Thriving and Spirituality Among Youth
Thriving and Spirituality Among Youth

Research Perspectives and Future Possibilities

Edited by
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I have witnessed firsthand the diverse tapestry of life in more than 130 countries. I've seen young people from many walks of life—vastly different cultures, faiths, traditions, and societies—who both succeed and fail. I have seen young people from tragic environments overcome their obstacles with amazing grace and resilience. I've talked with many young people who beat the odds of poverty, war, bad schools (or no schools at all), addiction, and family violence. And I have seen many who do not.

Over the past 35 years, I have worked as a social entrepreneur to help improve the conditions and prospects for young people where they live, learn, work, and play. These young people represent the more than 1.7 billion people today who are between the ages of 15 and 29. Eighty-five percent of them live in developing countries.

All of us who have survived adolescence know that it can be a tough time of life, a period of transition, development, and discovery. Many young people report feeling isolated and disconnected during these years, when they are undergoing major physical, social, and developmental changes. Although many people simply survive their adolescence, others fall into negative behaviors as they question who they are and their place in the world.

It is also true that the great changes and identity search during adolescence lead many young people to seek ways to contribute to something beyond themselves. Some of these young people were born into tragic circumstances, but now they serve as mentors and role models or as youth representatives on local, national, and global boards; or they work as social innovators to improve their countries and communities; or they are successful young entrepreneurs creating new enterprise.

Many girls and young women, just by the nature of being born female, have to struggle and fight for their opportunities and human rights in their countries and communities. Some of these incredible, brave young women are now furthering their education, becoming successful entrepreneurs, and challenging laws, customs, and stereotypes by serving as a whole new generation of role models in their communities and nearby towns and villages.

The reason or reasons why these young people are able to make positive differences despite their circumstances are multiple and varied. Some young people are able to connect with a positive mentor or role model who helps change the direction of their lives. Some young people are able to access programs and services that provide them with the skills and experiences they need to acquire
improved opportunities. Some young people make it on their own, without any obvious outside supports from family or community. Often their own religious faith, conviction, determination, and/or sense of greater purpose propels them forward. These young people, and the millions like them around the world, inspire my work. I know they also inspire and inform the work of Richard Lerner, Amy Warren, Erin Phelps, and many of their colleagues.

I first met Richard Lerner in the early 1990s, when he was a newly arrived professor at Michigan State University, and I had recently been awarded a grant by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) to create and launch the International Youth Foundation (IYF). The WKKF had instituted a team of five experts who would serve as strategic consultants in advising on the evolution of IYF’s work. Richard Lerner was one of those five amazing people. The team was charged with joining me and other IYF leaders as we traveled around the world to visit partner foundations (in places like Thailand, Japan, the United Kingdom, Poland, Ecuador, the Philippines, and Germany, among others) and assess IYF’s effectiveness and impact. They collaborated with IYF in constantly reflecting on and improving our work.

What came through in their reports to WKKF was that the theoretical foundation upon which I had built IYF was, at the time, both innovative and effective. The theoretical foundation was based on years of my own experience, research, and conversations with young people and youth development experts in many countries. It rejected the widely accepted deficit model of youth development (prevention) and was built instead on the notion of promotion (i.e., that we should focus on the skills, attributes, behaviors, and attitudes we want to promote in young people).

In those early days, I identified the key characteristics of positive youth development as being represented by four Cs—competence, confidence, character, and connection—with detailed explanation of the meaning of each and the importance of their interrelationships. However, I had not scientifically tested these constructs, and I had no reliable evidence to prove that these constructs were well-aligned empirically with positive development. These characteristics were simply evident in so many of the young people I met in many diverse cultures, and I observed they were being promoted, both intentionally and unintentionally, in so many of the more successful youth programs I visited.

I had no idea at the time how well those four Cs—the concept of positive youth development and the theoretical program framework for IYF—would resonate with the research community, practitioners, and policymakers. Nor did I know how, with Richard Lerner’s great leadership and genius, we would continue to build on these notions (e.g., with the addition of the constructs of caring and contribution) and eventually then be able to scientifically validate and provide evidence of the existence of the six Cs that today define positive youth development. Since our early days traveling the globe together with IYF, Richard Lerner has continued, at an almost inhuman pace, to provide practitioners, scholars, and
policymakers with important research, thinking, and energy around the study of this emerging field.

