

Deep Growth Through Trials:
A Relational Spirituality Approach

Todd W. Hall
Rosemead School of Psychology
Biola University

PLEASE DO NOT DISTRIBUTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Todd W. Hall, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave. La Mirada, California 90639.

Email: todd.hall@biola.edu

Abstract

This paper examines deep spiritual growth emerging through significant trials through the lens of the Relational Spirituality (RS) framework. While an extensive body of literature on stress-related growth exists, less research has focused on the relational and spiritual mechanism of transformation through suffering. Using two high-coherence case studies selected through narrative analysis, this paper illuminates both the process of cultivating deep growth and its fruits. Findings revealed how secure relationships providing both comfort and challenge, contemplative spiritual practices facilitating integration of explicit and implicit knowledge, and practices of lament create the conditions for transformation during trials. These processes foster several interrelated fruits: experiential knowledge of God's presence, integrated capacity to see God in all circumstances, identity securely grounded in Christ, ministry emerging from brokenness, acceptance of limitations, deeper empathy, decreased striving with increased surrender, and faith-life integration. The narratives demonstrate how suffering can function as a unique catalyst for transformation when processed within secure relational contexts with God and others. Transformation occurs through a non-linear process where incremental changes eventually coalesce into qualitative shifts in attachment patterns and capacity to love. These findings corroborate the RS framework while providing richer nuance to our understanding of spiritual transformation through suffering. Implications for spiritual formation, pastoral care, and therapeutic practice are discussed, along with directions for future research examining deep growth across more diverse populations and contexts.

Keywords: relational spirituality, deep growth, attachment theory, narrative coherence, suffering, spiritual transformation, contemplative practices, secure relationships, identity formation, spiritual integration

Deep Growth Through Trials: A Relational Spirituality Approach

Suffering is part of the human condition this side of heaven. While suffering is not always necessary for growth, it turns out that trials can function as a doorway to deep spiritual growth, providing a clear view into this process. For psychotherapists, this becomes evident very quickly from clinical experience. We also see evidence for this notion in the substantial body of research known as stress-related growth or posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018). This literature, on balance, points to a paradox of the human condition: while we do not desire or seek suffering in and of itself, it often leads to growth that transforms our implicit self—our way of being and relating—in ways that seemingly could not have otherwise occurred. Despite extensive research on stress-related growth, there remains limited understanding of how suffering specifically facilitates spiritual transformation within a relational context. While psychological literature has documented growth following various forms of suffering, less attention has been given to the spiritual and relational mechanisms through which this transformation occurs, particularly using a qualitative methodology.

The focus of this paper will be on deep spiritual growth. Given that trials and suffering often function as the context of deep growth, I will illustrate deep growth from two case studies of people who have experienced significant trials. Furthermore, this paper specifically examines deep growth through the lens of a Relational Spirituality (RS) framework (Hall & Hall, 2021), which offers a unique perspective on transformation as inherently relational rather than based mainly on information or

willpower. By applying this framework to case studies of individuals who have experienced significant trials, we can better understand both the process and outcomes of spiritual transformation in relational contexts.

How, then, did I become interested in this topic? Several threads have contributed to my desire to focus on this topic. One thread is my own story. I have noticed that much of the deep growth I have experienced has occurred in the context of processing trials and suffering. There are numerous story lines of my own suffering and related growth, but one that led most directly to this project. I briefly mention my story here, not to point the spotlight on myself, but rather because it provides the experiential context for my motivation to pursue this project and my understanding of the process of deep growth. My personal experience with suffering and growth has informed not only my clinical work but also my development of the Relational Spirituality framework—a paradigm that draws on attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology, and relational theology to understand spiritual transformation.

This story line started on December 11, 2013, when my wife, Liz, received a phone call from her physician just as she was about to take our sons to church. I was in the front yard saying goodbye. Liz walked around the car into the front yard and I could tell she was trying to focus on the call. Whatever this was about, it was important. Then there was a moment I will never forget. As she was talking to the doctor, Liz hunched over as if she had been punched in the stomach, and a look came over her face that I had never seen before.

At that time we had been married for 21 years. I had seen a million looks on her face—but never this one. The best way I can describe the look is devastation mixed with fear and shock. It is the look you get when you've just been told you have cancer. We learned shortly after that it was stage two breast cancer. This led to a year-long very difficult treatment process for my wife, fear of losing my wife, and fear of my sons losing their mother. In addition, during the treatment process, a long-term client of mine died of brain cancer. I had been seeing my client, who had a history of severe complex trauma, for 11 years for 4 hours per week. The work was deep and profound, and I had become quite attached to her. This led to a significant journey of loss and grief—one that reverberated early losses in my childhood. Soon after the loss, I started experiencing debilitating migraines. What ensued was a multi-year journey of grief and chronic pain.

This led to a very intentional pursuit of healing and growth. Ultimately, I experienced deep growth in multiple domains of my life—growth that mirrors many findings from the stress-related growth literature. These included, among others, changes such as: a deeper appreciation for my limitations, a shift in my priorities to focus more on the quality of my relationships, and a deeper intimacy with God. This multi-layered experience led to a greater awareness of those around me who were suffering. As I gradually began telling my story, I found there were many people who resonated and had been through very significant trials. Many of these people, though not all, experienced profound growth through processing their trials. My journey led to a deeper appreciation of the power of suffering as a catalyst for deep growth. These

experiences raised several questions for me: How do secure relationships with God and others facilitate deep transformation through suffering? What spiritual practices enable individuals to integrate painful experiences into a coherent narrative? And how does this integration lead to qualitative shifts in one's capacity to love and be loved?

My work as a psychotherapist is another thread of my interest in deep growth. I've spent the last 30 years in this context striving to help people experience deep spiritual transformation in the context of suffering. These threads in turn led me to develop the relational spirituality (RS) framework mentioned above (Hall & Hall, 2021).

Building on these personal and professional insights, the purpose of this paper is to extend the RS framework by examining deep spiritual growth through trials. We will build on the general framework of the RS model, which draws on and synthesizes research and theory from multiple fields, including relational theology (such as Trinitarian theology) and numerous areas from psychology and the social sciences (such as interpersonal neurobiology, affective neuroscience, infant research, attachment theory, relational psychoanalysis, and more) to present a relational paradigm of human nature and transformation. While there are multiple lines and types of evidence synthesized in the RS framework, the goal here is to further nuance the model by drawing on case studies that illustrate and expand on the process and outcomes of deep spiritual growth. As part of a larger interview study, the present paper draws on two case studies based on in-depth interviews conducted by the author, each lasting two to three hours. I analyzed these interviews using an intensive multi-layered coding

process informed by grounded theory methodology, identifying emergent themes related to the process and outcomes of growth through trials.

These two case studies were selected due to their very high coherence. For the initial coherence analysis, three interviews were rated using Barger and McAdams' (1999) coherence coding system—two demonstrating high coherence and one with low coherence to provide contrast. All three interviews were rated independently by both the author and an AI system trained on the coherence model. Our inter-rater reliability analysis yielded robust results across all dimensions. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) for single measures was 0.96, indicating almost perfect agreement between raters at the individual rating level.

