in a healthy manner, Joseph repressed his emotions, cared for his younger foster brothers, and carried on living without her. It was when Joseph’s biological father drew his last breath with Joseph standing by his bedside, after supporting his mother through the last weeks of his father’s life, that the totality of Joseph’s traumas caught up with him and sprang forth from his eyes in the midnight hours. His father’s death came on the one-year anniversary of Joseph’s foster mother’s death—one he had yet to grieve. Joseph cried and cursed God for taking from him the mountainous abusive father of his youth, leaving only a husk of a man for Joseph to forgive and care for at the end of his life.

Adding to the traumatic experience of wrestling with the love, hatred, and resentment that Joseph held toward his father were his plaintive cries for death as his cancer progressed. Seven years after his last beating, Joseph was again at home, this time to care for his abuser in his last days. The dutiful and forgiving son, waiting on his every need and eager to make his passing as painless as possible. Yet, the shame of needing that care led Joseph’s father to plead with him—and to beg God—to end his suffering. Due to his father being diabetic, Joseph knew an insulin overdose would do the job. The night before his death, Joseph attempted to grant his father’s dying wish. He loaded up the needle with insulin while the hospice nurse was in the bathroom, lifted up his father’s T-shirt to reveal the rise and fall of his round belly, and inched the needle closer. Joseph’s hesitant hand caused the needle to brush his father’s skin, making him flinch in his sleep. Joseph realized he could not do it. Just then, the toilet flushed and he walked away. Neither malice nor mercy could get Joseph to take his father’s life. At that moment though, Joseph could not know that his father’s disease would run its course the following afternoon. After he died, those frozen moments plagued Joseph constantly: he almost killed his father.

Following this traumatic experience, Joseph drank often. He smoked cigarettes heavily and marijuana daily. He was in constant search of the next party and opportunity for meaningless sexual encounters with women whom he may or may not have known.

Anything to run from or numb the pain he could no longer hold at bay. Joseph was done with God. No more crying out; no more begging for forgiveness; no more seeking His comfort; no more caring about His judgment. Joseph became selective with his “performer” identity (Herman 2015); he saved that for the people he wanted to charm. Instead, Joseph started allowing the inner darkness, the ugly traumas of his life, to show through in his speech and actions. Wherever he went, Joseph had a knife in his front pocket, a red bandanna protruding from his back pocket, and a hope in his heart that he would have an opportunity to brandish the blade to anyone who thought they were tougher than him. This was the state of ugliness and spiritual confusion in which Joseph chose to move in with his elder foster brother, David, the son of his dead foster mother. David was family; he was facing prison time for a burglary he committed the previous year, and Joseph felt guilty for being the one who had let David’s victim into his apartment to find the stolen safe in his foster brother’s closet.

3.2.3. Connection between Spirituality and Mental Health in Joseph’s Life

As we saw in Joseph’s dual diagnoses of ODD and EDD, and supported by Salazar et al. (2013), traumatic events adversely affect a person’s mental health. When trauma is seen as a spiritual violation, it becomes apparent that secular experiences, following Harper and Pargament (2015), are “connected to the divine and . . . events that disrupt sacred aspects of life can have a significant impact on posttraumatic recovery, for better or worse”. On the “for better” side, when people have the ability to exercise positive spiritual coping mechanisms, this is a strong predictor of posttraumatic growth (Harper and Pargament 2015). Spirituality serves to comfort people, assuage anxiety, and increase feelings of security, also boosting confidence in oneself and/or in what Harold G. Koenig (2009) calls “Divine beings”. Though Joseph would not experience this in time to spare himself or others, positive spiritual coping is also “robustly associated with post-traumatic growth”, as is shown by Shaw et al. (2005). In extant literature, spirituality is shown to predict psychological well-being for adults who have experienced childhood trauma (Balgobin 2021), leading to less depression, suicide, anxiety, and substance abuse (Koenig 2009).