The purpose of this book, which Amy Warren, Erin Phelps, and Richard Lerner have ably edited, is to look more closely at the sixth C (contribution) and to study the links among young people’s contributions, positive development, and generosity. The editors and their colleagues posit that through contribution to self, family, and society, young people are able to transcend self and promote generosity, which, they go on to propose, is at the essence of spirituality. They go further to propose that this generosity may provide a key foundation for positive youth development.

In my own work, I have certainly met and been witness to many young people who are committed to improving not only their own lives but also the lives of others. Many of these young people have shared with me that they feel a sense of transcendence of self as a result of these contributions and that this sense of transcendence allows them to be agents both in their own healthy development and in the positive enhancement of others as well.

As this book points out, a young person’s individual motivation to contribute to civil society, and the particular sense of spirituality or transcendence and positive youth development that the contribution generates, is often a result of the dynamic relationship between a young person’s biological, psychological, and sociocultural characteristics. As such, the authors argue that it is important to promote such behaviors among young people (e.g., in formal, school-based, and out-of-school educational experiences). I certainly agree with this applied theoretical notion of promoting opportunities for young people to make positive contributions and that these opportunities promote positive development in youth. Imagine how the world would be different if all young people today were motivated and inspired to commit acts of generosity and make healthy, positive contributions to their world.

I am intrigued by the relationship Amy Warren, Erin Phelps, Richard Lerner, and their colleagues have found and continue to study between contribution and spirituality, and the relation of those constructs to positive youth development. Surely it is my own understanding of and beliefs about spirituality and my own definition of transcendence that informs my view and sparks my intrigue.

For me, the notion of spirituality cannot be solely explained through biology, psychology, culture, or sociological constructs. Of course, these are vitally important, and the lessons learned from this book provide us with substantive information to build on and apply. For me, it is also important to underscore the transcendent mystery of the spirit life itself. That is, equally as intriguing are the ways in which a belief in God, a belief in something (or someone) transcendent, can motivate contribution and generosity and can result in positive development. I bear personal witness from my extensive engagement in many cultures and countries to the pervasive influence of religious faith, religiosity, and some form of deeper, transcendent connection. I look to Amy Warren, Erin Phelps,
FOREWORD

Richard Lerner, and their colleagues to continue to challenge the field and further our thinking around this complex aspect of human development.

So, with this book, we can once again thank Amy Warren, Erin Phelps, Richard Lerner, and their colleagues for inspiring the field and, more broadly, society. The editors and their colleagues have helped us think about ways to promote positive youth development and, more specifically, how to support young people in contributing to the development of a more civil society. It is a well-stated goal of the scientists collaborating in this book to build a science of adolescent spirituality and to promote future, longitudinal research about the links between spirituality and positive development during adolescence. Such work will provide practitioners and policymakers and young people themselves with the evidence they need to improve programs and policies and enhance the positive development of all young people.

RICK LITTLE
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September 25, 2010
Preface

Following the theoretical framework established in Positive Youth Development and Spirituality: From Theory to Research (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008), this book—Thriving and Spirituality Among Youth: Research Perspectives and Future Possibilities—pursues a new, empirical phase in the study of spiritual development within the social and the behavioral sciences. This book brings new data to bear on the links among spirituality, positive youth development (PYD), and young people’s generosity, conceived of as their striving to matter by making valued contributions to self, family, community, and civil society.

Our prior volume (Lerner et al., 2008) provided a theoretical framework for a multimethod, cross-sectional investigation of these links, associations that were elucidated by the John Templeton Foundation (JTF)–supported study, “The Role of Spiritual Development in Growth of Purpose, Generosity, and Psychological Health in Adolescence.” The present book brings together scientists who collaborated in this investigation. These researchers present data illustrating the nature and importance of the spirituality–PYD–generosity relationship. These data are useful for understanding fundamental features of adolescent development and for providing a foundation for future, longitudinal research on the role of spirituality in healthy and positive youth development.

Although the study of PYD has been a burgeoning area of scientific study for about 15 years, and has been shaped in large part by past and current members of the JTF Advisory Board, no book has empirically explored this domain of scholarship as it is linked to spirituality, especially with a set of scholars from the wide array of scientific fields represented in this book. Accordingly, we hope that this book is a watershed event in the social and behavioral sciences, one marking the emergence of a vibrant and diverse research base for generating new spiritual information about young people. Our aspiration for this book is that it will stand as a baseline against which future, developmental (longitudinal) research will be measured.