The emphasis on coherence is important because narrative coherence has been found to correlate strongly with secure attachment patterns (Siegel, 2020) and overall psychological well-being (Barger & McAdams, 1999). This correlation is significant for our study of deep growth, as coherent narratives reflect an individual's capacity to integrate emotional experience with cognitive understanding—precisely the integration process that characterizes deep transformation. Individuals with high coherence are more likely to demonstrate deeper transformation both in process and outcomes, providing clearer illustrations of deep growth and spiritual maturity.

Daniel, an African American man in his mid-40s, grew up in a Christian family with his father being a pastor in his home country in Africa. He immigrated to the United States during his late teen years. His life was dramatically altered when his wife of two and a half years died suddenly in a car accident in 2012. This devastating loss

became a defining trial that led to profound transformation. Rather than being defined by this tragedy, Daniel intentionally processed his grief by developing support systems, engaging with Scripture, and practicing lament. His journey involved wrestling with theological questions about God's will and why suffering occurs. Currently remarried, Daniel has integrated his grief experience into a ministry helping others navigate loss and suffering, viewing his pain as something that God has redeemed for a greater purpose.

Joshua, a White American white male in his late 20s, was born with a cleft lip and palate, requiring numerous surgeries throughout his life. His early struggles with self-image were compounded when his mother abruptly left the family during his junior year of high school. These events triggered a crisis of faith and a period of depression, rebellion, and substance use as he attempted to escape his pain. In 2020, Joshua underwent a major jaw surgery that failed, resulting in excruciating physical pain that coincided with the COVID-19 lockdowns, leaving him isolated and unable to communicate. Through this intense, multi-layered suffering, Joshua experienced a profound spiritual transformation, finding God's presence in his darkest moments. This journey led him to youth ministry, where he now uses his experience of suffering to minister to others, having found a deeper, more authentic relationship with God and a greater sense of purpose.

Below, we begin by describing the nature and mechanisms of deep growth, drawing from my relational spirituality framework (Hall & Hall, 2021), to provide context for the process and outcomes of deep growth. Following this, the paper addresses how

we cultivate deep growth (the process) and the fruits of deep growth (the outcomes). As we will see, there is a significant degree of overlap between the process and outcomes of deep growth, because they are conceptually and experientially linked reflecting the non-linear, relational nature of transformation.

Theoretical Framework for Deep Growth:

Relational Spirituality

The Relational Spirituality (RS) framework offers a comprehensive approach to understanding spiritual transformation as inherently relational rather than being based primarily on explicit knowledge or willpower. This framework is built on four interdependent components that work together in a dynamic process of spiritual formation: Loving presence, attachment, two ways of knowing, and deep growth.

Loving Presence: The Foundation and Goal

At the heart of this framework is loving presence, which is both the process and ultimate goal of spiritual transformation. Loving presence involves two key aspects: (1) desiring and seeking the good of the other, and (2) pursuing appropriate relational connection. This concept aligns with Jesus' vision of true flourishing in the Sermon on the Mount, which New Testament scholar Jonathan Pennington (2017) suggests centers on wholehearted, integrated love for God and others. As 1 John 4:19 reminds us, "We love each other because he loved us first." The RS framework proposes that we are essentially "loved into loving."

Attachment: Created to Connect

Substantial scientific evidence indicates that humans are biologically "created to connect." Neuropsychologist Allan Schore notes that "our brains are physically wired to develop in tandem with another's, through emotional communication, beginning before words are spoken" (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003). Our deepest sense of self is shaped by attachment relationships—primarily with parents and God, but also with mentors, close friends, spouses, and even symbolic attachments to leaders and organizations.

These relational patterns become encoded in our implicit memory as "attachment filters" that shape how we experience and relate to others, including God. These filters range from secure to insecure on a continuum. Secure attachment is characterized by comfort (haven of safety) when distressed and challenge/encouragement to explore (secure base), along with coherence (ability to make sense of experiences) and closeness (shared purpose and experience).

Two Ways of Knowing: Head and Heart

One paradox in spiritual growth is people who possess extensive knowledge about God yet feel emotionally distant from God. This points to the distinction between two ways of knowing that is critical for understanding deep growth. Explicit knowledge (head knowledge) is conscious, deliberate, slow, and easily verbalized. In contrast, implicit relational knowledge (heart knowledge) is nonconscious, automatic, rapid, and difficult to verbalize.

These ways of knowing can become split and fail to work together, creating an emotional barrier to experiencing God's love despite intellectual understanding. The integration of these two knowledge systems is crucial for deep growth.

Deep Growth: The Transformational Process

Deep growth focuses on changing our implicit relational knowledge—our attachment filters—to become more Christ-like in our capacity to love. Unlike linear models of spiritual development, deep growth follows a winding journey with curves and seeming dead ends. Growth happens through incremental changes that eventually coalesce into qualitative transformation, often experienced as spiritual "tipping points" where small inputs produce large, unpredictable effects.

The engine of deep growth is what I call the "knowledge spiral"—a process of integrating explicit and implicit knowledge through two primary mechanisms (Bucci, 1997; Hall & Hall, 2021). First, we *interpret our experience* by articulating gut-level feelings and implicit relational knowledge, often through story. This process translates "unthought knows" (Bollas, 1987) into language, bringing them into conscious awareness where they can be transformed. Second, we *feel an idea*, whereby abstract theological concepts becoming fused with emotions, transforming implicit knowledge.

These processes work together in a spiral. As we persist, our relational capacities expand, making us more securely connected to God and others, and more capable of loving. This reflects Paul's vision in Ephesians 4:15-16 of the body of Christ "speaking the truth in love" and growing "to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head."

Deep growth can be cultivated through several key practices, especially during suffering. These include secure relationships, secure communities, and spiritual practices. The remainder of this paper focuses specifically on the deep growth component of the RS framework, exploring in greater detail how this process unfolds through the processing of trials in the broad practices outlined above. Drawing on the two case studies of individuals who have experienced significant suffering, we will examine both the process of deep growth (how it is cultivated) and its fruits (the outcomes that emerge).

Cultivating Deep Growth

Deep growth—growth that transforms our implicit relational knowledge or attachment filters—involves several key dimensions. While suffering itself does not directly cause growth, it provides an opportunity for our attachment filters to be shaken up, creating the possibility for transformation. In this section, we explore how we experience and intentionally promote deep growth through secure relationships, secure communities, and contemplative spiritual practices.

Secure Relationships

Our spiritual journeys are fundamentally relational, and the quality of our relationships with God and others forms the bedrock of our growth through suffering. To grow and heal, we need relationships that have the characteristics of a secure attachment relationship.