On the “for worse” side of having a significant effect on posttraumatic recovery, when people implement negative spiritual coping mechanisms, there is a higher chance they will experience more severe posttraumatic stress and mental health symptoms (Harper and Pargament 2015). As we see through Joseph’s experience, Koenig (2009) shows that the struggles that arise from negative spiritual coping can significantly increase anxiety, wherein people feel that God is punishing them, has abandoned them, or is not able to intercede on their behalf. This was largely Joseph’s experience in relation to spirituality. Not only is this negative coping likely to lead to an increase in anxiety, according to the research conducted by Ano and Vasconcelles (2005), it has also shown to heighten depression, distress, and overall psychological burden to people experiencing stressful situations. So deep is the spiritual violation of trauma and the chasm created in the self, that it is likely to negatively impact the very core of one’s emotional well-being for the long term (Park et al. 2017). In Joseph’s life, his core self was so violated that it led him down a path toward spiritual death.

Somehow it made perfect sense to Joseph’s muddled newly-18-year-old mind to go with his foster brother back to David’s victim’s home and steal the same safe, if not a bigger one. In one fell swoop, Joseph thought he could solidify the “thug” identity he was actively creating; obtain enough money to prevent his foster brother from serving any significant prison time for his previous crime; atone for being the one who (in his mind) had led to David facing prison time; and get some money for himself to start a life as a high school dropout with aspirations of joining a gang and delving into the drug trafficking trade. Joseph did not need God. He felt in complete control of his life for the first time ever and trusted that it would be a “simple” robbery where he would do some threatening, get some money, and go on with his life. Nobody would be physically harmed and the family was

rich anyway, so they would be fine without the few thousand dollars of which he hoped to deprive them. Neither Joseph nor David could see the connection between Joseph's childhood abuse and the aggressive behaviors that were now manifesting before them, a connection highlighted by [Prino and Peyrot \(1994\)](#).

Joseph had no idea his mind would break at the sounding of the home security alarm. Somehow, as soon as that alarm went off, Joseph was no longer the intruder. He became a boy trying to protect his family from anyone who posed a threat to them. David was Joseph's family, and the innocent family whose home he was actively violating became a threat to him. They became the enemy. Neither David nor Joseph knew that, as [van den Blink \(2012\)](#) says, "Painful life experiences get encoded in our brains and bodies and can be reactivated with great intensity by the right kind of trigger decades later, even if we believe that we have dealt with them or have completely forgotten about them". Joseph would not understand this for another five years when his mother reminded him of the heart of his father's training, but in that moment, Joseph's father's voice was commanding in his subconscious: "It doesn't matter whether they are 8 or 80, man, woman, crippled, or in a wheelchair; if anyone is a threat to your family, you take them down. Kill them if necessary" ([Hylton 2021](#)). On this darkest of nights, that meant a 48-year-old man and his 10-year-old daughter. Joseph believes that God spared their lives, even though Joseph left them for dead as he fled from their home—without a dollar in his pocket.

After spending almost two years in county jails, spiritually lost and broken, Joseph was sentenced to 90 years in prison, with all suspended but 50 years to serve, and 16 years of probation to serve upon his release. Joseph blamed his foster brother. *If David had not stolen that safe the first time, I would never have been in a position to uncover the evidence. I would never have felt guilty for him getting caught. I would never have known how to get to the house, nor had any connection to that family at all. It was all his fault.* Or so Joseph told himself. Others affirmed this false narrative as well. From the detectives who arrested him to the men with whom Joseph was incarcerated to some of the correctional officers charged with overseeing him; whoever had been subjected to the media reports or court documents assured Joseph that his crime was purely David's responsibility. At most, Joseph was the "bullet" and David was the "gun": if he had not loaded Joseph up and pointed him in the direction of their victims, Joseph would be a free man. It then became Joseph's duty to hate the man he once loved so dearly. According to what [Craig Haney \(2001\)](#) calls "prison politics", either Joseph had to kill David or vice versa; they could not both live in the same prison. One of them had to die, and while Joseph did not fear death and many times wished for and fantasized about the act of dying, he refused to give his foster brother the satisfaction of being the one to end his life; therefore, Joseph spent many of those long nights in the prison's segregation unit plotting David's untimely demise, while spiritually dying himself.