The chapters in this book provide evidence of the rich and nuanced relations that may exist between the development of thriving and of spirituality among diverse young people. Although they are well aware of the limitations of pilot, cross-sectional data, the contributors to this volume nevertheless illustrate well—through their creative exploitation of the data sets generated through the resources provided by the JTF—how the study of spiritual development enhances an understanding of the bases of positive development among diverse youth and,
in turn, what additional new spiritual information might be garnered if the work presented in this volume is extended in future, longitudinal research.

The contributors to this volume present innovative and important ways of using qualitative data, physiological and brain imaging data, and a variety of quantitative information—sources of information often triangulated with additional data sets available to the authors—to elucidate the nuanced and variable links between thriving and spirituality among diverse young people. We believe that the readers of this volume will be intrigued by the findings about these links that are presented across the chapters, and that they will—as do we—see great merit in pursuing additional, developmental research about the thriving–spirituality relationship in the lives of youth.

Ultimately, then, the goal of this book, and of the scientists collaborating in the cross-sectional research discussed in it, is to build a new, developmentally rigorous (i.e., theoretically predicated, multidisciplinary, multimethod, change-sensitive, longitudinal) database for a science of “adolescent spirituality.” We envision this field as integrating basic and applied scholarship and as clarifying how to foster across the adolescent years health and positive development, as well as youth contributions to families, communities, and civil society.

We would like to express our gratitude for the creativity and knowledge of the scientists who have contributed to this book. We thank all of our colleagues who have worked so hard to craft such useful and engaging chapters. Their expertise has made this book possible. The JTF-sponsored pilot project, from which contributors drew data to generate the chapters of this book, was enriched by the contributions of our colleagues from the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University, who helped with the recruitment of samples and the collection of data. The study gained from the contributions of a succession of three project directors, Robert W. Roeser, Jacqueline V. Lerner, and Amy Eva Alberts Warren and, as well, from several research assistants, Mona Abo-Zena, Dan Du, Sonia Issac Koshy, Inbar Sharon, Alan Poey, Mary von Rueden, and Brian Wilson. We greatly appreciate their contributions.

We are grateful as well that Rick R. Little, Founder and Past-President of the International Youth Foundation and now President of the ImagineNations group, wrote such a powerful, provocative, and inspiring Foreword to the book. In turn, we deeply appreciate the erudite and insightful Afterword that Professor Pamela Ebstyne King, of Fuller Theological Seminary, contributed to the book. Her scholarly acumen about the nature and importance of spirituality for thriving among youth has enhanced immeasurably the quality and impact of this book.

We also appreciate the important contributions to this book that have been made by Jarrett M. Lerner, Managing Editor at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development. His expertise and impressive productivity in guiding the development of this work through all phases of the manuscript development and production process were invaluable to us.

We are also grateful for the support of and the commitment to quality scholarship of our publisher, John Wiley & Sons, and to our editor at Wiley, Patricia
(Tisha) Rossi. Tisha’s enthusiasm for the substance of this volume and her expertise in publishing excellent scholarship have been essential in guiding us to complete this work with quality and efficiency.

We also are deeply appreciative of the support provided to us by the John Templeton Foundation. The collaborations among the scholars contributing to this volume, and the science that has been produced, could not have occurred without the vision and support of the Foundation. In addition, we are grateful to the Thrive Foundation for Youth, and to its Executive Director, Carol Gray, for her support of this volume. We deeply appreciate all that Carol has done to link our scholarship with the numerous communities within which the Thrive Foundation is working with impressive effectiveness to foster thriving among young people.

Finally, our work on Thriving and Spirituality Among Youth: Research Perspectives and Future Possibilities has been framed by the intellectual leadership of the late Sir John M. Templeton. Sir John stressed the importance of generating new spiritual knowledge to help direct the lives of youth along positive life paths. His life work inspired us to undertake the scholarly work represented in this volume. We dedicated the first volume derived from this project to him. Because of his vision, values, and virtues, it is fitting that we also dedicate this second book to his memory.

A. E. A. W., Medford, MA
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September, 2010

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