Attachment relationships are relationships in which a child looks to a caregiver to provide a *haven of safety* in times of distress, and a *secure base* from which to explore

the world. Attachment relationships also continue throughout adulthood. These two functions work together in a mutually reinforcing way, creating a virtuous cycle of security.

While the notion of a secure base has been somewhat vague, recent theory and research has further elaborated the characteristics of a secure base. In general terms, a secure base refers to support of the other's exploration, goals, and personal growth. Building on the foundation provided by attachment theory, Brooke Feeney and Roxanne Thrush proposed three main characteristics of a secure base that support exploration (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

First, a secure base is available when needed to provide emotional and practical support (*availability*). Second, a secure base does not unnecessarily interfere with exploration (*noninterference*). Third, a secure base encourages and accepts exploration (*encouragement*).

To simplify the model for application purposes, we can think of a haven of safety as *comfort*, and a secure base as *challenge*. During times of suffering, we need others who can provide a balance of comfort and challenge. Without sufficient comfort and support, overwhelming emotions may cause us to shut down or become dysregulated. Yet without sufficient challenge, we might remain stuck in unhealthy patterns of coping or thinking that perpetuate our pain rather than transform it.

What makes this balance particularly effective is that it creates a context of emotional safety for taking the risks necessary for growth. When we know others will be there to catch us if we fall, we become more willing to venture beyond our comfort

zones. This secure relationship dynamic not only applies to human relationships but also mirrors how God relates to us during trials, providing both comfort in our distress and gentle challenge toward growth. In the interviews, this theme emerged repeatedly as participants described key relationships that facilitated their growth through trials.

The Art of Presence in Mentoring Relationships

Daniel's grief journey was supported by relationships that exemplified secure attachment characteristics, particularly through his pastor's commitment to long-term presence:

I asked Pastor Grant, 'Hey, are you willing to meet with me once a week for the next couple of weeks so that we can process this loss?' I remember the first time, he was so uncomfortable by what I was going through. And he's like, 'Daniel, I think you may need to see a grief counselor.' I'm like, no, that's not what I'm asking you. I'm asking you if you can practice the art of presence... he hesitated and he said, 'Yeah, I think I can do that.' And so we did that. I remember we did that for three years, where we would meet every week.

This quote reveals the power of committed presence during grief. Despite initial hesitation and discomfort, Daniel's pastor provided what attachment theorists would call a secure base—consistent availability that created safety amid overwhelming loss. Particularly significant is Daniel's explicit request for "the art of presence" rather than professional intervention, highlighting the unique value of authentic companionship. His pastor's willingness to commit to this relationship for three years exemplifies the ongoing availability characteristic of secure attachment figures.

Honoring Questions Without Rushing to Answers

Daniel also benefited from his mentor's willingness to honor difficult theological questions without rushing to provide simplistic answers:

I remember there are times where we would meet and I told him, 'Today, I don't want to talk. Can we just sit in silence because the grief has been riding me all week?' And then there are other times, all I wanted to do was share with him all these theological questions I had, like the crisis that it created in me. And I remember you'd think that he would have the answers. Like every time he would say, 'No, I don't have the answers.' He's like, 'You are asking really good questions.' He said 'These are questions even CS Lewis struggled with.' And I was okay with him saying, 'I don't know the answer to that,' or 'just keep wrestling with it.'

This testimony illustrates how secure mentoring relationships create space for both silence and questioning—two essential elements often missing in conventional pastoral care. The pastor's willingness to sit in silence honors the nonverbal dimension of grief, demonstrating the "noninterference" aspect of secure base behavior. Rather than filling uncomfortable silences with platitudes, he allowed Daniel to set the pace and depth of their interactions. Equally important was his validation of Daniel's theological questions without providing premature closure.

Emotional Attunement and Unconditional Love

Joshua's growth through physical pain was profoundly supported by his father's emotional presence and vulnerability:

I've only ever seen my dad cry when my mom left. And then there was a moment when, 'cause I'd only had chocolate flavored protein shakes that were watered down for basically January to July. And I just like, I hated that, you know? And so I wanted something really savory and I also really wanted pizza. And so my dad got a pizza from Little Caesars and Extra Sauce and Ranch and we blended it and I thought, this is gonna be good. And I tried and drink it and I gag and I started throwing up. And then I was throwing up, but then I was crying 'cause I was in so much pain. 'Cause of all the pressure and hurting. And then I just like, I'm like over the sink and I like look up at my dad and I'm like, you know, got all this throw up and I'm like, tears. I like, look at my dad and he's like crying for me. And so that was like the second time seeing him cry.

This powerful testimony illustrates a critical aspect of secure attachment during suffering—vulnerable emotional attunement. His father's tears represent what Joshua later describes as unconditional love: "For my father... that was a really tangible example for me, of his love for me no matter what." Unlike relationships where emotional vulnerability is missing (as with his mother who "loves us to the moon and back, but almost at like an arm's distance"), his father's willingness to be emotionally present created profound security: "We got really close from it all. And now he's not just my dad, but like my best friend as well."

This relationship exemplifies how secure attachment provides emotional containment during overwhelming physical and emotional pain. Joshua's father's willingness to witness his son's suffering without needing to fix it or maintain emotional

distance created a healing connection that transformed their relationship. Rather than maintaining a facade of strength, the father's tears communicated a message more powerful than words—genuine compassion that created safety for Joshua's own vulnerability. This contrasts dramatically with Joshua's earlier experiences where he felt the need to hide his pain, demonstrating how authentic emotional presence can help integrate suffering into one's broader relational and spiritual narrative.

Intervention During Crisis

Perhaps the most dramatic example of secure attachment as a lifeline comes from Joshua's experience of suicidal ideation:

My junior year was when it was at its worst of suicidal ideation. I still remember the feeling of like, I see a car coming and I'm going to do it, but something stopped me, like I just couldn't. And then there was one day during my junior year where I didn't have a plan, I was just going to do it. I was home alone and I was doing the dishes and I was just holding this big kitchen knife and I was like, I'm just going to... oh man. The feeling's coming back... I was just going to do it, and as I'm holding it in my hand and I'm about to do it, my phone rings and it's my dad's best friend, and he was just calling to see how I was doing. So I dropped the knife, told him what happened. He came over and he was kind of like, 'Joshua, don't ever do that again.'

This powerful account illustrates the literally life-saving potential of secure attachment relationships during acute crisis. The phone call—which happen to come at the precise moment of potential self-harm—demonstrates the responsiveness of secure attachment

figures to implicit distress signals. The mentor's response combines both comfort (immediately coming over) and challenge ("don't ever do that again"), illustrating the dual aspects of secure attachment that promote growth. This blend represents the balance between the "haven of safety" and "secure base" functions—providing emotional safety while simultaneously establishing structure aimed at promoting well-being.

Secure Communities

Secure attachment can also be extended beyond individual relationships to entire communities. Spiritual communities play an important role in our growth process, especially during times of suffering. Social scientists have extensively studied what they call "authoritative communities," which support healthy development through a blend of warmth and structure—similar to how comfort and challenge function in secure attachment relationships (Hall & Hall, 2021).