3.3. Healing

Forgiveness and Service as Joseph's Pathways to Trauma-Healing

As Joseph came to learn, forgiveness is a form of power. It is gaining the ability to release oneself from the oppressive burden of carrying the experience of harm, as well as from the resentment toward the harmdoer. According to [Howard Zehr \(2015\)](#), forgiveness means no longer letting a past harm and harmdoer dominate a person's life; rather, forgiveness is an act of empowerment and healing. When a trauma is inflicted by one person upon another, the harmed person needs repair and healing; forgiveness is an avenue through which that person may resolve what [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) call "global and situational discrepancies" created by the trauma. Forgiveness can also serve the goal of life transformation, providing a way to shift from a posture of anger and blame to one of peace ([Harper and Pargament 2015](#)). This shift in Joseph's life came over time, and was difficult to attain. Yet, once someone learns how to forgive a spiritual violation of trauma, they may then have skills and spiritual development ([Park et al. 2017](#)) that provide a firm foundation to support future forgiveness, which is highly correlated with posttraumatic growth ([Shaw et al. 2005](#)). As is shown in Joseph's life, the more one spiritually grows and develops

in their ability to forgive, the more likely they are to enjoy better psychological well-being (Park et al. 2017). Yet, learning to forgive after experiencing repeated traumas can be an incredibly difficult task.

Joseph was not able to begin entertaining the idea of forgiveness until he had been incarcerated for a full three years. After spending most of that time in various segregation units for fighting and rules violations, he finally admitted to God and to himself the extent of the harm he caused in the commission of his crime. Until then, he had lived in a state of perpetual denial. He had been ill-equipped to deal with the deadening effects of the guilt and shame he felt as a result of his actions, so he lied to himself, to God, and to everyone else in fear of being held accountable for his actions. However, Joseph had begun to learn and accept what he sees as the biblical protocol for seeking forgiveness and what to do when someone else wrongs him: during Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He says, "if you bring your gift to the altar [begin to pray] and there remember that [someone] has something against you, leave your gift there [stop praying]. First be reconciled to [seek forgiveness from that person], and then come and offer your gift [resume your prayer]" (Matthew 5:23–24) (*The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV)* (1982)). Joseph had also come to understand that he needed to afford himself the same forgiveness he was to offer to others. Once he began to reckon with the extent of the harms he had caused in the commission of his crime, Joseph started taking seriously the lessons he was learning in the Bible. Yet, he still needed help in building well-being. He needed to serve.

In the wake of trauma, service to others may become sacred, thus qualifying that service as spirituality. Service may be a spiritual practice for some, a spiritual pathway for others, and a spiritual destination for still others. For Joseph, service was all three. As a practice, service may manifest as what Park et al. (2017) say is a person's (re)dedication to religious commitments or their pledge to be more devout in spiritual practices or disciplines. It may also be a practice of serving food at a soup kitchen, participating in food drives to feed people struggling with homelessness, or visiting ill or infirm people at a hospital or nursing home. According to Dill (2017), service work can also be viewed as worship to God. As a pathway, survivors of a trauma may devote themselves to helping others or reducing the threat of a trauma to others (Park et al. 2017). This could lead someone into the field of advocacy, activism, or to choose a career path of public service as a way, says Houston and Cartwright (2007), "to fulfill his or her perceived obligation to the betterment of mankind". As a spiritual destination, Park et al. (2017) assert that people may devote themselves to alleviating the suffering of others or to changing the legal system or the culture, the goal of which is to create sufficient meaning in their lives that they may arrive at a place of sustained healing and peace. Through experiencing forgiveness and devoting his life to service in this way, Joseph has attained meaning and healing in his life.