According to a report by the Commission on Children at Risk, authoritative communities are "groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life" (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003). These communities provide both relational warmth and moral structure. They are neither permissive with an "anything goes" attitude, nor authoritarian with a cold, rigid focus on rules. Instead, they create environments where members feel supported while simultaneously being encouraged toward healthy growth through appropriate expectations and boundaries.

The local church, when functioning well, clearly fits the description of an authoritative community. It provides relational warmth through genuine care and support while also offering moral structure through teaching and mutual accountability. This blend creates a context in which deep growth can occur, especially during times of suffering.

The case studies revealed numerous examples of relational support that came in the context of a broader community. Daniel's experience with his cultural grief practices demonstrates how formalized community rituals create safe spaces for processing loss:

After the first day, they set up a tent and I was there for two weeks. This is another thing I like about the way we grieve back home. Like everyone wears black, which is your way of communicating to the world that you just lost a loved one. You're very sensitive. You are very vulnerable and you need to be treated with care. So everybody knows that. I remember I was sitting in the tent with her parents, like people would come, if you want to talk, they would talk to you otherwise, they would just say, 'I'm praying for you.' They would sit in silence for an hour and they would leave. That was like so therapeutic and comforting.

This account reveals how structured community grief practices facilitate healing by acknowledging vulnerability and creating appropriate spaces for emotional expression. The community members intuitively understood the balance between offering conversation and respecting silence—a sophisticated form of attunement that mirrors secure attachment dynamics on a community level.

Daniel's insights into community support reveal a nuanced understanding of different roles that people play during suffering:

I think one thing I learned from the get go was okay... when it comes to grief journey, there are two types of people... The analogy I want to use is like, okay, when your house burns down and catches fire, who are the first people to come? It's firefighters, right? They would come, put out the fire, but then you'll never see them again. Who comes after that? It's the builders. The builders would come like a couple of days later. They will be there for days and weeks and months until it's rebuilt and it's all complete. Some people can only play the role of a firefighter, meaning like, these are the ones that will come and bring food and send you sympathy cards the first couple of weeks, but then you'll never see them again. I think God provided me with the builders that I needed that walked that journey with me for years and years.

This insightful metaphor illustrates an important aspect of mature engagement with community support—recognizing and appreciating different capacities for help rather than expecting everyone to serve the same function or to serve according to one's own expectations. Daniel's acceptance that "some people can only play the role of a firefighter" demonstrates the wisdom that comes from experiencing community support during trials.

Spiritual Practices During Trials

The process of deep growth through suffering often involves various spiritual practices that help individuals process their pain, find meaning, and experience God's

presence. While the notion of "spiritual practices" typically brings to mind structured activities like prayer and Scripture reading, a broader range of contemplative engagements with God were illustrated by the case studies. These practices served as vehicles for making meaning of their suffering, experiencing God's presence within their pain, and developing a deeper trust in God despite unanswered questions.

Encountering God in Scripture During Trials

One of the primary ways participants experienced deep growth was through transformational encounters with Scripture. During trials, biblical passages often took on new meaning, moving from abstract theological concepts to deeply personal truths that addressed their specific circumstances. This process illustrates how suffering can open unique pathways for Scripture to become "alive" in new ways.

Daniel's experience illustrates how Scripture provided new perspectives on suffering that facilitated spiritual reorientation through identifying with Christ in his suffering:

I think I became well acquainted with like the side of Jesus I didn't know before.

Like the Bible says he was a man of sorrows, familiar with our deepest grief... It

was during my grief journey that I really began to experience that side of him.

This quote powerfully demonstrates how suffering created an opening for Daniel to connect with dimensions of Christ's character that were previously abstract. The biblical description of Jesus as "a man of sorrows" moved from being merely informational to deeply formational during his grief journey. His language—"experience that side of

him"—reveals how Scripture became a conduit for a deepened implicit relational knowledge of Christ rather than merely intellectual understanding.

Perhaps the most profound example of Scripture transforming perspective came when Daniel found meaning in the biblical passage about preferring the "house of mourning":

I started enjoying going to funerals and memorials more than going to weddings. Because, like in the Bible it says it's better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting. You know? Like it says that like... You know why? You know why? I think all of a sudden, okay, now I'm like reoriented. Like it started making sense because okay, when you go to a wedding or, or a baby shower, okay, you are happy for the couple, you are happy for the family, but you don't know if this marriage is gonna go the distance. Right. It might end up in divorce... But when you go to the house of mourning, the house of when you go to funerals. It reminds you just how fragile life is. It makes you question if you're living life the way God wants you to. It really puts things into perspective.

This quote beautifully illustrates how Scripture transformed Daniel's perspective on life and death, bringing to mind the ancient practice of "*memento mori*"—remembering that you will die. The biblical passage about "the house of mourning" being better than "the house of feasting" became a felt truth for Daniel, reorienting his entire worldview. He explicitly mentions this reorientation multiple times: "now I'm like reoriented," "it started making sense," and "God started reorienting me." As with the ancient practice

of *momento mori*, contemplating his death clarified Daniel's priorities, helping him to live well now.

Joshua similarly experienced a profound reinterpretation of Scripture during his physical suffering following jaw surgery:

He met me in a really real way through his word, um, and through a Tim Mackey sermon on Psalm 22. It's about praying through our pain and man, it's really good. I listened to that; read Psalm 22 in a new light, and I was like, oh man, like... He has met me in my pain because he's entered into it with me on the cross. And, you know, I just saw a lot of parallels between what happened on the cross and what was happening in my own life... physically speaking a bit like feeling abandoned or isolated from everybody. Immense pain, feeling forsaken by God, but then realizing like God became Jesus on the cross, became God forsaken, and so that he could identify with us when we feel like that.

Joshua's testimony illustrates how suffering created a new interpretive lens for understanding Scripture. The familiar words of Psalm 22—"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (NLT)—moved from abstract theological concept to experiential reality through processing his physical pain. His identification with Christ's suffering on the cross represents a profound integration of his personal experience with the biblical narrative.

Contemplative Prayer and Divine Presence

Beyond Scripture engagement, participants experienced transformation through contemplative forms of prayer and awareness of God's presence. These practices

facilitated a deepened implicit relational knowledge of God that transcended intellectual understanding.

Daniel describes how prayer and awareness practice became integrated into his daily life:

For simple pleasure, like in the morning when I wake up, like the first thing I say is, wow, okay, God wants me to be alive today and he wants me to enjoy whatever he has in store for me today. So I pray about the day and I go at it with everything I have, and then I'm able to enjoy everything good that happens throughout the day.

This brief reflection reveals how contemplative awareness became woven into Daniel's daily rhythms. Rather than compartmentalizing spirituality to designated "prayer times," his practice of acknowledging God's presence in each day ("God wants me to be alive today") demonstrates an integrated spirituality that infuses ordinary experience with sacred meaning.

Joshua articulates a profound encounter with God's presence during his lowest point:

He kind of brought me to this really low place... And then, he met me there in a really real way. And then since then, my walk with him has become a lot more real... I kind of was like, okay, Jesus is the only answer to everything I'm going through. Not just like the emotional spiritual pain, but the physical pain. He's there with me in it. I want to know more about him. I wanna know him. And so I kind of started reading the Bible as if I'd never read it before.

This testimony captures the transformational potential of encountering God in the depths of suffering. Joshua's experience illustrates what theologian James Loder (1989) called "the transforming moment"—when personal crisis creates an opening for profound spiritual encounters that bring about a new sense of implicit relational knowledge. His description of being brought to "this really low place" and then meeting God "in a really real way" exemplifies how suffering can strip away religious pretenses and create space for an authentic encounter with God.

Perhaps the most profound testimony of experiencing God's presence in suffering comes from Daniel:

That was a profound experience for me, because up until he entered this world and became one of us, he couldn't relate to us because the Bible says God is very different from the world he created. But it's when he became flesh, he became one of us that I remember, like during that journey, people would come up to me and then when I was like, really in my darkest moment, I would say to them, "Hey, you can't say anything to me because you can't relate to my journey, or you haven't lost a loved one." There were times like I would enjoy saying that to people... and then when I got to Jesus, I was like, "Ah, he's a man of sorrow," so I can't say to him, "You can't," and that felt good... *So I think I've learned that He is a lot closer to us than we think, and He wants to do life with us more than we know... He's there all the time and he wants us to involve Him in everything we go through.* And I think He helped me to be able to do that. And it truly saved my life, Todd. Otherwise, man, I like, I would tell, when

people say, "Man, you're so strong. You got through that." I'm like, "Man, without Jesus, without his presence, without him taking care of me and comforting me, I would've taken my life without him." Because it would've become too much. But I saw how close he was and how comforting he was, and I think that journey made his presence and the kind of wounded savior he is very much alive and real.

This powerful testimony captures the essence of experiencing God's presence in the crucible of suffering. Daniel articulates a profound shift from intellectual understanding of Christ's incarnation to an experiential encounter with "a man of sorrows" who could relate to his pain when it felt like no one else could. It is particularly noteworthy how his suffering created a unique opening for God's presence—when he felt he could dismiss human consolation ("you can't relate to my journey"), he discovered he couldn't make the same claim to Jesus. In short, he identified with Christ in his suffering.

Lament: Entrusting Our Suffering to God

Biblical lament provides a structured way to bring pain and suffering to God while fostering trust in His character and purposes. Throughout Scripture, particularly in the Psalms, we find examples of honest expression of pain coupled with affirmations of God's faithfulness. Case study participants discovered the powerful role of lament in their spiritual growth through trials.

Daniel articulates how learning the language of lament transformed his grief journey:

One thing that really helped me walk through that journey was learning the language of lament. Oh, that was big. Really, really big. Because I remember reading about Walter Brueggeman. Oh my gosh, I think it's his resource that really helped me. So he talks about like how the book of Psalms can be divided into three categories. You know, Psalms of orientation—these are like psalms you'd read when life is going according to plan and it's peachy. Like Psalm 23, right? Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want because I have everything. And I remember prior to [date of loss of first wife], that's how I would describe my life.

This reflection shows how theological frameworks for understanding lament provided Daniel with a vocabulary and structure for processing his grief. By discovering the scholarship of Walter Brueggeman on the Psalms, Daniel found validation for the disorientation he was experiencing and permission to express his raw emotions to God.

While Joshua doesn't explicitly use the language of "lament," his narrative reveals the complete arc of the lament process—from honest questioning to renewed trust:

Pain level was through the roof. I couldn't talk to anybody, couldn't make any jokes to even make light of the situation. Yeah. I couldn't, couldn't breathe. And it was just all these things. And I, I got to a point where I was like, okay, 'God, what the heck? Mm-hmm. You know, like, I thought we were good. I've given my life to you. Like, what are you doing?'

This candid questioning echoes the biblical lament tradition, where honest expression of confusion, anger, and pain becomes the doorway to deeper relationship with God. Like

the psalmists who often begin with questioning God's apparent absence or inaction, Joshua's raw expression—"what the heck?"—represents the authentic starting point of lament.

But as with biblical lament, Joshua's questioning leads to a transformational encounter. We see this aspect in a previously mentioned quote:

He met me in a really real way through his word, um, and through a Tim Mackey sermon on Psalm 22... I listened to that read Psalm 22 in a new light, and I was like, oh man... He has met me in my pain because he's entered into it with me on the cross. And, you know, I just saw a lot of parallels between what happened on the cross and what was happening in my own life... physically speaking a bit like feeling abandoned or isolated from everybody. Immense pain, feeling forsaken by God, but then realizing like God became Jesus on the cross, became God forsaken, and so that he could identify with us when we feel like that.

This progression from questioning to revelation to renewed trust nicely captures and illustrates the lament process found in Scripture—particularly in the Psalms. What begins with raw honesty before God culminates in a profound theological insight about Christ's identification with human suffering.

From Questioning to Surrender

A common pattern in the spiritual journey through trials involves a progression from asking "why" questions to a place of surrender and trust. This doesn't mean abandoning questions altogether, but rather coming to a place of peace with mystery,

unanswered questions in the context of a growing experiential knowledge of the goodness of God.

Daniel articulates this journey beautifully:

In the beginning, I kept asking God, why did this happen? What are you up to? Is this your will? You know it's okay to do that, right? Because I mean, when I studied about grief, everyone wrestled with the why questions, whether it's Job... or Lamentations, Jeremiah was struggling, "why God," or even Jesus, who knew why he came to Earth... said, "why have you forsaken me?" It's okay. But when God chooses not to reveal the answer, I think that's where you have to be okay with it. So in my case, like God kept saying to me, "I'm not gonna reveal it. You're gonna have to walk by faith. You're gonna have to trust me." So I think that helped me like to stop asking the why and start trusting him and walk by faith.

This reflection powerfully illustrates Daniel's journey from questioning to trust. What makes this account particularly valuable is how he normalizes questioning through biblical examples (Job, Jeremiah, and even Jesus) while also acknowledging the need to eventually move toward trust when answers aren't forthcoming. His statement that "God kept saying to me, 'I'm not gonna reveal it'" reflects a mature spiritual posture that can hear God's gentle redirection from endless questioning toward trust.

The culmination of this surrender process is beautifully expressed in Daniel's reflection on ultimate questions:

As long as I'm on this side of heaven, every time people ask me, "Why did the accident happen?" I'm gonna keep saying, "I don't know. I don't know." But when people ask me, "What do you think God is up to?" I think one day when I get there and I see the big picture along with all the saints, I think that's when I would say, "Now I know what he was up to." So I'm willing to wait for that glorious day where it will all come together. I think what it says in Revelation is also like, what sustains me. It says, "And then he will wipe away their tears. There would be no more sorrow, no more death, no more pain, no more grief." I'm like, man, there will come a day that will be like distant memory. And so I have something to look forward to.