Rather than allowing him to physically or spiritually die in the confines of the segregation unit, Joseph says God had other plans. He placed in Joseph's life a decorated combat veteran who refused to allow the prison environment to lead brothers to murder one another. This man, Jethro, is what Carolyn E. Yoder (2020) calls a "reparative leader"; he intervened and became Joseph's mentor. Over several years, Jethro further introduced Joseph to the Jesus Christ of the Bible as opposed to the effeminate Europeanized version that kept Joseph away from Him for most of his life. Jethro challenged Joseph to learn God's Word, put it into practice and watch God prove His Word true—and Himself real and living. Joseph learned to pray, fast, and seek God's face for guidance, strength, and peace, growing to truly trust God to keep His promises. Over a three-year period, Jethro also guided David and Joseph through the restorative justice-mediated dialog process that is outlined by Llamas and Larson (n.d.), which ultimately led to mutual forgiveness, healing, and genuine reconciliation. Starting with very short, superficial, and mediated conversations, Jethro gradually increased the time, frequency, and depth of those conversations. After the first several months, Jethro was able to initiate an interaction, then step back and allow the brothers to speak alone. With Jethro coaching Joseph through the biblical protocol of

seeking forgiveness, at the end of those three years, Joseph was finally able to both forgive David and seek his forgiveness.

Ten years of dedicated spiritual work later, Joseph knows what it means to love, serve, and give of himself without expecting anything in return. He no longer allows himself to carry the stress and traumas of his past as he has come to understand how unbearably heavy they are. Rather, Joseph casts his cares on the Lord, knowing that He cares for him, as Joseph feels he is guided to do in 1 Peter 5:7 ([The Holy Bible, New King James Version \(NKJV\) 1982](#)). Now living in a state of constant self-evaluation and -reflection, Joseph remains vigilant against any regression in his character, conduct, or conversation. Thus, Joseph is able to stay focused on his spiritual destination by remaining faithful in his spiritual practice and keeping his feet firmly planted on his spiritual pathway of continued forgiveness and service.

4. Summary

This article examined extant literature as it pertains to the case study of Joseph, an incarcerated man, through whose experience we see the themes of trauma, spirituality, and healing related to incarcerated people. This article examined Joseph's case study as it relates to the body of literature around the themes of Trauma (Part 1), which includes child abuse as a trauma and trauma as a spiritual violation; Spirituality (Part 2), which addresses positive/negative spiritual coping mechanisms, interpersonal aspects of spirituality/spiritual coping, and connection between spirituality and mental health; and Healing (Part 3), which encompasses forgiveness and service as pathways to trauma-healing.

Joseph experienced a varied multitude of traumas throughout the course of his life. Joseph's childhood was marred by physical, mental, and emotional abuse at the hands of his father, thus violating parental trust through spiritual violation. Repeated forced separations while in foster care led to Joseph receiving a dual diagnosis of emotional detachment disorder and oppositional defiant disorder, effectively stripping him of the ability to rely upon the interpersonal spiritual support that could have greatly assisted him in building resilience and positive spiritual coping mechanisms. Witnessing the sequential deaths of his foster mother and biological father then led to Joseph's state of spiritual confusion which resulted in him inflicting trauma on an innocent family through violence. Joseph's inability to reconcile what he had done with who he thought himself to be while contemplating murder and the idea of being murdered in a prison environment was guiding him toward spiritual death. Thankfully, Joseph believes God intervened by providing him with a mentor who facilitated the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation between him and his foster brother—ultimately leading to Joseph's spiritual healing through continued service.

Future research should focus on the spiritual/healing journeys of people who have both experienced trauma and have inflicted trauma upon others. Specifically, incarcerated people should have their voices intentionally included in this research. In reviewing numerous materials for this article, it became glaringly apparent that there is a dearth of scholarly work performed in this area. In particular, the experiences of incarcerated people are notably absent from studies conducted in relation to trauma-healing and spirituality. Research must be carried out to remedy this void, utilizing structured, semi-structured, and focus group interviews. Potential guiding questions for researchers could be as follows: How can such a person's experience healing, and does the current body of literature apply to the spiritual/healing journeys of such people? Do the current impact implications of spirituality/spiritual coping mechanisms apply to people who have experienced trauma and have inflicted trauma upon others?

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