In this poignant reflection, Daniel exemplifies the spiritual practice of entrusting his suffering to God through surrender and trust. Rather than demanding immediate answers to the "why" of his tragedy, he has come to a place of profound acceptance of mystery. This surrender isn't passive resignation but active trust—a willingness to wait for God's future revelation while holding onto biblical promises of ultimate redemption.

Joshua's journey similarly illustrates how questioning can give way to a profound recognition of God's presence in all circumstances:

But the one who loves me dearly meets me in my darkest moments. So I know that he's there in my darkest moments, even though it's harder for me to see him. In those, which is like, that's flipped for me. It used to be I couldn't see him in the darkest moment of my life at that point when my mom left, but now it's, he's met me at an even darker moment, so I know that. Now it's, you know,

when I'm on the mountaintop, the proverbial mountaintop, it's harder for me to see him. So, but more and more I'm recognizing his presence on the mountaintop as in the valley.

This reflection reveals a remarkable transformation in spiritual perception—from being unable to sense God in darkness to having his most profound encounters with God through suffering. Joshua articulates a reversal of conventional spiritual experience; while many struggle to feel God's presence in trials, his suffering has so profoundly revealed God's presence that he now finds it more challenging to recognize God "on the mountaintop." This represents a mature, integrated spiritual orientation that has emerged through the surrender process—a perspective that can recognize God's presence in all circumstances rather than only in positive experiences.

The Fruits of Deep Growth

The fruits, or outcomes, of deep growth through trials are diverse and far-reaching, extending beyond mere coping to profound transformation of character, identity, relationships, and spirituality. As our case studies demonstrate, when suffering is processed in relationship with God and others, it yields a harvest of maturity that may not have been possible through less demanding pathways.

Experiential Knowledge of God's Presence

Perhaps the most significant fruit of deep growth is the movement from abstract, propositional knowledge about God to a deep, experiential knowing of God's presence. Both case studies revealed how suffering creates a unique opportunity to experience

God's presence in profound ways that transform one's relationship with Him. Daniel articulates this transformation vividly:

I've been through the valley of the shadow of death, and I've come out of it. And whatever lies ahead, I know you are gonna be with me because I saw you in the darkness. So I know you're gonna be with me, so I'm not gonna question your presence. I don't question God as much because you know that he's up to something and he's gonna work all things for good, and that he will never leave you nor forsake you. Like all these promises in the Bible, all of a sudden now you've internalized it. So it's not like something you have to be reminded of—it actually is naturally out of me now. The Word of God is now alive in me because of this journey. I've read about you, I heard about you, but now my eyes have seen the Lord. I can say that has been true for me from my journey.

His statement, "I've read about you, I heard about you, but now my eyes have seen the Lord," echoes Job's declaration after his own suffering journey and captures the essence of how trials can deepen our implicit relational knowledge of God. It is striking that Daniel observes that Scripture has become "alive" in him—biblical promises have moved from external concepts requiring conscious recall to internalized truths that shape his perception automatically.

Capacity to See God in Everything

Another significant fruit of deep growth is the development of what might be called "sanctified awareness"—the capacity to perceive and appreciate God's presence in everything, including ordinary moments. Both participants described a profound shift

in perception where they began to see God's hand in all aspects of life, not just in obviously "spiritual" domains.

Daniel articulates this transformed perspective:

People say to me, 'Oh my goodness, you laugh over the silliest things or you get joy out of the simplest things.' I have learned that I don't have to go on an expensive vacation trip to have a good time. God can meet me in the kitchen while I'm cooking or as I'm changing my son's diaper. Because I see God in every moment in whatever I'm doing, I get simple joy out of that.

He further explains how this shift in perception extends to all of life:

The profound level is whenever major life events happen, I'm like, 'Okay, God is gonna do something here too. I'm gonna meet him here.' It has really changed the way I see things. I see everything through spiritual lens like never before. As opposed to 'God was in this, God probably is not involved in the snow'—God is in everything. It's my awareness level that has changed now.

We see here how suffering has paradoxically enhanced rather than diminished his capacity for pleasure in small things. This represents a profound shift in temporal orientation—from being trapped in past regrets or future anxieties to embracing the present moment as a gift. Such integration does not compartmentalize spirituality to designated religious activities but infuses all of life with sacred meaning.

Finding Identity in Christ Rather Than Circumstances

A critical fruit of deep growth is the transformation of identity—moving from being defined by one's circumstances to finding identity in relationship with Christ. Both

case studies demonstrate how suffering provided an opportunity to reimagine identity in more secure and enduring terms.

For Daniel, this meant refusing to be defined by his loss: "I did not want to be defined by, I didn't want people to say, 'Oh, that young man who lost his wife in a car accident.' No, I didn't want to be labeled as that." Instead, he made an intentional choice: "I am not gonna be defined by [date of loss of first wife]. He started reorienting my perspective." This refusal to be defined by tragedy represents a profound spiritual maturity. Rather than allowing his identity to be determined by his most painful experience, Daniel chose to integrate that experience into a larger narrative of God's work in his life.

For Joshua, the shift in identity came through the stripping away of false identities:

My image issues got whittled down to literally nothing. I lost all my bodybuilding stuff I worked for. I couldn't pretend anymore. People saw me for who I was. I was naked and exposed. But with all of that, and then realizing that God's with me in that, transformed everything about the way that I think about myself.

This stripping of false identities created space for a more authentic self to emerge:

I can see my past and talk about it in a way that's not full of shame, but understand why I was the way that I was. I'm able to give myself grace. I've been able to forgive myself.

The transformation of identity exemplified in these quotes reflects a movement from insecure attachment patterns to more secure ones. As participants' implicit knowledge of God deepened through suffering, they developed a more secure sense of self that was not contingent on circumstances or performance.

Ministry Emerging from Brokenness

Another significant fruit of deep growth is the discovery of meaning and purpose through ministry to others from a place of brokenness. Both participants described how their suffering uniquely positioned them to offer authentic presence and hope to others facing similar trials. Daniel shares a powerful example of ministering from his own brokenness:

I've been walking the journey with a couple who lost their 6-year-old at an amusement park accident. It's been such a dark journey for them. As we sit in silence or as we cry together, they would say to me, 'Oh my goodness, you are the only person who can truly understand what we're going through.' When I share with them how God met me during my journey, they're like, 'That's what we want for our lives,' but they don't know how to do that.

This quote demonstrates how processed suffering creates a unique capacity for empathic connection. We see here the redemptive cycle of growth: Daniel's own suffering, once integrated, becomes a resource for others facing similar pain.

Joshua describes a similar dynamic:

The more I know him, the more beautiful, more compelling, and loving and generous he becomes. I can't help but want to share that with other people. If

that means sharing my pain with other people or my experience of pain so that it becomes like a reverse window where whoever's listening can see God through my pain—dude, keep it coming, Lord, because I want people to experience you the way that I am.

This represents one of the most profound fruits of spiritual transformation through trials—what was once meaningless suffering becomes meaningful ministry. Both participants' recognition that God uses their "life experience to accomplish his plans and purposes" reflects the mature, integrated spiritual perspective that personal pain can be integrated into a larger redemptive narrative.

Accepting Limitations and Embracing Mystery

Deep growth through trials also produces a mature capacity to live with unanswered questions, embracing mystery rather than demanding resolution. Both participants demonstrated remarkable comfort with the tension between God's sovereignty and the reality of suffering.

Daniel articulates this comfort with mystery:

I wrestled with that. The conclusion I came to is that God did not cause the accident. It was human error. Could God have prevented the accident? Yes. Did he choose not to? Yes. Why? I don't know. So I became okay with the mystery of God's will. The fact that he chose to allow it, this is where I have to learn to trust him and be okay with it.

This acceptance of limitations and embrace of mystery represents a significant theological and spiritual maturity. Rather than demanding that God explain suffering or

conform to human expectations, both participants demonstrated comfort with a God whose ways are sometimes inscrutable. This does not represent passive resignation but rather active trust—a willingness to wait for God's future revelation while holding onto biblical promises of ultimate redemption. Such trust is only possible because of a secure attachment to God that has been forged, paradoxically, through the experience of suffering.

Deeper Empathy for Others' Suffering

Another fruit of deep growth through trials is increased empathy for others who are suffering. Both participants described how their own pain enabled them to enter more fully into the pain of others. Joshua expresses this increased empathy:

I have so much more empathy for others, and people who are in pain or maybe they're not walking with God or they're just different. But no one really knows why. I'm like, you have no idea—their jaw can be falling off right now. You have no idea what they're going through. Or maybe their wife just left them.

Daniel similarly describes how his suffering has made him more sensitive to the pain of others:

The whole experience has made me acutely sensitive and empathic toward others who are suffering. Recently, a friend called and told me about a serious illness his wife was experiencing. I was immediately cut to the heart and moved with compassion. I wanted to do something, anything, to help, because I know something of this pain.

This deepened empathy represents a significant interpersonal maturity. Having experienced their own pain and received comfort, participants were better able to comfort others. Their suffering expanded their capacity to love by increasing their ability to enter into the struggles of others.

Decreased Striving, Increased Surrender

A significant fruit of deep growth is decreased striving and increased surrender—a willingness to rest in God's sovereignty rather than attempting to control or understand outcomes. Joshua expressed surrender in the following way:

I don't need to create my own future. I'm just resting in whatever God has for me. So come what may, that might mean healing, that might mean staying a local church pastor, whatever. I'm trying not to look far ahead, but just be faithful with what, where I'm at. 60 seconds at a time.

Related to this, Joshua articulated how his suffering revealed the futility of self-reliance:

This has shown me I cannot control any part of my life. But the one who can loves me dearly and meets me in my darkest moments.

This decreased striving and increased surrender represents a spiritual maturity that trusts God's character and purposes even when circumstances are painful. It represents freedom from the burden of trying to control what cannot be controlled, and peace that comes from entrusting oneself to a loving God. As Joshua puts it, his suffering led him to be "freed up" from the constant striving to make life happen on his terms.

Faith-Life Integration

Perhaps the most comprehensive fruit of deep growth is faith-life integration—the collapse of artificial divisions between theological understanding and lived experience. Both participants described how suffering helped them develop a more unified, coherent spirituality. Daniel articulates this integration:

I would say now, looking back, my theology and my life experience are well integrated. You don't see separation between them. Whatever I talk about when it comes to God versus my life experience, I think my life experience affirms the truth of God.

Joshua similarly describes how his suffering led to greater integration:

My relationship with the Lord is stronger. My marriage is so much better now.

I'm less disintegrated and more whole, satisfied in where I'm at and who I am in Christ.

This integration represents what spiritual formation aims to achieve—not compartmentalized religion where beliefs are segregated from daily life, but an integrated whole where explicit doctrine and implicit experience mutually inform and reinforce each other. Daniel's observation that his "life experience affirms the truth of God" suggests a virtuous cycle where lived experience confirms theological truth, which then deepens lived experience.

Discussion

The case studies of Daniel and Joshua offer rich illustrations of deep growth through trials that both confirm and extend the Relational Spirituality framework (Hall & Hall, 2021). Below I highlight key insights that emerged from the interview data, the

notion of integration as a paradigm for deep growth, implications for spiritual formation, and finally limitations and directions for future research.

Key Insights from Integrating Interview Data with the RS Framework

Several key insights emerged from the case study narratives. First, both cases demonstrate how suffering creates unique opportunities for transforming implicit relational knowledge in ways that might not otherwise occur. When Daniel states "I've read about you, I heard about you, but now my eyes have seen the Lord," we see the shift from theological knowledge about God to experiential knowing through suffering. Similarly, Joshua's experience of finding God in his physical pain transformed abstract biblical concepts into experiential knowledge.

Second, these narratives reveal the bidirectional nature of the knowledge spiral. Both men interpreted their experiences through theological frameworks while simultaneously allowing those experiences to deepen their emotional grasp of theological truths. This integration of explicit and implicit knowledge occurred in the context of secure attachment relationships with mentors, community members, and ultimately with God, supporting a core tenet of the RS framework.

Third, the nonlinear nature of transformation is vividly demonstrated in both cases. Neither of the participants experienced immediate growth following their trials; rather, incremental changes accumulated over time until tipping points occurred. These spiritual tipping points became visible as their attachment filters reorganized, leading to new ways of being and relating that reflected deeper security in their relationship with God and others.

Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, these narratives reveal that deep growth is an inherently relational process. Both Daniel and Joshua's transformations occurred within a web of relationships that provided the necessary context for change. Daniel's mentoring relationship with Pastor Grant, who practiced "the art of presence," and Joshua's experiences with mentors who "walked him through" Scripture demonstrate how secure relationships create the conditions for implicit relational knowledge to shift toward security.

The integration of the three insights above—suffering creating openings for transformation, the bidirectional knowledge spiral, and nonlinear change—all occurred within these relational contexts. As implicit relational knowledge of God and others moved toward greater security, both men displayed increased capacity to extend comfort and challenge to others experiencing similar trials. This pattern illustrates the core principle that we are fundamentally "loved into loving"—as they experienced God's love through human relationships and direct spiritual encounters, their capacity to offer that same love to others increased. This reflects the cyclical and relational nature of transformation, where love received becomes love given in an ever-expanding cycle of relational integration.

Fifth, these narratives reveal a consistent pattern of divine intervention woven throughout both the process and fruits of deep growth. Both participants describe God as an active agent in their transformation, not merely a passive recipient of their spiritual life. When Daniel states, "I think he started reorienting my perspective" and describes how "*God kept saying to me, 'I'm not gonna reveal it. You're gonna have to*

walk by faith," we see his perception of God as actively guiding his spiritual journey. Similarly, Joshua's account that God "brought me to this really low place... and then he *met me there* in a really real way" reflects his understanding of divine orchestration even within his suffering. In addition to perceiving God as an active agent, both participants were also actively engaged in their growth process through spiritual practices and opening themselves to participate in the work God was doing in their lives.

This dynamic reflects what Paul describes in Philippians 2:12-13, where he encourages the Philippian church to "Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (NLT). In the context of encouraging restoration of relational harmony in the corporate life of the Philippian church, this passage presents a picture of a synergistic process—the community "working at this matter until the spiritual health of the community . . . is restored" while depending on God working in them (Martin, 1987). This synergy between human participation and divine action appears throughout both case studies—in relationships, where participants experienced God working through mentors and communities; in spiritual practices, where they encountered God's presence in Scripture and prayer; and in the fruits of growth, where participants attributed their transformed perspective, decreased striving, and deeper empathy to God's work within them. Rather than compartmentalizing God's intervention as a separate category, these narratives demonstrate how God's

transformational work permeates the entire growth process, operating alongside and through human effort and relationship.

Integration as a Paradigm for Deep Growth

Following Daniel Siegel's (2020) definition, integration can be understood as the linkage of differentiated parts. This integration occurs at various levels: within the brain as neural networks grow and connect, within the mind as we link emotions with cognitions, in relationships as we maintain our individuality while connecting deeply with others, and in communities as diverse members work together toward common goals. The prototype of this integration may well be the Trinity, as described by the Greek term *perichoresis*—the dynamic, mutual indwelling and sharing of divine love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Hall & Hall, 2021).

This multi-level integration appears consistently throughout both case studies. Daniel's grief journey shows integration occurring within his narrative (coherence), within his theology (holding both God's goodness and mysterious will in tension), and within his relationships (developing authentic presence with others and simultaneously holding others' capacity to care and their limitations). Joshua similarly demonstrates integration in his ability to find meaning in suffering, connect his pain to Christ's, and develop empathy for others through his own trials.

Perhaps most significantly, both men showed signs of faith-life integration, moving from a compartmentalized spirituality to a holistic approach in which their relationship with God permeates all aspects of life. As Daniel noted, "My theology and my life experience are well integrated...whatever I talk about when it comes to God

versus my life experience, I think my life experience affirms the truth of God." This integration represents the mature fruit of spiritual formation where theological abstractions become embodied wisdom.

Implications for Spiritual Formation, Pastoral Care, and Therapy

These case studies offer several practical implications. For spiritual formation, they suggest the importance of creating safe relational contexts where people can process suffering honestly. Both men benefited from mentors who honored their questions without rushing to provide simplistic answers. This balance of comfort/attunement on the one hand, with challenge/encouragement to explore and grow on the other hand, creates a "growth zone" where transformation can occur.

For pastoral care, these narratives highlight the value of relational presence over solutions. Daniel's description of his pastor practicing "the art of presence" during his grief illustrates how non-anxious accompaniment can be more healing than theological explanations alone. Similarly, the stories underscore the importance of validating lament as a biblical practice rather than pressuring people to move quickly toward positive resolution. Being emotionally attuned to others who are experiencing dark places can be very difficult for practitioners and caregivers. This requires us to continually be in the process of doing our own inner work so we can tolerate and help others metabolize painful emotions.

For therapists, these cases demonstrate the value of addressing both explicit and implicit dimensions of growth. Therapeutic approaches that facilitate referential integration—helping clients tell their stories while also providing frameworks for

understanding them—may be particularly effective in promoting deep growth through trials (Hall & Porter, 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by its focus on only two case studies, both involving educated men with strong Christian backgrounds. While their stories provide rich illustrations of deep growth, they cannot capture the full diversity of transformational pathways. Future research should expand to include more diverse participants across gender, cultural background, educational level, and denominational affiliation.

Additionally, longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how deep growth unfolds over time. While the case studies relied on retrospective accounts, following individuals through trials as they occur would offer a different, perhaps more nuanced, vantage point on the incremental changes that precede transformational shifts.

The relational spirituality model could be further developed by examining how specific contemplative practices facilitate different aspects of the knowledge spiral. Future studies might explore which practices best support interpreting experience versus feeling ideas, and how these might be tailored to individuals with different attachment patterns.

Finally, quantitative measures based on the themes identified in case studies and qualitative analyses could be developed to assess deep growth more systematically. Such instruments would enable larger-scale studies examining the relationships between attachment patterns, spiritual practices, and growth outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper sought to extend the Relational Spirituality framework by examining deep growth through the lens of two case studies involving individuals who experienced significant trials. These narratives corroborated key elements of the RS model while providing richer nuance to our understanding of both the process and outcomes of spiritual transformation. The interrelated themes that emerged—secure relationships providing both comfort and challenge, contemplative spiritual practices integrating explicit and implicit knowledge, the role of lament in processing suffering, and the fruits of deep growth including experiential knowledge of God, decreased striving, and faith-life integration—illustrate how suffering, when approached within secure relational contexts, can become a unique catalyst for transformation. These accounts reveal that deep growth involves a complex, non-linear process where incremental changes eventually coalesce into qualitative shifts in one's attachment filters and capacity to love. Future research should explore these dynamics across more diverse populations and contexts. It is hoped that these insights will stimulate further investigation into spiritual transformation and provide practical wisdom for spiritual directors, pastors, therapists, and others seeking to facilitate deep growth in themselves and those they accompany through trials.

References

- Baerger, D. R., & McAdams, D. P. (1999). Life story coherence and its relation to psychological well-being. *Narrative Inquiry*, 9(1), 69–96.
<https://doi.org.ezproxy.biola.edu/10.1075/ni.9.1.05bae>
- Bollas, C. (1987). *The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*. Columbia University Press.
- Bucci, W. (1997). *Psychoanalysis and cognitive science*. Guildford Press.
- Commission on Children at Risk (2003). *Hardwired to connect: The new scientific case for authoritative communities* (New York, NY: Institute for American Values).
- Feeney, B.C. & Thrush, R. (2010). Relationship influences on exploration in adulthood: The characteristics and function of a secure base. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(1), 57-76.
- Hall, T.W. (with M.E.L. Hall) (2021). *Relational spirituality: A psychological-theological paradigm for transformation*. IVP Academic.
- Hall, T.W. & Porter, S. (2004). Referential integration: An emotional information processing perspective on the process of integration. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 32(3), 167-180.
- Loder, J.E. (1989). *The transforming moment* (2nd ed.). Helmers & Howard.
- Martin, R.P. (1987). *Philippians* (2nd ed.). Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Pennington, J.T. (2017). *The sermon on the mount and human flourishing: A theological commentary*. Baker.

Siegel, D.J. (2020). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Tedeschi, R.G., Shakespeare-Finch, J., Taku, K, & Calhoun, L.G. (2018). *Posttraumatic growth: Theory, research, and applications*. Routledge.